

Letter from Arthur to Mary Prior, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1954<sup>1</sup>

CANTERBURY UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

CHRISTCHURCH, N.Z.

Thursday. 29/7/54

Darling honey,

Re Jack' letter – I'll definitely devote the larger part of my Wellington thing<sup>2</sup> to a discussion of whether the question of Platonism v. nominalism is purely a verbal question. I shall contend that

1. The question as to whether there are abstract entities isn't a verbal question or a question about language at all.
2. The question as to whether 'there are abstract entities' is true is partly a verbal question, exactly as the question as to whether 'My eyes are brown' is partly a verbal question. (If 'brown' is being used to mean what it ordinarily meant by 'square', it's false, since my eyes aren't square, while if it's being used as usual, it's true; since my eyes are brown).
3. Platonism isn't a thesis about language. Whether nominalism is, is more or less up to the nominalists.
4. Nominalism is just a matter of language if it is no more than a preference for using the word 'entity' in a restricted sense, to mean what I'd call a 'concrete entity'. In this sense of 'nominalist', I'm quite prepared to become one. Let'em have 'entity' in their restricted sense, and for what I {2} previously called an 'entity' I'll use the word 'object' instead. Or if they want to restrict the sense of 'object', they can have that one too, and all familiar words, and instead of 'entity' or 'object' I'll say 'bimps'. And if they want to restrict the sense of 'bimp' I'll take any word they care to give me. But since they give me none, I'll use 'bimp' in what follows.
5. Nominalists, then, want to restrict words like 'entity', 'object', 'being' &c. to concrete bimps. O.K., let'em, and I'll follow suit. They also, so far as I can see, wish to shroud abstract bimps in a blanket of silence, and not talk about them. This does, indeed, raise a difficult question of etiquette. What does common courtesy require of me when I am in the presence of a man whom I know to be afflicted by this extraordinary phobia? Ought I to say, 'look here, old man, I'm sure you'd be happier if you left the room for a while – we're going to talk about abstract bimps? And perhaps after a while a convention would grow up by which I need only say, and politeness would only allow me to say, 'We're going to talk about you-know-what'. However, I argue that if this is how things stand, there's no real difference of opinion bet.<sup>3</sup> me and the nominalists, and it is only a matter of words.

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<sup>1</sup> Editors' note: This letter has been edited by Martin Prior, David Jakobsen and Peter Øhrstrøm. It is part of the Martin Prior Collection, presently kept at Aalborg University folder B, item 4a, dated 29/7/54. The letter is written on Canterbury University College writing paper. It is sent by Arthur from the family home in Christchurch to Mary, who was still in the sanatorium.

<sup>2</sup> Editors' note: Prior is probably referring to the conference that took place in Wellington 27<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> August, 1954. However, at this conference his main contribution was his paper "The Logic of Time-Distinctions". This makes it uncertain, whether Prior presented his thoughts on Platonism versus nominalism at that occasion. He might simply have changed his plans.

<sup>3</sup> Editors': Probably an abbreviation for 'between'.

6. Or perhaps it is the word ‘not’ whose meaning the nominalist wishes to restrict. He doesn’t want to {3} admit that virtue is not square, because he wants to use ‘not’ to mean ‘of some shape other than –’. Again, so be it. If this is what ‘not’ means – and let’s not quarrel about how we shall use a word – I too will refuse my assent to ‘Virtue is not square’. Indeed, I’ll say that in this sense of ‘not’ it’s definitely false; for it is false that virtue is of some shape other than square. How the nominalist says ‘Virtue has no shape’ I don’t know; but I can say it for him, if he’ll give me some other word to use for ‘not’ in my sense. (And if he won’t I’ll make one up).
7. But I know that this modus vivendi will not satisfy the nominalist. He doesn’t want to say that it is false that virtue is not square. He wants to say that both ‘Virtue is square’ and ‘Virtue is not square’ are neither true nor false, but meaningless. Though I gather that he wants now to modify that to the contention that they are meaningless in his language, but not meaningless in mine, and that we can talk either language as we please. If he means this last modification seriously then it implies that there are truths which are expressible in my language, but aren’t expressible in his. If it doesn’t imply this, then how does he express the truth which I express by saying that virtue is not square? – or, for that matter, the truth which I express by saying that virtue has no shape?
8. Do I believe that mathematics is the ‘physics of the supersensible’? I can’t say that I like this description much. The over-and-under talk is a political metaphor that I {4} don’t see the point of, and why physics? (Why not, say, the ‘chemistry of the supersensible[?]’) I insist only that there are nonsensible bimps, and that we may study them; I am indifferent as to whether we call the study of them ‘mathematics’, ‘physics’ or even ‘metaphysics’. As to ‘mathematics’, I gather that many people would like to use that word for symbolic games in which the symbols are uninterpreted; me, I think these games are good fun, and useful too, and I don’t mind at all if they are called ‘mathematics’, so long as the study of non-sensible bimps, which is something quite different, is called something; or at all events, so long as it goes on.

The bit in all this that I’ll have to give most thought to is 7 – it is there that the central issue lies I think.

Parton<sup>4</sup> and Crowther<sup>5</sup> were shrouded in gloom at morning-tea today, about the way the voting went yesterday. They reckon the Council won’t proceed with caution and fall back on the second proposal when it’s clear that a suitable rector can’t be found, but will regard us as having given them the green light and will appoint one by hook or by crook. – One is tempted to regard the vote yesterday as a revealing one, in a negative sort of way; it seems to show, in particular, that neither Garrett<sup>6</sup> nor Allen belongs to the real hard-core academic party here, which consists (with Parton going) of Philips<sup>7</sup>, Crowther and myself; but I guess that’s smug.

{5} Rang John McLeod about PAS for Martin this afternoon, and he quite unsolicited started talking to me about you and assured me that there was no evidence of cavitation in your t??<sup>8</sup>, and that he’d be surprised if your stomach content or whatever it is was positive.

Kids get their X-rays tomorrow morning – I gave Martin a little touch of school this afternoon – he seems to have just now an irritating little cough, which I must tell John Mac about on Wed. – Both their

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<sup>4</sup> Editors’ note: H.N. Parton had been teaching Chemistry at Canterbury University College since 1930.

<sup>5</sup> Editors’ note: Allan Crowther was appointed Professor of Psychology at the same time as Prior was appointed Professor of Philosophy. At that point, subsequent to Sutherland’s death, the Department of Philosophy and Psychology was split.

<sup>6</sup> Editors’ note: John Garrett was Professor of English Canterbury University College in Christchurch.

<sup>7</sup> Editors’ note: Neville Philips taught History at Canterbury University College.

<sup>8</sup> Editors’ note: The word is not readable. The following line may suggest that it has to do with the stomach.

temperatures are reasonable and Ann has kept the bed dry for the past few nights, so maybe that bout of wetting it is over.

Today I answered an ad. in the paper for fixing fireplaces – rang a phone-number and left a message for the joker that does it. He may be round tonight or tomorrow morning, or may ring me at College in morning.

Hell, aren't these evenings cold! Must post this and get to bed. I wish you were going to be in it. I love you and love you and love you

Skig

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PS. Left some turps at ???<sup>9</sup> to be taken up to you today.

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<sup>9</sup> Editors' note: The word is not readable.