

Every Thing Is Positive

Philipp Keller

“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.

1. 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?
2. Absences? They’re weird, ill-motivated (to think that one sees a headless woman when one fails to see her head is a mistake (Armstrong 1968), create necessary relations between distinct existences, where this is not grounded in anything. They cannot all be absent. But at least for suitably restricted quantification, we can easily imagine situations where nothing is absent.
3. Excluders? There might not be enough, or at least not enough that do the excluding by necessity. If $\neg p$ is true 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?
4. Falsity wearing the trousers? Perhaps truth is really lack of falsity, and statements have truthmakers in virtue of lacking falsmakers. If this lack of falsmakers is not reified, then this type of truthmaking is irreducibly counterfactual. Counterfactuals need truthmakers. The truth of “there is no falsmaker for “ p ” cannot explained itself by there being no falsmaker for *that*.
5. The main problem, however, with this proposal is that grounding is asymmetric: the absence of falsmakers 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 falsmaker for “ p ” is *ipso facto* a truthmaker for “ $\neg p$ ”, we cannot have both truth- and falsmakers 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 falsmakers for the negative statements, and there is no way to decide. So falsmakers are a red herring.
6. Negative things, facts, universals or states of affairs? Suppose we had 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? I’m assuming that it is not, i.e. does not contain a fact of the form $[p \wedge \neg p]$, where the embedded “ \neg ” is read ‘ontologically’.

7. 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.

8. 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 all kinds: lacking the property of being a self-exemplifier is ok, but being a non-self-exemplifier is not.

9. 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 $[\neg(p \text{ obtains})]$ 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.

10. 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.

11. 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.

12. In the truthmaker literature, worries about negative truths are usually introduced with reference to Molnar's 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.

But (i) to (iv) are not inconsistent. Their joint truth implies only that some negative statements are made true by something positive. Just accept that, and let truthmaking be contingent.