



TO BITE OR NOT TO BITE: TWILIGHT, IMMORTALITY, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Brendan Shea

I can't always be Lois Lane. I want to be Superman, too.

—Bella Swan, *Twilight*¹

Over the course of the *Twilight* series, Bella Swan gradually succeeds at convincing Edward Cullen to turn her into a vampire. When Edward questions her about *why* she wants to become a vampire, she repeatedly says that it is out of love for him. On one level, she might hope that by becoming a vampire she could better understand Edward's emotions and abilities and could thereby love him more fully. On another level, however, Bella's desire is for *immortality*, and her underlying worry is that her human mortality is in conflict with the

goals she has in life. As Bella understands it, much of her life's purpose is provided by the love she feels for Edward, Jacob Black, and her extended "family." Insofar as her eventual death will prevent her from being there to protect and guide the people she loves, Bella might think that choosing immortality is the best thing for her to do.

But is Bella correct in thinking that there is a conflict between love and mortality? Or is there something about love, and about living a meaningful human life, that actually *requires* her mortality? These questions, while hypothetical, are of real philosophical interest. After all, Bella's love for others, her reason for living, will strike many of us as resembling our own reasons for living. If she's right in choosing to become a vampire, this suggests that our mortality is in conflict with the goals of love, and that this is our misfortune. If she's wrong, it would suggest there's something valuable in our mortality. The questions that confront Bella are specific versions of those that confront us all: What constitutes a meaningful human life? What choices should we make in order to live such a life?

More Love and Death

Though it seems to men that they live by care for themselves, in truth it is love alone by which they live.

—Leo Tolstoy²

Bella first seriously considers becoming a vampire toward the end of *Twilight*. James attacks and bites Bella, but Edward prevents Bella from becoming a vampire by sucking the venom out of her wound. When Bella wakes up in the hospital, she criticizes Edward's action and argues that it would have been better to allow her to become a vampire. Bella

worries that her mortality will prevent her from truly loving Edward. Her concerns are, in fact, expressions of a classic philosophical question: Is it possible to live a meaningful life if one must eventually cease to exist?

While Bella is in the hospital, she worries that “I may not die now . . . but I’m going to die sometime. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I’m going to get *old*.”³ Later, after the prom, she tells Edward that “mostly, I dream about being with you forever.”⁴ Bella’s love for Edward is expressed in terms of certain *desires*. She wants to spend time with Edward, to be physically intimate with him, to protect him from harm, and to help him pursue the things he values. These desires show up in Bella’s choice of Edward over Jacob, and in her willingness to take risks on Edward’s behalf.

Bella believes that love (in particular for Edward) makes her life meaningful—it gives her goals to pursue. Mortality, unfortunately, seems to *guarantee* that Bella cannot fulfill these goals. As a human, she will one day die, and when she does, everyone she loves will be left to struggle on without her. Thus, mortality might seem to doom Bella to a meaningless existence—to a life with a purpose she can never achieve.

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), in his autobiographical book *My Confession*, recounted his own attempts to reconcile the knowledge of his mortality with his desire to live a meaningful life. Like Bella, Tolstoy worried that if we must die, and if there is no afterlife, then all of our lives are necessarily meaningless. He claimed that our situation is analogous to that of a traveler clinging to a twig halfway down the side of a deep well. There is a beast waiting to eat him at the top of the well and a dragon at the bottom. His death is assured by two mice that are gnawing on the branch. Tolstoy went on:

But while he is still hanging there he sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, stretches out his tongue and licks them. In the same way I am clinging

to the tree of life, knowing full well the dragon of death inevitably awaits me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand how I have fallen into this torment. And I try licking the honey that once consoled me, but it no longer gives me pleasure. The white mouse and the black mouse—day and night—are gnawing at the branch from which I am hanging. I see the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tastes sweet . . . and this is no fable but the truth, the truth that is irrefutable and intelligible to everyone.⁵

The problem, for both Bella and Tolstoy, seems to be that the knowledge that we will one day die prevents us from enjoying the pleasures—the honey—that life has to offer.

Tolstoy considered and rejected several potential solutions to this problem. First, we might ignore the knowledge that we must die, and live as if this were not the case. Tolstoy claimed this is impossible, and Bella's experience provides some support for his view. Second, we might live for our family and friends. But Tolstoy thought this also must ultimately fail—after all, they will die as well, and so any good we can achieve for them is at best temporary. Finally, we might live for the moment, and enjoy the good things with the knowledge that they will one day be gone. To Tolstoy, and to Bella, this seems a bit hollow, insofar as it involves accepting that nothing one does will ever “really” matter. Tolstoy concluded that life can only be meaningful if the soul is in some sense immortal.

But there are a few reasons for thinking that Bella and Tolstoy might be mistaken. First, their view assumes that any worthwhile life must change the world in some permanent way. Bella's actions, however, suggest that she can't really believe this. She risks her life repeatedly to save her mother, to save Edward, and to save her child. These sacrifices presumably would be worthwhile even if she knew that all the

people she risked herself for must *eventually* die. Imagine that the Volturi manage to kill Bella, the werewolves, and the Cullens at the end of the fourth book; more than this, imagine that Alice Cullen tells Bella ahead of time that this will happen. While this certainly would have been tragic, it seems unlikely that Bella would suddenly stop thinking it worthwhile to help her loved ones. So perhaps there's hope for a meaningful mortal life after all.

Even if Bella and Tolstoy are correct in their supposition that a meaningful life must leave a permanent mark, there is no reason to think that a mortal person couldn't lead such a life. Mortals can leave permanent marks on the universe in all sorts of ways. They can have children, write books that inspire others, or pursue careers that help others. They can fight for just causes, as the Cullens do against the Volturi, and try to leave the world a better place for those who come after them. Just as being mortal doesn't prevent us from making a positive difference, being immortal doesn't guarantee that we will make one. If you spend your immortal life eating humans (as most vampires do), this would certainly not leave the world better off.

Bella has a motivation for becoming immortal that most of us don't have, of course: Edward is already a powerful and elegant immortal, while she is a clumsy mortal. Even if she recognizes the possibility of *other* people living meaningful mortal lives, she might think that she can't do so. Her love requires that she be able to help *Edward* in some meaningful way. So, she says, "I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships. But it just seems logical . . . a man and woman have to be somewhat equal . . . as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other *equally*."⁶ As a mere mortal, Bella will be unable to do anything for Edward he cannot do for himself. Moreover, her life span will be only a fraction of his, and thus she risks becoming a mere footnote in the story

of his life. Edward recognizes this worry, but initially refuses her request nevertheless. He worries, of course, that Bella will lose her soul in the process.

On Losing One's Soul

Therefore death is nothing to us, nothing
That matters at all, since mind we know is mortal.

—Lucretius⁷

If Bella's worry is that she can't properly love Edward as a mortal, his worry is the opposite. He worries that he has already lost his soul, and that making Bella a vampire will strip her of her soul as well. He tells Bella that "I cannot be without you, but I will not destroy your soul,"⁸ and later pines, "If there were any way for me to become human for you—no matter what the price was, I would pay it."⁹ Carlisle Cullen explains Edward's fear as a fear that God won't accept him, or that there can be no afterlife for him. But there's another worry too. Both Edward and Rosalie Cullen seem at times to regret their immortality, feeling that they've lost something valuable. Just as Bella's worry about death should strike us as plausible, so should this latter pair's ambiguous attitude toward immortality. If our souls are the things (whatever they are) that make us human, the question becomes: Could a vampire have one?

Imagine for a moment that you are Carlisle. It's morning; you spent the sleepless night listening to music and rereading your favorite book for the thirtieth time. You go downstairs and say good-bye to your family. You're never tired, so there's no point to picking up coffee on the way to work. You only need to hunt for your food once a month or so, so there's no such thing as a family breakfast. It's cold outside, but you don't

notice. You'll never get ill from underdressing, or not washing your hands, or eating the wrong thing; you'll never be out of shape or be tired after a long day's work. There's no need to give your children a ride to school, or to worry when they are not home on time. The last time one was hit by a car, the vehicle was the victim. You go to the hospital where you've worked for the last several years. Some of your colleagues worry that they've wasted the prime of lives and that they never can get back the long hours they've dedicated to the hospital. Their children have grown up and moved away. Yours, of course, will remain exactly as they've always been.

Outside of the occasional disagreements with rival vampire clans, there is no real danger in the Cullens' lives. This may sound quite pleasant until we consider how *inhuman* such a life would be. In particular, it's hard to see how such a life could have the same type of meaning or purpose that a well-structured human life does. Bella's love and sacrifice for others gives meaning to her life. Edward's love for Bella can never quite be the same. His choice to stay in Forks, unlike Bella's, does not involve any real sacrifice. Bella's mother will get older, and her Phoenix friends will move away to college. Edward's family remains unchanged, and he always has an infinite amount of time to travel and go to college. Likewise, Edward's risks on Bella's behalf are at first relatively trivial. Edward risks nothing when he saves Bella from being hit by a car, or when he scares away the thugs in Port Angeles. For ordinary humans, these acts would be incredible expressions of love; for Edward, they are no more than we ought to expect.

Contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued that the relationships and goals that give human lives meaning and value *require* that these lives have a permanent end. In an article about the philosopher Lucretius (96–55 BCE), she argues that “for many, if not all, of the elements of human life that we consider the most valuable, the value they have

cannot be fully explained without mentioning the circumstances of finite and mortal existence.”¹⁰ Nussbaum specifically argues that immortals could not be courageous insofar as courage “consists in a certain way of acting and reacting in the face of death and the danger of death.”¹¹ This same invulnerability also undercuts the ability of immortals to be genuine lovers or friends. To be a genuine lover or friend is to be prepared to make sacrifices, but immortals simply have no way to sacrifice themselves.

Nussbaum suggests that, on reflection, one can see that nearly every human value is incompatible with immortality. As the Volturi government shows, there is little need for social *justice* among vampires, in the sense of creating a society that helps the worst off. *Thrift*, as demonstrated by the Cullens’ enormous wealth, is meaningless to those who have an infinite amount of time to gather money. The same point holds for virtues such as moderation or dedication to a craft. For a person like Edward, who wants to dedicate his life to loving Bella, immortality might thus be a curse rather than a blessing.

Twilight’s vampires are not Greek gods, of course, and the Cullens are capable of being killed. The Volturi, in particular, introduce an element of real danger that allows for the Cullens to demonstrate the human virtues of courage, love, and loyalty. But Nussbaum’s argument need not entail an absolute distinction between those who are capable of love or courage, and those who aren’t. Instead, we should recognize that love and courage come in various degrees, and that the capacity to realize these virtues is linked to one’s invulnerability to death or pain. On this view, it is simply more *difficult* for creatures like vampires to be loving or courageous, though it might not be impossible.

The world described in the *Twilight* books supports Nussbaum’s claim. The vampires are to a large extent as Nussbaum describes the Greek gods—they pursue their

own pleasure, have few close friends, and value preserving their own lives above everything else. They, like other immortals described in literature, simply have no reason to value things like friendship, justice, or courage. In the absence of such human values, they devote their lives to the pursuit of more immediate bodily pleasures. Nussbaum's general point is also supported by *Twilight's* stories of old werewolves, who *chose* to age and die normally once the vampiric threat receded.

The Cullens, and in particular Carlisle, provide a partial answer to Edward's and Nussbaum's worries about immortality. Carlisle, unlike many of the other vampires, does not seem to need the threat of danger to motivate him to acts of love or compassion. In fact, his life seems to be the paradigm of meaningful life. He spends his days working at a hospital and his nights with his family. He has saved many of his family members from premature death and still serves as something like a "father" to his immortal "children." The attraction of Carlisle's "alternative" lifestyle is clearly recognized by others of his kind—Alice seeks him out, and both Jasper and Emmet seem to take him as a role model. While the actions of the amoral Volturi feed Edward's fear that he has no soul, Carlisle represents the possibility of living a meaningful immortal existence.

The possibility of Carlisle living this meaningful life requires that *other* people be mortal, however. Carlisle's work in a hospital, for example, only makes sense if there are creatures capable of sickness and death. If everyone in the world were a vampire, there would certainly be far less need for such work. Even Carlisle's role as father depends on his saving the children from sure death and helping them to adjust to their new life. If *everyone* were guaranteed immortality, there would simply be no one Carlisle could help. This does not show, of course, that immortals must live *meaningless* lives. Instead, they must find new values to give structure to

their lives. And these new values may be quite different from the type one might expect.

I'm Bored . . .

I guess things are going to be kind of boring now,
aren't they?

—Jacob Black, *Breaking Dawn*¹²

At the close of *Breaking Dawn*, Bella and her allies appear to be well on their way to “happily ever after.” One could imagine how the years after the close of the book might go. Renesmee grows quickly to adulthood and moves away with Jacob. Charlie and Renee grow old and die; alternatively, they become vampires and move in with the rest of the clan. Bella travels the world, attends a variety of famous colleges, and writes a novel of her own. But what then? What will Bella and Edward do two hundred years from now? Or two thousand years from now? Eventually, they will have seen every sight and read every book. If they devote themselves to the task, they may succeed in ridding the world of the Volturi, or even in converting all vampires to their brand of “vegetarianism.” There will, at some point, be nothing left to interest them. After thousands of years, they may even lose any need or desire to speak to each other—each knows what the other will say, and without the person saying it. The problem, it seems, is one of *boredom*.

The philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) considered the problem of boredom by analyzing a character named Elina Makropulos, who appears in a play by Karel Capek (1890–1938). Three hundred years before the play’s action begins, Elina drank a potion that gave her immortality. This has not worked out well for her, however, since her

unending life “has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. Everything is joyless.”¹³ Williams argued that this is a necessary consequence of Elina’s immortality, since there is no way a meaningful *human* life could go on forever. According to Williams, our lives are directed at the fulfillment of certain *categorical desires*—desires whose fulfillment is not conditioned on our being around to see them fulfilled. Hunger and lust, for example, are not categorical desires, since we care only about fulfilling such desires on the condition that we are alive to fulfill them. Categorical desires, such as the desire that one’s children do well after one dies, are not conditional in this sense and can thus provide a “purpose” to human lives. Elina’s problem is that she has fulfilled all the categorical desires that gave her life meaning and can find no new ones to take their place. It is simply that “everything that could happen to one particular human being of forty-two had already happened to her.”¹⁴

The problem with categorical desires, according to Williams, is that they eventually “dry up.” The desire to successfully raise four or five (or ten or twenty) children might well provide meaning and purpose to a person’s life. But what happens when one has raised hundreds of children over the course of thousands of years? It seems likely that, over an infinite expanse of time, many of us would find it difficult to hold on to the same attitude of hope and caring that we originally had. Nothing would be new or surprising. The same thing holds true for almost any categorical desire. One can only write so many books or compete in so many sporting events before one ceases to find such activities worthy of pursuit.

Aside from the Cullens, the lives of the *Twilight* vampires provide examples of a life without categorical desires. The vampires live for the gratification of immediate hungers and lusts; they rarely seem to care about things outside themselves. Even when they “love” one another, as Victoria and

James apparently do, this seems to be a mere desire to be in each other's company and not a genuine concern for each other. Moreover, this feature of immortals is not unique to the *Twilight* saga. Vampires generally are described as self-interested creatures driven by rage, lust, and hunger. The same holds true for the Greek and Roman gods, for Milton's rebellious angels, and for faeries and goblins throughout folklore. Immortals, with rare exceptions such as the Cullens, are regularly described as shortsighted and self-absorbed, with little interest in the values that shape human life.

It's Complicated

You don't get to be human again, Bella. This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot.

—Alice Cullen, *Eclipse*¹⁵

Now consider Bella's choice again. She is being offered immortal life with the promise that she can spend it with other immortals she loves. If Williams is right, Bella has every reason to expect that one day (perhaps thousands of years from now) she *will* have lost her categorical desires and will have become bored with her new life. When this day comes, it's unclear whether it will still be *Bella* making the choice to commit suicide or to continue on—after all, we are defined by those things that truly matter to us. Someone else in Bella's body, someone with the same memories but with none of Bella's categorical desires for the well-being of others, wouldn't be recognizable *as* Bella. Bella has no reason to expect that this creature will make the right choice; in fact, she has every reason to think that it will behave as badly as most vampires with similar desires do. This provides Bella with at least some reason to think that immortality might not

be the right choice for *her*, even if the Volturi and others are perfectly content with it.

In the end, it's impossible to say whether Bella's love for Edward and others will be capable of providing meaning to her immortal existence. If Nussbaum and Williams are correct, however, it will be very difficult for an immortal creature to be capable of anything like a meaningful human life for an indefinite period of time. Our lives are given meaning by the people and causes we choose to sacrifice our time and effort to. Immortals, even in the limited sense in which vampires are immortal, might not have the same capacity to "sacrifice" anything. Even if Bella's love does survive the change unscathed, as it seems to, this ability may diminish with time, as the sheer repetitiveness of immortal life begins to take its toll. There is simply no way of telling for sure what such a life would be like.

Bella's choice is a version of the choice we all make in deciding how we ought to live our lives. It is tempting to think, as Bella initially seems to, that love is somehow "more than human" or that our mortality is an unfortunate accident that prevents us from fulfilling our duty to love one another. But actually our ability to love is closely tied to our mortality and vulnerability. We can love one another only so far as we are capable of sacrificing ourselves, and only when the person loved can in some way be helped by our sacrifice. Moreover, the desires and purposes that shape our lives may themselves necessarily be limited, incapable of being stretched out over an infinite existence. Bella's choice to become a vampire is not necessarily the wrong one for her to make, but it is not one that we should envy.

NOTES

1. Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), p. 474.
2. Leo Tolstoy, "What Men Live By," in *What Men Live By and Other Tales*, trans. by Aylmer Maude and Louise Maude (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1918), p. 33.

3. *Twilight*, p. 476.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 498.
5. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. by Jane Kentish (London: Penguin Classics, 1988), p. 32.
6. *Twilight*, p. 473.
7. Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. by Ronald Melville (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 92.
8. Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2006), p. 518.
9. Stephenie Meyer, *Eclipse* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), p. 273.
10. Martha Nussbaum, "Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1989), p. 337.
11. Nussbaum, "Mortal Immortals," p. 338.
12. Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), p. 749.
13. Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in John Fisher (ed.), *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 74.
14. Williams, "The Makropulos Case," p. 82.
15. *Eclipse*, p. 311.