

Shepherd Book: Gadfly of Serenity

The Influence of Socrates and Kierkegaard in *Firefly*

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Abstract

Joss Whedon's fascination with existential philosophy is seen in many of his works, including the TV series *Firefly* and subsequent movie, *Serenity*. While existentialism is a comparatively modern philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard, one of its founders, took inspiration from the ancient philosopher, Socrates. Kierkegaard employed Socrates' method of dialogue while engaging with, and criticizing, his own 19th century Danish society. The Socratic method is characterized by incisive questioning of fundamental assumptions, without offering any solutions. The influence of Kierkegaard is clear through the entire series of *Firefly*, but it is especially evident in the character of Shepherd Book. Using Socratic dialogue, this man of God with a mysterious past encouraged others to examine their own belief systems. Shepherd Book offered little dogmatic preaching, but rather questioned the presuppositions of other crewmembers and allowed them to search out truth for themselves. Although often in the background, Shepherd Book had a significant role during pivotal moments of the series, either as a peacekeeper or Socratic figure. This essay will explore the scenes in which Shepherd Book utilized Socratic dialogue and will demonstrate how this impacted the plot progression and character development of the crew. Just as Socrates and Kierkegaard helped shape the future of their societies, Shepherd Book had a unique part in the unfolding story of *Firefly*.

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Shepherd Book is introduced as a conventional religious figure, but he quickly becomes an essential character onboard *Serenity*. He not only acts as a mediator in pivotal moments of conflict, but he is also the catalyst for internal tension in other characters. In his role as a moral guide for the crew of *Serenity*, he often forces others to confront their own inconsistent values. He is neither a religious prig unable to consider other perspectives, nor a coward without any personal convictions. For example, though Captain Mal was certain Shepherd Book would be offended by Inara's occupation, his response was very different. Rather than ostracizing Inara, Shepherd Book shows sympathy and concern by bringing dinner to her cabin after she had an argument with Mal. Despite her profession, he treats her like the other crewmembers, in contrast to Captain Mal's own oscillation between mockery and admiration for Inara. Shepherd Book's method of engaging with the characters of *Firefly* is similar to the style of two influential philosophers of the western world, Socrates and Kierkegaard. This essay will discuss the similarities between Shepherd Book and Socrates while demonstrating Kierkegaard's role as a link between Socrates and the modern school of existentialism, which has influenced much of Joss Whedon's work. Firstly, the character and method of Socrates will be outlined, and then Kierkegaard's use of the Socratic method will be described. After establishing what it means to be a Socratic figure, both abstractly and concretely through Kierkegaard, the use of the Socratic method by Shepherd Book will be illustrated through scene examples. And finally, the significance of a Socratic figure for the plot development of *Firefly* will be explored.

Socrates

In his defense before the jury of Athens, Plato (1999) said Socrates likened the 4th century B.C. Athenian society to a “great and noble steed” and likened himself to a gadfly, given by God to the city for the task of, “arousing and persuading and reproaching” them. While this was a somewhat self-deprecating title, there were others in Athens who would have gladly used this as a derogatory label for Socrates. Throughout the centuries, Socrates—what little we know of him—has been admired and imitated. But like many great figures throughout history, his fame came after death, and for Socrates death came in the form of execution. Accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and unwilling to conform to their demands of orthodoxy, he preferred death than a life of compromised truth. As Kierkegaard (1989) writes, “The Athenians could take his life—to this he would submit—but an acquittal on the condition that he give up this divine mission he would never accept, since that would be an attempt to murder him in an intellectual and spiritual sense” (p. 173). No original work by Socrates exists; all that is known of him comes from the works of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon. While these sources lack many details about his personal life, they give a broad sense of Socrates as a philosopher. The texts describe different facets of Socrates, and through the varied perspectives of each, a more accurate portrait of Socrates can be seen.

Aristophanes portrayed a caricature of Socrates in his comedy play, *The Clouds*. When one of the characters visits Socrates’ prestigious school, a student recounts to him Socrates’ latest endeavors. He said that Socrates saw someone bitten by a flea and wondered, “How many times the length of its legs does a flea jump?” When the guest inquired as to how Socrates resolved this question, the student explained, “Oh! It was most ingenious! He melted some wax,

seized the flea and dipped its two feet in the wax, which, when cooled, left them shod with true Persian slippers. These he took off and with them measured the distance” (Aristophanes, 2001).

In *The Clouds*, Socrates is described as the stereotypical intellectual, wasting time with irrelevant questions and heedless to the concerns of the real world.

Conversely, Xenophon shows a Socrates who is primarily concerned with giving practical help. His Socrates is most interested in the doings of other people. While this is certainly an oversimplification, Xenophon’s portrayal of Socrates leans more towards a moralizing busybody than the traditional view of Socrates seen through Plato. At the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy database, Eve Browning (2014) writes, “In contrast to Plato’s Socrates, who is committed to ‘follow the argument wherever, like a wind, it may lead us’ (Plato, Republic 394D), Xenophon’s Socrates strives always to send his conversation partners away with some nuggets of practical advice which they may put to use right away” (p. 1). This description of Socrates is more approachable and likeable than those recorded by Aristophanes or Plato, but it cannot be assumed to be a completely accurate description of Socrates.

While Xenophon’s Socrates tries to give practical help, Plato depicts a Socrates committed to searching out the truth. He describes in detail Socrates’ persistent questioning and the resulting uncertainty left with his interlocutor. One of Plato’s early dialogues, *Euthyphro*, gives us insight into a typical conversation that Socrates would hold with members of Athens. This dialogue takes place while Socrates and Euthyphro are standing in line together at the Athens court of law. Euthyphro makes a comment about his own admirable understanding of piety—specifically his piety as a respectful son. However, when questioned as to his business at the court, Euthyphro says that he is taking up a case against his father. The incongruity of this claim strikes Socrates, and he begins to question Euthyphro as to what “piety” means to him.

Socrates takes the position of an ignorant student, humbly asking Euthyphro to enlighten him on this concept. However, Euthyphro is unable to satisfy his student's insatiable curiosity. Like an inquisitive child who insists on asking, "why?" to every answer given—ad infinitum—Socrates' keen use of logic overturns every answer Euthyphro offers him. Euthyphro suggests every common definition of "piety," only to have Socrates question it out of validity. Euthyphro, exhausted by his attempts to satisfy Socrates, finally gives the classic excuse, "I have something urgent I must attend to," and flees from Socrates' questioning. While Aristophanes' portrayal is extreme, yet humorous, and Xenophon's depiction is familiar and conventional, Plato's Socrates is, at best, exasperating. These are the primary original sources for understanding Socrates, and in the scope of this paper, the perspective shown by Plato will be the main reference since it is Plato's view of Socrates that most strongly influenced Kierkegaard. There are two primary characteristics of Socrates as recorded in Plato's Dialogues that are relevant to this topic.

Socratic Characteristics

Firstly, he is a negative figure. This can be seen in the dialogue with Euthyphro referenced earlier. Socrates persists in asking deceptively simple questions that undermine Euthyphro's fundamental beliefs. The dialogue is centered on Socrates' questions, and by the end he demolishes Euthyphro's shallow conception of "piety". Euthyphro is left with nothing, and so he flees, quite literally. At no point does Socrates attempt to actually answer the question, "what is piety?" Instead he is focused on making sure Euthyphro realizes his own presuppositions are *not* what piety is. Socrates is only interested in tearing down the preconceived ideas of society, but he leaves the individual to rebuild a belief system for himself. This specific concept of being unable to give an answer is called *aporia*. It is defined as "being at

a loss.” In this example, Euthyphro is reduced to *aporia* and escapes the onslaught of questioning by contriving an excuse. *Aporia* is an essential element of a Socratic dialogue and describes the result of an interaction with a negative figure, such as Socrates. The goal of a Socratic figure is to leave the interlocutor in a state of *aporia*—being unable to give an answer.

Secondly, Socrates uses the framework of *maieutics* when questioning others. *Maieutics* is the conviction that every person is capable of finding the truth within him or herself, but they often need someone to help them bring forth those truths. The word is derived from the Greek term for midwifery. While a woman has the inherent capability to bring new life into the world, a midwife is needed to assist. Likewise, Socrates assisted others into bringing forth knowledge from within their own minds. An example of this is seen in the dialogue, *Theaetetus*, wherein Socrates leads a slave boy to discover truths of geometry—demonstrating the concept that even those ignorant in a subject can discover the truth from within themselves.

In conclusion, a Socratic figure is someone who engages in questioning for the purpose of destroying presuppositions, but is also someone who does not offer the truth. Instead, they use dialogue to facilitate the discovery of truth from within their interlocutor. The Socratic figure is, therefore, a negative figure—only tearing down assumptions and offering no answers in return—and will leave their interlocutor at a loss for answers until they find the truth within.

Søren Kierkegaard

The 19th century saw a revival of interest in the ancient writers and thinkers. It became popular within intellectual circles to read and then engage in discussion about the old philosophers. Kierkegaard was part of the Danish Golden Age, an era of artistic, scientific, and intellectual productivity. Jon Stewart (2005) notes, “There was never an independent

philosophical tradition in Denmark prior to the Golden Age, and thus it is no surprise that the country's philosophy even during the first half of the 19th century was largely derivative, being dominated primarily by the then recent trends in German thought" (p. 5). This changed during the Danish Golden Age though; Kierkegaard and his Danish contemporaries, such as Martensen and Heiberg, made their own noteworthy contributions to the academic world. However, Kierkegaard—like Socrates—seemed to become more popular after his death. But his passion for dismantling socially and religiously imposed structures of thought is a concept that appeals to a wide range of thinkers, from Christian theologians to nihilist philosophers.

Kierkegaard was born in 1813, in Copenhagen, Denmark. He attended a respected school as a child and went on to study philosophy and theology at the Copenhagen University. His few visits to Berlin, where he heard lectures from the greatest philosophers of his time, were important for his intellectual development. Kierkegaard inherited his father's sense of melancholy, almost bordering on fatalism. Kierkegaard's father was convinced that all his children would die by the age of 34 (the age of Christ when He died), perhaps as punishment for having borne a child with their mother out of wedlock. This prophecy, which held true for all but two of the seven children, gave Kierkegaard a sense of urgency in his own work. Kierkegaard became romantically involved with a young woman, Regine Olsen, but then broke off their engagement after much angst and turmoil. He was driven by the need to sacrifice his personal gratification for the sake of spiritual growth. This was a defining event for Kierkegaard and its influence can be seen in many of his works. Kierkegaard died in 1855, at the age of 42.

Socrates' Influence on Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard first began exploring Socrates and his use of irony in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. The first part of this work deals with Socrates as an historical figure. There was much debate in academia at the time about the varying portraits of Socrates described by Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato. Kierkegaard takes his own position on this and gives an interpretation of the original sources. He goes on to examine more closely the work of Socrates. Referring to Socrates' *maieutic* approach, Kierkegaard (1989) says, "He went around to each one individually in order to find out if that person had a sound position...his activity was intended...to wrest from them what they had" (p. 175). Later on he writes, "Socrates did not stop with a philosophical consideration of mankind; he addressed himself to each one individually, wrested everything away from him and sent him away empty-handed" (Kierkegaard, p. 173). Socrates was a negative figure who undermined the presuppositions people held, and then left them to build a new framework for themselves. The Sophists, Socrates' antithesis in Athens, claimed they were the source of knowledge. In comparing Socrates and the Sophists, Kierkegaard (1989) writes, "If the Sophists had an answer for everything, then he could pose questions; if the Sophists knew everything, then he knew nothing at all" (p. 210). This, again, highlights the negativity of Socrates' character. But Kierkegaard's interest in Socrates was not purely academic; he also wanted to exemplify the Socratic method in his interactions with society.

Just as Socrates spoke out against the religious establishment of his time, Kierkegaard spent much of his life criticizing the Danish church. He thought the modern Christian authorities in Denmark had abandoned the original foundation of the Christian faith. The church required trust in objective truth as taught by the church itself, whereas Kierkegaard felt the subjective knowledge found within oneself was the source of true faith. He writes, "The thing is to find a

truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die” (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 19). Kierkegaard’s response to the Danish church, which maintained that their objective knowledge was a requirement for Christian faith, parallels Socrates’ response to the Sophists who insisted on being the source of truth for Greek society. Kierkegaard thought this dogmatic attitude threatened the essence of Christianity. Since Kierkegaard’s critique of the Danish church centered on its insistence as the only source of objective knowledge, he looked to Socrates as his model for engaging with the church. Kierkegaard (1855) writes, “The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it means to be a Christian” (p. 341). Just as Socrates challenged his own polytheistic Greek culture, Kierkegaard took a negative position towards Christianity by leading his readers to question the established church without offering them any positive answers.

To conclude this section, the Socratic method is characterized by a negative approach to the established truths of a society. Rather than suggesting an alternative view, a Socratic figure helps others come to the realization that their presuppositions are not as stable and irrefutable as they had assumed. This method is seen originally in the dialogues of Socrates, and also in the life and works of Søren Kierkegaard.

Socrates and Shepherd Book

With the Socratic framework established, we can analyze the character of Shepherd Book in relation to both Socrates and Kierkegaard. There are specific scenes and quotes from Shepherd Book that demonstrate his role as a Socratic figure. In addition, there are common themes between Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Shepherd Book, which suggest their similarity of purpose.

Scene Examples

Shepherd Book is introduced to the audience through his conversation with Kaylee. Captain Mal assigns her to find some passengers for *Serenity* while they are on Persephone. She notices the aimless wandering of Shepherd Book and decides he is a promising customer. After she points out that he doesn't seem to have any particular destination or purpose in mind, Shepherd Book explains that, "...how you get there is the worthier part." His purpose is not the promotion of an established idea, but rather the journey towards greater understanding. And while Captain Mal is convinced that the Shepherd is aboard to make converts, Shepherd Book is surprisingly neutral for being a religious figure. His lack of overt preaching is consistent with his remarks to Kaylee in this scene, for he is not venturing into the world to promote a religious cause; he is searching out the truth himself.

At the end of the first episode, we see Shepherd Book experiencing his own type of existential crisis. The encounter with Dobson, the story of Simon and River Tam, and his own involvement in that conflict, left the Shepherd questioning his preconceived values. He confesses to Inara, "I've been out of the abbey two days, I've beaten a lawman senseless, I've fallen in with criminals. I watched the captain shoot the man I swore to protect. And I'm not even sure if I think he was wrong." When he wonders if he ended up on the wrong ship, Inara suggests that he is exactly where he ought to be. While Shepherd Book serves as a Socratic figure for other characters, he is also undergoing the loss of foundational assumptions about life. This is most obvious in Episode 1, where Shepherd Book embarks on a journey that he hopes will give him new insight, but struggles to make sense of the events he witnesses, and participates in. The reality of life outside the abbey forces him to reconsider his presuppositions about life, just as he will encourage others to question their preconceived values.

In Episode 2, *Train Job*, Shepherd Book and Captain Mal have a conversation about their problematic passengers, Simon and River Tam. Up to this point, Captain Mal maintained a renegade persona. He wants to be known as the rebel—the unpredictable bad guy who is only out to make a profit. To him, morality means weakness. The imposition of moral standards is synonymous with the Alliance—an institution he tries desperately to escape. But Shepherd Book bluntly asks why he has decided to harbor these high-profile fugitives, when he'd have a better chance of staying off the Alliance radar without them. At first Captain Mal tries to keep up his self-serving identity by saying, “Same reason I took you on board, Shepherd. I need the fare.” But after Shepherd Book points out that Simon Tam doesn't have a chance of compensating the Captain for all the trouble he's caused, Captain Mal finally says, “Only 'cause it's the right thing to do.” Of course, keeping with his character, Captain Mal is unable to say anything serious without making light of it, so this admittance of moral qualms is delivered with a tone of mockery, but there is no other way to make sense of his kindness towards Simon and River. As the series goes on, his “devil-may-care” attitude is contrasted by his obviously strong, though independent, sense of morality. This decision to harbor Simon and River, while surprising to the viewers at first, is consistent with his character.

However, in this scene, Shepherd Book penetrates the Captain's persona of reckless self-serving values and forces Mal to face the reality that he does value doing what is right. For a man who tries so hard to rebel against the established system of government—and morality—this could be devastating. Since the Battle of Serenity Valley he has been on a quest to leave the rules of society behind, and suddenly he must confront the remnants of morality left in his own value system. He is rebel enough to disregard the Alliance—but not rebel enough to abandon a couple

strangers who can only bring trouble for *Serenity*. Through the conversation with Shepherd Book, Captain Mal wrestles with the conflict of values within himself.

In Episode 3, *Bushwacked*, the crew comes upon what appears to be an abandoned ship. Wash and Zoe explain that it is the type of ship often used to transport settlers to the frontier—the space equivalent of a wagon train. Shepherd Book is immediately concerned about the wellbeing of the settlers. He first suggests that they alert the Alliance, but Captain Mal cynically remarks that the Feds have no interest in rushing out to the frontier to help their taxpayers. Jayne comments that the Shepherd can say a prayer for the settlers as they “slide by.” Undaunted, Shepherd Book mentions the story of the Good Samaritan, to which the Captain promptly assures him they’ll stop to look at the ship. But Captain Mal’s decision was not purely altruistic; he recognized the opportunity for plunder if there were no survivors aboard the vessel.

This dialogue highlights the tension between civilized life and life on the frontier. On the “home” planets, there was always some authority to call, but on the border, there’s no 911 service. It is a place devoid of traditional values and authority structures. It is this absolute freedom that attracted Captain Mal, ever the rebel. But if there is no ethical system imposed by the state or society, then individuals must create their own system. For Captain Mal, the tension between altruism and narcissism is resolved through an uneasy synthesis. In the rough world of the frontier, there is no place for idealistic “do-gooders.” If you don’t look out for yourself, you won’t last long. But Captain Mal tries to balance out these contradictory value systems, as in this scene. Shepherd Book keeps insisting that he do what is right. And while doing what is right on the frontier is different than what someone would have done on the home planets, Captain Mal must decide what he stands for. Through the conversation with Shepherd Book, he must confront his contradictory values and make a choice about how he ought to act in this particular situation.

In Episode 7, *Jaynestown*, most of the crew is occupied with the surprise of finding Jayne to be the hero of a small town, which is populated primarily by serfs or slave labor. Shepherd Book stays on *Serenity* with River Tam while the story of Jayne's accidental heroic feats transpires. River finds the Shepherd's Bible and determines to "fix it" for him, explaining the multitude of weaknesses she found within the text. Shepherd Book gently corrects her by saying, "It's not about making sense. It's about believing in something and letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about faith. You don't fix faith, River. It fixes you." This parallels Kierkegaard's concept of faith and its role in a person's life as quoted previously, "The thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die" (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 19). And later in the same paragraph, Kierkegaard elaborates, "Of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity, to be able to explain many specific points—if it had no deeper meaning for me and for my life?...I certainly do not deny that I still accept an imperative of knowledge and that through it people can be influenced, but then it must come alive in me, and this is what I now recognize as the most important thing" (ibid). They both see faith as a transformative and personal acceptance of an idea as truth for that individual. Belief is not simply conformance to the established belief system, but rather the active reception of a belief that becomes relevant on a personal level. Faith, for Kierkegaard and Shepherd Book, is not simply a socially imposed framework of morality, but rather a personally found belief in something that is real and meaningful to the individual.

Common Socratic Themes in *Firefly*

Beyond these specific scene examples, there are common themes between the personalities of Shepherd Book, Kierkegaard, and Socrates. One of these themes is their position

on the outskirts of an established religious community. Socrates' questioning of the polytheistic Greek society led to his execution. Kierkegaard spent his life criticizing the Danish church of his day. While Shepherd Book's background was unfortunately not fully explored, his departure from the abbey suggests that his values were not entirely aligned with the established church. He seems to have no loyalty to the existing religious structure, preferring to live in accordance with his personal beliefs. Even from the brief mentions of his past, it is clear that his backstory includes much more than a quiet life at the abbey. None of these characters fit the standard for religious figures in their society; rather, they transcended the conventions and defined themselves by their own value system.

In addition, Shepherd Book rarely brings attention to the knowledge and skills he has that do not come with training as a religious figure. For example, in the movie *Serenity*, when the crew reunites with Shepherd Book to seek shelter from the Alliance, Book points out to Mal that the Alliance will not come with an army. Their search for River Tam is a stealth mission and they will send an operative. Book goes into detail about how the Alliance will come at them "sideways"—leading Mal to comment on how he gained this knowledge of Alliance techniques if he had spent his life in the abbey. However, this is a rare disclosure of his knowledge, it is not often that he involves himself in *Serenity*'s conflicts to the point of revealing his familiarity with combat. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard points out the double-sided irony of Socrates' dialogues. Firstly, it is ironic because Socrates claims to be ignorant of a subject, when he is in reality quite learned on the topic. It is secondly ironic because Socrates treated his interlocutor as an expert when he usually was ignorant of it, such as in the dialogue with Euthyphro. We see a similar irony in Shepherd Book because he often assumes the role of a Shepherd who would have no knowledge helpful in battle or conflict. But occasionally it is revealed that he does have

much experience and knowledge in these areas where he claims ignorance. The assumption of ignorance is a theme of ironic or Socratic dialogues and Shepherd Book often typifies this attribute.

To summarize, the influence of Socrates and Kierkegaard on Shepherd Book is seen in his own search for knowledge and his passion for enabling others to reach a greater understanding of truth. His lack of dogmatic evangelizing and his empathy for characters with different value systems sets him apart from the stereotypical religious figure.

The Relevance of a Socratic Figure

Rather than having a simple and formulaic place in the story, Shepherd Book's role in the plot of *Firefly* is both conciliatory and contentious. He is both a peacemaker and a troublemaker. While others, such as Jayne, are motivated by personal gain, Shepherd Book's actions are motivated by his desire to identify and do what is right. Though the discovery of what is right may be a rough journey, as it was for Shepherd Book in the first episode, it is this desire for self-awareness and the pursuit of justice that propels Book.

During the fight between Dobson, Simon, and Captain Mal in the first episode, Book attempts to de-escalate the situation several times by interjecting comments such as, "I think everybody could stand to calm down a bit." While the emotions begin to get out of hand for the other characters, Shepherd Book maintains a calm appearance. However, as Dobson and Mal continue to ignore him, his frustration with the situation grows, eventually shouting, "Everybody just stop it! Stop it!" Shepherd Book gives commentary on the escalating situation; his position as a self-imposed mediator contrasts the growing strain between the other characters. In Episode 6, *Our Mrs. Reynolds*, Shepherd Book insists that the "marriage" between Saffron and Mal is

technically valid according to the religious customs of the planet, much to the Captain's dismay. But he also insists that Mal take no advantage of the girl he plans to divorce. This adds a level of tension—and humor—when the girl seduces Captain Mal as part of her scheme to take control of *Serenity*. In Episode 12, *The Message*, after the Captain brings the body of his war partner, Tracey, aboard, he discovers the story is much more complicated than the simple and tragic farewell speech ostensibly recorded by Tracey before his death. Shepherd Book realizes the lawmen pursuing the stowaway, Tracey, for his smuggled internal organs are outside their jurisdiction after noticing their lack of contact with the local authorities. This insight gives the crew a crucial advantage over the Alliance, although Tracey doesn't trust them to keep him safe, and ends up dead. Shepherd Book demonstrates a unique sense of logic and empathy. He is knowledgeable enough to notice key details, such as the radio silence between the Alliance and the local authorities, but empathetic enough to mediate highly-charged situations, unlike Captain Mal.

His pointed questions force the other characters to grapple with their deepest desires and motivations. He is a voice of reason when the temper of Captain Mal begins to overpower his judgment. Shepherd Book serves as the balance to each character by highlighting the antithesis of their personal propensities. When Captain Mal is swept away by his glorious and unrealistically grand ideas, Shepherd Book is practical and pragmatic. When Jayne becomes infatuated with his desire for personal gratification, Shepherd Book reminds him of a higher standard for life. He immediately notices the tension in Mal and Inara's relationship and probes her about her attraction to Mal. Although she typically tries to deny anything more than a professional relationship, this cover slips away during a conversation with Shepherd Book. Shepherd Book not only grounds the other characters when they begin to lose their way, but he

simultaneously propels them forward to greater self-knowledge. In the manner of a Socratic figure, he encourages them to seek out the truth that will be true for them. As he tells Captain Mal in the follow-up movie, *Serenity*, “Why when I talk about belief, do you always assume I'm talking about God?” And in his poignant dying words to the Captain, Shepherd Book insists, “...I don't care what you believe in, just believe in it.”

Conclusion

Joss Whedon's fascination with existentialism is seen through the entire *Firefly* series. It is particularly obvious in Episode 8, *Out of Gas*, Episode 12, *The Message*, Episode 14, *Objects in Space*, and the follow-up movie, *Serenity*. This series confronts the questions of existence, identity, and purpose in a world that seems void of meaning. Quoting Shakespeare's raving Prince of Denmark, in a world that is “a sound and a fury, signifying nothing,” how can you find significance for your existence? This was a concern for Kierkegaard as he witnessed the alienation of the modern age. The technology and advancements of modernity have made our world so much bigger—but at what cost? Kierkegaard suspected that we might begin to lose sense of ourselves in a world so vast. Erik Hanson (2012), in an anthology about Kierkegaard writes, “Modernity, Kierkegaard observes, has become obsessed with the opinion of the crowd, with the result that there were no longer any individuals” (p. 116). The concerns of Kierkegaard in the 18th century are all the more relevant in the futuristic world of 2517. We can relate to his concerns in our modern society, but Joss Whedon portrays a future where this alienation has only intensified. He contrasts the estrangement of cosmopolitan life on the home planets with the emptiness facing the crew of *Serenity* on the fringe of civilization. This is a place where all comfortable pretenses and presuppositions are stripped away. It is a place where people are forced to deal with the seeming absurdity of their own life. The legend of the Reavers, people

who went mad by staring into the void, seems believable to those looking into the same nothingness. The edge of space is a fitting place to confront our finite existence and Joss Whedon takes full advantage of this by allowing his characters to face their humanity in poignant and sometimes disconcerting situations.

Each of the Socratic figures discussed here had their own theme or core question that drove their life. For Socrates, it was the question, “what does it mean to be human?” For Kierkegaard, it was the question, “what does it mean to be a Christian?” And it seems that Shepherd Book’s driving question was, “what does it mean to do what is right?” These figures wrestled with the questions of existence, belief, and ethics in the hope that we would likewise consider the fundamental issues that determine the course of our own lives.

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