Chapter Ten

Firefly and Serenity: Two Forms of Freedom

In this chapter we argue that the concept of freedom found in Firefly and much of the spinoff movie, Serenity, is a very limited concept of freedom, appropriate only for the tragic hero. It is very different from the ideal of freedom found in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which we have described in Chapter One, with the help of Dostoevsky and the Russian existentialist, Lev Shestov, who argue, “freedom consists in the force and power to prevent evil from entering the world” (Athens and Jerusalem, 256). As we have seen, this ideal of freedom is portrayed most dramatically in Buffy through various attempts to prevent the Hellmouth from opening, or to seal it if and when it has been opened. This is very different from merely choosing between good and evil, or choosing the lesser of two evils. Of course, the notion of the tragic hero appears in Buffy as well as in Firefly and Serenity, though it is important to note that it is usually introduced in Buffy in order to contrast the freedom of the tragic hero with the ideal of freedom we have just described. For example, at the end of Season Five, Giles finds it necessary to kill the character Ben, who, through no fault of his own, is the vessel which the Hellgod Glory must use in order to manifest herself and destroy the world by means of a ritual that will melt all dimensions into one. Giles is a tragic hero because he is faced with a choice between two evils, killing an innocent person or allowing the destruction of the entire world. The sacrifice of the individual in this case would certainly seem to be the lesser of the two evils. It is important to remember, however, that Giles is not happy about being forced into the position of choosing between evils: “I’ve sworn to protect this sorry world and sometimes that means saying and doing what other people can’t. What they shouldn’t have to” (5.22, “The Gift”). People should not have to be forced to choose between evils, lesser or otherwise. It constitutes a lack of freedom as the ethical ideal in Buffy makes perfectly clear, since freedom involves prevent-
ing evil from entering the world. Being forced to choose between evils is what makes the existentialist tragic hero tragic, because it is still choosing evil, allowing evil to enter the world. Our true hero, Buffy, it will be remembered, refused to kill Ben, which is why Giles felt it was left up to him.

Giles quite rightly asserts that the world ought not to be such that we are forced to choose between evils. This is, nevertheless, the way the worlds are portrayed in both Firefly and Serenity. They are governed by a totalitarian regime calling itself the Alliance. This Alliance seems to be a confederation between China and the United States of America, which were presumably the two dominant powers on “earth that was.” The flag of the Alliance is a combination of the stripes of the U.S. Stars and Stripes and the gold stars on red background from the flag of Communist China (the flag is seen in passing in the episode “The Train Job”). The setting of the Alliance worlds is some five hundred years in the future in a new solar system consisting of planets and moons that have been “terraformed” in order to replicate terrestrial conditions and environments. The Alliance has firm control over the central planets, which are regarded as “civilized,” but its hold over settlements on the outer planets and moons is somewhat tenuous. As a result of the weak hold the Alliance has on these territories and of its inability and/or unwillingness to provide them with the same levels of supplies and services that the inner planets have, these remote regions have developed at different rates socially, economically, and politically. Many of these far-flung regions (like the frontier towns of the “Old West” or rural Afghanistan today) seem to be governed by local warlords and mercenaries. As Mercedes Lackey argues in “Serenity and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon’s Firefly,” “The dystopian society in which the crew of Serenity operates feels real.... It resonates because the rules by which this dystopia operates are familiar.... The Alliance uses a lot of the same psychological weapons on its own people that all the major governments of the world ... are ... using today” (63–64). Lackey sees Firefly as a criticism of modern industrial society. We agree. Although the setting is five hundred years into the future, human nature and human relations (personal and political) seem not to have changed and certainly have not evolved for the better.

Though people under the Alliance have the illusion of freedom, they are very careful not to upset the status quo for fear of losing that very freedom (though they are, of course, clinging to an illusion). For example, in the episode “Safe,” we learn in various flashbacks that Simon and River Tam come from a respected family living under Alliance rule. Both brother
and sister were stellar students. Simon is on his way to a brilliant medical career. His sister, River, at this point has been sent to a government-sponsored school for gifted children. Simon learns that this so-called school is in fact a covert government experimental institution which is dedicated, among other things, to turning child prodigies into government agents, through psychological, as well as biomedical, interference. Simon cannot convince his parents that River is a victim of this kind of government exploitation. Simon and River’s parents appear to have just too much to lose (their status in this society) to question what the government is doing with their daughter. Simon is thus left on his own to attempt to rescue his sister. And he is willing to risk his entire medical career to do so. At one point, he is arrested in what is called a “blackout zone” and his father is forced to bail him out. The father is most concerned that this will go on the family’s permanent record. The fact that this “civilized” society both has blackout zones and keeps permanent records on its citizens suggests that the kind of freedom available to its citizens is, if not completely illusory, at best severely curtailed. Simon’s father certainly feels threatened when his son steps out of line in this way. We can only wonder what happens to the family after Simon, with his contacts from the blackout zone, rescues River from the government’s experimental facility. Simon and River, in fact, end up fleeing the Alliance by booking passage with Captain Malcolm Reynolds and his crew of malcontents aboard Serenity.

Serenity is a firefly-class spaceship, which Captain Malcolm Reynolds is using as an independent transporter, finding odd jobs supplying goods to the outer planets, sometimes legally, sometimes not. He can certainly be regarded as a smuggler, though he would be the first to insist that many of the jobs he undertakes are perfectly legal and in fact sanctioned by the Alliance. As Lackey points out in her essay “Serenity and Bobby McGee,” it is likely that far more of these activities than Mal realizes are sanctioned, or at least tolerated, by the Alliance. The Alliance’s resources are stretched far too thinly to provide adequate services to the outer planets, so the Alliance is quite happy to allow smugglers like Reynolds to keep the populations somewhat contented by moving required goods such as food and medical supplies illegally. Malcolm Reynolds is unwittingly helping the Alliance govern the outer planets, or at least preventing their populations from rebelling. Mal thinks he is free, and the Alliance is more than willing to let him persist in this delusion, since he and those like him are performing a useful service for their imperial administration (66–67). So, Mal thinks he is flying under the radar of the Alliance, but they are in fact letting him do so, at least until he welcomes the fugitives, Simon and River
Tam, on board. In doing this, Mal “crosses that invisible boundary—the point past which the Alliance has to notice him and do something about him” (Lackey 68). He must now avoid inspection by Alliance ships and watch out for both covert government operatives and bounty hunters, a necessity that begins to reveal to him the tenuousness, and indeed the illusory nature, of his freedom.

All of Mal’s major decisions are in fact the decisions of a tragic hero in that he is constantly forced to choose the lesser of two evils. Both Firefly and Serenity are space westerns. Folks on the frontier, the outer planets, tend to shoot each other on occasion, and it seems to be permissible to shoot bad guys, if you need to. There is certainly not the respect for human life we find in the Buffy and Angel series (most vampires and demons excepted, of course). For example, in the two-hour pilot, “Serenity Parts One and Two,” Mal is selling stolen Alliance foodstuffs to Patience, a female outlaw leader in a remote outpost. Mal expects her to try to bushwhack him with snipers rather than make an honest deal, and so sends the toughest member of his crew, Jayne, to quietly take out the sniper and take over the sniper’s position. This, Mal hopes, will give him the advantage. It is an amusing scene, with Mal and his second-in-command, Zoe, standing on the ground facing Patience and several members of her gang, all on horseback. After money has exchanged hands, Patience informs Mal that there are complications: she doesn’t like to part with money she doesn’t have to. Of course, she thinks she has the advantage with her sniper hiding up in the hills. When the shooting begins, she realizes the sniper is targeting her own men, and Mal and Zoe have drawn their pistols. Mal and Zoe kill most of Patience’s men, though both he and Zoe are slightly wounded. Mal shoots Patience’s horse, which she was using for cover, and as she is trapped beneath the horse, he takes back the sack of money which he had returned, ostensibly to avoid trouble: “I did a job. I got nothing but trouble since I did it, not to mention more than a few unkind words as regards to my character. So let me make this abundantly clear. I do the job. I get paid. And that’s all” (“Serenity, Part 1 & 2”).

This tells us something about Mal’s moral character. Although he has shot a number of her henchmen, he refrains from killing Patience. Unlike Patience, he is willing to live up to the terms of the contract even though in these remote regions such contracts are legally unenforceable. Patience also knows that she was purchasing illegally salvaged Alliance goods, so she knew that she could get away with swindling Mal. There was no way he would report her to the authorities even if the authorities had an effective presence in this region. Mal is not governed by external moral rules, but
has rather an internal moral discipline, such as it is. Comparing Mal and Patience, Mal is obviously the one with the better moral character, though this may not be saying much. Mal, after all, is willing to undertake illegal jobs, such as train and bank robbery. These illegal acts are usually against the Alliance, which Mal once regarded as the enemy since he was a volunteer soldier with the Independents, who in fact lost the war with the Alliance at the battle of Serenity Valley. The fact that he has named his ship “Serenity” suggests that he has not entirely forgotten the conflict against the Alliance. Alliance targets seem to be fair game. Mal seems to be content just surviving without the Alliance telling him what to do. At the end of the “Serenity” episode, he tells Simon that—in spite of being pursued by the law, criminals, and savages (reavers); having half the people on the ship, including himself, “shot or wounded”; and deciding to harbor “known fugitives” (Simon and River)—he has had “a good day” because he is still flying. Simon responds, “That’s not much.” Significantly, Mal replies, “It’s enough.” But by the end of the movie Serenity, Mal finds that it is not enough. His concept of freedom has expanded. We contend that it becomes in actual fact much closer to the ideal of freedom we have detected in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel.

In order to see how freedom develops in Serenity, it is important to examine more closely the concept of freedom in Firefly and how it relates to Mal’s moral integrity. We have seen that although Mal is in a sense free (and somewhat motivated) to kill Patience, he spares her life. Why does he do so? Mal, after all, seems more than willing to kill anyone whom he considers evil and who gets in his way. In the “Serenity” episode, upon returning to the ship (immediately after having spared Patience’s life), Mal finds that a government lawman is holding River with a gun to her head, keeping Simon, Kaylee and the rest of the crew at bay. Without breaking his stride, Mal draws his gun and unhesitatingly shoots the lawman dead. It appears that he has re-holstered his gun by the time the lawman hits the floor. Mal and Jayne then unceremoniously dump the body out the hatch as it’s closing and the ship is taking off. Jayne remarks, “Buzzards’re the only ones gonna find him...”

So what are the crucial differences between these two cases, Patience and the lawman? Interestingly enough, on the DVD commentary on this episode, by Joss Whedon and Nathan Fillion (who plays Mal), we are told that when the lawman breaks out of the brig where the crew had him confined and knocks Shepherd Book out, they have him hit the good Book two more times when he is down just to establish that the lawman is bad, because Mal’s going to shoot him at the end of the episode. So both Patience and the lawman may be considered evil. The crucial difference
seems to be that the lawman, at the time, constituted a clear and present danger, while Patience was no longer a threat.

Once things settle down, Mal asks Jayne if the lawman had tried to make a deal with him. The lawman had been a passenger on Serenity for some time though, at first, no one knew he was after River. When Jayne doesn’t reply, Mal asks, “How come you didn’t turn on me, Jayne?” Jayne’s response is certainly meant to tell us a great deal about his moral character, “Money wasn’t good enough.” Jayne is obviously both evil and dangerous, not to mention unreliable. Mal, however, does not shoot him, unhesitatingly or otherwise, but simply asks “What happens when it is?” They both agree that that will be an “interesting” day.

Though Jayne is dangerous, he is obviously of some use to Mal and probably worth the risk. Mal is constantly living on the edge like this. For example, just before facing Patience and her henchmen, Zoe comments to Mal on the location of the meeting place, “I don’t think it’s a good spot, sir. She still has the advantage over us.” Mal quips in reply, “Everyone always does. That’s what makes us special” (“Serenity, Parts One and Two”).

Mal is even willing to accept jobs from vengeful lunatics, of which this ‘verse has its fair share. For example, in the episode, “The Train Job,” Mal is hired by a character called Niska who shows him a tortured corpse he has hanging in an adjoining room, and explains, “Now, for you, my reputation is not from gossip. You see this man, he does not do the job. I show you what I do with him and now, my reputation for you is fact, is... solid. You do the train job for me, then you are solid. No more gossip. That is strong relationship.” In response to Niska’s further question about whether or not Mal approves of Niska’s killing this man, Mal says, “Well, I’m sure he was a ... very bad person” (“The Train Job”).

Though this may have been meant ironically, there can be no doubt that Mal considers it permissible to kill very bad persons. In fact at the end of the episode, Mal kills Niska’s man, Crow (the one responsible for torturing the victim seen in Niska’s office). After carrying out the train job, and subsequently discovering that the “loot” was much needed medical supplies for a remote settlement, Mal returns the cargo to its rightful owners. He then unsuccessfully tries to persuade Crow to take the advance payment and return it to Niska. Mal also promises to stay out of Niska’s way in the future, arguing that that solution would be “best for everyone.” Crow refuses and threatens Mal, telling him to use the money for his own funeral since no matter where Mal goes, no matter how far he flies, Crow will hunt him down and “the last thing you see will be my blade.” With a resigned “darn,” Mal pushes Crow into the intake of the ship’s fast idling
engine, which results in an instant and gruesome death. Mal turns to another of Niska's henchmen and begins his speech again, but this henchman has learned the lesson quickly: "Oh I get it. I'm good. Best for everyone. I'm right there with you."

The death of Crow, then, has some value for Mal in that it softens up Crow's colleague in crime, who, as we have seen, is much more cooperative. Mal is also taking Crow's threat seriously and dealing with it expeditiously, ridding the world of a murderer torturer in the process. John Wright, in his paper on this episode, "Just Shove Him in the Engine, or The Role of Chivalry in Firefly," argues that Crow's death is unrealistic. Aside from a captain's jeopardizing the engine of his ship with the harder body parts, Wright suggests that Mal, himself a petty criminal, should, and indeed would, know that a crime boss could not let the murder of one of his men go unpunished (165–166). We would argue, on the contrary, that Mal knows full well that Niska will be out to get him, just because Mal has not completed the train job as instructed. The tortured corpse in Niska's office made that perfectly clear.

This is just another example of Mal's living on the edge. We disagree with Wright's criticism that this is unrealistic (though we are curious about the use of what look to be jet turbine engines on a craft designed for the vacuum of space). Regardless, Mal has acted exactly as we would have expected him to, given his character. We have already seen this facet of his character when Mal chooses to invite Simon Tam to become a member of his crew as the ship's doctor. Mal welcomes Simon and River in spite of being explicitly warned by the late lawman they had held captive that such an action will make Serenity a constant target of the Alliance, since River Tam is one of the Alliance's prize experimental projects: "That girl is a precious commodity. They'll come after her. Long after you bury me they'll be coming" ("Serenity, Parts One and Two"). Mal is quite well aware that both Niska and the Alliance will be out to get him and the crew of Serenity. He knows the risks and is willing to live with them.

Mal is actually willing to spare the life of a combatant even when the rules of engagement require the death of the opponent as a matter of protocol. As Inara complains, "Mal, you always break the rules. It doesn't matter which 'society' you're in! You don't get along with ordinary criminals either! That's why you're constantly in trouble!" ("Shindig"). Inara is a Companion, licensed by the Alliance to serve as a high-class geisha, who has rented a shuttle aboard Serenity in order to serve clients on the various worlds to which Mal and his crew fly. In the episode, "Shindig," which takes place on a planet which seems to support what looks like a mid-18th
century genteel society complete with fancy-dress balls, Mal feels it necessary to defend Inara's honor and finds himself challenged to a duel with swords. Significantly, it is Inara who shows Mal the basics of fencing during a quick lesson the night before the duel. The training of the Companion seems to be very comprehensive.

Though Mal disapproves of her profession, often calling Inara a "whore" to her face, he tells her he is defending her honor because he respects her as a person, explaining why he challenged her insensitive client: "I might not show respect to your job, but he didn't respect you. That's the difference, Inara. He doesn't even see you." Unfortunately, this particular client is well known as an experienced and expert swordsman. Mal is only able to win the duel by grabbing his opponent's sword by the blade and turning the duel into a fist fight. This is enough to leave his opponent on the ground with Mal's sword at his throat. Mal is told by the local official who volunteered to be his second, "You have to finish it, lad. For a man to lie beaten and yet breathing, it makes him a coward." Mal responds, "It would be humiliating, having to lie there while the better man refuses to spill your blood. Mercy is the mark of a great man." Mal then stabs his opponent, wounding him slightly, and says that he guesses he is just a good man, as opposed to a great one. He then gives his victim another painful stab, saying, "Well, I'm all right," as opposed to either good or great.

We would argue that Mal is here, as usual, the tragic hero, having to choose among evils. His own internal discipline and moral sense prevent him from killing an opponent who is no longer a threat, yet the rules of the society he happens to be in require that he do so, because not killing this person shows lack of respect for both the individual and the society.

In this episode, we also learn something about the nature of Inara's freedom and power. The victim, her former client, calls her a whore and spitefully tells her that he will see to it that she will never work again. She replies, "Actually, that's not how it works. You see, you've earned yourself a black mark in the client registry. No Companion is going to contract with you ever again."

Mercedes Lackey argues in "Serenity and Bobby McGee," that, in fact, Inara's "freedom is as thin as the piece of paper her license is printed on. Without it, she's no longer respected or respectable; she goes from being a sought-after professional to nothing but a lovely and exquisitely trained whore" (69). Mal has, in actual fact, already cautioned Inara that following Alliance rules may buy her a nice life, but these same rules simultaneously make her a slave ("Shindig"). We would add that Inara has no more freedom than Simon and River Tam's parents, who also regard themselves
as respectable members of society. It is interesting that Mal is able to see the illusory nature of Inara’s freedom much more quickly than he discovers that he himself is subject to similar self-deception.

It is not until Mal finds himself and his crew pursued by the relentless and extraordinarily committed Operative, an agent of the Alliance sent to capture River, that Mal begins to learn the true nature of the Alliance and how it maintains and perpetuates its control. This occurs in the movie Serenity, where Mal finds his eyes becoming opened to depths of Alliance evil that even he had not previously suspected. River has learned the secret failure the Alliance has been attempting to hide. In the terraforming of the extremely remote planet, Miranda, the Alliance scientists had added G-32 Paxilon hydrochlorate to the artificial atmosphere in order to pacify the population and thus make it malleable to Alliance control, easier to govern. Paxil is in fact a widely used anti-depressant today, though we are sure that the resemblance of names is purely coincidental, well purely amusing at least. The Alliance’s experiment with “Pax” as they call it (“peace” in Latin) was in some ways too successful. Mal and his crew, partly to escape the pursuit of the Operative, travel to Miranda with some considerable danger to themselves since it lies on the other side of Reaver territory. Miranda turns out to be a ghost planet, not for the reasons given officially by the Alliance (terraforming failure), but rather because the entire transplanted population of several million had simply died, having become so passive under the influence of the Pax that they were unable and uninterested in doing anything required for survival (such as working, or even eating and drinking). The Alliance has, in fact, removed Miranda from official charts and histories, effectively removing it from existence in an Orwellian manner.

The Alliance also denies the existence of the Reavers, constantly broadcasting that no evidence of Reaver existence has ever been found, and teaching in the schools of the central planets that Reavers only appear in stories or myths, like the Bogeyman. On Miranda, Mal and his crew find a holographic recording in a crashed Alliance research ship. This recording contains not only the truth about how the G-32 Paxilon-hydrochlorate catastrophe led to the deaths of the planet’s colonists, but also how the Pax had the opposite effect on 0.1% of the population, making them aggressive beyond madness, with insatiable desires to rape, murder, and cannibalize their victims (sometimes eating them alive). These are the Reavers whose existence the Alliance is understandably so eager to deny. They have created them through their unethical experimentation and manipulation of unsuspecting populations.
What does Mal decide to do with this new knowledge? In the strictest sense, it is irrelevant to his means of making a living, so he could just simply ignore it and continue with business as usual, with its unspoken and only half-understood principle of not bothering the Alliance too much. However, for a personality like Mal’s, with his degree of moral integrity, “business as usual” is not now an option any more than keeping the stolen medicines in “The Train Job” would have been. Knowing how deeply people have been meddled with by the Alliance, how the Alliance has, in fact, attempted to make people “better” through their Pax modification, and knowing that the Alliance is more than likely to try it, or something similar, again, Mal realizes that he and his crew cannot be the only ones to be exposed to the information on the holographic recording. He resolves to broadcast this recording as widely as possible throughout the ’verse: “So, no more running. I aim to misbehave” (Serenity).

He decides to use the resources of an old friend, calling himself Mr. Universe, who has both listening and broadcasting equipment capable of “broadawing” the hologram, putting it “on every screen for thirty worlds.” The only difficulties are that Mal suspects the Operative pursuing River will be waiting for them, with an Alliance fleet, at Mr. Universe’s moon and that to get to that moon they must again pass through Reaver territory. To deal with the Alliance fleet, Mal decides to irritate the Reavers on his way by, an easy thing to do. As he expected, he is pursued by many Reaver ships, and when he emerges at Mr. Universe’s moon, the Reavers and Alliance ships attack one another, keeping each other busy while Serenity slips through.

Mr. Universe has already been killed by the Alliance Operative, who will stop at nothing to capture River in order to keep the Alliance’s secrets safe. The Operative at this point has no idea what secrets River is carrying; he is simply operating on faith. He is helping to build a better world and believes the Alliance is the key to that utopia. Indeed, as Shepherd Book had pointed out to Mal, it is the strength of that belief that makes the Operative especially dangerous as an enemy: “Sorta man they’re like to send believes hard. Kills and never asks why” (Serenity).

Mal, too, now has something to believe in, something for which he is even willing to sacrifice his life. He must get the message out. As Mr. Universe had been fond of saying, “You can’t stop the signal” (Serenity). The Alliance had attempted to destroy his broadcasting equipment, but fortunately, they had missed his backup unit hidden above the power generator deep within the moon. Before he died, Mr. Universe was able to program his robot wife, the lovebot Lenore, to tell Mal its location. While
Mal’s crew attempts to hold off the invading Reavers who are now trying to break into the broadcasting complex, Mal attempts to get the message out. He is forced to fight the Alliance Operative, who has also been told the location of the hidden broadband equipment (lovebots are not really programmed to know to whom they are talking). After some difficulty, Mal gets the upper hand, and actually spares the Operative’s life, leaving him to watch the Miranda holograph message now being broadwaved “on every screen for thirty worlds.”

This shatters the Operative’s illusions imposed on him by the Alliance, and more than challenges his belief in the better world that he thought he was sacrificing himself to help bring into being. Just as well, because once the Reavers are defeated, the Alliance troops capture Mal and his crew. The troop commander radios the Operative, “Targets are acquired! Do we have a kill order? Do we have a kill order?” (Serenity). They are told in response to stand down. The Operative has completely lost faith in the Alliance. River is no longer a threat to them, as the secrets she might have been carrying are now widely known.

The utopian world the Alliance had attempted to develop with the help of G-32 Paxilon hydrochlorate (Pax) is strikingly similar to that offered by the goddess Jasmine in Season Four of Angel. She promises, “the best of all possible worlds, without borders, without hunger, war, or misery. A world built on love, respect, understanding, and, well, just enjoying one another” (Angel 4.21, “Peace Out”). She actually brings this about, at least within the city of Los Angeles. She certainly has Angel and his crew completely enthralled. Just gazing upon her beauty seems to produce instant love and adoration, together with a feeling of euphoria.

Jasmine, certainly a beautiful goddess, is portrayed by Gina Torres, the actor who plays Zoe in Firefly and Serenity. Everyone who meets Jasmine seems to believe that she will make their world and their lives as beautiful as she is. However, as Steven Harper argues in his article, “Jasmine: Scariest Villain Ever,” all this “bliss doesn’t come without a price. Once you see Jasmine, you lose all will to do anything but serve her” (51). Harper is, quite rightly, genuinely troubled by the kind of world Jasmine presents us with. We achieve world peace and so forth, but, like the Alliance, she has deprived her followers of freedom in the process. As Angel puts it, “The price was too high, Jasmine. Our fate has to be our own, or we’re nothing” (4.21).

However, the loss of freedom is only part of the price for the utopia Jasmine offers. This is a Whedon horror-comedy after all. It turns out that Jasmine eats people, but not that many (between eight and twelve people
a day). What Harper finds truly frightening is that he feels almost willing to pay this price for what she offers, “and seems able to deliver — an end to death by violence ... no wars, no genocides, no holocausts, no murders, no spouse abuse, no child abuse, no drive-by shootings, and no suicides” (51). As Jasmine herself says, “I murdered thousands to save billions” (4.21).

This does constitute a genuine moral dilemma. As Harper perceptively puts it, “She offers a better world at an affordable price. Scary to the marrow” (51). We have already seen Faith using this kind of cost-benefit analysis to exonerate herself when she inadvertently kills a human bystander: “In the balance, nobody’s gonna cry over some random bystander who got caught in the crossfire” (Buffy 3.15, “Consequences”). But, as we saw, this was Faith’s first step toward the dark side. Choosing the lesser of two evils is still choosing evil. The dilemma presented by Jasmine constitutes Whedon’s acute and devastating exposure of the problems presented by a utilitarian ethics with its cost-benefit approach to moral issues.

Interestingly enough, Jasmine also raises difficulties for the kind of love ethics Whedon seems to favor. She inspires love in her followers, preaches that they should love one another, and seems herself to love people (in more than the culinary sense). However, her followers are so besotted that they become fanatical and are willing to hunt down and kill those who do not accept Jasmine and her message of love. As Harper points out, “Jasmine’s followers take on a wild-eyed fanaticism similar to the kind that powered the Inquisition ... they see unbelievers as dangerous” (54). Though Jasmine does not encourage such violence, she knows it exists and does nothing to stop it, if it means the elimination of those who have begun to see her as the demon she truly is. The individual under Jasmine’s spell has no way of seeing her for what she is, and because everyone is under the same spell, skepticism cannot arise.

It is only by sheer chance that Fred discovers the ugly reality beneath Jasmine’s façade of beauty. Fred is subsequently, with some difficulty, able to pass this knowledge on to Angel, who discovers the magical means to make this revelation universal with the more mundane help of radio and television broadcasting. The point is that Fred had to work extraordinarily hard, risking her very life, to dispel Angel’s illusions. He could not have done this by himself. He needed to have his beliefs challenged, and was most reluctant to give them up. The Jasmine story suggests that a love ethic without a diverse communitarian base, one that allows skepticism and encourages the exchange of ideas and perspectives, can be easily perverted, or even turned into its opposite. A free and open press is also required to maintain such a diverse society. Angel is able to expose Jasmine for the
demon she really is as she is about to broadcast her offer of a false paradise over radio and television to the entire world. Instead, the media expose her at the last moment. Still, she almost got away with it.

We are horrified by Jasmine, but can console ourselves by saying that that story is merely a myth, and that such events could never happen here. What Jasmine represents in a mythical form, the Alliance embodies as a political regime that is much closer to present-day reality, as Lackey’s article, “Serenity and Bobby McGee,” shows in considerable detail. The incarnation of a strikingly similar deprivation of freedom and exercise of mind control by an Alliance government that has sacrificed millions of its citizens for the greater good, and covered it up, forcibly reminds us that such a regime does not require the interference of the supernatural. Significantly, despite its colossal failure with Pax, the Alliance has not renounced the principle that it can, and indeed, must, use evil, consciously and deliberately, to bring forth what it considers to be the Good.

Once Mal has discovered the depth of evil in the Alliance, he, like Fred and Angel in parallel circumstances confronted by Jasmine, feels compelled to expose the truth to as many people as he can, and is even willing to sacrifice his life in order to do so. His crew, even the self-centered Jayne, accept this as a cause worth dying for, and, as a result, they achieve a kind of freedom they have never before experienced, a genuine freedom which prevents more evil from entering the world. The Alliance cannot be destroyed, but it can be, and has been, wounded.

There is also the chance that Mal’s actions might inspire other, so far dutiful, citizens of the Alliance, to question and resist the regime in other (probably less dramatic) ways. That such internal resistance is a real possibility is indicated by the actions and choices of Simon Tam, who is able to overcome all the socializing imposed on him by the Alliance through its school system (seen intermittently in Serenity) and its other means of social control (wealth, status, etc.) and to work in a self-sacrificing way to rescue his sister. What makes Simon so dangerous to the Alliance is love, unconditional love for his sister. Whedon is using Firefly and Serenity, as he did Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel, to critique rationalistic systems of ethics, such as utilitarianism, and to support his alternative communitarian love ethics, built on a foundation of existential choice.