

Zuzana Rybaříková: *The Reconstruction of A.N. Prior's Ontology*  
Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci, 2016, 134 pp.<sup>1</sup>

This is Rybaříková's dissertation in book form, which she defended at the Palacký University of Olomouc under the supervision of Jan Štěpán. In the interest of full disclosure, Petr Dvořák, who is my own dissertation advisor, was on her dissertation committee. Rybaříková's primary goal is to trace the development of Prior's thought vis-à-vis some thinkers who influenced him and with whom he disagreed: "[M]y study is primarily a historical work focused on the evolution of Prior's ontological views" (p. 18). Contrary to what the title may suggest, no systematic reconstruction of Prior's ontology is attempted. Indeed, it would seem that in Rybaříková's view, no such reconstruction is possible—at least not a consistent one—for Prior "did not present one consistent concept of ontology" (p. 118). In the first part of this review I present some of the logico-ontological theses which Rybaříková ascribes to Prior. In the second part I comment on what I think are some of the strengths and weaknesses of Rybaříková's work.

Prior was an unabashed nominalist in the sense that he thought that to be or to exist is to be a concrete thing. He also thought that propositions, possible worlds, properties, and moments of time are not concrete things, and therefore, given his nominalism, they don't exist (pp. 12ff). Though moments of time do not exist, the present is real, but the past and the future are not. One might think that the present is real only if at least one moment of time exists—namely the present one—and therefore Prior's nominalism conflicts with his presentism. But, for Prior, the present is real not in the sense that the present moment exists, but rather that the only things which exist are the ones which exist presently (p. 16).

To be or to exist is indeed to be the value of a variable if and only if the variable in question ranges over concrete things. If the variable in question ranges over propositions, properties, moments of time, and the like, then to be or exist is not to be the value of a variable. Thus, one may freely slide between

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“it’s possible that  $p$ ” and “for some possible world  $w$ ,  $p$  is true”,  
 “ $p$  was true” and “for some past time  $t$ ,  $p$  is true at  $t$ ”,

as well as

“ $p$  is a world proposition” and “ $p$  is true, and for any proposition  $q$ , if  $q$  is true, then necessarily, if  $p$  is true then  $q$  is true”,

and the like without expressing theses which imply that a possible world exists, or that a time exists, or that a proposition exists (pp. 46f; 53ff; 87). Thus, for example, Prior may both agree with Quine that propositions don’t exist, and yet disagree with Quine in maintaining that, in many cases, it is not sentences, either written or spoken, but propositions, construed as the “contents” (p. 85) of one’s thoughts, which one believes, doubts, knows, and so on. And what are propositions? Following F. P. Ramsey, they’re “logical constructs”. Against Frege, however, they are human inventions and therefore are “dependent on the human mind” (p. 84).

If we may quantify over propositions, times, and worlds, and yet deny that they exist, may we also do the same for concrete things which don’t presently exist but did exist (e.g. Napoleon) or will exist (e.g. someone’s future child)? No and no.<sup>2</sup> From what I gather from Rybařková’s exposition (pp. 101ff) of Prior here, the central problem seems to be as follows: We may quantify over Napoleon only if he is the value of a variable. But since Napoleon is (or was) a concrete thing, he is the value of a variable only if he exists, and since everything which exists is that which exists presently, it follows that Napoleon exists presently. But Napoleon doesn’t exist presently. Ergo, etc.

Any attempt at quantifying over future concrete things is plagued by a similar problem. However, this isn’t a drawback for Prior because, unlike past individuals for whom or for which there are “state-able facts” (p. 111) (e.g. that Napoleon was an emperor), there are no future facts about any concrete thing, either that it exists

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<sup>2</sup> In some passages Rybařková contradicts what I’m about to say. For example, we’re told that “a distinct feature of Prior’s presentism was that he allowed quantification over objects which are not present” (p. 16) and that Prior “admitted that there were also facts about entities which had not begun to exist yet” (p. 103). However, since neither statement is accompanied by further comment, and because they seem to contradict the main tenor of Rybařková’s account, I’m not sure what to make of them. On p. 55 there’s a hint as to how Rybařková’s Prior may avoid contradiction, for we’re told that, for Prior, free variables “can stand for non-existent entities” and that both modal and temporal operators may “bind variables which stand for actually non-existent individuals”. However, here again Rybařková doesn’t elaborate.

(or not), or that it is such and such (or not). This is just a consequence of Prior's brand of indeterminism with respect to the future.

Rybařiková's book is well structured. Each of the main chapters is on a certain logico-ontological theme in which Prior's views (or lack thereof, if Prior's didn't have a settled position) are presented after an extended exposition of some views of some thinkers who influenced him or with whom he disagreed. Here I shall list the themes and the names of the thinkers who are prominent in Rybařiková's discussions:

Chapter 2: Possible Worlds and Time Instants: Jan Łukasiewicz, Wittgenstein, and Carew Meredith

Chapter 3: Quantification: Quine and Stanisław Leśniewski

Chapter 4: Propositions: Quine, Frege, and F. P. Ramsey

Chapter 5: Names and Individuals: Leśniewski and Russell

Unfortunately, Rybařiková's characterization of a thinker's view isn't always accurate. In discussing Frege on one version of the problem of the substitution of identicals in intensional contexts as it appears in his "On Sense [*Sinn*] and Reference [*Bedeutung*]" (1948, §§34ff), Rybařiková says that Frege would say that the following sentences

[a] ... evolution is based on natural selection.

[b] ... evolution runs at the level of genes.

are not inter-substitutable in a context such as

Darwin believed that ...

For, Rybařiková tells us, though [a] and [b] have "an identical sense" (p. 75), from

Darwin believed that [a]

It doesn't follow that

Darwin believed that [b]

But it's the other way around: Frege would say that [a] and [b] have the same referent (*Bedeutung*)—the True (or so we'll suppose)—but not the same sense (*Sinn*), as [a] and [b] express distinct thoughts.

In several places Rybařiková's wording invites the reader to confuse variables with their values. Here are some examples:

“Prior differentiated among individuals bound by a quantifier, which refer only to some of the existent individuals, and among those which are free and can also stand for non-existent individuals.” (p. 55)

“Ramsey maintained that only individuals referred to existent entities.” (p. 58)

“[...] according to Prior there are also quantifiers [...] [that] [...] do not require the actual existence of entities which are bound by them.” (p. 63)

In some cases Rybaříková’s exposition of Prior is underdeveloped. Rybaříková reports (p. 101) that Prior claimed that the following schema

$$\varphi y \supset \exists x \varphi x$$

has some false instance. The counter instance cited is:

Alexander rode Bucephalus  $\supset$  Some [presently existing]  $x$  is such that Alexander rode  $x$

and we’re told that this is a counter instance because its antecedent is true, but since Bucephalus no longer exists, and presumably no currently existing thing is such that Alexander rode it, its consequent is false. Now, by my lights, in order to have an instance of the schema’s antecedent, we need an expression with a free variable, but any straightforward translation of “Alexander rode Bucephalus” would employ only constants—one for Bucephalus and one for Alexander. I suppose, though, that we’re to assume that Bucephalus is the value of the free variable in, say,

Alexander rode  $y$

In which case the counter instance would be

Alexander rode  $y \supset$  Some [presently existing]  $x$  is such that Alexander rode  $x$

So far, so good. But, in Rybaříková’s understanding of Prior’s view, Bucephalus is the value of ‘ $y$ ’ only if he presently exists (given that Bucephalus is (was) a concrete thing), in which case, in accordance with the schema and on Prior’s own terms,

Some [presently existing]  $x$  is such that Alexander rode  $x$

So I don’t see how Prior could consistently maintain that

Bucephalus is the (or a) present value of ‘ $y$ ’ in ‘Alexander rode  $y$ ’

and it's false that

Some [presently existing]  $x$  is such that Alexander rode  $x$

and there's not much in Rybaříková's exposition which would help the reader see that, appearances to the contrary, Prior isn't inconsistent here, or that the reader should be confused because Prior, at least in her view, is inconsistent.

Aside from these drawbacks, someone looking for a general overview of Prior's views on some fundamental logico-ontological issues, especially in relation to the thinkers mentioned above, as well as the nuts and bolts of some logics for which Prior was either an important innovator or sole inventor, will find it in Rybaříková's book.

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#### References

FREGE, G. (1948): On Sense and Reference. Transl. by Max Black. *The Philosophical Review* 57, No. 3, 209-230.

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The study of Zuzana Rybaříková is presented as predominantly an historical work. It is mainly focused on ontological ideas of Arthur Prior. She tries to discover some influences and to trace Prior's ideas in debates with those contemporary thinkers that had significant impacts on his development. Her particular interest seems to be in Prior's connections with members of Lvov-Warsaw school.

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