

ON PRIOR'S FIFTH SENSE

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Here is a passage from Aristotle:

If a man is, saying that a man is is true. The implication goes both ways, for if saying that a man is is true, it follows that a man is. Nevertheless, it is not because saying that a man is is true that a man is; rather it is the other way round: saying that a man is is true because a man is.

Aristotle is pointing out at once a strong equivalence between two kinds of things we say, and a strong difference between them. It seems a paradox: if two remarks are equivalent even inferentially, how **can** one be more basic than the other?

As Prior pointed out, an exactly similar thing can be said about sets. If Prince is a cat, Prince is a member of the set of cats; the implication is reciprocal, for if Prince is a member of the set of cats, Prince is a cat. Nevertheless, it is not because Prince is a member of the set of cats that Prince is a cat; rather, it is because Prince is a cat that Prince is a member of the set of cats.

Prior argued that this point is the basis of Russell's and Poincaré's vicious circle principle. I shall argue that this is right, and that it undermines the major criticisms of the principle, by Quine and Gödel.

The Aristotle quote comes from chapter 12 of his Categories, which is a list of senses of 'prior': after listing four, he says that a fifth is important but neglected, and illustrates it with the way in which that a man is prior to saying so's being true; this, he concludes, is a fifth and neglected sense of 'prior'. Hence my title.

This notion - the fifth sense of 'prior' -has been very little explored and utilised. Prior is one of the few who has to some extent done so. I look at some of his applications of it.

The paradox has also not been explored; again, Prior is a partial exception. I look at the distinctive methodology of his treatment.

In effect he starts with unexamined folk intuitions and treats them as something like Moorean pre-analytic certainties. So he treat such equivalences as

Fido is a member of the set of dogs just if Fido is a dog

'Snow is purple' is true just if snow is purple

as indisputably true. He may not be committed to this approach; he presents it (in **Formal Logic** as a reconstruction of Russell's).

This way of proceeding has gone well out of fashion, largely for good reasons. I explain what I take these reasons to be, and show how Prior's version does not fall foul of them. I also argue that a contrary approach yields Prior's conclusions just as effectively.

Prior also takes as obvious the Aristotelean point that in such equivalences, the ‘just if’ can be replaced by ‘because’ in the longer-to-shorter direction but not in the other.

He does not say this explicitly, but I think he can be interpreted as going on to ask: how should these longer idioms be construed so as to provide the best explanation of these two phenomena? His conclusion (not in his words) is that in both cases the equivalences should be understood as in the first instance quasi-definitions; so he espouses with Russell a no-class, with Ramsey a no-truth reading. I say more about just what this quasi-definitional comes to.

I also look at other distinctive arguments of Prior’s which I consider exploit the fifth sense of ‘prior’. His argument for parsing ‘believes that p’ as ‘believes that / p’ is one such.

I also discuss difficulties for this solution in the case of sets and truth: roughly, that there are other comparably important criteria for a satisfactory account of set-talk and truth-talk, and it is not clear that ontologically minimal accounts meet them. But adequate response to this is beyond the scope of a single paper.

Philosophy

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