

An Angry Young Man **A close reading of Arthur Prior's contribution to social ontology**

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Abstract: This paper is about Arthur Prior's first published piece of philosophy, "The Nation and the Individual" (1937). Its aims are (1) to show that Prior made a remarkable contribution to social ontology in the 1930s; (2) to interpret Prior's proposal as a promise of reduction by translation; (3) to connect Prior's ideas with Searle's social ontology.

I. Arthur Prior was 23 when he published **his first piece of philosophy**, his five-page article "**The Nation and the Individual**" (Prior 1937), in the *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, at least if we do not count his very early contributions to the *Open Window* (among them Prior 1933a, 1933b, 1935) as philosophy papers. That was long before he became a logician. It shows him as an angry young man, a **political** mind disgusted with totalitarianism. My paper has three **aims**:

(1) to show that Prior made a well-informed, creative and remarkable contribution to **social ontology** in the context of the analytic philosophy of the 1930s which is still interesting from a systematic point of view;

(2) to interpret Prior's proposal as a promise of reduction by (sophisticated) translation.

(3) to connect Prior's proposal with John **Searle**'s social ontology.

Prior's paper is little known, so it requires and deserves a close reading. It makes clear why there is a connection between **reductionism** and anti-reductionism in social ontology and in other fields, for instance the debate about the reduction of macro-properties-talk to micro-properties-talk or about the reduction of biological-properties-talk to physical-properties-talk. It is a paper on ontology well before Quine is said to have reinvented the field (Quine 1948). It is best interpreted as an attempt to formulate a theory which avoids an ontological commitment to social entities (in particular: nations) while trying to account for sentences which contain, as their grammatical subjects, expressions which *seem* to refer to nations, but which in fact do not refer to anything, because **nations do not exist**. Interestingly, Prior's text deals with **ethics** insofar as it hints at certain ethical consequences of the proposed semantic reconstruction of nation-talk. So there is a lot happening on those five pages.

II. Some work must be done in order to isolate the relevant points from Prior's text.

(1) **The text must be placed before its historical background.** I hope that I will be able to have a look at the **black scrapbook no1 in box 11 of the Nachlass** in the Bodleian Library which, along with his personal copy of the paper, seems to contain (political) literature that Prior read at the time and kept. It would be interesting to find out more about influences on the religious young intellectual. New Zealand had suffered heavily in World War I, and there seems to have been a certain tradition of pacifism and conscientious objection (which, while possible, had severe consequences) – a tradition that, according to the interview Mary Prior gave to Per Hasle, continued in World War II. The *philosophical* background of the paper is the battle between the organicists (Hans Driesch, worse: Othmar Spann) on one side and the reductionists of the **Vienna circle** on the other side. It is particularly visible in an important paper by Moritz Schlick, "Über den Begriff der Ganzheit", ("On the very concept of a whole") (Schlick 1935a, 1935b). The theoretical conflict is correlated with political frontlines

in 1930s Vienna (Strobach 2013). Going back to Schlick is important regardless of whether Prior knew his text, because it shows an earlier systematic stage of the debate on social ontology: It is clear that Schlick is anti-organicist and reductionist with regard to both biology and social ontology and that he somehow promotes translating away a commitment to the existence of mind-independent wholes. But the details of his translation project are unclear. It is not clear whether *prima facie* names for wholes are (a) not supposed to refer at all or are (b) just not supposed to refer to mind-independent entities, but may refer to patterns which we read into a situation for the sake of convenient description. And it is not clear what kind of translation Schlick has in mind. For, as Prior's text makes clear, what Schlick says might apply to two different very kinds of translation.

(2) Some charitable interpretation is required. Clearly, Prior is anti-organicist. However, a point that needs to be argued is that he is really a reductionist about nation-talk. His own formulation of his main claim is: “ ‘nations’ are ‘logical constructions’ ” (Prior 1937, 295). This sounds close to Schlick's “patterns”. So it sounds as if he thinks that expressions which *prima facie* look like names for nations are indeed referring expressions that refer to nations, but that entities of this sort are not at all what the organicists think they are. However, both the word “nation” and the phrase “logical constructions” appear in shudder quotes. If one has a close look at the kinds of translation that Prior actually sketches, he turns out to be much more radical than one might think at first sight. For what he actually suggests can do completely without a claim of the form “nations are...” that has existential import. Instead, what he says rather implies claiming “nations do not exist” in the sense of “England”, “Germany” etc. being non-referring terms. Expressions that look like referring terms for nations are not referring terms at all and should disappear upon proper logical analysis which shows how to reduce nation-talk to talk about individuals. According to Prior, in 1937 the principal proponents of the view that *prima facie* nation names are referring terms, are “Fascists” (Prior 1937, 295).

It may be noted that Prior uses the term “logical construction” in a very important passage of his mature work, too. In the closing section of his “Tense Logic and the Logic of Earlier and Later”, he declares instances of the B-series to be “logical constructions” out of tensed facts (Prior 1968, 134). There, the statement that this is what *they* are is clearly not supposed to bear existential import, but is to imply that instances of time do not exist. So a charitable interpretation of his early paper presupposes no more than that Prior meant sentences which contain the phrase “logical construction” in the same eliminative way in 1937 in which he means them in his mature work.

(3) Prior's distinction between two kinds of reductionist translation must be stated clearly in order to assess its systematic potential. Going beyond Schlick, Prior distinguishes two different translation projects which both suggest a reduction of nation-talk by logical analysis. Let us call them (a) reduction by distribution and (b) reduction by paraphrase.

(ad a) At first sight, once more, it looks as if **reduction by distribution** is supposed to provide a referent to the term “England”: a (non-organicist) plural subject, i.e. “Dick and Tom and Harry etc.” It is even true that Prior's description of reduction by distribution contains the claim that England “*is* a certain number of individuals” (Prior 1937, 294 f.). One may be in some doubt whether this is any reduction at all. But again, a closer look reveals that this is *not* the core of reduction by distribution. Rather, reduction by distribution is the following claim:

For any *prima facie* name of a nation, “n”, the surface sentence of the grammatical (not logical) form $\lceil \Phi n \rceil$ is true iff its analysans $\lceil \Phi a_1 \wedge \dots \wedge \Phi a_n \rceil$ is true, where “a₁” to “a_n” are names of individual human beings.

So reduction by distribution is indeed *reduction* of nation-talk: “n” has no referent, not even a plural one. Nations do not exist. An advantage of reduction by distribution is its simplicity. It is conservative with respect to the predicates and revisionary only with respect to the subject terms. So it makes analysis/translation mechanical. However, as Prior points out, reduction by distribution is semantically implausible “England declares war on Spain” is intuitively not equivalent with “Dick declares war on Spain, Tom does, Harry does etc.” (Prior 1937, 296). Failure of distribution is diagnosed in Frege 1914, 246, for the example “Siemens and Halske built the first telegraph lines”. However Prior cannot have known this text from Frege’s Nachlass. The phenomenon is already described in medieval logic by the distinction between *suppositio distributiva* and *suppositio collectiva*, but although later on Prior knew a great deal about the history of logic (as Prior 1967 shows), he probably did not in 1937.

(ad b) **Reduction by paraphrase** is more complicated, but also more plausible. Rather like in Russell’s “On Denoting” (Russell 1905), the apparent referring term vanishes into a translation that is not even a structural multiplication of, but is very much unlike the surface sentence. What remains is the following claim:

Every surface sentence of the grammatical (not logical) form $\lceil \Phi n \rceil$ is equivalent, and thus translatable *salva informatione*, to some conjunction of sentences $\lceil \Psi_1 a_1 \wedge \dots \wedge \Psi_n a_n \rceil$.

Or, as angry young Prior puts it:

“Any significant statement about ‘England’ [...] is [...] precisely equivalent to [...] a set of statements [...] about Tom, Dick, Harry etc. [...] The statement that ‘England made war on France’ [...] is [...] equivalent to [...] a set of statements like ‘Tom made a belligerent speech in the house of commons’, ‘Dick dropped a number of bombs on a queue of Parisian women and children’, and ‘Harry was put in prison for being a conscientious objector.’” (Prior 1937, 296).

The choice of examples is telling about Prior’s attitude towards war. The logical point would be unaffected, if they read “Tom made a speech in the house of commons that convinced every one of England’s just cause” etc.

(4) The **critical function of the theory** must become visible. Reduction by paraphrase for nation-talk is not only a neat proposal which is certainly more plausible than reduction by distribution. It has ethical consequences. And it has so by drawing a particular boundary between sense and nonsense, between **significant and insignificant speech**. This is also historically interesting: The Logical Empiricists definitely held that philosophy has a critical function as nonsense detector. Prior’s way of detecting nonsense is restricted to social ontology, it is more refined, and Prior is not afraid of **ethical consequences** of his theory (as the Logical Empiricists had to be for theoretical reasons). This is a remarkable step beyond Logical Empiricism. How do the consequences come about? In the case of distributive reduction you could rely on the *predicate* Φ having the same meaning in the analysans and in the analysandum. This is not so in the case of reduction by paraphrase for Φ and any of the Ψ s. So whenever a predicate expression (like “is owed its duty”) is concatenated with a nation-term in a surface sentence, its meaning, if any, must be seen as merely analogical to the meaning of a homophonic predicate applied to individuals. Such analogical talk must be

identified as analogical talk (this is the critical part). And it must be *justified* by paraphrase (this is the normative part). Not all nation-talk is nonsense, just because there are no nations. But such analogical talk as cannot be justified is nonsense. For instance, one has to check if the phrase “duty to the nation” can be spelled out in terms of duties towards individuals (Prior 1937, 297). Not all nation talk is significant just because exactly all *significant* nation-talk can be translated into talk about individual human beings. **“You owe your life to the nation” is a good candidate for plain nonsense.** Think of situations towards the end of a hopeless war: To whom, exactly, do I owe the sacrifice of my own life? To whom, not to what. Although Prior does not explicitly write so, the consequence must be: If there is no plausible answer, desertion is justified. This is no small result for a bit of semantic analysis.

III. Alas, even **reduction by paraphrase is not plausible.** But it took a long time to realize this. This did not happen in the field of social ontology, but rather in the theory of the natural sciences in the context of the debate on the question whether all science-talk could be reduced to physics-talk, and all physics-talk could be reduced to talk about microphysical particles. Since the mid-1960s, but not before, most philosophers of science have become convinced that such translation projects do not work, never mind how refined they are. In 1937, Prior is not only up-to-date, but very advanced.

IV. Is this merely a historical diagnosis on a historical text? No, something may be learned from it. Let us skip a few decades and have a look at **John Searle’s social ontology.** Here, a particularly interesting text is Searle’s debate with Barry Smith (Searle and Smith 2003). Neglecting a number of details, what happened is this: Smith objects to Searle that not all social objects conform to Searle’s famous formula “physical object X counts as social object Y in context C” (cf. Searle 1995, 2010) for the lack of plausible candidates for referents of the X terms (the so-called problem of free-standing Y terms). An interesting case is an obligation: A certain utterance, which is *qua* event a physical object in a very wide sense of the term “physical object”, may count as the *creation* of an obligation, but it cannot be the obligation itself, since, as we usually say, the obligation will stay once the speech act has long been over.

Searle hates the whole idea (cf. *ibid.*): Of course, an obligation survives the end of the speech act, some temporal overlap suffices for counting-as even to the naturalist. The famous formula was never meant to be a definition. Even the use of the term “social *object*” makes you think of strange entities. *Qua* objects obligations would have to be like tables and chairs, but then that’s not what they could be like. They would be bizarre immaterial somethings that a good naturalist should never buy. One should instead talk only of social *facts*.

This is quite messy: *Are* there any obligations or not? Why must all objects be like tables and chairs? However, it is possible to extract what would be the best that Searle could say along the lines of his own theory (cf. in particular Searle 2010, 108f.), i.e. something like: “A good naturalist should not accept the existence of obligations, because he should not buy immaterial continuants, as obligations would have to be. ‘Obligation’ is a non-referring term. Indeed, the speech act in question is not identical with what it brings about. It has changed a human being of flesh and blood into someone obliged. So a material continuant that had been there before has now, in addition to what it was before, also become a social object in a certain respect, namely *someone obliged*. No new object has come about. And, of course, nobody has become an obligation.” At least, this agrees well with Searle’s claim that a corporation is just a set of status functions (Searle and Smith 2003). What Searle means by this may be spelled out as follows:

The word “corporation” is a non-referring term, but (for instance) the sentence “XYZ Ltd. exists” can be translated into a sentence of the form “Human being a_1 is someone obliged to do action l (in circumstances c) $\wedge \dots \wedge$ human being a_n is someone obliged to do action m (in c')”. Similarly with all other sentences in which the *prima facie* name “XYZ Ltd.” occurs.

Prior’s 1937 article helps us see that this is a **return to the project of reduction by paraphrase**. Corporation-talk is supposed to be reduced to talk about individual human beings, just as Prior suggests reducing nation-talk to talk about individual human beings – by paraphrase, not by distribution.

V. And so, likewise, that part of **Searle’s project**, the reduction of all social-object-talk to talk about status functions **fails**, as all over-ambitious reductionist translation projects do.

VI. A bit of **my own opinion**: Like Prior, I do not think that *prima facie* names for nations refer to nations. They do not refer to quasi-organisms. Neither do they refer to plural subjects, as Margaret Gilbert will have it (Gilbert 1989). Whatever the merits of her social ontology for the description of families and other small groups, this is, in my view, what Popper, with some right, criticized as tribalism (Popper 1945). Unlike Prior I think that *prima facie* names for nations are referring terms, as far as the usual examples go. What do they refer to? States. And what are states, ontologically speaking? Ask the experts, i.e. ask the lawyers and ask Thomas Hobbes: They refer to **legal persons** (Strobach 2005). So do *prima facie* names for corporations. Legal persons are non-plural, simple immaterial objects which come into being by social creation. A certain corporation’s existence is the *reason* for certain people (the CEO etc.) being *obliged* people. For others (contractors, customers etc.) its existence is a necessary condition for being obliged people. This is something very different from “XYZ Ltd. exists” *meaning* the same as “Tom *qua* CEO is obliged to do X etc.” If a certain legal person did not exist some brain states of some human beings would be different. That much naturalism, in a way: a naturalism of global supervenience, is good enough for me (although, of course, not good enough for Searle).

VII. I hope to have shown that **Prior’s first published paper in philosophy is relevant even today**. At the very least, and from experience, I recommend it as an **ideal set text** at the beginning of a course on social ontology. It may serve as an introduction to all the problems of social ontology which are related to the question of reductionism. It makes students sensitive to questions of ontology. It points towards a surprisingly long **tradition of social ontology within analytic philosophy**. It may show the students what **radical thinking** can be and why social ontology may **politically provocative**. Last but not least, since Prior’s 1937 paper is so short, you have plenty of time to discuss it in class.

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