

## Family History\*

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**Abstract:** I argue that meaning in life is importantly influenced by biological ties. More specifically, I maintain that knowing one's relatives and especially one's parents provides a kind of self-knowledge that is of irreplaceable value in the life-task of identity formation. These claims lead me to the conclusion that it is immoral to create children with the intention that they be alienated from their biological relatives—for example, by donor conception.

When I received my maternal grandfather's birth certificate from the General Register Office in London, I found that the space for the mother's signature had been completed in the same official hand as the rest of the certificate. It read, 'The mark of Golda Saltman, Mother,' next to a tiny, tentative *x*. Golda's mark, similarly annotated, appears on the birth certificates of my grandfather's next older brother and younger sister, who were also born in London, each at a different address on the East End.

My great-grandparents had arrived in London, with two children, some time before 1891, the date on the birth certificate of their first English-born child. Different versions of family lore trace them variously to Minsk, Kobryn, and Brest-Litovsk, although the best guess may be that they moved from one location in Ukraine to another before deciding to leave altogether. After the birth of their fifth child, they left London for New York, the father sailing in 1895, the mother and children a year later. On the ship's manifest, archived at Ellis Island, he is listed as Nathan Saltman, 32 years old, a cabinetmaker from Russia.

My grandfather attended the City University of New York and became a physical education teacher in the New York City public

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schools. One of his daughters followed him into that profession; the other daughter, my mother, became a school librarian. I and my two brothers are university professors.

I assume that my great-grandfather left Ukraine to escape conscription into the Czar's army, or some equally unpalatable fate devised for the Jews. I do not know why the family left England for the United States. Judging from the changes of address recorded on the children's birth certificates, I imagine that work in the Jewish furniture factories on the East End afforded only a precarious living. No doubt, the parents were looking for something better.

I and my brothers are the beneficiaries of that search: we have the 'something better' that our great-grandparents were looking for. It has turned out to include the luxury of writing essays such as this for a living, three short generations after a time when births in the family were certified with an  $x$ .

That I am the great-grandson of Russian Jewish immigrants, that I enjoy the fruits of their strivings—this much I know with certainty. I also know that I inherited not just the fruits but the striving, too. What I don't know is how to understand that latter piece of my inheritance. Was it passed down entirely through my mother's upbringing by her father, and my upbringing by her? Or is the push in my personality a genetic endowment, from great-grandparents who twice pushed on?

A formal photograph of Nathan and Golda, dated 1918 and signed 'Sincerely, Ma and Pa,' hangs on the wall of our living room, next to a photo of my wife's paternal grandmother as a child, with her parents and siblings. My great-grandparents stand in their best clothes, looking awkwardly resolute; my wife's great-grandparents sit on a rustic front porch in Tennessee, looking more than a little like hillbillies. I think of these pictures as representing the eclectic ancestry of my children.

My children have inherited attitudes and life-ways from these ancestors, but they would have received such a cultural inheritance from

anyone who had reared the people who reared them, or the people who had reared those people, and so on—anyone connected to them by the ancestral of the ‘parenting’ relation, whether or not it corresponded to the relation of biological ancestry. Does it matter that their cultural inheritance came, in fact, from the same sources as their genes? If it had come from different sources, would their ancestry have mattered to them, divergent as it would then have been from their cultural past?

Naturally, my children’s ancestry would still have mattered in that it would have influenced many of their characteristics, from their appearance to their aptitudes. What I’m asking, though, is whether their ancestry would or should have mattered in their eyes. Would they have had any reason to care about their progenitors—about knowing who their progenitors were or knowing them, as we philosophers say, by acquaintance?

Many adoptees think so. They go to heroic lengths to find their biological families, impelled by what they describe as a deep and unrelenting need.<sup>1</sup> But maybe they are just confused, because of living in

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1 A recent literature review concludes: ‘Following conservative estimates of more recent studies in countries with open records policies, about 50% of all adopted persons will, at some point in their life, search for their birth parents’ (Müller, U., and Perry, B., ‘Adopted Persons’ Search for and Contact With Their Birth Parents I: Who Searches and Why?’, *Adoption Quarterly* 4 (2001): 5-34, p. 8). These numbers have recently been increasing (p. 9), perhaps in response to greater awareness and acceptance of such searches.

The offspring of donated sperm and eggs have also begun to search for their biological families, often via the Internet. See, for example, the Donor Sibling Registry (<http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com/>); the Donor Offspring/Parents Registry and Search Page (<http://www.amfor.net/DonorOffspring/>); the ‘Donor Offspring’ page of the Donor Conception Support Group of Australia (<http://www.dcsgrg.org.au/>); the UK Voluntary Information Exchange and Contact Register (<http://www.ukdonorlink.org.uk/>); and a report of a registry for donor offspring in Japan (*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, July 5, 2005, <http://www.fortwayne.com/mld/newssentinel/living/12058173.htm>). A series by David Plotz in the online magazine *Slate* resulted in many inquiries from donor offspring seeking their biological families (<http://slate.msn.com/id/98084/>); Plotz discusses these inquiries, and many other aspects of donor conception, in *The Genius Factory: The Curious History of the Nobel Prize Sperm Bank* (New York: Random House, 2005). See also a website devoted to the CBC documentary ‘Offspring’ by Barry Stevens (<http://www.cbc.ca/programs/sites/features/offspring/>), and an op-ed entitled ‘Give Me My

a culture that is itself confused about the importance of biological ties. Maybe adoptees could be brought to see the insignificance of ancestry, if only they were sufficiently rational and realistic.

We had better hope so. For our society has embarked on a vast social experiment in producing children designed to have no human relations with some of their biological relatives. Conceived of anonymously donated sperm or eggs, these children are permanently severed from all or part of their biological past, not by adversity of the sort that befell my great-grandparents, but by the deliberate intentions of their custodial parents.<sup>2</sup>

The experiment of creating these children 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.

Clearly, it has turned out to be less than enough for any adopted person who goes in search of a biological family. The new ideology of the family is rarely mentioned in this context. The ideology isn't mentioned, I

Own History' by one of Stevens' half-siblings, David Gollancz (*The Guardian*, May 20, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,718666,00.html>).

On the similarities between donor conception and adoption, see Eric Blyth, Marilyn Crawshaw, Jean Haase, and Jennifer Speirs, 'The Implications of Adoption for Donor Offspring Following Donor-Assisted Conception,' *Child and Family Social Work* 6 (2001): 295-304.

<sup>2</sup> In discussing gamete donation, I am going to gloss over the many variations in this practice, in which single adults, homosexual couples, or infertile heterosexual couples cause a child to be conceived with donated sperm, donated eggs, or both, often but not always with the help of *in vitro* fertilization or gestational surrogacy. Locutions designed to maintain strictly neutrality among these variants would be unwieldy, and so I avoid them in favor of shorter but admittedly less precise locutions. For example, I generally speak of donor parents and custodial parents in the plural, although there may be only one of each. Generating the relevant disjunction of variants is left as an exercise for the reader.

Cases of gamete donation often have other potentially controversial aspects. For example, there is often only one custodial parent, or no custodial parent of one sex or the other. Creating children with the intention that they not have a custodial father, or alternatively a custodial mother, is potentially just as problematic as creating children divorced from their biological origins. But these problems are a topic for another paper.

imagine, because it isn't needed to justify traditional adoption, in which people volunteer to replace biological parents who are unavailable, unwilling, or unfit to care for a child they have already conceived. The child needs to be parented by someone, and it cannot or should not be parented by its biological parents, for reasons that would outweigh any value inhering in biological ties. An ideology belittling the value of such ties is not needed to justify entrusting this child to adoptive parents.

The new ideology of the family is needed rather for cases in which people wanting to parent a child cause one to be conceived with donated gametes. That this child cannot be parented by one or both of its biological parents is not a disadvantage that its custodial parents volunteer to mitigate; it was a desideratum that guided them in creating the child, to begin with. Not being attached to a partner with whom they could be fertile, they needed a child who was correlatively unattached, a child already disowned by at least one of its biological parents. Rather than adopt a child whose ties to its biological parents had been ruptured after conception, they intentionally created one for whom those ties were ruptured antecedently. This choice would be morally problematic if biological ties were genuinely meaningful. Hence the need for an ideology that denies their meaning.

These remarks are admittedly polemical, and they will no doubt offend some readers. Whether there is anything to them depends on whether there is significant value in being parented by one's biological parents or, more generally, having human relations with one's biological relatives.

The idea of such a value can hardly be considered unusual, given that it is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 7, paragraph 1, states: 'The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know

and be cared for by his or her parents'.<sup>3</sup> The rights enunciated in this provision strike me as important, and this essay takes a few tentative steps toward explaining why.

I take only a few steps because I want to skirt many of the considerations that catch the eye on a first glance at the topic. The topic of our biological origins is littered with mythical or symbolic thoughts, about blood and bone and seed and such. I want to pick my way around these thoughts, in search of some realistic and rational considerations. My reason for being so cautious is that doubts about reproductive technology are often written off to fear and superstition. I want to avoid raising any considerations that might be dismissed on those grounds.

My caution in this regard will lead me to overlook many considerations that I see as genuinely meaningful. What is most

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3 The Convention is posted at <<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>>. See Eric Blyth and Abigail Farrand, 'Anonymity in donor-assisted conception and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,' *International Journal of Children's Rights* 12 (2004): 89-104. The *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* makes clear that the term 'parents' in this clause includes biological parents in the first instance, and that the Convention therefore militates against the practice of anonymous gamete donation (Rachel Hodgkin and Peter Newell, *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNICEF, revised edition 2002], pp. 117-19).

For some social-scientific and legal perspectives, with further references, see: Michael Freeman, 'The new birth right? Identity and the child of the reproductive revolution,' *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 4 (1996): 273-97; A.J. Turner and A. Coyle, 'What does it mean to be a donor offspring? The identity experiences of adults conceived by donor insemination and the implications for counselling and therapy,' *Human Reproduction* 15 (2000): 2041-2051; Lucy Frith, 'Gamete Donation and Anonymity,' *Human Reproduction* 16 (2001): 818-824; *Truth and the Child: A contribution to the debate on the Warnock Report*, ed. N. Bruce, A. Mitchell, and K. Priestley (Edinburgh: Family Care, 1988); *Truth and the Child 10 years on: Information Exchange in Donor Assisted Conception*, ed. Eric Blyth, Marilyn Crawshaw, and Jennifer Speirs (Birmingham: British Association of Social Workers, 1998).

The material cited here argues that donor-conceived offspring should have access to information about their biological parents. In this paper I argue for a stronger conclusion—that donor conception is wrong. In my view, the reasons for concluding that children should have access to information about their biological parents support the stronger conclusion that, other things being equal, children should be raised by their biological parents. For many children already born, other things are not at all equal, and adoption is therefore desirable; but as I argue below, other things are indeed equal for children who have not yet been conceived.

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. To downplay the symbolic and mythical significance of severing a child's connections to its biological parents is therefore to misrepresent what is really going on, if not because the symbols and stories are literally true then at least because they are truly part of the human psyche.

But to speak of the human psyche in such terms is already to verge on superstition, in the eyes of those who consider themselves enlightened. Although I will briefly reintroduce some of these terms at the end of my essay, I will first try to address the enlightened in their own rationalistic terms.

An argument against the use of donated gametes risks giving offense because it seems to raise doubts about particular children as to whether they should have been born. But talk about whether someone should or should not have been born is confused and confusing.<sup>4</sup>

'Should' and 'ought' express norms that tell us what to do. In addition to these norms recommending or requiring action, there are values attaching to objects and events, warranting various modes of appreciation for them. Events can be felicitous, deplorable, or regrettable, for example; persons, places, or things can be beautiful or ugly, admirable or contemptible, lovable or hateful, and so on. If you expect the world to deliver perfectly congruent norms and values—that is, if you expect that insofar as something is beautiful or admirable or lovable, its coming into existence will be a felicitous event, or its creation will be a right action—then you are bound to be disappointed. There are beautiful things whose creation is a grievous wrong (mushroom clouds),

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<sup>4</sup> The arguments of this section can also be couched in the more technical terms of Kantian ethics. See my 'Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics', to appear in *Self to Self* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and 'Love as a Moral Emotion' (*Ethics* 109 [1999]: 338-74), to be reprinted in the same volume.

disgusting things whose coming into existence is fortunate (feces), regrettable events that are right to bring about (the death of an attacker), and so on.

Matters are further complicated by the possibility of conflict between values that attach to types and values that attach to individual tokens of them. My wedding ring may be precious to me even though it is of an inferior type, neither beautiful nor well-wrought nor of any significant monetary value; irises are gorgeous although one is just as good as another. If you expect the world to serve up only precious individuals of precious types, and vice versa, then you are bound to be disappointed once again.

To say that someone should or should not have been born mixes normative categories in a way that sows confusion about the object of assessment. Does this statement assess the person, the event of his coming into existence, or the act of creating him? And does it make an assessment with respect to him individually or with respect to some type that he instantiates?

Suppose we judge that people should not have more children than they can adequately care for. Have we implied that there are children who should not have been born? Yes, of course, if that statement means just that some children are born after their parents should have stopped having children. Yes, too, if it means that the birth of a child destined to be neglected is a regrettable kind of event. But we have not implied, of any particular child, that his existence should be regretted or that his birthday should not be celebrated. Loving an individual child and rejoicing in his existence is perfectly consistent with thinking it wrong for parents like his to have had so many children. And if you expect the world to spare you from this sort of evaluative complexity, then you are in for the biggest disappointment of all.

Much as we love disadvantaged children, we rightly believe that people should not deliberately create children who they already know will be disadvantaged. In my view, 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.

Philosophers should not have to be reminded that living things tend to resemble their biological relatives. After all, the philosophical term for indefinable similarities is ‘family resemblance’. Though much has been written by philosophers about family resemblance in this technical sense, little has been written about literal resemblance within families, which is after all the paradigm case of technical family resemblance.

The philosophical concept of family resemblance is that of a similarity that can be immediately recognized but not readily analyzed or defined. Many of our concepts have their extension determined by family resemblance among their instances. To have such a family-resemblance concept is just to have the ability to know an instance when we see one, without being able to say how we know it.

Although there is only one of me, I have a self-concept of the family-resemblance kind. This self-concept is not the singular concept by which I pick out the one and only me; it’s my concept for the personal type of which I happen to be the only instance but to which a *Doppelgänger* would belong, if I had one. I would recognize a *Doppelgänger* under this concept, by our family resemblance.

Much of what I know about myself is contained in this family-resemblance concept and cannot be articulated. I know that I am *like this*, where the import of ‘this’ is encoded in the self-concept of which anyone just like me would be an instance. Hence much of my self-knowledge is, so to speak, knowledge about my family resemblance to myself. This family-resemblance knowledge about myself includes information not only about how I look but also about my personal manner, my styles of thinking and feeling, my temperament, and so on. This ellipsis is difficult to fill in without resort to figurative expressions, because family-resemblance information is unanalyzable by definition.

My concept of my self-resemblance contains much of my psychological knowledge about myself. Philosophers like to characterize folk-psychology as a theory; in reality, however, most of folk psychology is an intuitive matter of knowing how to anticipate and deal with people *like that*—knowledge that is heavily dependent on family-resemblance concepts of personality types and behavioral styles. So it is with my folk-psychological self-understanding.

Finally, my family-resemblance concept of myself contains much of that self-knowledge by which I am guided in my efforts to cultivate and shape myself. I can articulate a few self-descriptions that indicate some directions of self-cultivation and contra-indicate others. I'm physically coordinated and I have a good sense of rhythm, so studying dance makes sense for me; I have a lousy memory and weak powers of mental computation, so studying chess is a bad idea. But many of my aspirations are directed at fulfilling family-resemblance concepts: they are aspirations to be *like that*, where 'that' denotes a type for which I have some paradigms or images but no explicit definition. And these aspirations are conditioned and channeled by family-resemblance knowledge as to how someone *like this* might or might not become *like that*.

I think that forming a useful family-resemblance concept of myself would be very difficult were I not acquainted with people to whom I bear a literal family resemblance. Knowing what I am like would be that much harder if I didn't know other people like me. And if people bear me a literal family resemblance, then the respects in which they are like me will be especially important to my knowledge of what I am like, since they resemble me in respects that are deeply ingrained and resistant to change.

The difficulty of knowing what I am like is the topic of some suggestive remarks by Bernard Berenson in his *Sketch for a Self-Portrait*:<sup>5</sup>

This self, what is it? For about seventy years I have been asking that question. Can one frame an idea of one's own personality, map it out, make a picture of

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Berenson, *Sketch for a Self-Portrait* (London: Robin Clark, 1991).

it that is in any measure convincing to an inquiring and fairly honest mind? In my case it has not been possible. I know what people think of me, favourably and unfavourably, and I have a sense of what composite image of me ends by taking shape in the minds of acquaintances. In my own mind and heart there is little correspondence with this image, although I have learned to accept it as that in me, of me, to which others approach as to a treaty-port in old China or Japan. To myself I am an energy of a given force of radiation, and of a certain power of resistance; and I seem to be the same in these respects that I remember being when I completed my sixth year. [p. 23]

... I wish I could have some image, a coherent image of my personality with a definite shape and clear outlines. It is hard enough to know how one looks, impossible to know what one is. We are left to infer it from what people say about us and what we accept, reject, repel and controvert in what we hear about ourselves. We cannot even get a notion remotely parallel to what we acquire by staring into a mirror. That is little enough, for we gaze fixedly, we pose, we search and ask 'is that me?' or 'is it that or that?'; and when it happens once in a blue moon that we look into a mirror unexpectedly we seldom recognize the image there appearing as a reflection of ourselves. Yet how definite is this corporeal shape compared with any sense of one's entire personality, so uncharted, of such wavering outlines, of such uncertain heights and depths! [p. 27]

I have at times wondered what my instinctive and instantaneous reaction would be if I could meet myself for the first time. This has all but happened. More than once it occurred that somewhat absentmindedly I was mounting a broad staircase which at the landing had a pier-glass rising from floor to ceiling. I seemed to see coming toward me a figure not particularly to my taste, not at all corresponding to the type I instinctively liked; and this figure had an abstracted effaced expression that I should rather sidle away from than be drawn to. All this before recognizing that it was myself. [pp. 67-68]

I find Berenson's remarks suggestive on several points. First, Berenson conceives of his personality as having a 'shape' or 'outline', like that of his physiognomy or physique. He thus suggests that his personality is an object not of analysis or description but rather of perceptual recognition, as if by family resemblance. Second, his psychological profile is inaccessible to introspection and therefore visible only from a detached perspective, as seen through other people's eyes. Finally, the usual technique for viewing himself externally, by looking in the mirror, proves inadequate because his reflection usually shows him in the act of self-presentation, striking a pose that is unlike his spontaneous self.

Presumably, the same difficulties arise for external self-inspection of his personality, for which mirrors are harder to come by and poses harder to see through.

If I want to see myself as another, however, I don't have to imagine myself as seen through other people's eyes: I just have to look at my father, my mother, and my brothers, who show me by way of family resemblance what I am like. For information about my appearance, they may not be as good a source as an ordinary mirror; but for information about what I am like as a person, they are the closest thing to a mirror that I can find.

If I want to know what a person *lie this* can make of himself, I can look first at what my parents and grandparents made of themselves, or at the self-cultivation underway on the part of my brothers and cousins. The point is not that I necessarily can or should strive to be whatever my biological relatives have become, but rather that my own experiments-in-living (as Mill called them) are most informatively supplemented by experiments on the part of people who are relevantly like me. Our extended family is, as it were, a laboratory for carrying out experiments-in-living relevant to the lives of people like us.

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.

Children denied a knowledge of only one biological parent are not entirely cut off from this view of themselves, but they are cut off from one half of it. Their estrangement even from one parent, or from half-brothers and -sisters, must still be a deprivation, because it estranges them from people who would be familiar without any prior acquaintance, people with whom they would enjoy that natural familiarity which would be so revealing about themselves.

How odd it must be to go through life never knowing whether a sense of having met a man before is due to his being one's father. How tantalizing to know that there is someone who could instantly show one a living rendition of deeply ingrained aspects of oneself. How frustrating to know that one will never meet him!

When people deny the importance of biological ties, I wonder how they can read world literature with any comprehension. How do they make any sense of Telemachus, who goes in search of a father he cannot remember? What do they think is the dramatic engine of the Oedipus story? When the adoptive grandson of Pharaoh says 'I have been a stranger in a strange land,' do they take him to be speaking merely as an Egyptian in the land of Midian?<sup>6</sup> How can they even understand the colloquy between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker? Surely, the revelation 'I am your father' should strike them as a bit of dramatic stupidity—a remark to be answered 'So what?'

Of course, these stories embody the mythical and symbolic values that I have promised not to invoke; but they also, and independently, illustrate a bit of common sense about the self-knowledge drawn from acquaintance with biological relatives. Telemachus, Oedipus, Moses, and even Luke Skywalker illustrate the centrality of this knowledge to the task of identity formation, and the centrality of that task to a meaningful human life. Through the ages, people unacquainted with their origins have been regarded as ill-equipped for a fundamental life-task and hence as dramatically, even tragically disadvantaged.

As the offspring of donated gametes reach adulthood, they are rediscovering and reiterating the age-old wisdom about the importance of biological ties. In footnote 1, above, I have cited several online registries through which thousands of donor-conceived adults are seeking to contact their biological relatives. Britain has recently outlawed

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 2:22. The speaker is Moses, who not only *is* a stranger among the Midianites, where he has fled from Pharaoh's court, but *has been* a stranger all of his life, ever since his mother set him afloat on the Nile.

anonymous gamete donation, on the grounds of a child's right to know his or her parentage. Donor offspring are beginning to protest their status as strangers in a strange land.

Acquaintance with a child's biological family can be a source of knowledge for people other than the child itself. The use of anonymously donated gametes can leave not just the child but also its custodial parents in the dark, and in ways that adversely affect their parenting.

Information relevant to self-cultivation is also relevant to the rearing of children. And that information is even more consequential for child-rearing, because the growth of children is so dramatic in comparison with what is still possible once the age of self-cultivation has been attained. So much of what perplexes parents has to do with the nature whose unfolding they are trying to foster. How far can the child hope to reach, and in which directions? What is the child unable to help being, and what can it be helped to become? What will smooth its rough edges, and what will just rub against the grain?

I would not want to have raised my younger son without having known my maternal grandfather, with whom he has so much in common. I would never have understood my older son if I hadn't known his uncles, on both sides. And raising my children without knowing their mother—that would have been like raising them with one eye closed. It's not just my sympathetic knowledge of her that has helped me to understand them but also my understanding of her and me in relation to one another, since each child is a blend of qualities that were first blended in our relationship.

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.

Human families are disrupted in various ways, by death or divorce or poverty or social upheavals. In these circumstances a child is entitled to be raised by parental figures who love it and love one another, even if they are not its biological parents. The child is also entitled to feel that it is the social equal of other children and that its parents are the equals of other parents. Here again, however, different evaluations are easily conflated or confused. To acknowledge that adopted children have missed something of human importance is not to disparage the children, their parents, or the love and mutual care among them. Similarly, we should not have to disparage anyone in order to acknowledge that the offspring of donated gametes will miss something important as well. And then the contrast between these cases—between compensating children for something they have already lost and creating children with the intention that they never have it—should lead us to question the morality of anonymous genetic donation.

The reason for resorting to donated gametes in many cases, of course, is the desire of an adult to have a biologically related child, despite lacking a partner with whom he or she can conceive. And my arguments imply that having a biologically related child is of genuine value, as a potential source of self-knowledge for the parent. Yet whereas the parent will be just as fully related to the child as any mother or father, the child will know only half of its biological parentage. Surely, we don't believe that parents are entitled to make themselves slightly better off in some fundamental dimension by impoverishing their children in the same dimension. Why, then, should they be entitled to enlarge their own circle of consanguinity by creating children whose circle will be broken in half?

The answer to this question cannot be that the children will be compensated by receiving the gift of life. The so-called gift of life cannot

compensate a child for congenital disadvantages, because it doesn't make the child better off than it would have been without them.<sup>7</sup>

Look at it this way. We cannot justify severing the child's ties to one of its parents by pointing out that, in order to avoid doing so, we would have had to omit creating the child altogether. This justification would portray separation from a biological parent as the lesser of two evils for the child, preferable to the greater evil of never having existed. But never having existed would not have been an evil for the child, because a non-existent person suffers no evils.

To be sure, the child of a genetic donor is usually glad to have been born. But the fact that a child would be glad to have been born cannot justify us in conceiving it.<sup>8</sup> Congenitally handicapped people live rich and fulfilling lives into which they are glad to have been born, but a woman who is taking a teratogenic medication has an obligation not to conceive a child until she has stopped taking it. Waiting to conceive until she has stopped taking the medication will of course entail that the handicapped child she might have conceived will in fact never exist. Had she conceived that child, it might even have been thankful that she chose not to wait before conceiving. But the wrongness of deliberately conceiving a handicapped child cannot be mitigated by that child's future thankfulness. To offer such a justification would be to confuse two distinct questions.

One question asks, about a particular individual, whether the disadvantages of his life are so great as to outweigh the value for him of living. This is the question that someone answers by being glad to have been born or, alternatively, wishing that he hadn't been; but it is not the question that we face at the point of deciding whether to conceive a child. At that point there is no particular individual with respect to

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<sup>7</sup> I call it a 'so-called gift' because it has no intended recipient. It is a 'gift' that is launched into the void, where some as-yet nonexistent person may snag it. Such untargeted benefits do not fit our usual concept of gift-giving.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am introducing the 'non-identity problem' first discussed by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).



whom we can ask whether he would welcome or regret the kind of life we have to offer. So we have to compare there being a person who lives that kind of life, on the one hand, with there being no such person, on the other—abstractly quantified alternatives concerning no particular individual. Such a person, if he existed, would compare *his* living such a life with *his* never having lived—alternatives concerning him in particular. How he would choose between a disadvantaged life and non-existence, as alternatives concerning him in particular, cannot dictate how we should choose between there being a person who faces such alternatives and there being none. Preferring a disadvantaged life as the only alternative to non-existence may be a rational choice for him to make, and yet those alternatives may be such as no person should have to face. Indeed, the reason why there should be no person who has to face these alternatives is precisely that, once brought into existence facing them, he will find that his own individual non-existence is the only alternative to his disadvantages.

Frankly, to criticize proponents of gamete donation for overselling the ‘gift of life’ is to credit them with greater moral sensitivity than they generally show. The websites of sperm and egg banks tend to betray no hint that the lives they are helping to create will be the lives of future children whose interests are entitled to consideration.<sup>9</sup> Gamete donation is presented as affecting primarily the parents, by enabling them to ‘create families’.

But the party of the first part in these transactions is surely the child. For the parent, the birth marks the beginning of a particular life-stage; for the child it marks the beginning of life itself—the beginning of a life that will extend far beyond the parents’ control or ken. The question ‘Is this a good way to get a child?’ cannot dominate the question ‘Is this a

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Pacific Reproductive Services (‘Making the Most Important Decision of Your Life’: [http://www.pacrepro.com/why\\_prs.htm](http://www.pacrepro.com/why_prs.htm)); Xytex Corporation (‘Creating Families Through Innovation’: <http://www.xytex.com/patient/faq.html>); California Cryobank (‘Reproductive Tissue Services’: <http://www.cryobank.com/>). A perusal of these and similar sites suggests that the new ideology of the family is actively spread by an industry in support of its commercial interests.

good way for a child to have been gotten?’ And the latter question cannot be finessed on the grounds that a particular child could not have been gotten any other way, since the alternative for that child would have been a benign nonexistence.

Nor can the former question be given precedence on the grounds that gamete donation is the only way for the prospective parents to get a child. The alternative of adopting an already existing child is often available, and I have argued that it is morally preferable, because it provides a custodial family for a child already and independently destined to be alienated from its biological family. As I have mentioned, creating a new child designed to suffer that alienation is often preferred to adoption precisely because of the parents’ interest in biological ties—a interest that they choose to further slightly in their own case by creating a person for whom the same interest will be profoundly frustrated. I regard this choice as morally incoherent.

What’s more, there is the question of what moral weight attaches to a person’s desire to procreate. Traditionally, that desire has been thought to ground a moral right to procreate only for those who are in a position to provide the resulting child with a family. According to the new ideology of the family, of course, virtually any adult is in a position to satisfy this requirement, since a family is whatever we choose to call by that name. But this new ideology is precisely what I am questioning. To defend the ideology on the grounds of a person’s right to procreate would be question-begging. The right to procreate is conditional on the ability to provide the resulting child with a family; what counts as providing the child with a family in the relevant sense is a question that must be settled prior to any claim of procreative rights.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Framing the considerations in this way makes clear their application to the case of single women who use artificial insemination to create children whom they intend to raise on their own. Children can of course be successfully reared by single mothers, if necessary. But children can be successfully reared, if necessary, in orphanages as well—a fact that cannot justify deliberately creating children with the intention of abandoning them to an orphanage. (Imagine a woman who would like to have the experience of conception and childbirth without incurring the responsibility for raising a child.) Just as the serviceability of

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.<sup>11</sup> I opened with the story of my Russian ancestors, whose search for something better I imagined to have culminated in my writing this essay. My family background includes many such stories, whose denouement I can see myself as undergoing or enacting. But do such family sagas have to be sagas of biological families? Let me approach this question by saying first what I think that stories do.<sup>12</sup>

Organizing events into the form of a story provides an understanding of them distinct from what would be provided by causal explanations. A well constructed story recounts events in such a way as to lead us through a natural sequence of emotions, which is ultimately resolved in an emotional cadence that leaves us knowing how we feel about the events. We know how we feel because we have been through a sequence of feelings that is familiar to our emotional sensibilities; because we have arrived at a conclusory feeling, a state of emotional rest; and because our conclusory feeling takes all of the preceding events into its view.

To understand events in this emotional sense is to grasp their meaning—that is, what they mean to us, in emotional terms. My finishing an essay on family histories is a meaningless event, in a string of meaningless events, unless and until I can embed it in a story that makes it an occasion for feeling ambitions achieved, fears allayed, sufferings redeemed—or pretensions punctured, for that matter. 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

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orphanages cannot justify procreation in reliance on their services, so the serviceability of single parenting cannot justify the creation of children with the intention that they grow up without a father of any kind.

11 The importance of narrative self-knowledge is stressed by David Gollancz in the essay cited in note 1, above.

12 See my 'Narrative Explanation,' *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003): 1-25.

my entire education and career takes on meaning in relation to the story of my ancestors.

Adoptees can certainly find meaningful roles for themselves in stories about their adoptive families. Even so, they seem to have the sense of not knowing important stories about themselves, and of therefore missing some meaning implicit in their lives, unless and until they know their biological origins.

Here the temptation of symbolic and mythical thinking grows, and I still want to avoid succumbing to it. Insofar as there is a realistic basis for valuing biological-family history, I suspect that it is the same as the basis I have already identified for self-knowledge—namely, the resemblances that hold within biological families. What rests on this basis is different, however, in the case of historical narrative.

Whereas direct acquaintance with biological relatives helps me to know what I am like, knowledge of family history helps me to understand what it means to be like this. The quality that sometimes makes me a malcontent seems to have impelled Nathan and Golda into the role of emigrants. The quality that makes me a homebody seems to have drawn their every migration toward a better urban homestead for their growing family. These different descriptions of our shared qualities endow those qualities with different meanings, by assigning them to the protagonists of different scenarios—the emigrants versus the malcontent, the homesteaders versus the homebody. The scenarios typical of these protagonists work their way towards different emotional resolutions, with corresponding differences in meaning.

I know that I have it in me to be a malcontent homebody, a grumbling stick-in-the-mud. Do I also have it in me to spurn one home for the prospect of a better one? Nathan and Golda did, according to their story, and it's because they did that am I here to ask the question, bearing their genetic legacy. Maybe, then, I should borrow a page from their book. The point, in any case, is that I could never have considered borrowing a page from that book if it had been permanently closed to me at birth.

How do I know that I have inherited these qualities 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. Why would we create children whose provision of possible self-understandings was poorer than our own?

I know that many people have no interest in their ancestry, no sense of kinship with their kin. These people define themselves in terms other than those which are descriptive of their relatives, and they pursue life stories disjoint from their family's history. But even these people benefit by knowing where they come from.

I think that someone who denies having anything in common with his biological relatives is either speaking figuratively or in denial. Almost all of us look and sound and feel and move like the people from whom we came: a genuine sport of nature is very rare. What is more likely is that a person's similarities to his relatives lie in aspects of himself that don't matter to him, or that he dislikes and rejects. Not valuing commonalities is indeed a way of not having anything in common, figuratively speaking; it just isn't a way of literally having nothing in common.

Someone who doesn't value what he has in common with his relatives may think that he need never have known them in order to identify and cultivate those aspects of himself which he does value. But I doubt it. This person is likely to have defined himself as different from his relatives precisely because they served as ill omens of his possible futures, or at least as foils against which his contrasting qualities could attract his eye. Learning not to be like his relatives has still involved learning from them: if he had never known them, he might well have ended up more like them.

The point is that biological origins needn't be worth embracing in order to be worth knowing. Someone who doesn't know his relatives cannot even turn up his nose at them. The question for him is not 'Shall

I follow my forebears?’ but ‘*Am* I following them?’, and to this latter question he can never know the answer. He can have neither the satisfaction of continuing in their footsteps nor that of striking out on his own, because their footsteps have been effaced. To tell him that those obliterated footsteps weren’t important for him is to tell what the experience of all times and cultures condemns as a lie.<sup>13</sup>

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13 While this essay was in press, I learned of the following additional resources on donor conception. Since August 2005, New Zealand has required all donor-conceived births to be recorded in a Human Assisted Reproductive Technology (HART) Register ([http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/HARTbrochure.pdf/\\$file/HARTbrochure.pdf](http://www.dia.govt.nz/pubforms.nsf/URL/HARTbrochure.pdf/$file/HARTbrochure.pdf)). The HART Act requires that information about donors be made available to their offspring at age 18. In addition to the publications listed in note 3, see: Jacqueline A. Laing and David S. Oderberg, ‘Artificial Reproduction, the “Welfare Principle”, and the Common Good,’ forthcoming in *Medical Law Review* (2005); Alexina McWhinnie, ‘Gamete donation and anonymity: Should offspring from donated gametes continue to be denied knowledge of their origins and antecedents?’, *Human Reproduction* 16 (2001): 807-17. Thanks to Rupert Rushbrooke for these references.