

Genealogical Overkill

by

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caveat lector

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Tracing a family tree back as many years as possible is a fond pastime for many people. The further back they trace it, the happier they are. They like to note with pride their relationships to important people who lived centuries ago. I think that they could probably find better ways to spend their time.

In the first place, family trees are more than a little hypothetical. Nobody knows for sure who all of his distant male ancestors really were. All that we have is the testimony of the mothers, which can be notoriously unreliable. That being the case, many people might not know the identities of their true fathers. They might think that they do, but maybe they really don't. Even if what the mothers had to say was always completely honest and accurate, then we'd still go wrong a lot of the time because the further into the past we trace a family tree the less reliable the records become. In my own case, I have some ancestors who appear in the records under different names. Much of the data are simply unknown. Because of that sort of thing, there are even situations in which the identities of the female ancestors are a mystery. However, there's another even better reason to be skeptical of boasts about ancient lineage. That reason is simple arithmetic.

Let's assume that each generation of human ancestry takes about 25 years. It might be a bold assumption but 25 years is probably as good an estimate as any other and it makes the arithmetic easier. For the sake of convenience, let's designate me as being of the generation of 1950. I was alive in 1950. If you weren't, then pick your own decade and do your own calculations. The difference will be insignificant. We must also assume that the number of my ancestors will double with each generation into the past. That is, I had two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so forth. Social scruples relating to incest will usually make that a good assumption for several generations into the past. Beyond those few generations, it's a less reliable assumption. That is, the further back into the past that I trace my family tree, the more likely it is that some particular individual might occupy more than one place in that family tree. So, the actual number of ancestors that I have at some point in the past will probably be smaller than the number predicted by my simple-minded doubling method. Nevertheless, the number of my ancestors will still be large and it will be larger as I consider generations further into the past.

In Table 1, on page 3, I've shown the theoretically maximum number of ancestors that I had at different times in the past. I've also shown the estimated population of the world at different times in the past. The numbers of my ancestors are based on the simple doubling assumption that I mentioned in the previous paragraph. The estimates of world population are from the U.S. Census Bureau. The numbers of my ancestors are approximate but they're probably every bit as accurate as the numbers provided by the Census Bureau. Even if the numbers are all off by several percent, they still support my point. Table 2, on page 4, makes the situation even more graphically clear.

You can see that if I trace my family tree back to even as recent a time as the 1200's then it's pointless to speculate about who my ancestors were. The theoretically possible number of my ancestors at that time was almost three times the population of

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the entire world at that time. In theory, I could be descended from every human being who was alive on the planet as few as 800 years ago. So it doesn't matter if I had an ancestor back in the Middle ages who was a king. In that same generation, I also had ancestors who were rapists, farmers, wheelwrights, candle makers, sheriffs, thugs, soldiers, and so forth. At that point in the past, my ancestors, all 350,000,000 of them, were a completely random sample of people scattered over a large part of the world. The only thing that those people had in common (the **only** thing!) was that they would eventually all be my ancestors. That's about as trivial as it gets. Also consider that those same people are probably also the ancestors of a large fraction of the people who are alive on the planet today. Furthermore, consider this. What do I care about some descendant of mine who's going to be alive in the year 2911? Nothing. I don't see how anything could be less important.

The calculation casts genealogy in a whole new light. There's probably some virtue in genealogical studies of such things as susceptibility to diseases, ancient migrations of human populations, and so forth. As proof of some self-doubting person's relationship to some noted figure in the distant past, just for the sake of a bragging point, genealogy is just about the most useless field of study imaginable. We might as well assume that everybody alive today is related to everybody who was alive a thousand years ago. I suppose that the lesson here is that the only ancestors who really matter are the ones that we can actually remember for ourselves. Treasure those and forget the others. Take the time that you would otherwise have spent looking for leaves on a website and, instead, spend that time with your grandparents or with your grandchildren, as appropriate. There's a family history that's worth the effort.

Table 1: Ancestry Amplification vs. World Population

<u>Span</u>	<u>Generation</u>	<u>Number of Ancestors</u>	<u>Estimated World Population</u>
1926 – 1950	me		2,400,000,000
1901 – 1925	parents	2	
1876 – 1900	grandparents	4	1,550,000,000
1851 – 1875	great grandparents	8	
1826 – 1850	ancestors	16	1,128,000,000
1801 – 1825	ancestors	32	
1776 – 1800	ancestors	64	813,000,000
1751 – 1775	ancestors	128	
1726 – 1750	ancestors	256	629,000,000
1701 – 1725	ancestors	512	
1676 – 1700	ancestors	1024	600,000,000
1651 – 1675	ancestors	2048	
1626 – 1650	ancestors	4096	470,000,000
1601 – 1625	ancestors	8192	
1576 – 1600	ancestors	16,384	545,000,000
1551 – 1575	ancestors	32,768	
1526 – 1550	ancestors	65,536	
1501 – 1525	ancestors	131,072	
1476 – 1500	ancestors	262,144	425,000,000
1451 – 1475	ancestors	524,288	
1426 – 1450	ancestors	1,048,576	
1401 – 1425	ancestors	2,097,152	
1376 – 1400	ancestors	4,194,304	350,000,000
1351 – 1375	ancestors	8,388,608	
1326 – 1350	ancestors	16,777,216	
1301 – 1325	ancestors	33,554,432	
1276 – 1300	ancestors	67,108,864	360,000,000
1251 – 1275	ancestors	134,217,728	
1226 – 1250	ancestors	268,435,456	400,000,000
1201 – 1225	ancestors	536,870,912	
1176 – 1200	ancestors	1,073,741,824	360,000,000

