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**What is changing and what has already changed:
Parenthood and certainty in moral discourse**

Camilla Kronqvist

Abstract

Among the beliefs Wittgenstein holds that cannot be taken to be true or false, but rather appear to him as certain, are “all human beings have parents“ (*On Certainty* §240): “I believe that I have forebears and that every human being has them” (*OC* §240) and “I have a father and a mother” (*OC* §282). I ask what moral questions are entailed in thinking of the changes that our current Western conceptual landscape has undergone in relation to parenthood and family life in the light of the growing rights and recognition of sexual and gendered minorities.

What is changing when we start to think of sentences such as “Everyone has a father and a mother” as not expressing an indubitable truth, a fundamental fact of our existence, but as constituting an oppressive social norm? What has already changed in our ways of conceiving of ourselves when we stop regarding such ways of expressing ourselves as a necessary aspect of our natural history but start thinking of them as one possibility among others in finding good and meaningful forms of life? What aspects remain unquestionable in Wittgenstein’s beliefs throughout these changes, and what aspects of our family ties would we do best not to let slide?

Introduction

“Jeder hat Vater und Mutter” (Everyone has a father and mother). These words, written in 1985, come from German philosopher of education Klaus Mollenhauer (1985, 11). They surface in a reflection on the ramifications this has for the question of education. They serve as the axiom, the self-evident truth, on which he bases the further claim that everyone therefore has undergone a process of education. Once one reaches this conclusion, it is easy to look past his initial statement. Yet, it is worthwhile to stop at the claim as it stands, to see what it conveys, or what someone may try to convey with it. This is so because the statement may seem so obviously true that one does not even need to pause to reflect on it. Or, it may seem so obviously false, now in 2021, that one feels unclear what to say about it in the first place. Maybe one is even unable to see past it because it seems to impose a problematic conservative ideal. Rather than expressing an empirical truth or a logical necessity, it is taken to reveal a normative stance, or an oppressive norm, saying more about what some groups of people think “should be” than what is. In other words, it may be taken to speak more to the conviction that “Everyone *should*

have a father and a mother” than to express a willingness to consider the actual lives of children who do not grow up with a mother and a father.

Although Wittgenstein does not commit himself to the precise wording of Mollenhauer’s statement, in *On Certainty* he makes some remarks that lie very close to it. He mentions, “I have a father and a mother” (Wittgenstein 1991, §282), “[A]ll human beings have parents” (Wittgenstein 1991, §240) and “I believe that I have forebears and that every human being has them” (Wittgenstein 1991, §240). He offers these as propositions that cannot be true or false in an ordinary sense nor speak of a logical necessity. Rather, they appear to him as certain. In the light of this, I ask what is obviously true in Mollenhauer’s statement, and what is obviously false in it. What is changing when we start to think of sentences such as “Everyone has a father and a mother” as not expressing an indubitable truth, a fundamental fact of our existence, but as constituting a social norm that appears to be oppressive of those lives that do not fit the norm (Cf. Segerdahl 2013, in response to Butler 1990 and 1993)? What has already changed in our ways of conceiving of ourselves when we stop regarding such ways of expressing ourselves as a necessary aspect of our natural history but start thinking of them as one possibility among others in finding good and meaningful ways of living? What aspects remain unquestionable in Wittgenstein’s beliefs throughout these changes, and what aspects of our family ties would we do best not to let slide?

I work with these questions from a perspective that I see as typical of any philosophical inquiry after Wittgenstein. I ask what makes us prone to regarding Mollenhauer’s and Wittgenstein’s statements in certain ways and how such tendencies can change when considered in the light of everyday ways of speaking? I further inquire into what ethical questions arise from thinking of the different possible meanings of these sentences in varied circumstances. In addition, I add reflections that are more personal, reflecting on the ways in which I, as the parent of two children with two mothers, have come to think differently about Mollenhauer’s statement over the years. I compare it to ways in which similar statements have been defended in debates against adoption rights for same-sex couples and against same-sex marriage, in the years preceding and succeeding the birth of my children, and the kind of moral and conceptual changes that thinking through these issues have occasioned in me, as a person and as a philosopher living through these changes. This allows me to indirectly address the question of how the personal and philosophical intersect in ethical inquiry after Wittgenstein.

1. What kind of fact?

When we were writing our doctoral theses, my now wife, a philosopher of education, discussed Mollenhauer in one of her chapters (Schaffar 2009). Her discussion concerned the possibilities of educating for freedom by force, and she used the sentence under discussion to introduce the thematic. Commenting on drafts, I read it so often that it stuck with me. The truth it seemed to tell resonated with another recognition that was then very present in our lives – the knowledge that she and I could not conceive a child.

It was, at that time, the greatest sorrow in our shared life.

Wittgenstein's interest in sentences that in strange ways appeared to be certain was that they were not comparable to empirical statements, that is, to sentences that could be either true or false. To see what is right or wrong with thinking about Mollenhauer's statement, we may therefore ask how we could determine whether it is true. By observation? Is the statement "All human beings have a father and a mother" a *universal*, comparable to "All human beings are mortal", and do we know such truths by inducing from individual observations to a generalisable conclusion?

This explanation is simple, and may feel intuitive, at least to the layperson. It offers, however, an understanding of the statement that seems most obviously false. Clearly it is not the case, and was never the case, that every child one observed had a father and a mother, present at the moment of observation, or actively present in its life. The mother died at birth or packed her bags and left. The father was unknown or deceased before the child was born. The statistical data also speaks against this general conclusion. In Finland we could expect a review of different households with children, showing how many children are born within same-sex marriages or partnerships, how many have single parents or live in families with step- or bonus parents, and so on. Judging by observation, experience clearly shows that not all children have a mother and a father.

The statistical data, however, may still show that a majority of cases involve a father and a mother. In other words, the statement could be taken to mean "Most, if not all, children have a father and a mother." It is this statistical relation, someone could argue, that grants the generalisation "Every child has a father and mother." Still, "most human beings" do not add up

to “all human beings”. Universals do not admit of exceptions, so if we agree that there are exceptions to this “rule”, we should at least not treat the statement as a universal.

Excluding the possibility of its being a universal, however, is not as damning as some philosophers may think. It is not necessarily illegitimate to generalise from the majority of cases. In fact this kind of argument is in line with other *generic statements* such as “Birds lay eggs” or “Tigers are striped”. This heterogeneous group of sentences used for different purposes does not satisfy the needs of the normal philosophical qualifiers, such as *all* or *some*. Thus, they defy the truth conditions that philosophers set up for true sentences. Nevertheless, most of us are ready to accept them as true. Children even appear to have a much easier time making sense of them than the more elaborate “all” and “most”. At least they learn to use them at an earlier age (Leslie 2008, 2–3). Generic statements in that way represent a use of language that we easily seem to master but have much more difficulty to understand, at least when we philosophise.

Delineating what we could call the general form of the generic, a way for generics to be true, has proven difficult. As Sarah Jane Leslie (2008) points out, generics may often be paraphrased in sentences including “generally”, “usually” or “typically”. By adding “generally” and “typically” to “Tigers have stripes” and “Dogs bark”, we get “Generally, tigers have stripes” and “Typically, dogs bark” (Leslie 2008, 7). In these cases, both sentences appear to be true. This, however, is not true for all generics. It is true that “Sharks attack bathers”, but not that “Usually, sharks attack bathers.” It is false that “Bees are sterile”, but true that “Generally, bees are sterile” (Leslie 2008, 7).

Another way out is to frame generics with “under the most normal conditions” (Leslie 2008, 8). This accounts for the fact that “Birds lay eggs” is true even if the majority of birds do not do it; only female birds lay eggs, and they need not be in the majority. This points to the fact that a trait does not need to be statistically significant to be generic. Instead, generics point to something distinctive of a type. It suffices that 1% of mosquitoes carries the West Nile virus to grant the truth of the statement “Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus” (Leslie 2008, 8).

Rather than pointing to quantifiable facts, generic statements often appear to state facts about an organism’s natural history. Entering a more Aristotelian form of argument, Michael Thompson suggests that statements about natural history are not aimed at determining how

representative a certain trait is in a larger group of individuals. Rather these descriptions point to what is characteristic of an organism by placing it in its environment (Thompson 2004, 49, 65; see also Crary 2013, 48.). It is typical, for example, that they describe an organism in the determinate singular form: “The cat has four to six kittens.” Such statements can be true even if it is impossible for a singular cat to have both four and six kittens (Thompson 2004, 48).

In alluding to what is normal, however, the natural historical statement moves beyond what is natural. It sets a standard for how an organism’s life is supposed to evolve in relation to its environment when everything goes according to plan (Thompson 2004, 80–81; Crary 2018, 49). In that way, these statements of facts – and they do admit of being true or false – are not only descriptive statements but also have normative features. It is this normative stance that makes a statement such as that of Mollenhauer sit uncomfortably among theorists who also want their academic disciplines to deliver a social critique, pointing out how social stereotypes may permeate our assessment of what is natural. (The works of Judith Butler that I discuss later give just one version of this critique, which has become a staple in feminist epistemology.)

Thus, we can think of “Every child has a father and a mother” as a statement about our natural history.¹ But if this statement is really a statement to the effect that “Every *normal* child has a father and mother”, the theorists committed to social critique argue, we seem to set up a picture in which any minority child who cannot point to two differently gendered parents is not just *different* but *deviant*. It is precisely this step that needs to be scrutinised in any scientific attempt to give us knowledge about the kinds of beings we are.

“But wait!” someone might interject. “All this talk about universals, generics or facts about our natural history fails to account for a fundamental biological fact. We do not need to turn to environmental biology to clarify this statement; it suffices to go to cell biology to know that a male sex cell and a female sex cell are needed for conception. It is this very general fact of human nature that the utterance seeks to convey. In other words, without a father and a mother there would be no conception in the first place!”

¹ In this way it can be read in relation to Wittgenstein’s remarks about “very general facts of nature” (Wittgenstein 2009, 56n).

Yes, but no. We can certainly agree that at this present stage, a sperm and an egg cell are required for successful conception. No technological advances, such as cloning or the conception of an egg cell by some other cell than a sperm, have so far changed this fact about the species *Homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, we should not hurry to conclude that, for this reason, “everyone has a father and mother” is a biological truth. For what role do the words “father” and “mother” have in a biological description, especially at the cell level? In what ways do words like “man” and “woman”, “male” and “female” denote a biological category? (See Martin 1991 for a critique of how scientists studying conception have been guilty of reproducing gendered stereotypes in their description of the “biological facts”.) Is it even possible to translate these words into purely biological discourse? Are there not rather many ways of understanding what is entailed in being a father or a mother that are not direct consequences of our biology but rather expressions of the way in which we are enculturated?

Think only of the changing role of fathers we have experienced in the Nordic countries, where fathers are expected to take a much more active role in child rearing, and are supposed to develop a strong emotional bond with their children, in contrast to the earlier ideal of the man as the family’s provider, someone who could remain in the background of the child’s life. The possibility of such changes in the perceived roles of fathers and mothers suggests that “father” and “mother” rather mark social categories that are not reducible to their possible biological underpinnings. Rather, they point to shifting aspects of our social realities. Feminist thinkers have therefore suggested the need to distinguish social expectations of how mothers should be “socializing and nurturing” a child from “the physical act of bearing a child” (Rogus 2003, 815, with reference to Nancy Chodorow). This is necessary to bring fully into view how these aspects of our social realities contribute to the meaning of these concepts.

The question, then, is not only about what the facts are but also what kinds of facts they are – biological, historical or sociological? We need to consider the meaning that different appeals to facts have in relation to different contexts in which we may speak of “having a mother and a father”. To judge whether an utterance is *true*, this suggests, we first need to clarify to ourselves what *meaning* it makes to say it in a specific context.

2. What kind of logic?

Why could we not even think of conceiving a child together? Was it because she as a woman could not bear my child? Or because she as a woman could not father my child? Because it was impossible for a child to have more than one mother? In being aggrieved by such sentences, what occasioned in us such grief? What was it that we felt to be impossible? And what allowed the once impossible to one day become a necessary aspect of our being? The indubitable acknowledgement that we were the mothers of these children. That she, at least, bore my child, and I hers.

A further interest of Wittgenstein in indubitable sentences that could not be true or false was their not possessing the necessity attributed to analytic propositions. In that way, they escape the logical analysis to which philosophers could subject Mollenhauer's statement to find out whether it constitutes a necessary truth. Looking at the sentence with Kantian eyes, we could, for example, see it as an analytic statement, by contrast with a synthetic one. Then the statement "Every child has a father and a mother" could be broken down into statements such as "Every child has two parents" or "Every child has a male and a female parent." This would seem to lead us to truisms such as "A father is a male parent" or "A mother is a female parent." They appear similar to "A bachelor is an unmarried man" or "Triangle has three angles", where the predicate, after Kant, can be said to be contained by the subject. The truth of the statement could then be said to be determined entirely by the meanings of the words themselves. This would imply that it is senseless to speak of a child without a father and a mother, just as it is senseless to speak of a married man as a bachelor, or an unmarried woman as a bachelor.²

Such views seemingly played in the background of persons inclined to say, "A woman can never be a father", or "A man can never give birth to a child", in the public discussions leading up to the Finnish laws regulating same-sex marriage and internal adoptions within female couples. For a philosopher it was striking to see how philosophical certain forms of argument were in probing the limits of changing definitions: "A union between two people of the same sex cannot be a marriage!" "A woman can be another mother, but she cannot in any way replace a father!" Such phrases about what "cannot anyway be" are telling. They point to the strongly held conviction that this is what the words *must* mean (cf. Wittgenstein 2009, §599). But what is the sense of the perceived "must" here? And must words mean something so well defined?

² Another possibility is to think of Mollenhauer's sentence as a synthetic a priori, similar to metaphysical statements such as "every event has a cause".

If one considers these seemingly philosophical convictions in an everyday lived context, they can soon start to lose their hold. Imagine someone saying to me, “So, you’re the father of the family?” after I have talked about the experience of feeling helpless at the delivery, or being, in some small ways, rejected as the parent who is not breast-feeding. To this, I can answer “Yes, it seems so” without having to agree to be “the man in the family” in any other possibly relevant sense. This possibility points to a sense of “being a father” that is not connected with the fact that one’s sex cell contributed to the birth of a child. Rather it is connected to the position or role of a caring parent who is not breast-feeding. This position is not only available to a man but also to another parent who is not breast-feeding, even if that parent is a woman. (Of course, if none of the parents are breast-feeding, no significance needs to be attached to this.)

Such considerations of how the words “mother” and “father” are used in everyday situations help us see how their differing meanings are linked together by “family resemblances” (Wittgenstein 2009, §67). They do not denote any single property, such as a “female” or “male parent”, but are used to bring out different relationships or characteristics in different situations. At some points, they serve to bring out a biological relationship. At other times, they point to one’s history with someone, and at still others, at the character of one’s relation to someone that serves to give this relationship its significance. The sense of security attached to a child’s certainty that it has two fathers is an aspect of the love it has for the parents it grew up with. Another grown-up child’s fear of repeating her mother’s mistakes in relation to her own children may be an expression of experiences of loss and lack of intimacy with her mother. At times the words point to something like an ideal in our lives that we can strive to live up to. I may wonder whether I succeed in being a good mother or find it difficult to identify with being “a mother” without pulling into the question the fact that I am “the mother of this child”, the biological connection or my juridical responsibility for it.

We should also not forget that from the perspective of the child, words such as “Mom” and “Dad” function as names, which are not just used to denote someone, but also to call them. When my son at a younger age shouted “Mom!” without making a distinction between his moms, it was meant as “Come and help me” and not as “You gave birth to me.” The irrelevance of the latter biological sense, although in other cases relevant, is also apparent in his declarations of love. “You’re the best mom in the world!” he can say to the both of us, and not hesitate to add, “You both are.”

In this manner, we as speakers of a language inhabited by “moms” and “dads” lean on different criteria when we speak about “fathers” and “mothers” in different situations. There is not necessarily one defining criterion that determines what the words must mean. Our task as philosophers reflecting on the logical categories of parenthood is therefore not to lay down the determining criteria, such that in the end it is all biology, or in the end it is at least not biology. Rather, we need to be responsive to the different criteria at play in different situations to become clear about what we mean by leaning on one criterion here and another criterion there. Shifting between criteria even within a conversation, as Pär Segerdahl says in relation to “man” and “woman”, “is not necessarily a contradiction, since the meaning of the nouns can change with the spontaneous use of them. Language often functions in this un-bureaucratic, ‘wobbling’ manner” (Segerdahl 2013, 186–187).

As a Wittgensteinian philosopher, I want to take this “un-bureaucratic”, “wobbling” character of language as a reason not to legislate about language use, by saying that the logical analysis of a word reveals that it is meaningless to utter a specific string of words. Rather I, as Segerdahl, want to expose the un-static and open-ended character of language that appears whenever we try to find an essence to the meaning of a word. Turning to the real bureaucrats legislating about parental laws, it also seems reasonable to suggest that they should not turn into bad philosophers by stipulating essentialising, and perhaps also metaphysical, uses of words in legislation, such as suggesting that biological criteria need to determine juridical obligations in relation to a child. They, too, as it were, stand in need of recognising the different senses in which we may talk about being a father and a mother. There is, to put it crudely, nothing to be gained by arguing about the meaning of words, if one takes this to imply that meanings could be settled and clear once and for all. There is much more to be gained by recognising the possibility that words can be used differently from what was previously the case. At the same time, I recognise the need to argue precisely about the wordings of specific pieces of legislation, since there we are faced with a situation where the meaning of words in some ways needs to be consolidated.

Not legislating about language, however, does not mean denying the ways in which, for Wittgenstein, sentences like “I believe that I have forebears and that every human being has them” (Wittgenstein 1991, §240) also “stand fast” (Wittgenstein 1991, §151). On the contrary, his discussions always move between that which seems to be subject to change and that which needs to be kept in place for us to still think we are doing the same thing. The different criteria

we lean on in speaking about “mothers” and “fathers” in different cases reveal the different games we are able to play with the words, and the possibility of suddenly shifting games. As long as we play one game, however, it is only to be expected that the rules stay the same. We may dispute that biological criteria should be the sole criteria on which to judge parenthood legally, but if we are to settle the biological parenthood, we agree that a DNA test will do.

Even in the case of remarks such as “There are men and women” or “Everyone has a father and a mother”, which seem to expose a form of life (cf. Segerdahl 2013, 199; Zerilli 1998, 452; Christensen 2011), Wittgenstein encourages us to imagine different ways of living in language. In *On Certainty* he plays with the idea that the solidity we experience in certain statements is comparable to a riverbed. This riverbed “consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited” (Wittgenstein 1991, §99).³ This picture, where “fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid” (Wittgenstein 1991, §96), allows us to think of the utterance “Everyone has a father and mother” as something that at an earlier point was considered as solid ground, as standing fast in our lives, but that now is shifting sand, something that we can question and even desire to change.⁴

It is only to be expected that when such mostly unspoken agreements in language start shifting, reactions against these shifts become more vocal. Something that earlier did not need to be stated, and was only assumed, now needs to be defended. But in these kinds of shifts we can also expect new forms of agreement. Rather than repeating a sentence like “Every child has a father and a mother”, we start explaining to our children that “Some children have two fathers and others have two mothers. Some have two mothers and two fathers.” For the children who hear this explanation, it appears just as obvious as Mollenhauer’s initial statement given the life that they lead. In relation to friends with parents who have more than one of each, it is also clear that in so far as this description is true, Mollenhauer’s is not.

³ The picture of a riverbed can be read together with the picture of the “rough ground” (Wittgenstein 2009, §107) Wittgenstein wishes to return us to in philosophy. Both these pictures create a contrast to the “requirement” for “the crystalline purity of logic” (Wittgenstein 2009, §107) that he identifies in his earlier view of logic in the *Tractatus*.

⁴ In this picture of language there is no absolute dividing line between the empirical and the logical. Rather this picture suggests that this distinction becomes a meaningful contrast in some contexts to clarify certain kinds of mistakes and doubts. It also points to the kinds of reassurance and certainty that can be meaningful in certain situations and relationships.

3. A kind of mythology

In 2004 director Peter Greenaway takes part in a conference at my university. In an interview given to the university magazine, he states, “I would argue, slightly provocatively I must admit, that there are only two things to talk about. One is sex and the other is death. And I know nothing about you gentlemen except for two things. Two people fucked to create you, and I’m sorry dear gentlemen, but you’re going to die. The rest is a blank paper.” (Prest 2004, 21, my translation)

Greenaway knows that he is being provocative, but he takes himself to be speaking a truth, the truth about our biology, though slightly more dressed up, or dressed down. I am less certain. As a storyteller, I think he’s telling yet another story, and as with any story there are some things he focuses on, and others he excludes, most importantly that not all people enter the world in the way he envisages. After scanning the internet for tips and tricks on how to create babies, I know that even in heterosexual relationships one may need to resort to courses that extend beyond what biology textbooks in school told us about sexual reproduction. And I am certain that sexual reproduction goes quite a short way in explaining what it means to make a family.

“So Mr Greenaway, I have to tell you you’re not well informed. And although I see you’re being caught up in a picture, it is not the only one. So, I will tell you a different story. When I look at my two children I say, “They were born out of our love.” And if you go for hyperbole, I can do that too. I say, this is where everything important starts, in our responsibility for those, and that, we bring into being.”

Greenaway’s response offers a more secular way of understanding our place in the world than the biblical “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27), which in Finland has also been used to motivate the exclusion of same-sex marriages from the church. Yet, it is important to note that his version is in no way a more neutral account of what happened than the religious one. Rather it is the religious perspective, or a perversion of it, drawn in the dust. His words can only be a provocation in so far as they denounce what is taken to be of significance in the religious perspective, such that the act of creation should be perceived as something holy and not banal.

These ways of thinking about what grounds or conditions our existence show how the statement “Everyone has a father and mother” can be seen as one of “[t]he propositions describing this

world-picture [that] might be part of a kind of mythology” (Wittgenstein 1991, §151). They involve taking a stand on the causes and reasons for our existence, as individuals, and as a species, and thereby voice perspectives as to what is valuable in that life, and the ways it is valuable.⁵ Consider only the possible disagreements that may ensue from attempting to decide whether “fucking” is a more appropriate description of the sexual activity than, say, “making love”, and what may drive someone to prefer the one and resist the other.

By speaking not just about what is true but expressing perspectives as to what makes our lives meaningful, these ways of thinking also show how Mollenhauer’s statement can be seen in the light of what queer theorist and poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler regards as a heterosexualising law or norm. With this, Butler wishes to make clear the ways in which the heterosexual bond between man and woman has been both ritualised and idealised in the attention that is normally attached to a child’s being a boy or a girl, and the expectations that follow on from the statement, such that a girl, as a woman, should marry a man and give birth to yet more girls and boys (Butler 1993, 232). Uttering Mollenhauer’s words, on this view, becomes yet another way in which gender, and expectations on how our lives should be lived, is created and reinforced.

The target of Butler’s critique is a heterosexual narrative that dominates our understanding of ourselves. Her work alerts us to how these ways of speaking do not only express a value but take the shape of a normative stance that asks to be recognized. Nevertheless, she also risks creating a similarly dominating narrative that pictures language as an unavoidable power structure that is strengthened every time we use words such as “mother”, “father”, “girl”, “boy”. Her emphasis on our discourses as a binding order creates a picture of language as a straitjacket from which we cannot liberate ourselves.

Against this picture of language as a monolith, Segerdahl remarks that a presentation of language in terms of Wittgenstein’s more loosely conceived grammar does not compel “us to talk, act and live as we do” (Segerdahl 2013, 200). This is the grammar that tells us “what kind of object anything is” (Wittgenstein 2009, §373) and what it is we do when we use words in particular ways, but that does not tell us what to do. This is *the* critique Wittgensteinians make

⁵ Greenaway’s reference to sex, birth and death, bears resemblance to Peter Winch’s (1964, 322) suggestion, after Vico, that these constitute limiting notions in our life. See Kronqvist 2020 for a discussion of Winch’s suggestion.

against poststructuralist ideas of language (see Zerilli 1998 and Moi 1999, 30f, for a similar criticism). In many respects it is also my critique. Even if we admit that the truth of certain statements is dependent on a surrounding practice, as a move in a game is governed by the rules of the game to constitute a move, we are not forced to enter any particular linguistic practice. The reminder that we, in leaning on different criteria, can be said to play different games when we speak, and in shifting criteria can be said to shift games, shows the possibility of our changing the game, and beginning to play a different game. We are therefore not obliged to buy into either biblical mythology or some secular version of it. We can seek and find ways of re-envisioning what our words mean and creating alternative mythologies to picture our place in the world and in relation to others.

Yes, it is possible to consider the act of sex in relation to both death – “the little death” – and the creation of life. (“Sex as both a destructive and creative power.” There, a reading of what seems to drive Greenaway’s myth.⁶) Yes, there is a place to wonder at the possibility of two people in love, a man and a woman, becoming three in the woman’s giving birth to their child, fathered by him. (A driver behind the religious myth.) But it is not given what “facts” can be seen as mysterious as well as mythical and what the factual basis is for these ways of seeing our life as meaningful. Therefore, we can also imagine other life stories that give as much reason to wonder at the meaning of one’s life than the above suggestions.

I, as a woman, can marvel at the possibility that another woman is carrying my child, even if there is no genetic connection between me and the child. Part of the marvel can be that it enables me to transcend the biological necessity that in the earlier case sets one going: “Imagine that I can become a mother without needing to be pregnant.” Rather than feeling contentment at fulfilling the “purpose of nature”, I can thus be relieved of a sense of nature guiding my life, and feel relief at not being bound by nature.⁷ Just as erotic love, manifested in marriage, can be seen as a mystery in creating a family of people who are not biologically related, the love of a child that I do not doubt “is my child”, without any biological link, is the mystery that makes our bond meaningful.

⁶ The disagreement between me and Greenaway is perhaps the disagreement between those who, after Freud, say “It’s all about sex” and the ones who, with Plato, say “It’s all about love.” To the lovers, the ones who only think of sex have not considered how love, as well as sexual desire, is transformed by contemplation of the good.

⁷ Cf. only the quite different attitudes to biological determinism that are given by the ones who regard biology as destiny, and the kind of existentialism exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* who regards women’s being bound by biology, menstruation and childbearing as a burden preventing them from realizing the freedom constitutive of the human being. Immanence forcing itself on the transcendent subject.

The considerations that Wittgensteinians raise against a poststructuralist, conforming picture of language offer reassurance of our possibility of moving effortlessly around in language as long as we free ourselves from certain metaphysical pictures. Yet, these considerations offer no real assurance to a theorist like Butler who does not rest securely in language, who feels that the language that they speak is not really theirs. What comfort is it that we *can* speak differently if what worries us is that we do not *live* differently? What is the point of saying, “This is what we do” if we need to recognize that this is something “We should not to do”? “A confession”, Wittgenstein remarked, “has to be part of a new life” (Wittgenstein 1994, 16). What, then, if we only gesture at the grammatical possibility of a new life, and do not embark on it ourselves?

Here, our philosophy cannot be merely linguistic, it has to be explicitly moral. It cannot just underline our freedom to speak (what it is possible for us to say) but has to question what *moves* us to speak, and even more when it appears *necessary* for us to speak (what we feel we *cannot but* say, or what we feel we *must* say). In raising these questions, we move from the epistemic certainties in our life to the question of what constitutes a *moral necessity*. (See e.g. Hertzberg 1990.)⁸ Butler can, on such terms, be seen as speaking out of a moral necessity, as drawing attention to the violation done to individuals who do not fit into present pictures of the world, whose lives are not made intelligible by present frameworks of speaking (Butler 1993, 232). This I see as Butler’s main ethical concern, although it is sometimes clouded by overly theoretical language.⁹ She speaks with the recognition that certain ways of speaking that once seemed to just describe a stable way of living do violence towards the people who through their life open for a new way of speaking and living the relationships between, for example, parents and children.

⁸ This raises part of my concern about the direction discussions about moral certainty often take. The sense in which “Murder is wrong” (see Pleasants 2009) seems to me not to be truth-apt in the way metaethicists have desired is not because it is akin to a *certainty* but because it is a *command*: “Thou shalt not kill.” And commands call for obedience, not for verification. The sense in which the sentence may appear unassailable is rather in the necessity experienced in following this command, in so far as I recognise the ethical demand it articulates in my relation to the other. Furthermore, there is nothing apparently odd in voicing a moral command. We continually say, “Don’t do that”, to our children. We have, however, a tendency to question the command. As Wittgenstein writes, “The first thought in setting up an ethical law of the form ‘thou shalt ...’ is: And what if I do not do it” (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.422). In these ways, moral commands seldom have the character of meaningless but indubitable truths that sentences such as “These are my hands” have. We are also mostly well aware of what it would mean to go against them. This is what we call a moral temptation.

⁹ As Wittgensteinians, we should in that way not be blinded by the character of specific forms of language use but be able to consider what that language does, beyond giving expression to metaphysical images of language.

To address these questions, we need to discuss questions of ethics and the kind of commitments required of us as speakers. We need to address the responsibility confronting me in asking not just what it means that “Everyone has a father and a mother” but what it means for me to be a mother of these particular children. Such reflection on my responsibility requires my taking a stand on what sentences such as Mollenhauer’s mean in relation to my own life as a mother. In what ways does my surrounding society support or hinder me in living the truth of being their mother? (After waiting three years for the legislation on internal adoption to pass in Finland, and then come into effect for our first-born, it is a small but tangible joy every time I read that two children are registered on both of our tax returns.) What are the social expectations related to being a mother that I have inherited from my community, and to what extent do I see them as destructive or constructive? In so far as such expectations are part of my language, a tradition I have been born into, but may struggle to find ways of inscribing myself in, these reflections may confirm to me the sense, so central to poststructuralist philosophy, that my language is never fully mine. In more respects than one, the language that we speak is the language of our parents. Where the relationship between parent and child has been conflicted, which has been the case so often when the family constellation of the child differs from those of the parents, hearing one’s parents speak in one’s own words may in several ways be disconcerting.

Being a mother, however, is not merely a matter of relating to the concept of motherhood as it is represented in my community and culture. It is being engaged in the relationship to my children, as their mother, and acknowledging how these relationships *give* meaning to the concept, through my own ways of responding to them and taking responsibility for who I and they become in this relationship. Thus, it raises questions about the concept of motherhood that I learn not from my parents but from my children, and what concept of motherhood I am deliberately and unwillingly *giving* them. Hearing the voice of one’s parents in one’s own ways of speaking to one’s children may be a source of mixed emotions, giving reason to consider, contemplate or confront one’s relation to the past, and how that past lives on in the present. Hearing one’s own voice speak in one’s children, perhaps only then hearing what it is saying, is an occasion to unearth how one’s present lives on in the future.¹⁰

¹⁰ This can be read alongside Hannah Arendt’s suggestion that educators “stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, an even though they may, secretly or openly wish it were other than it is” (Arendt 2006, 186).

This ethical call to consider the role of responsibility in understanding the concept of a mother should not be mistaken for an empirical claim. It is not so that every parent is responsible. There are children who are born to both reckless and irresponsible parents, just as there are children who are not “born out of love”. Perhaps a certain degree of recklessness is even required to bring a child into the world, even in the happier cases, since it is impossible to envision beforehand what the responsibility for a child will actually amount to in a particular lived relationship. The realisation, even the whole-hearted acceptance, that I am responsible for my children is also no guarantee that I speak or act responsibly in relation to them. Evidently, the insight that asking myself the moral question, whether I am rising to the responsibility of being a mother, may itself be taken as an expression of my taking responsibility, or of scrutinizing the responsibility I am facing as a mother. At times, however, that philosophical consideration offers only a small comfort in the light of my actual failings towards my children.

The possibility of describing some of our responses to our children in terms of failures to take responsibility, however, alerts us to the weight of that responsibility we carry for those who come after us. How I relate to my responsibilities as a mother will, in other words, be reflected in my understanding of what it means to have parents and children, and what I take to be indubitable in the relation between parent and child. Many of us may, for instance, think of it as tragic if a child learns that they were “a mistake” or born as the effect of their mother’s being raped. It is easy to imagine the difficulties a child, even as an adult, may experience in coming to grips with the fact that it was not wanted, and that one or both of the parents could perhaps look at its birth with regret. The fact that a parent can come to think of a child born out of too much alcohol, or a broken condom, as life’s greatest gift or a blessing does not exclude the uglier versions where the parent cannot stop thinking about what happened as a mistake. This persistent thought may certainly not be whole-hearted. Only articulating it, however, can be seen as a betrayal of the child, in that it constitutes a failure to act responsibly to those who have been placed within one’s care. What I give to my children in terms of giving them a conception of what it means to have a mother, father or more generally a parent, is in those terms nothing less than a sometimes faltering sense of belonging to this world, and of being welcomed in it.

Conclusion

I began by asking what makes us prone to thinking of “Everyone has a father and mother” as an obvious truth. I have pointed out that we cannot judge whether the statement is true without

taking a stand on what it means. I have shown the different meanings it can have in different circumstances, and that in many circumstances it is unclear what it means. I have also brought out how it actualises questions about how we as human beings make sense of our lives, and the possibility of these lives changing, sometimes drastically, and at other times not fast enough, to accommodate the needs of every individual being part of our shared life. I have pointed to ways in which the tendency to essentialise and idealise certain uses of language may become not merely a problem in philosophy but a problem between us, as members of linguistic communities who may or may not be in agreement about how to live.

Wittgenstein spoke of not being able to doubt that he had two parents. It is unfortunate that he, as I am, was not in the position not to doubt that he had two children. Even if there are clear similarities between the indubitable certainty that these statements actualise, there are also important differences between them. Where my certainty that these are my parents points to my knowing where I come from, the certainty that these are my children gives no guidance as to where we are heading. Here, the question becomes not just an existential question about who we are in relation to each other, nor just an ethical question about our responsibility towards each other. It becomes, as Mollenhauer also framed it, a pedagogical question. How do we go on together, so that you can go on without me? What can I hold on to in the tradition I have inherited, and what do I want to bring into the traditions I am upholding? How can I move with you in considering the meaning of these questions? These seem relevant questions to ask in any ethical inquiry after Wittgenstein.

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