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Marilyn Strathern

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This volume marks an epoch of sorts. The essays belong to, and the majority were written during, the time when the Bill for the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act (1990) going through Parliament had stimulated public debate in Britain. The implications of the medical developments that lay behind the Act are world-wide. These essays touch on the British debate from the particular perspective of an anthropologist. New procreative possibilities - fertilization in vitro, gamete donation, maternal surrogacy - formulate new possibilities for thinking about kinship. At the same time, and inevitably, possibilities are imagined through ideas already in existence and already part of a cultural repertoire. As cultural facts, such ideas inform our representations, descriptions and analyses of kinship, and the future of kinship lies in their future too. The same issues also open up larger questions about how to think the interaction between 'nature' and 'culture' as such. Anthropologists have their own investment in the concept of culture, and questions are in turn raised about how anthropology will reproduce its concepts in the future. My hope is that together the essays will demonstrate one kind of contribution that anthropological knowledge can make to current debate. It is knowledge that openly draws on substantive materials from other parts of the world, and hence from other people's cultural facts, even when it is most about home. Thus the present essays are informed by recent rethinking of models of kinship in Melanesia. This serves as a reminder of what is at stake in fashioning new descriptions of kin relations. Anthropological knowledge offers a transparent example of the process involved in rethinking through concepts and images whose expressible forms already belong to other repertoires and thus to other specific domains of ideas. In that it borrows as much from itself and its own past as it does from elsewhere. And in that sense the world is kin.

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