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ON TRUTHMAKERS FOR NEGATIVE TRUTHS

JC Beall

I. Introduction

Positive claims say something as to how the world *is*; negative claims say something as to how the world is *not*. Are there true negative claims? The question is difficult. It seems that truths are made true and what makes them true are truthmakers. But truthmakers are parts of reality; they're (proper or improper) parts of what exists. That's the rub. If truthmakers are parts of what exists then it would seem that no negative claims have truthmakers; and if no negative claims have truthmakers, then this very claim has no truthmaker. Alas, philosophical perplexity.

In his recent 'Truthmakers for Negative Truths' [4] George Molnar wrestles with the problem of truthmakers for negative truths. His paper maps out the territory nicely and gives interesting, plausible objections against a variety of familiar proposals. In the end, his diagnosis is that negative truthmakers are not to be found; they eventually seem too mysterious or conspicuously ad hoc.¹ Whilst I am sympathetic with virtually all of Molnar's criticisms I do not share his pessimism about negative truthmakers. By my lights, the main (and only) problem with Molnar's paper is that he overlooks a very simple but viable approach to truthmakers—the *polarity* approach, as I will call it. My aim in this paper is simply to present the polarity approach and indicate briefly how it satisfies Molnar's desiderata for negative truthmakers.

II. A Model of Negative Facts

Why seek truthmakers for negative truths? The motivation, as Molnar says,² comes from embracing the following three theses:

1. The world is everything that exists.
2. Some negative claims about the world are true.
3. Every true claim about the world needs a truthmaker.

For present purposes I assume, without comment, that there are very good reasons for holding all of (1)–(3). The task, then, is to formulate a theory of truthmakers for negative truths. For simplicity, I will call the desired truthmakers *negative facts*, in which case the task is to find a philosophically viable theory of negative facts.

¹ Molnar gives many detailed criticisms but these two seem to be the most common problem.

² See Molnar [4, §VI]

My proposal is that the only difference between negative facts and positive facts is a difference in *polarity*—a postulated property of the proposed theory. Before defending this proposal it will be helpful to have a concrete model on which discussion can be based.

The model is not at all new with me. Ancestors of the model include van Fraassen’s [3] atomic facts, and more recently the situation semantics of Barwise and Perry [2]; however, my presentation follows that of Graham Priest [5], to whose work most of this discussion is greatly indebted.³

The model is straightforward. Reality, **W**, comprises a set of properties and relations, **R**, a set of objects, **D**, and a set of polarities, **P**={1,0}. Each property $r_n \in \mathbf{R}$ has a degree, which is represented by n in ‘ r_n ’. From these ingredients come *atomic facts*:

$$\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, i \rangle$$

where $r_n \in \mathbf{R}$, and $d_1, \dots, d_n \in \mathbf{D}$, and $i \in \mathbf{P}$. Intuitively, $\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, 1 \rangle$ is the fact that d_1, \dots, d_n are r_n -related; $\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, 0 \rangle$ is the fact that d_1, \dots, d_n are not r_n -related. $\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, i \rangle$ is a *positive fact* if and only if $i=1$; otherwise, $\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, i \rangle$ is a *negative fact*. Whence we have our negative facts.

From here, we define what it is for statements to be *true in reality* or *false in reality*. Suppose that P_n is an n -place predicate and c_1, \dots, c_n are singular terms. We let $\delta(P_n)$ be an element of **R** and let $\delta(c_j)$ be in **D**. Then the sentence $P_n c_1, \dots, c_n$ is *true in reality* if and only if reality comprises the following fact:

$$\langle \delta(P_n), \delta(c_1, \dots, c_n), 1 \rangle;$$

the given sentence is *false in reality* if and only if reality comprises the following fact:

$$\langle \delta(P_n), \delta(c_1, \dots, c_n), 0 \rangle.$$

Once these atomic sentences have truth values the compound sentences gain truth values in the usual way. Letting $\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}}$ and $\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}}$ stand for *true in reality* and *false in reality*, respectively, we have the familiar clauses:⁴

$$\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}} \sim A \text{ iff } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}} A$$

$$\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}} \sim A \text{ iff } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}} A$$

$$\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}} A \vee B \text{ iff } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}} A \text{ or } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{T}} B$$

$$\mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}} A \vee B \text{ iff } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}} A \text{ and } \mathbf{W} \models_{\mathbf{F}} B$$

³ My presentation of the formal features of the approach simply rehearses Priest’s presentation. I am grateful to Priest for the opportunity to see early versions of his relevant paper. Also, I am very grateful to a referee for pointing out that van Fraassen’s atomic facts are indeed an ancestor of the model, despite van Fraassen’s claim that he avoids negative facts.

⁴ The clauses for conjunction are the usual dual ones.

So goes the formal picture. The informal story is equally straightforward. In short, truth consists in *correspondence* with *truthmakers*, where the truthmakers are positive and negative facts. Most importantly, however, the polarity approach seems to satisfy Molnar's desiderata for a viable theory of negative facts.

Molnar's paper shows the inadequacies of the familiar *exclusion* and *absence* approaches to negative facts.⁵ By implication, any satisfactory approach to negative facts cannot fall into these categories. The polarity approach clearly avoids these categories. The polarity approach does not invoke *incompatibility* as a way to secure the truth of negative claims; hence, it avoids the exclusion category. Moreover, the negative facts of the polarity theory are not mysterious *absences*; hence, it avoids the absence category. What makes the negative facts *negative* is not that they are 'absences' or otherwise 'not there' (as it were); what makes them negative is their *polarity*. In this way the polarity theory satisfies most of Molnar's desiderata. There is, however, another desideratum.

Molnar's chief desideratum for an acceptable theory of negative facts is that it avoids mystery and ad hocery. This raises what will be the biggest objection to the polarity theory, namely that the polarities themselves are either mysterious or ad hoc. If this is correct, then the polarity theory fails for reasons on which Molnar rejects other main proposals. Are the polarities of facts mysterious or ad hoc?

The answer is a short but conditional 'no'. In short, the polarities of facts seem to be no more nor less mysterious than the polarities of physics—the likes of spin, charm, flavour, and so on.⁶ Such polarities are postulated in science to explain the data. The situation is exactly parallel with respect to metaphysics. The polarities of facts may not be the sorts of properties one *sees* in the world; however, this is no objection against the existence of such polarities. After all, one doesn't *see* the truth or falsity of statements in general; but that's no reason to think that neither truth nor falsity exists. The polarities of facts are postulated to explain the intuitions which motivate theses (1)–(3). In this way, the postulation of such polarities differs only in detail from the postulation of polarities in science; both are postulated to explain data and accommodate theory. Accordingly, the polarities of facts seem to be neither ad hoc nor mysterious—provided that, as I assume, the polarities of science are neither ad hoc nor mysterious. And with this, the polarity theory seems to satisfy Molnar's desiderata for truthbearers for negative truths. But there remains one more objection.

One might object as follows.⁷ The theory is viable only if the polarities are distinct (non-identical). But what negative fact backs such distinctness? In order to distinguish between

$$\langle \delta(P_n), \delta(c_1, \dots, c_n), 1 \rangle$$

and

⁵ For presentation and telling criticism of these approaches see Molnar §I–§IV (inclusive).

⁶ Priest (*op. cit.*) gives this response, which I endorse fully. Let me emphasise, however, that the analogy is meant only to answer the charge of mystery and/or ad hocery; it is not intended to answer all questions about the theory. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for comments on this point.

⁷ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising the following objection. My formulation of the objection follows the referee's closely.

$$\langle \delta(P_n), \delta(c_1, \dots, c_n), 0 \rangle$$

we need the negative fact that the polarities (1 and 0) are distinct. But *this* negative fact cannot be assumed to have the form

$$\langle r_n, d_1, \dots, d_n, 0 \rangle$$

without begging the question; any negative fact of that form involves the very polarities in question. Accordingly, the polarity theory has no non-circular explanation of why its polarities are distinct.

How should the polarity theorist reply to this objection? To begin, whether question-begging is really at issue is not clear; question-begging involves burden of proof, which is always a difficult matter to assess. Still, question-begging aside, the objection is certainly correct in its main charge—the charge of circularity. The polarity theory cannot point to a polarity-free fact which grounds the distinctness of the two polarities; there are no such polarity-free facts, if the polarity theory is correct. But on this score the polarity theory is on par with *any* theory of truthmakers—or at least any theory attempting to retain (1)–(3). After all, if all truths have truthmakers then truths about truthmakers have truthmakers. But, then, there will be some truths about truthmakers for which no non-circular explanation is available; the truthmaker thesis itself is a good example.

Is this really a problem? I do not think so. Any theory postulating *fundamental* properties or facts will run into such circularity. At some point, ‘explanations’ of fundamental matters cease to be explanatory; in effect they become mere repetitions of ‘that is just the way things are’. Such encounters with bedrock (as it were) seem to be unavoidable, in which case the polarity theory can hardly be faulted—at least on that score. Accordingly, I conclude that the polarity theory, whilst circular as charged, remains a viable approach.

III. Closing Remarks

George Molnar’s recent paper shows the many difficulties facing popular theories of negative facts. The only problem with Molnar’s paper is that he overlooks a simple and promising approach to negative facts—the polarity theory. I have tried to present the polarity theory, and indicate briefly how it satisfies Molnar’s desiderata. There may well be problems with the polarity theory that I have overlooked. For now, however, it seems that we may have our negative truths *and* their truthmakers; we need merely recognise the polarities that populate our world.⁸

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⁸ This paper is the direct result of a lively and productive exchange with George Molnar, to whose memory the paper is dedicated. I am grateful to two anonymous referees whose comments have made this paper significantly better. Finally, I thank Graham Priest and Greg Restall and Mark Colyvan for ongoing philosophical conversation.

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