

Teaching *Firefly*

James Rocha

California State University, Fresno

In this paper, I will examine my experiences in teaching value theory, broadly construed (including political philosophy, ethics, and existentialism), through Joss Whedon's *Firefly*. What I hope to show from these experiences is how using science fiction engages the students, enlivens discussions, and provides fully thought-out examples that allow us to think about philosophical issues in unique and useful ways. Before addressing these specific issues, it will be useful to note why science fiction in general is helpful for philosophy teaching in these sorts of ways.

Let's examine how science fiction can assist the teacher of political philosophy. A significant part of political philosophy involves examining societies, both ideal and non-ideal, while considering numerous conditions and circumstances that have likely never existed in real life. While historical and contemporary examples are sometimes useful, they often run short. Yet, purely made up examples often lack the fleshed-out details necessary to fully analyze the philosophical issues, e.g. what an anarchist society might look like or what practical problems you might run into when attempting to encase freedom in uncharted territory hidden away from the watchful eye of empire. Fortunately, in such cases, we have science fiction to provide us with a helping hand.

My primary claim here then is that science fiction provides elaborate examples that allow philosophers to test out their intuitions with checks and balances provided by writers who seek to create fictitious, but plausible universes. That is, the philosopher cannot develop an entire, detailed universe for the purpose of describing a theory. And we may not even be best positioned to perform this task. In fact, as the person theorizing about political philosophy, the philosopher is likely to build bias into their imaginary society—she seeks to imagine it as working even when she is attempting, as best as she can, to be honest and forthcoming about potential flaws. Further, the philosopher is likely to overlook practical problems that would limit and structure fictional depictions, which must be granted a general sense of plausibility to entice skeptical audiences. Because the philosopher is primarily interested in discussing and testing a theory, she is less likely to track the details that make the society more plausible. Yet, in having to entertain and tell a story of a quite different universe, the science fiction writer is intensely concerned with presenting a picture that, while it may be biased, is more interested in prioritizing story over ideology.

Even if the story proves to be biased, the philosophy teacher can note the biases, critique them, and question the plausibility of certain parts of the story. Thus, works of science fiction provide fleshed-out examples that can be referenced, analyzed, and critiqued. Further, even as the philosopher focuses on certain parts, they can take for granted that these works include numerous other details that the audience may already know or could search out independently of the philosophical exposition.

This point is not limited to political philosophy. Philosophers can also use science fiction to further ethical examples, raise issues for metaphysics and epistemology, test intuitions in mind or phenomenology, etc. Science fiction is useful in a variety of philosophical fields as it helps the philosopher consider examples that are quite different from what real life provides. We will be able to see this point more clearly by examining the teaching of *Firefly*.

I. Teaching Political Philosophy in *Firefly*

Firefly (2002), along with the subsequent movie *Serenity* (2005), is a dystopian story about a planetary system that is ruled by a seemingly benevolent empire, the Alliance. The Alliance owes their control over the known universe to a war (which came to be known as “The Unification War”) with separatist factions, the Independents, or more colloquially, the “Browncoats.” While the Alliance wished to bring their advancements in technology and democratic methods to all the planets, the Browncoats wished to maintain independence for planets that did not seek to be a part of the Alliance. The action for *Firefly* and *Serenity* takes place after the Unification War, among the crew and passengers of a firefly-type spaceship called, “Serenity.” Each member of the group have his or her own reasons for wishing to avoid the Alliance, and they travel among the outer worlds, searching for odd jobs, such as smuggling, robbing trains, and transporting goods and persons.

Firefly is quite useful for teaching political philosophy because it presents a putatively American-style imperial neo-liberalism (I’m writing from the perspective of someone who teaches in the United States), but from the perspective of people who wish to resist being incorporated into the alleged benefits of being neo-colonized or globalized. In other words, as a teacher, the *Firefly* universe allows you to raise issues of imperialism, colonialism, cultural difference, and neo-liberalism, all without having to make the students uncomfortable about talking about what could be described as the “American neo-empire.” That is, it is advantageous to discuss imperialism as it exists today—not the imperialism of ancient Rome or imperial Great Britain—where neo-imperialistic activities are presented within the cloak of liberal democracy and affable capitalism. Yet, usually when you teach neo-imperialism and globalization, you do so with a sense that the students cannot move beyond their ideological perspectives as Americans living in the heart of empire, and move to considering what neo-colonialism means for an Iraqi, an Afghan, or a Haitian.

Science fiction, however, enables this pedagogical move. A philosophy (or political science) teacher can subtly shift beyond the students’ implicit biases and simply place them into the shoes of the colonized by showing a TV show where the main characters do not wish to be part of the supposedly liberal empire. While the characters openly acknowledge

that the Alliance provides superior technology, including medical technology, they also cherish their freedom more than those advancements. Consider this exchange from an Alliance classroom (the children are 10 years old according to the script) early in the film *Serenity*:

Boy: Why are people fighting against us? Wouldn't they want things to be better?

Teacher: That's a very good question. Let's think about that.

[A few students answer in ways that suggest the people resisting are simply savages and cannibals. The teacher continues.]

Teacher: I don't think anyone's answered Borodin's question. Why would the Independents be fighting against Unification?

River Tam: They want quiet...They want it to be quiet again.

[Teacher asks River to explain more, which she does]

River: It's unrealistic to believe that one governing body can reshape seventy-two planets with separate cultural structures in its own image and encounter anything but brutal and earnest resistance. It's unrealistic and it's noisy.

As the show develops, we will learn that River Tam has been experimented on by the Alliance, though it is never entirely clear what they had hoped to do with her. In this classroom scene, a young River challenges the larger ethic of liberal imperialism by asking whether it is worth it for the neo-colonies (in this case, the 72 other planets) to accept improved technology and supposed democracy at the exchange of having new ways of life and new values, which are quite foreign to their own cultures, imposed upon them. And since River is one of the main protagonists on board the ship *Serenity*, the viewers—in this case, my students—can understand her perspective without feeling alienated from the realization that they, as Americans, are probably much closer to the Alliance than they are to any of the 72 border planets.

Firefly also introduces us to political theories through its characters and situations. As many have argued, a few of the key main characters seem to be libertarians (Hinson, Sanchez, Goldsmith, Sturgis, Rocha). That is, the show represents the right-libertarian philosophy by having characters who prize negative liberty (the freedom from being interfered with) above positive liberty (the freedom to enact one's will), who value that consent should almost never be violated, and who believe that the best political society involves mostly unrestrained capitalism. The lead protagonist, Captain Malcolm Reynolds ("Mal"), quite clearly espouses and acts from a libertarian philosophy. Consider when he explains what freedom is to Zoe Washburne, his first mate:

"Live like real people. A small crew—they must feel the need to be free. Take jobs as they come. They never have to be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we'll just get ourselves a little farther."
(*Firefly* S.1 E.8, "Out of Gas.")

Mal believes in a freedom that is defined negatively: it involves *not* being under anyone's heel. But, more specifically, it is only about not being under the government's heel (in this case, that of the Alliance). Mal believes that since he owns the ship and his crew work for him, they can be a bit under his heel as their boss (also Mal comes from the military, but that seems less relevant here since his current crew are mostly not from the military—though Mal embracing a military hierarchy could be an issue for further classroom discussion). Thus, he prizes negative liberty where one is not coerced by the government, but is not as critical of capitalist hierarchy. Mal is clearly a right-libertarian.

Libertarianism is a political theory that a lot of students are interested in. Yet, it is also a very difficult theory to support in real life circumstances. *Firefly* exhibits this difficulty. While Mal holds a libertarian philosophy, he often will prize assisting the positive liberty of others over his consent or even his own negative liberty. That is, he will help others in need merely because they are in need (and thus assisting their positive liberty), even if this means violating his consent or putting himself and his crew into otherwise unnecessary danger. For example, Simon Tam and River Tam are fugitives who are using Mal's ship to escape the Alliance. Even by having them onboard, Mal is risking his own capture and imprisonment, yet he never seems to believe that he consented to keep them longer than one trip, which is all that Simon paid for.

Further, in the episode "The Train Job," Mal has consented to steal some unknown goods for a clearly villainous man, Adelai Niska. Yet, when Mal discovers that he has stolen medicine from people who desperately need it, he decides to break his consent with Niska, risking that Niska will capture, torture, and kill him, to support the positive liberty of people who are currently too sick to live meaningful lives. Mal explains himself to a sheriff who is looking to recover the medicine:

Sheriff: These are tough times. A man can get a job. He might not look too close at what that job is. But a man learns all the details of a situation like ours. Well, then he has a choice.

Mal: I don't believe he does. (S.1 E.2, "The Train Job.")

Thus, Mal values so much the positive liberty of the sick that he does not think he has any choice but to violate his consent with Niska and risk the loss of his own negative liberty once Niska violently reacts to this consent violation. This episode depicts a very significant and realistic problem with right-libertarianism that cannot be easily conveyed with an imaginary, quick, and ad-hoc philosophical example.

Through watching Mal's difficult choice—which he doesn't even experience as difficult—the class witnesses the limitation of a specific philosophical theory. While some students may wish to defend libertarianism from this objection, they are now situated to do so by examining a fleshed out and plausible example given to us by *Firefly*. Thus, in using the show, we not only have a handy way of getting students to see multiple perspectives of an issue, but we also provide fodder for debate and discussion about political philosophy.

II. Teaching Ethics in *Firefly*

In addition to political philosophy, *Firefly* provides a plethora of ethical examples by asking what these people on Serenity should do in various morally sticky situations. In particular, the core relationships between the main characters regularly challenge students to consider ethical theories and problems through perspectives that are made plausible through concrete and detailed examples. As key examples of this pedagogical utility, I will first examine how different characters respond to the difficulties and dangers that Simon Tam and River Tam present to the crew in a way that exhibits different moral theories. Additionally, Malcolm Reynolds' relationship with Inara Serra, fraught as it is with sexual tension, further exhibits key points about feminist theory.

As mentioned, the Tam siblings are fugitives from the Alliance, and their placement on Serenity places the entire crew's lives at risk. The various members of the crew respond to this dangerous scenario in different ways that allow us to explore various ethical theories in the classroom. For example, Malcolm Reynolds and Shepherd Derrial Book eventually both wish to save the Tams (though Mal was originally willing to sell them out in the first episode, "Serenity"). For Book, his moral sacrifice appears to be driven by his religious beliefs. Yet, Mal is fairly antagonistic to religion, and the show is less clear about where Mal's moral code comes from, as noted in this early exchange:

Book: I'm wondering why a man so anxious to fly under Alliance radar would house known fugitives. The Alliance had her in that institution for a purpose whatever it was, and they will want her back. You're not overly fond of the boy. So why risk it?

Mal (sarcastically): Only because it's the right thing to do. . . .

Book: I'm beginning to wonder if you yourself know why you're doing it. ("The Train Job.")

While Book's morality may in fact derive from his religion, Mal makes clear in multiple episodes that he is either an agnostic or an atheist, and has no use for religion. Yet, over the course of the series, Mal demonstrates strong moral principles, which he cannot always articulate. This point provides a useful entry for discussing moral theories, especially with students who firmly believe that moral theories in some sense derive only from religion. Such students can also recognize that they know, either directly or through indirect experience, of atheists and agnostics who are moral people. Yet, it might be the case that non-believers, like Mal, sometimes have a harder time explaining what grounds their moral viewpoints. That, of course, is what moral philosophers both provide and teach: the grounding of moral theories, especially where the grounding is not as straightforward as it is for divine command theory.

Therefore, by using Mal's vague sense of moral duty to the Tams, we can transition to the other characters, who both wrong and support them. In terms of the former, Jayne Cobb, who also adopts a (more problematic and somewhat inconsistent) libertarian morality, clearly does not feel that he owes the Tams anything since he has made no

consensual agreement with them. In fact, since they are wanted fugitives, he is both following the law and profiting from the reward money by turning them in. Yet, Simon responds to Jayne with a clear sense of moral duty, in spite of Jayne doing wrong to him. At one point, when Simon, who is the ship's doctor, is about to operate on Jayne, Simon explains:

“You’re in a dangerous line of work, Jayne. Odds are you’ll be under my knife again. Often. So I want you to understand one thing very clearly. No matter what you do or say or plot—no matter how you come down on us—I will never ever harm you. You’re on this table, you’re safe. ‘Cause I’m your medic.”
(*Firefly* S.1 E.11, “Trash.”)

Simon can be used to exhibit either a Kantian or Aristotelian perspective, and also as someone who deeply believes in his Hippocratic Oath. In any of those cases, Simon is not interested in the fraught relationship between himself and Jayne—he is not going to treat Jayne differently because Jayne does not like him or even plots to betray him. Simon's moral duties are not dictated by who Jayne is or what Jayne has done, but are dictated by his greater obligation to do right, no matter what consequences may befall him or whether he personally likes the other person. And, unlike Mal, Simon seems to have a clear sense of what his duties are and is not at all unsure of whether he should follow them. Perhaps he gets this certainty from his medical ethics, or perhaps it is just who he is.

Fortunately, since it is a TV show, I can encourage students to explore these questions and seek out additional details by examining more episodes and thinking more about Simon as a fully developed character. That is, by using a TV series as your core example, you enable students to flesh out and argue about moral development as it occurs over multiple episodes. And these moral issues are, of course, complex and provide fodder for further student exploration, as we may pursue what grounds Simon's moral character, how his moral character influences others, especially Jayne and Mal, how Simon's moral character is challenged and what that means, etc.

Another character, Kaylee Frye, provides a moral framework that is representative of a feminist ethics of care. There is no questioning of Kaylee's moral support for Simon, and her unwavering commitment to risk her life to save him and his sister. In part, Kaylee's resolute moral position is based in the relationship she develops with Simon. And I do not mean here just that she has romantic feelings for him—though that is true. What I mean is that through knowing him and understanding him, Kaylee sees Simon's goodness. Her relationship establishes that he is worth caring for because she can see that he has made the ultimate moral sacrifice for his sister, hence showing that Simon too has developed his own strong moral commitments through relations of care. So, even when Simon threatens not to save Kaylee after she is shot in the pilot, “Serenity,” Kaylee refuses to think badly of him because she sees him as “nice.” Her instinct, based on their early, developing friendship and the moral relationship she sees Simon has with his sister, turns out to be accurate as Simon's niceness and goodness is confirmed over and over again in the series.

Having brought up feminist ethics, it is important to note the sexist relationship that Mal has with Inara, in spite of the love interest between them. While Mal and Inara may have unrequited feelings for each other, their outward relationship is a business one: Mal rents a shuttle to Inara and brings her to ports where she works as a “Companion” (an escort in a universe that respects escorts who are part of the escort guild, as Inara is). Their agreement is mutually beneficial: because Mal has a companion on board, his ship is able to travel to certain planets that would be inaccessible were not for Inara’s escorting business. Yet, Inara, for her part of the deal, makes explicit demands: her shuttle is her home on the ship and Mal must respect her space (he cannot enter without permission) and he is not to call her a “whore” (Inara states these rules quite explicitly in “Out of Gas,” where their initial agreement is displayed). In spite of their mutually beneficial and consensual business arrangement, Mal repeatedly and disdainfully ignores these rules. Throughout the series, he enters her shuttle without permission, and he often calls her a “whore” or refers to her work as “whoring.”

Mal’s treatment of Inara allows for a discussion about sexism in relationships, and the ways in which we may overlook immoral activity in certain scenarios. Mal is an otherwise likeable character. The viewers, our students included, are meant to root for Mal as the hero of the show. Further, Mal and Inara clearly have romantic feelings for each other, and both of them are surely trying to mask those feelings. While the heights of immoral and bigoted behavior—where individuals approach evil—are easily spotted, most of us are more endangered by being immoral because life is complicated and we have confused feelings. Mal is being unfair to Inara by not accepting her boundaries and by using a word as awful as “whore,” and we can discuss whether his unfairness amounts to sexism (I would argue it does). Importantly though, his behavior is most useful for moral discussion because we like Mal, we understand that his feelings are complex, and many students will see the potential for themselves acting similarly. Yet, these facts do not seem like acceptable excuses for treating Inara like a “whore.”

As we can see, the characters on *Firefly* provide numerous opportunities to explore moral theories and issues. As philosophy teachers, we can point to specific stories, fleshed out characters, and details that the students are able to explore on their own. Instead of often used philosophy examples, whose entire stories occur in a few paragraphs or minutes, these TV episodes encourage the students to debate with other, salient examples, bring in their own analyses and interpretations, and to be invested in their learning insofar as they are invested in the characters and the show.

III. Teaching Existentialism in “Objects in Space”

As a final example, it is worth discussing the one episode of *Firefly* that Joss Whedon purposely used to explore a philosophical theory. “Objects in Space” is Joss Whedon’s attempt to discuss existentialism (DVD Audio Commentary). In some ways he succeeds and in others he comes up short, but the episode is entirely engaging in a way that allows students to actively discuss the strengths and problems of a philosophical theory.

“Objects in Space” (S.1 E.14) was the final episode of the TV series *Firefly* before it was canceled, and revolves around a bounty hunter, Jubal Early, who has boarded Serenity to capture River Tam. Jubal and River provide distinct existential perspectives throughout the episode as the battle rages aboard Serenity over the safety of River and the crew. I assign two articles for discussing this episode: Lyle Zynda’s “We’re All Just Floating in Space” and David Baggett’s “*Firefly* and Freedom.” These essays clearly discuss the existentialist themes of the episode, but they differ on whether the episode successfully illustrates existentialism. Therefore, the episode plus these essays provide an excellent standpoint for a debate about existentialism.

The episode begins with a fairly straightforward expression of existentialist thought, which Whedon claims is largely derived from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (DVD Audio Commentary). River has picked up a gun, but she refuses to infuse it with negative or violent properties. Instead, River sees the gun as an object that is as innocent as a tree branch (and it is as a tree branch that we the viewers initially experience it). Yet, the rest of the crew are somewhat puzzled and significantly frightened by River’s seemingly playful attitude towards the gun. The rest of the crew, then, can only experience the gun as a gun. They lack the existentialist attitude that the object is theirs to define and impute meaning to. As River explains, “It’s just an object. It doesn’t mean what you think” (“Objects in Space”).

Thus, Whedon intentionally uses this scene to exhibit existentialist thought: it is up to River to determine how she understands the gun, whereas the others are unable to escape the socially designated meaning of the gun. Yet, the other character who exhibits existentialist thought, the bounty hunter Jubal Early, does so in a much less benign fashion. In perhaps the most terrifying moment of the episode (and really the series), Jubal sees Kaylee’s body as an object that he can imbue with any meaning of his choosing: “Ain’t nothing but a body to me. And I can find all unseemly manner of use for it” (“Objects in Space”). While River can impose an innocent meaning on a gun, Jubal imposes a horrifying meaning on Kaylee’s body.

What is pedagogically useful with this contrast is that the two critics who wrote about the episode each use the contrasting existentialist characters to draw opposing conclusions. Lyle Zynda believes that Jubal Early’s existentialist thought is symbolic of existential despair or even existential dread (91-92). Insofar as the objects of the world are not already laden with meaning, there’s a certain hopelessness and potential meaninglessness to Jubal’s experience of the world. He sees a room, a ship, or even a woman’s body (again, note the connections that can be made to feminist theory here) as objects that he must confront as alien and undefined. Yet, River, for Zynda, finds joy in the absurdity: the meaninglessness of the world opens it up for River’s free choice to create and define the world as she sees fit (94). So, while Jubal represents the downside of existentialism (the dread), River represents the positive: the transcendence of the absurdity (94).

David Baggett, however, interprets the River/Jubal contrast very differently. While Baggett agrees that Whedon wishes to present River as the preferable existentialist thinker, Baggett doubts that existentialism allows Whedon to make this move (15). Instead, Baggett believes that Whedon is helping himself to a kind of objectivist moral standard that will not fit within existentialist theory. This tension leads Baggett to think that Whedon is not as much of an existentialist as Whedon might think, precisely because he is committed to a sufficiently rich sense of objective morality (15-17). Thus, for Baggett, Jubal's supposedly immoral existentialism is neither better nor worse than River's supposedly moral existentialism.

What is significant about these distinct interpretations is that Zynda and Baggett set up a debate that students can engage in through referencing the show. We supplement our discussions about morality on *Firefly* now with a discussion of whether Whedon can help himself to those moral considerations while constructing an existentialist episode. Since the final episode of the series is a purposeful attempt to exhibit a philosophical theory (existentialism), it makes for a perfect closing of the course's discussion of *Firefly*. The students are prepared to take issues from political philosophy, moral theory, and now existentialism, and debate their various interpretations of the theories and the show, in an attempt to display the knowledge they gained from watching *Firefly*.

IV. Conclusion

We began with the idea that science fiction provides a method to supplement philosophical discussion and understanding through creative, plausible, and fully fleshed out examples. In particular, we are especially aided in the teaching of philosophy through science fiction that allows us to explain theories and ideas in ways that engage and excite the students.

Here, I have discussed how I use *Firefly* to teach students political philosophy, ethical theory, and existentialism. In part, this show works because Joss Whedon and his team of writers, actors, and crew have put together a show that is intellectually rich and yet still entirely entertaining. Although I have concentrated on *Firefly*, I have taught, with much success, many of Joss Whedon's TV shows and movies, including *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Dollhouse*, and "Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog." These shows and movies have enabled me to reach students on topics as widespread as feminist theory, ethics, existentialism, political philosophy, philosophy of law, and philosophy of race (the last of which connects to a much needed critique of Whedon's weakness when it comes to a plethora of racial issues). I believe my experiences exhibit some of the ways in which we can use science fiction to enliven philosophical issues in the classroom.



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