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## **Introduction**

My mother once told me that we choose our parents. At first I had no idea what she was talking about. It briefly occurred to me that she was giving expression to some kind of hippy existentialism. Later on I began to think she had a point. In this chapter I attempt to articulate what that point might have been. In doing so my aim is to give an interpretation of my mother's remark according to which it articulates an ethically significant insight. I will try to make sense of the idea that, in suitable conditions, making the kind of choices my mother was talking about can be both conducive to wellbeing and a genuinely virtuous achievement. I will describe how this achievement relates to some controversial questions about the responsibilities that parents are sometimes said to have to inform their children about their genealogical origins. By 'genealogical origins' I mean to include facts about the nature of our conception, gestation or birth, as well as features of our familial history, such as facts about step-parenting, adoption, extramarital relationships and the like.. More narrowly, I hope to throw light on some of the ethical challenges involved in creating or bringing up children who are in some way estranged, or otherwise detached, from one or more of their biological parents. By 'biological parents' I mean to include (apart from parents reproducing in 'conventional' ways)

persons providing gametes, persons providing embryos, and persons carrying a pregnancy on behalf of someone else during the course of assisted reproduction. The class of such children includes some children born as the result of assisted conception. It also includes adopted children, children with one or more missing parents (including orphans), conventionally conceived children one of whose social parents is not their biological parent, and others. The exact process by means of which the children in question are brought into existence, such as whether gamete or embryo donation was involved, is not crucial to my main concern here. What is crucial to my main concern is the potential for estrangement or detachment that the process in question creates, and the ethical significance of that potential.

Like millions of children of her generation, born either during or in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, my mother grew up with an absent father. In her case, the identity of the father was known, and some forms of communication between father and child were possible (exchanges of letters, gifts, etc.). Yet there was no prospect of any direct personal contact between father and child, and the amount and kind of information passed on to my mother about her father's identity and circumstances were severely affected by the complexity of post-war European political demographics and historical memory. At one point in my mother's early adulthood, written communication between father and daughter flared up, and then came to an end. From that point onwards, questions about her father's identity or circumstances seem to have played at most a peripheral role in my mother's life, except for isolated episodes, mainly in response to the curiosity of her own children. Until the death of my grandmother in the late 1990's,

questions about my mother's genealogical origins on her father's side seem to have been of little importance to her conception of who she was, or to how she would present herself to others as a daughter, wife, mother, friend or member of her community. So exactly what, given these constraining facts about her own familial circumstances, did she mean when she said that we choose our parents? In the next section I sketch one possible answer to that question. In the following sections, I then consider two lines of argument for the claim that the kind of choice my mother was talking about is one it is always wrong for someone to wilfully impose on another in the presence of ethically acceptable alternatives (which in her case, I assume, did not exist).

### **Choice and identity**

On one standard interpretation, what my mother said about choosing our parents is obviously false. Normally, we do not choose our parents. Never in the biological sense, and in a social sense in particular circumstances only, such as in certain divorce proceedings, or in other situations involving the possibility of shared or alternative parenting. In any case, the kind of dependency experienced by children with respect to their parents, at least in the early years of life, is such that there is very limited scope for their exercise of any meaningful choice for or against specific parental relationships. So what could my mother possibly have been on about?

Making a choice trivially implies the existence of more than one option. Making a choice voluntarily is often said to require at least one alternative option to be in some sense (e.g.

morally or prudentially) acceptable (c.f. Olsaretti, 2004). Yet saying this leaves much unspecified about the nature and ethics of making choices. There are many different circumstances in which someone might be said to choose something, either voluntarily or non-voluntarily. In one kind of case, someone could be said to choose something if they have the option to decide between that thing and another thing of the same kind. Suppose I am travelling by plane to a philosophy conference on assisted reproduction. During the flight, I might be presented with the choice of an in-flight meal and choose between chicken or beef. Alternatively, I might be presented with a choice between either taking or not taking something. Thus, I might be presented with the choice of either accepting the one in-flight meal on offer or not having an in-flight meal at all. Obviously, these two scenarios do not exhaust the possibilities. On some airlines you can decline both the chicken and the beef and request a vegetarian option instead. Other passengers prefer to bring their own food on board, as often seen on low cost carriers. Some very keen passengers may even take their chances and ask for chicken *and* beef. Then there are different kinds of choice exercised with respect to the same option. Suppose only beef is on offer. Still, the beef could come with a salad, a piece of bread and some cheese, and a glass of juice or water. Or perhaps you are able to combine parts of the hot meal served at one point in the flight with parts of the cold meal offered at another point. In each case, and for a wider or narrower range of options, you would have the opportunity to make a voluntary choice, and thereby exercise your agency in more or less successful or admirable ways.

On one way of interpreting my mother's remark, what she was bringing to my attention was that working out one's relationship to one's parents is a long term creative process that involves a complex exercise of agency, and in the course of which a wide range of ethically significant choices will be made about the nature of that relationship, even in circumstances (such as those she experienced) where the range of options on offer is severely constrained. Thus, a relationship to one's parents is one that could develop in such a way as to become more or less detached, either physically or psychologically. And these days it is possible to have a close personal relationship to one's parents even though you live permanently on the other side of the world. As a child, many of the aspects of that relationship are in the parents' gift. Yet at some point, many of us find ourselves in a position of having to choose where to live in relation to our parents, how and how often to see or communicate with them, who of them to see more often, and whether, and if so how, to involve them in our own domestic affairs. Children exercise such choices in meaningful ways insofar as they might have some say about whether they mostly play inside the home with their parents present or absent, outside the home with other children, in a club, in the home of other children, or with other relatives; and so on. In my mother's case, these choices were severely constrained in at least one important respect. Yet it is a notable feature of her relationship to her father that she does not appear to have found these limitations either deeply problematic or constraining. Nor does her eventual decision to terminate contact seem to have been experienced as a grave loss, at least by her. I have no reason to believe that my mother's experience is either special or unique in this respect.

I say that a person's conception of him or herself as a certain kind of individual is a conception of themselves as having a certain kind of 'practical identity'; an identity they may or may not think of themselves as sharing with others to whom they consider themselves to be closely related in some way (as when someone identifies themselves as a certain kind of person, or as a member of a team (c.f. Korsgaard, 1995). To form a conception of oneself in relation to one's parents involves a complex exercise of agency in the course of which a person develops a practical identity that is informed both by their beliefs about what that relationship *is* and what it *ought to be*. To that extent, it inevitably involves a range of ethically sensitive choices, even if the options for relating to one or more of one's parents are severely restricted by facts beyond one's control. One kind of person to become is a person who self-identifies as a person from a two-parent family, where both social parents are also assumed to be one's biological parents. Yet another kind of person to become is a person who self-identifies as a person from a single parent family, a family with an absent father, or a family where there is no social relationship with one or more of one's biological parents, for example in cases of anonymous sperm or egg donation. Making the kinds of choices that are necessary to form and sustain such a practical identity can obviously be done more or less successfully or admirably. In particular, choosing (or choosing away) a certain kind of relationship with one or more of one's parents can have significant effects on the level of someone's wellbeing, and can in some cases amount to a virtuous achievement, and one that need not be purchased at the cost of either ignorance or self-deception. It is in this sense that I think my mother was right to say that we choose our parents, and that in saying so she was giving expression to an ethically significant insight.

## **Identity, knowledge and virtue**

No reasonable person would seriously deny that someone could respond in the most admirable ways to having a severely restricted range of options. Even so, there are situations in which so responding is at best a virtue of necessity, and in which we might consider it better if the person in question would never have had to exercise the relevant choices in the first place. The fact that children can grow up to live well and form ethically admirable, good, or otherwise satisfactory relationships to one or more of their parents in a range of difficult circumstances (regardless of whether or not these circumstances involve non-conventional methods of conception or gestation) does not imply that it is therefore either admirable, good or even permissible to deliberately place them in those difficult circumstances. There is more than one line of argument that might be thought to put the enforced detachment of children from core aspects of their genealogical origins into ethical doubt. Here I shall consider two. The first relates to the place of self-understanding in our formation of a virtuous practical identity. The second relates to the fact that certain forms of adaptive preference formation can be a symptom of one person having been wronged by others. Before I address these lines of argument, however, I shall briefly explain the notions of a ‘virtue’ and a ‘virtuous achievement’ on which my discussion depends (c.f. Hursthouse, 2012).

For the purposes of this paper, I say that a ‘virtue’ is an admirable character trait, and a ‘virtuous achievement’ its successful manifestation or exercise, where by ‘successful’ I

mean ‘actually successful’, not just ‘successful as things appear to its subject’ (more of which below). Thus, you might admire someone for their honesty (a virtue), especially in a situation where telling the truth was a difficult thing to do (a virtuous achievement). Some people think that possession of virtue to a very high degree is necessary to live a good life. I do not make that claim. What I do claim, though, is that virtue can enhance a good life, such that living well and being virtuous constitutes one of the greatest excellences of which human lives are capable. Furthermore, even if trade offs are sometimes possible or even necessary, the aim to live well while also being virtuous is itself a distinctively admirable one. If I tell you that I dream of a good and virtuous life, I do not expect to have to give you any explanation or excuse.

What personal features does a good and virtuous life require? For present purposes, the main feature that matters is self-knowledge. If you have poor knowledge of yourself, you could be less likely to live well, or to develop what you yourself would consider an admirable character. Indeed, it is natural to think that a highly virtuous person is a person who knows him or herself unusually well, and for whom disclosure of further facts about themselves would not subvert their general sense of who they are and what they ought to be. Some of these facts will be intrinsic to that person, such as how they look and feel. Other facts will be relational facts, such as how that person is related to the people around them, or to past events affecting the choices they have to make about the course of their life. There are several ways in which such facts are said to affect the way someone’s life is going and the extent to which it makes sense to admire them. One way is for those facts to be significant in themselves (e.g. the fact that you are a human person). Another



way is for those facts to be significant in virtue of the person investing them with significance, as when you decide to pursue a certain project. A third way is for those facts to be accorded significance by others, for instance the fact that you are a suitable candidate for being invited to participate in another person's project. In each case, there is both a first person and a third person perspective one might take on the evaluative significance of those facts - perspectives that will often come apart (c.f. Griffin, 1986; Feldman, 2004). Thus, I might think I have gained acceptance as a member of a circle of friends with whom I personally identify, but actually have failed to do so because the other members of the circle do not in fact identify with me. It is a controversial question to what extent I can be said to be doing very well in this kind of case. Alternatively, I might proudly represent myself in public as an exemplary embodiment of admirable personal features, the possession of which is known to be a necessary condition for admittance to a club of which I am a member, whereas in fact an exception was made in my case and the people who admitted me are sworn to secrecy about the compromising terms of my admission. It is a controversial question to what extent my proud displays can be said to be an admirable expression of the features in question in this kind of case (even if I have actually acquired those features in the interim). The issue is partly a matter of how the attitudes and behaviour of others, including their possession and application of knowledge about me, affects our third personal evaluation of the significance of my behaviour. The suggestion is not that in *every* instance where someone is kept in the dark, or where other people mislead us about some aspect of our lives, it is impossible for us to live either well or admirably. Who ever lived a life without being subject to some form of deception with regard to certain facts about their life or character? The suggestion is that

*sometimes*, when facts about someone that are unknown to them are handled by other people in ways that create a serious mismatch between what they take themselves to be and what they actually are, this can be a genuine obstacle to their efforts to live either well, or admirably, or both.

### **Knowing who you are**

At some point in our life, at least some of us ask ourselves who we are, and who we want to be. Both questions involve a factual as well as an ethical component. Who I am is in part a function of my past and present circumstances, and is partly determined by others. It is also a function of what I do in response to those circumstances, both with respect to my actions and with respect to my conception of who I am. In particular, some of my actions, including those by means of which I come to define myself as a certain kind of person, will partly be based on developing a self-conception, and therefore on who I take myself to be.

What do I need to know about myself in order to truly understand who I am in such a way as to live well or virtuously? On one view, known as ‘origin essentialism’, my numerical identity, as the unique individual that I am, is determined by my causal and, most importantly, my genetic origins (c.f. Parfit, 1984; Nagel, 1991). On this view, if someone had been conceived just before or just after me; or been differently constituted genetically through conception and gestation, that person would not have been me. It follows that unless I know the basic facts about my genealogical origins (including the

basic facts about my conception and gestation), I literally don't know who I am, in the sense of being one particular distinguishable individual.

Even if we are convinced by origin essentialism as a correct account of numerical identity, as in being one identifiable individual rather than another, it does not follow that the facts determining my numerical identity are sufficient to determine my practical identity, as in being (and self-identifying as being) a human individual with some distinguishing features rather than others. There are many things that could make more of a difference to who I think of myself as being than the facts that determine how I was constituted as the biological entity that I am. These include features of the social environment into which I am born. They also include ways in which I can mould myself to form certain characteristics in light of what I consider to be good or admirable. Yet even if we do not consider facts about numerical identity to determine facts about practical identity, it could still be reasonable to take an interest in facts about our genealogical origins in our construction of a practical identity. First, some of our physical and other medically relevant characteristics are inherited via our biological parents. Second, some physical and psychological characteristics are inherited via our biological parents and may find expression even if we do not grow up among those parents. In each case, these inherited features may affect the way other people behave towards us regardless of how we relate to those characteristics ourselves. Third, many people identify with their genealogical origins beyond merely taking an interest in physical and psychological similarities and medical statistics, and to the point of giving facts about those origins a pivotal role in the construction of their practical identity. Indeed, many of

us live in cultural circumstances where facts about our genealogy form a central part of widely shared practices of mutual recognition, solidarity and respect. Of course, our interest in facts of genealogy may vary according to circumstances. Thus, it is probably more pleasing to learn that one's ancestors performed impressive or heroic acts of achievement and sacrifice than to learn that they were engaged in acts of non-discriminate brutality. Yet regardless of what we may or may not feel about these facts ourselves, the way other people feel about them can sometimes have a decisive influence both on our ability to live well, and on our capacity to achieve certain forms of virtue.

Clearly, some facts about a person's genealogical origins (such as the identity of their social parents) can be more central to someone's conception of themselves than others (such as the identity of distant biological relatives). Even so, there is some plausibility to the idea that the more about those origins one knows, the more about one's place in the world one is able to understand. This thought naturally gives rise to the following argument. Virtuous agency requires the construction of a virtuous practical identity. The construction of a virtuous practical identity requires accurate self-knowledge. Accurate self-knowledge requires knowledge about one's genealogical origins. All else equal, the more extensive knowledge about one's genealogical origins one has, the better placed one will be to construct a virtuous practical identity. Therefore, to deliberately prevent someone from acquiring accurate knowledge of their genealogical origins will harm their chances of constructing a virtuous practical identity. To that extent, it is wrong for parents to curtail their children's access to facts about their genealogical origins. The wrong in question might in principle be outweighed by facts of the particular case that

make the communication of such facts either difficult, impossible, or otherwise to the detriment of the child in question. And the inability to form a genuinely virtuous practical identity need not detract from someone's ability to live well. Yet the fact that this possibility could be realised in any particular case does not detract from the fact of its wrongness, at least other things being equal (c.f. Velleman, 2008).

This argument rests on a number of questionable assumptions (some of them descriptive, some of them ethical). Even so, I think it would be a mistake to dismiss it without qualification. It would be both dogmatic and unreasonable to flatly deny that knowledge of one's genealogical origins can be valuable, and therefore that to prevent someone from acquiring such knowledge is to burden them with a potentially significant loss. Why, for example, should children growing up in families where one or more of their biological parents is absent or unknown be uniquely excluded from developing a conception of themselves that is based on a truthful account of their genealogical origins, as in cases of anonymous egg or sperm donation? Even so, the argument is faced with a number of difficulties which together cast doubt on the idea that detachment from knowledge about one's genealogical origins (whether by acquaintance or by description) is necessarily harmful to the development of a virtuous practical identity.

First, just like it is not necessarily better in general for me to know more about something than to know less about it, so it is not necessarily better for me to know more rather than less about some aspect of my genealogical origins. Facts about those origins can be depressing, confusing, disruptive, distracting, or simply boring. Perhaps I have exactly

seven ancestors named 'Paul'. So what? With respect to children, like my mother, who grow up in the absence of one or more of their biological parents, the extent to which accurate genealogical knowledge would either enhance or detract from their chances of successfully developing a virtuous practical identity is a context sensitive matter. Furthermore, the potential for harm does not come only from one direction. The ethical flipside of a potentially harmful ignorance of one's genealogical origins is a potential harmful insistence in a genealogically obsessive culture that everyone should take an active interest in those origins. To enforce such an interest on everyone regardless of their contingent inclinations and circumstances could be both oppressive and, in cases where it is likely to be a cause of exclusion or stigmatization, potentially cruel.

Second, we don't care about our origins in every possible way. I might identify more with one of my parents than with the other; with my friends more than with my cousins; with a cause more than with my country; with my job more than with my gender. If so, I will partly detach myself from certain aspects of 'who I am' in order to cultivate the practical identity of someone with a multiplicity of overlapping social identities, at least some of which could be of greater significance to me than even basic facts about my genealogical origins. One possibility (and the one apparently realized by my mother) is to develop a practical identity in full consciousness of its 'gappiness' with respect to certain core facts about one's genealogical origins, as someone who does not care (or does not care very much) about certain facts about the exact nature of their biological lineage. To put it differently: one type of person that you can become is someone who does not care (or care that much) where you come from; who your biological parents are; the

hometown of your paternal grandparents; that you are one of your biological father's five hundred donor children; or whether you were biologically constituted by a mixture of leftovers on a dish. That someone could decide to become such a person, and could do so admirably, is indicated by the case of the millions of people (like my mother) whose detachment from some aspect of their biological inheritance has been forced upon them by circumstances beyond their control (such as death, adoption, gamete or embryo donation or having one or more absent parents). To this extent, cultivating an attitude of indifference towards even core aspects of one's genealogical origins can constitute an exercise of virtue. Thus, even if we were to think of the value of self-understanding as some kind of ethical 'master-value' (or even as a 'constitutive aim of action'), it would not follow that the kind of self-understanding that prioritises knowledge of one's genealogical origins must be thought of as either the only genuine, or the most valuable, form of self-understanding that someone could virtuously cultivate. Another option, and one that could in principle be equally admirable, is one in which other attachments provide the primary resources for the construction of a virtuous practical identity. The cultivation of a practical identity in conditions of substantial detachment from core facts about one's genealogical origins is therefore in principle consistent both with genuine virtue and with the kind of self-understanding on which virtue depends. One kind of person I can truly know myself as being is the kind of person who does not care (or does not care very much) about those things.

## **Not knowing who you are**

In order for someone to decline something, that thing had better be on offer. It is one thing to develop a virtuous practical identity in conditions where facts about one's genealogical origins play little or no role in the context of being aware that there are significant gaps in one's knowledge of those facts. It is quite another to develop such an identity in the false belief that one's knowledge of those origins is accurate or complete. The response to the line of argument considered in the previous section presupposes that the person whose practical identity is in question is aware of the epistemic limitations of their situation in a way that is not the case for many children who grow up in a state of detachment from their genealogical origins, and for whom the decision scenario described in the previous section is therefore not relevant in a first personal way. It therefore does not follow from the arguments of the previous section that there are no residual obstacles to the decision on the part of someone's parents to either protect or exclude their children from knowledge of basic facts about their genealogical origins. All that follows from the argument of the previous section is that there are no such obstacles in principle (at least with respect to self-understanding) in cases where the epistemic limitations in question are known to the persons themselves. So what, if anything, can be said about cases where this condition fails to be met?

One response that is clearly inadequate is to appeal to the obvious fact that all children face the task of constructing a practical identity in conditions where some facts about their genealogical origins are unknown to them. This response fails to address the main



issue for two reasons. First, and as already noted, some facts about our genealogical origins are likely to make a much bigger difference to our self-understanding than others (even if what facts these are will vary from person to person). Second, there is an ethically relevant difference between someone else deciding what it is crucial for you to know about yourself and making that decision for yourself. Children who grow up in the absence of one or more of their biological parents, including some children born as a result of donor conception, are often put in that situation by someone else. How should we ethically describe the scenario in which someone places another person in conditions where they are either kept in the dark about core facts about their genealogical origins, or are actively prevented by others from escaping that ignorance? Answering that question gives rise to a further line of argument against the claim that living in ignorance of core facts about one's genealogical origins is compatible with the successful development of a virtuous practical identity.

There is a distinctive kind of wrong that is associated with the detachment of its victims from their real interests in the service of the interests of others. In the domain of politics this kind of wrong is sometimes described in terms of the idea of 'false consciousness': or the lived experience of someone who may think they are successfully pursuing their genuine interests, whereas in fact their condition is primarily serving the interests of others, interests whose satisfaction depends on other people being substantially detached from their own (c.f. Geuss, 1989). Thus, a member of the contemporary working class could take pride in their pursuit of affordable designer sports wear and the latest generation of smart phones, never seriously considering the possibility that it is exactly

by having their attention focused on the accumulation of trivial consumer goods that their labour and acquiescence can be effectively mobilised in the interests of the power and privilege of the economically and politically dominant super-rich. In a similar way, women who express contentment at radically asymmetric power relations between the sexes are sometimes described as suffering from false consciousness in virtue of having been forcibly detached from developing an adequate grasp of what is essentially an oppressive and exploitative relationship between men and women.

There are at least two sorts of case of this kind of direct relevance to the present topic. On the one hand, there is the case of someone who is detached from their real interests in virtue of having cultivated a conception of their interests to accord with the options actually available to them, where this does not involve them being ignorant of any relevant fact, but is compatible with them being consciously aware of the way in which their choices are effectively constrained. Consider a prisoner who adjusts his routine to prison life in order to survive a long term of incarceration, or a victim of dictatorship who adjusts their ambitions to take account of the fact that they are living in a police state. On the other hand, there is the case of someone who is detached from their real interests in virtue of having been kept ignorant of some facts their ignorance of which is the cause of their failure to pursue those real interests. Consider someone who is fully devoted to construct a pleasant living environment within a prison compound, without ever paying any serious thought to the fact that their actions would be forcibly prevented should they try to leave. Instances of either kind could be described as cases of ‘adaptive preference formation’. Adaptive preference formation in cases where the pursuit of one’s ‘real’

interests have been put out of bounds by others in a way that is either easily avoidable or unnecessary is a widely recognized form of unjust servitude. Of course, not all forms of adaptive preference formation are ethically problematic in this way. Thus, even though changing my route through the mountains because of the weather or altering my vast weekly intake of alcohol to reduce my health insurance premium could both be extremely unwelcome and seriously inconvenient from my first personal point of view, I would not thereby consider myself to be a victim of any kind of wrongdoing on that account. Indeed, one of the basic marks of knowing right from wrong is the ability to distinguish the obstacles to possible action that do, from those that do not, constitute unjustified interference with our pursuit of our real interests.

It might be argued that even though the development of a practical identity in full awareness of the restricted potential for knowledge of one's genealogical origins could be a non-malignant form of adaptive preference formation, the cultivation of a practical identity by someone who is deliberately kept ignorant of core facts about their genealogical origins would be a case of false, if contented, consciousness; at least in cases where the ignorance in question would have a seriously detrimental effect on their ability to live well compatibly with having true beliefs about themselves. One case of this kind of relevance to the ethics of assisted reproduction would be that of a donor conceived child whose personal sense of self-worth is for some reason conditional on a false belief about their inheritance of certain physical traits from one or more of their social parents.

There are at least four ethically significant analogies between the formation of a practical identity in a state of imposed ignorance about one's genealogical origins and a state of false consciousness as I have defined it here. When taken together, these analogies might be thought to provide an argument in favour of the claim that parents ought to make available to their children (in some way, and at some point) such facts about their genealogical origins as they may have at their disposal.

First, in both cases the unavailability to a child of some possible practical identities is conditional on a form of detachment (involving either ignorance or lack of acquaintance) that is not of their own making, but has been imposed on them (in some cases deliberately) by others. Second, the detachment in question either is, or could be, imposed on the child at least partly in the interest of others (such as social parents, absent biological parents, or anonymous and identity release gamete donors), whose interests will normally play a significant part in any decision about which, if any, facts to disclose, and how. Third, for at least some subjects of ignorance about their genealogical origins this ignorance results in a genuine loss of opportunities for valuable self-understanding and social relationships, such as a potentially meaningful relationship with a person involved in their conception or gestation. Fourth, although some children would clearly decide not to take up these opportunities if presented with them, others surely would, in which case the fact of their ignorance will make a substantial difference, both to their potential for constructing at least one kind of virtuous practical identity and to other facts about the course of their life. For this latter class of people, the actual conditions in which they are made to develop a practical identity arguably do stand as a genuine obstacle to

the cultivation of a practical identity that is informed by what for them either is, or would be, an important aspect of their self understanding.

Against these considerations, the following disanalogies provide a case for the claim that keeping certain facts about their genealogical origins hidden from children is not necessarily wrong in itself, and can in some circumstances actually be the best ,or even the right, thing to do for parents or other carers (c.f. Appleby, Blake and Freeman, 2012).

First, even if the interests of parents are in some way served by the ignorance of their children, it does not follow that those interests are thereby served *conditionally* on that ignorance. The two could co-exist, or be statistically related, without either one being a condition of the other, or anyone ever producing one in order to serve the other. By analogy, the fact that my father never taught me how to hunt may have been convenient for him given that he wanted to teach me how to fish, even if it is false (which it is) that he never taught me how to hunt *in order* to be able to teach me how to fish. Second, even if parental interests play a role in their decision of what to tell their children about their genealogical origins, only a pathological form of parenting would ignore the interests of the child completely. In such a case, ignorance of their genealogical origins is likely to be the least of the child's problems. In general, decisions about what to tell one's children, how to do so, and when, are subject to a wide range of ethically significant considerations, including the capacity of the child to understand and process the relevant information, to make meaningful use of the information in thought and action, and the potential for harm associated with either giving, facilitating, making available,

withholding, evading, manipulating, refusing, or obstructing the child's pursuit of the relevant information at any given time. These are all considerations that can be substantially informed by what would be in the child's best interest. It follows that one of the necessary conditions for false consciousness, or any other form of maladaptive preference formation, will fail to be met in many cases where children are kept ignorant of some core aspect of their genealogical origins. Third, and as already noted, it cannot be assumed in connection with the first line of argument considered in the previous section, that acquiring more knowledge of one's genealogical origins is necessarily going to benefit someone, either with respect to their ability to live well, or with respect to their cultivation of a virtuous practical identity. And even if it is, it cannot be assumed that gaining access to this knowledge will necessarily be more beneficial with respect to the cultivation of a virtuous practical identity than either a comparative state of ignorance, or a state of deliberately cultivated detachment from that knowledge.

Of course, if a person's path through life is conditioned by a state of ignorance imposed on them by someone else, then those who have imposed that state of ignorance are taking an ethically significant risk, in part because the information in question could become available and thereby affect (either positively or negatively) the way the child relates to itself and to those who kept the information from them. Thus, the project of bringing up a child to a state of adulthood while preventing the disclosure of central facts about their genealogical origins (such as the identity of one or more of their biological parents) is one that may require the cultivation of sophisticated habits of information management, at least some aspects of which could be mishandled, either by themselves or by other

members of the relevant community, and/or subsequently be picked up on by an aggrieved child as a cause of anger or resentment. Incidentally, this is a kind of risk that would not be removed by the guaranteed provision of a facility for disclosure, such as the legal right granted by some states to donor conceived children to know the identity of their biological parents once they become adults (Draper, 2005). Being detached from some core aspect of one's genealogical origins during a formative period of one's life is one that could reasonably be experienced as a significant loss; even if it is a loss that needs to be evaluated in light of the fact that any path marked out for us by others is thereby a path marked out for us at the exclusion of other paths.

## **Conclusion**

The extent to which not knowing one's genealogical origins may affect someone's ability to live either well or virtuously inevitably depends on features of their circumstances above and beyond the question of what those facts are and the intrinsic features of that person's nature or personality. It also depends on how this absence of knowledge is embodied in the social world in which that person lives, how that knowledge relates to what they think of themselves as being, and what (if anything) other people do with that knowledge. In some cases, the relevant facts may present no obstacle to that person's wellbeing or their ability to cultivate a virtuous practical identity. In other cases, such as those where the knowledge in question would undermine that practical identity, or where others have acted so as to make that person's commitment to some of their life projects depend on what is essentially a false view of their place in the world, the relevant facts

can present obstacles both to that person's wellbeing and their capacity to cultivate a virtuous practical identity. This conclusion highlights what is a basic truth about the contextual dependence of many of the most interesting questions about the ethical significance of our knowledge of the past. Although some of that significance clearly derives from what the relevant facts about the past are, some it also depends on what people either have chosen, or will choose, to do with their knowledge of those facts, and how they come to treat each other as a result. In light of this truth, it is only reasonable to be sceptical about highly general and inflexible claims concerning the rights and wrongs of different forms of assisted reproduction, and the informational challenges to which they give rise.

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