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**11**

**OUR SENSE OF SELF**

We each have a view of ourselves, ideas about our character, our strengths and weaknesses, the things we might do and might have done, as well as things we simply could not do and could not have done. These views we have about ourselves inform our actions, from the trivial to the most highly consequential. These views we have of ourselves provide us with a sense of our identity.

David Velleman, in the course of arguing that donor conception is wrong[[1]](#footnote-1), stresses the importance of family history in shaping our self-conception. He is clearly right about this.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Velleman illustrates from examples involving his own family history, one’s conception of who one is and what one might be may be shaped in profound ways by one’s understanding[[3]](#footnote-3) of one’s own family. More than this, Velleman’s account of the ways in which his knowledge of family history has shaped his own conception of who he is is anything but idiosyncratic. It is not implausible to think that most, perhaps the vast majority of people, are affected in this way.

Much as I disagree with Velleman’s views about donor conception, that will not be the main focus of my remarks here, although I shall have a few things to say about it. I am interested in the extent to which our self-conceptions, shaped, as they are, by our understanding of family history, are genuinely accurate. Velleman stresses the extent to which the stories we tell ourselves about our families and their histories play a role in shaping our lives; he is concerned to show just how valuable our understanding of family history is by showing how profound a role it plays in our sense of self. It is worth asking, however, especially if we think that Velleman may be right about the importance we attach to our understanding of family history, and about its very real effects on the conduct of our lives, whether the self-conceptions which are the products of such understanding are typically faithful to the facts. It is not unreasonable to think that a proper assessment of the value of the stories we tell ourselves about family histories may be affected by their accuracy: someone whose self-conception is the product of delusions of grandeur both about his own qualities and the history of his family, would hardly provide a model for motivating claims about the ways in which one’s views about family history serve as a source of value.

Delusions of grandeur are not, of course, the typical case, but I believe that Velleman has given insufficient attention to the issue of the accuracy of our self-conceptions. My ultimate goal here, however, is not just to address the issue of accuracy. Like Velleman, I am interested in the value that our self-conceptions confer on our lives. The accuracy of these self-conceptions is, in my view, just one important element in understanding the ways in which our self-conceptions affect our lives’ value. It is this larger issue of value on which I hope to shed some light.

I

An important part of one’s self-conception has to do with one’s views about one’s own capacities: the kind of life one might successfully pursue or have pursued. Had I not been able to find a job in philosophy, I would probably have gone to law school, and I believe that a career in the law is one in which I might have found some real satisfaction. There are other pursuits which I am confident would not have worked out for me. I do not believe that I could have been a professional athlete of any sort. I began my college career as a mathematics major, thinking that a career in math would be fulfilling, but I found out after just a few semesters that this wasn’t possible for me.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Velleman suggests, quite plausibly, that our views on these matters are influenced in important ways by our understanding of family history.

…my family-resemblance concept of myself contains much of that self-knowledge by which I am guided in my efforts to cultivate and shape myself. I can articulate a few self-descriptions that indicate some directions of self-cultivation and contra-indicate others… But many of my aspirations are directed at fulfilling family-resemblance concepts: they are aspirations to be *like that*, where ‘that’ denotes a type for which I have some paradigms or images but no explicit definition. And these aspirations are conditioned and channeled by family-resemblance knowledge as to how someone *like this* might or might not become *like that*. (366)

Even if our view of our own capacities and limitations may be informed by many sources, Velleman plausibly suggests that our knowledge of our own biological relatives can play a powerful role here.

If I want to know what a person *like this* can make of himself, I can look first at what my parents and grandparents made of themselves, or at the self-cultivation underway on the part of my brothers and cousins. The point is not that I necessarily can or should strive to be whatever my biological relatives have become, but rather that my own experiments-in-living (as Mill called them) are most informatively supplemented by experiments on the part of people who are relevantly like me. Our extended family is, as it were, a laboratory for carrying out experiments-in-living relevant to the lives of people like us. (368)

Let us assume, at least for the sake of argument, that people generally have accurate views about the lives of their relatives, something which, of course, is often not the case at all.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even assuming this, however, just how accurate can we reasonably expect the self-conceptions shaped by these experiments-in-living to be?

Most people who are fortunate enough to be raised by their biological parents know a good deal about them, and at least some knowledge of one’s biological grandparents is common as well. It is not at all uncommon, however, to have little knowledge of one’s more distant forebears. One may know a good deal about one’s own generation, although this knowledge is, of course, sometimes lacking; indeed, not everyone has a large enough family to have a great many cousins or siblings whose lives might inform one. To put it crudely, the number of data points here is likely to be quite small.

The fact that the sample size here is so small is particularly important because any attempt to figure out what one’s own capacities are from the lives one’s relatives have led would require a very complicated teasing apart of biological and environmental factors. If one’s relatives have pursued a single occupation for several generations, it would be risky, to say the least, to suppose that one is likely to have some special talent for that pursuit. Some distant relative may have fallen into that occupation quite by chance, or through a lack of any real choice in their particular circumstances. Others more recently may have been pushed into that pursuit by parental pressures. None of those relatives need have had any native talent for that pursuit, and even if they did, one certainly needn’t have inherited it. Indeed, it would be surprising if many of the choices of this sort which various relatives made were not largely a product of environmental factors, and, in particular, environmental factors which may no longer be present, rather than anything terribly distinctive and attributable to heredity.

Many of us, like Velleman, have parents or grandparents who were born in other countries, in circumstances dramatically different from those we find ourselves in today. The opportunities available to them, in many cases, were utterly unlike anything we currently face. The occupations which my parents pursued and which their parents pursued are, no doubt, quite vivid to me, and I have no doubt that this vividness played a dramatic role in shaping my own self-conception, as vivid data tend to do. But evolutionary biologists know that determining which traits are genuinely heritable is an extraordinarily complicated affair. There is a reason why such biologists base their work on studies of large populations rather than a handful of vivid examples. The extension of evolutionary ideas to the psychological domain in the hands of evolutionary psychologists is exceptionally controversial.[[6]](#footnote-6) What is uncontroversial, however, is that individuals wholly untrained in the workings of evolution, drawing conclusions about their own native talents and capacities on the basis of a tiny sample of their relatives’ pursuits, are unlikely to come to any realistic conclusions at all. The vividness of the data and their emotional salience make these ideas loom large in our minds, but they do not contribute to the accuracy of the conclusions we reach.

My point here is not merely that there is a science relevant to the conclusions we draw from family history, namely evolutionary biology, and most people have little or no knowledge of the relevant science. The same is true, after all, about many different areas of daily life. There is a science devoted to the effects of force on bodies in space, and most individuals are largely ignorant of the details of that science. In spite of this, we are all well aware that objects which are dropped near the surface of the earth will fall down rather than rise, and we are able to give rough and roughly accurate predictions of the trajectories of many moving bodies. In these cases, however, the accuracy of the beliefs we have which are unaided by science is underwritten by a native folk physics, a set of inferential tendencies which are fairly accurate for many everyday purposes, even if they also produce a great many mistakes as well.[[7]](#footnote-7) In other areas, subject-matter specific native help is not needed to form accurate judgments simply because the target subject-matter is relatively easy to comprehend given the kinds of data we are likely to possess and our general intellectual abilties. Accurately understanding one’s capacities, strengths and weaknesses, career paths which are likely to be successful, and so on, based on one’s beliefs about family history, however, involves neither trivial intellectual skills, given our data, nor native intellectual capacities specially suited to true beliefs on these topics. Without scientific guidance on these topics, and data of a sort which are rarely possessed, true belief is very unlikely to result from our ruminations on family history.

Consider, for example, a child who grows up in very fortunate circumstances, and whose parents and grandparents and great grandparents all went to college, with many of them obtaining advanced degrees. Compare such a child with one whose family members, for as many generations back as family memory allows, have not completed high school. The first of these children may never have even contemplated the possibility of failing to go to college; the second may not have even thought of going to college as a possibility. Such things are not at all uncommon, and they are of a piece with the ways in which Velleman describes the experiments-in-living which emerge from the laboratory of one’s extended family playing a role in shaping one’s conception of what one’s capacities and talents are and the kind of life that might be open to one. It should be obvious that any adverse judgments about the second child’s intellectual capacities on the basis of family history would be completely unjustified, but this is not because Velleman is mistaken in thinking that people tend to form such judgments about their own capacities on just such a basis. Indeed, sadly, Velleman is surely right about this.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The data about one’s own family thus provide one with an extremely impoverished basis for theorizing about one’s talents and capacities, as well as the kind of life which one might lead. The sort of theorizing required for forming accurate judgments about these topics, even if one had a sufficiently large body of data, would involve areas of expertise, in order to reach conclusions that are at all likely to be accurate, which extraordinarily few people have. This does not stop us from reaching conclusions about these topics. It just means that these conclusions are unlikely to be true.

Indeed, this surely understates the problems involved in such inferences. I have been assuming thus far that one’s data about family history are themselves accurate, questioning only whether the conclusions one might draw from facts about family history are likely to be true. But the assumption I’ve been making for the sake of argument—that the data about one’s forebears upon which one draws accurately represent one’s family history—deserves to be challenged as well. When Velleman discusses his own family history he often uses factive verbs, speaking, for example, of the way in which this history provides him with “self-knowledge”. (365) At other times, however, he is quite frank about the extent to which his beliefs about his forebears are a matter of conjecture. “I assume,” he says, that his great-grandfather left the Ukraine for certain reasons (358); “I imagine,” he says, certain things about the employment possibilities available to his great-grandfather (358). While Velleman often speaks about family history, he also speaks of “family lore” (357), which surely has a less factive flavor, and indeed, he acknowledges that this lore, in his own case, is internally inconsistent (357). Velleman acknowledges, as well, that “the topic of our biological origins is littered with mythical or symbolic thoughts, about blood and bone and such.” (362) These are not, to be sure, the kind of factual bases on which one might draw if one were seriously engaged, in the manner of a genealogist, in constructing an accurate family history.

The information about family history which is passed down from parents to children is often, notoriously, not only highly selective and misleading, but inaccurate as well. Parents will often intentionally hide information about relatives which is either embarrassing to them or which they think, rightly or wrongly, might be troubling to their children. It is a rare child indeed who will have an accurate view of the incidence of alcoholism, suicide, or mental illness in their family history, or even the extent to which certain relatives were just plain unpleasant, at least when such information can easily be hidden. It is hardly unusual for family history to be presented through rose-colored glasses, lightly, or at times, heavily edited, for the edification of the listener. Many individuals, understandably, find it difficult to talk about traumatic events in their own lives, failing to inform their children about their dealings with wars, deprivation, or abuse. It would be absurd to suppose that children who are the product of extra-marital affairs, or of rape, can count on being given a frank accounting of their origins. If these events, circumstances, and experiences were rare, then it would say little about the typical case. But alcoholism, suicide attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, mental illness, embarrassing characteristics and events, painful circumstances and experiences, are, of course, extremely common. The reliability of the data which constitutes one’s family lore is not just a serious question for that one in a million individual whose family has experienced these things, since such individuals are anything but one in a million. It calls into question the reliability of family lore for all of us.

There are a number of psychological tendencies which are bound to go to work in forming our self-conceptions on the basis of family lore. I have already mentioned the role of vivid data, which play in to a tendency we have to generalize from small bodies of emotionally salient information of just the sort with which family lore and personal interactions with relatives present us.[[9]](#footnote-9) There is also a well-documented tendency to overestimate one’s own positive characteristics[[10]](#footnote-10), a tendency which may frequently be nurtured by one’s acquaintance with family history, especially as it is handed down to us. We tend to attribute cross-situational character traits--such as honesty, generosity, and so on--both to ourselves and to others, traits which are unlikely to be implicated in any realistic account of the origins of our behavior.[[11]](#footnote-11) Once we form a conception of our selves, such conceptions tend to be extremely resistant to change in the face of new evidence, aided and abetted by our selective memories, which allow us more easily to recall information which is congruent with our self-conceptions, rather than information which might call them into question.[[12]](#footnote-12) In addition, of course, all of these tendencies play a role in forming the very accounts of family lore which our relatives hand down to us, and which form an important part of the basis for our self-conceptions.

It would thus be a mistake to move very quickly from talk of our knowledge of family lore to talk of our knowledge of actual family history, and to move from there to talk of self-knowledge embodied in our self-conceptions. Our family lore, the beliefs about family history which we form on its basis, and, even more so, the beliefs we form on that basis about our own personal characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, as well as the possibilities which might or might not be open to us, all deserve to be treated with a very large grain of salt. These views we have of ourselves and of our relatives are likely to be filled with a great deal of misleading information, outright error, and wishful thinking. How much real knowledge might be generated by the processes which give rise to these beliefs is very much in question.

II

Just how important is the accuracy of our view of family history, and of our self-conception, to the value of our acquaintance with family lore? Although Velleman presents a good deal of the information about his family lore as fact, and frequently speaks of the self-knowledge to which it leads him, he also, at times, seems quite unconcerned with the accuracy of his beliefs on these matters. Indeed, even when Velleman does, briefly, raise the issue of accuracy, acknowledging that our self-conceptions may, indeed, be inaccurate, it is largely to dismiss the importance of the issue. Thus, for example, Velleman remarks,

To downplay the symbolic and mythical significance of severing a child’s connection to its biological parents is therefore to misrepresent what is really going on, if not because the symbols and stories are literally true then at least because they are truly part of the human psyche. (363)

At another point, he comments,

How do I know that I have inherited these qualities from Nathan and Golda [Velleman’s great grandparents]? I don’t: it’s all imaginative speculation. But such speculations are how we define and redefine ourselves, weighing different possible meanings for our characters by playing them out in different imagined stories. In these speculations, family history gives us inexhaustible food for thought. (377)

It would certainly lend a different flavor to Velleman’s paper were he to argue, straightforwardly, that inaccurate views about our relatives and ourselves are of such great value that it is simply wrong to have children by way of anonymous donor sperm or egg, thereby cutting such children off from the possibility of erroneous views about themselves by way of inaccurate views of their own family history. But while such a view would have a different flavor to it than the suggestion that it is wrong to cut children off from a knowledge of their own biological family history, and the self-knowledge that results from it, the view which acknowledges the unreliability of our beliefs about family history and our self-conceptions resulting from them is in no way inconsistent. Interestingly, one of the psychologists most noted for work on the inaccuracy of our self-conceptions has herself argued that an overly positive self-conception, one that fails to fit the facts, is an important part of good mental health.[[13]](#footnote-13) Let us therefore ask whether views about one’s biological family, and the self-conceptions they give rise to, have the value Velleman ascribes to them, whether they are accurate or not.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that beliefs about family history, regardless of their accuracy, provide us with “inexhaustible food for thought” about the possibilities which might be open to us, and the kinds of people that we are. Of course, it is not as if those who are unacquainted with their family histories, for whatever reason, will lack sources of inspiration for ruminations on these matters. One will look in vain in the social psychology literature for evidence that children of closed adoptions, and children who are the product of anonymous sperm and egg donors, are lacking for a self-conception. Role models of all sorts, including adoptive parents, family friends, teachers, and figures from history and fiction, may all serve as stimuli for thoughts and beliefs about the kind of person one might be and the possibilities which are open to one. Indeed, even in the case of those who are richly acquainted with their biological relatives, these other sources of inspiration are well known to provide fertile ground for such thinking. Gays and lesbians often note that, on first coming to terms with their sexuality, the role models provided by other gay and lesbian individuals is of tremendous importance in their developing self-conceptions, playing a far more important role than knowledge of family history. The same is true, of course, for a great many individuals who find themselves with personal characteristics of whatever sort which are especially salient and important to them, and which are not represented by other members of their biological families.

This is not to deny, what Velleman rightly points out, that adopted children will often have a profound desire to know about, and meet, their biological parents. But it is important not to mislocate the import of this. While Velleman is right, I believe, to think that these desires deserve our respect and consideration, all his talk of the ways in which our beliefs about our families of biological origin serve as a stimulus for our self-conceptions certainly makes it sound as if the lack of such beliefs will thereby rob us of the possibility of rich imaginative thinking about the lives which might be open to us and the sort of people we might be. And this simply cannot be right. There is ample stimulus for such thinking, however much we may or may not know about our biological origins. The very psychological tendencies described above which serve to provide those who are acquainted with their biological parents with a host of beliefs about the possibilities open to them will go to work on other raw materials to provide a rich basis for the imaginative thought Velleman describes and values so highly. In the case of those who are unacquainted with their biological relatives, one might reasonably think that these imaginative exercises, however compelling to those who engage in them, and however highly valued, will vary a great deal in their reliability. In this respect, however, they do not differ very much from the imaginative exercises of those who are acquainted with their biological relatives.

It is thus revealing that Velleman does not argue that those who are acquainted with some of their ancestors are better able to steer their lives successfully in confronting the many decisions, both small and large, which we all face. Instead, what he argues is that biological family matters loom large in our psyches, whatever role they may play in directing our behavior.[[14]](#footnote-14) Indeed, as Velleman admits, even this claim is not universally true.

I know that many people have no interest in their ancestry, no sense of kinship with their kin. These people define themselves in terms other than those which are descriptive of their relatives, and they pursue life stories disjoint from their family’s history. (377)

But no sooner does Velleman acknowledge this point than he seeks to minimize its importance. “I think that someone who denies having anything in common with his biological relatives,” Velleman tells us, “is either speaking figuratively or in denial.” (377) And for those who do not find their biological relatives to be the source of the kind of inspiration which Velleman himself finds in his own family history, he remarks,

Someone who doesn’t value what he has in common with his relatives may think that he need never have known them in order to identify and cultivate those aspects of himself which he does value. But I doubt it. This person is likely to have defined himself as different from relatives precisely because they served as ill omens of his possible futures, or at least as foils against which his contrasting qualities could attract his eye. Learning not to be like his relatives has still involved learning from them: if he had never known them, he might well have ended up more like them. (377)

Yes, of course, one’s biological relatives may serve as role models, both positive and negative; one may be inspired to try to be like them, or to be different from them. But the same is true, of course, of other people. One may find both positive and negative role models in one’s acquaintances of all sorts, whether they are biologically related to one or not. One may have a vivid acquaintance with one’s mean Uncle Harry or bitter Aunt Jane and vow, on the basis of that acquaintance, not to be like them. But mean or bitter people, as well as other role models, both negative and positive, are ubiquitous. One would be hard pressed to make out a case for the claim that, absent acquaintance with biological relatives, one would be at a loss for role models of whatever sort. But now the importance of acquaintance with one’s biological relatives is becoming harder to make out.

It is worth pointing out, as well, that while Velleman tends to focus on the kinds of positive role models he is fortunate enough to find in his own family, some of the very traits and characters which populate others’ family histories may play a role far less constructive than even the negative role models which Velleman considers, individuals who merely serve as useful warnings that one doesn’t want to be like *that*. While it is not uncommon to find one’s family history inspiring, it is also not uncommon to find features of one’s family history tiresome, or frightening, demeaning, or overwhelming. Some feel ennobled by the recognition that they are members of a certain family; others feel suffocated by the thought, or depressed, or trapped.[[15]](#footnote-15) Acquaintance with the members of one’s family, and with the facts of family history or family lore, is not an unalloyed good. Its role in individuals’ psyches is highly variable, which is not surprising, given the high variability in the kinds of families there are. Velleman speaks of children who are raised by neither of their biological parents as ones whose family ties have been “ruptured” (361), a connection “severed” (363, 372), suffering “alienation” from their biological families (374). But for many individuals, connection with their families brings with it a very substantial cost, and it would be unreasonable to suppose that whatever benefits an acquaintance with one’s family members may bring will always outweigh those costs. One might reasonably think that the net value of such connection is highly variable, and not always positive.

I have been speaking as if the value of the connection with one’s biological relatives consists in the benefits and burdens which such connection provides, the net value consisting then of nothing more nor less than the value of benefits minus burdens. But this may not be the right way to think about this issue. Thus, consider how we should measure the value of a person’s life for that person. One might think of the person’s life itself as a kind of neutral palette upon which things of positive and negative value are layered. A life need not always be of positive value to the person who lives it if the negative features of the life outweigh the positives. Alternatively, one might think that living itself is of value as well, even apart from the goings on in that life which are of value.[[16]](#footnote-16) Similarly, one might think about connection with one’s biological relatives in just that way. On such a view, connection with those relatives is itself of value, even apart from whatever benefits or burdens it might bring. On this view, to lose out on the connection is therefore a real loss, even if a calculation of benefits minus burdens would suggest otherwise.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I must confess that I find such a view rather obscure[[18]](#footnote-18), and there is certainly nothing in Velleman’s paper which suggests a commitment to a view of this sort, let alone a defense of it. Velleman insists that his defense of the importance of biological connections will stick to “realistic and rational considerations” rather than “mystical or symbolic thoughts.” (362, and again at 363 and 369) His case for the value of the connection seems to be made entirely on the basis of concrete benefits which the connection is alleged to bring. I will thus continue to focus on these, and assume that the value of the connection is to be assessed, rather prosaically, in terms of benefits minus burdens.

Velleman cites not only alleged direct benefits to the individual who knows his or her biological relatives, but also to those who raise such children, when they know the child’s biological relatives (including, of course, the case in which they themselves are the child’s biological relatives).

Information relevant to self-cultivation is also relevant to the rearing of children. And that information is even more consequential for child-rearing, because the growth of children is so dramatic in comparison with what is still possible once the age of self-cultivation has been attained. So much of what perplexes parents has to do with the nature whose unfolding they are trying to foster. How far can the child hope to reach, and in what directions? What is the child unable to help being, and what can it be helped to become? What will smooth its rough edges, and what will just rub against the grain? (370)

There can be no doubt that parents confront all of these questions and more in raising children, and the resources they draw on to address these questions are many and varied. There are numerous parenting guides of all sorts, discussions with friends and other parents, pediatricians, and mental health professionals. Velleman is right to add that one’s views about the child’s biological heritage will play a role here as well, but, once again, all of the remarks made earlier about our understanding of the influence of such heritage apply. It is doubtful that beliefs formed on the basis of views about biological heritage, with the exception of some views about physical health and a narrow range of mental illnesses,[[19]](#footnote-19) are typically formed in a very reliable manner. Once again, this is not to deny that parents thinking about these issues may often be influenced in a profound way by thinking about the child’s biological relatives. The point is just that this tendency is not truth-conducive, especially for the sorts of questions Velleman raises. What we know about the ways in which people form beliefs about character traits[[20]](#footnote-20) thus casts substantial doubt on Velleman’s claim that, “The use of anonymously donated gametes can leave not just the child but also its custodial parents in the dark, and in ways that adversely affect their parenting.” (370)

It is worth noting as well here that anonymous gamete donation is fully compatible with, and typically goes along with[[21]](#footnote-21), a frank accounting of the donors’ medical histories. Thus, the kind of information which is most useful in self-understanding and in dealing with some of the issues that arise in child rearing need not be, and in typical cases, is not withheld even in the case of anonymous donation. The kind of information which is not provided, and which personal acquaintance with donors would provide, is just the sort that is most likely to lead to beliefs about character and life prospects in unreliable ways. And it is this latter kind of information, rather than the sort that is revealed in medical history, which is the focus of Velleman’s discussion throughout.[[22]](#footnote-22) The kind of information and acquaintance which Velleman focuses on is, to be sure, far more evocative and emotionally satisfying than a cold recitation of medical histories, but it is the latter, rather than the former, which is a reliable source of information about the child’s likely prospects in life.

It is, indeed, the very evocative nature of information about family history, and personal acquaintance with one’s biological relatives, which animates Velleman.

I am inclined to think that a knowledge of one’s origins is especially important to identity formation because it is important to the telling of one’s life-story, which necessarily encodes one’s appreciation of meaning in the events of one’s life… Organizing events into the form of a story provides an understanding of them distinct from what would be provided by causal explanations. A well constructed story recounts events in such a way as to lead us through a natural sequence of emotions, which is ultimately resolved in an emotional cadence that leaves us knowing how we feel about the events. We know how we feel because we have been through a sequence of feelings that is familiar to our emotional sensibilities; because we have arrived at a conclusory feeling, a state of emotional rest; and because our conclusory feeling takes all of the preceding events into its view. (375)

This contrast between a narrative understanding of our lives and causal explanations seems to be doing a lot of work for Velleman. It deserves some careful attention.

Narrative understandings, on Velleman’s view, allow for an “appreciation of meaning,” something which, it seems, mere causal explanations do not.[[23]](#footnote-23) Let us consider an example which might be illustrative of this suggestion. Suppose that Roger has just been fired from his latest job, having suffered through a series of unsatisfying jobs of relatively short duration. He is married, although that too is not going well for him, and he is twice divorced. He takes some time to look back on his life thus far, and he thinks about his family history. His father too suffered through a series of unsatisfying and unsuccessful jobs, and marriages as well, and he sees himself as recapitulating his father’s failures. “I’m just doomed to failure,” Roger thinks, “just like my old man,” and then he remembers something his father used to say. His father had an explanation for his own failures: there was always a woman—one of his wives, a co-worker, a boss—who was responsible. On thinking about this, something clicks, and Roger sees the apparently unconnected events of his own life as “a natural sequence of emotions, which is ultimately resolved in an emotional cadence that leaves [him] knowing how [he] feel[s] about the events.” Roger knows how he feels, alright: he’s angry at those women, all of them, who are responsible for his failures, just like his father.

Now this is, to be sure, an unattractive narrative, and Roger is someone with a very unattractive personality. But, of course, there are people like this--quite a lot of them—and they too have narratives which provide for them a kind of emotionally satisfying story that makes sense of their lives. Not every story is an uplifting one.

Consider, now, instead, a causal account of certain features of Roger’s life. Roger’s father was an alcoholic, though Roger never saw that side of him, since his father always hid his drinking from Roger, and Roger too is an alcoholic, though he doesn’t see himself that way. In addition, Roger, like his father, suffers from narcissistic personality disorder; neither Roger, nor his father, were ever able to see their own faults very clearly, and both blamed all their failures on nearby others. Roger might well benefit from psychotherapy, treatment for his alcoholism, and medication for depression. The kind of narrative which Roger tells himself, and which seems to him to make sense of his life, is part of his problem.

There’s a sense in which this causal explanation of the events in Roger’s life fails to assign a meaning to them, while the narrative, instead, does. If the causal explanation is correct, and I’m supposing that it is, then the sequence of events in Roger’s life don’t have any emotionally satisfying meaning: they’re just the meaningless product of some underlying pathologies. If it’s an account that gives this sequence of events some emotional resonance that Roger is looking for, the causal story just won’t provide it; the false narrative, which is a product of his narcissistic personality disorder, will, instead, fill the bill nicely.

Now not all cases are like this, of course, but when the narrative stories we tell ourselves to make emotional sense of our lives are simply inaccurate, as in Roger’s case, I find it hard to see the value of buying into the narrative. Many will tell themselves stories which are more uplifting than Roger’s, but uplifting or not, if the narrative is at odds with the facts, then one may be living in a fool’s paradise, or, worse still, a hell of one’s own making. We shouldn’t value these narratives simply because they provide order, whatever order they may provide, and however accurate or inaccurate they may be.

Of course, narratives needn’t be at odds with the facts, or an accurate causal account of the features of one’s life, and causal accounts need not leave the sequence of events in one’s life devoid of meaning. One’s choices over an extended period in one’s life may be the product of a rational plan, and this may lead to a good deal of emotional satisfaction as the plan develops. There are all sorts of ways in which a rich and satisfying life might proceed. A causal account of such a life does not rob it of its meaning, nor is it emotionally unsatisfying. Some causal accounts are devoid of meaning and unsatisfying, but, of course, this is in part because some lives are devoid of meaning and unsatisfying. When lives are like this, providing a false narrative for them does little to solve the problem.

Velleman’s contrast between a narrative story of one’s life—which “necessarily encodes one’s appreciation of meaning”--and a causal account—which does not—is thus badly overdrawn. Matters are made worse still by the suggestion that knowledge of family history, and personal acquaintance with one’s biological relatives, is so extraordinarily instrumental in providing an appreciation of meaning in one’s life. As Velleman himself acknowledges, “Adoptees can certainly find meaningful roles for themselves in stories about their adoptive families.” (376)[[24]](#footnote-24) Meaningful stories, whether inspired by beliefs derived from biological family lore, or from stories about one’s adoptive family, or from inspirational fiction, or any manner of other source, are all too easy to come by. Self-understanding, however, which requires an accurate account of one’s life, is much harder.

To the extent that these narratives we tell ourselves are meant to provide us with self-knowledge, something Velleman alludes to throughout his discussion of these issues, they will need to be at least approximately true, and they had better not depart very far from the accurate causal accounts to which Velleman gives such short shrift. To the extent that we steer our lives and our child-rearing by way of such narratives, an accurate understanding, or at least a roughly accurate understanding, is crucial. Lives guided by self-conceptions which are wholly out of touch with the facts about one’s character, the possibilities available to one, and one’s interactions with others, are unlikely to go well. One should not measure the value of a person’s self-conception by the extent to which it provides a coherent and satisfying narrative apart from its contact with the truth. But to the extent that truth matters, acquaintance with one’s biological relatives is only one consideration among many, and not one of the more important considerations at that, especially given the unreliability of family lore and the inferences we tend to draw from it.

A clear-eyed look at our self-conceptions and the psychological tendencies which give rise to them must allow that there is a good deal of wishful thinking, hasty generalization, and reliance on tiny pools of information of dubious accuracy which goes into them. There are personality features which play a role in the way in which such self-conceptions are formed which lead to highly non-trivial distortions in our beliefs about ourselves.[[25]](#footnote-25) I am not suggesting that we are wholly ignorant of what we are like; that would be absurd. But it would be equally absurd to take our self-conceptions at face-value across the board. These views we have of ourselves are a mix of knowledge and mere fancy, with the ratio of knowledge to fancy being highly variable. The contribution which an acquaintance with family lore provides to real understanding is, as I’ve argued, far from straightforward.

Velleman wishes to make his case for the importance of contact with biological relatives, as I’ve noted, in a way which avoids “myth or symbolic thoughts,” basing it entirely on “realistic and rational considerations.” (362) Judged by these standards, I believe the arguments I have provided here show that he has not succeeded. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the standard of “realistic and rational considerations” is not one that Velleman wishes to endorse. After noting that he will confine his argument to just such considerations, Velleman remarks, “My caution in this regard will lead me to overlook many considerations that I see as genuinely meaningful.” (362) To the extent that Velleman regards considerations beyond those that are realistic and rational as relevant to an understanding of what is genuinely meaningful, I recognize that the arguments I offer here are ones he is bound to find unconvincing. At the same time, I believe it is still worthwhile to ask what realistic and rational considerations alone suggest on this topic, and it is to that project that I hope to have made some contribution.

III

The issue of the morality of donor conception may now be treated fairly quickly, in the light of the considerations offered thus far. Even those who are convinced by Velleman’s arguments that knowledge of one’s biological family history, and acquaintance with members of one’s biological family, is of real importance should find Velleman’s central arguments for the immorality of donor conception extremely unpersuasive.

“Much as we love disadvantaged children,” Velleman tells us, “we rightly believe that people should not deliberately create children who they already know will be disadvantaged.” (364) If children who are the product of donor conception are not acquainted with at least one of their biological parents, and if this constitutes a disadvantage, as Velleman argues, then people should not create children by way of donor conception. The argument couldn’t be more straightforward.

Such an argument, of course, proves far too much. All of us are such that any children we have, even by the most common method of bringing children into being, will inevitably face certain disadvantages. The fact that our medical histories are less than perfectly unblemished, that our characters and personalities are less than ideal, and that the circumstances in which our children will be raised are also less than perfect guarantees that all children will have to cope with disadvantages. In many cases, we know antecedently of some of the disadvantages they will face. Someone might actually endorse such an argument for the conclusion that having children by any means whatsoever is immoral, but this was surely not Velleman’s intended conclusion.

Of course, it is not permissible to saddle one’s would-be children with just any disadvantage whatsoever. Exactly what is permissible here is, rightly, a subject of real controversy, but I think we can all agree that knowingly bringing into existence a child who will experience nothing but extraordinary pain for an extended period, followed immediately by a painful death, is horribly immoral. If one knows in advance that engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse will bring about the existence of such a child, then it is surely morally required that one abstain from such an act. But nothing in Velleman’s case against donor conception suggests that a life without contact with one’s biological family is on a par with a life filled with nothing but pain, nor would this be plausible. As Sally Haslanger suggests,[[26]](#footnote-26) one might reasonably think that there is some threshold quality of life here below which one may not permissibly go. Nothing in Velleman’s paper even begins to make an argument that a life without contact with, or even knowledge of, one’s biological relatives is automatically, or even typically, below such a threshold.

More interesting is Velleman’s point that couples who make use of either donor sperm or donor eggs are typically motivated by a desire to have a child who is biologically related to at least one of them. Velleman regards any such motivation as suspect, since it presupposes

an interest that they choose to further slightly in their own case by creating a person for whom the same interest will be profoundly frustrated. I regard this choice as morally incoherent. (374)

I think that Velleman is right here that such parents do typically value having a biological connection to the child they raise, and this is a motive for their preference for the use of donor gametes over adoption of a child biologically unrelated to them.[[27]](#footnote-27) So, as Velleman sees it, the choice to have a child in this way is incoherent because it both affirms (in the case of the would-be parents) and denies (in the case of the would-be child) the importance of biological ties.[[28]](#footnote-28)

But such a reconstruction of the motivational source of this kind of choice is extremely unsympathetic. Such parents need not view their own biological connection to a child as important and the child’s biological connections as unimportant. They may value both, and choose to use donor gametes because this allows for some connection, both for the parents and for the child. Both may be at a disadvantage, from the parents’ perspective, relative to situations in which children are biologically related to both of the parents who raise them, but the would-be parents may rightly think that they have much to offer their child, and that this will allow for the child to have a sufficiently rich and satisfying life. Unless we add the implausible premise from the previous argument, that any disadvantage to one’s offspring is unacceptable, there is nothing incoherent in such motivation.

Velleman does also point out that in cases where a couple cannot both serve as biological parents, there is always the option of adopting, if they want children to raise.

The alternative of adopting an already existing child is often available, and I have argued that it is morally preferable, because it provides a custodial family for a child already and independently destined to be alienated from its biological family. (374)

I certainly understand such a view, and I do not find it obviously unreasonable. But by the same token, it may be morally preferable to adopt rather than to conceive biologically related children of one’s own, given the desperate need for good adoptive homes. It is not clear why one should focus here on those who would have children by way of gamete donation, rather than couples both of whom are fertile. One might, moreover, think that adoption in these circumstances, absent a strong independent desire to raise an adopted child, is supererogatory, both for fertile and infertile couples. To say that adoption is morally better, in either case, does not entail that anything less is morally unacceptable.

One final point here is deserving of mention. The only empirical evidence which Velleman offers for his claims about the importance of acquaintance with one’s biological relatives is the fact that so many children of closed adoptions are deeply concerned to discover and contact their biological parents. (359, n.1) Velleman suggests that this is best explained by supposing that adoptees value these biological connections very highly, and, indeed, that these connections are of great objective value. Human motivation is a complicated thing, and I think it is a mistake simply to assume that adoptees must all share some single overriding motivation for these searches. But it is at least worth considering the possibility that there is another element motivating at least many adoptees who wish to meet their biological family of origin: they may wish to know why it is that they were given up for adoption. It is worth noting in addition that the kinds of concerns which could easily motivate this kind of search might well be far less likely to animate children who are conceived from donated gametes.

Velleman does not provide us with any argument for the immorality of donor conception which is not easily defused.

IV

Let me briefly sum up. Velleman’s case for the importance of acquaintance with one’s biological relatives, and knowledge of one’s biological family, depends on a host of implausible claims about the ways in which such knowledge may enrich one’s life. The self-conceptions we form on the basis of such acquaintance and knowledge are often filled with misinformation. While an accurate self-conception may be of tremendous value in guiding one’s life, it is not at all clear that the ways in which we make use of family lore reliably contribute to such a conception. We should not take our self-conceptions entirely at face-value. There is, to be sure, a certain mythology about the importance of biological connections and the self-understanding that springs from knowing one’s biological relatives, but a serious examination of the source of our self-conceptions does not suggest that they are typically reliably formed, especially to the extent that they depend on acquaintance with biological relatives. If this is correct, it is difficult to defend the claim that such self-conceptions are inevitably of great value, and more difficult still to defend, on that basis, the claim that donor conception is immoral.[[29]](#footnote-29)

1. “Family History,” *Philosophical Papers,* 34(2005), 357-78. That this is Velleman’s conclusion, rather than some weaker claim, is clearly stated in footnote 3, 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For just one useful source on these issues, see Kate C. McLean, *The Co-authored Self: Family Stories and the Construction of Personal Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I use the term ‘understanding’ here advisedly, since talk of one’s understanding of family history is not factive, unlike talk of one’s knowledge of such history. Velleman often speaks of knowledge here, and the way in which our understanding of family history provides us with self-knowledge, thereby begging the question about the accuracy of the resulting beliefs. Since the issue of accuracy is one of the foci of this essay, I will not simply assume that our beliefs here are correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My thinking that this kind of career might be open to me may have been prompted, in part, by the knowledge that my father was a very successful mathematics major in college. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a useful overview of some of the psychological literature on the accuracy of our views of ourselves, see David Dunning, *Self-Insight*, Psychology Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a useful critical discussion of these issues, see David Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature*, MIT Press, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Michael McCloskey, “Intuitive Physics,” *Scientific American*, 248(1983), 122-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thus, consider these remarks in an obituary in *The New York Times* for the distinguished sociologist and psychotherapist Lillian Rubin:

   She graduated from high school at 15 but was 39 before she enrolled in college. By landing a secretarial job straight out of high school, she said, she had fulfilled her family’s highest expectations. “For a girl of my generation and class, college was not a perceived option,” she wrote in the introduction to *Worlds of Pain.* To her mother, a seamstress, “a daughter who worked at a typewriter in a ‘clean’ office—yes, this was a high achievement.” (July 2, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, e.g., Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*, Prentice-Hall, 1980, Chapter 3. There are circumstances in which this tendency to generalize on the basis of a small sample will be quite reliable, as in cases involving essential properties of natural kinds. (I have discussed these cases in detail in *Inductive Inference and its Natural Ground*, MIT Press, 1993.) The inferences we are liable to make on the basis of family history, however, are not of this rather special sort. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nisbett and Ross, *op. cit.*, 196-9; Shelley E. Taylor and J. Brown, “Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 103(1988), 193-210; Shelley E. Taylor, *Positive Illusions: Creative Self-Deception and the Healthy Mind*, Basic Books, 1989; David Dunning, Judith Meyerowitz, and Amy Holzberg, “Ambiguity and Self-Evaluation: The Role of Idiosyncratic Trait Definitions in Self-Serving Biases,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(1978), 1082-1090; Ziva Kunda, *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*, MIT Press, 1999, Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, Temple University Press, 1991; Ziva Kunda, *op. cit.*, Chapters 9 and 10; John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*, Cambridge University Press, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nisbett and Ross, *op. cit.*, Chapter 8; Lee Ross and Craig A. Anderson, “Shortcomings in the Attribution Process: On the Origins and Maintenance of Erroneous Social Assessments,” in *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., Cambridge University Press, 1982, 129-152; Ziva Kunda, *op. cit.*, Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See work cited in note 10 above by Shelley E. Taylor. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thus, see, for example, the passages quoted in the text above from pages 363 and 377 of Velleman’s paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A useful counterpoint to Velleman’s account of his own family’s history, if such is needed, is Ray Monk’s biography of Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, Jonathan Cape, 1990. Such accounts are hardly a rarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thomas Nagel suggests a view of just this sort in “Death,” reprinted in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1-10:

    The situation is roughly this: There are elements which, if added to one’s experience, make life better; there are other elements which, if added to one’s experience, make life worse. But what remains when these are set aside is not merely *neutral:* it is emphatically positive. (2) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. To say that, on this view, losing the connection is always losing something of value is not to say that, all things considered, it is always better to have that connection. Thus, for example, Nagel’s view in the article cited above is that life itself is of value, even apart from the good-making experiences it may contain, but he does not hold the view that, all things considered, every life is of positive value. Some lives, on his view, contain so much pain and suffering that it is better to end them than to go on living. Similarly, one might hold that the connection with biological relatives is of value even apart from the good-making experiences it gives rise to, and, at the same time, believe that, in some cases, the bad-making experiences this connection gives rise to are such that one would have been better off without the connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is not because I am attracted to any sort of hedonistic account of value. One needn’t think that an account of value need be provided in terms of pleasures and pains alone in order to find the views that life itself is of value, or that connection with biological relatives is itself of value, wholly obscure. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. These are certainly an important exception, although they too must surely be informed by something more than just an acquaintance with the child’s biological forebears. Folk views about heritability, even of physical traits, are not known for their reliability. Given sufficient background medical knowledge, knowledge of the medical histories of a child’s biological relatives can be of tremendous value, of course, and nothing said here is meant to deny that. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See the sources cited in notes 7 through 10 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, for example, the explanation provided by the Sperm Bank of California, which is quite typical. <http://www.thespermbankofca.org/content/why-family-health-history-important-donors>. Velleman is no friend of such sperm banks, or the clients who use them. He remarks,

    Frankly, to criticize proponents of gamete donation for overselling the ‘gift of life’ is to credit them with greater moral sensitivity than they generally show. The websites of sperm and egg banks tend to betray no hint that the lives they are helping to create will be the lives of future children whose interests are entitled to consideration. Gamete donation is presented as affecting primarily the parents, by enabling them to ‘create families.’ (373)

    One might, with equal fairness, criticize anyone who has purchased a used car by appealing to the dishonesty of used car dealers. The suggestion that we may evaluate the motives and character of individuals by way of the advertisements directed at them is absurd on its face. Further, as far as the advertisers go in this particular case, one might think that the reason their websites “betray no hint that the lives they are helping to create will be the lives of future children whose interests are entitled to consideration” might just be that this point is too obvious to need stating. The reason that gamete donation “is presented as affecting primarily the parents” might well be that advertising directed toward children who don’t yet exist is unlikely to be terribly effective. Velleman allows that his remarks in this paper “will no doubt offend some readers.” (361) It is passages such as this one which may go a long way toward explaining that reaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The following passage vividly conveys the sorts of concerns which seem to move Velleman:

    I would not want to have raised my younger son without having known my maternal grandfather, with whom he has so much in common. I would not have understood my older son if I hadn’t known his uncles, on both sides. And raising my children without knowing their mother—that would have been like raising them with one eye closed. (370) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. One cannot help but be reminded here of Sellars’s distinction between “the space of reasons” and “the space of causes.” I have discussed that distinction, and the use Sellarsians make of it, in “Reasons, Naturalism, and Transcendental Philosophy,” in J. Smith and P. Sullivan, eds.., *Transcendental Philosophy and Naturalism*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 96-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. At the same time, Velleman suggests that there is something important here that adoptees miss out on. The quoted sentence in the text is followed by this remark:

    Even so, they seem to have the sense of not knowing important stories about themselves, and of therefore missing some meaning implicit in their lives, unless and until they know their biological origins. (376)

    As I remarked earlier, one might well think that such a feeling is deserving of consideration, without accepting Velleman’s explanation of the import of acquaintance with one’s biological relatives and a knowledge of their history. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I have discussed a number of these features and the ways in which they work in “Introspection and Misdirection,” Chapter 1 above, and “What Is It Like to Be Me?,” Chapter 2 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Family, Ancestry and Self: What is the Moral Significance of Biological Ties?,” *Adoption and Culture*, 2(2009), 91-122, reprinted in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford University Press, 2012. Haslanger’s paper is primarily focused on the implications of Velleman’s views for adoption, but the points she makes there are ones with which I am largely sympathetic. Many of her points are complementary to the ones I make here. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This is not, however, the only motivation for such a choice. To note just one other motive: a woman may have a strong desire to experience pregnancy, and to experience giving birth to the child she raises. I agree with Velleman, however, that the desire to have a child with some biological relation to at least one of the parents who will raise the child is typically an important part of the motivation in these cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Such parents may view the biological connection as something which is objectively valuable, as Velleman does, but they may also view it as something which is entirely optional, but which they, in fact, value. I will assume that they have the first of these views, since it presents Velleman’s argument in a more sympathetic light. Parents who have the latter attitude, however, do not even seem to face the problem which Velleman raises, for they may regard it is an open question whether their offspring is likely to share such values. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I have profited from comments on an earlier draft of this paper by Brad Skow, as well as discussion of these issues with Robin Harris and Annie Harris-Kornblith. A version of this paper was presented at the University of Colorado, and discussion there was very helpful to me. David Velleman also provided useful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)