Ancestry, identity and meaning

The importance of biological ties in contemporary society

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Biological ties are important to people; there is no doubting that. But exactly why they are important is increasingly relevant at a time when so much about the family exists in flux—the shapes of families are shifting, as are the technologies used to assist in creating them. Beneath many of the current debates over family structure or assisted reproductive technologies (e.g., those concerned with adoption, surrogacy, donor insemination, and gay- and lesbian-parented families) lay some fundamental moral questions. Is it important to know one’s biological parents? Are biological parent–child relationships different, in any important moral sense, to non-biological parent–child relationships? What value should be attributed to biological ties?

Recently, some authors have focused on the role that biological relationships play in the life task of identity formation. Velleman (2005, 2008), for example, argued that an ongoing connection with biological parents is so significant in forming one’s self-knowledge and identity that it is morally wrong to deprive someone of this. Thus, in his view, practices such as anonymous gamete donation are inherently problematic. Alternatively, Haslanger (2009) agreed that biological relationships play a valuable role in healthy identity formation, but only because the current cultural context is strongly “bionormative.” The way forward, she argued, lies not in shaping moral understandings to fit with a bionormative cultural context, but rather in challenging bionormativity. She said: “I enthusiastically endorse the disruption of old ideologies of the family, and resist new ideologies that entrench and naturalize the value of biological ties” (p. 92).

1 In this chapter, I generally treat the concept of “biological ties” as if it were an unproblematic description of shared ancestry. However, as Dempsey (2006) pointed out, advances in assisted reproductive technologies have problematised such simple conceptions: “For example, biological maternity can be now potentially separated into a biogenetic and a gestational component, which allows for a diffusion of the hitherto singular character of biological motherhood” (p. 45). Unfortunately, space does not permit an exploration of such nuanced understandings of biological ties.

2 That is, the current cultural context manifests a “culturally dominant biologism” (Haslanger, 2009, p. 93).
In this chapter I follow the above authors in exploring this issue. The focus on the role that biological relationships play in identity formation is an important development in broader debates over biological ties, one that takes seriously the often-underestimated role that narrative and meaning play in people’s lives. I begin by outlining the positions of Velleman and Haslanger, both of whom are prominent philosophers. Although there is much to learn from these authors, I argue that their writings also serve to illustrate how debate in this area often fails to adequately account for the unique cultural conditions of contemporary society, and thus fail to identify exactly why biological ties mean so much to so many people in today’s world.

**Biological ties and identity formation**

“Meaning in life”, Velleman (2005) asserted, “is importantly influenced by biological ties” (p. 357). Indeed, he argued that actually having acquaintance with one or both of one’s parents is so important that it is morally wrong to deliberately bring a child into existence knowing that they will be denied this (as is the case, for example, for children of anonymous gamete donors).

According to Velleman, knowing one’s parents is valuable for two main reasons. First, it allows individuals to develop accurate and healthy forms of self-knowledge. Coming to understand oneself—one’s temperament, proclivities, and styles of thinking, feeling and relating—is an important part of living a flourishing life; but it is no easy task. While physical selves can be reflected in a mirror, inner selves are opaque: often “inaccessible to introspection and therefore visible only from a detached perspective, as seen through other people’s eyes” (p. 367). One of the central ways in which true self-understanding can be developed is through contact with one’s kin, particularly parents and siblings.

If I want to see myself as another … 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. (p. 368)

Whether one shares many characteristics with family members or defines oneself in opposition to them, relating with one’s immediate kin is often the only way to access “deeply ingrained aspects of oneself” (Velleman, 2005, p. 369).

Second, knowing one’s parents helps one to develop a coherent and positive sense of identity. According to Velleman, identity development is not simply a matter of garnering self-knowledge, but also of telling a story about that knowledge and the events of one’s life. Such stories, or narratives, can provide a sense of meaning and emotional resolution that a causal explanation of qualities or events simply cannot. Importantly, it is people’s kin who provide the material with which some of their most significant narratives are constructed. While those who are unaware of their biological origins can certainly develop meaningful narratives within the context of their non-biological families, they will likely “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” (Velleman, 2005, p. 376).

In contrast to these views, Haslanger (2009) welcomed new ideologies of the family and relationships. She argued that Velleman’s emphasis on biological kin as a key to self-
knowledge is highly exaggerated. Yes, people need others in order to develop certain forms of self-knowledge, but these others need not only be their kin; they may be friends, community members, public figures, or even the fictitious characters of films or literature. Furthermore, the development of self-knowledge is as much about introspection and the exercise of agency as about the mirroring of others.

Haslanger (2009) went on to examine the claim that biological ties are a significant factor in healthy identity development. She argued that the personal narratives that people develop normally adhere to certain dominant cultural schemas, and that the dominant schema for the family in contemporary post-industrial societies is the “natural nuclear family” schema, which says that children are best conceived and raised by two heterosexual adults joined in a loving relationship (i.e., marriage). She agreed that the “natural nuclear family schema plays an important role in forming identities—including healthy identities—in our current cultural context” (p. 113). However, she argued that this is not because biological ties are inherently necessary for healthy psychological development or that the nuclear family unit is always the optimum environment in which to raise children; rather negative effects are often associated with living outside of a hegemonic cultural schema. Of those disconnected from their biological parents, she said: “lacking knowledge about one’s biological family, one is left without questions that matter culturally, and this is stigmatizing” (p. 113). It is difficult to live a flourishing life when one is the member of a stigmatised group, when one does not have access to the relationships and forms of knowledge that the dominant family schema deems normal and necessary. For Haslanger, the way forward lies in challenging bionormativity, not in pandering to it.

**Reflections on the debate**

What are we to make of the debate discussed above? Certainly both Velleman (2005, 2008) and Haslanger (2009) have presented sophisticated cases for their opposing views, and focus on issues—such as the role that narrative identity plays in a flourishing life—that are sidelined in much of the relevant literature. However, in important ways their arguments are also lacking.

Velleman posited that biological ties are important because of the pivotal role they play in the development of self-knowledge. Surely Haslanger (2009) was correct when she challenged Velleman’s (2005) claim that parent–child relationships are essentially the only route to “deeply ingrained aspects of oneself” (p. 369). Surely people come to know themselves in multiple ways: through relationships, through identification with fictional or historical characters, through introspection, through the exercise of agency, through understanding their own culture and upbringing, and not least through the joys and hardships of life. Harris (2009) demonstrated that the role that parents play in shaping their children’s characters is often assumed to be much more significant than it actually is; that children’s peer groups and their genetics, for instance, are considerably stronger predictors of character than parenting practices. It would appear that by attributing more weight to the familial relationship than is warranted, Velleman was committing an error of reasoning similar to that identified by Harris.

Velleman (2005) then discussed the role that biological ties play in identity development and the construction of personal narratives—he was one of the first authors to explore this issue in any great depth. Haslanger’s (2009) response—her assertion that the importance attributed to kinship stems from bionormative cultural schemas—appears convincing. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine individuals having “the sense of not knowing
important stories about themselves” (Velleman, 2005, p. 367) if they lived in a society that paid little heed to biological connections. However, Haslanger’s proposed course of action is untenable. She encourages the “disruption of old ideologies of the family” (p. 92), as if the “natural nuclear family” schema is the only factor contributing to the value individuals place on biological connections. In doing so, she both underestimates important human propensities and fails to adequately account for a number of the defining characteristics of the contemporary social order. The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to support the above claims.

In the next sections of this chapter, I present an argument that departs from those of Velleman and Haslanger. I argue that most people are compelled to develop personal narratives that position their existence within a story or framework that extends beyond the borders of their own birth and death in order to create narratives that give their lives a sense of continuity and meaning. Increasingly in contemporary society, for reasons I outline, these narratives are built around biological connections and ancestors.

The human propensity for meaning

Human beings have a unique propensity for developing and adopting ideologies—be they mythological, religious, philosophical or political—that ascribe meaning to the universe and individual existence. Traditionally, every known human culture has offered its members meaningful grand narratives—creation stories, myths, rituals, and religious and spiritual beliefs—which have provided a framework that allows them to position their own life stories within a broader context and helps to imbue their individual experiences, sufferings and mortality with meaning (Brown, 1991).3

Numerous theorists have recognised this propensity for meaning and attempted to explain its origins. Perhaps the tradition that has most closely examined the role that meaning-providing belief systems play in promoting psychological security is existentialism. In particular, theorists who have investigated existentialist concerns within a psychiatric or psychoanalytic framework (e.g., Becker, 1973; May, 1991; Yalom, 1980), although divergent in their writings, all focus on the ways in which cultural belief systems and narratives work to allay a number of primary human concerns, such as the fear of death, meaninglessness, isolation and the responsibility that accompanies psychic freedom. For these writers, meaning-rich ideologies and cultural narratives help individuals to address problems and anxieties that almost invariably burden self-conscious, autonomous beings.

More recently, Dennett (2006) and Dawkins (2006) have led a growing number of authors who argue that human beings are “hardwired” to view the universe as inherently meaningful, and who treat the tendency towards mythological and religious thinking as a natural, evolved phenomenon that is amenable to scientific study. Dennett, for instance, posited that the tendency to believe in God, deities or other supernatural forces arises out of an evolved capacity to attribute intentional action to others. This capacity became very beneficial in evolutionary terms, for it allowed humans to develop bonds based on empathy and to more effectively anticipate the behaviours of others. However, it also led to the tendency to fallaciously see intentions underlying all events, and to invent supernatural entities to account for those events or

3 The anthropologist Brown (1991) developed a list of “human universals”, which “comprise those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no known exception” (p. 11). Included in this list were “creation myths”, “end times myths”, “beliefs and narratives”, “magical thinking”, “beliefs about death”, “death rituals”, “mourning” and “rites of passage”.

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phenomena that were not obviously attributable to the intentions of human or other
animals. Contemporary religious doctrines are, according to Dennett, simply more
refined versions of earlier animistic belief systems, which saw natural phenomena,
such as the weather or the changing of the seasons or the genesis of the Earth, as
being guided by spirits or deities.

For the purposes of this chapter, it does not matter whether one accepts that the
propensity to imbue human life with meaning arises out of deep existential anxieties, or
is a product of human evolutionary history, or is due to some other reason altogether.
I describe the existential and evolutionary theories above to demonstrate that many
other theorists are concerned with this issue, and also that there are at least conceivable
descriptions of its aetiology. What matters here is that people are predisposed in this
way; that the human search for meaning, whatever its genesis, is an empirical reality and
is therefore a relevant factor in the consideration of certain moral issues.

The loss of meaningful grand narratives

If every known culture has offered its members grand narratives, which have enabled
them to position their own life stories within a broader context and helped them to
imbue their individual lives with meaning, an illuminating question to ask is this: What
do contemporary, post-industrial societies offer in this regard?

Such societies are historically unique in that they are increasingly guided by secular,
scientific understandings of existence; understandings that fail to clearly direct people's
propensity for meaning, and do not offer an emotionally satisfying explanation of how
individual life stories fit within a larger narrative (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). As Mellor
and Shilling wrote, “modernity has developed alongside an extensive desacralisation of
social life, yet has failed to replace religious certainties with scientific certainties” (p. 413).
Take the dominant contemporary creation story—Darwinian “evolution by natural
selection”—as an example. Evolutionary theory provides a sophisticated answer as to
how humanity came to be, but is silent on the why. Many evolutionary theorists believe
that life began when “at some point a particularly remarkable molecule was formed by
accident … [and] it had the extraordinary property of being able to create copies of itself”
(Dawkins, 1976, p. 15). This may well be true, but presenting the history of life as an
“accident”, followed by the unfolding of blind forces offers no sense that there might be
meaning or a purpose to human life beyond that which is invented. Evolutionary theory
provides an extremely lengthy narrative framework, no doubt, but it is not one that sits
comfortably with a tendency to ascribe meaning to the universe.

Furthermore, many of the central narratives of the secular-scientific world view
actively promote the idea that the universe and human life is free of intrinsic meaning.
Midgley (2003) argued that, far from being value-neutral, science is guided by a number
of pervasive myths, which she describes as “imaginative patterns, networks of powerful
symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world” (p. 1). These myths are
not necessarily false, but they are also not the result of scientific investigation; rather,
they reflect metaphors and non-empirical, metaphysical presuppositions. The most
dominant of these myths, Midgley contends, are: atomism, or the idea that the universe
is divisible into basic units; reductionism, or the idea that the universe (or systems
within it, such as societies or biological entities) is best understood by investigating

4 It is important to note that I am not concerned with the veracity of this theory, but rather the effect it
has on individuals.
its individual components; and, materialism, or the view that there is no non-physical aspect to reality.

The next question to ask, then, is: What is happening in post-traditional societies to the human propensity for meaning? Is it dwindling, conditioned out of existence by the hegemony of the secular-scientific worldview? Or is it simply finding new avenues of expression?

**Narrative identity and the body**

For many in contemporary society, the physical body is a central constituent of identity. Of course, bodies have always been important—they connect individuals to the world and others; they are the ultimate source of life, of experience, of all pleasure and pain—but never have they been so central to people’s personal narratives (Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993). Giddens proposed that the dissolution of grand narratives and tradition has been accompanied by an increase in “ontological insecurity”, where people’s fundamental existential questions remain unanswered, and they struggle to develop a sense of order and meaning in their lives. As meaning and self-identity are no longer simply bestowed by grand narratives or reliable social structures, they become the responsibility—the “reflexive projects”—of individuals. Furthermore, Giddens argued, “regularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained” (p. 57). Shilling agreed, submitting that “there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person’s sense of self-identity” (p. 3).

The rise of consumerism in the post-traditional world has also played a significant role in increasing the body’s salience in personal narratives. Turner (1996) argued that “with mass culture and consumerism came a new self, a more visible self, and the body comes to symbolise overtly the status of the personal self” (p. 1). Mellor and Shilling (1993) agreed that there has been “a massive rise of the body in consumer culture as the bearer of symbolic value”, which leads to “a tendency for people to place more importance on the body as constitutive of the self” (p. 413). As examples, these authors point to the proliferation of images of bodies—invariably young and trim—in advertisements and popular entertainment, and the rise of “body projects” (e.g., health and fitness regimes, diets, cosmetic surgery, body art) as central practices of personal identity.

It can also be seen that the secular and scientific ideologies discussed above encourage people to view themselves as simply material beings. Mainstream medicine, for instance, treats the body as a biological machine devoid of a spirit or soul, and many accept its purely physical accounts of the aetiology, course and treatments of different disease states. Similarly, much contemporary psychology and psychiatry, with its emphasis on neurobiology and cognition, is structured around a materialistic conception of mental health and disease; where depression, for instance, was once viewed as a “dark night of the soul” or an adaptive response to difficult circumstances, it is now seen by many as a “chemical imbalance” in the brain necessitating chemical intervention. Even traditional religious and spiritual practices, such as yoga and mindfulness meditation, are often stripped of any metaphysical context and seen as simply holistic forms of exercise or mental training. In a multitude of ways people are encouraged to think of the self in physical terms.

**Personal creation stories**

One result of the fact that the body has become a more central focus of identity is that physicality now also tends to be dominant in those wide-reaching narratives that people
use to ground their lives in a broader, meaning-providing context. In many traditional cultures, a sense of continuity and meaning was provided through connection with ancestors, it is true, but it was also provided through stories of the non-physical or spiritual: through belief in realms or states that exist after death, or in the idea that one’s soul or karmic force continues through a series of incarnations. In the post-traditional order, secular and materialistic understandings of the self overshadow the influence of spiritual beliefs. The propensity to position one’s own life stories within a broader narrative framework has, for many, found a new avenue of expression: through stories that involve them in a corporeal lineage, that see them as a link in a chain of bodies that extends into the distant past and will continue to exist in perpetuity.

Although research with adoptees, foster children and donor-conceived people has consistently identified a sense of “genealogical bewilderment”, or identity confusion, among those who do not know their biological parent(s) (Kirkman, 2004; Turner & Coyle, 2000), this research tends to focus on facets of identity such as self-esteem or a sense of belonging, rather than on the broader sense of narrative meaning described in this chapter. Exceptions include March’s (1995) study with adoptees, in which interviewees “lacked the biological kinship ties used to establish generational continuity” (p. 657), and Turner and Coyle’s (2000) work with donor-conceived people, where the authors identified a feeling of “genetic discontinuity”, and argued that those raised without knowledge of their biological parents should be provided with “a forum within which their particular need to construct a past and be understood within a genetic context can be met” (p. 2042).

There are, however, more oblique forms of evidence that can be seen to support my argument. For instance, consider the massive rise in popularity of genealogy. Although interest in ancestry dates back centuries, it was traditionally the preserve of the aristocratic classes, not the popular pursuit seen today (Zerubavel, 2012). Today, websites such as Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org are hugely successful, each with millions of paying subscribers. Indeed, Wells (2006) observed that genealogy is “the second most popular American hobby after gardening (and the second most visited category of Web sites after pornography)” (p. 11). Finkler (2001) convincingly argued that “the ideology of genetic inheritance promises contemporary humans immortality within the flux of the postmodern world” (p. 248) as the “individual exists in a transient world but is fastened biologically to the past and future” (pp. 248–249). However, it is important to also note that those conducting genealogical investigations are seldom simply searching for the names of their ancestors or genetic information (Mason, 2008). Rather, they are (or are also) looking for the stories of their ancestors; stories that then become the various threads of broader genealogical tapestries. Identifying with the stories and circumstances of one’s ancestors can promote “an almost interpersonal sense of the past … a way of experiencing even distant historical events quasi-autobiographically” (Zerubavel, 2012, p. 3).

The extent to which qualitative research with adoptees, foster children or donor-conceived people can be used to support the argument I present in this chapter is a difficult question, and one that for lack of space I cannot adequately explore. If the propensity for meaning does indeed stem from existential concerns and/or evolutionary forces, there would be strong reason to believe that this propensity may be operating largely outside of conscious awareness. For example, Terror Management Theory, a popular branch of social psychology, has in recent years empirically verified that the fear accompanying an awareness of mortality unconsciously motivates individuals to invest in cultural belief systems that imbue their lives with meaning (for a review of this research, see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).
p. 21). What is this if not an attempt to create a narrative that provides a broader context for one’s own existence?

Consider also the fact that many adoptees and children of anonymous gamete donors go to great lengths to identify and learn about their biological parents (Kenny, Higgins, Soloff, & Sweid, 2012; Kirkman, 2004). But why should this be so? Levy and Lotz (2005) claimed that their desire to locate their biological parents was simply a symptom of the misguided emphasis placed on genetics in contemporary society. While it is true that some adoptees and children of anonymous gamete donors search out their biological parents solely for genetic information, for many others such information is a secondary concern, or even of no concern at all (Kirkman, 2004). In an effective attempt to counter the arguments of authors such as Levy and Lotz, Laing (2006) offered the following thought experiment:

Imagine an adult adopted as a child who is seeking out his father. Suppose he discovers there is a match for paternity with X. He is elated but soon discovers that X is not his father but the twin of his father, Y. The discovery that X is not his father at all, but his uncle, will be a matter of great significance even though the DNA for both X and Y might be the same (p. 549).

This example demonstrates that the valuing of biological ties cannot simply be attributed to a desire for genetic information (because for almost all intents and purposes, the uncle is as biologically similar to the adopted child as the father). This example suggests that most people would prefer to meet X over Y because what they are actually searching for is a story—a personal creation story, if you like. What was my father like? What were the conditions that led him to make his reproductive decisions? How does he feel about me? Yes, these are “questions that matter culturally” (Haslanger, 2009, p. 113) and so can be a cause for stigma if they remained unanswered, but in societies in which diverse family forms are increasingly common, this explanation seems unable to fully account for the intensity with which many conduct searches for their kin. It seems likely that these questions are also important because they speak directly to the decisions and conditions that led to one’s very existence, and not knowing their answers leaves a lacuna right at the closest link of a chain that could connect one—in a meaning-providing way—to one’s forebears.

**Conclusion**

In sum, I agree with Velleman (2005) that knowing one’s family history provides a broad context “in which large stretches of my own life can take on meaning in relation to the story of my ancestors” (pp. 375–376). However, while Velleman saw this as being indicative of the inherent importance of biological ties, I argue it is simply the current manifestation of a deeper human propensity to position one’s own life story within a broader, meaning-providing narrative. While the grand narratives of traditional societies (such as myths, creation stories, religious and spiritual beliefs) give their members the means to express this propensity, the grand narratives of contemporary society leave people wanting. In the absence of meaning-providing grand narratives (and in the presence of secularism, scientism and consumerism), people’s biological history and ancestry have become common ways for them to attempt to position their own lives within a broader context. Thus, Haslanger’s (2009) suggestion of resisting bionormativity by disrupting “old ideologies of the family” ignores both the human propensity for meaning and some of the central features of the current social order.
Those involved in debates over issues such as adoption, surrogacy and donor insemination often come down on one or the other side of the classic nature/nurture divide. Many, like Velleman, take what is basically an essentialist approach, seeing biological relationships as inherently valuable. Such authors run the risk of naturalising what are actually socially constructed phenomena, and supporting conservative conceptions of family life. Others, like Haslanger, adopt more of a constructivist position, arguing that the value of biological ties is socially constructed, and that it can and should be challenged. These authors have a tendency to overestimate the extent to which individuals in the post-traditional order are able to fashion their own identities, and risk trivialising the deep importance that many attribute to biological connections. As is almost always the case when the nature/nurture problem surfaces in a particular debate, the complex realities of the human situation are not properly captured by polarised philosophical positions.

Although the argument I present in this chapter needs a much broader treatment than I can give it here, I hope to have at least initiated a conversation, and to have demonstrated that there may be ways to conceive of the importance of biological ties that adequately account for the characteristics of contemporary society.

References


**Acknowledgements**: Justin Oakley’s guidance throughout the stages of planning, writing and rewriting of this chapter has been invaluable. Thanks also to Deborah Dempsey for encouragement and feedback, as well as Amy Watson, Pauline Kenny and Carlie Sporton for insightful comments on later drafts.