

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.

Chapter 1 – Prior’s journey from theology to philosophy

As it is only natural to assume that Prior’s early preoccupation with theology influenced his later philosophical and logical ideas, it is, inherently beneficial to undertake a larger and more thorough examination of his youthful, theological nous. Apart from a general historical interest, such an investigation illuminates Prior’s work through the articles he wrote during his philosophical studies which lead-up to his first, important contribution to philosophy.

It is worthwhile, perhaps, to speculate; “Is it possible to trace any influences on Prior’s thinking concerning ‘faith and knowledge’ which would cast light on his 1942, faith-crisis?” Furthermore and for a broader perspective, it might prove interesting to more deeply examine some of the sources which influenced the young Prior. The most important resource is, however, a seven pages diary note which was found at *The Bodleian Library*, dated the 25th of March, 1942, which was in the middle of his crisis of faith. In this he describes an experience, which gave him clarity on the direction his life had to take after he now considered theology an illusion. The document is a new valuable source providing us with a deeper understanding of Priors journey from the theology to his youth to philosophy and logic.

Chapter 2 – The Defender of Intentionality

By rejecting an extensionality view of logic, the invention of tensed-logic constituted an assault on the prevailing anti-metaphysical tendencies, which cast a long shadow over philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. As it turns out, Prior—before he invented tensed-logic, in his work systematizing and defending the autonomy of ethics—defended an intensional perspective of ethical propositions. An important perspective of Prior’s contribution to metaphysics is, therefore, his general defense of intensionality. This is evident in Prior’s correspondence with J. J. C. Smart, as the former was preparing himself for the John Locke Lectures in Oxford. Apparently Smart was not enthusiastic about Prior’s idea of giving prëeminence in his lecture to the metaphysical problems of sempiternality. Furthermore, it was argued, the distinction between an extensional perspective and an intensional one still occupies a central role in the discussion of tense-logic, as it constitutes the core of the truth-maker objection.

Chapter 3 – The Authonomy of Ethics

Prior’s investigation into the historical and logical authonomy of ethics was rooted in his youthful preoccupation with theology, especially regarding faith and knowledge. In *Faith, Unbelief and Evil*, Prior touches upon the topic in a fictive discussion between a humanist and a theologian. Prior considered a defense of the autonomy of ethics an important job—one which the logician was compelled to make as a sort of sanitary undertaking, especially regarding the supposition of God’s existence as a necessary foundation for morality.

In this chapter, a treatment of Prior’s argument for the autonomy of ethics is offered in light of contemporary discussions, specifically concerning God’s existence as a necessary foundation for

morality. This is done in order to reformulate and defend Prior's central argument from *Logic and The Basis of Ethics* (1949). Here, it is argued that Prior's definition of the autonomy of ethics is best understood as a *de jure* objection; that is, against any attempt to ground ethical propositions in a foundation, which is assumed to be non-ethical. This must be distinguished from a *de facto* objection; that is, attempts to ground ethical propositions in a specific kind of foundation. It will be argued that, on the basis of this distinction, the autonomy of ethics is a relevant objection against the argument of God's existence as being a necessary foundation for morality. As it turns out, Prior later came to be skeptical of his own argument for the autonomy of ethics. It is, therefore, necessary, in order to re-actualize Prior's argument for the autonomy of ethics, to visit Prior's own counter examples to his view of the autonomy of ethics as made in 1949. Furthermore, it will be argued that, even though his counter examples are successful in defeating the autonomy of ethics in general, they do not destroy its specific use, specifically in regard to a discussion of God's existence as necessary for morality.

Chapter 4 – Freedom and Responsibility

One of the places in Prior's authorship where it is apparent that his early fascination with theology followed him throughout his philosophical career, is in his treatment of morality and responsibility. Prior treated the topic in *The Consequences of Action* (1956), and it turns out, in that article he applied an argument developed in *Reaction to Determinism* (2012), which is published together with this thesis. This re-actualization of the argument is considered in order that we might investigate Prior's view on determinism and freedom. It is, therein, argued that Prior's view on indeterminism flowed from what he, with a reference to Jonathan Edwards, calls "limited indeterminism". It turns out that—in another hitherto unpublished article from the 1940's, *Of God's Plan and Purpose* (1940), which is published together with this thesis—Prior knew about the theory called, *scientia media*. Since *scientia media* features prominently in his discussion of determinism and freedom, should not the fact that Prior already knew of it, at least since the 1940's, raise this question: Why didn't he make more use of it in his philosophical and logical work?

Chapter 5 – Modality

Prior's general views on modality, necessity and possibility, are central to any full evaluation of his philosophical work: Prior's tense-logic is a version of modal-logic. This chapter argues that the development of tense-logic, as a version of modal-logic, is natural, especially in light of the fact that C. I. Lewis' systematization of modal-logic was driven by his intention to develop an intensional logic to stand as an alternative to Russell's extensional logic. Prior's own work with a modal system, from *Formal Logic* (1962), is treated; and an analysis is made of Prior's view on necessary, as well as, possible existence. Prior's beliefs concerning necessary existence is here compared with Alvin Plantinga's and J.N. Findlay's. This is done in light of a thesis Prior developed during his work with tense-logic. It is argued that that thesis expresses Prior's commitment to Jonathan Edwards' limited indeterminism. Thereafter, Prior's opinion on possible existence is treated in light of an article, published together with this thesis, entitled *Names of Names* (2012). It is further argued that Prior's view on *possibilia* is inspired by C.S. Pierce, and Jonathan Edwards. In the

writings of those two, Prior found a metaphysical resource to anchor existence in actuality. Finally, it is promulgated that Prior's version of actualism gave him particular problems with the explanation of certain concepts, such as, coming to being, and possible existence; and that Prior's intention was to seek for a solution to these metaphysical problems in tense-logic.

Chapter 6 – The Metaphysics of Time

The most substantial contributions Prior made to metaphysics is, without doubt, the invention of tense-logic and the resultant treatment of metaphysical problems his creation made it possible to reformulate. Prior's contribution to the metaphysics of time is considered in light of two objections to his dynamic view of time. The first objection is taken from an outset in the theory of relativity and the second, from the idea of truth makers. This approach sets the stage for a larger treatment of Prior's notion of the present; which, on one hand, gathered many philosophers under the banner of "presentism"; while, on the other hand, also divided many of them—especially regarding the metaphysical consequences of his definition of the present.

Criticisms from another presentist, Quentin Smith, are investigated in regards to Prior's notes for *The Notion of The Present*. It is argued that these notes do much to inform any who seek to read/interpret Prior and, also, that they mitigate the sting of Smith's criticism. The notes also demonstrate that Prior was aware of how controversial his concept of the present—which categorize propositions about the future, together with propositions about mythical persons—was. This problem, it is further argued, is related to another metaphysical issue Prior sought to solve by way of tense-logic. It turns out that formulas, developed by Ruth Barcan, can be used to prove: If it will be the case that $x \phi$'s; then there is an x , such that it will be the case, $x \phi$'s. One of the solutions upon which Prior worked—but which, in the end, he rejected—was whether the quantification of future objects should be understood as the quantification of possible objects. Prior described this as his waiting-room model and his rejection of it was motivated by metaphysical reasons.

Chapter 7 – Freedom and the Contingent Future

The various threads constituting the tapestry of Prior's authorship: The occupation with theology in his youth; the philosophical commitment to limited indeterminism, and finally; his invention of tense-logic, are all drawn together in his argument against divine foreknowledge of the truth-value of future contingent propositions. It is here argued that Prior's treatment of this problem, in *Formalities of Omniscience*, substantially contributed to the emergence of a unique position on the question of divine foreknowledge and human freedom: Open theism. Thus, it is not unreasonable to consider whether Prior reached the goal he sought for himself: That something of value would come from his professional studies of theological systems. This was what he hoped for, those final, gloomy days of a war-torn winter and what he wrote of, in his notes, the 25th of March, 1942:, even though he left himself no further consolation . . . For by then he considered theology a mere illusion.