

Spike's Journey: From Nietzschean Übermensch to Kantian Moral Agent

October 24, 2025

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Abstract

This paper examines Spike's character development across Buffy the Vampire Slayer seasons 2-7 as a philosophical transformation from a failed Nietzschean Übermensch to an authentic moral agent. Initially presenting Übermensch characteristics through his rejection of conventional vampire behavior and embrace of individualistic values, Spike's deeper motivations reveal him as fundamentally driven by resentment rather than genuine self-creation of values, marking him as exemplifying Nietzschean slave morality despite surface appearances. The behavioral chip implanted in Season 4 functions as an external moral constraint that paradoxically enables exploration of vampire moral capacity without soul restoration, operating as what can be termed a "neutering device" that parallels Christian moral frameworks. Spike's ultimate decision to seek a soul represents a fundamental shift from external to internal moral authority. The church confession scene in "Beneath You" (7x02) crystallizes this transformation, where Spike confesses not his vampire crimes but his choice to become "a kind of man," embracing moral responsibility through self-imposed rather than externally compelled constraints. This evolution demonstrates movement from Nietzschean self-assertion toward Kantian moral agency based on duty and rational will, suggesting that authentic moral development requires both recognition of universal moral law and personal commitment to ethical action.

Introduction

Joss Whedon's Buffy the Vampire Slayer consistently challenges traditional moral binaries, nowhere more complexly than in the character arc of Spike (William the Bloody). From his introduction in "School Hard" (2x03) as a swaggering vampire who declares "I love

to brag!” to his soul-tortured confession in “Beneath You” (7x02), Spike undergoes what can be understood as a profound philosophical transformation. This paper argues that Spike’s journey represents a movement from a failed attempt at Nietzschean *Übermensch* status—revealed as fundamentally rooted in resentment and therefore exemplifying slave morality—toward authentic Kantian moral agency achieved through the voluntary acquisition of a soul and subsequent embrace of duty-based ethics.

The Illusion of the *Übermensch*: Spike’s Initial Philosophical Position

When Spike first appears in Sunnydale, he seems to embody many characteristics of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* ideal. He explicitly rejects the conventional vampire hierarchy, dismissing the Anointed One’s followers as he declares, “Do you know what I find works real good with Slayers? Killing them.” His casual violence and embrace of chaos appear to represent a rejection of traditional moral frameworks in favor of self-created values. Unlike other vampires who show deference to ancient hierarchies, Spike creates his own moral universe centered on the pursuit of “a good fight.”

This apparent *Übermensch* status becomes more complex when contrasted with Angel’s moral framework. Where Angel embodies what might be termed a Christian guilt complex—his soul providing him with remorse and moral constraint—Spike initially appears free from such limitations. His declaration that “we’re vampires” when criticized for drawing attention suggests a character who has moved beyond good and evil in the Nietzschean sense, creating his own value system based on authentic vampiric nature rather than human moral categories.

However, the flashback sequences in “Fool for Love” (5x07) reveal the fundamental flaw in this interpretation. William’s transformation into Spike is not driven by authentic self-creation but by profound resentment stemming from social rejection. When Cecily declares “You’re beneath me,” she establishes a power dynamic that will define Spike’s entire vampiric existence. His subsequent obsession with slayers—“the women at the top of the food chain”—represents not transcendence of human values but their inversion, a classic example of what Nietzsche identified as slave morality’s resentful response to perceived superiority.

The Chip as External Moral Constraint: Exploring Vampire Moral Capacity

The behavioral modification chip implanted in Season 4 creates what can be understood as a “neutering device” that fundamentally alters Spike’s relationship to moral choice. As one character observes, “Nietzsche would argue that Christianity and slave morality is a neutering device exactly in the same way that the chip is.” This parallel illuminates how the chip functions not merely as a plot device but as a philosophical experiment in externally imposed moral constraint.

The chip enables exploration of vampire moral capacity without the metaphysical complications of soul restoration. Spike’s ability to hurt demons while being prevented from harming humans creates a moral framework that operates independently of internal conviction—he

becomes capable of heroic actions not through choice but through constraint. This external limitation paradoxically reveals internal capacities for empathy and moral reasoning that challenge the show's initial premise that vampires without souls are purely evil.

Significantly, Spike's empathetic abilities—his capacity to understand and manipulate others' emotions—become redirected toward protective rather than predatory ends. His relationship with Dawn and his growing integration into the Scooby Gang demonstrate that moral behavior can emerge from external constraints, even in the absence of internal moral conviction.

The Decision for Internal Moral Authority: Seeking the Soul

Spike's decision to seek a soul represents the crucial philosophical turning point from external to internal moral authority. This choice cannot be understood as merely romantic obsession with Buffy, though that provides the immediate motivation. Rather, it represents recognition that authentic moral agency requires internal rather than external constraint.

The significance of this decision lies not in its outcome but in its voluntary nature. Unlike Angel, whose soul was imposed as punishment, Spike actively chooses to acquire moral capacity. This choice demonstrates what Kant would recognize as the fundamental requirement of moral agency: the ability to act from duty rather than inclination, to choose moral constraint over unlimited freedom.

The Church Confession: Crystallizing Transformation

The church scene in "Beneath You" provides the clearest articulation of Spike's philosophical transformation. His confession—"to be the kind of man who would never—to be a kind of man"—reveals the depth of his moral evolution. Significantly, Spike confesses not his vampire crimes but his choice to acquire a soul, recognizing this decision as the act requiring moral accountability.

When Spike embraces the crucifix, allowing it to burn him as he declares "Can we rest now? Buffy... can we rest?", he demonstrates the movement from Nietzschean self-assertion to something approaching Kantian moral duty. The physical pain he accepts represents his willingness to embrace moral constraint as self-imposed rather than externally compelled. His question "Can we rest now?" suggests recognition that moral agency requires ongoing commitment rather than single transformative moments.

The church setting itself reinforces this philosophical shift. Where his initial vampiric transformation occurred in a dark alley driven by resentment and desire for power, his moral transformation occurs in sacred space through voluntary acceptance of moral responsibility. The contrast illuminates the movement from slave morality's resentful response to perceived superiority toward authentic moral agency based on recognition of universal moral law.

From Nietzschean Self-Assertion to Kantian Duty

Spike's completed character arc demonstrates movement from failed *Übermensch* status toward authentic moral agency grounded in Kantian rather than Nietzschean principles. His

final moral framework operates not through self-created values that transcend good and evil, but through recognition of universal moral duties that constrain individual will.

This transformation suggests that the show ultimately endorses a Kantian rather than Nietzschean approach to moral development. While Nietzschean self-creation of values might appear more authentic, Spike's journey demonstrates that such apparent authenticity can mask deeper forms of resentment and slave morality. True moral agency, the series suggests, requires both recognition of universal moral principles and personal commitment to ethical action—precisely the combination Kant identified as the foundation of moral duty.

The chip's role as external constraint that enables discovery of internal moral capacity parallels Kant's understanding of moral law as both constraining and liberating. Just as Kantian moral duty constrains individual inclination while enabling authentic moral choice, the chip constrains Spike's vampiric nature while revealing his capacity for moral reasoning and empathetic connection.

Conclusion

Spike's character development across *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represents one of television's most sophisticated explorations of moral philosophy in narrative form. His journey from apparent *Übermensch* to authentic moral agent reveals the limitations of purely Nietzschean approaches to ethics while demonstrating the possibility of genuine moral transformation through voluntary acceptance of constraint.

The series' treatment of Spike suggests that authentic moral development requires both external structures that enable moral discovery and internal commitment to ethical principles that transcend individual desire. His transformation from a resentment-driven vampire who inverted rather than transcended human values to a soul-bearing moral agent who accepts duty-based constraints offers a compelling argument for the necessity of both recognition of universal moral law and personal commitment to ethical action.

Ultimately, Spike's philosophical journey demonstrates that the path to authentic moral agency lies not in the Nietzschean transcendence of good and evil, but in the Kantian recognition that true freedom emerges through voluntary acceptance of moral duty. His confession "to be a kind of man" represents not limitation but liberation—the discovery that genuine authenticity requires not the rejection of moral constraint but its willing embrace.