

Every Thing is Positive

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“There is implanted in the human breast an almost unquenchable desire to find some way of avoiding the admission that negative facts are as ultimate as those that are positive.”
(Russell 1919: 280)

Abstract

To account for the negativity of our thinking and speaking, many philosophers have been tempted to posit negativity in the world. In my talk, I ask what this might possible mean and argue that, even in its most plausible version, belief in negativity is still mistaken: what accounts for the truth of our negative judgments and thoughts is the contingency of the positive things there are. There are no, nor could there be, any negative things.

Many negative things are true of me: that I am not a woman nor a father, not taller than 2 m, nor asleep, not in the company of a unicorn, and not a number nor a universal. As philosophers, we are entitled to ask why: what is it about me that accounts for my not being a woman, what is the worldly ground of the truth of this negative statement? My possession of the usually incompatible property, many will say, of being a man. But the “usually” here breeds problems: should we not in philosophy ask for answers that are more than just ‘usually’ right? The need for a complete, a determining answer is especially pressing with respect to questions that could be asked exactly the same way under circumstances under which they would receive a different answer: nothing about me, in these cases, accounts for my not being a father or my being unaccompanied by a unicorn, for I could be exactly as I am and live in a world that contains children of mine and unicorns. How are we to account for this?

To all these negative things true of me correspond positive things false of me: negation allows us to trade the ones for the others. But if it is true that I am not asleep if and only if it is false that I am asleep, could not then the absence or lack of sleep account for my being awake? This absence or lack, however, does not really seem a real thing: it is not itself something that is either present or absent, it is not a state I’m in or not, it is not something that could be seen or touched. To think that one sees a headless woman when one fails to see her head is a mistake (Armstrong 1968). Even if they were ontologically respectable, however, absences face another problem: they are weird, because they rule out the existences of the things they are absences of. This exclusionary power has to be accounted for: and what about the nature of absences (if they existed) could possibly explain these necessitating powers? Not just brute necessary connections come with absences, but they themselves seem necessary: they cannot all be absent. But at least for suitably restricted quantification, we can easily imagine situations where nothing is absent, not even any absences. So there are no absences.

If absences cannot do the job, perhaps positive things can? Could not the truth of “I am not asleep” be grounded in my wakefulness, rather than in the absence of sleep? My wakefulness, then, would make true *both* “I am awake” and “I am not asleep”, and account for the necessary incompatibility of “I am awake” and “I am asleep”. The first obvious problem with this idea is that there might not be enough such excluders. But even if there were, we would have to ask whether they do their excluding contingently. In many cases, this seems so: it is clearly a contingent fact that my doing a circular movement with my right hand excludes my doing a horizontal movement with my left hand.

Suppose, however, we had enough necessary excluders. An exclusion account of truthmakers for negative truths would still face the following objection which Grossmann (1992: 130–131) takes from Russell (cf. 1918: 213–215 and 1919: 288–289): if $\neg p$ is true (in virtue of q being the case as well as) in virtue of q and p being incompatible, then what makes this latter, obviously negative, statement of incompatibility true? Must there not be something excluding their compatibility?

Once it becomes clear that neither absences nor excluders are the right kind of thing to make negative things true, it is tempting to go back to the initial equivalence between the truth of the negative statement and the falsity of the corresponding positive one. Why should we assume, one thought would go, that it’s truth, rather than falsity, that wears the trousers? Perhaps truth is really lack of falsity, and statements have truthmakers in virtue of lacking falsemakers. If this lack of falsemakers is not reified (which would be a mistake for the reasons above), then it is irreducibly counterfactual:

“Consider the truth that there is no rhinoceros in the room. This is supposed by Simons not to have a truthmaker. This means that, if he is right, there is nothing in the world in virtue of which this truth is true. Yet at

the same time this truth is supposed to make ‘a difference in what there is and what there is not’. This looks like, and I take it is, a counterfactual. As it applies to our example, it can be rendered: ‘if the truth had been a falsity, there would have been one more thing in the world (the rhino) over and above what there actually is’. True. But if this counterfactual truth is to be taken in ‘a tough-minded and realist way’ (as Simons say it is to be taken) then should there not be something about reality in virtue of which the truth is true? If not, ‘tough-minded’ and ‘realist’ may involve some bluff.” (Armstrong 2005: 273)

Counterfactuals need truthmakers. The truth of “there is no falsemaker for “ p ”” cannot explained itself by there being no falsemaker for *that*.

The main problem, however, with this proposal is that grounding is asymmetric: the absence of falsemakers for “ p ” cannot ground the truth of “ p ” if the truth of “ p ” is the same thing as the falsity of “ $\neg p$ ” and this latter one is grounded in the presence of truthmakers. Because a falsemaker for “ p ” is *ipso facto* a truthmaker for “ $\neg p$ ”, we cannot have both truth- and falsemakers and understand truthmaking as a special of grounding.

So we have a choice to make, to decide which are the positive and negative things. This choice is arbitrary, unmotivatable, and therefore potentially discriminatory: Am I a man because of the absence of a second X - or the presence of a Y -chromosome? Let us hope that this is not up to the courts to decide. We cannot have positive things both as truthmakers for the positive and as falsemakers for the negative statements, and there is no way to decide. So falsemakers are a red herring.

This is where some have been tempted to go for ontological negativity. To provide truthmakers for true negative statements, they introduce ‘constitutively’ negative things, facts, universals or states of affairs. Some things, the idea is, contain something that may be represented by something like sentential negation. As there is matter and anti-matter, there are facts and anti-facts. It is very difficult to understand in what sense anti-facts are still facts, albeit negative ones. But let that pass.

Suppose we now have an understanding of what it would be for the world to contain negativity, as vague and imprecise it may be. We can then ask the following question: is it possible for the world to be contradictory? This is not quite the same question as to whether there are true contradictions, because one may be a dialetheist just because one thinks that the right account of the truth-predicates interpretes it as applying both to some sentences and their contradictions, without being committed that they correspond to equally contradictory facts. By a contradictory fact, in the following, I mean a fact of the form $[p \wedge \neg p]$, where the embedded “ \neg ” is read ontologically. The world would be contradictory if it contained such a contradictory fact.

In the following, I will presuppose that the world is not contradictory in that way. This is, first, because I find it overwhelmingly plausible. Second, I find it difficult to imagine how it could be intelligibly denied: if someone says that he believes that the world contains facts of the form $[p \wedge \neg p]$, I will interpret him as meaning something else than me “ \neg ”. Having thus brought to a Quine our discussion, I’ll change the topic.

Having accepted the idea of ontological negativity as at least *prima facie* coherent, we have to ask what it is. How is the negative fact $[\neg p]$ constituted? Does it contain $[p]$? If it does not, then what else does it contain than \neg ? How do then $[\neg p]$ and $[\neg q]$ differ? If it does contain $[p]$, on the other hand, it cannot contain it as obtaining. So containment must relate the facts ‘as existing’ as it were, not ‘as obtaining’. But if both $[p]$ and $[\neg p]$ contain (in this sense) $[p]$, then $[\neg p]$ must contain something more, something contained twice in $[\neg p]$. So ontological negativity commits us to hyperintensional, structured facts. They commit us to the impossibility of there being nothing and make non-factualism unstatable. But there is worse: it also commits us to an obtaining relation. This is then itself embedded into facts, creating paradox, absurdity and regress.

Some facts are self-referential, and some of these do not obtain. So it is a fact that they do not obtain. So something must make “this fact does not obtain” true. But nothing (that is nothing that obtains) can. This carries over to negative items of different ontological types: lacking the property of being a self-exemplifier is ok, but being a non-self-exemplifier is not.

The negative fact $[\neg p]$ obtains iff $[p]$ does not obtain. The not obtaining of $[p]$ itself is a negative fact. Is it the same fact as $[\neg p]$? Neither answer seems possible: it is true that the fact $[\neg([p] \text{ obtains})]$ obtains iff and only if $[\neg p]$ obtains, but it is still different, because facts are structured and they contain different components. So they are different. If they are different, however, then we seem to have a difference without a difference maker: it cannot be \neg , for this is present in both. It must be obtaining, but then this makes $[p]$ and $[p \text{ obtains}]$ different.

Flesh this out more thoroughly, using thick-bracket notation for ‘not obtaining’.

So the absence of a positive fact is not yet a negative fact. But some positive facts are absent. For example, the positive fact that Plato Socrates is missing from the world. This is not because its existence is excluded by some negative facts; rather, it cannot exist because its component are not of the right kind to form a fact together. This has to have a ground, so there is a negative fact that combines it and existence. But what is this *it*? Plato strikes his beard.

The in my view crucial problem with negative facts can be put this way: what *in the world* can connect a particular with a property that particular does not have? It cannot be a real tie, or exemplification, because that would make the fact

positive. It must be something like whatever tie accounts for the unity of the proposition. Negative facts, then, start looking suspiciously similar to true propositions, albeit negative ones.

In the truthmaker literature, worries about negative truths are usually introduced with reference to Molnar's 2000 allegedly inconsistent quatuor:

- (i) The world is everything that exists.
- (ii) Everything that exists is positive.
- (iii) Some negative claims about the world are true.
- (iv) Every true claim about the world is made true by something that exists.

Moved by an impression that the four claims are not co-tenable, Armstrong and Russell deny (ii), Simons goes on to deny (iv), while Wittgenstein perhaps rejects (iii). Mumford (2005: 268) claims that 'true' is used ambiguously in the quatuor: in its strong, 'truthmaker' sense, he rejects (iii); in the weak, 'degenerate' sense, he thinks (iv) should be rejected.

These authors do not seem to see, however, that (i) to (iv) are not inconsistent. Their joint truth implies only that some negative statements are made true by something positive. And so they are: my being a man makes true the negative truthbearer that I am not a woman, my being awake the negative claim that I am not asleep. But what makes it true that there are no unicorns, or that I do not have any children? The world, in the first case, and my prudent behaviour in the second. Both of them are (metaphysically) co-possible with there being unicorns and my having children, but that's neither here nor there. Let truthmaking be contingent, if it has to be, complicating our ideology, in order to keep our ontology kosher, and, more importantly, entirely positive.

References

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