

20

COMING TO TERMS

Ethics, Motherhood, and the Cultural
Science Fiction of the Gene

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I went in search of my roots and had my DNA tested and I am a Zulu.

Oprah Winfrey¹

Within the DNA is written not only our histories as individuals but the whole history of the human race. With the aid of recent advances in genetic technology, this history is now being revealed. We are at last able to begin to decipher the messages from the past. Our DNA does not fade like an ancient parchment; it does not rust in the ground like the sword of a warrior long dead. It is not eroded by wind or rain, nor reduced to ruin by fire and earthquake. It is the traveller from an antique land who lives within us all.

Bryan Sykes, *The Seven Daughters of Eve*

INTRODUCTION

I begin this chapter with a public statement by Oprah Winfrey and a passage from the first page of Bryan Sykes's international bestseller *The Seven Daughters of Eve* (2001). Both demonstrate the tremendous extent to which our popular understanding of kinship – and motherhood in particular – has become “genetic,” mediated by discourses on the gene and genetic technologies. In what follows, I address the ethical implications of this new understanding of motherhood. I argue that mainstream “genetic” discourses, exemplified by Winfrey and Sykes, have come to frame what it means to be a good mother. These discourses offer a

moralizing vocabulary that masquerades as Science and Truth. While they provide a ready-made vocabulary for a woman to “come to terms” with motherhood in its increasingly genetic and technological dimensions, I argue that these terms ultimately instrumentalize the maternal relation, reducing what should be an ethical relation to one that is procedural, calculative, and ostensibly the domain of science. The “science” of the gene, and the ways that it is deployed as a moral discourse on motherhood, should best be acknowledged as a cultural science fiction.

In what follows, I demonstrate first how the cultural science fiction of the gene is leading toward the geneticization and technologization of motherhood and the maternal relation. I argue that this idea of motherhood is fast becoming the paradigm of the ethically good mother – the mother whose relation to her child is mediated by genetic terminology and who submits to genetic technologies, experts, and tests as a pre-parental duty. I will suggest that this paradigm limits the ways a mother can conceive of her relation to her own body and to her child. I demonstrate this through the deceptive ways that Bryan Sykes depicts motherhood as genetic in his popular book, *The Seven Daughters of Eve*. Next, I discuss the work of two well-known bioethicists, Margaret Somerville and Leon R. Kass, both of whom appeal to “science” and “nature” to make their claims about ethical motherhood. Ultimately, what they really offer, again, is a cultural science fiction, naturalized categories that severely delimit the terms of motherhood and the maternal relation. In response, in the final pages of this chapter, I turn briefly to the work of Adriana Cavarero, a feminist philosopher, who allows us to imagine motherhood as an ethical relation that is not mediated by the gene and genetic technologies – locating ethics in the “scene of infancy,” a deeply embodied and sonorous bond that joins mother and child.²

WEIRD SCIENCE

Reading from the opening page of Sykes's book, above, we find a broad array of metaphors meant to instruct the average reader in the “science” of DNA. We are told that genes are a kind of “writing,” a historical record of sorts, at once personal and political, situating the individual within the vast history of the human race itself. In these lines we are called, rhetorically, to assume responsibility not just for ourselves, but also as actors who must look both backwards and forwards in time, and whose actions form part of a vital link in those histories that were and that will be. But if our genes are a form of “writing” that is historical and

historicizing – a “book of life”³ – then reading the presumably unbroken “message” in this text is more complicated than these metaphors might suggest. “Writing” must be “deciphered,” as Sykes says.⁴ But by whom? While our genetic code predates us and will outlast those of us who have children, only the expert can read it, and the expert’s interpretation relies on “advances in genetic technology.” So if genes carry ethical implications, it is unclear where that ethical responsibility lies. If it is *my* responsibility, “I” am nevertheless beholden to a science and technology that exceeds me and that offers alien terms for the self; perhaps I have no personal expertise in genetics, no familiarity with genetic technologies, and so on. I am armed only with metaphors. And if, in some sense, it can be said that I *am* my genes, where then is the locus of my responsibility with respect to my genes and to who I am? Moreover, in what terms shall I assume responsibility for my children as the historical genetic expression of my genes and of me?

Sykes does not hesitate to personify the gene, calling it a “traveller from an antique land who lives within us all.”⁵ For some, such as those carrying genetic markers for certain diseases, this traveller must seem like an uninvited and unwelcome guest. From an ethical perspective, the metaphor of the traveller points to a conundrum that has emerged with the mapping of the human genome and burgeoning genetic technologies in reproductive medicine: the gene begs the question of ethical agency in novel ways. Traditionally, biomedical ethics is founded on and presumes personal agency, an individual’s capacity to act and to decide for herself, autonomously. In the Western tradition, autonomy harks back to Enlightenment principles of human reason; as a political right, achieving this recognition has been a long and difficult battle for women, who, until recently, have not been considered as fully autonomous, rational, or even as the rightful owners of their bodies by men and by a paternalistic medical establishment. If we now admit, however, that our genes enjoy a kind of “agency,” that they act in us and on us, according to their own logical code, then the traditional principle of autonomous, rational agency – that being I call “I,” that self for whom I am answerable, ethically – is displaced onto or into my genes. If, by these lights, a woman’s genes can be said to have rights, will a woman still have a right to choose? This is a weird science, indeed.

I have argued elsewhere that bioethics has yet to address the challenges of technological advances,⁶ but what interests me here are the wider cultural effects of genetic discourses, and in particular, the cultural forms in and through which a mother’s ethical responsibility is mediated

and experienced. I will claim that the cultural effects of these discourses have become *naturalized* in such a way as to conceal the crisis in bioethics. After all, if genetic and other molecular sciences demonstrate that human behaviour must refer to our genes rather than to a rational and autonomous “self” or “person,” then we can no longer presume that this self or person is the unequivocal source of her own agency, reason, or freedom. The repercussions are legion, not just for reproductive medicine, but for Western culture in general, including our legal-judicial complex, the institution of democratic governance, and capitalist economies, to name just a few cultural forms that presume an autonomous and rational subject. If such a subject is shown to be a myth, these institutions will find themselves without substance. But acknowledging that selfhood or personhood is a cultural form, as I do here, does not in itself abrogate us of ethical responsibility, despite what some critics of post-modernism might think. On the contrary, I argue that it is *only* by acknowledging these cultural formations as such that we might resist the dangerous naturalization of these forms – a naturalization that opens the door to social and political abuses in the name of Science and Nature. In other words, I argue that as “genetic” discourses circulate culturally and produce cultural effects, in some instances these effects are conceived and promoted as “natural,” and therefore *beyond* cultural criticism. This ideological move is dangerous because it provides a platform for troubling conservative sociopolitical agendas while rhetorically immunizing them from critique. Instead, I will suggest that the ethical mother ought to resist the naturalizing effects of genetic discourses and engage in the ongoing practice of cultural critique.

GENETIC “HERITAGE”

Sykes’s book exemplifies the ways cultural forms become naturalized. And Sykes writes with the backing of institutional authority: he is a geneticist at Oxford University. His book claims that through analysis of mitochondrial DNA, which is passed on intact through maternal descent, modern Europeans can be traced back to a total of only seven women or “clan mothers” from the distant past. Sykes tells the story of the Iceman, whose 5,000-year-old corpse was discovered frozen in the Italian Alps in 1991. Remarkably, the Iceman’s DNA was tested, cross-referenced with databases of recent DNA samples, and found to be a match with one Marie Moseley, an Irishwoman living in Dorset, England. In some sense, this story is as much about Moseley as it is about the Iceman; it is a story

about kinship relations in the genetic age, how we are coming to relate to our own genetic material – an unprecedented, new form of family relation. Moseley's name was released to the press and she became a celebrity overnight. But what is most fascinating is how Moseley experienced what some might call an ethical relation to her distant and hitherto unknown ancestor. Sykes writes, "One of the strangest and, at first, surprising things about this story ... is that Marie began to feel something for the Iceman. She had seen pictures of him being shunted around from glacier to freezer to post-mortem room, poked and prodded, opened up, bits cut off. To her, he was no longer just the anonymous curiosity whose picture had appeared in the papers and on television. She had started to think of him as a real person and as a relative."⁷ Sykes admits he is fascinated by the way Moseley began to sense a kinship with the Iceman, but his initial surprise soon yields to the suggestion that her feelings are only "natural."

In his book, Sykes traces his own line of descent back to one of the seven primordial clan women, whom he has named "Tara": "I know that I am a descendant of Tara, and I want to know about her and her life. I feel I have something in common with her, more so than I do with the others."⁸ Sykes moves between "knowing" and "feeling" with apparent ease, though it is unclear how his "knowledge" relates to his "feelings," whether or how they stand in a causal relation, or what these feelings might actually mean. Instead, he offers an elaborate narrative of what life must have been like for "Tara." He writes, "The streams held small trout and crayfish, which helped Tara to raise her family and held the pangs of hunger at bay when the menfolk failed to kill a deer or wild boar."⁹ Indeed, his book devotes a full chapter to each of the seven "clan mothers," a historical fiction worked up from archaeological knowledge of the time and place that each is imagined to have lived. And while he will not win any literary prizes, his stories are not bad. His reader is swept up into narratives that solicit an active identification. The narrative structures implicitly suggest that we each possess a genetic knowledge of our distant forebears, and that the desire to know them and the desire to personify them are as natural as DNA itself.

Sykes's book concludes with the dizzying image of himself connected to his original clan mother, "Tara," in an unbroken genetic lineage made visible and marked by extreme pathos:

I am on a stage ... I have in my hand the end of the thread which connects me to my ancestral mother way at the back. I pull on the

thread and one woman's face in every generation, feeling the tug, looks up at me ... They are my ancestors ... I want to ask them each in turn about their lives, their hopes and their disappointments, their joys and their sacrifices. I speak, but they cannot hear. Yet I feel a strong connection. These are all my mothers who passed this precious messenger from one to another through a thousand births, a thousand screams, a thousand embraces of a thousand new-born babies. The thread becomes an umbilical cord.¹⁰

The "messenger" here is mitochondrial DNA that has a similar genetic sequence, but Sykes's imaginative description recasts this molecular reality as a "strong connection," a heartstring, or even love – a moment of hysteria that the reader must raise up and take on faith. Can we reject his image – "all my mothers" – without committing matricide? I believe we must. For Sykes, DNA has unproblematically become social, the embodiment of a desire, a moment of revelation and truth. Stranger still, he thinks that this ancient genetic heritage also influences and guides our social relations today: "When two people find out that they are in the same clan they often experience this feeling of connection. Very few can put it into words, but it is most definitely there."¹¹

While Sykes admits at the end of his book that DNA does not exactly *cause* such feelings of kinship, and that DNA merely "traces the links" that presumably are already there and shared among "clan members," we might think back to Moseley, whose feelings are in fact wholly attributable to the *cultural* significance of genes because her feelings for the Iceman did not predate her knowledge of their genetic similarity. If DNA is, as Sykes eventually claims, "a token or a symbol of the shared ancestry it reveals,"¹² he is nevertheless unable to offer a *scientific* account for any "feelings" of kinship, and thus he contributes to a "genetic" discourse in which DNA becomes the site at which such feelings are at once produced and naturalized – not because the gene is a mere "token" or "symbol," but because it has great cultural significance, is thought to hold a tremendous power of explanation and revelation, and is interwoven with seductive narratives of origin as warm and comfortable as an old pair of fuzzy slippers.

I have argued thus far that Sykes's story effectively naturalizes what should best be described as the cultural values and interpretations of the gene that enjoy wide circulation, a cultural science fiction. While Sykes places great emphasis on the power of genetic technologies to trace our ancestry, and while we might grant that his more scientific work makes

an important contribution to genetics, the substance of his popular book is a question of culture. His narrative does not hesitate to assign a greater cultural – indeed, quasi-religious – meaning to genes, and he posits that our feelings and gut reactions are natural and normal, rather than generated through cultural discourses, such as his own and others like it. It is not that science should not tell a good story; it should, but without losing sight of verifiable evidence. Sykes's almost Pentecostal speculations on the community of spirit shared by "clan members" and on the purportedly "natural" feelings associated with these kinship relations – all delivered anecdotally, without a shred of scientific evidence – should have no place alongside serious scientific work, which falsely lends a kind of scientific credence to mere opinion and fantasy. Indeed, one can see why racists have seized on Sykes's theory, since it supports an essentialist understanding of races or "clans," and justifies feelings of racial difference, if not racial "preference," in the name of "science."¹³ I have discussed Sykes at length because his book is a bestseller with wide popular appeal. And it helps us to understand how genetic discourse enters the mainstream; like a good song or religious text, the story of the gene is malleable enough to serve all manner of cultural needs. Certainly, the desire to narrativize one's own history and pre-history is strong in our culture. Oprah Winfrey has capitalized on and further popularized genetic discourses through the public search for her own genetic "heritage." But belonging to the Zulu tribe, enjoying that identity, and being part of that rich history and culture, is irreducible to a genetic sequence in one's mitochondrial DNA – much more complex than Winfrey's identity claim.

My contention here is that wider cultural norms and discourses affect the presentation and uptake of discourses that are ostensibly scientific. We must therefore exercise a critical vigilance in assessing scientific claims. In this view, ethics cannot simply be an extension of scientific findings, as if these findings were somehow natural, as if they were evidentially pure and immediately true, or as if they presented propositions that asked only for rejection or consent based on "feelings." Ethics is a more troublesome beast. To be ethical means that we must also take responsibility for the cultural norms and conditions that inform our scientific findings *and* our feelings alike. It is not enough to say that a nature/culture binary operates here because the ultimate meaning of natural science is always, at some level, cultural: science is significant and meaningful because it bears upon the human lifeworld, because its findings have cultural implications, and more generally, because culture itself provides the ultimate frame within which science will be understood – the terms and language within which

anything at all can appear. This is not to deny the material existence of the gene; of course there are bodies and diseases, a material basis for genetic realities and their effects. But how these figure for us, their significance and meaning, will depend on the cultural conventions in and through which they are represented. Our ethical responsibility thus extends beyond individual bodies, beyond those "facts" presumed to be "natural," and beyond discrete disciplinary discourses that each define them in their own way – from genomic science to the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Ethical responsibility extends in space and time, from the cultural presentation and uptake of science to the historical dimensions within which both science and culture are formed and reformed.

GENETIC "ORPHANS"

I would like to turn now to the work of Margaret Somerville, which, like Sykes's, conflates scientific and cultural discourses in complex and dangerous ways. Somerville is the founding director of the Centre for Medicine, Ethics, and Law at McGill University. She is described as a renowned ethicist and is the recipient of many honorary doctorates and awards. Her work receives tremendous publicity and support through the popular media. Consider a recent article written for the *Ottawa Citizen*, titled "A Natural Fear." Here Somerville argues that our popular feelings of fear and disgust are natural and should form the basis for ethical decision-making. In a nutshell, "we should heed our 'yuck' reaction,"¹⁴ a feeling she describes as a "moral intuition" that we ought not in any way to repress. This view seems indisputable and perhaps even prudent in the context of a small field of genetic research that proposes the combination of human and non-human DNA. Her article focuses on this marginal research. The point is driven home visually, too, since the article contains a photograph of a lab rat with a human ear growing on its back. The image is enough to make any reasonable person shudder, and lends rhetorical support to a position that argues for the "naturalness" of feelings, the human "yuck factor."

But the "yuck factor" that Somerville extols seems uncertain when we apply it to less extreme cases. Much of Somerville's work argues that new reproductive technologies are unethical on just this "natural" ground. For example, she argues that the creation of children through sperm or ovum donation is unethical. And she has campaigned tirelessly against same-sex marriage because, in her view, it legitimates unnatural forms of reproduction – those outside the bounds of procreative heterosexual sex within the

traditional institution of marriage. She writes, "it is inherently wrong to transmit life, intending that a child should result, other than by sexual reproduction though the union of the natural ovum from one identified, living, adult woman and the natural sperm from one identified, living, adult man."¹⁵ However, not all of us feel a natural disgust when we think of new reproductive procedures or the myriad kinship relations with which they might be associated. Indeed, as she herself states (in alarmist tones), the latest Canadian census shows that "married Canadians are in the minority and the number of common-law and same-sex partners, including those with children, and single parents have increased."¹⁶ These numbers alone suggest the extent to which social mores have changed in Canadian culture. But Somerville laments the loss of the nuclear family, arguing in favour of this institution from the viewpoint of the child, which she imaginatively occupies. She refers to children born outside the sanctity of heterosexual matrimony as "genetic orphans." She claims that a child is born with a "biological," "genetic," and "natural" *right* both to know his or her biological parents and to be raised by them.¹⁷ But it is unclear how seamlessly the language of rights maps onto biology, since rights are typically understood in sociopolitical terms. The link is not made. While Somerville claims that "genetic relationship goes to our deepest roots of who we are and to whom we bond,"¹⁸ it is questionable the extent to which our personal identity, kinship bonds, or political rights are, at their root, genetic. Somerville's discourse is, then, a counterpart to Sykes's: where he exploits feelings of belonging as a sign of genetic "heritage," Somerville exploits feelings of alienation or abandonment as a sign of genetic "orphanage."

By calling such children "genetic orphans," Somerville recasts a cultural category as "scientific" and mobilizes our feelings surrounding "orphans" as something ostensibly "natural." Although she does not mention him, the work of the American bioethicist Leon R. Kass certainly informs Somerville's position. Kass is a medical doctor and an academic who served as chairman of President George W. Bush's Council on Bioethics from 2001 through 2005. To understand what is at stake in "feeling" arguments such as Sykes's and Somerville's, it is worth looking at Kass's (1997) seminal article, "The Wisdom of Repugnance." In a nutshell, Kass claims that when we think of emerging reproductive technologies, we feel a natural and immediate repugnance. His other words are: "offensive," "grotesque," "revolting," "repulsive." Some, like Somerville, have called this the "yuck factor." Kass writes that it is precisely in such an emotional response that "we intuit and feel, immediately and without argument, the violation of

things that we rightfully hold dear."¹⁹ Capitalizing on a culture of anti-intellectualism, he claims that "repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity."²⁰ Kass is interested in establishing a universally true morality, and he finds in repugnance "the deep ethical norms and intuitions of the human community."²¹

Critics have responded to Kass, stating that emotion alone cannot and ought not to be the basis for morality. Martha Nussbaum, for example, correctly points out that, historically, such spurious reasoning has supported all manner of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.²² Here we might think of the racist's repugnance in the face of mixed-race marriage; the racist would claim that his strong emotional reaction is "natural," and hence justified as a universal norm. But philosophers and scientists alike oppose this view, understanding that emotions are dialogical, social, and historical. While Kass sees such emotions as "natural," and while we might indeed have come to *experience* them as "natural," "intuitively correct," and "immediate," emotions should best be understood as culturally mediated, a sort of "second nature," perhaps, that ought to be subject to cultural critique. *We must be held responsible for our emotions precisely because they are not wholly natural.* And who, we must ask, is this "human community" – this "we" – that is unproblematically presumed by Kass and Somerville? It is unlikely that there is a common "we" who shares their particular intuitions and feelings. Our multiethnic and multifaith society does not guarantee Kass or Somerville their premise, which calls into question what will count as a shared or universal sense of "the natural."

In an essay titled "The End of Courtship," Kass expresses deep regret that birth control technologies rob women of their "destiny," which he sees as motherhood: "Thanks to technology a woman could declare herself free from the teleological meaning of her sexuality – as free as a man appears to be from his. Her menstrual cycle, since puberty a regular reminder of her natural maternal destiny, is now anovulatory and directed instead by her will and her medications, serving goals only of pleasure and convenience ... She has, wittingly or not, begun to redefine the meaning of her own womanliness."²³ Such a statement might seem extraordinary from a man who was, for many years, arguably the most powerful bioethicist in the USA, responsible for public policy, and shaping public opinion. Feminists have worked for decades to challenge this biology-as-destiny model of "womanliness"; and these challenges have included not just a critique of "natural" versus "artificial," but subtler analyses of who is authorized to speak on behalf of women everywhere.

In a more recent publication, Kass demonstrates with particular clarity how his view of “nature” is, I would say, nothing but a guise to further his own neoconservative political agenda. The text in question is a 700-page study on the Book of Genesis in which Kass argues for a supposedly “unmediated reading” of Genesis. Now wearing his theologian’s hat, he seeks to find in this Old Testament book a single and harmonious message that would morally guide humanity, which ultimately demonstrates that his view of bioethics, while ostensibly “natural,” is no more than a matter of faith or superstition.

ALLEGORIES OF “THE NATURAL”

To offer one example of how “the natural” can categorically justify all manner of abuse, consider Kass’s comments on the practice of routine infant (male) circumcision. I find his position to be shocking and unethical in the extreme. And I mention it here because in North America, the decision whether to circumcise her baby boy might be the first – but lasting – ethical decision that a mother makes in relation to her newborn infant’s body. Kass writes that circumcision is “a taming of maleness, putting men into the service of the (more traditionally womanly) work of child rearing.”²⁴ But what exactly is “natural” here? Is the human body natural, or is it natural to mutilate and “tame” this body in the service of fatherhood and “clan” or “family values”? It is impossible to retrace the moral argument back to nature; rather, it is Kass’s interpretation of a religious text that is “naturalized.” Elsewhere Kass concedes that circumcision is “conventional” and “artificial” because it is a religious sign of God’s covenant, but amazingly he maintains that it is also “natural”: “It is [first] the memorial of an agreement that deems it necessary (hence, conventional); [second] it must be made by man (hence, artificial); yet [third] it is marked in the organ of generation (hence, also natural).”²⁵ How, one wonders, is something “natural” just because it is done to natural sex organs? This logic would sanctify rape! Kass’s contradiction can only be explained as a personal cultural view that he goes to great lengths to justify and naturalize. To those like me who feel a repugnance toward Kass’s view, his answer might be that our repugnance is perverse, unnatural, and thus not a true expression of moral wisdom. He is authorized, presumably, to police our feelings and desires, silencing us before we can speak. This posture of moral authority won Kass the dubious title, “the ethics cop,” by CNN and *Time* magazine.²⁶

In Canada, Somerville deserves to be awarded a similar title for her crusade. In her CBC Massey Lectures, published as *The Ethical Imagination* (2006), she takes aim at critics like me who, she imagines, represent “an increasingly prevalent, postmodern, politically correct approach that neutralizes language to abolish difference.”²⁷ Her grasp of postmodern theory is weak and confused, stating that these positions hold that “natural differences between the sexes and in gender don’t exist,” and that “they are just constructs.”²⁸ Ironically, Somerville’s gesture itself “neutralizes language,” ignoring a wide body of literature that distinguishes sex from gender in important ways. Some of this literature suggests the importance of understanding gender as distinct from sex, particularly in the ways that gender is lived and experienced, lent social and cultural signification. Gender is not “constructed” out of thin air or simply invented; there is no such freedom. Discrimination and violations of the gendered body are all too real. Thus, it is unfair to characterize these critiques as “anything goes.” Even the category of “sex” – ostensibly a biological or natural category distinct from the cultural – must be understood in some sense as meaningful only within its social and historical contexts. Feminists and postmodernists, for the most part, do not argue that sex is simply “constructed,” as if bodies did not matter; on the contrary, these theorists often demonstrate precisely that the way these bodies *do* matter – in scientific as well as cultural discourses – means that we must attend to the social and historical significance of sex and sexual difference.²⁹

Somerville’s definition of “the natural” seems, on the surface, to take account of these sociohistorical dimensions. She claims that “the natural” is neither “purely biological” nor “purely a cultural construct,” but “involves a combination of biology and culture.”³⁰ But this more encompassing view of the natural is the ruse by which she will argue for the “naturalness” of only those cultural formations she herself endorses, calling them the “secular sacred”: “Some of these elements are biological, and some are a combination of biology and culture. It is their totality that makes up the natural in human nature.”³¹ But it soon becomes clear that by “natural” Somerville means “normal,” that is, adhering to her cultural norms. Unlike Kass, she does not seek recourse in the Old Testament, though she veers in this direction when she claims that procreative norms must be sanctified by normative heterosexual marriage. When these norms are transgressed, we (“normally”) are supposed to feel an “innate repugnance.” “It is possible,” she even suggests, “that repugnance could be genetically based.”³² She states that the ethical approach is a “basic presumption,” “a presumption in favour of respect

for the natural.”³³ This move “protects traditional values and wisdom” and “places the burden of proof of justification on those intervening to change the natural.”³⁴ The sleight of hand here is both that “the natural” encompasses normative cultural phenomena and that “the person relying on a basic presumption does not have to prove their case.”³⁵ Thus the default ethical position is that all traditional values are good because they are traditional, and that we must err on the side of protecting them, rather than critiquing them. She writes, “in situations of equal doubt, the position of the person who is favoured by the basic presumption prevails.”³⁶

My view is diametrically opposed to Somerville’s. Ethics is nothing if it is not the assiduous effort to call such norms into question, to err on the side of their critique, rather than to maintain the status quo. And there are good ethical reasons for doing so. First, “situations” are never truly “of equal doubt,” that is, all things are never equal. Prevalent positions or “basic presumptions” are usually supported by powerful institutions, practices, and beliefs, many of which might well be discriminatory, hateful, prejudicial. We must be mindful of the ways that race, class, gender, sexual orientation – to name just a few – operate to disable criticism and to limit the very terms by which one might formulate a critique in the first place, the coming to terms of ethics. Somerville’s position is remarkably naïve and ahistorical in this regard. She must believe that everyone is equal, that everyone has equal access to the resources – intellectual, material, and otherwise – that would help them to mount a critique, to satisfy the “burden of proof.” And here we must ask, who will decide when this “burden of proof” has been satisfied? Surely it will be those in power, those who control the terms of the discourse, the media apparatus, education, economic resources, and so on. Discriminatory practices require a vast machinery to operate. Somerville is either ignorant of or indifferent to these workings.

Indeed, Somerville is part of this machinery that shuts down ethical discourse in the name of the Natural and the Good. When she speaks of “genetic orphans,” she is part of a system that mobilizes and condones particular emotions, which she then dubs as “natural.” While I do not deny that children experience the desire to know their biological families, to understand this desire we should also take account of wider cultural discourses and the importance they place on our conceptions of “genetic heritage.” Rather than essentializing these desires as “biological” or “genetic,” an ethical approach might try to understand how kinship relations come to be signified and made significant. Certainly, as more children come into the world outside the normative bonds of holy heterosexual matrimony, perhaps it is time to re-think – and to honour

– the many forms of family life that we find in our society. In fact, everywhere we look we seem to find a growing number of “genetic orphans” who should resent such a moniker. This includes children brought into the world through new reproductive technologies, children who have two moms or two dads, children of separated or divorced parents, adopted children raised by non-biological parents, and so on. How is the adoptive mother who loves and cares for her child any less a mother? And even in those traditional nuclear families that Somerville favours, the DNA tests tell a different story. Consider the number of fathers who unknowingly raise another man’s (biological) child. According to one UK report, “estimates suggest that 5 per cent of the population may have a different father to the one they think they are related to.”³⁷ I should note that these findings were accidental, from DNA tests where paternity was not at issue (e.g., testing for congenital diseases). A Canadian report from the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto gives an even higher figure: “It’s now widely accepted among those who work in genetics that roughly 10 per cent of us are not fathered by the man we believe to be dad.”³⁸ These statistics raise many legal and ethical questions, but they demonstrate that fatherhood is irreducible to DNA; these men experienced themselves as dads and their children recognized them as such, at least until the results of the DNA test were announced.

CONCLUSION: RESISTING NATURALIZING GENETIC DISCOURSES

I have argued that scientists like Sykes, Somerville, and Kass act unethically insofar as they make claims about Nature and then maintain that they possess some kind of immediate access to scientific Truth. I have not argued that “anything goes” or that nature is no more than a “social construction,” as Somerville puts it. Instead, I contend that our ethics must extend beyond the gene, that we have a deep ethical responsibility for the effects of wider cultural discourses that circulate, and for the kind of cultural scientific significance we attach to genetics as we wrestle with the changing realities of kinship. This both expands the idea of ethical responsibility and shifts its locus towards relationality, away from the normative individualism of the Western tradition. I believe our reproductive technologies have advanced faster than our ability as a culture to come to terms with them and their effects. Certainly, we experience a kind of ethical vertigo as we look out onto this new terrain. We are unsure how to navigate. But this does not mean that our ethical discourse ought to capitulate to scientists and to a scientific lexicon, to find

in these people and their terms the whole truth of ethical parenthood. Rather, today more than ever, we need different perspectives. Genetic terminology can be reductive and essentializing; it encourages a woman to marshal her DNA as a kind of commodity and it responsabilizes her to avail herself of every latest genetic test. She begins to think of herself as a genetic subject and of her child as a genetic extension of herself. Such an approach eradicates difference and neutralizes the language within which ethical relations find their home.

How, then, might we foster a genuine respect for difference in a language that creates, rather than collapses, meaning? And how might we, at the same time, remain vigilant in the face of those forces that seek to advance their conservative social and political agendas in the guise of Nature, Science, and Truth?

Certainly, mothers occupy a privileged place in the life of a child, teaching that child the meaning of relationship long before he understands the logic of DNA. This relation is non-instrumentalizable, both independent of and unable to be reduced to genetic codes. Here I would like briefly to mention the work of the Italian feminist philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, whose book *For More Than One Voice* (2005) might offer us one way forward. In this book, Cavarero discusses the productive power of the maternal voice in relation to the infant. Characterized as a “la-la melody,” as a “wordless language,” or as a “duet,” the sonorous, vocalic exchange between a mother and her infant stands in stark contrast to the logical, signifying language of the Western philosophical tradition. The exchange between a mother and her child is meaningful in quite another way; it is material, resonant, rhythmic. As Cavarero writes, it is a “reciprocal invocation” between mother and child, “the condition of every communication.”³⁹ In other words, this embodied vocalic exchange is the condition of possibility for any logical thought because such thought always already presumes a pre-semantic relation between self and other, an ethical relation first forged in the maternal relation, in a “scene of infancy” that is prior to the institution of language proper. It is the formative ethical moment of being-with-another.

Cavarero’s is a critique of logocentrism and of Western metaphysics in general, a critique of the ways that women’s voices have been construed by this philosophical tradition as illogical. Her project recuperates the material, embodied aspect of the voice to demonstrate that it inaugurates an ethical relation because it is an address that asks “who are you?” rather than “what are you?” While Western metaphysics is poised to answer the question “what are you?” by filling in some logical content (“I am a Zulu”), asking “who are you?” invites a narrative response, a

self-questioning, and an open-ended to-and-fro relation between the interlocutors. “Who are you?” asks an existential question, and in doing so, opens a relation that promises to sustain our inability to provide an immediate and meaningful answer. The vocalic cadence of demand and response communicates the uniqueness of the speaker and the one to whom she speaks, without signifying the content of her speech in abstract logical terms. Although Cavarero does not mention it, I would suggest that genetic code is the ultimate expression of logocentrism and Western metaphysical thought, providing a “teleological meaning” to woman’s sex and casting reproduction as a natural “destiny,” to use Kass’s freighted term. From a feminist perspective, one might say that DNA finally realizes the phallogocentric dream of bringing reason and order to the realm of chance and chaos at the site of the female/maternal body. The “map” of the human genome is one means by which the body is colonized by medicine, rendered legible, or made to “speak” in particular ways – presumably revealing the secrets of human identity and life itself. Despite our deep desire to know who we are and where we come from, and despite the religious rhetoric in which it is frequently framed, DNA cannot answer these existential questions, nor can it make sense of the human relations that make such questions possible in the first place.

I am suggesting, then, that we read in Cavarero’s “scene of infancy” a metaphor for ethical motherhood. The vocalic exchange between mother and infant, which “precedes, generates, and exceeds verbal communication,”⁴⁰ is the site of an ethical relation that opens onto a proliferation of meanings and metaphors, fostering difference in a language that brings the ethical relation to term(s). In these terms, the mother does more than provide a genetic code; she works to ensure that her child’s life is meaningful, that it has existential significance, caring for the child by teaching that child how to care for himself. This is the way that ethical motherhood is mediated. It is this creative ethical dimension that we must explore as we strive to develop forms of cultural life that will adequately respond to the challenges raised by genetic technologies. This will not preclude a genetic understanding of the mother’s relation to her child, but it will help to ensure that these relations remain vigilant to the naturalizing effects of “genetic” discourses.

NOTES

1 “U.S. Chat Show Host Could be a Zulu,” *BBC News online*, 15 June 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4096706.stm>.

- 2 Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*.
- 3 Keller, *The Century of the Gene*, 54.
- 4 Sykes, *Seven Daughters of Eve*, 1.
- 5 Ibid., 1.
- 6 See Murray, "Care and the Self."
- 7 Sykes, *Seven Daughters of Eve*, 7–8.
- 8 Ibid., 9.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 289.
- 11 Ibid., 290.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 See, for instance, James Meek, "In Search of Eve's Daughters." *Guardian UK*, 11 June 2001, <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/medicallscience/story/0,,505080,00.html>.
- 14 Margaret Somerville, "A Natural Fear," *Ottawa Citizen*, 5 November 2007, <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=e77cef2d-od83-47c8-b6b2-9ce733d56919>.
- 15 Somerville, *Ethical Imagination*, 140.
- 16 Margaret Somerville, "Dispossessed and Forgotten," *Mercator.net*. 18 September 2007, http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/dispossessed_and_forgotten_the_new_class_of_genetic_orphans/.
- 17 Somerville, "What About the Children?," 63–78.
- 18 Somerville, "Dispossessed and Forgotten."
- 19 Kass, "The Wisdom of Repugnance," 20.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 25.
- 22 See Nussbaum, "Emotions and Law," in *Hiding From Humanity*, 19–70.
- 23 Kass, "The End of Courtship," 45–6.
- 24 Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, quoted in Phyllis Tribble, "Of Man's First Disobedience, and So On," *New York Times*, Books Section, 19 October 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/19/books/of-man-s-first-disobedience-and-so-on.html>.
- 25 Kass, "Educating Father Abraham."
- 26 See Orecklin, "Leon Kass: The Ethics Cop" and "Inside Politics," *CNN News online*, 20 August 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/2001/08/20/leon.html>.
- 27 Somerville, *Ethical Imagination*, 96.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 See, for instance, Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
- 30 Somerville, *Ethical Imagination*, 96.
- 31 Ibid., 99.

- 32 Ibid., 104.
- 33 Ibid., 115.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 107.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 *BBC News UK*, "Who's the Daddy?," 16 May 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3023513.stm.
- 38 Carolyn Abraham, "Mommy's Little Secret," *Globe and Mail*. 14 December 2002, F1.
- 39 Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 29.
- 40 Ibid., 29–30.

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