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Prior on Radical Coming-into-Being

Abstract. Chapter VIII of *Papers on Time and Tense* (1968) on ‘Identifiable Individuals’ is the locus where Prior elaborates his polemic on whether radical coming-into-being is a *genuine de re possibility* of the individual substances. He argues for the conclusion that there is no such possibility concerning radical coming-into-being as opposed to piecemeal change. Therefore the property or predicate about an individual’s origin does not yield *de re* modality.

Prior considers the thought experiment of swapping the properties of two individuals through worlds. Say, we have in the actual world the person Julius Caesar with the usual Caesar-like properties. We have also Mark Antony as an inhabitant of the actual world with his own properties. Suppose that through chains of accessible worlds we reach a world such that Caesar has all and only the properties of Mark Antony and vice versa. Surely, this world is qualitatively indistinguishable from the original world. The thought experiment is typically explored for highlighting our intuitions whether the world resulting in complete property swap is different in any sense from the original world. Those who say that the two worlds are actually one, for all that matters only is what properties are instantiated and co-instantiated in a world and the instantiating entities are nothing over and above the properties they instantiate—are Leibnizians applying the criterion of L-indiscernibility. Others, who feel that there is a genuine difference between the two worlds, claim that Caesar and Antony still differ by their haecceistic properties of *being Caesar* and *being Antony*, respectively, whatever other properties of theirs are swapped. The usual retort from the Leibnizian camp is that haecceistic properties are not genuine properties.

The dispute about the identity condition of worlds and individuals cannot be settled in a short talk. What is interesting is how Prior finds his way out of the dilemma. He is neither Leibnizian nor haecceist. Moreover, he is not making the Kripkean point about the necessity of origin. Instead, he finds that the property which is necessarily exempt from property-swap is the property of originating from the actual ancestors one has. This property is resistant

to property exchange. If this is so, it helps to solve the problem of Leibniz-indiscernible worlds. And it has the virtue of not being a suspect haecceistic property, like that of being identical to Caesar; it is similar to it though in being an impure relational property.

After considering several property-swaps, Prior asks: ‘can we not go further and suppose Caesar to have had the whole of Antony’s life, including being born to Antony’s parents?’ (1968, 85.) The question is not about logical possibility since the proposition asserting Caesar’s having born to Antony’s parents is not inconsistent.

By contrast, construed as a question about a *temporal* possibility, we have a more substantial issue at hand. For now we can ask: ‘*when* was it possible?’ And it is easy to see that ‘*after* his birth ... it was clearly *too late* for him to have had different parents.’ (ibid.)

This insight is fairly obvious. Why not ascribe, then, the *de re* possibility of having different parents ‘*before* Caesar existed’? Intuitively speaking, the remoter the present is, viewed from a distant future, the more possibilities are still open concerning that present (taken indexically). Alas, the crucial point, highlighted by Prior, is that however broad the general possibility is in this case, ‘there would seem to have been no individual identifiable as Caesar, i.e. the Caesar who we are now discussing, who could have been the subject of this possibility.’ (ibid.)

Now Prior’s point can be generalized to the possibility of actual individuals, too. My contribution to the problem consists in this suggestion: let us extend Prior’s point to the *de re* temporal possibility of the coming into being of *actual* individuals thereby bringing forth its full metaphysical significance. The generalization is this:

If Caesar (or any other actual individual) could not have been the subject, before his birth, of the (later) unrealized possibility, equally, *he* could not have been the subject of the *later realized* possibility either. This means that none of us who was going to be born could have been the subject of a *de re* possibility of being (going to be) born – *i.e.*, at least not before our conception. And this amounts to saying that what is once actual is always preceded by what is non-possible, contradicting thus the logic of propositional modalities. According to these modalities the actual is never preceded by something impossible. “Precedence” is taken here in the sense of yielding existential conditions through temporal priority.

So we have to rule out not only the unrealized *de re* possibilities concerning origins. The realized courses of originating by birth are not possible either, at least *not* in the *de re* sense. The reason being that there is no identifiable individual to ascribe the *de re* possibility to. Hence, there is no identifiable individual to ascribe the putative *de re* necessity of origin either. The realized and the unrealized *de re* possibilities/necessities are in a symmetric situation

relative to each other: both require the semantic precondition that the term in a referential position successfully refer, which is not fulfilled in either case. Let me note that cases of origin as temporal *de re* modalities are treated like cases of empty names in extensional contexts.

Prior rightly claims that any genuine *de re* possibility/necessity presupposes that the subject of the modal ascription, even if just a ‘thin’ individual, be fixed referentially. Since this is not satisfied in the case of the putative *de re* possibility of origin, the latter cannot be regarded as a case of *genuine de re* possibility. Further, I suspect that Prior is doing more than simply calling attention to the lack of a demonstrative reference when there is not yet anybody before birth to refer to. I take it that Prior is emphasizing the absence of a *descriptive* device of referring to individuals to consider *de re* possibilities. As Prior notes ‘as new distinguishable individuals come into being, there is ... a multiplication of distinguishable logical possibilities’ (*op.cit.*, p.91.) Now it is fairly obvious that the basis of the distinction among individuals and their possibilities are of a qualitative nature. For example, there must be people identifiable qualitatively as different applicants to a job for opening the logical possibility of competition for that job. So I take it that Prior is implying some descriptive notion of individuals. It is a further question how ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ his implied notion of individuals is.

We have seen that the putative *de re* possibility of origin lacks the semantic precondition of reference. But then it is hard to see how one can satisfy the natural intuition that it is still meaningful to talk about the possibility of someone’s having had a different origin.

The suggested solution is this: there is no subject, strictly speaking, of such *de re* possibilities. Our modal claims can be entertained only in the way that can be illustrated by Burleigh’s example of a promise of giving someone a horse. Such promise may be disambiguated *not* as the promise of a specific horse but as the promise that can be fulfilled by giving someone *any* horse. So is the case with the possibility of origin. As Prior puts it, ‘the possibility that *an* individual should begin to exist ... is like a promise of the second kind’ (*op.cit.*, p.86.) In other words, this possibility is ‘general’ rather than specific. This is tantamount to saying that the possibility of origin is not a *de re* but a *de dicto* possibility. And this is the solution to the seemingly paradoxical situation. It is possible *that* someone be born to such and such parents, but it is not possible *of someone* that *he* should be born to these or other parents.

So, Prior’s solution to the problem of *de re* possibility with radical coming-into-being consists in denying that there is such *de re* possibility and satisfying, instead, our modal intuition with the *de dicto* form of possibility. *De re* possibility with respect to radical coming-into-being is, at best, a *post factum* possibility: as Thomas Aquinas put it, quoted by Prior, it is an ‘accident’ which ‘is subsequent to the thing’ that has already come into existence.

The ramification of the topic worth considering is the issue of temporal vs logical possibilities. The temporal possibility just discussed is obviously different from possibility in the logical sense. In the logical sense of ‘could’ Caesar could have been born to persons who actually turned out to be the parents of Mark Antony for there is no inconsistency in the proposition stating this course of events. (Leibnizians would, perhaps, object that there is, for the ‘complete concept’ of Caesar excludes the relational property of being born to those other people.) Logical possibility seems then to be permissive about a case explicitly ruled out by temporal possibility.

The gap between the two kinds of possibilities is smaller though: for, both possibilities as *de re* possibilities have an existential precondition such that ‘before [Caesar] existed it was not logically or in any other way possible that he should *come to have* those people, or any other people, as his parents’. (*op.cit.*, p.92.) As possibilities dependent on an (empirical) existential precondition, the logical and the temporal readings of possibility behave much the same way.

Another ramification would be to compare radical coming-into-being with piecemeal change. It is clear from the foregoing that radical coming-into-being, in Prior’s view, is not change in the piecemeal sense of an existing thing acquiring/dropping properties over time. Coming-into-being should not be taken, as he points out, to mean that ‘once *X*’s non-being was the case and now its being is’. It should be taken to mean, instead, that ‘it is *not* the case that *X was*, but it *is* the case that *X is*’, and this does not express a change but two contrasting present facts’. (*op.cit.*, p.88.) Clearly, radical coming-into-being does not have the features of a genuine change. Radical coming-into-being is not unique, however, in this respect: Cambridge changes are typically not taken to be genuine changes either. Elsewhere I have discussed them.

Conclusion: the property of origin should be exempt from the range of properties affording *de re* locutions. This logical insight is backed by the metaphysical insight that radical coming-into-being does not constitute genuine change. The common source of these insights is that the property of origin (unlike other properties of individuals) lacks the existential precondition. *After* this precondition being fulfilled, the property of origin is an accident subsequent to the individual. As a consequence, the property swaps between individuals through worlds must stop at the impure relational property of origin.

The broader metaphysical moral is this: we have seen the limits of *de re* talk drawn by the property of origin or radical coming-into-being. It is all too familiar that *de re* locutions are found suspect from Quine on, for the weird metaphysics one gets when one quantifies in modal contexts. The present talk is obviously not a follow up on Quine’s discontent with the ‘invidious attitude’ (as he calls it)

of Aristotelian essentialism.¹ Rather, by drawing the lines of applicability one can assess the merits of the metaphysical doctrines. As to the significance of Prior's argument, we have seen that it offers a genuine novel suggestion to the polemic about property-indiscernible worlds. He does not seek haecceistic differences in order to explain the difference of Leibniz-indiscernible worlds. Rather, Prior shows that there is a further difference which is responsible for the difference between any two qualitatively indiscernible worlds: it is the *difference of origin* of the individual inhabitants of the worlds. To repeat, the *property of origin* is neither purely qualitative, nor haecceistic, but a peculiar accident that can be had only *post factum* and it is resistant to property-swap.

REFERENCES

- Prior, Arthur, 1968, *Papers on Time and Tense*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
Quine, W.O, 1953/1963, Reference and Modality. In id., *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

¹ Quine (1953) characterizes 'Aristotelian essentialism' by its 'adopting an invidious attitude towards certain ways of uniquely specifying' an object and seeing these ways 'as somehow better revealing [the object's] "essence"' than alternative specifications.