ON NEGATIVE FACTS

by

Richard Peter Main

September 2001

A dissertation submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of State

University of New York at Buffalo

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The whole problem, when dealing with “the mystery of negation” is to not find oneself *forced* to say something “preposterous” (McDonough 1986, 32).

Acknowledgments

If I had written this work in the absence of my advisors, or with less talented advisors, I have no doubt that the result would have been completely different and vastly inferior. Without the kind but firm criticisms of both Kenneth Barber and John Kearns I probably never would have changed my initial, flawed ideas about what makes a true negative statement true. This is not to say that Barber and Kearns agree with all of my conclusions concerning this issue, but only that without their input I would never have realized how flawed my original ideas were. In addition to his candid and insightful criticisms, Kenneth Barber was instrumental in pointing out extremely valuable readings to me, which opened up a whole a new dimension of the problem this work concerns. Throughout my stay at UB, John Kearns has been exceptionally generous and kind in his contribution to my education. In fact, Kearns allowed me to audit one of his logic classes before I enrolled at UB, which greatly enhanced my interest in logic. I am especially indebted to him for the time and care he has taken in providing me with the most valuable and detailed criticisms concerning this project and, of course, for his constant encouragement. My debt to my other advisor, Barry Smith, will be obvious to anyone who reads the text. While I am sufficiently headstrong to disagree with Smith on numerous issues, his extensive writings on truthmaker theory have had a substantial influence on this project. In particular, the structure and content of the second chapter is largely due to his influence. I must also mention a fourth advisor of sorts, namely John Corcoran. Even though Corcoran was not a member of my dissertation committee, and even though he has had little to do with this particular project, the contribution that he has made to my education at UB is so great that I could not possibly fail to mention him. In my opinion, the excellence of the philosophy department at UB is in large part owing to its having two logicians as talented, and as diverse in philosophical outlook, as John Kearns and John Corcoran. My outside reader, David Hunter, was also extremely helpful, as his comments were instrumental in improving my argument that every true basic negation has a truthmaker.

In addition to my advisors, I also need to thank my good friends Leonard Jacuzzo and Tim Noonan. Tim’s criticisms of early drafts of the first and seventh chapters were of considerable help to me, and Lenny’s philosophical, material, and moral support from beginning to end were as generous and constant as they were valuable. I must also thank my wife and family for their support. My wife, Ivonne, in addition to her encouragement, provided me with the means of finishing this project by freeing me from the burden of being gainfully employed. My sisters, parents, grandparents, and in-laws have, likewise, been a steady source of encouragement. Lastly, I would like to thank my aunt and uncle, Anne McManus-Grant and S.G. Grant.

Contents

Acknowledgments iii

Abstract x

Chapter 1: On Truth 1

1. The Objectives Of This Investigation 1

2. Various Senses Of ‘True’ And ‘False’ 4

3. Cohesion Of Overall Meaning 8

4. The Common Sense Understanding Of Truth 11

5. ‘Being True’ Is A Relational, Analyzable Property 13

6. Truth Is Ontic 14

7. Three Major Rivals To The Correspondence Theory Of Truth 17

8. Statements 28

9. The Relation Of Correspondence 30

Chapter 2: On Truthmakers 42

10. Truthmakers 42

11. Truthmakers Distinguished From Meanings,

Truth Conditions, And Referents 43

12. The Principle Of Truthmaker Maximalism 44

13. The Superordinacy Principle 50

14. The Strong Thesis Of Atomicity 52

15. The Weak Thesis Of Atomicity 55

16. Overdetermination Of Truth 59

17. Minimal Truthmakers 68

18. Two False Equivalence Theses 71

19. The Truthmakers Of Tautologies 71

20. The Unrestricted Implicative Thesis 74

21. Two Restricted Implicative Theses 75

22. The Thesis Of Maximal Reference For Atomic Statements 76

23. The Thesis Of Minimal Reference For Atomic Statements 78

24. Further Comments On The Definition Of ‘Truthmaker’ 79

25. Ontological Categorizations Of Truthmakers 84

Chapter 3: On Negative Truthmakers 92

26. Outline Of My Argument For Negative Facts 92

27. Purely Truth-Functional Explanations Of Truth 92

28. The No-Truthmaker Theory 94

29. Russell’s Argument That

Every True Negation Has A Truthmaker 99

30. Clarification Of Russell’s Argument That

Every True Negation Has A Truthmaker 102

31. On Non-Existent Facts 103

32. On “Semantic Facts” 105

33. Recap Of The Argument That

Every True Basic Negation Has A Truthmaker 107

34. True Basic Negations Have Negative Truthmakers 108

35. Analyses Of Negative Facts 115

36. Negative Element Theory 116

37. Negative Property Theory 119

38. Absence Of A Property Theory 121

39. Negative Exemplification Theory 123

40. Representation, Negation, and Negative Exemplification 130

41. The Clincher 136

Chapter 4: Parmenides 141

42. Parmenides’ Naming Theory Of Truth 141

43. Parmenides’ Argument 146

44. Basic Negations 149

45. True Negative Singular Existentials Have Truthmakers 153

46. Names And Descriptions 154

47. Non-Denoting Names 158

48. Non-Denoting Names As Pretend Referring Names 161

49. Non-Denoting Names And Their “Objects” 163

50. General Facts 164

51. A Rough Sketch Of The Truthmaker For

“Sherlock Holmes Does Not Exist” 171

52. Dreams, Delusions, Pretense, And Reality 173

53. A Parenthetical Remark On ‘Baal’ 176

54. Attributive And Referential Uses Of Descriptions 177

55. Conclusion 181

Chapter 5: Plato 184

56. Plato’s Early Treatments Of ‘The Problem Of Falsity’ 184

57. Obstacles To Interpreting The “Sophist” 186

58. A Brief Summary Of

The Four Main Interpretations Of Plato’s Solution 187

59. Synopsis of the Sophist: The Aim Of The Dialogue 190

60. Synopsis of the Sophist: False Identity Statements 192

61. Synopsis of the Sophist: False Predicative Statements 196

62. The Predicate Distinctness Theory 204

63. The Subject Distinctness Theory 210

64. The Complex Negative Property Theory 211

65. The Incompatibility Theory 222

66. Conclusion 227

Chapter 6: Russell 230

67. Russell’s Use Of ‘Fact’ 230

68. Facts And Names 232

69. Kinds Of Facts 235

70. Atomic And Molecular Statements 238

71. Negation And Falsity 240

72. Two “Ways” Of Corresponding 243

73. Correspondence And Representation 250

74. Rejection Of Molecular Facts 254

75. Russell’s Criticism Of Demos’ Incompatibility Theory 258

76. Forms And Qualities Of Facts 264

77. The Meaning Of Negation 270

78. The Reality Of Facts 273

79. Conclusion 274

Chapter 7: Wittgenstein 277

80. Obstacles To Interpreting Wittgenstein 277

81. Wittgenstein’s Use Of ‘Correspondence’ 277

82. Non-Existent Facts 281

83. Non-Existent Facts And Reality 284

84. “The Dualism That Cannot Exist” 288

85. On What Is The Case Instead Of Some Possible Positive Fact 291

86. Negation And Representation 295

87. The Sense Of A Statement 304

88. Conclusion 308

Chapter 8: Conclusion 311

89. What’s Right About The Incompatibility Theory 311

90. What’s Right About The Non-Existent Fact Theory 312

91. The Idea Of Negative Facts Isn’t Preposterous 313

92. On The Failure To Recognize Negative Facts 318

93. Topics For Further Investigation 321

Works Cited 323

Abstract

Most contemporary analytic philosophers hold some sort of correspondence theory of truth, but there is no consensus among such philosophers as to what makes false atomic statements false, and their true negations true. In this work I develop and defend a particular version of the minority view that false atomic statements are made false by negative facts. While such positions have never been popular, I argue that their unpopularity is largely due to common misunderstandings of negative fact theories in general; and that the basic assumptions common to all correspondence theories of truth require correspondence theorists to recognize that special, negative features of reality make false atomic statements false. In particular I argue that a correspondence theorist cannot consistently maintain that nothing makes false atomic statements false; nor can the falsity of such statements be accounted for by supposing that there are facts about the incompatibility of some positive state of affairs with others, or by supposing that their are facts about the incompatibility of certain pairs of positive properties (and relations).

Very briefly summarized, the theory I defend is as follows: A false atomic statement is made false by the non-obtaining of a positive state of affairs, and the non-obtaining of a positive state of affairs constitutes a negative fact. Such a fact consists of the negative exemplification of a property by an individual (or of a relation by a number of individuals taken in a certain order). The non-obtaining of a positive state of affairs is not a non-existent positive complex, but rather an existent negative complex. In short, to say that a fact is negative is not to say that it is existentially negative (i.e., non-existent), but only to say that it is exemplificationally negative. Negative facts are exemplificationally negative in the sense that their constituents are united into a fact via a special, negative fact-structuring tie. This tie, negative exemplification, unites an individual and a property into a fact without that individual exemplifying that property (and similarly for facts involving a relation and a number of individuals).