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Arthur Norman Priors bidrag til metafysikken

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Abstract

This thesis gathers the central threads of Arthur Norman Prior's philosophical work, from his intense concern with theology in his youth, to his invention of temporal logic and his subsequent treatment of metaphysical problems, before his death in 1969. A central part of the work has consisted in research into the A.N. Prior Archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford. As a result of this, a series of articles have been uncovered, annotated and edited with the view of publishing them in this thesis, and, also with respect to A.N. Prior's upcoming centenary in 2014. These aforementioned articles are found in the second part of this thesis. They treat historical theology, as well as tense-logical and philosophical problems; resultantly, they are relevant to our present investigation of Prior's contribution to metaphysics. Some of these metaphysical problems were elsewhere addressed in published articles. These can be found in the third part of the thesis.

A.N. Prior is best known for his contribution to logic. His groundbreaking invention of temporal logic rightly overshadows his earlier occupation with theology. Prior's works, on the other hand, count many important contributions to various metaphysical topics, such as a timeless God's knowledge of tensed facts, and his discussions of divine foreknowledge of the contingent future. Furthermore, Prior's rejection of the positivistic reservation towards metaphysics which, qua Wittgenstein's influence stood strongly in the middle of the twentieth century, has contributed to the renaissance of metaphysics in the twentieth century. The rejection is connected with Prior's invention of tensed-logic, which provided a strong logical tool for the reformulation of classical philosophical arguments. From Prior's correspondence it appears that the invention of tensed-logic is related to a metaphysical problem he saw as the inevitable consequence of traditional treatments of temporal problems by means of atemporal (i.e., tenseless) logic. Prior's various attempts to solve the problem, which he labeled sempiternalism, were central to his contributions to logic and philosophy—surpassed only by another metaphysical topic: determinism and freedom. Both have roots in his early occupation with theology. The solutions Prior sought pivoted on a principle which he, with a reference to Jonathan Edwards, called limited indeterminism.

The invention of tensed-logic gathered the problems and provided Prior with the possibility of contributing substantially to metaphysics—contributions that traced their origins back to his preoccupation with theology, as well as the vision springing from his 1942 crisis of faith. In the midst of this crisis, Prior was convinced that something good would result from his studies into the history of reformed theology. Prior's development of tense-logic made it possible to re-formulate the ancient and medieval perception of divine foreknowledge of the truth/value of future, contingent propositions. His treatment of this problem and subsequent rejection of such foreknowledge by God is an important element in evaluating the vision Prior formulated for his professional career in the midst of his crisis of faith.