

Negative Facts

Kyle Spoor

Logical Atomism was a view held by many philosophers; Bertrand Russell among them. This theory held that language consists of logical parts which are simplifiable until they can no longer be reduced. Thus, ordinary language must be analyzed to break it down to these simple elements in order to understand it. However, his contemporaries and philosophers still to come did not agree entirely with what kind of facts were acceptable. They all agreed that there are atomic as well as molecular facts (ones which can be broken down into atomic elements); but Russell also believed that there were general, negative, and intensional facts as well. The main point of this paper is to give the arguments to both sides of the view on negative facts and to provide my own reasoning of why negative facts *do* exist, and in what way they exist.

I. Russell's Proposal for Negative Facts

Russell felt that there were four kinds of facts: particular positive, particular negative, general positive and general negative. He makes a note of these facts in his Lecture III from his Lectures on Logical Atomism. He mostly focuses on the idea of a negative fact and brings about introduces the idea in a casual way. He uses the "fact" 'Socrates is not alive.' In the real world this fact has a corresponding, false proposition that 'Socrates is alive.' However, Russell goes on to say that, "One has a certain repugnance to negative facts...going about the world." Russell accepts a certain correspondence theory of truth; stating that the truth or falsity of a proposition is only how it relates to the world. Thus, his proposition that 'Socrates is not alive' is true only because of the fact in the world to which the proposition corresponds. For the proposition 'Socrates is alive' is a false proposition because it is not in correspondence with the facts of the world (that 'Socrates is not alive'). Russell poses the question that if there were no negative facts, then why would the fact that 'Socrates is alive' be wrong?

II. Arguments Against Negative Facts

Arguments against negative facts are hard to come by, because other analysts have a difficulty in giving a precise answer to the problem, and

thus have no clear argument against Russell's idea. One of his students at Harvard, Raphael Demos, wrote an article in the April 1917 edition of *Mind* giving probably the most complete argument against negative facts.¹

Demos says that 'not' can be taken as the qualification of the predicate.² Thus, the predicate should be read as 'not-red' in the statement 'This is not red.' He uses an example concerning God and His being a provider. Demos believes that God will not provide, because God does not exist, thus He is non-provident. Here Demos is using the 'not' as the qualification of provident, because the 'not' refers almost as much to the grammatical subject as to the grammatical predicate in the sentence. Demos also uses the argument that 'X is not to the right of Y' is a relational proposition in which there is no predicate at all for the not to describe the relation it is contained in. Demos also argues that a negative proposition must not be taken at its "face value." By this, Demos means that the negative facts must be interpreted in such a way as to reveal themselves as referring to positive facts.³

Ramsey comes up short in his argument to not allow negative facts. He says that it is hard to think that 'not' names some element in a given fact, namely the relationship of incompatibility. Ramsey also says that if there is a double negation, and the negation is naming an element, then the element should be named twice. Ramsey implied that if we are

¹ Raphael Demos, "A Discussion of a Certain Type of Negative Proposition," *Mind* 26, no. 102 (April 1917): 188-196.

² Russell does not agree with this argument. He feels that the 'not' is not the qualification of the predicate, but the qualification of the whole proposition. Thus, it is not the case of 'not-red' in the proposition 'This is (not-red)', but 'not (This is red).' Russell uses his King of France proposition to prove this: use 'not-bald' and the proposition would be false because there is no King of France and it is implying that there is some one who is the King of France and he is not bald. Now since this is false because there is no present King of France, we would *think* that the negation would then be true, "the King of France is bald." However, this is also false because there *still* is no present King of France, which it shouldn't be, based on normal use of propositions. Thus the negation must refer to the whole proposition and not just the predicate in order for the negation to work properly on the propositions stated.

³ This is the argument that Russell responds to, to give his complete explanation of negative facts.

to accept negative facts, then it seems we have to accept double negative facts, and those would be something different from the positive facts at their core. Then if we were to accept double negatives, we would also then have to accept triple negatives, quadruple negatives, and so on, causing a mess of language. He even goes so far as to say that ‘not’ is only an “accident of our symbolism.” Ramsey then recommends that in replace of ‘not’, statements of contradictory value should be written upside-down. Ramsey tries to come up with a solution, which is not wholly accepted by other analysts, that facts should be thought of in terms of positive attitudes of belief and disbelief, e.g. ‘not- p ’ is to claim a disbelief in p . This was not wholly accepted because Ramsey considered this system of beliefs as a result of causal properties. By this Ramsey means that believing in ‘not- p ’ and disbelieving ‘ p ’ have the same causal properties, thus remaining in the world of positive propositions. However, the idea of a belief in a negative and a belief in positive being causally equivalent was a hard thought to accept though not hard to illustrate. For example, the behavior consequences of not believing that I am running low on gas seem to be different from those of my believing that I am not running low on gas. In the former case, I might be more inclined to glance at the gas gauge than in the latter.

There is an argument that says the acceptance of negative facts is admitting an innumerable amount of them (there’s no elephant in my room; there’s no whale in my room; there’s no hippopotamus in my room; etc. etc. *ad nauseum*), which goes against Ockham’s razor⁴. Also there is the idea that negative facts are complex, and there are elemental facts that they correspond to, instead of being basic atomic elements. For the negative facts only “exist” (using the term loosely) in relation to positive elemental facts. A problem with this relation is that it is very difficult to explain, and thus is not liked.

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein proposed an argument against Russell’s negative facts. Wittgenstein believes that the ‘not’ signifies nothing in reality because the signs ‘ p ’ and ‘not- p ’ can say the same thing, but the negation is not a

⁴ Ockham’s razor - The principle that entities should not be needlessly multiplied.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Dover, 1998), trans. C.K. Ogden, <http://www.kfs.org/~jonathan/witt/tlph.html>.

characteristic of the sense of p ; and the propositions ' p ' and ' $\text{not-}p$ ' have opposite senses, but they correspond to the same reality.⁶ As seen in 4.0312, Wittgenstein states his belief that the logic of facts cannot be represented in any way. In 4.063, Wittgenstein gives an example of how this is the case. He uses a black spot on a white piece of paper, declaring that a point on the paper that is black is a positive fact while a white spot is negative. However, Wittgenstein goes on to say that the sense of the proposition must be determined in order to know when ' p ' is true or false, that is to say whether it is a black point or a white one. He then says that this "simile" breaks down when we understand that we can point to a spot without knowing about color, but when it comes to having a proposition without a sense, it does not relate to anything because it does not identify to anything that can be called "true" or "false." Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the signs of the propositions do not matter (no point in identifying the negative), for they correspond to the same thing as long as they have the correct sense in their nature, though opposite.

III. Russell's Counterargument

Russell did consider an alternate view which was proposed by his student, Demos. Using general terms, J.O. Urmson explains this view, in his book *Philosophical Analysis*, as "'not- p ' means the same as 'there is some proposition q which is true and incompatible with (or excludes) p .'"⁷ This theory does not, however, claim that a specific proposition is a part of the meaning, but that there is a true proposition, which is unknown, that is incompatible with the stated proposition, and thus general negative terms are used.

Russell rejects this view for three reasons. First, incompatibility is not less disturbing metaphysically than simple negative facts being elements. For incompatibility means that there is something illogical in the world and the world is considered logical; thus when something is rendered incompatible, it does not sit quite right in our minds when viewing the world as being logical. Russell thinks that contradiction and

⁶ Ibid, 4.0621.

⁷ J.O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 70.

incoherence can exist only among our beliefs and not in the world, because the world is what it is and there cannot be logical incompatibilities in the world though opposing forces may operate in the world.

Second, the theory makes a complex fact basic. The complex fact that cannot be reduced is the apparent negative fact ‘not- p ’, which is complex in the sense that it is a truth function of the fact p . Demos’s proposal wants to reduce it to the “basic” fact ‘ p is incompatible with q ’ (simple fact) because it does not want complex facts unreduced. So taking ‘not- p ’, which is true, and reducing it simply to p , creates a false truth value; thus making it so that there is no such fact p , and thus leading to ‘there is a q , such that p is incompatible with q .’ This is so, because for incompatibility to work, one proposition needs to be false, p , while the other remains true, q . It is then necessary to have the corresponding fact ‘ p is incompatible with q ’ to reduce ‘not’ to incompatibility, and there is an interpretation of this statement such that there is a corresponding fact that is non-decomposable, molecular and thus not desired. Unfortunately, ‘ p is incompatible with q ’ is not exactly basic because it contains two elemental propositions p and q . But the purpose of Logical Atomism is to avoid molecular facts that cannot be broken down into atomic elements, so Demos’s proposal seems to bring the “end” to Logical Atomism.

Third, the elements in the facts are themselves propositions, and Russell felt that propositions could only be logical constructs and not basic elements of language. Incompatibility cannot be between two facts, but instead be between two propositions, for incompatible facts would mean an incompatible world, which is logically impossible. However, if incompatibility is going to be accepted as a fundamental fact, it has to be accepted that it will include propositions instead of facts; for incompatibility cannot exist between facts in the world, only propositions about the world, otherwise we would have an illogical world which is not the case. Conversely, Russell believes that propositions are not a part of the real world. Russell feels that if this incompatibility is going to be accepted as a fact explaining the real world, there is going to have to be some clarifying and “dressing up” to do. Ultimately, Russell felt that it is extremely difficult to explain a

positive assertion that is false (an assertion can only be false because of a fact), unless there are negative facts.

IV. Conclusion

If ‘not’ does not name any element found in the world, then it would follow that it would be eliminable. Analysts came to agree that it did not name an element, but they could not seem to find a sufficient way of eliminating it from ordinary language. Though there wasn’t anything entirely wrong with Ramsey’s proposal to write negations upside down, it was not widely accepted because they wished they could eliminate negative propositions all together. However, all Correspondence Theories face similar problems. This specific problem arose because the Picturing Theory was a fundamentalist version of the Correspondence Theory. I feel that the argument is still debatable, with evidence going both ways. However, I do believe that there are facts that may be considered negative in the world. These “negative facts” are just ordinary facts that include the ‘not’ as a relation to the positive world. This relation I believe lies in the Kantian intuition of space and time; e.g., ‘Socrates is not alive’ is in a negative, temporal relation to the fact ‘Socrates is alive’ and ‘there is not an elephant in my room, there is not a tiger in my room, etc., etc., *ad absurdum*,’ is a negative, spatial relation because of the idea of contingency of these objects are not located in the room.⁸ There is no clear decision to include negative facts in Logical Atomism’s ontological catalog. Russell describes this debate best when he says, “It seems to me that the business of metaphysics is to describe the world, and it is in my opinion a real definite question whether in a complete description of the world you would have to mention negative facts or not.”⁹ Ultimately, I come to an

⁸ By negative, temporal relation and negative, spatial relation, I am not using negative as in negative time (which cannot exist because time is always positive) or negative space (cannot exist because in this realm, space is always positive), but as an adjective to “relation” and in a sense that the fact or relation is negative because time has passed and the other fact ‘Socrates is alive’ is old in relation to ‘Socrates is not alive’; or because the contingency is not found in the location of space being discussed.

⁹ Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Classics, 1985), 79.

agreement with Russell according to the fact that negative facts do appear necessary when describing the world, however, I do not agree with his idea of what a negative fact really is.