**“It Might Have Been!”: What Matters in Alternative Possible Lives**

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**1 Personal Identity Over Time and Abortion**

There are two philosophical problems of personal identity. One is the problem of personal identity over time. This is the problem of determining, once a person or individual exists, what the conditions of her continued existence are. An account of personal identity over time will imply an answer to the question of when we begin to exist as well as to the question of what the conditions of our ceasing to exist are.

The second problem is that of personal identity “across possible worlds.” This is the problem of determining, once a person or individual exists, whether that same person could have come into existence in different conditions – for example, at a different time. If the history of events had been different in some way before some actual person began to exist, would this person have existed in that alternative possible history or, in other words, have been identical with some person in that alternative possible history?

Over the last several centuries, and in particular during the last four decades of the twentieth century, philosophers have developed a substantial literature on the first of these problems, and on its relevance to issues in moral philosophy. The second problem, and particularly its implications for moral issues, have been less extensively discussed. In this essay, I hope to contribute to remedying this neglect of the relevance of the second problem to issues in moral philosophy. I will not attempt to develop a theory of personal identity across possible worlds. My aim is to argue, among other things, that if we had a compelling theory of this sort, its moral significance would be quite limited.

Although this may seem a circuitous route to the central concerns of the essay, I will begin by briefly rehearsing an argument I presented earlier about abortion, misfortune, and prenatal injury.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In general, when continued life would be worth living, an earlier death is a greater misfortune than a later death. But according to common-sense intuition, this is not true during the earliest months, and perhaps even during the earliest years, of our lives. Many people believe, for example, that we begin to exist at conception but do not believe that the death of an embryo through the failure of implantation is a great misfortune for the embryo. And many people regard a miscarriage as a greater misfortune for the biological parents, especially the one who was pregnant, than for the fetus.

Yet these intuitions seem to conflict with the widely accepted understanding of the misfortune of death know as the Deprivation Account. According to this view, death is bad for an individual mainly, and perhaps only, because it deprives him of good life he would otherwise have had. This suggests that the extent to which death is a misfortune is proportional to the goodness of the life of which it deprives the victim, the overall goodness being a function of both the quality and quantity of the life that is lost. In previous work, I referred to this view as the *Life Comparative Account* of misfortune of death. But it is more generally an account of individuals’ *interests*, including the interest in continuing to live. The strength of an individual’s interest at any earlier time in having a benefit or avoiding a harm at any subsequent time is proportional to the magnitude of the benefit or harm. What is most in a person interest at any time is what would give him the overall best life among the lives possible for him.

The Life Comparative Account is the correct account of interests if, as Derek Parfit expresses it, “identity is what matters” over time – that is, if the basis of rational egoistic concern about future events is simply that they will be events in one’s own life. If personal identity is what matters in this sense, then one ought rationally to be equally egoistically concerned about all times in one’s future, for identity is not a matter of degree.

Parfit, as is well known, argued that identity is not what matters.[[2]](#footnote-2) His main argument, which I will assume is decisive, appeals to a hypothetical example in which a person’s cerebral hemispheres are surgically separated and transplanted into different bodies. What matters for the person prior to this procedure is preserved, at least to some considerable extent, in the lives of both the people with a single hemisphere, even though they are different people and thus cannot both be identical with the original person. Even if, as Parfit thinks is not the case, one of them is the original person, what matters seems also present in the relation between the original person and the other.

A natural presumption is that what matters are the relations that, in actual cases, are constitutive of personal identity over time. The normative significance of Parfit’s insight is then that, whereas identity must be all-or-nothing, the relations that ground identity over time can be a matter of degree. In his early work, Parfit argued that the criterion of personal identity over time is non-branching psychological continuity, which is constituted by overlapping chains of psychological connections, with any cause. Although his view of identity evolved in certain ways, his view of what matters remained the same: psychological continuity and connectedness, with psychological connections consisting entirely of qualitative similarity between mental states – for example, the relation between a visual image and a later qualitatively similar mental image.

My view is similar, though with one important difference. On Parfit’s view, a mental state at one time need not be in any way causally related to a qualitatively similar mental state at another time for the two to constitute a psychological connection. In my view, by contrast, psychological connections must be grounded in physical continuity of the areas of the brain in which consciousness is realized or generated. I believe, therefore, that the basis of rational egoistic concern about the future is a set of psychological relations – memory, continuities of psychological capacity, continuities of character, and continuities among beliefs, values, desires, intentions, and so on – grounded in the physical, functional, and organizational continuities of the relevant areas of the brain. I will refer to these relations, which are all matters of degree, as the “prudential unity relations.”

This view of what matters constitutes a general account of interests that I call the *Time-Relative Interest Account* (TRIA). On this view, the strength of a person’s interest in having some benefit in the future is a function of two variables: the magnitude of the benefit and the strength of the prudential unity relations between the person now and herself later when the benefit would occur. The TRIA also provides a measure of the misfortune of death. The extent to which death, when it occurs, is a misfortune for the person who dies is a function of two variables: the overall amount of well-being the person would have had if he had continued to live and the degree to which the prudential unity relations would have held between himself at the time of death and himself at the later times when the good and bad events in his life would have occurred.

The TRIA thus offers an explanation of why the death of a fetus is not a significant misfortune for the fetus, even if the fetus is deprived of the whole of a life that would have been well worth living. To present this explanation, it will be convenient to state a couple of assumptions and stipulations. I believe, and will assume for the sake of argument, that we begin to exist when the capacity for consciousness arises during the development of our fetal organisms.[[3]](#footnote-3) If this is correct, we begin to exist with only the most rudimentary consciousness. Thus, when we begin to exist, and for some considerable period thereafter, there are no psychological connections between us and ourselves in the future. We are psychologically related to ourselves in the future only by the fact that our earliest experiences and our later experiences will occur in the same mind, or the same consciousness. I will refer to this relation as “continuity of consciousness,” which can include periods of sleep or unconsciousness. For brevity of exposition, I will refer to the fetal organism before the appearance of the capacity for consciousness as “the embryo,” though of course the embryonic stage of human development ends well before that point. On this stipulative use of the term, we were never embryos. I will also use the term “fetus” to refer to us as we were prior to birth – that is, to entities that, if they continue to live, will be identical with later persons. And I will use “person” in the Lockean sense, to refer to individuals with psychological capacities above some threshold of self-consciousness, minimal rationality, and so on.

According to the TRIA, then, a fetus, at least in the early phases of its life, is wholly psychologically unconnected to itself as a child and as an adult. What matters is thus almost entirely lacking in the relations between the fetus and itself at any point in the future. (I say “almost entirely” because it seems that mere continuity of consciousness can, at least in some instances, be a basis for some degree of egoistic concern about the future.[[4]](#footnote-4)) A fetus, particularly one that has just begun to exist, may therefore lack an interest in continuing to live, or have at most an interest in continuing to live of negligible strength. Death would not frustrate any significant interest and thus would not be a significant misfortune for the fetus. Indeed, according to the TRIA, if one of us dies immediately after beginning to exist, that is no different in substance from that individual’s never coming into existence at all. And, unless a fetus has some form of moral status that is wholly independent of its psychological capacities and well-being, painlessly killing a fetus immediately after it has begun to exist is no different in substance from preventing a person from coming into existence.

This understanding of the misfortune of death for a fetus provides an obvious basis for an argument for the permissibility of abortion, even late abortion. If killing a fetus, particularly one that has just begun to exist and has only the most rudimentary form of consciousness, does not inflict any serious harm on the fetus, then it should be permissible, provided there is no reason to suppose that fetuses have a form of moral status that makes killing them impermissible even though death would not be a misfortune for them. Common sense endorses the view, to which I will return, that there is no moral reason to cause a person to exist just because that person’s life would be well worth living, and no moral reason not to prevent a person from coming into existence if doing so would not adversely affect any existing person. If that common sense belief is correct, and if the TRIA is correct that the painless killing of a fetus is relevantly like preventing a person from coming into existence, it follows that the painless killing of a fetus should be permissible, if no one other than the fetus is affected.

Those who are already disposed to believe, for whatever reason, that abortion is often permissible may welcome this argument. But the same premises may also seem to support a highly unwelcome conclusion: namely, that the infliction of prenatal injury may also often be permissible. For the reason why fetuses lack a significant interest in continuing to live is that they are psychologically wholly unrelated to themselves in the future in the ways that matter. But this also implies that they have no significant interest in avoiding bad effects in the future that might be caused by prenatal injury.

If painlessly killing a fetus is relevantly like preventing a person from coming into existence, as the TRIA implies, then injuring a fetus in a way that will make its subsequent life less good should be relevantly like preventing a better-off person from coming into existence and causing a different, less well-off person to exist instead. In neither case is there anyone with an interest in having the better life.

Suppose, for example, that one has a choice between inflicting an injury of a certain kind on an embryo and not inflicting that injury. There certainly seems to be a moral reason not to inflict it. But now suppose that there are two embryos and that one must decide which is to be selected for implantation. And suppose, to eliminate any differences between them that are irrelevant to my argument, that the embryos are identical twins. One of them, however, has suffered an injury of the same kind that one might choose to inflict in the first choice. If one selects the uninjured embryo for implantation, a person will later exist and have a life that is well worth living. If one selects the injured embryo, a different person will later exist whose life will be somewhat less good because of the effects of the injury. But one’s selection of that embryo will not be bad or worse for the later person, who would not have existed had one chosen the uninjured embryo instead. (This is thus an instance of the Non-Identity Problem.) It may seem that, on the TRIA, there is no significant moral difference between inflicting the injury in the one case and selecting the injured embryo in the other.

Admittedly, preventing a better-off person from coming into existence and causing a less well-off person to exist instead seems morally objectionable to most of us, and certainly more objectionable than simply preventing a person from existing whose life would be well worth living. But it is, as I will later indicate, difficult to explain why this is so. And in any case it does not seem as objectionable morally as the infliction of prenatal injury, which to most of us seems clearly seriously wrong.

If an argument for the permissibility of abortion is also an argument for the permissibility of inflicting prenatal injury, or even if it is also an argument for the claim that prenatal injury is substantially less morally objectionable than we have assumed, that is a reason for doubting that the argument can be correct. I have argued elsewhere that, for example, the strongest of all the objections to Thomson’s highly influential argument for the permissibility of abortion – which appeals not to the fetus’s moral status or interests but to its relation to the pregnant person – is that it seems to imply that the infliction of injury on the fetus is, if anything, *less* objectionable morally than killing it via abortion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Unlike the TRIA, the Life Comparative Account has an obvious explanation of why prenatal injury is wrong: it causes the victim to have a less good future life as a whole rather than a better one. To have the less good of two possible lives would be against the fetus’s interests and thus worse for the fetus, both now and in the future.

This claim about the implications of the Life Comparative Account requires two qualifications. First, it presupposes that the infliction of prenatal injury does not affect the identity of the person who will develop from the embryo or fetus. It is possible that a major injury to an embryo (which we are assuming would not be identical with the person who might develop from it) could be “identity-determining” – that is, that it could prevent the embryo from giving rise to the existence of one person and cause it to give rise to the existence of a different person instead. It is also possible that a major injury to a fetus could cause the individual who exists in association with that fetal organism to cease to exist and cause a different individual to come into existence instead. It is, however, much more likely that damage to an embryo could be identity-determining, as that would affect the conditions of an individual’s origin. For the purposes of this discussion, I will ignore these metaphysical possibilities and assume that prenatal injury is always “identity-preserving.”

Second, it is obviously not true that prenatal injury always causes an individual to have a less good life than that individual would have had in the absence of the injury. We know that sometimes a person’s suffering even a serious injury causes that person to have a better life – for example, when a car crash that injures a passenger prevents that person from boarding a plane that crashes as a result of a defect in the plane.[[6]](#footnote-6) While it may be difficult to identify actual instances because this requires counterfactual speculation, it is clear that there are instances in which an injury that occurs prenatally also causes the “victim” to have a better life – a life with more well-being, better distributed – than that individual would otherwise have had. But because prenatal injury is more likely to make the subsequent life worse rather than better, I ask the reader to assume that all instances of prenatal injury that I will discuss make the subsequent life worse.

With these qualifications in mind, we can see how the Life Comparative Account provides a seemingly plausible explanation of why the infliction of prenatal injury is morally objectionable. But, as we have seen, it also suggests, implausibly, that abortion should be far more objectionable, as it implies that abortion inflicts the greatest possible loss an individual can suffer – the loss of the whole of a life that would have been well worth living.

It may seem, therefore, that neither the TRIA nor the Life Comparative Account can recognize a significant moral difference between abortion and prenatal injury. The TRIA seems to suggest that neither is seriously objectionable, while the Life Comparative Account seems to suggest that both are. There is, however, a rather obvious response to the charge that the TRIA cannot explain why prenatal injury is significantly more objectionable than abortion. According to the TRIA, abortion at most frustrates a present interest of negligible strength, and also prevents the fetus from ever having any other interests. There is thus no one for whom an abortion need be significantly bad, or worse (except in the life-comparative sense). Having an abortion is, as I claimed, relevantly like preventing a person from coming into existence.

Prenatal injury, by contrast, will frustrate many interests that the fetus will *later* have. Because of this, prenatal injury is *worse* for the individual who is now a fetus. It is worse, moreover, not just in the life-comparative sense but also in the effect that it has on the individual’s *interests*. It is therefore quite different, morally, from preventing a better-off person from coming into existence and causing a different, less well-off person to exist instead. If one does the latter, that need not be worse for anyone and need not frustrate any of the less well-off person’s interests – except in the sense that those interests that the person will have and that will be frustrated would not have existed and been frustrated had one not caused that individual to exist. Prenatal injury, by contrast, will frustrate many of injured individual’s later interests that would have been satisfied if the injury had not been inflicted.

Prenatal injury will not, of course, *necessarily* frustrate future interests. The injured individual may die at any time before the bad effects of the injury first become manifest, which may be many years after the injury is inflicted. Indeed, the pregnant person, having caused the injury or become aware of it, may decide to have an abortion, thereby preventing the injury from having any later bad effects. I will later discuss whether the occurrence of prenatal injury gives the pregnant person a moral reason to have an abortion.

But, even though prenatal injury will not necessarily frustrate future interests, it nevertheless seems quite different from abortion. Abortion prevents the existence of interests that might have been satisfied. That seems acceptable, provided that the fetus has no significant present interest in the formation and satisfaction of future interests. (The Life Comparative Account, by contrast, suggests that there is a strong moral reason to ensure that the fetus develops and satisfies a long lifetime’s worth of interests.) Apart from the fetus’s negligible present interest in continuing to live and the interests of others, the only interests relevant to the morality of abortion are those the fetus would develop if an abortion is not performed. Because whether these interests will exist depends on whether an abortion is performed, I will refer to them as “dependent interests” relative to the choice between having and not having an abortion.

But whether a fetus will continue to live and have interests in the future is independent of whether it suffers prenatal injury – or, rather, nonlethal prenatal injury, which differs from lethal prenatal injury in just the way that it differs from abortion. It seems, in other words, that whether the fetus will later have interests that would be frustrated by prenatal injury is independent of whether the prenatal injury is inflicted. I will refer to interests whose later existence does not depend on whether an act that inflicts prenatal injury is done as “independent interests” relative to the choice between doing and not doing that act.

Whether an interest is dependent or independent is always relative to some act or choice. Because of this, interests that are independent relative to some act are not necessarily *future* interests. Although a possible interest is independent relative to a person’s act or choice at some time, it may be dependent relative to later acts by the same person or by others.

The relevant difference, then, between abortion and prenatal injury, according to the TRIA, is that, whereas abortion frustrates at most a negligible interest in continuing to live and merely prevents the existence and potential satisfaction of dependent interests, prenatal injury is likely to frustrate many interests that the individual will have independently of whether the injury is inflicted.

In the literature on population ethics, and particularly in the early literature, many philosophers have been tempted by the view that, whereas the interests of future people – people who will exist or whose existence is independent of one’s action – matter morally, and ground reasons for action, the interests of possible people – people whose existence is only possible or depends on one’s action – do not matter. These philosophers have, in other words, been tempted by the view that, whereas future or independent interests matter, possible or dependent interests do not. But that view is, I believe, decisively undermined by its implication that there is no moral reason not to cause a miserable person to exist just because her dependent interests in not suffering would be frustrated, and their frustration would not be compensated for by the satisfaction of more and stronger dependent interests in having benefits.

One cannot claim, therefore, that dependent interests do not matter. Nor does it seem that there is any general moral asymmetry between dependent interests and existing or independent interests. Avoiding the creation and subsequent frustration of a potential miserable person’s dependent interests in avoiding suffering seems to matter just as much as avoiding the frustration of an existing person’s interests in avoiding equivalent suffering.

Someone who is opposed to abortion might, therefore, argue that abortion is objectionable precisely because it prevents the fetus from developing and satisfying dependent interests. To this, a proponent of the TRIA could respond that, because a fetus has little or no present interest in the development and satisfaction of dependent interests, abortion remains relevantly like preventing a person from coming into existence, thereby preventing that person from developing and satisfying dependent interests. This, most people believe, is not morally objectionable; for, in the absence of any significant present interest in developing or avoiding developing dependent interests, there is a moral asymmetry between creating interests that would be frustrated, which is objectionable, and not creating interests that would be satisfied, which is not objectionable. This claim about the creation of interests parallels the familiar *Asymmetry* in population ethics about the creation of people – namely, that while there is a strong moral reason not to cause a person to exist if her life would be miserable, or not worth living, there is *no* moral reason to cause a person to exist just because her life would be well worth living. One might thus respond to the opponent of abortion by observing that, whereas abortion merely prevents the existence of dependent interests that would be satisfied, which is unobjectionable, the infliction of prenatal injury frustrates interests that will exist independently of whether the injury is inflicted, which is clearly objectionable.

This last claim is, however, highly misleading. While it is true that the infliction of prenatal injury normally frustrates some of the victim’s independent interests, many or most of the interests affected by prenatal injury may actually be dependent interests. This is because, if a fetus suffers an injury, its subsequent life is likely to be very different from the way it would have been in the absence of the injury. The extent to which an injured individual’s life is likely to diverge from the life that individual would have had if the injury had not been inflicted is a matter of degree. In many cases, the divergence is very extensive, especially if it begins around the time of birth and steadily increases as time passes. The infant may, for example, require treatments it would not have otherwise needed. As it becomes older, its activities may be limited in ways that they would otherwise not have been. And each of these differences will itself produce many more differences; for example, by causing the child to meet and form relationships with different people from those he would otherwise have met. In most cases, the divergence between the actual life with the injury and the alternative possible life (or lives) he would (or could) have had without it will be greater the more serious or severe the injury is.

This an extreme instance of a pervasive phenomenon. Our actual lives are constantly diverging from alternative possible lives we might have had if we had made different choices, or if certain events had not occurred.[[7]](#footnote-7) The subsequent life of a young philosopher who accepts a position at one university will evolve very differently from the way it would have if she had declined that position and accepted another offer she had at a different, distant university. She will meet and become close to people she would not have met had she taken the other job. Her interests in philosophy may develop differently from the way they would have if she had had different colleagues. She may be exposed to other influences that prompt her to become passionate about certain political issues that might otherwise have remained only tepid concerns. After some years, the interests she will have formed as a result of her attachments to certain people, her commitments to certain projects, and so on will be quite different from those she would have formed if she had accepted the other job. Something similar, though less extensive, will happen again if she changes jobs again at a later time in her career. The reason that the difference prenatal injury makes is likely to be far more extensive is that it occurs either before a person has begun to exist (if it is inflicted on an embryo) or immediately after that person has begun to exist. If the injury begins to change the course of the individual’s life from the time of birth, virtually the whole of the individual’s life may be utterly different from the way it would have been without the injury. And it is not only the person’s *life* that will be different. The person *herself* may become entirely different from the way she would have been had the injury not occurred. Because in her actual life with the injury she is from the beginning molded by different experiences from those she might have had, she is likely to develop different character traits and dispositions, as well as different beliefs, values, desires, ambitions, commitments, and so on.

Because the particulars in her life, and her attachments to these particulars, are very different from those that would have been in the life she would have had without the injury, many or most of the interests she will have in her actual life will be different from those she might have had without the injury. Of course, some of the interests she has in her actual life have nothing to do with her attachments to particulars and are ones she would have had even in the absence of the injury – that is, they are independent interests relative to the act of inflicting prenatal injury. Perhaps the most obvious interest of this sort is the interest she has in avoiding suffering. That is an interest that everyone has and is thus one she would have in any possible life she might have. We might call interests of this sort “generic interests.” But generic interests constitute only a small proportion of an individual’s interests. Indeed, they may be just descriptive labels that subsume a variety of an individual’s particular interests, so that, for example, an individual’s interest in avoiding suffering may just refer to the set consisting of the individual’s interest in not experiencing some instance of suffering that is possible at time t1, her interest in not experiencing some other instance of suffering possible at t2, and so on.

Generic interests contrast with what we can call “distinctive interests,” which are concerned with particular ways in which one’s well-being might be enhanced or preserved – for example, through the flourishing of one’s relations with a particular person or the successful pursuit of a particular ambition. They may, of course, be individuated in more fine-grained ways. One may, for instance, have an interest in being treated in an especially kindly way by a loved one on some specific occasion, in having an article accepted for publication in a particular journal, or in having a surgical operation performed in an exceptionally skillful way.

It is a person’s distinctive interests that are likely to be dependent interests relative to that person’s having been injured prenatally. But even if a person would not have had a particular interest if she had not been injured when she was a fetus, that interest can still be frustrated because she suffered that injury. For it is possible for one and the same act both to cause a person to have an interest and to frustrate that interest. And a person’s having been injured prenatally can also, of course, be the cause of the frustration of some of her generic interests. So prenatal injury can frustrate both types of interest. Even so, it is possible, particularly if certain conditions are satisfied, that only a small number of a person’s actual interests will be frustrated by her having been injured prenatally. And, paradoxically, this may be more likely to be true if the injury was relatively severe rather than quite mild.

The conditions in which this is most likely to be true include the following:

* A prenatal injury causes the injured individual’s life to begin right from birth to develop differently from the way it would have developed without the injury.
* The divergence between the actual life and the alternative possible life without the injury is extensive even soon after birth and increases rapidly with time.
* The interests that are affected by the prenatal injury are mostly dependent interests that are also distinctive rather than generic, such as interests concerned with attachments to particular persons or with particular ambitions, commitments, or projects.
* Even though the divergence between the actual life with the injury and the alternative possible life without it begins early, the bad effects of the injury do not begin to occur until later, after the person has developed extensive interests concerned with the particulars of her actual life.

In these conditions, even though the life with the injury may be less good in terms of its overall lifetime well-being, the injury may frustrate relatively few of the interests the person has in her actual life. This is, at least in part, because the interests the person will develop in her actual life will be adapted to the conditions of that life. Suppose that, if she had not been injured, the person would have become a concert pianist; but one effect of the injury was to impair her manual dexterity. Given that this was manifest early in her life, she never developed any ambition to play the piano and became a successful philosophy professor instead (recall that the life with the injury is, we are assuming, the less good life). If she had an interest in becoming a concert pianist, the injury would have frustrated it. But in her actual life, she never has that interest. That is an interest she would have had only in the alternative possible life without the injury.

Because both the circumstances of her actual life and the interests she has in that life are different from those of the possible life she would have had in the absence of the injury, it is highly likely, especially in the conditions described above, that her interests in her actual life will be better satisfied in that life than those same interests would have been in the life without the injury. This is not because she would not have had most of these interests in that alternative life. Even though they would, in that life, have been merely hypothetical interests, the events that would have satisfied them could have occurred. The reason that most of these actual interests, and in particular the distinctive ones, would not have been satisfied in the alternative possible life is instead that the *objects* of these interests would not have figured at all in that life. Many of the person’s actual interests may be concerned with her relations with her spouse. But it is highly likely that she would never have even met the person who is her actual spouse if her life had developed differently in the absence of the injury. And many of her other interests may be concerned with her relations with her child. But it is virtually certain that that child would never have existed if she had not been injured prenatally. She may well have had a child in that alternative life but it would have been a different child.

From within her actual life, the person may recognize that the alternative life she could have had would have been a better life. But, in part because her actual interests will be better satisfied in her actual life than they would have been in the alternative, better life without the injury, it can be entirely egoistically rational for her not to regret not having had that better life. It can even be egoistically rational for her to be glad that she has had her actual life rather than the better possible life.

Indeed, if the four conditions stated above are satisfied, *there may be no time in her actual life at which it would be egoistically rational for her to regret that she did not have the alternative, better life*. When she is very young, it is not possible for her to have egoistic attitudes to alternative possible lives she might have had. But when she is very young, she is bound by the prudential unity relations only to herself in the very near future. Assuming that the bad effects of the prenatal injury will become manifest only later, at a time in her life to which she is now unconnected by the prudential unity relations, there is nothing to connect her in the relevant way either to her actual future with the injury or to the future she would have had without the injury. And as she becomes older and begins to develop attachments to particular people, likings for specific activities, and so on, she will become increasingly unable to contemplate with regret an alternative life that would have been better in terms of overall well-being but in which much or most of what she actually cares about would have been absent.

We can refer to this phenomenon – that it can often be egoistically rational for a person not to regret having failed to have a better, though quite different, life – as the *Divergent Lives Problem*. It is relevant not only to the problem of differentiating morally between abortion and the infliction of prenatal injury but also to such philosophical issues as Lucretius’s challenge to the common sense view of the badness of death.[[8]](#footnote-8) Lucretius noted that, although we fear ceasing to exist through death, we do not fear the nonexistence that preceded our coming into existence. He thought, however, that there is nothing of significance that distinguishes our future nonexistence from our past nonexistence. This argument can be recast in terms of what I earlier referred to as the Deprivation Account of the misfortune of death. According to this view, death is bad because it deprives us of the good life we could have had if we had not died when we did. But, given a fixed time of death, it should also be bad for us that we did not begin to exist earlier than we did; for that too deprived us of good life we could have had. We do not, however, regret not having come into existence earlier; so neither should we be disturbed by the prospect of ceasing to exist sooner rather than later.

There have been many responses to Lucretius’s argument but the one that seems to me to best explain why the argument is mistaken is grounded in the Divergent Lives Problem. If I had begun to exist earlier than I in fact did, my entire life would have been radically different from what it has been. Even though my life would, by hypothesis, have been longer, and even if it would have been much better overall, I cannot wish that I had had that life rather than the one I have had; for virtually all that I rationally care about in my actual life would have been absent from that alternative life. That is the reason why I ought rationally to be unmoved by the thought that I might have come into existence earlier. And it is compatible with my concern to continue to live for a longer rather than a shorter period of time; for there would likely be more of what I rationally care about in a longer future life than in a shorter one.

It may seem that these claims must rest on some philosophical sleight of hand. If a person has a less good life rather than a better life, that must be *worse* for that person. And it seems that a person must always have egoistic reason to avoid what would be worse for him and to regret not having had what would have been better for him. And indeed the first of these claims is generally true. If a person is approaching a time when he must choose between having a future life that promises to be better overall, with a higher total well-being, and a future life that would be less good, it is generally egoistically rational for him to choose the former. There are, however, two types of exception, which are closely related. In one type of exception, the future life in which the person would have higher overall well-being is also one in which he would be less strongly related to himself now by the prudential unity relations. According to the TRIA, it might be in his present interest to choose the less good future in which he would be more closely psychologically connected to himself as he is now. In the other type of exception, the better future life would have less of what a person rationally cares about now, but would have much more of what he would *come to care about* in that future than the less good future would have of what he would care about in *that* future. (This exception is related to the first because the changes in what the person cares about in the better future would also be psychological discontinuities.) In these circumstances, it may again be egoistically rational for the person to choose the future life that he knows would be, at least in one clear sense, worse for him.

But even in these instances, in which the person can rationally prefer, for egoistic reasons, the less good of two possible futures, the future that would be better for the person is better only *in itself*, or only in terms of its intrinsic features, independently of its relation to the life that has preceded it. The better future might, for example, be longer and have a higher average quality of life. On most accounts, then, it offers the person the better life *as a whole*. This brings us to the main theme of this essay.

Our lives are, as I noted, continuously diverging from alternative possible lives, or futures, that we might have had. When we contemplate these alternative ways in which our lives could go, or could have gone, we have certain attitudes to them. These attitudes can, for reasons I have indicated, vary over time. A young philosopher who has applied for two teaching positions believes, correctly we can assume, that her present and later interests would be better satisfied if she were to have the job in the more prestigious of the two departments. Her life with that job would be better than her life with the less prestigious position. At that time, before it is determined which job she can have, she wants the more prestigious position. As it happens, however, she is rejected for that position but is offered, and accepts, the less prestigious position. For a time she regrets – I believe rationally – not having the alternative, better life that the more prestigious position would have afforded. But suppose that, as in the example I sketched earlier, she develops a relationship with one of her colleagues in the less good department and has a child with that person. It may now be impossible for her to regret, for self-interested reasons, not having the alternative possible life in the better department. Too much of what she justifiably cares about would have been absent in that life. It is, it seems, rational for her to be glad that she has her actual life rather than the alternative, better life she would have had if she had been offered the better job. Her rational attitudes to alternative possible lives can therefore vary over time.

If this is right, it shows that *identity is not what matters across possible lives* – just as Parfit showed that identity is not what matters over time. If identity were what matters across possible lives, it would be rational for this person at all times in her actual life to regret not having better alternative lives she might have had if she had chosen differently or if different events had occurred. We might refer to the view that it is always rational for a person to regret not having the best life that would be, or would have been, possible for her as the *Life Comparative Account of what matters across possible lives*. What I hope this discussion has shown is that this view is mistaken, just as the Life Comparative Account of what matters over time is mistaken.

Identity may well be a necessary condition for rational egoistic attitudes to other possible lives. And it may also be a sufficient condition for some types of egoistic attitude to those lives. But, as we have seen, it seems possible that one can rationally want a possible future life, then rationally regret having been unable to have it, then rationally not regret not having it, then rationally be glad that one does not have it. If all this is possible, then identity can be at most only one element of what matters across possible lives. It will help us to identify some of the other elements of what matters across possible lives to continue to examine some examples of attitudes of rational regret or, more particularly, examples of the rational absence of regret.

Suppose that, later in her life in the less good department, the philosopher no longer regrets not having the better life she might have had in the better department. There are two broad types of reason why her attitude may be entirely rational. They correspond to two broadly specified elements of what matters across possible lives.

We have already considered the first type of reason at length. It is that her actual interests are being and will continue to be better satisfied in her actual life than they would have been in the alternative, better life. There is, in other words, more of what she actually, and justifiably, cares about in her actual life than there would have been in the better life. In that other life, she would rationally and justifiably have cared about and pursued aims and activities that she in fact, and justifiably, does not care about.

The second type of reason why it is rational for her not to regret not having the better life is concerned with the fact that she herself would have been, or have become, quite different in that alternative life. While it is of course difficult or impossible for her to know what kind of person she would have become if she had become a member of the more prestigious department, it is clear that the different experiences and influences that she would have had in that life would have shaped her character, beliefs, values, and desires in various ways. And the differences between herself in her actual life and herself as she would have been in the alternative, better life steadily increase over time, so that after many years she may have become very different from the way she would have been. Gazing, insofar as it is possible, from the actual world into the possible world in which she has the better job, she may hardly recognize herself in the person who bears her name in that world. We often say of a person who has undergone profound changes of character, disposition, or values that “he is no longer the same person” or “he is a different person now.” This is of course metaphorical but is intended to call attention to deep psychological discontinuities between the person as he was and the person as he has become. The same metaphor may be even more apt in comparisons between a person as he is and himself as he would have been if his life had taken a different course at some point of divergence in the past, particularly if that point was before the person’s character had begun to be significantly shaped by his experiences. Indeed, the phrase comes close to being literally true when the divergence occurs before or shortly after birth, as is the case in most instances of significant prenatal injury.

The notions of psychological continuity and discontinuity across possible lives are of course quite different from the notions of psychological continuity and discontinuity over time – at least as I understand these latter notions. As I mentioned earlier, whereas Parfit thought that psychological connections were merely matters of qualitative similarity between mental states at different times, I believe they require physical continuity of the relevant areas of the brain. But for psychological continuity across possible lives, qualitative similarity is all that is possible. The extent to which I might rationally regret not having some alternative possible life thus depends in part on how psychologically similar to my actual self I would have been in that alternative life – how similar my character traits, dispositions, values, attitudes, and so on would have been to my corresponding psychological states in my actual life.

Just as psychological discontinuity over time is subversive of what matters over time, so psychological discontinuity or psychological dissimilarity is subversive of what matters across possible lives. And just as our interests in our future are a function both of the magnitudes of potential benefits and harms and of the strength of the prudential unity relations, so the rationality of our egoistic attitudes to alternative possible lives is a function both of how much those lives would have contained of what we actually care about and of the degree to which our psychological nature in those lives would be similar to our actual psychological nature. These are the two main elements of what matters across possible lives.

Because the egoistic attitudes it is rational to have towards alternative possible lives we might have had normally vary over time, we can refer to the view that holds that these are the two main elements of what matters across possible lives as the *Time-Relative Account of what matters across possible lives*. It is the account of what matters across possible lives that is the counterpart of the Time-Relative Interest Account of what matters over time. These two views contrast with the Life Comparative Accounts of what matters across possible lives and over time. Whereas the Life Comparative accounts presuppose that identity is what matters, the Time-Relative accounts presuppose that identity is not what matters.

We can return now to the problem of prenatal injury. I said earlier that, just as abortion is, according to the TRIA, morally little or no different from preventing a person from existing, so prenatal injury is morally little or no different from selecting an injured embryo for implantation rather than a different, uninjured embryo – that is, it is little or no different from causing a less well-off person to exist rather than allowing a different, better-off person to come into existence. This is also implied by the Time-Relative Account of what matters across possible lives. On this view, the reason not to inflict prenatal injury is equivalent in strength to (or perhaps negligibly stronger than) the reason not to cause a less well-off person to exist rather than to allow a better-off person to exist, when the difference in well-being between the life with the injury and the life without it would be the same as the difference in well-being between the lives of the different people.

Because most people believe that there is a strong moral reason not to inflict prenatal injury, this implication of the Time-Relative Account of what matters across possible lives, if correct, supports the view that there is a strong moral reason to cause or allow a better-off person to exist rather than to cause or allow a less well-off person to exist. We can, following Johann Frick, refer to this view as the “non-identity intuition.”

In part because it is vague, the non-identity intuition is widely accepted. Problems arise, however, when one tries to make it more precise – for example, by comparing the strength of the reason to that of other related reasons we recognize. Most of us, I suspect, find it difficult to believe that the reason to cause a better-off person to exist rather than a different, less well-off person is just as strong as the reason not to inflict prenatal injury (again assuming the difference in well-being between the two people’s lives would be the same as the difference in well-being between the life with the injury and the life without it, a qualification that the reader should assume applies to all such comparisons in the remainder of this essay). Most of us, on reflection, might contend that the explanation of why the reason not to inflict prenatal injury is stronger is that the infliction of the injury would be *worse for* the injured individual, whereas to cause the less well-off person to exist would not be worse for that person. Indeed, provided that the person’s life would be well worth living, or even just worth living, causing him to exist would be, if anything, *good* for him, and need not be worse for anyone else.

Whether being *worse for* someone is a morally significant consideration is a vexed issue in population ethics. As the comparison between the infliction of prenatal injury and causing a less well-off person to exist suggests, most of us seem to believe that it *is* morally significant. Parfit, however, denied this. To provide intuitive support for his view, he presented the following hypothetical example.

*The Medical Programs*

There are currently two medical programs. One, Preconception Testing, screens women who want to conceive a child for a condition that, unless treated, will cause any child they might conceive to suffer intermittent pain throughout its life. It is predictable that Preconception Testing will detect 1000 instances of this condition each year, thereby enabling 1000 women to be treated over a four month period. This will allow them to conceive a child who will not suffer the intermittent pain. This child would be a different person from the one they would conceive in the absence of testing. The second program, Pregnancy Testing, screens pregnant women for a condition that, unless treated, will cause the fetuses they are carrying to suffer intermittent pain throughout their lives. This program too will detect 1000 instances of the condition each year, thereby enabling the women to be treated, so that 1000 fetuses will be spared the intermittent pain. One of these programs must, however, be canceled, for lack of funding.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If Preconception Testing is canceled, 1000 children will be born who will suffer intermittent pain throughout their lives. The same will be true if Pregnancy Testing is canceled. The only difference is that if Preconception Testing is canceled, these 1000 children will be different from those who would have lived without the intermittent pain, whereas if Pregnancy Testing is canceled, the 1000 children will be the same children who, with testing, would have existed without the pain. Thus, while the cancellation of Preconception Testing would not be worse for the 1000 children who would suffer the pain, for they would never exist if the program were retained, the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing *would* be worse for the children who would suffer the pain, for they would exist but not suffer pain if the program were retained. Parfit believes that the two programs are “equally worthwhile.” If Preconception Testing would predictably detect 1003 cases of the condition while Pregnancy Testing would detect only 1000, he would judge that Pregnancy Testing should be canceled. He thus accepts what he calls the *No-Difference View*. Although he does not define this view, it is, roughly, the view that it makes no difference, morally, whether a bad effect is worse for a person or, because the person would not have existed in the absence of that bad effect, is not worse for the person.

Parfit cites the Medical Programs case as intuitive support for the No-Difference View. And I have always found it intuitively convincing. But its significance is quite limited. It does not in fact provide intuitive support for the quite general No-Difference View.

The case is supposed to test for the intuitive significance of an act or outcome’s being *worse for* someone. The cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would be worse for the 1000 children who would suffer pain while the cancellation of Preconception Testing would not be worse for the 1000 children who would suffer pain. But the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would be worse for the 1000 children only in the *life-comparative sense*: those children’s lives would be likely to be less good overall with intermittent pain than without it. But at the time that the decision to cancel the program would be made, those individuals would be fetuses. Because they would be unrelated by the prudential unity relations to themselves at the later times when they would suffer pain, the Time-Relative Interest Account of what matters over time implies that they have at most a negligible interest in having the future life without the pain. And, as for what matters across possible lives, our earlier discussion of prenatal injury applies equally here. For the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would simply be an instance of *allowing* prenatal injuries to occur. What that earlier discussion shows is that it is likely that, if Pregnancy Testing were canceled, there would be no time in the affected individuals’ actual lives at which it would be egoistically rational, according to the Time-Relative Account of what matters across possible lives, for them to regret that the program had been canceled. For at any time in their actual lives, they will have more of what they actually, and justifiably, care about than they would have had in the alternative possible life without the pain. And at any time in their actual lives, there would be substantial psychological discontinuity between themselves as they are and themselves as they would have been had Pregnancy Testing not been cancelled.

In short, the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would not frustrate any significant interests that the fetuses would have at the time, and it is highly likely that those individuals would never have any egoistic reason to regret that it had been canceled. That, of course, does not show that the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would not be bad. But what it does show is that it would be bad for much the same reason that the cancellation of Preconception Testing would be bad – namely, that it would cause 1000 less good lives to be lived rather than 1000 better lives.

This suggests that we should distinguish two senses of “worse for”: (1) the life-comparative sense, according to which an act or outcome is worse for a person if it would give that person a less good life overall, and (2) the “egoistic-reason sense,” according to which an act or outcome is worse for a person either has or will have egoistic or self-interested reason to prefer that the act not be done, or that the outcome not occur. The life-comparative sense is relevant only to the extent that identity matters. And I believe that it does matter in certain ways, both over time and across possible lives (as I indicated earlier). But in cases in which identity is not what matters, as is arguably true in the Medical Programs case, it is the egoistic-reason sense that is relevant.

It therefore seems that the Medical Programs case is a good test for the No-Difference View only if identity is what matters over time or across possible lives – that is, only if the relevant sense in which the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing is worse for the fetuses is the life-comparative sense. For it is in this sense that the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would be worse for individuals while the cancellation of Preconception Testing would not be. But if identity is not what matters across possible lives and the relevant sense of “worse for” is the egoistic-reason sense, then the cancellation of neither program would be worse for the individuals affected. The cancellation of Preconception Testing would not be worse for the individuals who would suffer pain because if it had not been cancelled, they would never have existed. And the cancellation of Pregnancy Testing would not be worse for the individuals who would suffer the pain because they would never have any interest that would be frustrated by the cancellation and there would never be a time in their lives at which it would be egoistically rational for them to wish that it had not been cancelled.

It is, perhaps, surprising that Parfit, who made the truly revolutionary philosophical discovery that identity is not what matters over time, should seek to support the No-Difference View by appealing to a case that in fact supports this view only if identity is what matters across possible lives. I suspect that if, as I believe, Parfit is right that identity is not what matters over time, consistency requires that we also accept that it is not what matters across possible lives.

The Medical Programs case, therefore, does not show that it makes no difference whether a bad effect is worse for someone. It shows that that makes no difference only if “worse for” is understood in the life-comparative sense. To test whether the No-Difference View is plausible if “worse for” is understood in the egoistic-reason sense, we must consider other examples in which we compare an act with a bad effect that is not worse for anyone with an act with a comparable bad effect that is worse for someone.

Suppose, for example, that one can do either of two acts but not both. The first of these acts would prevent a person who is a stranger to oneself from suffering a certain significant harm. One could do this act with no cost to oneself but the beneficiary would never know that one had done it and would therefore never be able to express gratitude, repay the favor, or do anything of the sort. The second act would prevent the existence of a person in whose life the same significant harm would occur but would also cause the existence of a different person whose life would be much the same except that it would not contain the significant harm. Although it would determine which of two people would come into existence, this second act would be neither better nor worse for anyone else and would not violate anyone’s rights. This act could also be done at no personal cost.

The failure to do the first of these acts would be worse for a person in the egoistic-reason sense. The failure to do the second act would not be worse for anyone in either of the two senses. If the No-Difference View is correct, there is no morally relevant difference between the two acts. The reason to do one is no stronger than the reason to do the other. It would therefore be permissible to do either. Many of us, however, have the intuition that the reason to prevent an existing stranger from suffering a harm is stronger than the reason to ensure that a person whose life would not contain an equivalent harm does not come into existence and that a different person whose life would not contain such a harm comes into existence instead. To many of us, the fact that our failure to aid the existing person would be worse for that person in the egoistic-reason sense makes a moral difference.

Those who do not share this intuition, or in whom the intuition is weak, might consider a variant of the example involving different modes of agency. One person, P1, acts in a way that he foresees will cause a stranger to suffer a significant harm, either as a means or a side effect. A second person, P2, acts in a way that he foresees will, either as a means or a side effect, prevent one person from coming into existence and cause a different person to exist instead whose life will be much the same as the other’s except that it will contain the same significant harm that P1 has caused. According to the No-Difference View, there is no moral difference between P1’s act and P2’s act, if other things are equal. This may be hard to accept.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In summary, the Medical Programs case does not provide intuitive support for the No-Difference View and the No-Difference View has implausible implications in other cases. Contrary to the No-Difference View, that an act or outcome is worse for a person *is* morally significant, provided it is worse in the egoistic-reason sense and not just in the life-comparative sense. But, since prenatal injury may be worse for the victim only in the life-comparative sense, causing it or allowing it to occur may be morally no different from causing or allowing a less well-off person to exist rather than causing or allowing a better-off person to exist instead.

If this is right, it provides support for the non-identity intuition – that is, the view that there is a strong moral reason to cause a better-off person to exist rather than a different, less well-off person. (To avoid having to repeat this cumbersome phrase, I will generally abbreviate the non-identity intuition as follows: “there is a strong moral reason to create the better-off.”) Most of us believe that there is a strong moral reason not to inflict prenatal injury. But, while most of us accept that there is a moral reason to create the better-off, we tend not to think that that reason is as strong as the reason not to cause prenatal injury. So, if inflicting prenatal injury is in fact relevantly like failing to create the better-off, we must revise one of our intuitive views. We should conclude either that the reason not to inflict prenatal injury is weaker than we have supposed, or that the reason to create the better-off is stronger than we have supposed.

It is possible that some will conclude that we have overestimated the strength of the reason not to inflict prenatal injury. They might seek to defend this view by arguing that people have thought that prenatal injury is more objectionable than it in fact is because, being unaware of the Divergent Lives Problem, they have mistakenly believed that prenatal injury is significantly worse for the fetus in the egoistic-reason sense. Still, it is difficult to believe that the reason not to inflict prenatal injury is significantly weaker than we have supposed. It therefore seems more reasonable to achieve consistency by accepting that, while the reason not to inflict prenatal injury may be somewhat weaker than we have supposed, the reason to create the better-off is significantly stronger than most of us have hitherto supposed.

This revision would, of course, take us closer to the No-Difference View. For it concedes that our reasons not to cause bad effects that are not worse for anyone in either of the two senses are not weaker by as much as we have assumed than our reasons not to cause comparable bad effects that *are* worse for people. But the revision can nevertheless stop well short of the No-Difference View. It does, however, require us to accept that the reason not to inflict prenatal injury that would have bad effects in the individual’s later life is not as strong as the reason not to inflict the same bad effects on someone who is already a person at the time.\*

If we conclude that the reason to create the better-off is significantly stronger than we have previously supposed, that may put some of our other beliefs in the area of population ethics under pressure. Most people, it seems, accept the view that is often referred to as

*The Asymmetry*

While there is a strong moral reason not to cause a person to exist if her life would be miserable, or on balance intrinsically bad for her, there is no moral reason to cause a person to exist just because her life would be worth living, or on balance intrinsically good for her.

The Asymmetry comprises two claims: the Affirmative and Negative Claims, respectively. The Negative Claim is, in effect, that there is no moral reason to cause a well-off person to exist rather than not cause anyone to exist. This is in tension even with a rather weak version of the non-identity intuition. But consideration of prenatal injury and the Divergent Lives Problem has compelled us to accept that the reason to cause a well-off person to exist rather than a different, less well-off person is significantly stronger than we previously supposed – as strong, for example, as the reason not to inflict a significant injury on a fetus. This raises a challenge: how can there be a *very strong* *moral reason* to cause a well-off person to exist when the alternative is that a less well-off person will come into existence instead, but *no moral reason* to cause a well-off person to exist – perhaps even the *same* well-off person – when the alternative is that no person will come into existence?[[11]](#footnote-11) Could it be – as the conjunction of the non-identity intuition and the Negative Claim suggest – that it is somehow worse to cause a less well-off person to exist than to cause no one to exist? I will not explore this challenge here. I mention it only to note that this problem becomes more acute the stronger the reason to create the better-off is.

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**Further material that I have not had time to develop or integrate into the text**

**Is abortion an acceptable remedy for prenatal injury?**

Suppose that a pregnant person inflicts a prenatal injury, either accidentally or as a foreseen side effect of doing something that was of great importance to her. She can, however, still expect with the normal degree of confidence that her child’s life will be worth living. Does she now have a moral reason to have an abortion? If she does not have an abortion, she will have done to her child both what will frustrate some of that child’s independent and dependent interests and what will be worse for the child in the life-comparative sense. If she has an abortion, she will at most frustrate only one interest – the fetus’s interest in continuing to live – that is of negligible strength. If she caused the injury culpably – for example, by taking strong drugs for recreational purposes – she can prevent the bad effects of her prior action by having an abortion. Let us assume that her own interests are not engaged: she is, for whatever improbable reasons, rationally indifferent between having the injured child, having no child, and having an abortion and conceiving another child who will not be injured. And let us further assume that the side effects of the different options are sufficiently unpredictable that consideration of them cannot affect what she ought morally to do.

According to common sense morality, the balance of reasons favors her not having an abortion. The only individual whose interests will be affected by her decision either to have or not to have an abortion is the fetus. Insofar as it has an interest at stake, that interest is in continuing to live.

But the TRIA, the Negative Claim, and the non-identity intuition together imply that the pregnant person has a strong moral reason to have an abortion. As I have noted repeatedly, the TRIA implies that, at least soon after it has begun to exist, the fetus has at most a negligible interest in continuing to live. It would be altogether unconnected with itself at any time in the future by the prudential unity relations. Its ceasing to exist is therefore relevantly like the failure of a person to come into existence; and killing it is thus relevantly like preventing a person from existing. Assuming, then, that having an abortion shortly after one of us has begun to exist is relevantly like preventing a person from coming into existence, the Negative Claim implies that the pregnant person has effectively no reason not to have an abortion.

If the pregnant person does not have an abortion, the person she will both cause and allow to exist can be expected to have a lifetime level of well-being that will be diminished to some extent by the prenatal injury she has inflicted. If she has an abortion and then conceives another child, that will be relevantly like preventing a less well-off person from coming into existence and causing a better-off person to exist instead. According to the non-identity intuition, she has a strong moral reason to do this. She does not, however, have any moral reason to have an abortion unless she will conceive another child who could be expected to be better off, or have a better life.

**Velleman**

When I presented some of the ideas in this paper to my graduate seminar last term, one of my students told me that I ought to read David Velleman’s three-part paper, “Persons in Prospect” in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. Since then I have had time to read only the few pages that, on a cursory review, seemed most relevant to my discussion here. What I have found is that Velleman anticipates my claim that identity is not what matters across possible lives. (Although he clearly means what I mean, he repeatedly expresses his view by saying that identity is not what matters “in survival.” But “survival” occurs over time; I cannot not “survive” in an alternative life that I might have had but have not had.)

I earlier offered a rather minimal sketch of a view about what matters across possible lives – that is, about what makes certain attitudes towards alternative lives one might have had egoistically rational. Velleman argues for a more radical view: not only that identity is not what matters but, in effect, that nothing can possibly matter across possible lives of one and the same person. He contends that, once one’s life has diverged from an alternative life one might have had – for example, once one has suffered some misfortune rather than not having suffered it – one’s “identical” in that alternative possible life has become “inaccessible to [one’s] self-concern.”[[12]](#footnote-12) That alternative life is itself “closed to [one] not only in practice but also in first-personal thought.”[[13]](#footnote-13) From these claims he draws the conclusion that “regretting *what might have been* is truly irrational,” and that “being relieved about *what is* may be irrational as well, insofar as it involves a comparison between the two.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

He also infers from his main claims that familiar accounts of harm and benefit that compare a person’s actual well-being with what it might have been in the absence of some act or event must be mistaken. “Harm and benefit should … be conceived as making a person better or worse off then he formerly was, and hence as involving a temporal rather than counterfactual comparison.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

These claims have implications that are difficult to accept. Suppose that I make a choice that raises my level of well-being, at least temporarily, but raises it much less than it would have been raised had I made a different choice. It is hard to determine what the implications of Velleman’s view are about my choice. Because my well-being has improved relative to what it was, it seems that I have done what benefited me. But inevitably my level of well-being will decline, then rise, and so on. How can I determine the long-term effects of my choice on my well-being without comparing my well-being at later times with what it would have been had I chosen differently? Temporal comparisons seem to be of very limited scope and significance.

I know, moreover, that my well-being now, and perhaps in the future as well, would have been higher if I had chosen differently. It seems that, according to Velleman’s view, I cannot rationally regret that I did not choose the better alternative life – even immediately after I made my actual choice. Yet Velleman also writes that “regretting what I actually did is perfectly rational, since memory puts me on first-personal terms with the agent who did it: he is my past self in every respect relevant to self-concern.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This seems to me inconsistent with the other claims I have quoted, if it is supposed to apply to my choice that has made me better off than I was but worse off than I would have been had I chosen differently. According to the criterion of well-being grounded in a temporal comparison, I have only benefited myself. How can I rationally regret that? I might, of course, have benefited myself by more; but to regret that I have to compare my actual life with the alternative possible life in which I would have been better off – and that life is “inaccessible to my self-concern.”

If, finally, “harm and benefit should … be conceived as making a person better or worse off than he formerly was,” then a person cannot be harmed either by being caused to exist with a life that consists of nothing but extreme agony or by being killed. For a person cannot be worse off existing than he was before he began to exist, or worse off not existing than he was when he existed. As Parfit noted, “better off” and “worse off” presuppose a comparison between two states of a person. It seems, moreover, to make sense to suppose that being caused to exist with a life of unrelieved extreme suffering is *bad* for the person who has that life and that the act that caused him to be in that state has harmed him. And it also makes sense to suppose that death can be *worse for* a person than continuing to exist and that there is thus at least one sense in which killing a person harms him (even if it does so only by depriving him of benefits he would otherwise have had).

1. References to *The Ethics of Killing* and “Paradoxes of Abortion and Prenatal Injury,” *Ethics* 116, 4 (2006): 625-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Reasons and Persons*… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a defense, see *The Ethics of Killing*… [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Consider, for example, a version of Bernard Williams’s “deprogramming and reprogramming” thought experiment. Suppose that, over the course of 40 hours, the neurons and other cells in a person’s brain are going to be gradually reconfigured so that all of her memories will be replaced by a coherent set of false “memories,” and all of her character traits, beliefs, values, desires, intentions, and so on will be replaced by different ones. Yet she will remain continuously conscious throughout this process. If, before the process begins, she knows that her body will be tortured immediately after the process has been completed, it seems rational for her to fear that torture. Yet there will be no psychological connections between herself before the process and herself at the time of the torture. Nor will there be any substantial form of psychological continuity. Assuming that this sort of process is possible – that is, that a human brain can generate consciousness continuously through a process of total reconfiguration – consideration of this possibility suggests that mere continuity of consciousness can be a basis of rational egoistic concern. It may be significant, however, that this is an example of a *person* who will be psychologically related to herself *after only a short period of time* only by continuity of consciousness. It may be less intuitive to suppose that mere continuity of consciousness matters to any degree between a *fetus*, which has no distinctive psychology at all, and itself at some *much later* time. It may also be that rational egoistic concern about suffering is less sensitive to the strength of the prudential unity relations than egoistic concern about other elements of well-being is. [These issues will be discussed more extensively, and in the text rather than in a note, in a revised draft of this essay.] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See McMahan… and McMahan… In using the term “pregnant person,” I happily defer to the demand for terms that do not specify gender, for in this instance satisfying the demand does not require terms that can, for example, make pronoun reference difficult to determine. My substantive view is that we should be reductionists about matters of gender. Whether a person is a man or a woman is not a deep fact of biology, metaphysics, or lexicography. The facts in these areas underdetermine the acceptable uses of these terms. What are at issue here are claims about the moral and political importance of people’s “identities.” I believe that the current obsession with “identities” is retrogressive because it attributes great significance to morally irrelevant categories that were originally believed to be morally significant only by bigots, and because collective identities interpose adventitious barriers between people who are far more alike than different in relevant respects. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Reference to Joel Feinberg’s example. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Reference to Robert Merrihew Adams, “Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil”? [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The argument in this and the following paragraph is developed in greater detail in my paper, “The Lucretian Argument,” in R. Feldman, K. McDaniel, J.R. Raibley, and M.J. Zimmerman, eds., *The Good, the Right, Life and Death: Essays in Honor of Fred Feldman* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2006): 213-26. [Also refer to “Preventing the Existence of People with Disabilities”?] David Velleman makes much the same point, attributing it to Matthew Hanser, in a footnote in “Persons in Prospect,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 221-88, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Reasons and Persons*, 1987 printing, pp. 367-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Examples involving failing to save a person’s life and killing a person are, I believe, intuitively more compelling as counterexamples to the No-Difference View. I have presented counterexamples of these sorts in “Climate Change, War, and the Non-Identity Problem,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 18 (2021): 211-238. I have not given them here because they introduce a complication. To determine how much egoistic reason one would have in one’s actual life to be glad that one’s life did not end at some earlier time, one must compare one’s actual life, which has much of what one actually cares about, not with an alternative possible life that would contain less, and in which one would be different in various ways, but with no life at all. I will discuss this complication in section XX. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Jeff McMahan, “Causing People to Exist and Saving People’s Lives,” *Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013): 5-35. Revised and abridged version under the title “Creating People and Saving People,” in Gustaf Arrhenius, Tim Campbell, and Krister Bykvist, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Population Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Velleman, op. cit., p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)