

# Chapter 3

## Hunters, Warriors, Monsters

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Sam and Dean do a lot of killing. In fact, the Winchesters spend most of their time driving around the United States “killing as many evil sons of bitches” as they can. Normally, we think of killing as morally wrong, and under normal circumstances the amount of killing that Sam and Dean engage in is probably pathologically insane.<sup>1</sup> But, as we well know, the brothers don’t live in an ordinary world. For starters, their mother was murdered by a mysterious yellow-eyed demon when they were children, and while that doesn’t excuse everything they do, it was through this tragedy that they learned that horrific monsters do exist. Subsequently, they are brought up believing it’s *right* to hunt them all down.

As hunters, Sam and Dean kill monsters because such creatures pose a threat to the lives of innocent people. But matters aren’t that simple; Sam and Dean are confronted with a complex array of moral issues in killing. Although they frequently deliberate on the ethics of killing, the moral principles by which the Winchesters justify these actions are sometimes ambiguous. Things get really murky morally when they find it necessary to kill innocent humans. In fact, the ongoing conflict the Winchesters have with certain types of monsters in *Supernatural* might be better described as warfare rather than hunting. Often times, Sam and Dean display behavior and attitudes toward killing that calls to question whether “hunters” is the appropriate title for them at all.

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## **Eat it, *Twilight!***

Early on in *Supernatural* we learn that hunters are ordinary people who know of the hidden supernatural evil that exists in the world and choose to spend their lives fighting it. Hunting, as the name suggests, involves tracking down these creatures and figuring out a way to destroy them. There are three fundamentally important types of creature in *Supernatural*: monsters, spirits, and demons. Shapeshifters, for example, are a type of monster with the ability to mimic a person's physical appearance and access their thoughts. Spirits, on the other hand, are dangerous ghosts that have died violent deaths or are lashing out in revenge for other personal reasons. Finally, demons are creatures that escape Hell long enough to possess people and cause all varieties of havoc, sometimes purposeful and sometimes purely meaningless. Although there are many important differences among supernatural creatures, Sam and Dean use the generic term "monsters" as shorthand for categorizing all the creatures they hunt.<sup>2</sup>

For most hunters, the monstrous nature of these creatures makes them "evil" and justifies their being hunted. Since it is the nature of a monster to maim and kill innocent people, giving little or no thought to a person's humanity, hunters see it as their duty to kill such creatures to prevent the death of innocent victims. For the most part, hunters are really a lot more like exterminators than what we'd traditionally think of as hunters. Normally, we think of hunters as hunting for food, skins, or sport, but the hunters of *Supernatural* aren't ordinarily motivated to hunt monsters for any of these reasons. Even if a hunter enjoys their work, they probably wouldn't describe it as "sport." They certainly wouldn't eat the monster when they had killed it, and rarely do they take trophies from monsters to mount on their walls. Like most other exterminators, the hunters of *Supernatural* get rid of the monstrous pests and move on to the next job.

As hunters—or monster exterminators if you prefer—Sam and Dean are motivated to kill monsters in order to defend innocent people from being victims of those monsters. It follows, then, that

from a moral standpoint Sam and Dean value personhood (or humanity) over the lives of the monsters they hunt. And we can relate to this—just think of all the pests we'd rather not have living in our homes, even if they aren't seriously threatening our lives. Most of us don't try to humanely remove cockroaches or fleas from our homes; we quickly resort to chemical warfare.

Sam and Dean begin hunting with a seemingly clear-cut distinction between humans and monsters, but as the series progresses black-and-white distinctions quickly turn grey. We find that some "monsters" exhibit many of the fundamentally good traits found in humanity, while conversely, many humans are undoubtedly monstrous. In other words, determining which creatures are pests for extermination is getting more difficult, since some people act horrifically toward other people. For example in "The Benders," Sam and Dean fight a family of humans who hunt and kill people for sport, which is pretty monstrous. This family is truly "hunting" in the traditional sense we discussed before, but they are hunting innocent people. In another clear example of a human crossing over the monstrous line, the episode "Time Is on My Side" has the brothers confronting Dr. Benton, a human who manages immortality by replacing his own decomposing organs with those of his victims. Given the opportunity to live in a similar fashion and avoid going to Hell, Dean decides that this type of immortality amounts to becoming a monster, which he finds unacceptable. On a related note, this is also Dean's main concern with going to Hell, since he fears it will turn him into one of the monsters he fears, loathes, and hunts.

On the flipside, there are some monsters that manage to reform themselves in such a way that they no longer threaten innocent people. Under normal circumstances, these would be the sort of monsters that Sam and Dean would exterminate. For example, in "Bloodlust," Sam is captured by a group of vampires. Their leader, Lenore, reveals to him that they have reformed and feed only on cattle. After being released unharmed, Sam eventually convinces his brother that the vampires should be left alone. In fact, Dean later admits to Sam that it would have been *wrong* to kill the vampires. And, of course, the idea that monsters can still retain their humanity is critically important for Sam, since he's concerned that he's changing

into a monster himself. Hence, a central moral question for both Sam and Dean is whether a monster can maintain its humanity, and what is special about humanity that makes it worth protecting over the monsters they exterminate.

## **The Sanctity of Life and All That Crap**

Of course, monsters aren't the only things Sam and Dean kill. They are also troubled by the frequent need to kill people who are not monsters, including innocent people possessed by malevolent demons. Sam and Dean know that killing people is wrong. In fact, the defense of people is often what justifies their killing of monsters. So what then are the primary moral issues involved in deciding to kill a human? And under what circumstances can Sam and Dean justify these killings?

All things being equal, most of us believe that killing a human is wrong. We recognize that to kill someone is to destroy something of considerable moral value, a human life. Some might argue that there is nothing about human life to morally distinguish it from other forms of life, but this view is typically rejected as implausible, since it makes a human life morally equivalent to bacteria and fungi. Ultimately, if we agree with the claim that it is wrong to kill another human, then we believe there is a basic right not to be killed by another person. If a monster is sufficiently like a human, then the monster may have the same right. Importantly, whether we're dealing with a human or a monster, this right is not absolute. There are some situations in which killing a person is justified provided we have the right reasons.

The strongest justifications for killing another person are the defense of your life or the lives of others.<sup>3</sup> In a case of self-defense, one is morally justified in killing an attacker when it is necessary to prevent one's own death at the hands of the attacker. For example, in "Dream a Little Dream of Me," Sam is attacked by Jeremy, who has been killing people Freddy Krueger-style in their dreams. When Jeremy attempts to kill Sam with a baseball bat, Sam manages to kill Jeremy first in self-defense. Had Jeremy not been killed, then Sam would have probably died from the attack. Since Jeremy is

attempting to kill Sam, it is permissible for Sam to kill Jeremy in defense of his own life.

Similarly, we are justified in killing someone to defend the life of another person. Consider “Simon Said,” in which Andy Weems kills his twin brother, Ansem, who is about to kill Dean. Ansem has the supernatural ability to control people’s actions and is in the process of making Dean shoot himself. Andy justifiably intervenes to save Dean by shooting Ansem first.

Three features of the attacks make the killings permissible. First, the attacker is an immediate deadly threat. Jeremy and Ansem’s attacks would have been deadly without immediate intervention. Second, the attacks are not justified. Jeremy’s attack is motivated by his desire to continue his “dreaming,” which has proved harmful to others. Sam is attacked unjustly after attempting to reason with Jeremy about his harmful actions. In the other case, Ansem was about to kill Andy’s ex-girlfriend, Tracey, by making her jump off a bridge, so Ansem was stopped with a bullet. Third, the attacker in both cases was morally culpable.<sup>4</sup> Jeremy and Ansem were both fully responsible for threatening the life of another person, such that their own deaths were essentially brought on by their own choices.

Ultimately, it’s clear that human life is important for Sam and Dean, and most of what they do is aimed at saving human life. If they do need to kill a person, then it is often justified in the defense of another human life. While Sam and Dean are less concerned with the monsters they kill, the more human a monster is, the more likely Sam and Dean are to leave it alone. The caveat here is, of course, when that monster poses a potential risk for humans in the future.

### **Nobody Kill Any Virgins!**

Often, Sam and Dean find themselves needing to decide whether killing a human is worth the benefits that may result. Notably, this is not an issue they typically have with monsters. With monsters, the default is almost always kill first and live with the consequences. However, with humans, it’s a very different picture. Sam and Dean have rules about when *not* to kill someone. Even if killing a person

would serve a greater purpose, the Winchester's won't kill a person who is a bystander or who is not a deadly threat.

For example, in the episode "Jus in Bello," Sam and Dean are trapped in a police station when a horde of demons take control of the local population. The demon, Ruby, proposes a spell to kill all of the demons surrounding the station, but Dean refuses because it involves sacrificing a virgin. Despite the fact that the spell would have saved everyone in the station and most of the innocent townspeople outside, Dean doesn't think they are justified in killing the virgin, Nancy. Even when Nancy consents to being sacrificed in order to save her possessed friends, Dean declares with his usual tact, "I'm not going to let the demon kill some sweet innocent girl that hasn't even been laid yet."

Furthermore, the brothers won't kill someone who isn't a threat, even if they previously had been. In "The Benders," Sam overpowers Lee and Jared Bender before shooting Pa Bender, rendering him harmless but alive. Rather than finish the job, Sam gives the rifle to the sheriff, Kathleen, so she can take the Benders into her custody. Instead, Kathleen shoots Pa Bender dead to avenge her murdered brother. Although Sam and Dean often have opportunities to kill people in this way, it's an unjust and immoral line they don't cross.

### **There's an Innocent Girl Trapped Somewhere in There?**

A tricky moral problem arises for Sam and Dean concerning the killing of innocent victims possessed by demons. A possessed person has no ability to control her actions; she is reduced to being a puppet manipulated by the demon, what demons cruelly refer to as a "meatsuit."

We are first introduced to an innocent person possessed by a demon in the form of Meg Masters, a young girl Sam meets while hitchhiking in "Scarecrow." Meg was possessed attending college and, while possessed, Meg is sometimes conscious of the demon's actions, even though she is helpless to stop them. People like Meg are not only innocent of the wrongs committed by the demon

possessing them, but they are also very much the kind of innocent people Sam and Dean feel obligated to protect.

Unfortunately, Sam and Dean still do sometimes knowingly kill these innocent people who happen to be possessed. One reason for this is that a person whose body is being possessed by a demon might already be dead; but it's hard to know for sure. Furthermore, lethal force harms only the human meatsuit, not the demon possessing it. In fact, this is how Sam and Dean inadvertently kill the human Meg when they cause her to be defenestrated from the seventh floor of a warehouse in the episode "Shadow." When Sam and Dean later exorcise the demon possessing her in "Devil's Trap," the human Meg dies from the injuries she sustained in the fall.

Sam and Dean learn a valuable lesson from their experience with Meg, and so they are fully aware that they are killing innocent people in addition to the demons that possess them. To that end, Sam and Dean generally stick to their belief that killing an innocent person possessed by a demon is *only* allowable when they have no other realistic alternative. In other words, they should really try not to kill possessed people, but they may do so when killing them is self-defense or in the defense of others. The right to defend a life comes from the fact that a victim is in danger of losing their life. It doesn't have anything to do with whether the attacker is in control of their actions.<sup>5</sup> As long as Sam and Dean are trying to defend an innocent life, they may kill a possessed person. If they didn't, then the possessed meatsuit would unjustly violate another innocent person's right to live.

Still, Sam and Dean often take significant risks to rescue the innocent person who is possessed. In fact, this concern is one of the driving motivations for Sam to harness the powers given to him by the demon Azazel, which gives him the ability to easily exorcise demons. Ultimately, when it is necessary to kill a possessed person, Sam and Dean believe the killing should always be carried out reluctantly followed by regret (but absolutely no tears). Sam and Dean regularly express their moral concern for the fate of the innocent people possessed by demons, especially those whom it is necessary to kill. Furthermore, both brothers are fearful of becoming hardened by the killing. They do not wish it to become

something they find easy to do. This problem is illustrated by the moral deterioration we observe in a fellow hunter, Gordon, who has learned to enjoy killing. Dean explicitly rejects this “moral flexibility” when Gordon tries to convince him it’s okay. In a sense, Gordon has moved on from the job of exterminating evil monsters to the enjoyable sport of hunting.

### **We’re Not Just Hunting Anymore: We’re at War!**

In “What’s Up, Tiger Mommy?” Sam kills a demon after performing a reverse exorcism to pull a demon back into the body of an innocent person, preventing it from passing on crucial information to other demons. By their own ethical standards, Sam and Dean would normally consider this type of killing cold-blooded murder. How can it possibly be morally justified?

In Season 8, the Winchesters discover there might be a spell to banish all demons from the world and keep them out forever. This might justify a temporary change in their ethics of killing. Rather than being hunters, we might argue Sam and Dean are combatants in a war against demons. In the episode “Malleus Maleficarum,” Sam even points out that their ongoing battle against demons is more like fighting a war than simply hunting, and the demon Ruby chastises Sam and Dean at the end of “Jus in Bello” because they don’t seem to know how to fight a war.

As hunters, Sam and Dean follow typical rules of morality when dealing with people, but if they’re warriors, those rules might change significantly. Warriors are bound by “Just War Theory,” which gives combatants special permissions for killing enemy combatants.<sup>6</sup> The just war tradition attempts to explain the “rightness” or “wrongness” of the decision to go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and the “rightness” and “wrongness” of the way in which a war is conducted (*jus in bello*).<sup>7</sup> Importantly, just war theory permits combatants in a war to do certain types of harms that are not allowed in a non-war context.<sup>8</sup> For example, combatants fighting a war can attack and kill enemy combatants without warning, as they might in a missile strike or



ambush. They are also permitted to do serious collateral harm, including killing and maiming non-combatants. Bombing a city, after all, includes bombing those people who just happen to be living there. But this is only allowed provided that the military objective is important enough to justify the foreseeable deaths of non-combatants.

At this point in the series, Sam and Dean are making a moral distinction between the two different roles of “hunter” and “warrior.” In their role as warriors, they would be permitted to commit killings that would otherwise be morally unjustifiable.<sup>9</sup>

### **I Might Be a Freak, But That’s Not the Same as Dangerous**

Under normal circumstances, Sam and Dean are monster exterminators. When it comes to killing, they rarely hesitate to destroy a monster. In fact, they’re often more willing to be merciful with evil, dangerous people than they would otherwise be with a monster. What’s more, the Winchesters generally give no justification for this bias. And when they’re confronted with this contradiction in their moral thinking, they normally awkwardly muddle through it. Nevertheless, this bias returns season after season in one episode or another.

Perhaps the most salient example occurs in “The Girl Next Door.” A kitsune child named Amy befriends Sam, and even kills her own mother to save Sam’s life. As an adult, Amy doesn’t kill people until its very own child becomes sick and needs fresh pituitary glands to survive. In desperation, Amy kills several people to save the life of her child.

After tracking Amy down and realizing that it’s his old friend from childhood, Sam sees no reason to kill her because her son is now healthy, and she no longer has a reason to kill. What good would it do when she is no longer a threat? It isn’t as though she *wants* to kill anyone.

Sam explains the situation to Dean who promises to leave Amy alone. But then Dean tracks Amy down anyway and kills her. Before killing Amy, Dean justifies himself to her by saying, “But

people ... they are who they are. No matter how hard you try, you are what you are. You will kill again ... Trust me, I'm an expert."

Unfortunately, it's a little difficult to know what Dean thinks he's an expert on here. If he thinks he's an expert on people, then he should recognize that he's not dealing with a human. After all, he kills her like he would any other monster. So, what he's saying doesn't really make sense, and it certainly doesn't make sense as a justification for killing Amy. No, to make sense of this, Dean would have to be suggesting he's an expert on monsters, like an exterminator's an expert on the bugs and rodents she exterminates. But if that's the case, how does Dean fail to see that he's far more "monstrous" than Amy? Dean has killed more innocent people than Amy, and he knows that he killed at least some of them for the wrong reasons. The difficulty here is that no matter how much we want to justify Dean's actions, he is what he is, and when he occasionally indulges in the type of "moral flexibility" that allows him to kill with impunity, Dean is worse than many of the monsters he hunts.

## Notes

1. Dean, in particular, is arrested on a number of occasions by the FBI as a suspected serial killer.
2. As the series progresses, Sam and Dean come across other types of creatures in the "Supernatural" universe, such as "pagan gods," "angels," "reapers" and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse (including Death himself). But the primary focus is on the three main groups. In the more recent seasons we also discover the leviathans, a fourth type of evil creature with characteristics of both demons and monsters, which presents a new suite of problems for the brothers.
3. For discussion of the philosophy of killing in self-defense and defense of others, see: Jonathan Quong, "Liability to Defensive Harm," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2012): 45–77. Jonathan Quong, "Killing in Self-Defense," *Ethics* 119, no. 3 (2009): 507–537; Jeff McMahan, "The Basis of Moral Liability to Defensive Killing," *Philosophical Issues* 15, no. 1 (2005): 386–405; Seumas Miller, "Killing in Self-Defense," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1993): 325–339; Suzanne Uniacke, *Permissible Killing: The Self-Defence Justification of Homicide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Fiona Leverick, *Killing in*

- Self-Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Judith J. Thomson, "Self-Defense," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20, no. 4 (1991): 283–310.
4. An agent is fully culpable for a threat of harm when the following conditions are met: (1) the agent acts in a way that results in a threat of impermissible harm to an innocent person (or persons); (2) the agent intends or foresees this harm, or else is acting recklessly or negligently; and (3) there are no relevant excusing conditions (e.g., blameless ignorance, duress, or diminished responsibility). Quong, "Liability to Defensive Harm," 50.
  5. Uniacke, *Permissible Killing: The Self-Defence Justification of Homicide*, 185.
  6. For a discussion on just war theory and the ethics of killing in war, see: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th edn (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Rodin, *War and Self-Defense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Brian Orend, *The Morality of War* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006); Fritz Allhoff, Nicholas G. Evans, and Adam Henschke, *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and War: Just War Theory in the 21st Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013).
  7. I won't describe the tenets of the just war tradition here but for an excellent (and short) overview, read: David Whetham, "The Just War Tradition: A Pragmatic Compromise," in *Ethics, Law and Military Operations*, ed. David Whetham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 65–89.
  8. S. Brandt Ford, "Jus Ad Vim and the Just Use of Lethal Force-Short-Of-War," in *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and War: Just War Theory in the 21st Century*, ed. Fritz Allhoff, Nicholas G. Evans, and Adam Henschke (Taylor & Francis, 2013), ch. 6.
  9. For more on exceptionalism, see: Andrew Fiala, "A Critique of Exceptions: Torture, Terrorism, and the Lesser Evil Argument," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2005): 127–142; Fritz Allhoff, *Terrorism, Ticking Time-Bombs, and Torture: A Philosophical Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), esp. Chapter 3, 35–56; Jonathan H. Marks, "What Counts in Counterterrorism," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 37, no. 3 (2005): 559–626.