

11-2013

## Review of The Connected Self: The Ethics and Governance of the Genetic Individual by Heather Widdows

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### Repository Citation

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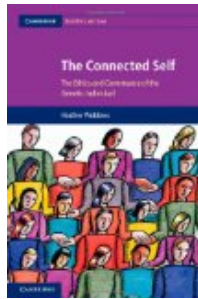
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## ETHICS



### Review - The Connected Self

The Ethics and Governance of the Genetic Individual  
by Heather Widdows  
Cambridge University Press, 2013  
Review by William Simkulet  
Nov 26th 2013 (Volume 17, Issue 48)

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with answering the question "What is the right thing to do?" It is generally accepted that the right thing to do in any given situation is the thing one has the best reasons to do. Moral agency requires rationality, or the ability to evaluate and rank reasons, and freedom, the ability to act as one chooses. In *The Connected Self: The Ethics and Governance of the Genetic Individual* Heather Widdows challenges this commonsense ethical framework. Her central claim is that contrary to the commonsense distinctions above, individuals are best conceived of not as isolated individual moral agents, but as members of a social group. According to the author's view, human beings in isolation are incomplete. If this is correct, then traditional ethical theories that focus on individuals are fundamentally flawed.

The book is divided into ten chapters. In the first two chapters, Widdows discusses what she calls the "current ethical framework", which focuses on individuals as the primary focus of ethics, and argues this framework needs to be abandoned. In the third chapter, Widdows presents the central thesis of the book, that the "genetic self is the connected self"; she argues that genetic information is public, shared information and this supports the connected self view.

In chapter 4, the author chronicles what she believes to be the failures of individual ethics since the genetic revolution began, focusing largely on what she sees as problematic implications of informed consent. Chapter 5 discusses the "communal turn" in bioethics, but concludes that group consent suffers from many of the same problems as individual consent. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss two further alternative ethical models, benefits sharing and the trust model, but neither is without issue. In chapters 8 and 9, Widdows sets out the two aspects of what she calls the "ethics toolbox"; chapter 8

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concerns the first part of the toolbox, how we ought to go about identifying ethical problems; while chapter 9 concerns how we ought to apply new, current, and alternative practices to solving those problems. Chapter 10 is a short, somber chapter. Here Widdows characterized the ethics toolbox as an *ad hoc* solution to make the best out of the current situation and as a method to experiment with and adopt new and better ethical practices.

As with all good ethicists, Widdows takes on the ambitious, substantive, and difficult task of offering a foundation for ethical inquiry. Her main contention is that individualistic ethical frameworks are fundamentally flawed because individuals are incomplete, and are best understood as parts of a community. Articulating and defending this claim alone would be an arduous task, but Widdows sets out to do so on top of advocating for a specific application of communal ethics, communal medical ethics. Her chief target here is the individualist concept of informed consent, which most individualist bioethicists take to be the cornerstone of medical ethics; roughly on this view just medical intervention, examination, and experimentation requires that an individual to willingly consent to the procedure while understanding the risks and potential benefits of the procedure.

The author sees the position argued for in this book as a radical departure from individual--centered ethics, but it's not at all clear this is the case. Early in chapter 1, the author characterizes communal ethics as consistent with leading feminist and virtue theories. Feminist ethicists and virtue theorists places importance on the individual as a member of a social community that is best understood in relation to other members in said community. This is not a moral relativist view, according to which there is no universal moral truth, but rather it is a reason--based view, according to these theories different individuals have different moral obligations than their neighbors because they stand in different relationships to their community and the world than their neighbors. Different individuals have different reasons to act from their neighbors, and thus different individuals can have different moral obligations than others. Despite all the talk about how individuals are members of a community, it seems the fundamental question of ethics is the same -- "What is the right thing to do?" This question is asked by individuals on the assumption that they are authors of their actions, free to decide what they will do from a set of desirable and undesirable possible futures, and fully morally responsible for what they do. Even if the individual is a connected self, as the author contends, the individual is still the focal point of ethics, and thus we need not move mountains to embrace communal ethics, as the center of communal ethics is the same as the center of individual ethics -- the individual.

In a bizarre turn, when the author shifts to bioethics, she seems to equivocate between personal identity and genetic identity. She contends "There are two very obvious features of genetic information which make the genetic self a connected self: first, that genetic information is *shared* information, and, second, that genetic information is *identifying* information." (30) Here the author seems to identify a self with that's self's genetic material, or DNA; but this is absurd. Moral agents are persons; minds, our DNA is merely a blueprint. DNA is obviously *not* identifying, otherwise genetically identical twins end up being the same person. Furthermore, while DNA may be public, the indiscriminate use of other people's DNA is certainly morally problematic. A scientist who clones you against your will from the skin flake you inadvertently leave behind has certainly crossed a line against you -- violated your genetic autonomy. Widdows cites the public nature of DNA as evidence that the self is connected; but we are not our DNA, we are our minds, and our minds are *inherently* private.

The author asks us to set aside the familiar ethical infrastructure of individual--centric ethics for a more accurate communal ethics, citing problems with individual ethics found in contemporary bioethics. Unfortunately, communal ethics seems equally bereft of solutions to these problems, and the author instead asks us to accept a makeshift "ethical toolbox" cobbled together from rejected theories, both individualistic and communal, but that does not cleanly solve the problems found in contemporary bioethics. Although Widdows' premise, that communal ethics is a better ethical framework than individualistic ethics, is enticing, to justify a massive revision in our ethical beliefs, we would need a correspondingly enticing benefit, such as a solution to problems in contemporary bioethics, or -- at least -- a better understanding of those problems. On this, I cannot say the author has delivered.

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ISSN 1931-5716

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