

Prior and the Limits of *de Re* Temporal Possibility

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In chapter VIII of *Papers on Time and Tense* Prior elaborates his polemic on whether radical coming-into-being is a genuine *de re* possibility of individuals. He considers it by the putative complete property swap of two individuals, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, through worlds.

Prior's original solution to the dilemma of the Leibnizian vs haecceistic position with respect to property-indiscernible worlds consists in pointing out that the property swap must necessarily stop at the property of origin. However, the possibility he denies is temporal and not logical; for, when we ask, 'when was it possible', it is easy to see that 'after his birth . . . it was clearly too late for him to have had different parents.' And as to the *de re* possibility of having different parents 'before Caesar existed' the obvious retort is there would seem to have been no individual identifiable as Caesar . . . who could have been the subject of this possibility'.

This sounds fairly trivial. But by parity of reasoning we can get an uncomfortable consequence; for, if Caesar (or any other actual individual) could not have been the subject, before his birth, of the (later) unrealized possibility, equally, he could not have been the subject of the later realized possibility either. Which means, that none of us who was going to be born could have been the subject of a *de re* possibility of being (going to be) born – i.e., at least not before our conception. This amounts to saying that what is once actual is preceded by what is non-possible, contravening thus the logic of propositional modalities.

The air of paradox can be dissolved by denying, with Prior, that the possibility of origin is a genuine *de re* possibility. As a possibility it is general or *de dicto*: it is possible that someone be born to such and such parents, but it is not possible of someone that he should be born to these or other parents.