

Everything is Positive

“The Metaphysics of Totality”, Glasgow

Philipp Blum, March 31, 2017

“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)

Against absences

If there are absences, how do we account for their exclusionary powers? What is it about the absence of unicorns that makes it incompatible with unicorns?

If there are absences, at least some of them must be present. If they all are individually contingent, what explains this? Where does the subtraction argument go wrong?

If there are absences, there are a lot of them: not only do the absence of unicorns and the absence of centaurs differ in essential properties, but they also both differ from the absence of things that are both unicorns and centaurs. The latter is not combinatorily built out of them even though its absence is not compatible with their absence (whereas its presence is compatible with their presence).

If a and its being F is properly added to what is in this room and what is true of the things in this room, what absences have to go? Not just the absence of a , but also the absence of anything F . Do we also have to add the absence of anything G , where G is a property only a could have but does not have? Do we have to add the absence of the absence of a ?

Against excluders

If some excluders are doing their excluding only contingently, something else must do their job when they are not doing it – another source of necessary connections.

Even if we have enough necessary excluders, must there not be something excluding their compatibility with what they exclude? To escape an explanatory regress, we need a higher-order excluder, excluding the compatibility of our first-order excluder and what is excluded, that is itself primitively incompatible with their compatibility.

If we do not reify the lack of falsemakers, truthmaking 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 itself be explained by there being no falsemaker for *that*.

More general problem: 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 for “ p ”. 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 kind 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.

Against constitutive negativity

Constitutive negativity: Some things contain something that may be represented by something like sentential negation. As there is matter and anti-matter, there are facts and anti-facts.

If there is constitutive negativity, it is conceptually possible for the world to be ontologically contradictory. Not only could the world contain both a fact $[p]$ and a fact $[\neg p]$, but it could contain the fact $[p \wedge \neg p]$. What would it be for the world to contain such a fact?

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 $[\neg \neg p]$. So ontological negativity commits us to hyperintensional, structured facts. They commit us to the impossibility of there being nothing and make non-factualism unstatable.

Paradox: 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.

Regress: 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.

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 how can it be combined if it does not exist?

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.

The *F*-totallers

Armstrongian totality facts have the form of “Tot(X, F)”, where X is a mereological sum of things, F any property (not necessarily a universal) and Tot the contingent and external relation of ‘alling’ or ‘totalling’. The truthmaker of “These are all the men” is the totalling of being a man by the sum of men, the truthmaker of “Theaetetus does not fly” the totalling of *being a property of Theaetetus* by the sum of Theaetetus’ (positive) properties.

What about “All ravens are black”? Armstrong says this is made true by the fusion of the totality facts that these are all the ravens and that these are all the black ravens. But then “all ravens are black” and “all non-black things are non-ravens” do not have the same truthmaker!

If there are totality facts, there is a totality of them. This totality of totality states of affairs cannot be a state of affairs, for it would then include itself as a component which is impossible if “state[s] of affairs [are] ‘something more’ than the mereological sum of [their] constituents” (Armstrong 2004: 72). It cannot have any property, not even the property (totalled in the first-order totality state of affairs) of existing at all. So what is it?

Call “Total” the totalling relation’s holding between the fusion of all totality states of affairs and the (second- or third-grade) property being a totality state of affairs. Total is impossible: if the totalling relation holds, then the fusion has to be the fusion of all states of affairs. The fusion, however, cannot contain Total itself, because it is a proper part of Total. Could some other property than being a totality state of affairs be totalled in Total? No, if Total really is the totality of all totality states of affairs. Could the totalling relation fail to hold? Only, it seems, if the fusion were not the totality of all totality states of affairs. But then there would be some other totality state of affairs not contained in it, and Total would not be the totality of totality states of affairs, contrary to what we assumed.

Essentialist totalitarianism

Schaffer’s cosmos does its truthmaking because it is unique by stipulation:

given the foundationalist assumption of a well-founded partial dependence ordering [...], Monism is equivalent to the thesis that every proper part of the cosmos depends on the cosmos. Suppose that Monism holds. Given well-foundedness, every actual concrete object must be either basic or dependent on some basic object. By

the definition of Monism, the cosmos is the only such basis. So every proper part of the cosmos must depend on the cosmos. In the other direction, suppose that every proper part of the cosmos depends on the cosmos. By the asymmetry of dependence, the cosmos cannot then depend on any of its proper parts. By irreflexivity the cosmos cannot depend on itself. So the cosmos must be basic. Moreover nothing else can be basic since by supposition everything else is dependent on the cosmos. So there can be one and only one basic actual concrete object, namely the cosmos. (Schaffer 2010b: 42–43)

If “the cosmos” is a rigid designator, however, it does not necessitate negative existentials. So it is a description – cf. Schaffer (2010a: 32): “...any expansion (any more to the world) requires a different unique fundament. [...] So <there are no dragons> is true at actuality, in virtue of actuality’s being the unique actual fundament.” But then what does the grounding is not that the cosmos exists, but rather that the cosmos is the cosmos, i.e. that it is *a* cosmos, i.e. everything there is. But *this* fact is not fundamental!

According to Cameron, the world is essentially complete:

I’ve claimed that the actual world is individuated by what is true according to it. This amounts to the claim that it has all its properties essentially. As such it is a suitable truthmaker for true negative existentials. No proper part of the world necessitates that there are no unicorns, since every proper part might have been a proper part of a different world that did contain unicorns; so the truthmaker, and hence the ontological commitment, of <there are no unicorns> is just the actual world. (Cameron 2008: 415)

Or rather, it is the actual world “*as such*”, given that it is everything there is – another totality state of affairs.

Maximalist properties and bona fide boundaries

A property *F* is *maximal* iff, roughly, large parts of an *F* are not themselves *F*. If *being a rock* is maximal, it has intrinsic duplicates which fail to be rocks because they are parts of rocks. So *being a rock* is extrinsic. This is an unwelcome result (even though Lewis bites the bullet).

Way out: Achille Varzi (1997: 42) distinguishes (topologically) “open” and “closed” entities, i.e. entities which include their boundaries and those that do not. Houses and rocks, if *being a house* and *being a rock* are maximal, are closed – the open counterparts of a house which are embedded in a larger house are not houses, for they lack (counterparts of) parts the original house had, namely its boundary.

Prize to pay: The boundary of the house, however, is not a part of the house, but it is part of the house considered in isolation. It would be wrong to think that the embedded counterparts too have that boundary, just as a *fiat* and not a *bona fide* boundary. Fiat boundaries, however, are not just possible bona fide ones. When I cut a soap in half, I do not ‘actualise’ a boundary that already, as it were, was there before, but I bring into being a new object, at the same time destroying another: “...fiat boundaries are not the boundaries that *would* envelop the interior parts to which they are associated in case those parts were brought to light by removing the rest [...]. Wherever you have a fiat boundary, you can have bona fide boundaries. But the former never *turns* into the latter – at most, it *leaves room* for them.” (Varzi 1997: 46)

We should qualify our realism about boundaries, however.

Kantian totalities and the demands of reason

In his account of the first two, so-called ‘cosmological’ antinomies, Kant claims that the totalities ‘generated’ by the conditioning relations of containment through repulsive forces and of parthood (forces are conditions of temporal and spatial boundaries, parts are conditions of their wholes) are transcendently ideal, and that this is why we cannot know that these totalities are finite nor know that they are infinite. To say that the world is indefinitely large, for Kant, is to say that it is indeterminate whether there is something outside the body we cognise as being limited by the boundary of the world; to say that the world is composed of indefinitely many parts is to say that for any given body and some partition of it, it is indeterminate whether it can be divided further.

The dialectic of pure reason in general and the disolution of the antinomies in particular are concerned to analyse the “transcendental illusion” (transzendentaler Schein) produced by the illegitimate but also inevitable extension of our use of the categories to concepts of reason (Vernunftbegriffe). This illusion consists in thinking that there is something corresponding to the “unconditioned” – i.e. to infer from some thing being conditioned that there is a totality, the thing together with all its conditions, that is itself unconditioned. Kant distinguishes four such “transcendental idea[s] of the absolute totality in the series of conditions”:

quantity the aggregative totality of all times (past and present), the totality of space (arrived at by successive consideration)
quality the divisive totality of partitions of matter
relation the totality of causes
modality the totality of conditions

Ideas of these totalities transcend the empirical use of human cognition, because

- we can represent temporal intervals and spatial regions only as proper parts of intervals and regions that contain them:
 - they are finite because they are bounded;
- we can represent extended things only as divisible: they are extended because they are complex;
- we can represent causes only as themselves effects: to be a full cause is to contain all its own causal conditions;
- we can represent reasons only as themselves explained: to be a full explanation is to contain everything explanatorily relevant;

In all four cases, reason takes the world to contain the totality of the necessary conditions. Such a totality, however, is not “sensually possible” (sinnlich möglich, A417/B444) and hence not an object of possible knowledge.

The question dividing transcendental idealism and transcendental realism is whether the unconditioned – the thing together with all its conditions – exists in itself; transcendental idealism denies this, on the ground that it cannot appear; it cannot appear because for beings like us synthesis is successive, which is a brute psychological fact. While this limitation is psychologically caused, it can be shown through philosophical argument that it exists. Kant claims that with all four ideas of reasons, the step from ‘for all individually’ to ‘of their totality’, while intellectually unavoidable, leads to contradictions:

1. because all regions are bounded, their sum is bounded (because it is a region) and unbounded (because it is the sum of everything bounded);
2. because all complexes have parts, their parts have parts (because they have to be extended to ‘make up’ the complex) and do not have parts (because they are that into which the complex is divided)
3. because all production is causation, the system of natural causation is causally complete (‘causal closure’) and also not causally complete (because, being natural, it needs a cause)
4. because everything is contingent (i.e. has an explanation outside itself), there is no absolute necessity (because all contingent things could not just individually, but also collectively fail to exist) and there is such necessity (because only something necessary can explain why it is contingent that there is anything at all).

To avoid falling into these contradictions, Kant counsels intellectual humility: while we cannot avoid thinking of the world (or the things in this room) as a totality, we should not take this totality to exist independently of our thinking of it as a totality.

Our belief in totality facts is mandated by our practice of metaphysical explanation: to explain why things exist and have the natures they have we have to assume that nothing undercutting our explanation is present. While unavoidable and hence excusable, however, such a belief in totality facts is still a mistake.

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