Prior’s Fable and the limits of de re possibility

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Abstract Prior’s hitherto unpublished “Fable of the Four Preachers” illuminates the connection of the metaphysical issues of trans-world identity with moral trans-world continuity. The paper shows Prior’s position with regard to genuine de re temporal possibility of individuals on the basis of chapter VIII of his Papers on Time and Tense. His position is that radical coming-into-being is not a genuine de re temporal possibility of individuals since there is no identifiable individual, before birth, who could be the subject of such possibility. The paper strengthens Prior’s claim by showing how an uncomfortable consequence of this intuitively appealing position can be avoided. As a result, the proper claim would be that the possibility of origin is general or de dicto: it is possible that someone be born to such and parents, but it is not possible of someone that he should be born to these or other parents.

Keywords Radical coming-into-being · de re possibility · de dicto possibility · Moral trans-world continuity

1 Introduction

The hitherto unpublished “Fable of the Four Preachers” of Prior illuminates hard metaphysical issues on a playful ground. Although it is too concise to display explicit arguments, let alone the philosophical doctrines themselves, still the alternatives briefly indicated there can be elaborated into fuller forms that are already worth discussing.

Prior invites us to consider four religious sects with radically different views without any hope of compromising. The adherents of the four sects give mutually exclusive
answers to what one might term metaphysically as questions of trans-world existence and identity. Typically, such questions include whether the same individual is literally present at other worlds, or, whether it is represented by proxies, say, counterparts. A further question is how to assess identity claims concerning these individuals in view of the fact that property-indiscernibility is not preserved through worlds. The latter is a particularly vexing question since the typical claims of trans-world identity seem to violate the laws of the logic of identity.

Prior’s sects have chosen a different approach. What Sects A, B, C and D have in common is that they connect the questions of trans-world identity with some position about trans-world moral continuity. For example, people of Sect A believe that there is an afterlife where everybody is treated according to his/her this-worldly deeds. Those who behaved well here will be rewarded there; those who behaved ill here will receive due punishment there. In short, the two worlds are connected morally: this-worldly deeds get evaluated in the other world with the natural constraint that the actions/behaviors and their evaluations or consequences are accorded to the same trans-world individual.

This story obviously presupposes trans-world identity rather than yielding a criterion of it. Story A is complicated by a further feature: people in the other world keep no record in memory of their worldly deeds and behavior so that they do not, and cannot, receive their moral evaluations in the other world with reflective consciousness. They simply do not know why they are punished or rewarded, though the moral evaluations are just and consistent provided that the trans-world identity of the agents holds. Prior focuses on the moral side; and from a metaphysical perspective the story might be taken to suggest that trans-world identity hinges not only on the first order properties of the individuals but also on their second order properties such as their reflection on first order properties, including relational ones, like actions, behaviors. Two worlds may be exactly alike according to the usual standards (facts, laws of nature), including exact similarity in terms of the first order properties of their conscious agents while differing with respect to the second order attitudinal properties of these agents.

Now the problem of second-order properties is typically addressed with supervenience in the metaphysics of possible worlds. Philosophers with Humean leaning claim that second-order properties, for example, those figuring in laws of nature, supervene on the first order properties of physical things. Though this is a bit of a simplification, nothing similar can be claimed about attitudinal properties: persons in different worlds may do the same without sharing the kind of reflection on, and the particular evaluation of, the very same actions. If such properties make a difference to worlds, then the similarities of worlds can not be decided only on the basis of the similarities of first-order properties even if Humean supervenience is granted with respect to physical features.

Inhabitants of the worlds, according to sect A, have no moral reflection on their own deeds in the ‘other’ world just because they do not remember having done them in this world. It is all too familiar from the history of philosophy that Thomas Reid criticized Locke for taking memory a criterion of personal identity. While memory may indicate personal identity, it is not constitutive of the latter. For identity is transitive