



## ‘It Might Have Been!’: What Matters in Alternative Possible Lives

Jeff McMahan (White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy,  
University of Oxford)

### ABSTRACT

To many of us, the infliction of serious prenatal injury seems morally more objectionable than abortion. We might seek to explain this by claiming that, while abortion frustrates only a weak interest that a fetus has in its future life, prenatal injury frustrates not only weak present interests in aspects of a fetus’s future life but also many strong interests that the person into whom the fetus will develop will have later. This, however, is generally not the case; for the life the person will have following a serious prenatal injury is likely to be very different from the life this person would have had in the absence of the injury. This means that virtually all of the distinctive interests that the injured person will have will be different from those that this same person would have had without the injury. And these interests will be better satisfied in the life with the injury than they would have been in the alternative possible life without the injury. This is a prudential analogue of Parfit’s Non-Identity Problem. It shows, I argue, that just as identity is not what matters over time, it is also not what matters across possible lives. I will attempt to identify the bases of egoistically rational attitudes to alternative possible lives, arguing that these are like the bases of our interests in our future lives in being time-relative. I will conclude by arguing that the reason not to inflict prenatal injury is relevantly like the reason we have in cases involving the Non-Identity Problem to cause better-off people to exist rather than different, less well-off people. This is of significance for certain issues in population ethics.



### DATE AND TIME

**29/30 SEPTEMBER 2021**

**9 AM 30 Sep MELBOURNE**  
**12 AM 30 Sep LONDON**  
**7 PM 29 Sep NEW YORK**

### SEMINAR HELD OVER ZOOM

Click [HERE](#) to register.

**Jeff McMahan** is the White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Oxford. He has published 3 books and over 100 articles, with a focus on moral and political issues surrounding life and death.

*To join our Seminar email list or for other questions, please email [nevin.climenhaga@acu.edu.au](mailto:nevin.climenhaga@acu.edu.au).*