

LOGIC AND THE BASIS OF ETHICS:
ITS EARLY RECEPTION AND ITS PLACE IN PRIOR'S THOUGHT

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Prior's *Logic and the Basis of Ethics*, (1949) was so well received at Oxford that it led to an invitation to Prior to travel from New Zealand to Oxford to give the Locke Lectures, which he did in 1956. In spite of the impact that *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* had in its day, it seems now to be conspicuously understudied. Scholars are aware of Prior's book, but there is little recent literature about it even within moral philosophy itself. My interest is to investigate why that is. What made *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* disappear from philosophical discussion to the extent that it has? How ought we to understand the early reception of *LBE* and its subsequent place in philosophical history?

One factor to note in trying to answer these questions is that the Oxford which embraced Prior's book so enthusiastically was the Oxford at the height of ordinary language philosophy. The influence exerted by ordinary language philosophy was strongest through the 1940s and 50s. It began to wane in the 1960s, finally disappearing in the 1970s. Within Prior's own writings *LBE* occupies a pivotal position. It is among the last of what for lack of a better label I will call his theologically-driven philosophical writings. Almost immediately after the publication of *LBE* Prior began to invest his energy in the study of logic, and the development and exploration of tense logic. The later Prior – that is, the logician Prior -- used the techniques of formal logic to address the problems of the ordinary language philosophers, and in adopting this method he clearly stands apart from those ordinary language philosophers. But where does the early Prior -- the Prior of *LBE* -- sit vis-a-vis ordinary language?

Both the title *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* and many of Prior's comments in its introductory chapter indicate that even as early as 1949 Prior had it in mind to clear up -- if not actually to answer -- problems within moral philosophy by applying logic to them. But appearances here are perhaps a little bit deceptive – for this risks overstating the amount that logic is really involved. The 'logic' which features in *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is largely limited to the articulation of inconsistencies which Prior finds in the debate in moral philosophy between what he calls 'naturalists' and 'anti-naturalists'. And one of Prior's principal themes is that in the debate between these two factions, both sides "frequently end up by identifying ethical propositions with logical ones". And this, as he explains, "imposes upon the logician the responsibility of showing that it is not possible to solve the difficulties of either side in this way" (p. viii). The 'logic of ethics' is not deontic logic here; it is, rather, the 'unmasking' of fallacious arguments which Prior discovers in moral philosophy, and which he thinks philosophers revert to if not kept on a straighter path by the gentle reminders from logicians that we need to guard ourselves from falling back into fallacious reasoning.

Prior himself had interests in determinism, divine command, and other related questions in philosophical theology. In *LBE*, Prior brings the spirit of a logician to bear on the history of the naturalistic fallacy, but he does not yet bring the new tools of modern logic explicitly to bear on the topic. And this helped to make his book approachable to his early Oxford readers. If it also felt 'friendly' to these same readers, that feeling would have only been helped by Prior's conclusion in *LBE* that it is 'not possible' for logic 'to solve the difficulties of either side' in the naturalism debate. If this is what logic shows then logic need not be feared.

While this attitude to logic may have appealed to Oxford philosophers in the early 50s, from the point of view of modern readers, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* is not a particularly easy book.

This would perhaps have surprised Prior because, as he announces in the Introduction, he has “attempted... to write not so much for the professional logician as for the general student of moral philosophy” (p. viii). And yet, of course, since it is about the naturalism/non-naturalism debate, the book is fundamentally about the analysis of words -- moral words -- and about the analysis of forms of argument.

In this talk I will go through *LBE* in order to illustrate how a proper understanding requires that we look at what had been going on in ethics in the late 1940s. The same features that seem to have made *LBE* music to ordinary language ears might be what today makes it difficult to appreciate. Some of the reason may also be due to the ways that ethics itself has changed. The fundamental questions that I wish to examine in this talk concern the real place of *LBE* in the history ordinary language philosophy. My aim is to consider, in turn, what Prior was perceived to be doing and, then, the extent to which the perception of what he is doing in *LBE* was what he was doing in *LBE*. This involves such questions as: Was *LBE* well received because it gave the impression that logic had only a minimal use in ethics? And, if so, was this fair to Prior? In attempting to answer such questions, I will draw on early reviews of the book and on other contemporary work in ethics. An important aspect of the paper will be to highlight select quotations from *LBE* which show Prior ‘unmasking’ fallacious arguments, and then to identify features of Prior’s method in terms of how it can be applied to such work in ethics.