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ABSTRACT: *Do we owe anything to our genetic relatives* qua *genetic relatives? The philosophical literature has primarily addressed this question in the context of procreation. But genetic matching databases raise the question of whether we owe anything to previously unknown genetic relatives. This article argues that influential philosophical arguments regarding moral claims to know one's genetic origins (sometimes referred to as a 'right to know') in the context of gamete donation have implications for a broader set of claims. First, these arguments imply more than a claim to know the identity of a genetic relative; the interests which they invoke can only be satisfied through a relationship. Second, the scope of the claims is broader than tends to be acknowledged: even if procreators have special obligations towards their offspring, these arguments imply that weighty moral claims can be made against other genetic relatives in many different contexts.*

KEYWORDS: procreation, adoption, gamete donation, relationships, parenthood, genetics, self-knowledge

1. Introduction

The question of what we owe those genetically related to us arises in a number of contexts, including gamete donation and the discovery of genetic relatives through genetic matching sites. What these have in common is that they can involve people making moral claims[1] against, or seeking relationships with, people to whom they are genetically related, on the basis of genetic ties. Cases such as these raise the question whether genetic relatives have *pro tanto* obligations to one another, *qua* genetic relatives.

What do we owe our genetic relatives *qua* genetic relatives? Are we obligated to enter into, or stay in, relationships with those genetically related to us? These questions have not, to our knowledge, been systematically addressed in philosophical ethics. A likely cause of this neglect is that, within the procreative ethics literature, genetic ties have often been dismissed as morally irrelevant in themselves, with arguments for their moral significance suspected of an illegitimate 'bionormative' bias (see, e.g., Bayne and Kolers 2003, Brake 2010, Gheaus 2012, Groll 2021, Millum 2017 (2.9), Rulli 2014a and b, Witt 2014).

[1] In the philosophical discussion on the moral foundation of rights, a claim is "simply the duty described from the vantage point of its object. Thus, I have a claim against you that you feed my cat just in case you have a duty to me to feed my cat; the directionality of the claim hooks up with that of the duty" (Sumner 2004 [1984], p. 25). Depending on the interpretation, a moral right is either the claim itself or a justified claim: a successful claim can generate a moral right (White 1979).

This literature has often focused on parental obligations. However, the questions about parental obligations which are the focus of this literature are distinct from the broader question of what we owe to our genetic relatives, including siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and so on.

We will show that this broader question is implicated in recent discussions of gamete donation in philosophical ethics. Here, we explore the broader question of what we owe to genetic relatives, *qua* genetic relatives, by examining these implications. Henceforth, 'the broader question' refers to this: what do we owe our genetic relatives *qua* genetic relatives? We make the case that some arguments made in the context of gamete donation have implications for the broader question that are yet to be addressed. We argue that there are unappreciated implications for moral claims to enter relationships not only with genetic procreators, but with other genetic relatives as well. While such claims pose moral and policy problems, our aim here is not to reject them, but to show how widely assumed premises in arguments for open donation entail these broader claims.

The broader question is pertinent today not only because of direct-to-consumer genetic testing and new genetic technologies which facilitate the transfer of biological material between people for reproductive purposes, but also because of changing family formations. Recent years have seen greater philosophical attention to intentional or chosen families: new familial relationships created through choice (see, e.g., Cutas and Chan 2012). But there has been less attention to a concomitant of this move into chosen families, namely, exiting families of origin or refusing relationships with genetic relatives. Two commonplace situations suggest there is a need for more analysis of the ethics of *exit*: family estrangement and refusal of encounters with previously unknown genetic relatives. In order to isolate the moral significance of genetic ties from more complex cases of estrangement,[2] we focus on the claims of genetic relatives against those with whom they do not have a prior relationship, including donor-conceived people as well as people who have found previously unknown relatives through genetic testing.

As the question of what genetic relatives owe one another has been most comprehensively addressed in the context of gamete donation, this is where we begin. First, we set out some prominent arguments advanced in the gamete donation literature. We then investigate three questions: (1) What is the moral claim to genetic knowledge a claim to? (2) Who can make such a claim? (3) Against whom is there such a claim? We will trace the implications of these questions for the broader question of what we owe genetic relatives *qua* genetic relatives.

2. The Interest in Knowing One's Genetic Relatives

Many people conceived with donor gametes—or otherwise raised separately from their close genetic relatives—want to know *that* they have close genetic ties outside of their immediate family and to know *who* these relatives are. While secrecy around

[2] Such relationships might have accumulated duties of gratitude or other special obligations; see, e.g., Brake 2011.

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gamete donation was long encouraged, many countries are moving towards banning anonymous donation and allowing donor-conceived people to access information about donors. Recent philosophical arguments support this move on the grounds that we have a significant interest in knowing our genetic origins. While this is sometimes formulated in terms of rights, such as a 'right to know' the identity of one's gamete donor, we will more cautiously refer to significant interests which can, under certain conditions, ground moral claims to know (following Groll 2021; for the rights claim, see, e.g., Frith 2001, McGee, Brakeman, and Gurmankin 2001; on interests, see Feinberg 1984).

Empirically, there is evidence that many people express an interest in genetic knowledge (see, e.g., Hertz and Nelson 2019, Blyth et al 2019, Indekeu and Hens 2018, Nordqvist and Smart 2014, Nordqvist and Gilman 2022, Schieb and Hastings 2012, Slutsky et al 2016). Most of this research explores donor-conceived adults' expressed attitudes towards knowing their genetic relatives, especially genetic parents, but some have canvassed the attitudes of donor-conceived children while they are still children (see, e.g., Hertz and Nelson 2019). Increasingly, research in this area has also explored the attitudes of other family members, including donors' families (see, e.g., Nordqvist and Smart 2014, Nordqvist and Gilman 2022). The groups studied report a wide array of attitudes to genetic and social ties, including curiosity about genetic siblings and other genetic relatives, ambivalence of family members (other than the parents) towards donor-conceived people, and donors' parents' longing to meet their 'genetic grandchildren' (Cutas 2023).

In addition, home DNA tests for ethnicity estimation and genetic matching have become widely popular. By testing, some have discovered close genetic relatives who were previously unknown to them. Some users have been contacted by others in search of their genetic kin, trying to identify how they are related. Likewise, many people travel to where their ancestors are from, where they may seek to encounter and connect with genetic relatives.

But do such subjective interests track objective value? One common reason given by donor-conceived people for this interest is the search for a resemblance which will be self-revelatory. This is sometimes expressed with the metaphor of a mirror: our genetic relatives are a mirror in which we can recognize ourselves (Indekeu and Hens 2018; Benward et al, in Groll 2021, p. 95). The idea that the interest in knowing one's genetic relatives is grounded in self-revelatory resemblance also appears in a philosophically influential strand of argument against anonymous gamete donation. Some ethicists have argued that one's genetic relatives are means to valuable self-knowledge due to this resemblance. (Indeed, although we will not pursue this point here, the construction of the search for genetic information in terms of the donor-conceived person's interests seems to treat the donor and other genetic relatives as tools to one's own personal development and flourishing; it is more plausible that what the offspring want is to know the person themselves, as opposed to a self-regarding desire for mirrors (Skow 2023; compare Schpall 2023). We call arguments that knowledge of one's genetic relatives is conducive to self-knowledge and hence a significant interest 'self-knowledge arguments'. Versions of such arguments in the literature have defended, variously, the views that it is a subjective interest and that it is an objectively valuable interest, and we mean to

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include both kinds of argument. In procreative ethics, such arguments have been advanced against anonymous donation—or against gamete donation *tout court*.[3] This classification does obscure some important differences between authors, but it picks out a widespread kind of argument.

As David Velleman controversially argued: "for information about what I am like as a person, they [genetic relatives] are the closest thing to a mirror that I can find." (Velleman 2005, p. 368; see also Velleman 2008. On the value of resemblance, contrast Brake 2015, and Schpall 2023, p. 219.) Velleman likewise argues that our interest in genetic knowledge is due to its "irreplaceable value in the life-task of identity formation." (Velleman 2005, p. 357) We come to know ourselves through knowing our genetic relatives. This knowledge guides our aspirations and the process of shaping our identities by showing us how our shared traits adapt to various contexts. Children intentionally "cut off" (Velleman 2005, p. 368) from this source of self-knowledge through anonymous gamete donation are wronged, because genetic ties are crucial to identity.

More recently, Daniel Groll has advanced a more cautious version of this view. Groll argues that there is a (contingent) subjective interest in genetic knowledge and that this subjective interest can give rise to moral claims. His first argument is empirical: empirical evidence shows that many donor-conceived people report such an interest. (Groll 2021, pp. 66–69) But as Groll acknowledges, even a widely-held subjective interest need not generate moral claims—if, for example, it were a trivial interest, like counting blades of grass, or one which arose only due to oppressive circumstances (such as bionormativity). The interest in genetic knowledge is worthwhile, and not trivial, according to Groll, because it can, for some, play a role in healthy identity determination. (Groll 2021, pp. 87)

Unlike Velleman, Groll stresses that there are multiple routes to identity determination, and the route through knowledge of one's genetic relatives is not privileged among these. Nonetheless, he holds that genetic knowledge can help donor-conceived individuals to answer the question "who am I?" by answering the constituent questions, "how am I?" (how did I come to be?) and "who am I like?" (as opposed to "what am I like?"). (Groll 2021, pp. 102–117) Groll also, unlike Velleman, acknowledges that knowledge of one's genetic relatives is a 'significant' subjective interest, not a "profound prudential good." (Groll 2021, pp. 56, 66–69) But, he argues, as a widespread significant interest, the principle of procreative beneficence requires parents and donors to try to fulfil it. Despite these differences, we will argue that Groll's account has implications similar to Velleman's for the broader question.

There are a number of objections one can raise to such arguments. It has been objected that we can obtain information which is just as useful about ourselves through interactions with peers, parents, and others who are not our genetic relatives; indeed, Alice MacLachlan (2019) argues that non-traditional family-making (including through donor conception) offers "abundant families," not

[3] Other lines of argument against gamete donation involve risk or the non-transferability of parental duties, e.g., Ferracioli 2014, Weinberg 2016.

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scarcity.[4] It has also been objected that self-knowledge arguments reflect bionormative biases—misconceptions about genetic heritability which are tied to oppressive structures (see, e.g., Haslanger 2009). Compare (in a different context) Camisha Russell on how race figures in gamete donation: people who deny that race has meaningful significance still use it as a determining criterion in selecting gamete donors (Russell 2018). And it has been objected that self-knowledge arguments misconceive genetics. Expecting to see one's traits mirrored in a genetic relative assumes that they would have been exposed to some of the same cultural and social stimuli (see, e.g., Haslanger 2009, Rulli 2014b, Witt 2014). By searching for trait recognition among one's genetic kin, we rely on implicit assumptions about the relation between biological potential and opportunity.

However, we will set aside such questions and accept the premises of self-knowledge arguments in order to see what follows. We show that self-knowledge arguments against anonymous donation have implications some of their defenders do not recognize.

3. What is the Claim to Genetic Knowledge a Claim to?

Phrases such as 'genetic knowledge' or 'knowledge of one's genetic relatives' are ambiguous. They might denote the knowledge that one has certain genetic relatives, knowledge of their medical history, of their identity, of their traits and interests, or direct, relationship-based, knowledge of them. Our inquiry does not concern the knowledge *that* one has been donor-conceived, or otherwise has unknown close genetic relatives. That is, we do not address whether, and when, parents should disclose to a child that they are donor conceived. If children have a claim to knowledge of their relatives, this has implications for what parents should do, but we do not discuss this here.

Setting this aside, we can distinguish, following Ravitsky (2010) and Groll (2021), medical knowledge, identity knowledge, and relationship knowledge. Medical knowledge concerns medical information that could be relevant for one's own health: for example, if one is at significant risk to develop certain heritable conditions or whether there is a risk that one might unwittingly marry or reproduce with a genetic sibling. Identity knowledge concerns information about the identity of the gamete donor, such as their name, or anonymized knowledge about the donor's physical features and personality traits. Identity knowledge could be shared through a recorded interview or short essay. Relationship knowledge involves meeting the person in question and developing a relationship.

We can now ask: what kind of knowledge is at issue in self-knowledge arguments? Most straightforwardly, there is an interest in medical information: if knowledge of our genetic relatives' medical conditions can support our own health and medical decision-making, we have an interest in medical knowledge (Ravitsky 2010; but see Leighton 2014). (Keep in mind that whether we have an interest in such knowledge is distinct from whether we have an all-things-considered claim to it, and further still,

[4] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this.

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from what law and policy should be. For example, it could be that we have an interest in such knowledge, but no moral claim to it, given privacy rights; or that we have a moral claim to it, but there is no acceptable policy for transmitting it.)

The more contentious arguments concern knowledge of one's own personality traits, aptitudes, and weaknesses—knowing 'who I am' in ways which support identity formation. For Ravitsky, such an interest can be satisfied through "non-identifying personal 'narrative' information about the donor." (Ravitsky 2010, p. 684) For Groll, it is the identity of the donor, by which he means their name, that assists in personal identity determination. We argue that satisfying the interest in self-knowledge requires more than either a name or a narrative: it will require extended and intimate interaction. This means not simply meeting once, but meeting on multiple occasions, making it possible to ask questions that emerge after reflection on a first meeting. And it means interacting in different contexts, since seeing how someone behaves yields more of the relevant knowledge than their self-report (self-reports are vulnerable to self-deception, self-opacity, inarticulacy, or even deliberate deception). For Velleman, the interest can only be satisfied by direct knowledge of the genetic relatives. We need direct interactions because "[m]uch of what I know about myself is contained in this family-resemblance concept and cannot be articulated." (Velleman 2005, p. 365) If it cannot be articulated and shared through a short personal statement or narrative, it can only be communicated through direct knowledge of family members—through a series of intimate interactions. And such a series of intimate interactions begins to constitute a relationship.

Velleman's view clearly requires relationships, not merely identity knowledge. But what is more surprising is that views such as Ravitsky's (2010) and Groll's (2021) also entail that the interest must be satisfied through relationship knowledge. Groll argues that the donor-conceived have an interest in knowing the donor's identity, but he explicitly states that a claim to relationship genetic knowledge would be "going too far." (Groll 2021, p. 8) Donor-conceived people's interest "usually falls short of an interest in relationship genetic knowledge," he writes; rather, "[w]hat they usually want to know is *who* their donor is for reasons that will then answer the question 'Who am I?'" But, on our view, a relationship is what is needed to answer this question.

Narrative information is not adequate to satisfy the interest in self-knowledge. Ravitsky argues that narrative information about the donor may meet the needs of donor-conceived people "in dealing with identity issues." (Ravitsky 2010, p. 684) However, an anonymous account of traits and lifestyle, such as that suggested by Ravitsky, will not do: the donor and their advisors may fail to foresee *which* information the donor-conceived person would value or might be useful in their identity formation. Such an account would be limited in content, and, again, it might be misleading, due to embellishment, self-deception, or limited expressive skills. Arguably, only a narrative statement which rose to the level of literature, with a high degree of introspection and self-awareness, could convey who the donor is in the sense relevant to identity formation (see Nussbaum 1990 on the information such literature can convey). Even then, if the statement is given at the time of the donation, it could be outdated.

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Likewise, knowing a name will not by itself satisfy the relevant interests. Again, by genetic knowledge, Groll means knowledge of the identity, the name, of the gamete donor. (Groll 2021, p. 8) His empirical argument relies on the testimony of the donor-conceived. If—as is plausible—the donor-conceived have a subjective interest in *personally* knowing and interacting with their donors, then only a relationship will satisfy this interest. Indeed, in a subsequent publication, Groll summarizes his claim as requiring that gamete donors make themselves "available to their genetic offspring" (Groll 2023: 214). But "availability" is vague. Groll explicitly does not intend a relationship, since he denies that there is a claim to relationship knowledge; more plausibly, he intends access for a meeting. But a single meeting would not yield the knowledge relevant to identity formation, either.

Groll's more philosophical argument, like Velleman's, concerns identity formation. But his assumptions entail that in order to gain the knowledge required for identity formation, we need relationships with our genetic relatives —at least, we need prolonged and repeated interactions, with some degree of intimacy, over an extended period of time. Such a series of intimate interactions amounts to a personal relationship (see Kolodny 2003, Brake 2023). Just knowing a name, or having a single meeting, is unlikely to satisfy the interest that Groll identifies. The interests in knowing "who am I like?" and "how am I?" can only be satisfied through a relationship: interacting, seeing traits, hearing stories, asking questions and receiving answers, with a chance to follow up. This involves the intimacy (in the sense of sharing information not shared with strangers) and interaction over time characteristic of a relationship. For example, knowing 'how I am' will require knowing about the donor's family of origin or how they decided to donate gametes. And knowing 'who am I like' will require observation and interaction: relevant details might be left out of a narrative statement. A narrative statement can mislead—and a name alone will convey very little.

Of course, it is possible that even having a relationship will not convey the needed information. This might suggest that any claim to know one's relatives is comparatively weak, since there is a chance that the knowledge might not satisfy the relevant interest. But this undercuts the argument for a claim to know one's donor, at least on views such as Groll's, and so it comes with a steep cost.

In short, one does not know who someone is, *in the sense relevant to identity formation*, by just knowing their name, or reading a narrative statement, or even having a single interaction. The self-knowledge interest requires extended, repeated, intimate interactions for its satisfaction—more than medical or identity knowledge, it requires relationship knowledge. This might, indeed, be a relationship of low intimacy—something less than a friendship but more than an acquaintanceship, taking place through a series of meetings; but it must involve *some* intimacy to be able to deliver the requisite knowledge. The point is just that the interest requires a relationship. We think views like Groll's face a dilemma here: either say that only a name or narrative is required, which is less onerous, but will not satisfy the alleged interest in self-knowledge; or, say that a series of interactions involving intimate disclosure is required—which would be more likely to satisfy the interest but would, in essence, be requiring a relationship.

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But there is more. It might be thought that while we have interests in relationship knowledge, such interests ground a moral claim only against the progenitor, who has made themselves liable through the act of donation. But, we argue, not only do these interests require more for their satisfaction than is commonly acknowledged, the scope of the claims arising from them is broader.

4. Who Can Make Such a Claim?

If there is a significant interest in knowledge of one's genetic relatives for the purpose of self-knowledge, not only donor-conceived people have such an interest. Anyone who lacks contact with close genetic relatives could have a similar interest in such relationships. This includes anyone estranged from their genetic families. It includes some gamete donors themselves (see Usborne 2018) or donors' other genetic relatives. Groll emphasizes that knowledge of one's genetic relatives is not the only, or privileged, route to self-knowledge. But the view that there are multiple sources of self-knowledge which different people will value differently cuts both ways: while it defends him against the charge of bionormativity, it also means that anyone, not merely the donor-conceived, might have such an interest.

While the interest seems most pressing in children and young adults who are forming their identity, people could have this interest throughout their lives—for instance, adults having a mid-life crisis or taking stock of their lives. Indeed, it is not children who are the intended interest-bearers in most accounts: Groll himself does not claim that the interest is held by children. The claim tends to be that open donation is required so that donor-conceived people may acquire access to information about donors upon reaching the age of majority. In short, if adult donor-conceived people have such an interest in knowing their genetic relatives, then other people—including gamete donors themselves—also have it.

One principled reason previous discussions have focused solely on the interests of donor-conceived people in knowing their donors—and not on the interests other people may have in knowing their genetic relatives—has to do with assumptions that donors have responsibilities towards those conceived with their gametes which other genetic relatives do not. So although proponents of such arguments might readily admit that anyone lacking knowledge of their genetic family does have an interest in acquiring it, they could argue that such persons only have a moral claim against procreators. Gamete donors have intentionally engaged in procreative activity which makes them liable to moral claims from resulting offspring; other genetic relatives have not. Thus such claims are only held against donors or procreators. But, as we will see in the next section, there are reasons to challenge this argument.

5. Against Whom is There a Claim?

So far we have argued that an identity interest in knowledge of one's genetic relatives can only be satisfied through a relationship. But this interest will not necessarily be satisfied by forming a relationship with the donor, nor can it only be satisfied by knowledge of the donor—as opposed to other genetic relatives. One might find one's

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donor uncommunicative or uninterested, and so not helpful in healthy identity formation. On the other hand, the interest in knowing close genetic relatives would be similar to that in knowing a procreator, at least by the lights of the self-knowledge argument. Interaction with one's genetic grandparents or aunts and uncles could help to answer 'how am I?', and interaction with these as well as cousins and siblings could help to answer 'what am I like?' (the question Velleman focuses on) and 'who am I like?' Could this entail that there are knowledge claims against close genetic relatives other than one's procreator—against genetic siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents, or cousins? This question has been underexamined[5]; in fact, we argue, the sweeping implications of self-knowledge arguments for such claims have been under-appreciated.

5.1. Interests in Knowing Genetic Relatives

If the interest in question is in knowing oneself through knowing those who are most like you or who have a causal bearing on your coming to exist, then the interest, following the reasoning of the argument, would be in interacting with whoever is most like you or plays such a causal role. Of course, critics have pointed out that one's social peers and non-genetic family may be just like you, and matchmakers as well as fertility doctors may play a causal role in someone's coming to exist (e.g., Witt 2014). But there are other implications.

Conceivably, many genetic relatives, including the long-lost cousin found via genetic matching, could be relevantly like you, and some might shed light on the "how am I" question through sharing family history (e.g., discovering Jewish ancestry could shed light on the migration of one's ancestors from anti-Semitic regimes). Presumably, there is a cut-off point at which the causal and genetic connections are so diluted that they are not relevantly different from connections with non-genetic relatives. However, there is no reason to assume that that cut-off point at which connections are too diluted to make a difference is the donor themselves. Indeed, the one most like you might be your own genetic twin, or a sibling, or a grandparent.

On the other hand, if a procreator is dissimilar enough, interacting with them will not satisfy the interest in knowing 'who am I like?' The donor may not be a recognizable mirror for the mirror-seeking person. We all have much more genetic potential than what is actualized in our immediately visible traits: we could have expressed other traits, and we can pass that implicit potential on in ways that *are* expressed phenotypically in our descendants. The donor-conceived person may express phenotypical traits inherited from the donor's parents. They may look strikingly like the donor's sibling or their other offspring. Meeting these other genetic relatives might make more sense from a trait recognition perspective. It seems, therefore, that these other relatives may be better able to satisfy the interests in question, and, indeed, that one might need a multiplicity of people to satisfy them.

[5] Groll 2021 raises the question of ancestral knowledge only to set it aside, pp. 85-86.

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There are other reasons why a donor might shed little light on the "how am I?" question. They may not have an interest in knowing about their ancestry, and thus not have much to tell. They may not know their own biological family or may be estranged from them. They may have migrated, or come from a family that migrated, and wish to define themselves as part of their adoptive culture, away from their origins. They may not like to talk about themselves. They may be problematic in other ways: not all families are mirrors that one would like to recognize themselves in. Rather than illustrating potential, they may illustrate failure.

Lastly, considerable recent empirical literature specifically tracks donor-conceived people's expression of interest in reaching out and relating to genetic siblings. Indeed, they do not always, and sometimes are not interested in the donor as much as they are in their 'diblings' (Hertz and Nelson 2019). And there are further reasons for their interest in their genetic siblings rather than the donor, having to do with, for example, the shared experience of being donor-conceived, the opportunity to build a siblinghood of choice, and so on (Cutas 2023).

5.2. Claims Against Genetic Relatives

If the interest in knowing one's other genetic relatives is comparable to that in knowing one's donor or procreator, are there comparable moral *claims* against other genetic relatives? It is easy to see that the interest in genetic knowledge generates sweeping moral claims on Velleman's account. Velleman discusses not just genetic procreators, but genetic *kin*, people to whom we bear a literal family resemblance. Velleman explicitly writes about grandparents, siblings, and other relatives. Our self-knowledge is achieved through knowing multiple relatives, and seeing their success or failure in different life paths. Knowledge of a procreator alone would not fulfil this.

Velleman's ambitious claim that knowledge of our genetic relatives is a profound prudential good, "of irreplaceable value in the life-task of identity formation," suggests that it could ground a moral claim against other genetic relatives (Velleman 2005, p. 357). A good of *irreplaceable* value in the autonomous formation of self would seem to generate a weighty moral claim—similar to a claim to education. Velleman's ambitious view thus arguably generates a claim to relationship knowledge of a wide range of genetic relatives. If this is correct, not only donor-conceived people would have such claims, but also, for the reasons set out above, all those not in contact with their genetic relatives, or anyone lacking such genetic relatives altogether.

Groll's argument for open donation, despite its more modest theoretical commitments, also entails this broader set of claims against close genetic relatives. We take Groll's reason for restricting the claim to be representative: procreators have special responsibilities to offspring. But the idea that procreators alone have such obligations relies on controversial views about responsibility and procreative obligations (see, e.g., Brake 2010). Moreover, even if procreators do have more extensive obligations than other relatives, there could still be claims against other genetic relatives.

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On the first point, Groll argues that gamete donation is "the kind of thing that 'triggers' parental responsibility." (Groll 2021, p. 162) Upon donation, gamete donors become prospective parents, and they transfer prospective parenthood to intended parents (Groll 2021, p. 182).[6] Groll invokes the (controversial [see Russell 2023]) principle of procreative beneficence in his account of donors' responsibilities, to explain why the donor-conceived have a claim against them, but not other relatives, on his view. But the claim that donors become prospective parents or that they have procreative responsibilities suffers from weaknesses common to causal accounts of parental responsibility. If it is the donor's causal role which triggers these obligations, this raises familiar questions about the relevant notion of cause (see, e.g., Bayne and Kolers 2003, Brake 2010, Hanna 2019, and see discussion in Brandt 2017, 2021). While the genetic material used is the donor's, it is primarily not the donor's actions that cause the donor-conceived individual to exist. The donor's material is used by healthcare professionals—if the insemination or fertilisation is done in a clinic—at the request of the intended parents, who determine the timing and the combination of genetic materials as well as deciding who will gestate. Thus the healthcare professionals as well as the intended parents stand in a proximate—possibly even more proximate—causal role to the creation of the offspring (on this point, see Hanna 2019, p. 269). The challenge to the causal theorist of parental obligations is to specify the relevant sense of cause without casting the net so widely that it includes healthcare professionals and others involved in creating the embryo. If the causal account is rejected—in favor of a voluntarist view, for example—the donor's causal role in creating the child need not entail that they have any special obligation to the child, particularly if they act under a reasonable expectation that their act will not give rise to any such obligations.[7]

But there is a further point: even if one accepts, due to the causal view or for another reason, that procreators do have special responsibilities, *they are not the only people who have special responsibilities to children, or to other adults*. Consider that a decent society ensures children are clothed, fed, sheltered, and so on—even if their parents or procreators do not provide food, shelter, clothing, and so on. We should, as far as we are able, ensure that children's significant subjective interests—of the kind that allow them to develop into adults—are satisfied. Such a duty falls on all who are able to satisfy it, although typically it can be coordinated through the state (see, e.g., Brownlee 2020, Chapter 2.5). In general, society should see to it that the needs of children are met, by providing education, healthcare, and nutrition. In many cases this can be carried out institutionally. But in some cases, similar to a duty of easy rescue, only particular people may be able to provide for these subjective significant interests, and the duty may fall on them.

Knowledge of one's genetic relatives is such a case. If donor-conceived people have significant subjective interests in knowing genetic relatives, perhaps social

[6] The view that parental obligations are transferable is controversial; see, e.g., Bayne 2003, Brandt 2017, Weinberg 2016.

[7] Granted, there is live debate over the nature and extent of procreative responsibilities which we cannot resolve here (see, e.g., Brandt 2020). This brief rehearsal of a common objection to the causal view makes the point that Groll's view here depends on a more fundamental claim, which itself requires defense.

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institutions should facilitate the knowledge and connections that would permit satisfying the interest. At the very least, they should not prevent them. But a duty to satisfy this interest may fall on those uniquely placed to do so, if this is possible without other violations. Like the duty of easy rescue, the duty falls on those uniquely placed to carry it out—in this case, by being genetically related to the donor-conceived person. Such interests could ground claims against any genetic relatives (perhaps uniquely) in a position to satisfy them. It may be that there is no-one so placed, or that forcing contact would risk greater moral violations. But while forced contact would violate bodily rights (Thomson 1971), there could be a moral duty to engage in such interactions (see Brownlee 2020 and Collins 2013 for recent arguments that we can have such duties to interact or befriend) —although such views are also contentious.

Of course, the argument for the 'right to know' depends on these interests being extremely weighty. But the point of the analogy is not that interests in knowing one's relatives are as weighty as interests in having basic needs satisfied, but that we can have duties to satisfy certain interests of others even when we have not explicitly undertaken this. Such claims to interaction can be grounded within the burgeoning literature on social human rights (see Brownlee 2020).

Although the duty to satisfy significant subjective interests of adults is less stringent than the duty to satisfy significant subjective interests of children, for adults who have lacked adequate contact with genetic relatives *since childhood*, the interests they have as adults could have special moral status because they issue from having lacked something since childhood. Just as a child who has been malnourished, leading to health problems as an adult, may have special claims to assistance on grounds of compensation, so too may adults in this position. These comparisons between relationship knowledge of genetic relatives and medical needs may seem forced. However, if relationship knowledge of genetic relatives is a significant enough interest to trigger duties of procreative beneficence, as Groll argues, then it may be a comparable interest to those involved in physical and mental health.

These are the broader implications of Groll's view. If genetic knowledge is a significant subjective interest which can ground a moral claim, people lacking knowledge of a wide range of relatives would have a (*pro tanto*) claim to genetic knowledge against genetic relatives who are not their procreators. Moreover, not only donor-conceived people would have such claims, but anyone lacking relationships with their genetic relatives. If knowledge of one's origins is instrumental to self-knowledge, knowledge of only one genetic relative, a procreator, appears insufficient.

There is a further implication: not only is creating children who will not know their biological kin morally problematic, but estrangement from one's biological family is *pro tanto* problematic as well, because it deprives relatives of a contributor to the sum of people who bear the resemblance. Granted, this may be so to a smaller degree than estranging a child from all of their genetic relatives on one side (through gamete donation) or even both sides (through embryo donation), but the difference here is one of degree. If several genetic relatives have already estranged themselves—or the group was already small—then the impact of each new estrangement is more significant.

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If the foregoing is correct, self-knowledge arguments face a dilemma. If the interest in knowing one's genetic relatives is not strong enough to ground a claim against genetic relatives, then such a claim, it would seem, could not weigh heavily in the ethics of procreation. If the interest in knowing one's genetic relatives is strong enough to ground a moral claim, then this moral claim is also held against non-procreator genetic relatives and the institutions through which society facilitates child welfare. Moreover, it is a claim to a relationship—but as we argue in the next section, claims to relationships lead to another dilemma.

6. Relationships and Refusal

As we have seen, self-knowledge arguments entail that many people have claims to extensive interaction, amounting to a personal relationship, with genetic relatives. This in itself is surprising. This point is not just of academic interest: new genetic technologies and services have stimulated public interest in genetic connections, as discovered through services such as ancestry.com.

It has been argued elsewhere that one cannot have a claim to force another to enter a personal relationship, understood as consisting in sustained patterns of interaction characterized by certain attitudes (Brake 2023, p. 22; for a stronger view, see Thomson 1971). If so (and such views are admittedly contentious), this creates a dilemma for views such as Groll's. If self-knowledge arguments seem to entail that donor-conceived people have a moral claim to enter relationships with genetic relatives, but no-one can have such a moral claim, then it seems Groll faces a choice. On the one hand, it could be that gamete donation is impermissible, since one necessary condition for its permissibility (i.e., the claim to a relationship) is morally impossible (because no-one can have such a claim). On the other hand, it could be that gamete donation is permissible; in this case, gamete donation does not require (impossibly) a moral claim to enter a relationship, which suggests that the interest in knowing genetic relatives is not significant enough to ground a moral claim. More generally, self-knowledge arguments must accept either that there can be moral claims to enter relationships or else that the interest in knowing genetic relatives is not strong enough to ground a moral claim.

Procreative ethicists have sometimes suggested that genetic ties ground claims to relationships. For example, Margaret Little writes that genetic relatives (among others) have a claim to openness to a relationship: "If biology per se carries any relevance, I want to argue, it is at this level. … They [biological connections] provide children with a moral claim that the person so related be open toward developing a deeper relationship…." (Little 1999, pp. 307–308; compare Harman 2022, Kolodny 2010). To explain, personal relationships consist in an evolving series of interactions; they involve a degree of intimacy, defined as sharing knowledge or experiences one would not share with a stranger; and, as *personal*, they involve the attitude of viewing the other as non-fungible, e.g., someone paid to interact and viewing the other purely as a client, replaceable by any other client, would likely not be in a personal relationship (see Brake 2023, Kolodny 2003). As Little points out, because relationships involve certain attitudes or emotions, there cannot be a direct claim to them: the claim is rather to openness to a relationship: "Some people arrive with a

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claim to my openness: they have a prior connection that serves, as it were, as a substrate to the fuller one.... (I say an openness to the relationship because personal relationships are partly constituted by emotions and interconnection of psyche. The claim someone presents thus cannot be a direct claim that I enter the relationship, but a claim that I be open to those connections – to interactions, say, that could lead to their development.)" (Little 1999, pp. 307–8) Indeed, this class of views is referenced in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on gamete donation: "Another kind of non-parental obligation that gamete donors might have is to remain open to the possibility of forming relationships with their biological offspring, though this openness does not entail an obligation to in fact form such relationships." (Brandt, Wilkinson and Williams 2021, citing Little 1999; Kolodny 2010) The idea that there is a claim to (openness to) a relationship with one's genetic relatives also seems to (inchoately) underlie some uses of genetic matching sites.

However, there are reasons to think we have a right to refuse relationships. Arguably, no-one can have a claim that others view one as non-fungible, much less a claim to love or affection (see Brake 2011, but contrast Liao 2015). Little's proposed claim to openness to a relationship would require that the agent engage in relationship-initiating activities. To the extent that this requires certain attitudes, it may be liable to a similar objection, that we cannot place others under a duty to have certain emotions or attitudes towards us. For example, we could imagine someone who is so distressed to learn about her parent's infidelity that she cannot open herself to a relationship with a newly identified half-sibling.

Second, claims to interaction arguably limit freedom unacceptably. I can promise to meet with you at a certain time, and thereby obligate myself to do so. But it is less clear that I can successfully promise to interact with you repeatedly, revealing intimate details of my life, for the purpose of your self-knowledge, 18+ years in the future. This is the case of a gamete donor agreeing to interact with offspring when they reach majority.

Finally, claims to interaction impose burdens of the kind which ground rights to refuse a relationship. The significant harms to mental health of bad relationships, including unwanted relationships, ground a right to refuse relationships. There are additional interests grounding such a right: the interests in autonomously shaping one's identity and in avoiding special obligations which arise within relationships (see Brake 2023). A right to refuse relationships will trump claims of another to a relationship. But 'mere' interaction imposes similar burdens, especially in the case of genetic relatives.

To these general arguments for a right to refuse relationships we can add interests specifically related to the distinctive burdens of relationships with genetic relatives. Procreators may have an identity interest in avoiding a relationship. So too might unwitting genetic relatives. Insofar as family is a key contributor to identity, there is a significant identity interest in determining our family membership. While we cannot control, of course, whether we actually have a half-sibling, we can control whether or not we interact or enter a relationship with them, with the identity-shaping effects that will have.

Just as there are distinctive burdens related to the identity interest in one's family membership, there are distinctive burdens related to the kinds of demands genetic

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relatives may make on us. Genetic relatives may impose distinctive demands for care and connection. Unrealistic expectations of those who have sought out 'lost' relatives could affect the mental health of those on whom they are projected as well as those doing the projection. Those seeking genetic relatives in order to 'mirror' themselves in them or to assist their personal identity formation may project expectations onto them: one can be a disappointment to somebody without ever having done anything to create expectations.

Again, someone might object along the lines of the causal theory. We might think procreators' responsibility limits their right to refuse relationships: "If someone knowingly and voluntarily causes someone to be needy of a relationship, her refusal to be a party to it can be plausibly viewed as a rejection of the needy person." (Olsaretti 2017, p. 75, cited in Gheaus 2021, p. 439)

But this returns us to the point that the causal theory itself faces challenges. First, on one view of what procreators owe, they are responsible for procreative costs required to bring children to sufficiency, not to satisfy all significant interests (Brake 2010). Second, creating a being who needs a relationship does not entail that the *creator* must fill that need. Although the debate over the causal view goes beyond the scope of this article, we note that the canvassed objection depends on premises which are not uncontroversial. Finally, as a practical matter, we shouldn't underestimate how much procreation results from forced pregnancy (in the U.S., this may be a stunningly large group, given lack of access to reproductive healthcare and sex education): not only can procreation be involuntary, but a genetic relative looking for connection may awaken old wounds and add to burdens on those who had little control of their own fertility.

What is the upshot of all this for gamete donation? One could bite the bullet and conclude that, considering donor-conceived people's interests, donors ought only to donate when they *and* their close genetic relatives are open to a relationship with those conceived. However, this would amount to committing oneself—and one's own genetic relatives—to a relationship in the future.

More generally, self-knowledge arguments must either hold that the interest in knowing one's genetic relatives is strong enough to trump the right to refuse relationships, or that it is not. If the latter, the arguments lose much of their bite. If the former, then they must acknowledge the claims of those who find relatives on genetic matching sites.

The latter route could be made more plausible by adopting the institutional approach mentioned above. What if governments, as opposed to specific individuals, were primarily charged with satisfying these interests (as a matter of child welfare, say, or compensation for childhood deprivation)? These claims could be administered institutionally. The state could create conditions for satisfying the significant interests by, as is already being done in some legislatures, creating genetic matching databases for those seeking relationships with genetic relatives. This could link those who are open to a relationship, creating the infrastructure for connections through which they could answer the identity questions posed above. At the moment, though, even initiatives that extend the scope of possible future contact from donor-conceived children to others such as donor siblings tend not to go further than those involved in in the donation (as donors or donor-conceived). For now,

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recommendations to move from expectations of secrecy to an understanding that gamete donation may create expectations between donor-conceived people and the donors *and* the donors' close genetic kin (see e.g. ESHRE Working Group on Gamete Donation 2022) are a way forward.

7. Implications

The answer to the broad question of what we owe genetic relatives has implications across our lives. It touches on the ethics of exit from genetic families and on how we should respond to previously unknown genetic relatives. It touches on the ethics of procreation beyond gamete donation—for example, on cases of bereaved family members claiming to use stored gametes from deceased relatives to create children. And it stands to have significant bearing on policy, such as government regulation of assisted reproductive technologies.[8]

Many people clearly have an interest in genetic ties following traumatic experiences of injustice. Beyond the donor conceived, this includes families torn apart during war or through kidnapping in the process of enslavement or forced resettlement or placement in residential schools or the child welfare system (Roberts 2022, Russell 2023). We do not mean to dismiss the interest in connecting with genetic relatives. Such cases should press against the intuition that genetic ties are simply arbitrary from a moral point of view.

We have not aimed to give a positive account of the significance of genetic ties here. Our point is rather that common explanations of this significance in the philosophical literature suggest that the interest would also be satisfied by meeting genetic relatives beyond the procreator, and in some cases could only be satisfied in this way; and that the interest can only be satisfied through relational interaction. If such an interest generates moral claims, these claims extend beyond the procreator to other relatives. Returning to the title question: what do we owe our genetic relatives? What self-knowledge arguments imply, if they accept that there can be claims to relationships, is that we may owe extensive interaction to any and all genetic relatives. To some, this may be so implausible as to suggest that something has gone badly wrong with self-knowledge arguments. But this article has sought to open, rather than close, discussion of this question.

Finally, we give a somewhat speculative account of why our guiding question is so important at this historical moment. Developments in assisted reproduction as well as genetic matching sites are encouraging people to attribute ethical significance to genetic ties. Likewise, genetic technologies (and the industries which profit from them) encourage us to expect genetic ties to do the work of relationships in our lives: to provide stories and connections which make life meaningful.

Intimacy and genetic ties may, but do not necessarily, overlap. Building a family tree based on genetic connections enforces the idea that genetic ties are the significant ties between people and displaces actual relationships founded on care, intimacy, and long-term interaction. It also disregards choices to exit or build intimate relationships

[8] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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in ways that do not align with genetic ties. We risk discounting and disregarding caring relationships when we choose to invest genetic ties with meaning. For these reasons, getting clear on what we can claim, and why, is a useful corrective of bionormative ideals of family—but also beneficial for donor-conceived people and others who cannot establish a relationship with their genetic relatives.

Many interests, including the profit motives of genetic testing companies, are converging to suggest that genetic ties provide meaningful connections, even in the absence of shared history or prior relationships. We should not let this emphasis occlude the importance of social relationships and care from those who are not genetic relatives.[9]

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