Addressing The Harms of Not Knowing One’s Heredity: Lessons From Genealogical Bewilderment

By Kimberly Leighton

The genetic tie’s value is not determined by biology. Rather, it systematically varies in a way that promotes racist and patriarchal norms. . . . There is nothing either precious or sinister about the genetic tie by itself. The genetic tie’s precise social import depends on the type of relationship to which it becomes relevant and the prevalent social conditions that influence that relationship. —Dorothy Roberts, “The Genetic Tie”

One day at table, a fellow who had been drinking deeply, made bold to say I was not my father's son. —Sophocles, King Oedipus

Introduction

In 2002, thirty-one-year-old Joanna Rose, a person who was conceived by her parents with the use of anonymous sperm, brought a claim against the British government. She sought to establish that the policy of secrecy about the identity of sperm donors, in effect at the time of her conception, caused her harm. She states in her lengthy testimony (which was strikingly quoted in full by the deciding judge): “I feel intense grief and loss, for the fact that I do not know my genetic father and his family. . . . I feel that this lack of information is potentially very dangerous. Such dangerous mis-information is re-enforced by birth certificates which do not reflect someone’s true genetic identity. . . . I find the fact that I do not have this missing genealogical picture very distressing” (Rose sect. 7). According to Rose, without access to her “true genetic identity” she was not just ignorant, but incomplete, as it purportedly left her without knowledge of her ethnicity, her racial identity, and her medical, genealogical, and social heritage. Moreover, she claimed that this lack positioned her as unequal to those who “have known both of their natural parents” (Rose sect. 7).

In the wake of the Rose case, many people who were conceived through anonymous gamete donation (AGD) and are now adults are reporting experiences of suffering in relation to what they believe they do not know about their conceptions.1 Like Rose, such people
Additionally claim that they should be able to have access to such information. But these accounts have more than a personal resonance: they are increasingly present in arguments in support of changing regulatory policies on reproductive medicine.\(^2\) Aiming to promote the best interests of the donor-conceived, advocates for overturning policies that currently allow donor anonymity are citing the voices of the donor-conceived as evidence of how unethical the practice of AGD really is.

Harm is prominently conceptualized in current discussions of the ethics of anonymous gamete donation through a comparison to adoption.\(^3\) In many arguments supporting the prohibition of AGD, critics contend that, analogous to adoptees who have suffered from policies of closed adoption that deny them access to their original birth certificates, people who were donor-conceived suffer from policies of anonymity that deny them access to information about the identities of the donor(s) involved.\(^4\)

More specifically, opponents of AGD are borrowing from adoption literature the concept of genealogical bewilderment. The emotional need to know that many people who were donor-conceived (or were adopted) express is considered by critics to be evidence of the need to end anonymous gamete donation. “Genealogical bewilderment” is the means by which such opponents of AGD recognize the desire to know as entailing an important moral interest, the interest in not being harmed in the way that is believed to follow from not having knowledge of one’s genetic heritage. According to Naomi Cahn, a prominent critic of anonymous gamete donation, “[l]ike adoptees, children of donated gametes may feel a sense of ‘genealogical bewilderment,’ a feeling that they are confused about their identity and different from other children” (Test Tube 256).

First developed in the 1950s and 1960s to explain what psychologists Erich Wellisch and H. J. Sants considered the maladjustment of their adopted patients, genealogical bewilderment is purportedly a condition people suffer from when they do not know their genetic parents. According to Sants’s much-cited 1964 article, “Genealogical Bewilderment in Children with Substitute Parents,” a “genealogically bewildered child is one who either has no knowledge of his natural parents or only uncertain knowledge of them. The resulting state of confusion and uncertainty, it will be argued, fundamentally undermines his security and thus affects his mental health” (133).\(^5\) For Wellisch and Sants, adoptees suffer genealogical bewilderment because their lack of knowledge of their natural or hereditary parents leads to their having compromised psyches. This result is not an outcome of adoptees’ bad genes, as earlier skeptics of adoption might have claimed, but an effect of how adoptees do not know the genes they come from.\(^6\) In this way, the diagnosis of genealogical bewilderment seems to displace former worries about the harmful effects of illegitimacy onto worries about the effects of adoption itself.

The fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment, that children suffer from not knowing—and not being raised by—their “real” parents, has been accepted by many in the adoption community. Following Wellisch and Sants, later psychologists of adoption have relied on genealogical bewilderment to explain the difficult adolescences they saw their adopted patients experience (e.g., Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig), and adoption activists have used the term in their efforts to articulate what they believe are the harms of closed adoption (e.g., Lifton, Lost). Through such applications of the term, genealogical bewilderment has become incorporated into the way many within and outside of the adoption community understand adoption.

This paper is an attempt to stymie what seems to be the general and growing acceptance of the idea that children who do not know their biological or genetic parents are necessarily harmed by that lack of information. I do not doubt that some people who do not have information about the people to whom they are genetically related experience distress.\(^7\) But I am troubled by what I see as the assumptions underlying the belief in genealogical bewilderment and the implications of the argument that supports the claim that genealogical bewilderment is a real phenomenon directly caused by not knowing one’s genetic genealogy. The normative framework assumed by the diagnosis of genealogical bewilderment has not been made explicit enough for us to recognize how the concept of genealogical bewilderment and the reality ascribed to it are actually part of the cause of the distress people experience rather than a means to alleviate that distress.

A close analysis of the two classic texts on genealogical bewilderment reveals that at their heart is a foundational commitment to a particular view of what a family is and, based on this view, a judgment as to
what a good family is. The argument behind the claim that adoptees necessarily suffer from genealogical bewilderment is that a child needs to know the genealogy of his genetic family because only with knowledge of heredity can a child develop into a normal adult with a healthy psyche. My primary argument here is that rather than addressing the feelings of those who are distraught over what they do not know about their genetic relatives in a way that might resolve those feelings, the diagnosis “genealogical bewilderment” is itself generative of the very conditions of such suffering. If we consider it morally important to address the harms people such as adoptees and the donor-conceived report experiencing feeling in relation to what they do not know about the people to whom they are genetically related, then we must resist using genealogical bewilderment as a way to appreciate those harms.

My analysis of Wellisch’s and Santos’s arguments for genealogical bewilderment reveals how the reasoning behind genealogical bewilderment produces the very phenomenon it believes itself to be explaining:

The fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment (GB) is:

Children who do not know their genetic genealogies are necessarily dysfunctional because they lack such knowledge.

The argument for GB is:

1) Genealogy of genetic ancestry provides us with knowledge about ourselves, i.e., our heredity;
2) The knowledge about ourselves that a genealogy of genetic ancestry provides is knowledge of who we really are, i.e., our identity;
3) Normal psychological development requires knowledge of identity;
4) Normal psychological development requires knowledge of heredity.

The implicit assumption in the argument is that not just any knowledge of identity will satisfy the third premise; it has to be the kind of knowledge that tells us who we really are. But even if this is the case, how do we know that heredity provides such knowledge? The only evidence that the originators of genealogical bewilderment provide to support GB is, in fact, what they consider to be the dysfunctional behavior of those who do not know their heredity. Those who do not know their heredity can never really know who they really are; that this uncertainty impedes normal psychological development can be seen in adoptees, for adoptees exhibit confusion about their identities and a desire to know who they really are, symptoms of “genealogical bewilderment.” Adoptees can never be sure of who they are because only those who know their heredity have such certainty, and such certainty defends against the pathologies that come with an uncertain heredity.

The circularity of reasoning behind the claim of genealogical bewilderment has been noted by critics of the term in relation to gamete donation. Iain Walker, Pia Broderick, and Helen Correia, for example, contend that through persistent referencing to genealogical bewilderment, “it has become an uncritically accepted ‘fact’ that children will be psychologically damaged by it” (273). Counter to the dominant view held by the psychology and medical establishments in Australia, the researchers hold “that couples and individuals conceiving children using donated gametes or embryos have been inadvertently misled by counsellors regarding the dangers of genetic unrelatedness, and in fact their children are unlikely to suffer the emotional disturbances described as a result of their use of donated genetic material” (273). Since parents using gamete donation receive counseling that encourages the expectation that their children will be dysfunctional because the families are not genetically related, it is difficult to determine the central cause of donor-conceived children’s psychological struggles. The fact that the experts’ recommendations promote the idea that the ideal family is genetically related no doubt affects how parents understand and value the family they make through assisted reproduction.

The critique of genealogical bewilderment offered by Walker, Broderick, and Correia is based on the lack of supporting data behind the diagnosis, as well as on the regulatory effects of using the concept of genealogical bewilderment in the political context of assisted reproductive technology. Their main target seems to be what Walker and Broderick refer to in another article as the “attempts to reproduce psychology” (38). At the heart of their criticism of the idea of genealogical bewilderment is what they see as a conflation of two concepts, genealogy and genetics: "Wellisch uses the concepts of
Adoption & Culture 3 (2012)

Leighton, "Harms"

a family is not the moral valuation of what a family should be can safely be assumed. A critical reading of Sants’s claim that children who do not know for certain who their genetic parents are will necessarily suffer from a lack of deep belonging reveals the performative function of the diagnosis of genealogical bewilderment: if genealogical bewilderment were the phenomenon Wellisch and Sants claimed it to be, it would act as evidence that there is a real and important difference between families made by social contract and those bound by blood, for only those who are truly related would be immune from it.

After presenting the normative assumptions about race and family undergirding the original concept of genealogical bewilderment, I return to the topic of gamete donation. The analogy many critics of gamete donation make between adoptees and people who were conceived using donor gametes, I show, relies not solely on the appropriation of the term "genealogical bewilderment." Contemporary arguments against using gamete donation as part of a legitimate and healthy form of family-making actually echo earlier anxieties about the status of the family. While the ultimate harm of adoption for Wellisch and Sants is the threat it poses to the metaphysics of race, the ultimate harm of donor-conception, for critics such as Margaret Somerville and David Blankenhorn, is the harm it poses to the metaphysics of gender. Specifically, as donor-conception allows gay and lesbian couples to reproduce—and anonymous gamete donation allows them to do so without involving the identity of a third party—the concept of "parent" is further severed from relations of genetics.

My aim in this project is to re-evaluate the ethics of the concept of genealogical bewilderment by revealing the assumptions behind its fundamental claim—both past and present—that not knowing to whom one is genetically related inevitably results in harm. The diagnosis of genealogical bewilderment, I argue, reflects the anxieties of those who view forms of family-making as dangerous when they are outside of purportedly natural sexual reproduction through which genetic ties can be traced (imaged) certainty. Rather than assume that not knowing to whom one is genetically related results in pathology, we need to evaluate the harmful effects of an understanding of genetic relatedness that renders some forms of reproduction inherently healthy and, as such, some forms of family inherently good. If I am right that

68
69
the diagnosis of adoptees and the donor-conceived as genealogically bewildered represents a racially-based, heteronormative understanding of identity and a prejudicial view of the family, the continued use of the term genealogical bewilderment as a way to help address the suffering that people who do not know their genetic relatives attest to feeling does more harm than good. By recognizing the category confusions that critics of adoption and gamete donation are really worried about, we can redirect our investigation of the causes of genealogical bewilderment away from the people who do not know and toward the systems of valuation that exploit their lack of knowing (and their desire to know) as a means of promoting their own views of what families are supposed to be.

**Being Without Genealogy: The Origins of Genealogical Bewilderment**

*Special attention is not generally paid to one's genealogy. It is usually accepted as a matter of fact. One is usually not more aware of it than one is of one's own shadow or mirror image.* —Erich Wellisch, "Children Without Genealogy—A Problem of Adoption"

Starting in the early 1950s, psychoanalytic psychiatrists Erich Wellisch and H. J. Sants began treating adoptees for what were considered behaviors indicative of maladjustment. In a letter published in 1952 with the title "Children Without Genealogy—A Problem of Adoption," Wellisch outlines the proto-concept of genealogical bewilderment, stating that he wants to "draw attention to the observation that lack of knowledge of their real parents and ancestors can be a cause of maladjustment in children" (41). The symptoms of such maladjustment include feelings of alienation from "foster parents," tendencies to running away, and suicidal ideation. According to Wellisch, because adoptees are "without genealogy," they have a weakened ability to develop a coherent body-image, a requirement for a complete sense of self-identity. This compromised body-image engenders in the adoptee a specific character problem, a kind of resentment, that can lead to a "rebellion" in the child, which can, Wellisch warns, turn "eventually to delinquency" (41–42).

Similarly, Sants argues that not knowing one's ancestry causes a fundamental uncertainty that severely hampers those who are what Sants called "genealogically deprived" from developing feelings of deep belonging. He believes that the genealogically-deprived adoptee has an incomplete self-image, unresolved Oedipal conflicts, and inadequate relationships with the "substitute" parents. In addition to these definite harms, being uncertain of one's genealogy also puts one at risk of becoming so obsessed by the lack haunting one's sense of self, that the desire to know can itself overtake one's life. A sign that adoptees suffer from genealogical bewilderment, Sants tells us, is their "concern over their lack" of knowledge which will "at some time" become a "searching for clues" (133). In response to their ignorance, adoptees obsessively search for their origins: "A characteristic of the genealogically bewildered, particularly from adolescence onwards, is their relentless pursuit of the facts of their origin" (Sants 139). "Once they have begun, their preoccupation with the task can reach disturbing proportions" (133). They have such intense "conscious and unconscious Oedipal anxieties," Sants tells us, that "the complications for the genealogically bewildered should not be lightly dismissed," even if they are sometimes difficult for the non-adopted to appreciate (139–40).

Wellisch and Sants attributed all these difficulties to genealogical bewilderment: "There are, of course, obvious reasons why on adoption of a baby often very few particulars are disclosed to the adoptive parents and sometimes no particulars can be given about the adopted child's family and origin. There also is the question," Wellisch emphasizes, "of whether or not it matters if a child has no knowledge of these particulars" (41). The fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment is that children suffer from not knowing—and not being raised by—their "real" parents. But here lies the central confusion: while it might seem that what harms the adopted are the consequences of not knowing one's genealogy, merely to be uncertain of one's genealogy, for Sants and Wellisch, is harmful, no matter the explicit effects of such ignorance. Genealogical bewilderment is, at once, the condition of being deprived of information about one's genealogy as part of one's status as an adoptee (an epistemic deprivation) and the effect of such a condition (emotional deprivation).
The positions of Wellisch and Sants on genealogical bewilderment reflect early twentieth-century psychoanalytic literature, specifically works that advance a dynamic understanding of the self and a phenomenological approach to self-conception. Wellisch's and Sants's explanations of what genealogical bewilderment is and how it develops specifically reference a theory of body-image formation from the work of the psychoanalyst Paul Schilder, who viewed the self not as an isolated ego separate from the world, but as something produced in and through relationships with others and as inextricably bound to the world. As Wellisch tells us, "[b]ody-image is not restricted to experiences of the individual's own body but also extends beyond its confines; a hat, a piece of clothing, the voice or breath become part of it" (41). At one and the same time, according to Wellisch, our body-image is integral to our sense of self—like a shadow or a mirror image—and is formed through relationships with things and people that "become part of" our body-image. "As a matter of fact persons outside ourselves are essential for the development of our complete body-image" (41). Sants takes up Schilder's idea that a self is not an atomistic thing that develops independently; our senses of self grow with our experience with and in the world, and with others. Sants quotes Schilder, who writes, "A discussion of a body-image as an isolated entity is necessarily incomplete. A body is always the expression of an ego and personality, and is in a world" (134).

Sants fills out the theoretical backdrop of genealogical bewilderment, presenting desire and identification as two necessary modes of relating through which body-image is formed. To develop a self in and through the body's relationality involves the mutually reinforcing processes of separation and identification. Rather than conceptualizing identification itself as the essential means by which an individual self is formed, Sants understands identification as a compensatory reaction to the infant's initial (and necessarily initiating) separation from the mother (or mother substitute, Sants notes), an idea he attributes to the work of Melanie Klein.12

One of Klein's major contributions to psychoanalytic theory was her re-orientation away from the (exclusive focus on the) psycho-sexual stages of development and toward (inclusion of) the pre-Oedipal. Put very basically, Kleinian theory holds that the infant's first awareness is a generalized sense of being that maintains no distinctions between the self of the infant and any other. The movement into self-awareness of the infant requires an initiating act of differentiation which, interestingly, comes via an act not of self-recognition, but of recognition of an other, usually the primary caretaker of the child (and more specifically, the face/breast of the caretaker). Though generative of the child's sense of self, this act of differentiation, from a Kleinian perspective, figures psychically as a loss for the child as it entails a loss of the original sense of unity with the world/mother that in turn becomes a source of anxiety. The recognition of the mother as a separate other is constitutively accompanied by a recognition of the mother's potential absence. Hence, early psychic development involves a child's psychic negotiation of her desire for the mother and fear of rejection by the mother.

Sants contends that the developing self of the child navigates this tension through a growing sense of belonging, particularly of belonging to the world that the child achieves through an extension of his self-image. Sants tells us that "[f]rom the first year onwards the child's awareness of his environment gradually extends from his mother or mother substitute to other members of his family. At each stage he appears to seek to establish a stable concept of himself as belonging to his extended environment because feelings of not belonging rouse earliest, deep-rooted and disturbing anxieties of maternal rejection" (134). Klein's model of psychic individuation provides Sants with an explanation of why we want to belong and the potential harm of not belonging. Using the work of psychoanalytic psychiatrist John Carl Flugel, Sants proposes a vision of how belonging is established. Sants suggests that the self's extension of feelings from the parents to larger circles of people, and finally to "other units of which the developing child becomes a member: e.g., school, university or town," is the means by which we deflect against the anxiety of separation (Flugel, qtd. in Sants 134). It is our primary attachment to (and fear of losing) our primary caretaker that helps us form connections with groups beyond the family boundaries.

The psychological framework the theory of genealogical bewilderment assumes, however, does not, on its own, provide an explanation of why uncertainty of one's genealogy necessarily causes the harms of genealogical bewilderment. Wellisch and Sants surely provide a way
to understanding how not knowing one’s genealogy can lead to a different sense of body-image or to different kinds of relations to one’s parents. But their theoretical approach alone cannot explain why these differences in and of themselves are harmful. Wellisch and Sants import into their view normative assumptions that lead to the judgment that these differences end up leaving the adoptee dysfunctional. They are the assumptions that get the argument behind the fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment—that not-knowing is the cause of genealogical bewilderment—off the ground, taking it from the merely descriptive claim that adoptees don’t know, to the diagnostic claim that adoptees suffer from their genealogical ignorance.

The fundamental claim of the views espoused by Wellisch and Sants is that an adoptee’s lack of information about his/her genealogy results in direct harm to his/her psychological development. What becomes clear when we examine the arguments supporting this claim is that the knowledge in question is of genetic genealogy—not cultural, social, historical, linguistic, etc.—and such genetic information is valuable because it supplies us—and, importantly, others around us—with knowledge of our heredity.

The question at the heart of our examination of genealogical bewilderment is why heredity, as knowledge of our genetic genealogy, is believed to be so important that not having it leads to abnormal behavior and development. For Wellisch and Sants, the knowledge of genealogy provides us more than access to actual people, or even to the stories of the lives of such people; it allows us to be normal adults. In order to be able to judge the harm of not-knowing, we need to understand the positive influence knowing has, such that it leads to having a good body-image and a healthy sense of belonging.

For Wellisch, the causal connection between an adoptee’s two forms of deprivation—epistemic and emotional—comes from the role heredity plays in terms of proper reproduction. Wellisch is worried about genealogical bewilderment because of how a genealogically bewildered child can grow into a delinquent adult based on his relationship to (genetic) reproduction. The connecting steps between the claim that adoptees are without their genealogy and the conclusion that such a lack of knowledge is potentially dangerous for society begins from the claim that adoptees’ lack of genealogy prohibits them from developing a complete body-image. There seems to be nothing explicit in how Wellisch—and later Sants—presents his understanding of proper body-formation that would require a specific kind of object. Surely it is plausible that a human being’s formation of his/her body-image might require, in addition to relations with inanimate objects that become part of it, other human beings with whom he/she can relate. Conceptualizing and experiencing one’s body as a human body, or even as the body-image of a person, might require relations to the body-images of other entities who have this kind of body-image. But such a requirement does not entail anything special about who those particular people have to be. And yet Wellisch goes on to say that, in regards to the essential role of persons for the development of complete body-image, “[t]he most important persons in this respect are our real parents and the other members of our family” (41). What the contribution is that real parents can provide—and that not-real ones cannot—Wellisch does not explicitly say. He simply asserts that “[k]nowledge of and definite relationship to his genealogy is therefore necessary for a child to build up his complete body-image and world-picture” (41). Because adoptees cannot have this knowledge, they cannot have a complete body-image.

The assumption here is that the intimate relationship one possesses between one’s own body-image and the body-images of one’s “real” parents provides something essential such that not having it results in harm. After claiming that “[k]nowledge of and definite relationship to his genealogy is therefore necessary for a child to build up his complete body-image and world-image,” Wellisch spells out indirectly what it is this intimate relationship makes possible—though he doesn’t say exactly what that is either—in a few dense sentences: “It [this knowledge of his genealogy] is an inalienable and entitled right of every person. There is an urge, a call in everybody to follow and fulfill the tradition of his family, race, nation, and the religious community into which he was born. The loss of this tradition is a deprivation which may result in the stunting of emotional development” (41).

We begin to see here what work “real” is doing in Wellisch’s understanding of the value of genealogy. Our real family is the family we were born into. We have a right to know the family we were born into because only by knowing this family can we fulfill an important
natural urge that we have. Knowing our genealogy gives our body-image something—through our relationship to the body-images of that real family—that is required for following the urge to fulfillment. The cost of not fulfilling this call is a lack of complete body-image which specifically can lead to a stunted emotional life as an adult. But there is an obscurity in Wellisch’s picture regarding the nature of the call that makes distinguishing exactly what the special intimate relationship with our real parents is from what not having the special intimate relationship deprives one of. This confusion comes about because, on the one hand, heredity is something that makes us of “the tradition” that we are, such that what we need to know is something about our “real” parents. On the other hand, genealogical bewilderment rests on the claim that adoption denies children something that is essential to their development. We are born with an urge—essentially to reproduce—and this urge is to “fulfill the tradition” of the family into which we were born. It would seem that anyone could fulfill this urge simply by reproducing, if it is the case that being a “real” parent transmits one’s tradition. So, what is the “real” problem? Why do we have to know our “real” parents if, in some sense, they are already in us?

The assumption here is that no matter who raises us, we still have the urge to follow the tradition of the family we were born to. The urge might be general to all human beings, but one’s individual urge is specified by one’s “real” family—that is, by one’s membership in a tradition, a term by which Wellisch means race and ethnicity. If we don’t know what our real race and ethnicity are, then, even if we reproduce and even if we think we are reproducing our tradition (e.g., in the case where an adoptee has never been told of her adoption), we will not fulfill the urge. Wellisch is claiming here that not only is there a drive to sexually reproduce, there is also in us a drive to sexually reproduce something that is born into us, i.e., to reproduce our race.

To be clear: the harm of being without genealogy, for Wellisch, is not that without it we cannot reproduce. The claim here is that without knowing our genealogy, we can’t know what it is that we are reproducing. Not only should we reproduce our tradition, we should know we are reproducing our tradition. Uncertainty about our so-called real parents would not be a problem unless the racial logic of heredity Wellisch is assuming included a desire for race itself. There are two threats to the urge that not knowing one’s real parents seem to pose: without knowing what my real race is, I could be passing—and so could my child—as a member of the race I think I am, even if I have a different heredity. Thus, the reproduction of race is tampered with: there is no clear correlation between the race I seem to be and the race I really am. Second, without knowing what my real race is, I could have a child with someone who is the race I think I am. Our child would then not only not be a member of the race we think we are; he would be a mixing of the races, and, by definition for Wellisch, a child has only one tradition. Thus rather than simply not knowing his true genealogy, an adoptee suffers because he cannot satisfy the desire to reproduce race. This urge to reproduce race is so strong, for Wellisch, that not knowing their real parents can cause adoptees to be bewitched such that they become maladjusted. “In light of these considerations,” Wellisch writes, “it is understandable that there are cases of maladjustment in children who show that the deprivation of a child’s knowledge of his genealogy can have harmful consequences” (42).

The causal claim that ignorance of one’s genetic genealogy results in the harm that is genealogical bewilderment thus relies upon a specific commitment to the view that race is something that both is and should be reproduced. It is psychologically harmful not to know one’s “real” parents because individuals’ bodies aim toward this reproduction. The psychological literature Wellisch references and draws from might get us to the claim that our body-images are affected by not knowing the people whose gametes were used in our conception. But Wellisch’s argument that we need to know our “real” parents relies on the additional normative claim that psychological health requires the reproduction of our real race.

Belonging to and with One’s Kind: Sants’s Family Values

Not only adopted children may lack knowledge of natural parents. Genealogically bewildered children may be found in any family where one or both of the natural parents is missing. Thus step-children and foster-children may show this condition as well as those reared by one natural parent in the absence of the other, most commonly the illegitimate children of unmarried mothers. What those being considered have in common is at
If my reading of Wellisch is correct, the risky uncertainty at the heart of genealogical bewilderment is not an adoptee's personal lack of information, but the ways in which being without genealogy can result in a mixing of heredities that confuses the metaphysics of race and the logic of reproduction, i.e., the rules that allow me to know both what I am producing and that this thing I am producing is something I am re-producing—that is, knowing the tradition that I come from and that, as such, defines me. People without genealogy are unable to know what they are producing when they have children biologically; hence, that which is supposedly the call inside them to reproduce themselves fails to be satisfied.

Lest these purportedly harmful effects of adoption encourage adoptive parents not to tell their children that they were adopted, Sants makes clear that people who do not know their genealogies—whether or not they know of their own ignorance—suffer because their failure to know keeps them from ever really belonging. According to Sants, “[t]he genealogically deprived child is handicapped by not knowing which clan or family he belongs to. Such children appear to be disturbed by this blockage of possible displacement” (134). Adoptees cannot experience the feeling of true belonging because actual belonging requires knowing one's actual clan. Surely it seems possible that adoptees—and for that matter anyone without knowledge of his heredity—can have clans. Even if we grant that some clan relations offer different kinds of experiences of belonging, there is no obvious reason, especially not on coming from the psychological theories Sants draws on, why adoptees' primary clan membership cannot be with their adoptive families and that this relationship cannot satisfy the developing child's psychological needs. Unless, that is, that, like “real” parents, “real” clan membership provides something that adopted clans necessarily cannot.

What makes the adoptee's uncertainty “handicapping” comes from Sants's view of and commitment to the value of heredity: because we are determined to be the kind of things we are, by where—in the sense of from whom—we are born, the genealogically bewildered do not and cannot know who they really are. To be precise, the genealogically bewildered cannot know what they are. Genealogy is knowledge of heredity, and heredity is the relationship between things that are of the same kind. If we don't know our "real" clan, we are unable to form the belief that who we are as part of a clan is who we "really" are. Clans—or families, as Sants says—are not merely people with whom we feel like we belong; they are groups of people who are connected by a tie that makes their relations of deep identification evidence of really belonging. In other words, we feel like we belong in our families of birth because we actually belong with them. Having this coincidence of hereditary relationship and clan membership is what Sants sees adoptees as necessarily lacking.

Much of the labor of establishing the relationship between knowledge of one's clan and one's psychological experience of belonging, for Sants, is done through his analysis of a fairy tale. Sants replaces Wellisch's rebellious teenage adoptee who is angry at the world, with the title character of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." The story, he tells us, "step by step illustrates so well the plight of the genealogically deprived" (135). The duckling's deprivation of knowledge comes not because he is an orphan with unknown parents and hence no genealogy, but because he has the wrong genealogy: "In this case it is a swan deprived of knowledge of his swan's genealogy by being hatched in a duck's family" that is the source of the genealogical bewilderment (135).

Sants's use of the captivating image of the ugly duckling lost among swans may have contributed to the persistence of the concept of genealogical bewilderment in adoption literature despite the lack of data in support of the concept. As psychologists Michael and Heather Humphrey have argued, there is much contestation about the reality of the phenomenon of genealogical bewilderment. The sample size originally used by Wellisch and Sants, for example, was by all standards small, and their work was, in many ways, on the fringes of psychoanalytic circles. That Sants saw himself as someone critical of the current of psychoanalytic thought of his day is evident in his own essay. According to Sants, post-World War II Britain saw a dramatic rise in both the number of adoptions and the acceptance of adoption as a form of family-making. At one and the same time there seemed to be two trends that together Sants found disturbing: on the one hand
psychological studies of children available for foster care were being conducted with the aim of promoting the mental health of children, and on the other hand, the psychological hypothesis that, “the quality of the parental care which a child receives in his earliest years is of vital importance for his future mental health” was becoming quite generally accepted (Bowlby, qtd. in Sants 139). What seemed to bother Sants was that the emphasis psychoanalysis was putting on early parenting concerned only the quality of the parenting itself, not the assumed (genetic) relationship of the child and the parent. Given the growth in and acceptance of adoption, the obvious value of the “real” parent could get lost:

Many child-care workers have interpreted the conclusions of the W. H. O. Report [the 1952 study of children in need of foster care, conducted by the United Nations] to mean that, in assessing a placement for a child in need, the main criterion should be the quality of loving care likely to be given to him. From this it could reasonably be assumed that if substitute parents are likely to provide better care than natural parents then any such child transferred soon after birth would be happier with the substitutes. To some extent this is a fair assumption.... But even in infancy there are dangers in this simplification. “Loving care” cannot be prescribed in a set of rules and the nursing of a child not born of the nursing mother cannot be the same as the nursing of a natural child. (138)

If genealogical bewilderment tells us anything, Sants offered, it is that, in fact, loving care cannot be enough to ground the sense of belonging children need to stave off primal anxiety. There is a difference between “real” parents and “substitute ones” and that difference matters: “Because of the different heredities there may be marked and peculiar differences in appearance and intelligence and skills. Differences in appearance can severely hamper a child’s capacity to identify with his parents in order to reinforce any feelings he may have of belonging as the result of loving care” (136). Loving care can result in feelings of belonging; but these feelings need to be reinforced with the additional identification that only having the same heredity can allow.

Donor-conception’s Harm to the Family

The issue [of the right to know] can be described in plain language. As one donor-conceived woman put it to a reporter: “Do you know your father? Well, why shouldn’t I know mine?”—Thomas K. Sylvester, “The Case Against Sperm Donor Anonymity”

Sants’s judgment that adoptive parents’ loving care is necessarily insufficient to satisfy the natural need for heredity (as that which can quell the child’s primal anxiety regarding the status of the mother) persists in contemporary defenses of a “right to know” claim made by people who were donor-conceived. In 2009, the Iona Institute for Religion and Society wrote in its response to the Irish Report of the Commission that, “[i]n focusing almost exclusively on the needs of infertile people, understandable though it may be, the needs and rights of children can become secondary, in the assumption that a loving family is enough” (“Making Babies”). And in May 2011, the judicial decision was made in British Columbia, Canada, that anonymous gamete donation shall no longer be permitted. The case was brought forward by three plaintiffs, all conceived using anonymous gametes, who claimed they were being denied the same rights adoptees were guaranteed under Canada’s open-adoptive policy. They were, in short, being treated unequally. While the case was ostensibly being argued as one of Constitutional violation, however, the judge’s decision in favor of the plaintiffs foregrounds what she considered to be the substantive issue connecting the lives of adoptees and those of the donor-conceived: “Strong and positive relationships with social parents do not satisfy or eliminate the desire and need of donor offspring to know where they came from, and their need to know their origins is just as powerful and real as those of adoptees” (Pratten 254).

The concept of genealogical bewilderment has been used as a means to ground the claim donor-conceived people have a right to know the identity of the donors relevant to their conceptions. One critic of gamete donation who has argued that, like adoptees, the donor-conceived are genealogically bewildered has been Alexina McWhinnie, a researcher who has written much on both groups of people. While McWhinnie grounds much of her argument on the findings of several
studies of the donor-conceived, she draws specific attention to how the donor-conceived report “common” feelings including “mistrust within the family; lack of genetic continuity; poor self-perception and frustration at being ‘thwarted in the search for their biological father’ (Turner and Coyle, 2000)” (812). These feelings and their seeming commonality override the small and selective nature of the samples, she explains.14 “As individuals, donor offspring emerge as competent, intelligent, articulate and thoughtful about others and about their own predicament. The words they use can express sadness and wistfulness, frustration and resentment, anger and puzzlement at the indifference of others. Whatever their individual experiences and the words they use to describe it, they all make clear that they consider they have been done a serious injustice and they wish the matter rectified” (812).15

Current arguments against anonymous gamete donation not only rely on the framework of genealogical bewilderment, they also make obvious genealogical bewilderment’s basic normative assumption and implication: children belong with their biological-genetic kin, which means modes of family-making that do not entail such belonging are necessarily harmful. As I noted earlier, there has been a general acceptance in the adoption community of the idea that not knowing the identity of one’s birth parents/family is harmful.16 Given this acceptance of the concept of genealogical bewilderment in the adoption world, many contemporary adoption activists and organizations actively endorse the project of a “donor-conceived rights” movement.17 But, as I argue here, there are several good reasons to reject this alliance—or at least to recognize, if not question, what views we are really supporting when we draw conclusions and make policy based on this analogy.

Accepting the fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment—that not knowing heredity causes harm—and illustrating the norms entailed by Wellisch’s and Santos’s defense of genealogical bewilderment, a vocal contingent of those against the practice of anonymous gamete donation alleges that it violates a child’s fundamental right to a mother and a father. One of the most vociferous critics of anonymous gamete donation, Canadian law professor and bioethicist Margaret

Somerville, has claimed that children have rights pertaining to “their biological origins”:

For those origins to be natural;
To know the identity of the progenitors of those origins; and
Unless the contrary is unavoidable in the “best interests” of a particular child, to be in contact with those progenitors within a family structure—that is to be reared by their biological mother and father within their genetic family. (12)

Somerville’s work has influenced that of Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values, who sees the growing recognition of the need to extend the right to marry to all people regardless of sexuality as in being direct conflict with children’s rights, specifically their right to know.18 He writes, “[i]t seems to me that this right of the child to know her own two natural parents is just as much a right, and just as important, and just as prominent in the history of human rights discourse, as the right of the adult to marry and found a family.” He claims that “from the perspective of the child,” having two parents who love him and each other and who are his “natural mother and father” is most important. Any conflict in rights claims, moreover—say between the equality claim of gay people and the rights claims of children pertaining to their biological origins—can be settled with a focus “first and foremost, on the needs of children.” In the lecture where Blankenhorn presented these points, he goes on to enumerate what rights he thinks children have with reference to their biological origins: “[1.] To know and be raised by its two natural biological parents . . . [2.] to [have] a natural biological heritage, defined as the union of the father’s sperm and the mother’s egg . . . [3.] to know his or her biological origins . . . [and 4.] to have the right to be heard.”

This last right is where we specifically see the claim of genealogical bewilderment at work in arguments such as Blankenhorn’s.19 It is right four that provides the evidence for both itself and for the other rights. Children have a right to be heard, because what they tell us, when we listen, is that they suffer when rights one through three are violated. To “illustrate” the importance of children’s right to be heard, he shares with his audience a voice that is “among the most important voices today in the field of human rights.” He then goes
on to present a letter written to Margaret Somerville by Narelle Grech, a self-identified “22[-4] year[-4] old donor conceived adult” (Blankenhorn). Responding to a discussion about programs that allow women going through in-vitro fertilization to share eggs—whether their own or those of a donor is unclear—the woman comments that such practices are “deals” that trade “human beings . . . as though they are items on supermarket shelves!” (qtd. in Blankenhorn). She highlights how having been conceived through donation has made her life difficult, and how her experience of being donor-conceived has shown her that gamete donation is unethical because it is fundamentally “dehumanizing.” She writes, “[l]little bits of non-identifying information will not substitute for the real person's family!! You are not only encouraging people to intentionally separate people from their families, you are going to be the cause of people who have to question their identity, and no one on this earth should ever have to do that. How dare someone take away someone else’s freedom to know themself!” (qtd. in Blankenhorn). In her case presentation has not proven effective, Grech asks rhetorically, “Have we as a society, learnt absolutely nothing from such movements as adoption?” (qtd. in Blankenhorn). Making the analogy to adoption, Grech sees the effects of donor-conception on the donor-conceived as like the effects of adoption on adoptees: it is the “intentional separation [of these children] from their biological mother and their maternal family” (qtd. in Blankenhorn). By implication, then, the harm done to adoptees by denying them their biological parents is the same harm done to the donor-conceived through AGD.

The voices of the donor-conceived must be listened to, critics of AGD contend, not only because we should take notice of the harm they purportedly suffer, but also because their feelings tell us what the ethical standing of the practice of AGD is. For critics such as Blankenhorn, the assumption is that the experiences of the donor-conceived reflect what is naturally valuable about knowing and being raised by one’s real parents: “They describe powerful feelings of loss of identity through not knowing one or both biological parents and their wider biological families, and describe themselves as ‘genetic orphans.’ They ask, ‘How could anyone think they had a right to do this to me?’”

Shifting the Analogy: From the Adopted and the Donor-conceived to the Practices of Adoption and Donor-conception

Although there is no such thing as a perfect home, there is such a thing as a normal family . . . Normality is something that is hard to define, yet easy to feel and see. —Dorothy Hutchinson, In Quest of Foster Parents

Some arguing against anonymous gamete donation have recognized that their position might seem to have conservative implications. Josephine Johnston, for example, notes that there is a worry that arguments in support of banning anonymous gamete donation entail a commitment to genetic essentialism. She counters that the claim that donor-conceived children have a right to know the identity of the donor(s) relevant to their conception does not “impute this information with any particular level of importance” (53). Instead, such positions as hers are only claiming that children (most likely after they have turned eighteen) have a right to assess the meaning of the information for themselves. In a response to the state of Washington’s recent decision to prohibit all anonymous gamete donation, Naomi Cahn and Wendy Kramer dismiss concerns that such regulation will lead to discrimination against gay and lesbian people who wish to use gamete donation: “This [fear] is unjustified. In fact, the UK extended equality of treatment to same-sex couples after it abolished anonymity.”

I respect that Johnston, Cahn, and Kramer are, like many in the debate about gamete donation, motivated by what they consider to be the best interests of children. However, there are really good reasons to think that the claims underlying arguments against anonymous gamete donation lend support to positions that rest on the belief that children should (only) be raised by the two people who contributed the sperm and the egg to their conception. One reason to think the positions are related is because arguments connecting them are already being made, as I have shown, by critics such as Somerville and Blankenhorn who advocate the prohibition of all gamete donation. Another reason to believe that the positions are compatible has to do with the scope of the more moderate position on gamete donation and its endorsement of genealogical bewilderment. In short, because critics like Cahn and others center their criticisms on the claim that not-knowing is the cause
of the suffering of the donor-conceived and specifically see disclosure as the solution to the potential harms of AGD, they neglect to criticize the valuation of heredity that motivates—or is at least implied by—their position.

An ethical mode of addressing the feelings of the donor-conceived must not lend support to positions that contribute to the harms I have outlined above. We must, in fact, refuse to reiterate the normative apparatus of genealogical bewilderment and no longer invest in the following ideas:

1) Knowledge of heredity is requisite for the truth of identity;
2) The desire to know is natural;
3) Not knowing our heredity is the cause of psychological distress of those who do not know; and
4) Knowing “real” (genetic, hereditary, biological) family is necessary for psychological health.

Not only will such refusals discontinue the potency of the normative ideological framework that supports the fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment, the shift in approach will challenge us to employ a critical approach to heredity heretofore unavailable to us by the continued assumption of the value of heredity. Such an examination of our valuation of heredity transforms the claims above into the following critical questions:

1) How does considering heredity the truth of identity engender ways of pathologizing the self?
2) How does the desire to know reflect social and cultural demands to make oneself an object of knowledge in specific ways?
3) How does being someone who does not (seem to) know her heredity in a culture that sees such knowledge as necessary for normal psychic development result in psychological distress?
4) How does not having one’s family recognized as real—or conversely, how does having one’s family be recognized as unreal or unhealthy—affect one’s psychological health?

These questions encourage a critical method, I offer, that can move the discussion of the ethics of gamete donation in a new direction, namely one that asks first and foremost what are the harms of assuming heredity has value such that we should know ours.

The direction of such a critique echoes Somerville’s worries about the effects of assisted reproductive technologies and the extension of the right of marriage to gays and lesbians: when we refuse to assume that bio-genetic relatedness has inherent value, we put into question what the essential value of being a bio-genetically related family is. Somerville has noted that “[t]he link between same-sex marriage, adoption and new reproductive technologies (NRTs) is that all of them unlink the child-parent biological bond” (179). Her objective is the promotion of that link as itself unquestionable, since she believes that “[t]he rights to a natural biological heritage and to knowledge of their 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” (188). The “unlinking” of parenthood from biology she considers to be an effect of allowing same-sex marriage that “radically changes the primary basis of parenthood from natural or biological parenthood to legal (and social) parenthood” (180). Her assertion of the “natural right” of the human person to have access to his biological heritage, as I see it, is an attempt to plug up what she sees as the normative gap left behind after gay marriage and reproductive technologies wrest apart our grasp of “the primary basis of parenthood.”

Somerville thus attempts to buttress the claim that the primary basis of parenthood is biology with the assertion that children have a right to know their biological heritage. By making biological heredity an interest that is so valuable it should be protected as a right, a child’s right to know should arrest the un-linking by re-linking the act of reproduction with the normative status of parent. Through this strategy, Somerville shadows the creation of the concept of genealogical bewilderment itself, a term that developed in response not only to the uncertainty of adoptees themselves, but to the uncertainty that was and is engendered by the social acceptance of adoption as a mode of family-making as good as biological reproduction.

The Unavoidable Uncertainty of Family Relatedness

For a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief.... But as intellectual growth increases, the child cannot help
Adoption & Culture 3 (2012)

discovering by degrees the category to which his parents belong. He gets to know other parents and compares them with his own, and so acquires the right to doubt the incomparable and unique quality which he had attributed to them... His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child.

—Sigmund Freud, "Family Romances"

Our understanding of the “desire and need to know” that court decisions, academic arguments, ethical analyses, and psychological assessments refer to is heavily informed by Wellisch’s and Sants’s proposal that children suffer genealogical bewilderment when they do not know their “real” parents. Sants himself had difficulty in discerning what was the real cause of this bewilderment, however, especially given that adoptive parents commonly (in the 1960s) did not tell their children of their adoption. What was it that could make children genealogically bewilder, even those who didn’t know they were adopted? They had to be genealogically bewilder, even the unknowing adoptees, even those who didn’t show signs of maladjustment, or else, Sants’s worry seems to be, loving care would be enough. The evidence of his claim that it is, ultimately, the difference in heredity that makes the difference in the quality of parenting came from his recognition that there was a “disturbance” when children were unable to identify and incorporate with “a long line of ancestors” (134). Genealogical bewilderment thus proves that there is something fundamentally uniquely important about the real—biological, hereditary, genetic—family.

But might the “disturbance” of the adopted have come not from the lack of hereditary sameness shared between parent and child, but from the expectations of such heredity? Perhaps the symptoms of genealogical bewilderment in the “ugly duckling,” for example, came not from his being “deprived” of knowledge of his real clan, but from his being discriminated against by those who refused him? Sants tells us that the ugly duckling in Hans Christian Andersen’s story illustrates the plight of the genealogically bewilder. “The swan is rejected because he cannot do what the others in his family can do as a result of his genetic endowment. Persecution leads to depression and wandering (symptoms found so often in the genealogically bewilder child)” (135, my emphasis). If we resist the presumption that heredity has inherent value, and instead ask the four questions I suggest above about how beliefs in heredity might result in harmful attitudes and actions, we produce a different reading of the source of the ugly duckling’s genealogical bewilderment.

If the ugly duckling’s story illustrates the tale of the foster-child, as Sants asserts it does, then what we see is that the assumptions made by others of what a foster-child is and should be result in his dejection and depressions. “The cat despises him because he cannot curve his back and purr and the hen because he cannot lay eggs,” we are told (135). Sants then suggests that the duckling isn’t being rejected, but just feeling rejected: the duckling “ventures to say, as many foster-children have done, that his foster family do not understand him” when they tell him to lay eggs or purr (135). Sants’s conclusion is, if only they knew he was really of a swan’s egg born, they would not have misrecognized his, leading him to his genealogical bewilderment. My response is, if only they didn’t believe in the determinism of heredity, including the idea that one can only belong to one’s kind, then they would not have pushed, jeered, bit, and beaten him, as the real story depicts. In addition to being told repeatedly how ugly he was, the duckling heard from those he encountered that they wished he would die, hoped his mother (duck) could “bear it over again,” and thought he “must be put down” (135). The duckling’s life, as Andersen tells the tale, began with rejection and “and afterwards it became worse and worse. The poor Duckling was hunted about by every one; even its brothers and sisters were quite angry with it, and said, ‘If the cat would only catch you, you ugly creature!’ And the mother said, ‘If you were only far away!’” (para. 26).

There are two lessons from genealogical bewilderment to be gleaned here. First, when we determine the cause of the “maladjustment” of those who do not have certainty of their genetic backgrounds—including people who were adopted, donor-conceived, internationally adopted, transracially adopted, and so on—to be their own lack of information about their heredity, we fail to recognize the harms that can come from our assumptions about heredity and the moral value of knowing it. I am not going so far as to say the animals’ beliefs in kind-determinism caused their violence, but I am alleging that Sants’s investment in his theory of genealogical bewilderment caused him to
mis-read or overlook critical elements of the story. Yes, some people who do not know their genetic heredity experience distress, and yes, some of them really want to know. These responses make sense in certain cultural and historical moments, such as now in the U.S., where, despite professed commitments to the value of equality and meritocracy, there is the constant assumption that you are, in significant ways, the same [kind] as those to whom you were born.21

To be clear, my point here is that, when we understand genealogical bewilderment as a phenomenon caused by not knowing and able to be remedied by knowing, we miss—and maybe even excuse—the violence that comes from our belief in heredity. Some might want to suggest that I am drawing a false dichotomy, and counter that we can recognize the need to know heredity as a biological or natural need and criticize and reject acts of bad behavior that reference heredity, such as racism, stereotyping, pigeon-holing, exclusion, and ethnicity-based violence, to name but a few. But the second lesson of Sants’s interpretation of the story of the ugly duckling is that genealogical bewilderment relies on two assumptions—we can’t belong to two families at the same time and we know with certainty that we can’t belong to those who are not with their natural families experience uncertainty that leads to maladjustment. Those who fit with their kind, on the other, naturally do so.

Genealogical bewilderment is our litmus test for real heredity, thus proving that there is something necessarily unnatural about the fit of an adopted child and his family, and something necessarily natural about the fit between the non-adopted and her family. In order to make this reading of heredity and its value stick, Sants must make the harm of genealogical bewilderment natural to the psyche of the duckling/adoptiveee. The adoptee’s actions are interpreted with a circular logic within this framework: understood as expressions of genealogical bewilderment, these acts evidence a “maladjusted” psyche, a product of the fact of having been adopted. Adoptees thus exhibit genealogical bewilderment because the belief that heredity provides certainty of identity demands evidence that is itself incorrigible; the pathological adoptee—harmed by the very fact of being adopted—provides such proof. If heredity did not provide certainty of identity and such certainty was not itself necessary, why else would adoptees profess a

desire to know their families of origin or be frustrated by their perceived ignorance?

As Sants’s interpretation of “The Ugly Duckling” also reveals, the making of the duckling in the family of the swans as un-natural also involves the naturalizing of the relationship between the non-ugly ducklings to their mother. Upon re-reading the Andersen story, we see how much effort the mother duck expends teaching her ducklings two things: how to be a duck (i.e., how to behave in the way that others expect you to behave as a duck) and how to treat others the way they expect to be treated based on what they are believed to be. In response to an argument going on about who has rights to a piece of scrap, the mother duck instructs the ducklings on how to be “well-brought up”:

“See, that’s how it goes in the world,” said the Mother-Duck, and she whetted her beak, for she too wanted the eel’s head. “Only use your legs,” she said. “See that you can bustle about, and bow your heads before the old Duck yonder. She’s the grandest of all here; she’s of Spanish blood—that’s why she’s so fat; and d’ye see? She has a red rag round her leg; that’s something particularly fine, and the greatest distinction a duck can enjoy: it signifies that one does not want to lose her, and that she’s to be known by the animals and by men too. Shake yourselves—don’t turn in your toes; a well-brought-up duck turns its toes quite out, just like father and mother,—so! Now bend your necks and say ‘Quack!’” (Andersen para. 16)

The ducklings are not born knowing what they are, nor are they born knowing what others are. The uncertainty of genealogical bewilderment comes from the fact that we don’t know what our kind is. The fundamental paradox of heredity, for Sants, is that it makes us what we are, and our knowledge of it is fallible. Yet, some “ducklings” become recognized as “ducks” while others, such as the “ugly” one—fail to be recognized as such. They are all, however, learning to be ducklings.

Genealogical bewilderment thus comes from the fundamental uncertainty of becoming a kind in the context of heredity. If our (imagined) heredities seem to be like the (imagined) heredities of the people who provide us loving care as children, we will be recognized as real members of their clan. If our (imagined) heredities don’t seem to be like the (imagined) heredities of the people who provide us loving
care as children, then the question of our clan membership becomes a problem. The problem is how to prove membership in something the reality of which is itself uncertain. Without evidence of family membership that is beyond doubt, the family to which we belong could seem arbitrary, and the knowledge claim that our family is our real family becomes unverifiable.

Conclusion

“What sort of a one are you?” they asked; and the Duckling turned in every direction, and bowed as well as it could. “You are remarkably ugly!” said the Wild Ducks. “But that is nothing to us, so long as you do not marry into our family.”—Hans Christian Andersen, “The Ugly Duckling"

Genealogical bewilderment offers one answer to the problems Wellisch and Sants thought adoption gave rise to, the problems of how we really know who is a duck and who is a swan and whether, in fact, there is such a determined—let alone determinable—difference at all. The danger of such indeterminacy, according to Sants’s and Wellisch’s views, on one level is the harm it brings to adoptees. If we consider how genealogical bewilderment reflects a larger commitment to and investment in heredity, however, we can see the threat adoption poses to the mechanism of racial production—in terms of both the reproduction of individual categories of race as well as the production of the notion of “the race” itself. As a diagnostic tool then, genealogical bewilderment simultaneously recognizes those whose membership in a particular race might be unclear, while it reaffirms the reality of racial membership, a double act of which appears to be the promotion of the health of bewilderred adoptees and the effect of which is the pathologization of adoption itself.

While genealogical bewilderment as a diagnosis seems aimed to relieve the stress thought to be experienced by adoptees and others thought to be genetically uncertain, its underlying concern—both in the past and in the present—is the maintenance of family as a means for reproducing bodies according to norms of gender, sexuality, and race. The uncertainty that adoption and other modes of non-normative family-making generates must be revalued as a means of resisting

the ideology and power relations reiterated through the narrative of heredity. We must recognize how the real danger motivating the logic of genealogical bewilderment is not the confusion experienced by the duck who thinks he’s a swan; it’s the supposed confusion that comes from ducks and swans making family together.

I am in no way suggesting that Wellisch and Sants were racists nor that anyone who uses the term genealogical bewilderment is a racist as such. But the idea that adoption poses a danger to the metaphysics of race—i.e., to the reproduction of the substance that is race (its ontology) and to the capacity for us to trust our taxonomies of race (its epistemology) is implicit in the origin of genealogical bewilderment. The link between adoption and the threat of racial impurity is made explicit in the work of early twentieth-century eugenics advocates. Henry Goddard, a critic of what seemed to be growing acceptance of adoption in the U.S. in 1917, captures the anxiety over adoption as a threat to race by imagining the adoptee infecting the adoptive family itself (who are themselves putting the human race at risk):

Now it happens that some people are interested in the welfare and high development of the human race; but leaving aside those exceptional people, all fathers and mothers are interested in the welfare of their own families. The dearest thing to the parental heart is to have the children marry well and rear a noble family. How short-sighted it is then for such a family to take into its midst a child whose pedigree is absolutely unknown; or, where, if it were partially known, the probabilities are strong that it would show poor and diseased stock, and that if a marriage should take place between that individual and any member of the family the offspring would be degenerates. (1003)

Given the stakes of the heredity game, it is no wonder that those told they were adopted want to know, and that everyone else, as Freud tells us, imagines they were adopted. In both cases, adoption explains our uncertainty, while the fantasy of having come from a much better family—a real swan’s egg—seems to resolve it. Genealogical bewilderment is an attempt to provide the means to tell the reality from the fantasy apart. 22 But what does it really tell us? The non-adopted might not see the harm being done to adoptees; people who were adopted might not know they were; anyone who feels they belong with
their families might not really belong with them. In other words, what we know and feel and are sure of about what we are is uncertain. But, the reality of genealogical bewilderment must be acknowledged, Sants insists, because “when a child of unknown parentage is encountered, the consequences of his deprivation become revealingly apparent” (137).

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Notes

1. In any ethical analysis, close attention must be paid to how our descriptions of the world reflect and affect our beliefs about it. This is particularly the case in discussions of reproduction where what to call the various stakeholders and practices is never neutral. Is a gamete donor, for example, a “genetic relative” to the person whose conception involved that donor’s gamete, and if so, should we refer to him as a “sperm father” as the critic of anonymous gamete donation, Thomas K. Sylvester, does? Mary Lyndon Shanley notes that what to call the practices involved—not only the people—is not straightforward. She opts for “gamete transfer” over “gamete donation” because it is rarely the case that sperm and ova are given as gifts and commonly the case that money is exchanged. Shanley does not make special mention of how the word “transfer” could evoke the question “to whom?”

Two particularly vexing language issues in discussions of gamete donation are what to call the act of reproduction involved and how to refer to the person who was conceived through that act. I have opted to use the phrase “donor-conceived” to refer to both the means by which someone was conceived using third-party gametes and the identity they have vis-à-vis that practice. I have settled on this for three reasons: the phrase is the dominant one used in the literature, especially when concerning the ethics and politics of reproductive technologies; “donor-conceived” parallels “adopted” in ways that make the comparison easily intelligible; and the term drastically reduces sentence length and awkwardness. I want to make special note here, however, that I am not comfortable with the term “donor-conceived” and see its prominent use—almost to the exclusion of all other terms for the person conceived using the third-party gamete(s)—as far from politically neutral. I resist the term because of how it emphasizes the role of the donor over all of the other agents involved, and even implies that the donor actively did the conceiving. I also consider that using the term as an adjective to describe a person or to capture something about her status as a person leads to serious question-begging. Clearly in any planned use of third-party gametes for the purpose of the conception of a child many activities, people, and products are involved, so why give such a privileged place to this particular aspect? The answer to that question cannot be dissolved through the use of a term such as “donor-conceived” as it is essential to an issue at the heart of the ethical debate, including the role that genealogical bewilderment is playing in it: is someone a specifically different kind of person because the sperm/egg used in his conception did not come out of the body of the man/men or woman/women through whose actions, such as intending and creating an embryo, having that embryo implanted in a uterus, and bringing that fetus to term, that person came into existence?

2. In her argument against donor anonymity, Michelle Dennison makes specific reference to the words of the donor-conceived that at once speak of emotional angst and suggest a political critique: “I’m here to tell you that emotionally, many of us are not keeping up,” said one teenager, whose biological father was an anonymous donor. “We didn’t ask to be born into this situation, with its limitations and confusion. It’s hypocritical of parents and medical professionals to assume that biological roots won’t matter to the “products” of the cryobanks’ service, when the longing for a biological relationship is what brings customers to the banks in the first place?” (6).
3. Naomi Cahn, a prominent opponent of anonymous gamete donation, makes explicit that the harm of anonymous gamete donation, like that of (closed) adoption, comes from how the practice results in a kind of genetic ignorance: “both donor-conceived children and adoptees experience the same lack of connection with at least one-half of their genetic heritages. . . . It is this lack of knowledge about their biological progenitors, and the emotional needs for this knowledge that many adoptees and donor offspring articulate, that has motivated advocates within each movement to push for disclosure, and that motivates this article’s call for a national, mandatory registry” (208).

Michelle Dennison’s argument against anonymous gamete donation makes full use of genealogical bewilderment to make her claim: she references the term to describe the donor-conceived, she compares the experiences of the donor-conceived to adoptees, and she cites the “adoption research” that has been done on genealogical bewilderment, referring to Sants. In addition to relying on the claim that knowing the identity of the donor will help instrumentally with the child’s medical health, Dennison brings into view the fundamental claim of genealogical bewilderment, arguing that having information about the donor will in itself be healthier for the donor-conceived: “Another compelling reason for granting donor-conceived offspring access to identifying information is the argument that information about one’s biological and genetic history is considered essential to the child’s mental health. A useful comparison to make when considering this argument is between donor-conceived children and adopted children. Adoption research has shown that strong feelings of insecurity can arise in adoptees because they lack information about one or more biological parent. One researcher defined adoptees as ‘genealogically bewildered’ and argued that ‘a genealogically bewildered child is one who either has no knowledge of his natural parents or only uncertain knowledge of them. The ensuing state of confusion

and uncertainty fundamentally undermines his security and affects his mental health” (8).

4. The analogy between adoptees and people who were donor-conceived is not only coming from critics of donor-conception. Activists for adoption reform also invoke the comparison. In her preface to Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience, for example, Bery Jean Lifton uses a comparison between adoptees and children conceived using medical assistance to make her point that her analysis of the harms caused by closed adoption is still relevant today. “Those brave new babies conceived by reproductive technologies that bypass Mother Nature’s old-fashioned recipe for creating life through the physical act of lovemaking, with or without the ingredient of love, will experience the same sense of alienation and bewilderment if the circumstances of their birth and full knowledge of their heritage are denied them” (x). She goes on to point out that the ultimate cause of the harm to such “brave new babies” comes not from being genetically unrelated to their parents—who might have used their egg and sperm for the conception, in fact. Such children are harmed because “they will be raised as if they were born to both in a natural way, rather through the intervention of scientific engineering” (x). Her argument against closed adoption cannot simply be based on the possible harms that come from lying to a child. The information not told has to matter. Lifton must understand bewilderment as a product of the very method by which a child was conceived, or else whether a child was told he was conceived inside or outside of a woman’s body would be irrelevant, especially when the former method, as she herself notes, can be done “with or without the ingredient of love” and surely without meaning to. To the contrary, like with adoption, it is impossible for any couple—of any gender mix—to go through the required steps of making a child using medically assisted reproduction to do so un-intentionally, and it is hard to imagine them undertaking such arduous steps to make a family without at least a modicum love.
The origin of the term genealogical bewilderment is commonly attributed to Erich Wellisch, most likely because Sants states this to be the case: “The term genealogical bewilderment was first used by Wellisch (1952), who became interested in the fact that an apparently large number of adopted children had been referred to the child guidance clinic at which he and the present writer were then working” (133). The letter, however, makes no mention of the phrase itself, leaving Sants as its actual originator, from what this author’s research suggests.

For an analysis of the idea that adoptees were dangerous because they were “bad seeds,” see Herman, Kinship.

For examples of people who were donor-conceived discussing the suffering they believe they have experienced due to the facts of their conception, see McWhinnie; and Hewitt.

The main target of Walker, Broderick, and Correia’s criticism is psychology’s role in the processes involved in medically assisted reproduction. In their 2011 article, “The Psychology of Assisted Reproduction— Or Psychology Assisting its Reproduction,” the authors question what they see as the “therapeutic injunction” of psychology whereby psychological counseling is believed to be necessary for people seeking reproductive medical assistance (38). “[P]sychology has been guilty of proceeding in the absence of sound theory and sound research. It has failed to practice its own ideal of the scientist-practitioner model. It has also failed to see, let alone question, the many assumptions it makes about fertility and infertility, about parenthood, and about families. It has assumed for itself the mantle of benevolent expert, and sometimes advocate of unborn children’s rights, without ever being appointed expert or advocate, without developing the necessary knowledge to be expert, and without any challenge being made by society, psychologists, or others, to its presumed expertise or right to advocate” (42). Their article concludes, “psychology and psychologists have been attempting to reproduce psychology, perhaps at the expense of developing a better understanding of the psychology of reproduction” (38).

Wellisch researched and wrote on such topics as projection and the use of the Rorschach test in clinical settings, “dreamy states,” and eye problems in children considered to be maladjusted. A Viennese émigré to Britain in 1938, before his death in 1954 Wellisch finished a detailed work examining the stories of Oedipus and Isaac (Obituary).

Some might consider the symptoms of genealogical bewilderment on a continuum with more recent views on Adopted Child Syndrome. According David Kirschner, the coiner of the term, Adopted Child Syndrome “may include pathological lying, stealing, truancy, manipulation, shallowness of attachment, provocation of parents and other authorities, threatened or actual running away, promiscuity, learning problems, fire-setting, and increasingly serious antisocial behaviour, often leading to court custody. It may include an extremely negative or grandiose self-image, low frustration tolerance, and an absence of normal guilt or anxiety” (93).

One question at the center of my investigation is what the status of the “real” of “real parents” is for someone like Wellisch. From my analysis, it is clear that “real” refers not only to the genetic or biological parents of a child, in the sense of who contributed the gametes to the conception, but also to something else. “Real” designates, in addition to a quality about the parents something about the kind of knowledge statement one can make about the parents and about oneself. As becomes clear in my reading of Sants, the importance of knowing one’s so-called real parents comes from the value thought to come from being able to be certain who those parents are. “Real” here thus refers to an epistemological claim about the parents as much as to the parents. Certainly the adjective “real” can be applied to parents of all kinds including adoptive and step- and to those people who have really been the ones to parent us. For Wellisch and Sants, however, “real parents” can only mean genetic parents: to not
know one’s “real parents” causes genealogical bewilderment because the real uncertainty at the heart of this psychological disorder is an uncertainty about heredity, and, as I show, heredity must be known and that knowledge must be incorrigible in order to know what kind of human being one is. Heredity is what gives us our real identity. When I use “real” throughout the text to qualify parents I am referring to Wellisch’s and Sants’s understanding of what real parents are, why knowledge of them is important and what the epistemic form of the knowledge claim of heredity must be within their framework.

12. Sants states that his psychoanalytic approach is based on Klein’s Contributions to a Psycho-analysis (1948) and Our Actual World and its Roots in Infancy (1959).

13. The judge’s rule in favor of the plaintiffs means that anonymous gamete donation will no longer be allowed in British Columbia. Should the decision be appealed and then held up by the BC Supreme Court, all of Canada will have to end anonymous gamete donation.

14. McWhinnie reiterates a theme one finds throughout arguments against AGD, that the “voices” of the donor-conceived have been ignored in the debate, and must now be listened to as we determine policy directions because “the data and findings are valuable” as they “add to the slowly developing body of knowledge and awareness about how donor conception can be experienced by those who result from it” (812). According to Vardit Ravitsky, positions like McWhinnie’s argue from the view that “knowledge of one’s genetic origins is essential for one’s psychological wellbeing, for the development of personal identity, and for the establishment of healthy family relationships. Depriving individuals of such knowledge, it is argued, results in the creation of complex identity issues and psychological distress. Thus, the right to know one’s genetic origins is based on the profound interest that people have in avoiding psychological harm and in leading full and healthy lives” (670).

15. Another leading figure in the movement against anonymous gamete donation is Lucy Frith. She has made particular note of the role of genealogical bewilderment in the debate, and McWhinnie’s role in promoting it: “The most common reason given for why knowledge of one’s genetic origins is thought to be a right is that it is deemed essential for a person’s well-being. Alexina McWhinnie, for example, has argued that donor offspring can suffer from ‘genealogical bewilderment,’ meaning that they can be curious about the physical characteristics, family aptitudes, and medical history of their gamete donors” (645).

16. The harm caused by adoptees not knowing the identities of birth parents is linked to various sources. For some it is secrecy itself which is the central catalyst of harm, while for others, keeping such documents as original birth certificates from adoptees causes them psychological distress as it keeps them from knowing identifying information about themselves. For some adoption reform activists, closed adoption violates what is seen as their political rights, often framed within a discourse of equality—i.e., adoptees are denied something that people who are not adopted have access to. For examples, see Lifton, Journey; Carp, Family; Novy; and Verrier. For some critics like Lifton, the harm of closed adoption comes from both the lack of knowledge that results for adoptees as well as the lack of connection to genetic relatives such ignorance is believed to result in. Verrier believes in the existence of a connection between a biological mother and the child she carries to term such that simply to be raised by another mother/family results in a “primal wound,” no matter what that child knows about that first mother.

17. Official adoption organizations are lending their support to those who are challenging policies that permit anonymous gamete donation based on the claim that not knowing one’s genetic parents or heritage is a deprivation that results in suffering. In their “Assisted Reproduction Technology Statement,” the American Adoption Congress (AAC) writes, “The American Adoption Congress believes that all
individuals whose genetic and biological origins are different from those of their legally recognized families have the right to know those origins. This includes people created through the donation or sale of eggs or semen, the transfer of embryos, gestational surrogacies, or any other reproductive technology. Knowledge of one’s origins can be vital to the psychological and physical well-being of human beings. Denying a person this information can have potentially serious consequences upon that person’s family relationships, health and reproductive choices. “Making clear how the American Adoption Congress understands its relationship to people whose conceptions involved the use of donor eggs or sperm, Marilyn Waugh, a past AAC Director, states (as quoted on the AAC website): “These are our people.”

18. That the Institute for American Values (IAV) has a clear definition of and investment in what counts as a family cannot be doubted. Among their four explicitly stated goals is “to increase the proportion of children growing up with their two married parents.” The phrasing here could suggest that the main concern of the IAV is not the gender of parents but is the interest of children to be raised in stable homes. Marriage is simply the best means for providing that stability. However, it is clear from the IAV’s website that their vision of marriage includes only those relationships formed between men and women.

19. An American philosopher who has argued that what is at stake in debates about gamete donation is, in fact, a larger understanding of what is—and what should count as—a family, is J. David Velleman. According to Velleman, “The experiment of creating these children [by anonymous gamete donation] is supported by a new ideology of the family, developed for people who want to have children but lack the biological means to ‘have’ them in the usual sense. The new ideology has to do with the sense in which the resulting children will have families. It says that these children will have families in the only sense that matters, or at least in a sense that is good enough” (360). For a thorough critique of Velleman’s argument, see Haslanger. In particular, Haslanger criticizes Velleman’s assumption that the foundation of identity must come from a bio-genetic tie to family members in order for an individual to develop a coherent sense of self.

20. For a thorough analysis of the history of disclosure in adoption see Carp, “Adoption”; and Henderson.

21. And with this assumption, as theorists on the effects of medicalization and geneticization have been analyzing, comes the expectation that you should know your heredity not just for you and your health, but for the health of “future generations.” Angus Clarke, author of “Genetic Screening and Counseling” offers a definition of geneticization: “There is a growing trend to account for differences between people in relation to both disease and non-disease characteristics such as intelligence and personality in terms of genetic factors. This is known as geneticization. It leads society to seek solutions to its problems through scientific and technological means rather than responding collectively through social, political, economic or environmental change” (Clarke 223).

22. I presented a sketch of this paper at the 2010 Association for the Study of Adoption conference in Cambridge, MA, and would like to thank the participants on the panel and in the audience for their comments. I also appreciate the comments provided by two anonymous reviewers of a very early draft of this paper. The development of my ideas about adoption, philosophy, and what it means to be related are deeply indebted to the work and thought of Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt; they both also offered advice I benefited greatly from for this particular paper, as did Naomi Scheman. My thanks also go to others whose conversations about ethics, genetics, family, and relatedness have motivated ideas in this paper including Debra Bergoffen, Ellen Feder, Shelley Harsh, Christine Hauskeller, Allison Hopper, Jeffrey Reiman, Andrea Tschepplik, and Gail Weiss. My extended gratitude goes to Emily Hipchen whose editorial support was beyond generous, to Amy McKiernan for her excellent
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