

Family, Ancestry and Self: What is the Moral Significance of Biological Ties?

By Sally Haslanger

1. Introduction

In a series of recent papers, David Velleman has argued that it is morally wrong to bring a child into existence with the intention that the child will not have contact with one or both biological parents.¹ Put another way, “other things being equal, children should be raised by their biological parents” (“Family” 362fn 3). The primary targets of his argument are those who use anonymous donor egg or sperm to conceive a child. In his view, there is a significant value in being parented by and having ongoing contact with one’s biological relatives. “What is most troubling about gamete donation is that it purposely severs a connection of the sort that normally informs a person’s sense of identity, which is composed of elements that must bear emotional meaning, as only symbols and stories can” (363). Let’s be clear. He is not just interested in the possibility of having information about one’s biological progenitors, but actual knowledge by acquaintance. So the kind of profile that is typically made available by gamete donors or in closed adoptions is insufficient, and even information that is revealed through open records is not enough. Unless there are substantial overriding considerations, a face-to-face relationship with both biological progenitors is morally required.²

I’m interested in this argument as an adoptive parent. I have two children, adopted as infants, in fully open transracial adoptions. My husband and I have made substantial efforts to develop close relationships with the birth families of our children, both for their sakes and ours. Velleman is not opposed to adoption: although he maintains that all things being equal it is better to be raised by one’s biological parents, he suggests that in the case of adoption (usually), “all things

are not equal." "The child needs to be parented by someone, and [in the case of adoption we can assume that] it cannot or should not be parented by its biological parents, for reasons that would outweigh any value inhering in biological ties" (361).

However, Velleman's argument against anonymous gamete donation takes aim at what he calls "a new ideology of the family," an "ideology" that has implications for adoption and other family forms: "The experiment of creating these children [by anonymous gamete donation] is supported by a new ideology of the family, developed for people who want to have children but lack the biological means to 'have' them in the usual sense. The new ideology has to do with the sense in which the resulting children will have families. It says that these children will have families in the only sense that matters, or at least in a sense that is good enough" (360). Although narrowly focused on anonymous gamete donation in the article just quoted, Velleman's concerns are broader. He explicitly mentions doubts about single parenthood, and gay and lesbian parenthood (360n2, 374n10). But in fact, any family form that fails to ensure an ongoing relationship with both male and female biological parents, and any choice that leads to such a family form, is (at least *prima facie*) morally suspect because the moral default is that a child should be raised by the two individuals from whose gametes he or she resulted.³

Like Velleman I find troubling the trend of reproductive technology and the assumptions behind it, especially the way it feeds a desire to have "designer babies" with the right sort of genetic background when there are many children in foster care and available for adoption in need of loving homes. I also support open adoption, where feasible.⁴ However, I believe that even in non-kin adoptions where children have no contact with biological relatives, adopted children *have* families and adoptive parents *have* children in a sense that is "at least . . . good enough" and, actually, equal to the relations between biological parents and children. I do not

agree with Velleman's suggestion that an ongoing connection with biological parents is so significant in forming one's identity that it is a moral wrong to deprive someone of this. And more broadly, I enthusiastically endorse the disruption of old ideologies of the family, and resist new ideologies that entrench and naturalize the value of biological ties.

So in this paper, I will argue against Velleman's position. I spend some effort to interpret his argument because, among other things, I take it to be more than an intellectual exercise: the moral standing of families like mine is at issue, and it would be too easy to dismiss his claims as just another manifestation of the culturally dominant biologism, or what I prefer to call *bionormativity*. Although I am also sympathetic with his desire to develop a moral theory that takes seriously empirical facts about human psychology and human flourishing, I argue that Velleman's evidence and the conceptual tools he uses for interpreting it are lacking. This may seem to leave the points on which I agree with him unexplained. So towards the end I will point to a different rationale for families being open to contact with biological relatives.

2. The Wrong in Denying Contact: How Far Does It Extend?

Velleman's claim that "other things being equal, children should be raised by their biological parents" is not implausible ("Family" 362fn 3). Suppose it was your responsibility to place a newborn with one of two families: the Abbots or the Babbots. Suppose the families are alike in every significant respect—their income, values, personalities, extended family, social circumstances are equivalent. To strengthen the similarity, you could even imagine that both the prospective mothers are twins and fathers are twins and they live in similar houses in similar subdivisions in the same city. However, suppose the baby is the biological offspring of Mr. and Ms. Abbot (they are both genetic parents and Ms. Abbot is the gestational parent of the child). It does seem, barring some important further consideration, that the baby should be placed with the

Abbots.

This thought does not entail, however, that the child has a right to be raised by the Abbots rather than the Babbots, or even that it would be good for the child. After all, the basis for thinking that the biological parents should be privileged in the case above may be due, not to the child's rights or interests, but to parental rights or interests; that is, it may be wrong to deny the biological parents the child unless there are compelling reasons to do so. But in the case of closed adoption and anonymous gamete donation, there *are* compelling reasons: the biological progenitors cannot or do not want to raise the child. Returning to the example above, if we suppose that the Abbots do not want to raise the child and are prepared to relinquish their rights, then it seems perfectly acceptable to place the baby with the Babbots who do want to raise the child, even if the Babbots are not biologically related to the Abbots.⁵

But *is it* acceptable? This is where Velleman resists. What about the interests of the child? Have the Abbots, in declining the responsibility to raise a child they have produced (assuming that they have the wherewithal to do so) done something morally wrong? In the case of gamete donation the question is even more pressing: is it wrong to undertake to create a child that one has no intention of raising?

Velleman's answer to the latter question is that yes, it is wrong. What Velleman thinks is the precise nature of the wrong, and how it extends to adoption, is not altogether clear. For example, how much does it matter that in the case of gamete donation, the conception was undertaken intentionally and in full knowledge of the consequences, where in the case of adoption, this is typically not the case? Threads in Velleman's argument suggest that closed or semi-open adoption (which could be safely opened fully) is on a par with anonymous gamete donation from a moral point of view, and that individuals who enter into an adoption arrangement that does not

include ongoing contact between child and birth families are doing something morally wrong. In this line of thought, the biological and/or adoptive parents are doing something that they have good evidence to believe will harm their offspring without overriding reasons that would justify doing so. In his words, "a life estranged from its ancestry is . . . truncated" ("Persons" 13) and we have a moral obligation to avoid truncating a life.

If Velleman is correct, the moral basis for contact is not the right of the biological progenitors to parent their child (a right that one can, at least under some circumstances, choose to forfeit); the moral basis lies in the well-being of the child. The biological progenitors may be able to forfeit their right to parent, but they do not thereby forfeit their responsibility to the child. The non-biological parents may accept the child "as their own" but this does not negate the importance of the biological progenitors to the child's well-being. As mentioned before, Velleman's focus is on cases of gamete donation rather than adoption—and the cases may differ in some morally relevant ways—but the core issue of contact affects both cases equally. Because the vast majority of non-kin adoptions in the United States do not involve ongoing contact with birth families, even though contact would be safe, Velleman's argument supports the conclusion that these non-kin adoptions (certainly numbering in the millions) are morally suspect.

3. Self and Identity

Velleman argues that those who participate in donor conception are doing harm to the resulting child because: "people who create children by donor conception already know—or already should know—that their children will be disadvantaged by the lack of a basic good on which most people rely in their pursuit of self-knowledge and identity formation. In coming to know and define themselves, most people rely on their acquaintance with people who are like them by virtue of being their biological relatives" ("Family" 364–65). From this quotation and other

passages in Velleman's essay, it seems that acquaintance with one's biological progenitors is important in two ways: (a) for forming a (healthy) self or identity, and (b) for gaining self-knowledge. There are really three interdependent tasks here.⁶ One is to form a self. Another is to form an identity. A third is to gain self-knowledge. How are these related?⁷

Self-knowledge is the broadest notion: I know lots of things about myself, some of which are rather trivial and peripheral to my identity. For example, I know that I broke my left index fingernail earlier today. A capacity for such self-knowledge (reflecting a body awareness, a basic sense of myself as in *this* body) is an important achievement that only a few species are capable of; but this particular bit of knowledge is unimportant. I also know that as a child I sometimes played with my older sister's doll with shiny red hair. This bit of knowledge could be woven into a narrative about my relationship with my sister, but in fact it is just a random memory that doesn't mean much to me. If I hadn't noticed that I had broken my fingernail, or hadn't dredged up the memory of playing with the doll, it wouldn't have been any kind of threat to my selfhood. Although plausibly some self-knowledge is important to being a healthy, functioning individual, one can presumably have a fairly stable self and yet lack important, even extensive, self-knowledge. For example, an adult who suffers partial amnesia as a result of an accident may have a stable self, but have substantial gaps in his or her long-term memory. What is crucial for children is sufficient self-knowledge in order to gain a stable self, for a stable self seems to be a necessary condition for a fully human life.

But what is a self? And what is the difference between a self and an identity? In the context of adoption, the controversy over transracial adoption has provided one useful framework for thinking about the difference. In the early 1970's, critics of transracial adoption argued that because transracial adoptees would be brought up in families that could not provide the resources

for developing a secure Black identity, Black children adopted into White families were profoundly harmed.⁸ Since then, however, psychologists have argued that there are two relevant dimensions of mental health to consider: "personal identity" (PI) and "reference group orientation" (RGO) (Cross 41–42). Measures of the strength of personal identity are concerned with "self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence, self-evaluation, interpersonal competence, ego-ideal, personality traits, introversion-extroversion, and level of anxiety"; measures of reference group orientation (in the context of these debates focused primarily on race) look at "racial identity, group identity, race awareness, racial ideology, race evaluation, race esteem, race image, race self-identification" (42).

William Cross used this distinction to study the transition from "Negro" to "Black" identity as a result of the civil rights movement. Whereas early studies of Negro identity represented it as pathological and burdened with self-hatred, Cross found that this research failed to appreciate the underlying psychological health of those studied: "The Black Social Movement of the 1960s achieved a high degree of ideological and cultural consensus among Black people, especially Black youth. But in changing their ideologies, the movement did not have to change the personalities of Black youth because most already *had* healthy personalities. Such mental health was a legacy of the personal psychological victories that their parents [who identified as "Negro"] were able to achieve and to pass on to the next generation" (xiv).

With this distinction between (PI) and (RGO), Cross was able to consider the alleged harm to transracial adoptees and found, contrary to earlier empirical claims, that there is "no difference in the PI profile for Black children involved in transracial compared to inracial adoptions." (Cross 111; Shireman and Johnson). Given strong personal identities, transracial adoptees have the ability to negotiate the further task of developing a racial identity in the social context they find

themselves.⁹ Although developing a healthy racial identity is not a simple or easy task, many people now believe that the challenges transracial adoptees face are not so extreme that they provide a case against transracial adoption. In fact, there is reason to think that if the choice is between early adoption into an other-race family, or an extended time in foster care or group homes, the former is preferable primarily because it provides a better context for developing a strong personal identity which then forms the basis for negotiating race and other social identities over time.

Drawing on this literature, I'll use the term *self* to refer to the cluster of basic traits that allow an individual to function as an agent, some of which are measured by the notion of "personal identity" (PI) mentioned above, and plausibly includes others not mentioned, e.g., a capacity for practical reason. I'll use the term *identity* or *social identity* to refer to an individual's reference group orientation (RGO), and the narrative tropes that are employed to navigate one's relation to the reference group. Damage or harm to self by circumstances that undermine the development of core capacities of agency is clearly something we have an obligation to avoid. But it is less obvious that we have an obligation to provide particular "identities" to children, especially identities that conform to the standard reference groups or the culturally dominant narrative tropes.¹⁰

It remains unclear at this point what the relationship is between self and identity. Are there particular reference group orientations—social identities and accompanying narratives concerned with biological origins and similarities—without which a healthy self cannot develop? Does the development of a healthy social identity require close contact with other members of the social group in question? And how malleable are the identities and narratives in accommodating difference?

4. Basic Goods

It might seem that the issues before us are fully empirical: how do human beings form healthy selves and identities? Velleman's argument in the passage quoted at the beginning of section three in this essay relies on an empirical fact about how "most" individuals form a sense of self, or an identity. Because "most" people form identities by contact with biological relations, we owe this opportunity to everyone. However, if we have a moral obligation to protect the opportunity for identity formation through contact with biological relations, it can't simply be because "most" people do it this way, but that it is a *good* way to do it. For example, at certain points in history most White people in the United States have defined themselves by reference to the White race and by acquaintance with other Whites. Being White was a fundamental element of one's identity (and for many, it still is). This identification with a race, tribe, or nation is not peculiar to the United States, but is a common and deep source of identity across time and culture. But the fact that "most" people in a certain context rely on racial categories to form their sense of self does not show that this is good or right or something that should be promoted. And this for two reasons: the belief that there are biological races is false, and identities formed around assumed biological races, specifically a White/Non-White binary, can reinforce racial hierarchy. In his more recent paper on the topic, Velleman acknowledges that the argument cannot rest on the claim that "most" people form identities through contact with biological relations, or that it is "natural" (i.e., selected for), for many traits common or natural in this sense are morally problematic ("Persons" 2).

What's needed is an argument showing that people who rely on acquaintance with their biological relatives to form their identities gain *knowledge* by this acquaintance (not false beliefs about their similarity to or even superiority to others), and that this knowledge is "*a basic good*."

What is "a basic good"? Here are two possibilities:

- i. A basic good is something *necessary* in order to lead a minimally good life.
- ii. A basic good is something *helpful* in achieving a minimally good life.

(i) is too strong for Velleman's purposes. There are many people who lead a minimally good life without acquaintance with their biological progenitors. Velleman seems to grant this, for he says that it is just "very difficult" ("Family" 366) to form an identity without access to a relationship with one's biological parents, and that having such a relationship is "especially important to identity formation" (375).¹¹ But (ii) seems too weak. It would be helpful if I gave all the money in my savings account to the homeless person I walk by on the way to work, but I haven't done something morally wrong if I don't.

To make a first step in complicating this framework, let us distinguish between a minimally decent life, a good life, and a completely flourishing life. Different goods play a role in enabling each of these. Although access to biological relatives is not necessary for a minimally decent life, Velleman seems to suggest that it is necessary for a good life.¹² This would suggest a better understanding of basic goods:

- iii. A basic good is something that, over and above the essential goods needed for a minimally decent life, is necessary in order to achieve a good life.

Denying someone access to such basic goods would have the effect that their life is more impoverished than it would need to be and it would be impossible for them to fully flourish. So it would be reasonable to think that in depriving someone of a basic good, all else being equal, you are harming him or her. And intentionally causing someone avoidable harm is morally wrong.

[See Figure 1].

[INSERT Figure 1]

Although this seems to be on the right track, it is important to note that what is necessary to achieve a good life is context specific, so it may be that what is necessary for a good life in one context, or at one time, is not necessary in another context or at another time. A famous example of this comes from Adam Smith: "By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct" (465). Should we think of the formation of selves and identities as sensitive to context?

One cannot provide someone a self or an identity. These are achievements that an individual must accomplish. What one can provide are the social bases for healthy selves and identities. I agree with Velleman's claim that it is morally wrong to create a child only to deprive him or her of the social basis for selfhood, of the minimal conditions that enable him or her to become a fully functioning agent. And selves are in the business of forming an identity. That's what selves do. But what counts as a healthy identity, and what resources are needed for forming such an identity are culturally specific. Identities locate us within social structures and cultural narratives; they situate individuals in relation to others. Because there are indefinitely many ways of organizing ourselves, there will be variations in what is owed to individuals who are engaged in identity formation.

Difficult questions arise because not all structures and narratives are objectively sound or

morally legitimate. I believe that the current racial structure (and gender structure) in the United States is morally problematic and I seek ways to undermine it, and yet I also believe that it would be wrong not to teach my children how to situate themselves as Black (and gendered) within that structure. Others believe that races are pernicious fictions and it is wrong to teach their children that they, or anyone else, are a member of a race; color-blindness is their policy. What do we owe our children here? It would be good for my children if the current racial hierarchy were weakened; if I teach them how to situate themselves within that hierarchy, their lives will be easier, but it plausibly also reinforces the structure. Justice and happiness, knowledge and security do not always coincide. How should we choose?

In spite of such complications, however, one might argue that there are some universal identity goods that we are obliged to provide children. The social bases for *selfhood* are, in the framework I've suggested, an essential good. And accompanying the social bases for selfhood will be social bases for *identity* formation (language, relations to others, etc.). But we should ask: what is necessary for *healthy* identity formation? Under conditions of slavery, slaves develop selves with identities, but their identities are disfigured by the cultural context. Gender and race hierarchies are harmful in part because of the limited and problematic set of identities that they make available. A minimally decent life can be achieved with an unhealthy identity. But a good life is not, or not easily, within reach.

Can we specify the social bases for a healthy identity? As I've argued, because identities situate one within a social context, it will be difficult to characterize universally necessary conditions. If Velleman's argument is sound, contact with biological relatives would be a universally necessary condition. I disagree with him about this, but would suggest that other conditions are plausible—for instance, that children should have access to basic knowledge of

origins where available, opportunities to gain knowledge of themselves that can anchor a meaningful life narrative, and cultural categories and narratives that are non-oppressive. Even here, however, there are cultural differences to keep in mind, e.g., in some cultures birth dates are not considered important and are not recorded, whereas in others birth dates and birthdays are central to one's legal and social identity. What counts as the relevant "knowledge of origins" will vary to some degree depending on context. However, if honesty about origins is a basic good, then lying to children about their adoptive status, or about their biological origins, would be morally wrong. But the question remains: what is the status of acquaintance with one's biological relatives? Is it a basic good?

5. The Goods of Knowing Biological Kin

Velleman points to two different epistemic goods gained by knowing one's biological relations. First, it provides a special kind of self-knowledge based on "intuitive and unanalyzable resemblances." Second, it provides a narrative within which our actions have meaning.

Note that neither knowledge of others who are similar by virtue of biological relatedness, nor biological narratives that draw specifically on such knowledge, are necessary for developing full selfhood. So in neither case is the good in question an essential good. The question is whether the knowledge gained through contact is a basic good, understood as necessary for a good life. Knowing many adoptees whose lives seem good by any ordinary standard, some of whom have, and others of whom don't have, contact with their birth families, I find it hard even to entertain the idea that contact with birth families is necessary for a good life. In fact, I think it would be insulting to adoptees I know to suggest that their lives are not good because they don't know their birth parents. Nevertheless, there may be something relevant that's easy to miss, so I will consider the issue of similarity in this section, and the issue of narrative in the next.

Haslanger, “Family”

As Velleman points out, it is very difficult to come to know oneself simply by introspection, or by watching oneself in the mirror. The best resource, he proposes, is observation of others who are importantly similar, and the best sources for such similarity are one’s biological family. “When adoptees go in search of their biological parents and siblings, there is a literal sense in which they are searching for themselves. They are searching for the closest thing to a mirror in which to catch an external and candid view of what they are like in more than mere appearance. Not knowing any biological relatives must be like wandering in a world without reflective surfaces, permanently self-blind” (“Family” 368). As mentioned before, his argument depends on not just having information about one’s relatives—this is typically available even in the case of anonymous donors—but having *acquaintance* with them. Why? His idea is that only by acquaintance can we appreciate the *intuitive and unanalyzable* resemblance we have to our biological relatives. We see another who is “like me.” And the recognition of this resemblance is crucial to access “deeply ingrained” aspects of my self.¹³

On the face of it, however, Velleman’s emphasis on biological parents and siblings is highly exaggerated. We all rely on many sources in our development of self-understanding, including friends, characters in literature and film, public figures and, in cases where biological kin are missing, custodial family members. If the crucial thing is that we have others around us who effectively mirror us to ourselves, then it isn’t clear why this should be a biological relative.¹⁴ Moreover, it is clear that self-knowledge is not *entirely* achieved by the route of mirroring Velleman describes, for if you don’t have some self-knowledge prior to seeing others like yourself, then how could you tell whether they are like you or not? After all, you don’t know what you are like! Given some sense of self, gained through introspection and agency, we find others to watch, to mimic, to emulate, to avoid. Although biology does sometimes provide ideal

mirrors for this process, all too often it fails miserably: it is common for children to fail when they model themselves on their biological parents, and many biological parents are failures in their own lives and so are poor models even if their children could be successful.

Moreover, if the goal is to find an objective basis for self-knowledge, judgments of similarity should be viewed with caution. In the case of racial or ethnic identity, the belief in shared "blood" provides a myth of commonality. Myths of commonality run rampant in families. And such myths of commonality trace politically significant contours. For example, a female friend with two sons once commented that my son Isaac and I look alike. I was surprised since no one had ever mentioned this before. She noticed my surprise and commented: "I'm told all the time that my sons look like me. I don't think they look like me at all. They are *boys*. But that doesn't seem to matter when people are looking for parent-child similarity. People don't think Isaac looks like you because he's Black and you're White. Skin-color matters when people look for parent-child similarity. But if you actually attend to his features, he looks a lot like you." An important insight in this observation is that what similarities are salient is largely a matter of context, and some socially significant similarities are allowed to eclipse others that may be more deeply important. I don't really see our physical similarities, but Isaac and I have other emotional and temperamental similarities. This too can be easily eclipsed by our racial (and sex) difference. Social schemas tell us, among other things: Who are you allowed to look like? Who are you allowed to *be* like? (We'll return to the idea of a social schema below.)

Implicit in Velleman's discussion is a theory about why adoptees search ("they are searching for themselves") and what they find when they do ("an external and candid view of themselves"). But research on adoptees, although plagued by methodological challenges and rarely if ever reaching consensus, doesn't support this picture. Although, as Velleman notes, the

number of adoptees who search has been steadily rising and may be approaching fifty percent ("Family" 259fn1), this is not surprising, given the opening of records and changes in adoption policy and counseling. However, this increase in numbers searching does not, by itself, support his interpretation of why adoptees search or the outcome. Although I cannot provide a literature survey in this context, there are a few points worth noting.

First, it is generally recognized that adoption is a significant factor in identity development, though whether an adoptee struggles with identity is to a significant extent a matter of context, where context includes both immediate family and society. Factors that influence identity resolution in adoptive families include: type of family relationships (e.g., authoritarian or not), ways of communicating (or not) about adoption, and parental attitudes about adoption.¹⁵ Social attitudes towards adoption influence the adoptee both indirectly by influencing parents' attitudes and directly. For example: "Problems of identity tend to arise when we have conflicting loyalties to persons, groups or associations. Identity problems arise for adoptive children not simply because they have been told they are adopted, but because there are conflicting cultural values around them, those concerned with nurturing parenthood held by their adoptors [sic], and the values concerning biological bases of kinship that are still very much alive in the culture generally" (Kirk 20; qtd. in Hoopes 155). Interestingly, and not surprisingly, adoptees who are brought up in a family which accords significant value to being reared in biological families, a value that they are obviously missing out on, are more likely to have identity problems and search for their biological relatives. Thus it would seem that Velleman's view is locally self-affirming. But adoptees who are brought up in families where biology is treated as one source, but not the only source for identity, are normally able to form healthy identities without contact with their biological relatives.

Second, in carefully controlled studies, adoptees have been found to have “no significant differences between their behavior and characteristics and those of the matched group of biological children.”¹⁶ In studies of adult adoptees (much of the adoption research is on youth), “while adult adoptees have had unique life experiences, in many ways they are navigating their adult years no differently than their non-adopted peers” (Borders, Black, and Pasley 415). If we remember the distinction between PI and RGO in the discussion of Black identity, this research suggests that adoptees do not suffer in developing a core self measured by PI relative to non-adoptees.¹⁷ Interestingly, however, “most of the differences found between adoptees and controls in this research could be attributed to search status. Lower self-esteem, lower family/friend support, and higher depression scores were all associated with searchers” (416). Whether this difference between searchers and non-searchers is the reason for, or a result of, searching is not clear; it is also confusing that this study apparently makes no distinction between searchers who have found family and those who have not. This research suggests, however, that contact with biological relatives is not an assured route to a healthy identity.

Third, adoptees search for their birth families for a variety of reasons and there are many different trajectories after reunion. Recent long-term studies suggest that in most cases, even when a good relationship is established with a birth mother, the adoptee’s primary relationship remains with their adoptive mother. Moreover, “The need to have a sense of genealogical and genetic connectedness appears strong. It is part of the drive that motivates people to search. Who do I look like? Where do I come from? Whom am I like in terms of temperament and interests, skills and outlook? But although these needs trigger people to search and seek contact, they do not necessarily imply the desire for a relationship. They are information led: they are designed to meet autobiographical and identity needs” (Howe and Feast 364–65). So even if we grant the

point that it can help to gain an objective perspective on oneself through having information about or even observing biological relatives, we must ask, how much more than a glimpse is needed? How often do we need to see ourselves unexpectedly in a store window in order to form a healthy identity? Is contact needed? Apparently, an ongoing relationship is not even desired by many of those who search.

6. Identity and Culture

Where are we now? According to Velleman, the self-knowledge one gains through relationships with one's biological progenitors "is of irreplaceable value in the life-task of identity formation" ("Family" 357). So far, I've identified and criticized two claims his argument rests upon:

- Judgments of similarity with biological relations are reliable (objective?) guides to self-knowledge.
- Those who lack a relationship with biological progenitors have difficulty forming secure identities and difficulty finding meaning in life because of this lack.

However, in order to do justice to Velleman's position, we should look more closely at the role of narrative in his account of identity formation. This will help flesh out his argument, and will also enable us to explore an alternative picture of the social function of identity.

Velleman acknowledges that the construction of identity isn't primarily a matter of finding the facts about one's past. It is a process of telling a story: "I am inclined to think that a knowledge of one's origins is especially important to identity formation because it is important to the telling of one's life-story, which necessarily encodes one's appreciation of meaning in the events of one's life." He continues: "Of course, my own life provides narrative context for many of the events within it; but my family history provides an even broader context, in which large stretches

of my life can take on meaning, as the trajectory of my entire education and career takes on meaning in relation to the story of my ancestors" (375–76). In describing his own family narrative—he is the grandson of Russian Jewish immigrants—he admits: "How do I know that I have inherited these qualities [being a malcontent, a homebody] from Nathan and Golda? I don't: it's all imaginative speculation. But such speculations are how we define and redefine ourselves, weighing different possible meanings for our characters by playing them out in different imagined stories. In these speculations, family history gives us inexhaustible food for thought" (377). This is confusing, for there is a tension between the role of story-telling in identity formation, and the role of "external and candid" knowledge that is important to gain from biological progenitors.¹⁸ Apparently Velleman's speculative imagination about his great-grandparents (Nathan and Golda) serves him adequately in constructing a story that links him to a meaningful past, so knowledge of the real events and acquaintance with actual ancestors is not required for the narrative project.

However, in the case of gamete donation or closed adoption, there is also material from which to build a story. Adoptive parents often receive not only medical information, but copies of long questionnaires filled out by one or both birthparents; the same happens in the process of gamete donation. Velleman uses the bits of evidence he gains about his ancestors—ancestors who died long before he was born—together with his knowledge of context and history, to create a story within which he can fit his life: his great-grandparents left Russia, he imagines, to find a better life, and he has benefited from their doing so. Even without contact with their biological progenitors, adoptees and the offspring of gamete donors can tell similar stories that have led up to their lives. Literature is not only filled with narratives about happy biological offspring and tragic adopted ones, but also biological offspring who feel tremendous alienation from their

parents, orphans and adoptees who find loving homes and live meaningful lives with little or no knowledge of their biological relatives, and almost everything in between.¹⁹ Velleman finds it confusing how those who do not prioritize biological ties can appreciate world literature ("Family 369; "Persons" 14); it isn't difficult if one allows that there are a variety of narrative forms that situate one in relation to one's origins, detailed ancestral narratives being one, maybe even an important one, but not the only one. Information about "family history" may be useful "food for thought," but a relationship with biological progenitors is not necessary to creating a speculative family history—and over the long run, speculation is all any of us has anyway.

Stories we tell about ourselves, our relation to others and to our past are not unique, but follow cultural schemas. The notion of schema plays a role in both anthropology and psychology. Within the field of social psychology, schemas are understood to be representations of phenomena that organize our beliefs in a way that helps us form expectations and process new information. Groups form shared schemas that enable their members to respond similarly to circumstances they encounter. Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts that frame our interaction with each other and our environment; such scripts can guide group members through collective events or even organize a life. Judith Howard (a social psychologist) suggests: "Schemas, for example, are both mental and social; they both derive from and constitute cultural, semiotic, and symbolic systems" (218). Internalized schemas make the structure of our social milieu seem right and natural.

An important part of individuation and socialization involves locating oneself in relation to others, specifically one's family and society more broadly. Some kinds of similarity become salient and have weight for us because of their cultural meaning. (Recall the issue of whether Isaac and I are similar.) Cultures provide categories for individuals and scripts for those within

the categories. Many of us have little choice about what category we fall into or which script we follow. However, identity crises arise when the categories are questioned or when the scripts we are following conflict or are incomplete; as we saw above, adoptees’ process of identity formation involves an encounter with two conflicting schemas of the family that must somehow be negotiated and internalized.

The dominant cultural schema for the family in the recent West is articulated by Velleman in his account of how healthy families are made: “Some truths are so homely as to embarrass the philosopher who ventures to speak them. First comes love, then comes marriage, and then the proverbial baby carriage. Well, it’s not such a ridiculous way of doing things, is it? The baby in that carriage has an inborn nature that joins together the natures of two adults. If those two adults are joined by love into a stable relationship—call it marriage—then they will be naturally prepared to care for it with sympathetic understanding, and to show it how to recognize and reconcile some of the qualities within itself. A child naturally comes to feel at home with itself and at home in the world by growing up in its own family” (“Family” 370–71). This schema—let’s call it the “*natural nuclear family*” schema—is so powerful as to eclipse certain facts, e.g., adopted children and those produced by gamete donation *are* growing up “in their own family” and often find spending time with their biological family uncomfortable and strange. And people with certain biological predispositions are actually not well-suited to parent others with those same dispositions but actually create powerfully dysfunctional family systems.

In his more recent paper, Velleman acknowledges that not all cultures have been structured around the nuclear family (“Persons” 13). And he admits that the commonality of having children raised by their biological relatives is not an argument for the goodness of this practice. But, he suggests, the ubiquity of the practice lends credibility to the “universal common sense”:

"When I say that my claim is universal common sense, I mean that people everywhere and always have based their social relationships, in the first instance, on relations of kinship, of which the basic building block is the relation between parent and child. Not every society has favored the nuclear family, of course, but virtually every society has reared children among their kin and in the knowledge of who their biological parents are " (13). Whether this is "universal common sense" is one question; whether its ubiquity lends it credibility is another. Common sense, even if "universal," is not always empirically sound, so it would be helpful if Velleman provided some empirical evidence for his own speculation about the history of the human species. I am not an anthropologist either, and hesitate to enter into debates that have persisted over a century concerning the relationship between social and biological "kinship." However, perhaps we can make progress in clarifying what's at issue. I quote at length a passage from a well-known text concerning "The History of Definitions of Kinship": "First, there is the genetic father, the man who supplies the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. He is for all practical purposes unknown and unknowable in most societies of the world, and even in our own with the best tools of modern science it is only possible to exclude certain persons but never to positively identify any particular person. Second . . . there is the genitor. The genitor is the man who according to the particular cultural theory of the particular society we are concerned with is held to be the man by whose actions the woman was caused to be pregnant. Thus, where the genetic father is a purely scientific concept . . . the genitor is defined in terms of the folk beliefs of each culture. It is conceivable, and Barnes seems to think it is possible, that such a status may be absent from some cultures. I would take it that these would be such places as are said to deny physiological paternity or the role of coitus in conception. Finally the third concept is that of the social father, or the pater. The social father need not necessarily be a man. Thus in cases of leviratic marriage,

woman-woman marriage, and so on, the culture may explicitly recognize and accord different rights, duties, and status to the (socially recognized) genitor and the pater, each different persons. It is with the genitor and the pater that anthropology is concerned and not with the genetic father. The same distinctions can be made between the genetic mother, the genetrix, and the mater, of course, and can be take to include theories of reproduction" (Schneider 110). Summarizing these distinctions, Schneider continues: "Thus there is genetic kinship in the sense of what the science of genetics seems to have established and there is the particular set of folk beliefs and indigenous theory of reproduction characteristic of a particular society. Finally there is the set of social conventions which consists in roles, norms, rules, rights, duties, and so forth which are attached to the culturally distinguished statuses which are embedded in the indigenous theory of reproduction" (110). Given that kinship relations might be based on genetic relations, folk reproductive theory, or social roles as sources of kinship relations, Velleman's claim about the centrality of kinship and parent/child relations is vague. There are several possible readings. Here are three:

- *Social reading*: Social kinship is the basis for all other social relations and the building block for social kinship is the relation between pater/mater and child. In every society children know who their pater and/or mater are.
- *Folk reproductive theory reading*: Presumed natural kinship is the basis for all other social relations and the building block for social kinship is the relation between genitor/genetrix and child. In every society children know who their genitor/genetrix are.
- *Biologistic reading*: Genetic kinship is the basis for all other social relations and the building block for genetic kinship is the relation between genetic parent and offspring. In every society children know who their genetic parents are.

From what I know of the anthropological literature on kinship, none of these claims would be considered uncontroversial. Given that in many societies people have had very a weak grasp of reproductive biology²⁰, and given the huge variety of (social) kinship structures that anthropologists spent a good part of the twentieth century studying, the biologicistic reading is the least plausible of the three.²¹ However, to claim, as in the social reading, that children know their pater and/or mater is virtually tautologous, for they are defined as the social parents. (In other words, of course children know and are usually reared by their kin, because the social notion of kinship can be defined in terms of roles vis à vis children.) But the social reading does not support Velleman's view anyway, for it is generally agreed that the pater and mater need not be biologically related to the child.²²

The folk biological reading is the most interesting, for it suggests a universal attempt at biologism, even if the beliefs about reproduction structuring kinship in a particular society are false. But there are several worries. First, in societies where the conditions for being genitor/genetrix are not conditions that pick out the genetic father and mother, the knowledge of genitor/genetrix does not provide the kind of biological resource that Velleman assumes universal. Second, even if in most societies children know *of* their genitor/genetrix (which, as noted in the quotation above, is controversial), it doesn't follow that they have ongoing contact with them. "It is so self-evident to most people in Euro-American society that children should be raised by their 'natural' parents that it might come as a surprise to learn that this is not always and everywhere the case. . . . Many anthropological and sociological studies illustrate the tenuous relationship a presumed biological father or genitor may have with his children, [and] . . . In fact, to share or reassign maternal responsibilities emerges as a relatively common strategy in many societies, by no means always arising from necessity (poverty or redressing childlessness

in others)" (Bowie 3).

We cannot settle here whether the anthropological evidence supports Velleman's claim or not, so let us suppose he is right. What follows? Claiming that the "naturalness" or ubiquity of a practice lends it credibility is a familiar form of argument. John Stuart Mill was one of the clearest and most articulate critics of this idea. Acknowledging the universal subordination of women to men, he eloquently argued that this was no mark in its favor. "In the first place, the opinion in favour of the present system, which entirely subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger, rests upon theory only; for there never has been a trial made of any other: so that experience, in the sense in which it is vulgarly opposed to theory, cannot be pretended to have pronounced any verdict. An in the second place, the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman . . . was found in a state of bondage to some man" (Mill 5). In both the case of male domination and in biological parenting, the issue is structural. Do we have reason to think, based on the facts as we know them, that male domination is necessary, or good? Do we have reason to think, based on the facts as we know them, that a society structured around biological parenting is necessary, or good? Both kinds of structures are, allegedly ubiquitous (though as just noted, this is controversial). In both cases we can give explanations about how they emerged and why they survive that do not now justify them. This is the crucial point: what explains the (alleged) universality? Is the best explanation that the structures are good and, in fact, better than alternative structures that have been tried? How can we know unless we have clear evidence of the effects of other structures? Indeed, the claim of universality undermines itself: it would be easier to argue for the goodness of the

structure if it weren't universal, for then we would have stronger evidence of its goodness in contrast to the alternatives under consideration.

Velleman suggests a more deliberative process, "People have tried living in vastly diverse ways, but they have almost always settled on lifeways that accord central importance to biological family ties" ("Persons" 15). Or, at least, that accord central importance to the relation between biological mother and child. To give Velleman credit, his account of the similar natures of biological parents and their offspring and the value of this for child-rearing is intended to provide a rationale for the practice. (We should note that historically, this too is a familiar form of argument: women *by nature* are in need of male supervision.) However, another explanation of the centrality of biological mother-child relations is easily available: until recently, infants needed to be breastfed. The most reliable source of breast milk for an infant would be its biological mother. It is tempting to think that just as, in Mill's words, male domination "arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman . . . was found in a state of bondage to some man," the centrality of biological mother-child relations arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society every infant was found to be in a state of needing a lactating woman, the nearest being its biological mother.

We should note, however, that Velleman doesn't need the claim that societies always and everywhere have organized themselves around the biological family to make his claim that this is a basic good. As noted above when considering the importance of linen shirts in eighteenth-century England, some goods are *contextually* basic. They are necessary in a particular culture at a particular time in order to have a good life. One could reasonably claim that because the "natural nuclear family" schema is dominant in contemporary Western societies and has been for several centuries, children are harmed who are deprived of the resources to situate themselves

socially using this narrative trope. Just as lacking a linen shirt in the eighteenth-century England would be shameful and suggest a history of bad conduct, likewise admission of adoptee (or birth mother or adoptive parent) status has been considered shameful and indicative of bad conduct in our recent culture, among others. Lacking knowledge of one's biological family, one is often left without answers to questions that matter culturally, and this is stigmatizing. Given the difficulty of living a good life as a member of a stigmatized group, we owe adoptees access to their biological relatives so they have answers to questions that the natural nuclear family schema assumes they will have.

Here we have come to a point on which Velleman and I agree. The natural nuclear family schema plays an important role in forming identities—including healthy identities—in our current cultural context, and many people are stigmatized by not being able to "fit" the schema; in short, early twenty-first century American culture is bionormative. Being stigmatized is harmful and it is difficult to live a good life when stigmatized in this way. However, even granting the cultural significance of the natural nuclear family schema, there are two ways to combat this stigma. One is to provide resources so that everyone can come as close as possible to fitting the schema, another is to combat the dominance of the schema. Velleman prefers the former strategy; I prefer the latter. The problem, as I see it, lies in the reification of the schema as universal, necessary, and good, and not the families that fail to match it.

I take the crucial question to be whether parents, or society more generally, is obliged to provide the social bases for healthy identity formation in terms of the dominant ideology of the culture. If the obligation is simply to provide the social bases for healthy identity formation, then if there are multiple routes to this result, the obligation is only to provide one or another of these routes. For example, if the dominant schemas for identity are implicated in structures and forms

of life that are unjust, the good of fitting neatly into the culture may be compromised. The best alternative may be to find or construct alternative—counter-hegemonic—identities and narratives that complicate gender, race, ethnicity, family, etc. In a context in which the dominant schema is biological/genetic determinism, it is useful to be acquainted with one's biological relations. But this is a conditional good and is not good by virtue of the biological relations alone. Anonymous gamete donation may make telling a life-story that fits with the dominant family schema difficult, but likewise children of interracial partnerships have (or had) more difficulty telling a life-story that fits with the dominant schema of the Black-White racial binary. This doesn't mean that interracial couples are (or were) doing something immoral by having a child. Providing our children the social bases for alternative family schemas may be not only permissible, but morally good; it may even be a moral duty to combat bionormativity. In particular, constructing and teaching narratives that normalize adoption and schemas that challenge the assumption that our biological inheritance defines who we are, may not be to spread lies (Velleman, "Family" 378), but to provide the resources to build a more just society.

In the case of the natural nuclear family schema, much more would have to be said to determine whether and to what extent its dominance is implicated in structures of injustice. Insofar as the schema underwrites traditional gender roles and heteronormative models of the family, I take it to be morally problematic. But this is a large debate that goes beyond the opportunities this paper provides. My argument is more limited. I believe that knowing one's biological relatives can be a good thing, and that contact is valuable in the contemporary cultural context largely because this context is dominated by the natural nuclear family schema. Even in this context, the formation of a full self and the formation of a healthy identity do not require contact with, or even specific knowledge of, biological relatives. Identities are formed in relation

to cultural schemas, and fortunately our culture provides a wealth of schemas that sometimes fit with and sometimes run counter to the dominant ideology. Living under the shadow of the natural nuclear family schema, it is reasonable to provide children with information about or contact with their biological relations, if and when this becomes an issue in their forming a healthy identity. However, if we are to avoid harming our children, then rather than enshrining a schema that most families fail to exemplify and which is used to stigmatize and alienate families that are (yes!) as good as their biological counterparts, we should instead make every effort to disrupt the hegemony of the schema.²³

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NOTES

¹ Cf. Velleman, "Narrative" and "Family."

² Note that Velleman's use of the term *parent* for gamete donor is a controversial choice in a highly charged domain. I cannot follow him on this. Of course, not using the term *parent* for gamete donors is also controversial. There is no neutral term, but I will often use the term *biological progenitor* as an alternative to both *donor* and *parent*.

³ Velleman is not alone in defending this view. See e.g., Benatar, though his argument is quite different and conclusion is more cautious.

⁴ Cf. Allen, "Open."

⁵ Velleman claims that biological parents are not entitled to "abdicate their responsibilities at will. We do not think that parents are morally entitled to put a newborn up for adoption because of a last-minute social engagement, for example, or dismay at the size of its ears" ("Persons" 10). Although I agree with Velleman on the two examples, it is because I believe that the decision would be ill-informed and irrational. However, I believe that a parent is morally entitled to relinquish their rights, if their decision to do so is informed and rational. Earlier in the paper Velleman uses the example of pushing a child into a swimming pool as an analogy with procreation, saying, "You shouldn't go pushing children into the deep end if you aren't willing to get wet" (8). Bracketing whether one should ever push a child into the deep end who can't swim, I think a more plausible claim would be: "You shouldn't go pushing children into the deep end if you haven't arranged for someone to jump in if and when necessary."

⁶ Is the wrong at issue here that individuals who lack access to their biological progenitors are at a *disadvantage* relative to others who live with biological relatives? This would mean that the harm could be ameliorated if everyone were adopted into non-kin families. But this is clearly not

what Velleman has in mind, as is obvious from his rejection of Plato's plan for child rearing in *The Republic* ("Persons" 2).

⁷ See also Witt.

⁸ See (National-Association-of-Black-Social-Workers, 1972); for a helpful analysis of this document and the movement behind it, see (Neal, n.d.).

⁹ There is no consensus on how transracial adoption affects RGO. Some studies suggest that inracial adoptees have stronger RGO than transracial adoptees; however, at least one study found that at age four, transracial adoptees have an RGO profile that is "'stronger'[Query: is this second set of quotation marks in the original? Where does the quotation end? The passage puts both "stronger" and "Black oriented" in double quotes, so I meant to put them both in single quotes within the quotation. Is that right?]' and more 'Black oriented' than that of peers being reared in Black homes!" (Shireman and Johnson, qtd. in Cross 111–12). The study found the difference to disappear by age eight.

¹⁰ See Allen for an argument that a child does not have a right against their parents to be brought up with a particular racial or even gender identity.

¹¹ In "Family," Velleman suggests a somewhat stronger claim, "Human life is important because it is a predicament faced by . . . a person, whose success at facing it will entail the flowering of personhood, and whose failure will entail a disfigurement of that value, in the form of damage to the self" (12). He continues with the thought that we must "avoid creating lives that will already be truncated or damaged in ways that seriously affect the prospects for flourishing within them. I claim that a life estranged from its ancestry is truncated in this way" (13). If denying access to ancestors will prevent someone from developing a secure self, or will damage such a self, then it would seem an essential rather than a basic good.

¹² In correspondence, Velleman explained to me that he does not believe that his arguments concern basic goods that are "owed to everyone," but rather they concern what we owe to people we contemplate bringing into existence (Email). On his account, procreative decisions must be based on a standard of adequate provision that is different from what is owed to existing children. In the case of gamete donation, the alternative is non-existence, whereas in the case of adoption, the alternative is remaining with the birth family, foster care, or some other form of custodial care; these differences are significant. As a result, he holds that his arguments do not apply to the case of adoption except insofar as one is considering bringing a child into existence in order to place them for adoption. Thus the reconstruction of his argument that I provide here should be understood as one he would not endorse. However, he does hold that due to the importance of biological ties, adoptees are at a disadvantage in comparison with non-adoptees, so the general import of his argument is relevant to the issue of open adoption insofar as one might plausibly think that one should not disadvantage someone without substantial reason. My arguments can be understood to question the existence and nature of the alleged disadvantage. I look forward to reinterpreting the details of Velleman's arguments in light of the feedback he has offered, and offer the interpretation I develop here as capturing a view that plays a role in our culture—so is worth analyzing—even if it is not a view Velleman would fully endorse.

¹³ Cf. Witt.

¹⁴ Although Velleman's emphasis on narrative suggests a sympathy with a psychoanalytic notion of self, the "self psychology" of Kohut employs the notion of "mirroring" in a way that seems relevant to, but different from, Velleman's notion of mirroring (see Baker and Baker for an overview of Kohut). In Kohut's view, to develop a healthy self it is crucial that the primary caretaker "mirror" the child by providing empathetic and appropriate responses to his/her

affective states. Whether the primary caretaker is capable of this has little to do with his/her similarities with the child, but depends more on their own narcissistic tendencies. Insofar as narcissistic projection and a failure to recognize the child as a fully separate person is more tempting with a biological child, it may even be that a non-biological parent or care-taker is better suited to this mirroring role than a biological parent.

¹⁵ See Hoopes esp. 162f; and Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy.

¹⁶ Borders, Black, and Pasley; also qtd. in Carp 252.

¹⁷ This data is not exactly what is needed to respond to Velleman's argument because the data doesn't distinguish adoptions in which there is contact with biological relations from adoptions in which there isn't. Because until recently there were very few fully open non-kin adoptions, however, the question is whether the data is primarily drawn from non-kin or kinship adoptions.

¹⁸ Velleman's essay, "Narrative Explanation," argues that there is an important distinction between subjective and objective explanation. Subjective explanation works by relating events to a familiar pattern "of how things feel" in contrast to objective explanations which relate them to familiar patterns of "how things happen" ("Narrative" 19). He warns, however, that there is a common projection error in reaching a subjective explanation: "we must recognize that the audience of narrative history is subject to a projective error. Having made subjective sense of historical events, by arriving at a stable attitude towards them, the audience is liable to feel that it has made objective sense of them, by understanding how they came about. Having sorted out its feelings toward events, the audience mistakenly feels that it has sorted out the events themselves: it mistakes emotional closure for intellectual closure" (20). In some cases we are both storyteller and audience, and we are piecing together the facts of our lives. It is possible, of course, to tell a story of our own lives that gives it meaning, i.e., provides an emotionally satisfying plot, but is

not a good explanation of who we are or how we got where we are. Velleman seems to suggest at some points that (a) the subjectively satisfying plots that provide for healthy identities must include details of both biological progenitors as a significant part of the story; and at other points that (b) with such a story and only with such a story can we achieve an objective explanation of who we are (because biology is an important objective determinant of who we are?), and so can only live a lie. But both (a) and (b) are mistaken. Plots are made available to people with very little information for them to fill in with what is available combined with speculation, and even those who think they have objective information about their progenitors often don't. We all live with a mix of fact and fiction pasted together with the glue that our cultural schemas provide.

¹⁹ See Novy, "Imagining" and "Reading."

²⁰ See Beckerman and Valente; Böck and Rao; and Merlan, for a start.

²¹ It may be worth noting that "primates do not have an innate ability to identify their [genetic] relatives, even their own offspring" (Silk 73), and although it is not typical, chimps will adopt the offspring of others (Thierry and Anderson; de Waal 70–73).

²² The further claim that social kinship is the basis for all social relations is also controversial. Although some anthropologists would probably agree, others would argue that, e.g., property, or land-holding, is the basis for social relations, including the structure of family (see Pasternak, ch. 7); or, more generally, that the structure of the family is dependent on the broader social system in which it is embedded (Harrell 27).

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