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Caring for children or just defying nature?

There seem to be few limits to what assisted reproductive technology can achieve or to the challenges that reproductive specialists are willing to tackle. The recent creation of gamete-like cells from mouse embryonic stem cells in three different laboratories has created the possibility of somatic-cell nuclear transfer for the treatment of infertility. In these experiments, researchers have successfully created oocytes (immature ova) from both male and female mouse cells. If gametes can be made from stem cells, it is likely that they would initially be used for 'medical' reasons, such as avoiding mitochondrial disease, or to allow men and women who lack ovaries or testes to have children. It is not difficult to imagine that eventually the technology would be used to help same-sex couples produce children to which both were related, children who would have either two biological mothers or two biological fathers.¹

Revolutionising and recasting reproduction

If it is eventually possible to develop an artificial uterus, the American writer Edward Grossman thought it would mean 'that the awfulness associated with pregnancy and childbirth will have nothing to feed on, and motherhood, if it continues to excite any awe at all, will not do so more than fatherhood'.² He went to say that 'an efficient artificial womb, far from increasing the incidence of birth defects, would reduce them by keeping the fetus in an absolutely safe and regular environment'. It might even be possible for a fertilised egg inserted into the male abdominal cavity to survive with hormonal treatment to mimic the womb. This could mean that a transsexual male

could provide sperm to fertilise a donor egg, with the resulting embryo implanted in his abdomen and thereby allowing him to give birth via a laparotomy to his own child. Professor Alan Trounson of Monash University was untroubled by the prospect of male mothers: 'I think it is a challenge to women's roles but then women have challenged men's roles in the community. I don't see it as something we should be frightened of'.³ There is, of course, a range of responses other than fear.

When human reproduction is concerned, a society is entitled to be concerned about the wider implications of involving technology. Certain types of activity are transformed, if not obliterated, by the intrusion of technological instrumentalism determined to counter or overcome any 'natural' impediment to whatever human beings might desire. It is clear that some forms of alternative parenthood made possible by ART have redefined, if not transformed, parenthood itself. As British theologian and moral philosopher Oliver O'Donovan points out:

The bond of natural necessity which tied sexual union to engendering children, engendering to pregnancy, pregnancy to a relationship with the child, gave us the foundation of our *knowledge* of human relationships in this area. Now that we have successfully attacked the bond of necessity (and artificial insemination was the first blow struck against it), we have destroyed the ground of our knowledge of the humane. From now on there is no knowing what a parent is.⁴ [emphasis retained]

But what about the children?

In many of the scenarios dealt with in this book, infertility is viewed as a problem for adults and ART is portrayed as the solution. I have argued consistently that use of

these technologies should not be permitted to create long-term disadvantages or possibly debilitating difficulties that either conflict with, or are plainly contrary to, children's best interests. Although most societies hosting fertility clinics in theory insist that the best interests of children are always paramount, debates about the legal and ethical aspects of ART are usually dominated by the desires and aspirations of adults. These debates have often sought to produce a consensus that is most convenient for adults while relegating children to the status of bystanders who are without a voice as their future is decided. This is evident in philosopher Leslie Cannold's belief that 'reproductive freedom accords us our privacy, our dignity, and the freedom to choose what we define as a meaningful life. This is why we believe it is so wrong for a society – through act or omission – to deprive its citizens of such freedom'.⁵ She is concerned purely about adults; there is no mention of children. In my view there is routinely far too much attention given to so-called procreative rights at the expense of hard-headed analysis of what constitutes a child's best interests. Individual adult autonomy is less significant, in my view, than the circumstances in which a child develops and the quality of life it subsequently enjoys. A child will be an adult for much longer than an adult will be a parent.

Worse still, in many arguments about ART we find that children are spoken of as if they were possessions to which adults have some obvious entitlement that no one can reasonably deny them – not even nature. Children and parents belong *with* one another but not *to* one another. Children should not be seen as a vehicle for adults to secure self-fulfilment. A child is a gift, not a commodity. Its life ought to reflect the loving relationship of its parents and be an expression of mutual belonging. And because the structure of that relationship is challenged, contested and even changed by many forms of ART, rather than affirming a clear position about what is best – not

adequate or minimal but *best* – for children as they grow and mature, there has been a notable tendency among ART’s advocates to blur the substantial benefits of conventional parenting arrangements by attempting to claim that all forms of family formation are equivalent in terms of their effects on children, when demonstrably they are not. In many forms of ART a clear definition of parental roles and family relationships is simply impossible. ART has in too many instances produced confusion and uncertainty about the status of various individuals involved in the care of children resulting from its use, and created conditions that have proved ideal for confrontation and conflict. A recent court case illustrates my point.

A lesbian couple in Ireland persuaded a male friend to provide sperm for artificial insemination. The two women and their friend signed an agreement acknowledging that it would be in the best interests of the child to know its biological father. It also stated that in the event that the child’s birth mother or her partner died, the man would continue to have contact with the child and that he would be consulted with respect to guardianship. A boy was born in May 2006 and given his father’s first name as his second name. Over the next four months, the couple began to believe that their friend was becoming too close to the child, and restricted his contact to monthly visits. In March 2007, they decided to have a holiday in Australia as the birth mother’s partner was Australian. Believing that they were considering relocating to Australia permanently in the hope of alienating the child from their now former friend, and dissolving the parental bond that had begun to develop, the donor father launched legal proceedings seeking guardianship and joint custody.

In the ensuing court action, two of the judges hearing the case believed the child needed to remain in Ireland, finding that it was in the child’s best interests to be near his father. In granting an order that restricted the couple to a six-week visit to

Australia, after which they had to return to Ireland and surrender their passports, Justice Henry Abbott found that the father had developed a bond with the boy, which would be ‘reciprocated imminently’ by the child who was then fourteen months old. The court made this decision fully aware that the lesbian couple had celebrated a civil union in England in January 2006 and were concerned that the man’s continuing presence would have an adverse effect on their relationship and on the quality of home life experienced by the child. In this and comparable cases, the courts have upheld the necessity of a child knowing the identity of his or her biological parents, and affirmed the importance of a bond developing between a child and those parents. We can only regret the existence of parental tensions of the kind that will surround this small boy and hope they can be contained as he tries to make sense of himself and his place in the world.

Throughout this book I have expressed my concerns about any form of ART that deliberately alienates a child from its biological parents because it has the potential to, at the very least, cause anxiety and, at the very worst, inflict harm. I am not alone in declaring my unease about the circumstances in which some children are born through ART and the potential consequences that flow from those circumstances. Bioethicist Margaret Somerville insists that children

have a right to a natural biological heritage – that is, a right to be conceived from the union of a natural sperm from a living, identified, adult man and a natural ovum from a living, identified, adult woman; a right to know what that heritage is; and unless an exception is justified in the best interests of the particular child, as in some cases of adoption, a

right to be reared by their own biological parents within their wider biological family.⁶

Father Frank Brennan has reached similar conclusions on the basis of his understanding of a child's inalienable human rights:

The rights to a natural biological heritage and to knowledge of biological origins are natural rights of the human person in that they are not dependent for philosophical cogency on the positive or common law of the state. No matter what our jurisprudential disposition, we cannot postulate a just law that denies either of these rights. Each of these rights is constitutive of the human person's self-identity, which precedes citizenship and which cannot be denied by other citizens or the state, even in the interests of other citizens who seek the prerogative to bear children without these rights. The right to bear children does not include the right to bear children denied their natural rights of biological identity and knowledge.⁷

The absence of information about one's genetic inheritance can be seen as a form of disability – which adults are apparently willing to inflict on a child. And yet many of those same adults will attempt to restrain a couple who want to produce a child that is physically disabled. To restate an earlier example, the mood of most societies would be against assisting a profoundly deaf couple who were determined to have a profoundly deaf child because a child with this disability would be more compatible

with their home life. There are some things, such as deafness, that we believe should be avoided if and when possible despite contrary parental desires.

Despite protestations to the contrary, most societies practice some form of positive eugenics by urging individuals and couples with a range of conditions to use pre-pregnancy genetic screening, often followed by pre-implantation genetic screening, as part of an IVF process, a practice defended on the grounds that transmitting a genetic condition to a child should be avoided if at all possible.⁸ After all, who would want a defective or disabled child when it was possible to have a perfectly functioning able-bodied one? If this is the prevailing social attitude, and I would contend that it is, why is there so little concern about producing children alienated from their biological parents? This void is not a physically disabling condition, but it has deleterious effects on a child in terms of its self-awareness and identity-formation. As I have shown, adolescents and adults denied information about the identity of their biological parents feel strongly about the potentially dire situation in which they have been placed. One donor-conceived child remarked:

I don't agree with donor conception full stop, not in any circumstance, not even if donor-conceived people can know their donor growing up. I think that donor conception should be banned. I know this will not happen in a hurry as the medical profession are more eager to make money from the treatment than they are to find a cure to infertility. Like anyone who has been denied their right to grow up with their biological parents or to know them, I feel that what I have lost is so much more than my biological father's medical history. I have lost part of my identity.⁹

I can sympathise with these sentiments for reasons I outline later in this chapter. But the belief that some connection with one's forebears has deep and abiding significance for the creation of a personal narrative, and that its absence can be experienced as a form of disability, is neither a new idea nor a novel claim. Many centuries ago the Roman philosopher Cicero commented: 'to be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?' Part of the problem is that we think of children as people under eighteen years of age – but we remain the children of our parents until we die. There are dimensions of parenting that can affect us for generations. In terms of identity formation, there is ample evidence that when men and women are in their twenties and thirties they begin to ponder questions of identity very deeply. The answers require, at the very least, accurate information about biological antecedents.

I am, then, unable to condone any reproductive procedure which precludes the possibility of an individual knowing both their biological parents. This is not always possible but it is the ideal we ought to preserve and promote. Children so born did not agree to the conditions to which they are subsequently exposed; they did not agree to any denial of their entitlement to know their biological parents. It is for these reasons that I advocate prohibition of any research that might enable scientists to develop gene-splicing and chromosome-combining techniques which will make it possible to create children with extraordinarily complex genetic backgrounds. This will further blur fundamental familial distinctions and further upset the two-biological-parents-living-together model that I have advocated. Put simply, the multitude of questions posed by these possibilities will be almost impossible to resolve. Will the child's parents be those who have provided the most genes or chromosomes or will the child

have multiple parents, each with a legitimate claim to parental access and supervision? Given their track record in less complex cases, I do not trust the courts to arrive at answers that will serve the best interests of children, notwithstanding my conviction that their interests were not, in any event, best served when they were ‘created’ in this way.

Some conclusions and anxieties

In terms of existing procedures, I cannot condone artificial insemination by donor. This is not because I am concerned that it is a form of adultery but because, in cases of unknown sperm donors, it denies the donor-conceived child’s entitlement to be raised by its biological father and because, in the case of a known donor, association with the donor has every chance of fracturing the relationship between its biological mother and her partner. I have no objection to the use of IVF or allied technologies to overcome infertility when the reproductive material comes exclusively from the man and woman who will be the child’s parents. This is where I differ from the official position of the Roman Catholic Church (although as an Anglican I share its concern for the fate of unused embryos) and the opinions of some radical feminists. But I am opposed to embryo donation, and to delaying the implantation of any embryo for a period exceeding five years. I am opposed to posthumous parenthood because it involves creating a single-parent family, which must be deemed inconsistent with a child’s best interests. I am opposed to surrogacy – whether or not the reproductive material comes from those who will raise the child – because it has great potential to both damage the surrogate and to pose potentially intractable and unresolvable legal problems that can harm the child. I also oppose the extension of ART to individuals where there is no medical or physical impediment to conception and a successful

pregnancy – a desire to delay pregnancy for lifestyle reasons is not sufficient justification for the use of ART. My preference for the two-biological-parents-living-together family model would also preclude surrogacy for the benefit of single men who want children, and IVF for single women.¹⁰

In instances where couples are unable to have children because one is infertile, adoption is a valid alternative (although I acknowledge that in Australia at least sufficient numbers of children are unlikely to be available in the foreseeable future). The need to relinquish children is always and everywhere regrettable, but it is preferable to abortion, which is always and everywhere harmful. One way of reducing the incidence of abortion is to promote the alternatives. In my view, adoption is much better managed now than when I was adopted 45 years ago. It should, however, be seen as a long-term custody arrangement, not a life sentence, because the prospect of reunion remains open. Intercountry adoption is, in my view, a laudable practice and a commendable act. I am opposed, however, to the adoption of children by same-sex couples, purely on the grounds that such couples cannot replicate the care provided by a heterosexual couple. This is consistent with the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which notes that boys and girls need the complementary care of a man and a woman.

I am conscious that there is much disputed evidence about what children need as they are growing, and about the immediate and long-term adequacy (or otherwise) of various forms of alternative parental arrangements. Some of the arrangements I have considered might have no discernable effect on a child in either the short or medium term. Other arrangements could disadvantage a child in the long term or leave them virtually disabled. In the worst situations, men and women claim to have been emotionally harmed or mentally destabilised because they have lacked a mother

or a father, and/or to have been denied access to information about their biological forebears. But will it ever be possible to isolate the lack of parental information or interaction and attribute their absence to reported disability or harm with any reliability? I suspect the answer is no. Some work has, however, been undertaken on the experience of younger children.

In their study of 41 IVF and 45 AID families, each with a child between four and eight years of age, a group of British researchers led by Dr Susan Golombok reported that there was no reason to believe that modes of family formation made possible by the new reproductive technologies had adverse consequences for children and parents.¹¹ The authors claimed that genetic ties are less important for family functioning than a strong desire among adults for parenthood. But the authors did not factor into their research the strong probabilities that same-sex couples who were facing difficulties would decline to participate, and that respondents could have had a prior personal commitment to ensuring the research produced the desired results.

Apart from the potential for distorted results, I do not dispute Dr Golombok's findings in terms of the sample group and the questions being asked, noting that the children were still young and only early childhood development was being assessed. It was not until I was seven years old that I understood, in an emotional and intellectual sense, what it meant to be adopted. My experience, and that of many other adoptees, is that identity questions arise and become more important much later in life. For me, it was not until I was in my twenties, when my adoptive father died and I had children of my own, that existential questions began to demand answers. Of course, not every child alienated from its biological parents by ART declares their opposition to the circumstances in which they were born. But enough of these

children do express concern to suggest that adults should exercise more caution before deciding to bring children into the world by this means.

There is sufficient evidence, however, to show that the structure of a family does have a bearing on the wellbeing of its members. In an article entitled ‘Do moms and dads matter? Evidence from the social sciences on family structure and the best interests of the child’, published by *Margins Law Journal* in 2004, Joshua Baker and Maggie Gallagher, respectively policy director and president of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy in the United States, conclude that ‘children do better, on average, when they are raised by the household of their own married mother and father’.¹² Of course, no family is perfect and there will always be some flaw in the parenting provided. But the two-parents-living-together arrangement is a structure that has consistently proved better for children than any other, without exception. The most pressing need is clearly for detailed longitudinal studies into alternative parenting arrangements. Until these are produced and their findings and conclusions are discussed and debated, it is not possible for anyone to affirm that alternative parenting arrangements do not have an adverse effect on children.

In wanting to dissuade people from having children because they cannot provide the parenting arrangements that the best interests of children require, I have argued that childlessness is not a plight that must be overcome by everyone at all costs. Childlessness is not a tragedy. It is not a basis for condemning anyone or urging them to try ART. The absence of children in a marriage does not necessarily make adult life less purposeful, nor should it make living any less fulfilling. We need, therefore, to be more liberal and generous when it comes to attitudes and assistance in relation to families that do not include dependent children. I suspect this will require a substantial shift in perceptions and a realignment of values if we are to recognise that

a person's ultimate worth is not determined by their ability to be a parent. This is especially so for women. Women have an identity apart from their role in bearing and raising children. Mothering is not critical to a woman's identity; pregnancy is not the culmination of female sexuality; and fertility is not the substantiation of human dignity. I do not believe that all women must have children for the sake of the human race or that they must give birth to be in any sense complete as human beings.

Retailing reproduction

In addition to the pressures often exerted by their families, childless couples are exposed to advertising from many (but not all) ART service providers, who engage in promotion dressed up as compassion. Some service providers are clever business people with clear commercial interests, which usually makes them highly unreliable as interpreters of community attitudes and entirely unsuitable as ethical guides. Some ART service providers do not like regulation, supervision or oversight because compliance regimes restrain their exploitation of market demand. In my albeit limited experience of ART service providers I have seen a tendency to probe, prod and push every legislative limit on the services they are able to provide. They interpret ethical guidelines in a manner that suits them and their clients, and perennially seek a broadening of the services they are allowed to offer and to whom. They might be professional but they are not altruistic. Fertility clinics are focused entirely on delivering a baby to their clients. This is their reason for existence, and it is unrealistic of society to think they ought to conduct themselves otherwise.

There are also ART service providers who evidently believe that a client's willingness to sign a consent document frees them from any ethical responsibility for doing whatever the client might want. A number of commentators have long

expressed concern that insufficient attention is given to the health risks associated with ART, and that inadequate information is provided on the likelihood of procedures being successful. In the absence of consensus about whether various forms of family formation and alternative parenthood have adverse effects on those involved, taxpayers should not be asked to subsidise the highly profitable procedures offered by ART service providers. There are many other needs that deserve higher priority and a larger slice of the health-care budget. If public resources are to be made available for ART, then married couples are entitled to priority because they provide the most stable and proven platform for parenting, thereby ensuring a child's interests are optimised.

The case against public subsidies for ART is strengthened by the number of instances in which the infertility that is treated is not caused by disease or a physical disorder but is a consequence of earlier lifestyle decisions. Given the growing incidence of childlessness, there needs to be greater public awareness of the phases of life through which human beings pass and the ways in which people might live differently in order to reduce social infertility. To put it bluntly, adults must decide to have children earlier in life when their chances of producing children are greater. The problem is that having children and becoming a parent is too often made subservient to economic priorities and career choices. To delay having children until later in life on the grounds that it is more expensive to raise children now than in past decades is simply mistaken. People in my parents' cohort, and in their parents' cohort, had far fewer resources at their disposal – and yet they managed to raise larger numbers of children. It is both heightened material expectations and warped personal priorities, manipulated by retailers and economists, which have led many people to think they must 'establish themselves financially' (all too often a goal not reached in time)

before having children. This delay is contributing to fertility problems and carries its own cost.

Some readers might dismiss these views as mere conservatism or simple fear of change. I believe them to be neither. Having closely observed various forms of alternative parenthood, I believe the positions I have embraced are prudent and consistent. The protection of children always comes first in my thinking, and I have endeavoured to apply this principle to each situation where some form of alternative is proposed. With respect to adults and the affects of ART, I recognise that some of my views are paternalistic but, I would contend, such paternalism is justifiable given the stresses and anxieties associated with technological solutions to natural problems. I accept, too, that my views reflect the beliefs of a particular faith community – which itself might not embrace entirely the ways in which I have applied them to alternative forms of parenthood. It is for this reason that I am not advocating that the positions I have taken become law or public policy to be imposed on those who do not share the beliefs on which they are based. I have not demanded that the state use its legislative powers or coercive capacities to prohibit access to, or use of, ART. But the state can, and I have suggested in some instances should, decide to withhold material and financial assistance. If individuals are determined to do things which the majority of society suspects might lead to disadvantage or cause harm to a child, I believe it is entirely reasonable to insist that private resources and not public money be used. There is already, however, a widely recognised residual need for some regulation of ART to prevent wanton exploitation of the vulnerable, and to ensure that health and safety standards are upheld by service providers. Although I would want to persuade most infertile couples not to head in the direction of ART, I support the benefits of uniform national legislation and the development of consistent operating guidelines

and policies. Infertile couples, who have already made some difficult decisions, should not have to navigate their way through administrative muddles or around jurisdictional complexities.

A personal perspective

My views on alternative parenthood are, of course, a function of my own experience of being relinquished at birth and raised as an adopted child. The particular perspective I bring to the discussion is an understanding of what it means to have two sets of parents – one social and the other genetic. I am conscious that both have played a part in the person I have become. Although I have made much in this book of the importance of genetic information and the necessity of a child being raised by those to whom it is related biologically, I recognise that both nature and nurture are operative in the formation of identity and in determining one's destiny. This has led me to consider the fascinating interactions between psychology and philosophy which I believe will assist those who are adopted – until recently the largest group of people to have experienced alternative parenthood – and donor-conceived children, whose numbers are swelling.

In the work of the German developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, identity is to be discovered rather than created. Individuals are implored to uncover their beginnings, to locate what is immutable, and to recognise what is fixed. Much of this activity is introspective and retrospective. It seems constricting rather than liberating in concentrating on similarities rather than on the essential differences between people. By way of contrast, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, depicts a dynamic evolution of identity formation in his acclaimed works, *The Sources of Self* and *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Taylor is concerned with the social dynamics of

identity, asserting that identity is formed from a range of available and competing sources but principally ‘by the people we love’. This is an important distinction, in that identity and its formation are not contingent upon biology. In a chapter entitled ‘Inescapable Horizons’, Taylor contends that it would actually take a great deal of effort to ‘*prevent* our identity being formed by the people we love’.¹³ While recognising that this might seem repugnant to some, Taylor claimed it is unavoidable because ‘the making and sustaining of our identity ... remains dialogical throughout our lives’.¹⁴

Thus, each person has their own way of being human. However, Taylor comments, this is a new idea because

before the late twentieth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me.¹⁵

In traditionally organised societies, personal identity is conferred on an individual by the society they enter at birth and by which they will be farewelled at death. In modern industrial urban societies, identity is either not conferred or must be discovered or re-conferred constantly. A similar concern lies behind the assertion of uniqueness. This has led to a fresh assessment of what it means to be human in a society which regards individuals as anonymous and treats them impersonally. Thus, the twenty-first century quest for identity must be cognisant of a larger global setting

– to see human beings as cosmic entities – in addition to the narrower provincial contexts which locate an individual within intimate and loving personal relationships.¹⁶ Taylor goes on to develop what he calls the ‘ethics of authenticity’, which rest on the premise that how I understand myself will determine how I relate. This is because, for Taylor, the sense of the good and the sense of ourselves are somehow related.¹⁷

In Taylor’s work, identity is created rather than discovered. Individuals are encouraged to discern the range of diverse sources from which they are derived, to interpret and reflect on those which have been existentially most significant, and to challenge those things which prevent them from being true to what they believe is ‘the good’. Much of this activity derives from initiative and ingenuity, as it dwells on differences between people rather than similarities. Taylor describes a process of liberation leading to a proper sense of identity as a means of avoiding dependencies.¹⁸ His approach focuses on factors external to the individual and is even speculative in concentrating on the present and the future rather than the past.

A critical reading of psychology and philosophy, of Erikson and Taylor as representatives of both, leads me to the synthesis that identity is discovered *and* created; that some things are given while others are changing. Identity is therefore best understood functionally. Identity formation, then, is a continuing process of coming to know oneself and others, of recognising oneself and others as being essentially similar but also fundamentally different. Combining the work of Erikson and Taylor also admits a role for both sets of parents – biological and social – to play a constructive role in the formation of identity of the adopted child. Therefore, as personal identity is unavoidably located within history but also inextricably bound to culture, individual biographies or ‘stories’ are highly significant in beginning to understand those parts of an individual’s sense of self and behaviour which are

inexplicable in terms of either nature or nurture.

There is thus nothing surprising in the number of biographies featuring the subtitle 'The life and times of ...' Human beings recognise that they are captives of time and place. This makes struggle a central theme in human existence, because all people strive at some point in their lives to defy some boundaries while learning at another point to respect limitations. The boundaries and limitations people recognise are as important as their appreciation of personal abilities and potential. This process of virtually grasping one's humanity is tied to the circumstances of one's birth and the condition of the world one enters. Thus, personal biography is indispensable to how individuals understand themselves and how they perceive themselves in relation to the world. When a child expresses an interest in knowing about the circumstances of their birth, we are faced not just with curiosity but with fundamental questions about human identity, through the answers to which are refracted a person's approach to life. As Charles Taylor properly observes, the question, 'Who am I?'

can't necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy. What does answer this question for me is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the identity within which I am capable of taking a stand.¹⁹

This makes personal biography important for all children. Our stories are invaluable

because each imparts a sense of identity and ‘prevents us from being lost in a world where the story is that we have no story’.²⁰ Identity is also related to feelings of affinity and consciousness, and the development of values and preferences. It makes us intelligible to ourselves. Our lives, therefore, are bound by many stories but those which incorporate our parents – our forebears – are crucial and primarily formative of identity and individuality. This has been affirmed by developmental psychologist John Sants’ work on the concept of ‘genealogical bewilderment’²¹ and Erikson’s exploration of ‘identity formations’.²²

Uncovering our stories is part of a continuing process which is not restricted to late adolescence. It is a curiosity of human society that individual lives are continually interpreted and reinterpreted. As the French social theorist Henri Bergson has shown, memory itself is a ‘reiterated act of interpretation’.²³ Consequently, we understand ourselves in terms of both where we are now and where we have come from. This has led some adopted children to claim that the secrecy surrounding their birth parents’ stories has deprived them of a vital component in understanding who they are, and has prevented them from formulating an authentic identity for themselves. I am sympathetic to this claim. Nor is there any reason for children born through donor gametes to be denied their linkage to the physical world and history of those donors. These donors are a reference point and part of the individual’s life narrative. Having been born in a particular place at a particular time, these circumstances should not be overlooked in an individual’s struggle to decipher the meaning of their life.

It is, of course, more than merely a matter of nature and nurture, as might be suggested by uninformed readings of Erikson and Taylor. Indeed, there is much argument within the nature-nurture debate about their relative and absolute influence on identity, as I explained in chapter 2. Genes may modify the effects of other genes;

they may modify the effects of the environment. Environmental events, both internal and external, may modify the effects of genes, and may modify the effects of other environmental events. But as a synthesis of Erikson and Taylor shows, there is a need to stress that the development of a healthy sense of identity is not entirely dependent upon knowledge of biological antecedents, or limited to the experience of nurture, as though these were self-evident givens. The interpretation of this information is an integral part of a larger undertaking. British ethicist Ian Ramsey notes:

the unity of personality ... is to be found in an integrating activity, an activity expressed, embodied and scientifically understood in terms of its genetic, biochemical and endocrine, electronic, neurological and psychological manifestations. What we call human behaviour is an expression of that effective, integrating activity which is peculiarly and distinctively ourselves.²⁴

In undertaking this activity myself, of greatest interest to me has been my biological father's identity and character. In what ways did I resemble him? Where did he live? What did he do? How did he handle life's struggles? What were the values and virtues that animated his life? When I met my biological mother in late 1995, I asked the first in a series of questions about my father. She told me his first name and eventually his second name. She thought he was a lawyer. Although she did not know it at the time of my conception, he was already married and had two children. This was and is all I know of my biological father. And that his name might be Charles Murphy and that he was probably born in 1937. At the conclusion of her final letter to me before contact between us ceased in 1997, my biological mother wrote: 'I guess I owe you an

apology for everything I have done to you ... and I apologise to you'. There was no need for her to apologise. She had given me the gift of life and I will always be grateful for that. I continue to hope that my father might one day materialise as the missing piece of the mosaic that is my life.

Some years ago I read the autobiography of the great British actor Sir Alec Guinness, entitled *Blessings in Disguise*. Guinness explained that he 'was born to confusion and totally immersed in it for several years'.²⁵ His father's name was not recorded on his birth certificate and his mother married several times, each marriage prompting a change of name. Several men were possibilities but he never gathered enough evidence to be sure. As he came to the end of his story, Guinness said: 'I have to admit that the search for a father has been my constant, though fairly minor, speculation for fifty years.'²⁶ Guinness purchased a gold pocket-watch with earnings from a play after his dream of receiving something from his father when he turned twenty-one did not materialise. He had engraved on the inside, 'The readiness is all.' It seemed a rather odd sentiment until he explained: 'Not that I have ever felt really ready for anything; but in an obscure way I suppose I felt I had arrived – somewhere, somehow, and from God knows where.'²⁷

It is out of concern for people who have felt this way that I have written this book. I hope its message is heard by everyone who proposes some form of alternative parenthood that involves defying nature.

7597 words

¹ J. Harris & G. Testa, 'Ethical aspects of embryonic stem cell-derived gametes', *Science*, no.

305, p. 1719.

² Edward Grossman, 'The obsolescent mother: a scenario', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 227, no. 5, May 1971, pp. 48–9.

³ Quoted in Robin Kent, 'The birth of the male mother', *Weekend Australian*, 17 May 1986, p. 15.

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, p. 48.

⁵ Leslie Cannold, *What, No Baby? Why women are losing the freedom to mother, and how they can get it back*, Curtin University Books, Fremantle, 2005, p. 319.

⁶ Margaret Somerville, 'Talking ethics, doing ethics', pp. 68–98 in Jonathan Mills (ed.), *Ethically Challenged: Big questions for science*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2007, p. 78 quoted.

⁷ Frank Brennan, *Acting on Conscience*, p. 189.

⁸ For a discussion of this trend see Melinda Tankard Reist, *Defiant Birth: Women who resist medical eugenics*, Spinifex, North Melbourne, 2006.

⁹ 'Narelle's Story', Jones & Kirkman, *Sperm Wars*, pp. 175–76.

¹⁰ I am aware of the High Court case involving Ms Leesa Meldrum but have chosen not to discuss it. Much has already been written about it and I have nothing substantial to add.

¹¹ Susan Golombok, R. Cook, A. Bish & C. Murray, 'Families created by the new reproductive technologies: quality of parenting and social and emotional development of the children', *Child Development*, no. 66, 1995, pp. 285–89.

¹² Maggie Gallagher & Joshua Baker, 'Do moms and dads matter? Evidence from the social sciences on family structure and the best interests of the child', *Margins Law Journal*, no. 4, 2004, p. 180 quoted. This research and the article from which it is drawn is cited, quoted and discussed in Brennan, *Acting on Conscience*, pp. 254–56.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, MA, 1991, p. 34 [original emphasis retained].

¹⁴ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 28.

¹⁶ The clash between Taylor's communitarianism and the type of liberalism he wishes to discredit is ably deconstructed in an article by Stephen Mulhall & Adam Swift, 'The social self in political theory: The communitarian critique of the liberal self', in David Bakhurst & Christian Synowich (eds), *The Social Self*, Sage, London, 1995, particularly pp. 110–14.

¹⁷ Taylor is not, of course, without his critics. His advocacy of classical 'negative liberty' – that the only coherent idea of liberty is a negative one of being unconstrained – within a communitarian framework has been criticised most strongly by Quentin Skinner, in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind & Quentin Skinner, *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, who argues that the notion of connecting the concept of 'individual liberty with virtuous acts of public service [which he says Taylor does in 'What's wrong with negative liberty' in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom*, OUP, Oxford, 1979, p. 193] ... is a mistake'. Skinner's criticisms here, and his general philosophical approach to social realities as expressed in a much earlier work, 'Social meaning and the explanation of social action', chapter 6 in Peter Laslett, W.G. Runciman & Quentin Skinner, *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1972, deprive Taylor of a coherent structure for his discourse of both self and social meaning by linking, in a Machiavellian sense, civic duty and self (and selfish) interest. Taylor's defence of what he contends is his philosophical realism is offered in the essay 'Philosophy and its history' in Richard Rorty et al (eds), *Philosophy in History*, pp. 17-30.

¹⁸ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, *The Sources of Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1989, p. 27.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ H.J. Sants, 'Genealogical bewilderment in children with substitute parents', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, no. 37, 1964, pp. 133-41.

²² Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York, 1968. One of Erikson's dimensions for viewing the development of a person's identity is the psycho-historical that

relates to their sense of genealogy, i.e. the sense of continuity linking the various stages of life common to all people. The importance of this concept for adoptees in search of their origins is described by A.D Sorosky et al, *The Adoption Triangle*, Anchor Press, New York, 1978, p. 14.

²³ See Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanist Perspective*, Anchor, New York, 1963, p. 70.

²⁴ I.T. Ramsey, 'Human personality' in I.T. Ramsey & R. Potter (eds), *Personality and Science: An interdisciplinary discussion*, Churchill Livingstone, Edinburgh, 1971, p. 128.

²⁵ Sir Alec Guinness, *Blessings in Disguise*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1985, p. 1.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 224.

²⁷ *ibid.*