PART ONE

“I USED TO HATE VAMPIRES, UNTIL I GOT TO KNOW ONE”: VAMPIRE-HUMAN ETHICS

TO TURN OR NOT TO TURN

The Ethics of Making Vampires

Christopher Robichaud

> Lorena: What more can I give? What is it you want from me?
>
> Bill: Choice.[1]

Sookie Stackhouse loves Bill Compton. And he loves her. The trouble is, Bill is a vampire and Sookie is human. Well, not quite, but she's not immortal either.[2] That means that as Sookie ages, Bill won't. Let's suppose that despite her fairy blood, Sookie can become a vampire. Would it be morally permissible for Bill to turn her into one? This question lies at the, um, heart of the issue we'll be looking at in this chapter. The "unlife" of a vampire is often understood as something a person is *condemned* to. Many see Bill, for instance, as being *damned* to exist as a bloodthirsty creature of the night. Such an existence sure doesn't sound like the kind of thing it would be nice to bestow on another. This is one of the reasons we're

tempted to say that Bill acted wrongly when he forced Jessica Hamby to abandon her normal life and replace it with an unlife of drinking blood—or at least, of drinking TruBlood—and shunning the daylight.

Bill and Sookie, Sitting in a Coffin, K-i-s-s-i-n-g

There's an important difference between Jessica's being turned into a vampire and the possibility of Sookie's being turned into one. Jessica didn't give Bill her permission, her consent. In fact, she was quite vocal in communicating just how much she did not want to become a vampire. In contrast, it's likely that Sookie would be prepared to give her consent. (This may not be an entirely fair supposition, but it's not absurd, either. After all, at the end of the second season of *True Blood*, she does decide to accept Bill's marriage proposal.)[3] This particular difference between Jessica and Sookie seems morally relevant. Whether it's permissible for Bill to turn Sookie into a vampire—and, more generally, whether it's permissible for vampires to turn the living into the undead—seems to hinge on *consent*. By this way of thinking, a vampire can turn a living person into an undead one only if the person to be turned has given consent.

So there appears to be a fairly straightforward answer to the question of whether Bill is permitted to turn Sookie into a vampire. He's allowed to do so only if she gives him her consent. But like so much else in moral philosophy, this answer, even if correct, just scratches the surface of the issue.

Show Some Respect

Consent seems to be a necessary condition for the permissibility of Bill's turning Sookie into a vampire. But can we say more than this? Absolutely. The importance of consent in determining how we're allowed to treat others is a popular

idea in moral philosophy and can be defended from several different perspectives. The one we'll focus on comes from one of the most famous philosophers of all time, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his *Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant presents a supreme moral principle, the categorical imperative, from which he thinks we can derive all of the more specific moral obligations that we have.[4] Kant provides several different formulations of this principle, perhaps the most popular one being the Formula of the End in Itself (also known as the Formula of Respect for Persons): "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."[5]

For Kant, we must treat persons this way—always as ends in themselves and never as mere means—because of their absolute, intrinsic value as agents who are capable of deliberating on their choices and setting their own goals. Our rational capacities are what make us distinct, claims Kant, and they ultimately ground the demands of morality. And so to respect the unconditional worth that all persons have as autonomous rational beings is to avoid using others to pursue *our* goals without their taking up those goals as their own. Let's suppose Bill wants to turn Sookie into a vampire so that they can spend eternity together. That's what Bill desires. And his desire leads him to adopt a goal: turn Sookie into a vampire. Now, it's likely that Bill is capable of doing this without so much as broaching the topic with Sookie, as we see him do with Jessica. But if he went about it in this way, he'd be doing something morally impermissible because it would violate the categorical imperative. Bill would be treating Sookie as a mere means to achieving his goal of turning her into a vampire. He'd be treating her as a mere means because he didn't allow her to take up his goal as her own—he didn't give her the respect she's owed as a rational person. To show Sookie proper respect, Bill would have to set aside his desire to turn her into a vampire until she *consented* to it.

According to this way of thinking, getting consent to perform certain actions is morally important because it's how we avoid treating people as mere means; it allows us, in other words, to have our actions conform to the categorical imperative. This isn't the only reason consent is important, but it's a compelling reason that stems from an appealing moral principle—the categorical imperative—and that acquires its force from an equally appealing idea—that people should be respected because of the unconditional worth they possess.

Read. My. Lips.

So Bill needs to get Sookie's consent before it's permissible for him to turn her into a vampire. But that's not the end of the story. One immediate question we need to answer is whether he needs to get her *explicit* consent. After all, there are plenty of cases where it seems that *tacit* or implicit consent is sufficient to guarantee that we aren't using people as a mere means and failing to give them the respect they're owed. Consider Sam Merlotte. As the owner and operator of Merlotte's Bar and Grill in Bon Temps, Sam is used all the time by customers to get what they want, typically food and drinks. They don't ask Sam's permission to do so, either. Yet it would be absurd to think that the Bon Temps community is doing something morally wrong by treating Sam in this way (although using Sam as a sacrifice to summon the "God Who Comes" is another story). It's reasonable for Sam's patrons to assume that he has tacitly consented to serving them food and drinks, since he freely established Merlotte's for just this purpose and, after all, he does take their money.

The point is that we use people all the time as a means to getting what we want, and there's usually nothing wrong with that. Problems arise only when we use them as *mere* means to our ends, when we use them without their consent. Often, tacit consent is sufficient to ensure that we're not going wrong in this way. In this light, should Bill presume that Sookie has tacitly consented to

being turned into vampire if she agrees to marry him? The answer is no. Although there are many occasions where tacit consent is enough to ensure that we aren't treating people as a mere means, there are also plenty of times when explicit consent is needed. As a good rule of thumb, the more serious the action that's being considered, the less likely it is that tacit consent is enough.

Indeed, if we're looking for moral guidance, it seems like a very good idea to get explicit consent whenever there could be reasonable doubt about whether individuals are willing to take up our ends as their own. That's because even though there are many instances where tacit consent is given, there are also many cases where it assuredly is not. Certain men have claimed, for instance, that because a woman flirted with them while drinking, she tacitly consented to having sex with them, and so, when later in the evening she was found passed out on a bed, they were morally permitted to have sex with her. No way. Flirting with someone is absolutely *not* tacitly consenting to sex. And saying yes to a marriage proposal is not tacitly consenting to being turned into a vampire. We can make an even stronger statement: since the stakes are so high (pardon the pun) when it comes to becoming one of the undead, it seems plausible that tacit consent, even if present, is *never* sufficient to give a vampire permission to turn a living person into a creature of the night. If Bill wants to turn Sookie into a vampire, he needs to ask her directly and to hear "Yes" from her lips.

Look Before You Leap

But even this might not be enough. There's good reason to think that consent is going to do the moral work that we need it to do only if it is *informed* consent. Fangtasia is filled with vampire wannabes, folks whose heads are likely filled with one too many undead romance stories. Wanting to be creatures of the night, to Fangtasia they go. Happily, we know the sheriff of Area 5, Eric Northman, well enough to feel confident that he won't be

granting any of them their wishes anytime soon. For Eric, it's doubtless because he loathes such people, and that's enough to keep him from even considering adding them to the vampire ranks. Whether he acknowledges it or not, however, Eric also has a good moral reason not to indulge their desires. That's because even though they've consented to being turned—quite often explicitly—they don't really know what they're consenting to. This robs the permission they give of its moral force. If their knowledge of vampires is based on flights of fancy rather than on the cold hard facts about existence as a bloodsucker, their uninformed verbal permission to be turned doesn't give Eric *moral* permission to turn them, whether he wants to or not.

Why? Recall the reason that consent is morally important. It's a way of making sure we're complying with the categorical imperative by helping us avoid treating persons as mere means to an end. Getting consent to do certain things to others is a way for us to give them the respect they deserve as rational agents. But we're not respecting their autonomy if their consent is given, as it were, "in the dark," regardless of whether we put them in the dark by deliberately deceiving them or they got there on their own. Accepting others' permission to do things to them while knowing full well that they don't have the relevant facts at hand is *not* respecting persons—it's manipulating them.

But even if we think this line of reasoning applies perfectly well to many of the patrons of Fangtasia, we might not think it applies to Bill and Sookie. After all, Sookie seems to have a grip on what the night-to-night ins and outs of being a vampire are all about. She's sleeping with one, for goodness' sake. More than that, she's been repeatedly drawn into the greater vampire community and exposed to how it operates. So it seems that if Sookie gives Bill her consent to be turned into a vampire, he needn't worry that it's uninformed.

Maybe. A problem with this way of seeing things arises when we acknowledge that there's some information we can't possess without experiencing it firsthand. For example, we can come

to know lots of facts about free-falling by learning them from an instructor or a book, but we learn something new when we actually skydive. No matter how smart we are, we can't learn *what it's like* to free-fall out of a plane until we actually jump. Similarly, Sookie can't learn what it's like to be a vampire—to burn in daylight, to thirst for blood, to see the world through undead eyes—until she actually becomes one. So our worry is that Sookie's consent to be turned into a vampire won't have moral force unless it's informed, which would include knowing what it's like to be a vampire in this experiential sense. But she can't know that without already being a creature of the night! Hence, she can't give informed consent, and thus Bill doesn't have permission to turn her into a vampire.

The response to this line of reasoning is fairly obvious. It's too strong a condition to insist that the knowledge we possess be firsthand in order for our consent to morally count. If that were the case, wannabe skydivers would never end up skydiving, because no instructor would ever be permitted to let them jump out of a plane, even after lots of pre-jump training—their informed consent could never be informed enough. That seems silly. Similarly, what counts as informed consent with regard to being turned into a vampire clearly falls somewhere between the wide-eyed romantic ignorance of the wannabes at Fangtasia and the unlife lessons learned from a century or more of existing as a vampire. Given Sookie's various connections to the vampire community, her consent to being turned may very well have enough knowledge behind it to be morally significant.

Don't Force It

We've seen that for consent to count morally it needs to be explicit and it needs to be informed. That's not all, however. It also can't be coerced. Consent given under duress doesn't carry any moral weight. Recall again that consent is important because it helps us make sure that we're giving persons the

respect they are owed. Needless to say, we can't accomplish that by *forcing* people to give us permission to treat them in ways we want but they don't.

Some of the ways that consent can be coerced are not obvious. Consider the situation in which Lafayette Reynolds finds himself at the hands of Eric at the beginning of the second season of *True Blood*. Eric wasn't looking to turn Lafayette into a vampire, but if he had been, he didn't get permission to do so when Lafayette asked—begged, really—him for it. Lafayette by that point was under considerable emotional and physical duress. This is a straightforward example of an instance in which consent doesn't have moral force. But forced consent, or consent under duress, doesn't always look like the situation Lafayette was in. A situation of forced consent might not be traumatic at all; indeed, it might be anything but. One of the more interesting powers that vampires have is the ability to glamour persons—a powerful ability to *charm* them in a way that more or less forces the glamoured person to do anything the vampire wants. Sookie is immune to glamouring, so there's no worry that Bill would acquire her consent to be turned into a vampire by doing that to *her*. But Sookie is the exception. Would consent procured through glamouring carry moral weight? Clearly not, anymore than consent through hypnotism would. Part of why consent packs a moral punch is that it is given *freely*. We respect persons properly when we allow them to freely take up our ends as their own. But surely a necessary condition for genuine consent is that the person giving consent is not under the mental control of another. So vampires can't circumvent the moral demands of genuine consent by glamouring someone into providing it.

Exceptions to the Rule?

Maybe we're being too restrictive. Are there perhaps situations in which a vampire would be morally permitted to forgo

getting explicit, informed, noncoercive consent before turning a living person into a vampire? From our reasoning so far, it sure seems like the answer is no. But that may burden us with some results that are hard to live with. One involves Jessica. Jessica vehemently resisted Bill's turning her into a vampire. But it's not entirely crazy to think that Jessica is better off existing as an undead creature of the night than she would have been had she continued living the life she was born into. After all, vampirism has empowered Jessica in a way that her family was never able to. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jessica is in fact better off now than she would have been and also that only by becoming a vampire could she be better off. If we're serious about the moral importance of consent, we're committed to saying that Bill shouldn't have made Jessica better off. And that sure seems troubling on the surface of things. But only on the surface.

Although we have a moral obligation to make people better off, we don't have a moral obligation to make them better off *no matter what*. The *no matter what* in this case involves treating Jessica as a mere means. Ultimately, where we come down on this depends on how strongly we take the moral mandate to give people the respect owed to them. If we think this mandate isn't nearly as absolute as Kant thought it was, then perhaps it will matter to us that Jessica would have been worse off had Bill not chosen to use her as a mere means to his own ends. But if we share Kant's conviction that we have an overriding duty to respect the autonomy of others, then we'll be more comfortable accepting that sometimes making someone better off, while certainly a good thing, is nevertheless not what morally ought to be done. In the case of Jessica, we might present our reasoning this way. Granted that she's better off as a vampire than as a human being, she nevertheless expressed her desire to remain mortal. Bill should have respected her right, as a rational agent, to make her own decisions, even if they may be bad ones. And, besides, no attempt was made to present her with facts that

might have persuaded her to embrace an unlife. No one gave her an opportunity to deliberate, nor did anyone take her lack of consent seriously. For these reasons (and more), what Bill did was wrong, regardless of whether Jessica gained a better existence than what she had before.

It would be convenient to leave things right there and conclude by saying that Jessica's case shows that consent is always needed. But we wouldn't be doing serious moral philosophy if we didn't go a little further and end by muddying the waters a bit. One thing that makes the reasoning just presented persuasive is that Jessica was never given a chance to deliberate adequately on becoming a vampire. But what if there's no such chance to give? What if a vampire faces the choice of turning someone or letting him die right then and there? The obvious example that comes to mind is Eric and his sire, Godric.[6] Godric had his eye on Eric for quite some time but turned him only after Eric had suffered a fatal wound on the battlefield. For a variety of reasons, it's reasonable to assume that Eric was in no condition to give adequate consent to being turned into a vampire. It's also reasonable to assume that Eric is better off continuing to exist as a vampire than he would have been dying on the battlefield. Did Godric still do something wrong?

Here we may have room to suggest that he didn't. The general thought process is as follows: If explicit consent at a certain time *can't* be given, but it is reasonable to conclude that it *would* have been given had there been the opportunity, then, everything else being equal, you haven't failed to treat a person with the appropriate moral respect by acting *as if* consent were given. We use this principle when, for example, we allow loved ones to make certain medical decisions for a patient who's unable to make decisions for himself. For this principle to apply to Godric, he must *reasonably* believe that Eric would have given the appropriate sort of consent had he been able to do so. Did Godric have good grounds to believe this? We can't

really know. But it's not too hard to give him the benefit of the doubt. He is, after all, an ancient vampire who's genuinely sympathetic to the human condition.

Except in such rare circumstances, though, vampires need explicit, informed, noncoercive consent before they're permitted to turn the living into the undead. Bill must get this kind of permission from Sookie before having her join him in a state of undeath. And he ought to atone somehow for making Jessica into a creature of the night without her consent. Bill has a lot to do and a lot to think about. But then he always does. He has set himself upon the path of being a morally upright vampire—not the easiest course, to say the least.

NOTES

1. Episode 207, "Release Me."

2. The first two seasons of *True Blood* hint that Sookie isn't human. We learn from Charlaine Harris's Southern Vampire Mysteries that Sookie has fairy blood in her veins.

3. In Harris's novels, Sookie's relationship with Bill doesn't develop quite so nicely, especially after Bill reveals to her that he initially wooed her on orders from the queen of Louisiana.

4. Immanuel Kant., *The Moral Law: Groundwork on the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Hiram Paton (New York: Routledge, 2005).

5. Ibid., p. 66.

6. Godric is Eric's sire only in the *True Blood* television series, not in Charlaine Harris's novels, from which the series was adapted.