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► **To cite this version:**

Timur Cengiz Uçan. The Notion of Negative Fact in the Early Works of Russell and Wittgenstein. 100 Years Tractatus: 44th International Symposium of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Aug 2023, Kirchberg am Wechsel, France. hal-04360112

HAL Id: hal-04360112

<https://hal.science/hal-04360112>

Submitted on 27 Dec 2023

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The Notion of Negative Fact in the Early Works of Russell and Wittgenstein

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Abstract

This paper consists in a comparative study of the notions of negative fact in the early works of Russell and Wittgenstein. How to account for our ability to think both that it is false that what is not the case is the case and incorrect to think that it is true that what is not the case is the case? Are the truth and the correctness of such thoughts and of their expressions meant to be insured by the existence of negative facts? Or do we need to think of negative facts differently? In his early works, Russell argues not only that negative facts exist, but also that the philosophical problem they suffice to solve is real. While in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein dissolves the philosophical problem by letting the superfluity and misleadingness of the affirmation of the existence of negative facts be seen as such.

This paper consists in a comparative study of the notions of negative fact in the early works of Russell and Wittgenstein which addresses three questions. The first is that of the reasons for which both Russell and Wittgenstein agreed on the philosophical importance of accounting for the intelligibility of negative facts. The second is that of the reasons for which it is both philosophically and plainly important to account for the intelligibility of negative facts, either by construing a notion of negative fact as Russell did, or, by clarifying the notion of negative fact as Wittgenstein did. The third is of the explanation of the contributions of each philosopher to the philosophical resolution or dissolution of this philosophical problem. Thereby, I hope to contribute to the achievement of a better understanding of the similarities and divergences of Russell's philosophical project in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* and that of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*.

Russell expresses as follows the philosophical problem, also addressed by Wittgenstein, which concerns the intelligibility of negative facts: "You have a feeling that there are only positive facts, and that negative propositions have somehow or other got to be expressions of positive facts." (Russell, 2010: 41-42) The misleading requisite addressed by Russell is one according to which negative propositions, or negative sentences in the grammatical sense, *must be* expressions of positive facts. The repugnance Russell expresses stems from the alleged necessity that to negative propositions *correspond* positive facts, that the possibility to form negative propositions necessarily implies their

correspondence to positive facts. That which is thereby *a priori* negated is that a negative proposition can *suffice* to express a negative fact, and that a negative proposition does not need to *correspond* to some fact or to express some *other* fact.

Russell and Wittgenstein agree with the common sense assumption of the superfluity of ontological counterparts to account for negative propositions. But they disagree with the common sense assumption formulated by Russell, according to which the non-existence of ontological counterparts to negative facts would imply the negation of the existence of negative facts. They attempted either to establish or clarify that a negative fact can both be truly and really expressed by a negative proposition. According to Russell, one should *a priori* establish that to a negative fact *corresponds* a negative proposition. The epistemological construction in which sense data theory consists provides groundings or insure that a logical clarification of the expression of our thoughts may be intelligible. Such theory should render possible the establishment of pertinent correspondence between propositions and facts, and thereby, insure that propositions are *about* the world, despite the possibility of skeptical denials of the existence and knowledge of the external world. But then, one central difficulty is that meanings of words could result entirely from assignations. By contrast, Wittgenstein calls into question the need of such *a priori* establishment of the correspondence of a negative fact to a negative proposition, and proposes a philosophical dissolution of the problem of the reality of negative facts. As brought out by Floyd (2006) and Sullivan (2013), Wittgenstein does indeed reject the *a priori*. But contrary to the approach proposed by Oaklander and Miracchi (1980), this dissolution does not amount to a rejection of the notion of negative fact. For, the conceivability of the verification of *some* negative facts does not imply that the possibility of the verification of the truth of a negative fact should be *coordinated* to the negative proposition. The logical clarification of the expressions of our thoughts is not based upon or rendered possible by an epistemological theory. This aspect of Wittgenstein's method with the *Tractatus* has been brought out by Conant (2002) and Diamond (1981). Wittgenstein rather renders clear that propositions compatible with scientific theories whose validity can possibly be established can be clarified by analysis. Thereby is not called into question the possibility of assignation of meaning to

propositional components, but the sufficiency of the model of arbitrary meaning assignment to account for the monstration by a proposition of its sense.

Russell's resolution of the problem of the intelligibility of negative facts

Russell proposed the construal of a logically perfect and ideal language (Russell, 2010: 25-26), to address, among other problems, the fantasy, or myth, of a private language. Such language, devoid of the ambiguities of actual languages, could analytically be construed by the establishment of a one-to-one correspondence between the components of a proposition and those of a fact, except logical connectives. Such language would suffice to exhibit the logical structure of the asserted or denied facts. One-to-one correlations would foundationally be needed to be established between words and objects to reach some understanding, ungrounded otherwise. Such correlations would be foundational of mutual understanding and guarantee the neutral evaluability of facts, characteristic of neutral monism (Klement, 2018: 174). But then, the establishment of the truth of negative propositions, composed as positive ones of propositional elements correlated to objects would not be possible, except if some truth-functional composites would *correspond* to negative facts. Some truth-functional composites, negative ones, would thus need to correspond as others to correlations of objects that could and would need to be established for a negative proposition to correspond to a negative fact. But how can such correspondence be established, if that to which a negative proposition would correspond would precisely need to be that whose existence is denied by the proposition?

Russell's solution is the correspondence of elements of distinct *classes*. The attainment of ultimate simples "out of which the world is built, and that those simples have a kind of reality not belonging to anything else." (Russell, 2010: 111) would thereby be rendered possible. That is to say, analysis not only needs to be possible, but also to end with unarbitrarily determined correct answers. For Russell and Wittgenstein, the condition for the achievability of analysis is that some propositions, atomic ones, *express* atomic facts. For, the alleged incapacity to affirm that which is not the case could not ground our abilities to reject, whenever required, falsities or injustices. According to

Russell, to account for the groundedness of our ability to reject, whenever required, the false and the unjust, we would have *to re-establish* the intelligibility of polyadic relations (Russell, 2010: 26). We could not but have to start *by reconstruing* the elements of the relations of separate things and their relations to render these intelligible again. Such move obviously raises the objection of infinite regress (Descombes, 2014: 144).

Wittgenstein's criticisms of Russell's resolution of the problem of the intelligibility of negative facts

As Russell, Wittgenstein is concerned with logical symbolism but does not suggest that everyday language could be imperfect by contrast with logical symbolism. A non-logically construed ambiguous language could not and should not be opposed to a logically construed unambiguous language. Wittgenstein acknowledges that Russell showed that the assumption of the equivalence between the apparent and the real form of a proposition can be misleading (TLP, 4.0031). But he also renders clear that equally misleading would be to reject the possibility of such equivalence, required to account for analysis. Such rejection would involve both renouncing the intelligibility of novelty and the systematic rejection of the orderliness or articulateness of propositions of colloquial or everyday language (TLP, 5.5563). Wittgenstein clarifies a *plain* assumption that should eventually not be discarded by any philosophical attempt, that true negative propositions are *sufficient* to express negative facts: negative facts can be accounted for.

Russell and Wittgenstein criticized the distinction of the notions of being and existence implied by metaphysical conceptions that sought to guarantee our ability to express ourselves through correlated *categories* which would enable us to distinguish possible from impossible combinations of sensical elements, and thereby, sense from non-sense. Nevertheless, the criticism Russell addressed to such conceptions implied granting that our ability to express ourselves could and should be *restored* against any such conception. The substitutability of *correspondence* of correlated elements comprised in types or classes should be affirmed to oppose conceptions according to which correlations of categories would render us able to articulate propositions by enabling us to relevantly distinguish possible from impossible combinations of

sensical elements. When Russell argued “that there were negative facts” (Russell, 2010: 42); he insisted about the importance of not dogmatizing, of not considering negative facts as existences to *affirm*: “I do not say positively that there are, but there may be” (Russell, 2010: 42). Russell thereby discommits the consideration of the philosophical problem of the intelligibility of negative facts from the assumption of the necessity of the existence of an ontological counterpart correlated to true negative propositions. He thereby proposes a new solution. But as remarked by Wittgenstein, this solution can immediately raise concerns with respect to the situatedness of logical space, of the whole of possibilities. Some distinction between conceivable and relevant possibilities should indeed be accountable for *from within* logical space. This is one of the main motives for which Wittgenstein calls into question both the possibility and intelligibility of would-be attempts to *restore* our ability to express ourselves against or despite categorial conceptions.

With his theory of types, Russell dispenses with the task of the coordination of a negative proposition to a positive proposition and thereby to a positive fact, whose need is asserted by Raphael Demos: “a negative proposition is an ambiguous description of some positive proposition [...]” (Demos, 1917: 196). But Wittgenstein further dispenses with Russell’s theory. The adequacy of our notion of proposition is indeed called into question by the defense of Russell’s theory: “that the word ‘proposition’, in the sense in which we ordinarily try to use it, is a meaningless one” (Russell, 2010: 103). By contrast, Wittgenstein’s approach in the *Tractatus* is that *any* philosophical conception of our ordinary notion of proposition needs to be able to account for the complete intelligibility of propositions. Russell’s paradox needs to be dispensed with. Wittgenstein summarizes Russell’s intuition for conceiving the theory of types in 3.332: “No proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself”. The propositional sign having been defined as “the sign through which we express the thought” (TLP, 3.12) and as the *fact* “that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way” (TLP, 3.14), the impossibility for the propositional sign to be contained in itself can be established as follows. Were we to admit that the propositional sign could be contained in itself, then we would also have to (misleadingly) admit that any propositional sign could not have served to express any determinate thought. Wittgenstein’s answer to Russell thusly involves seeing in which sense

Russell's theory is unconcerned with a certain indetermination within language that Wittgenstein provided us the means to dispense with. By contrast with Russell, Wittgenstein urges us not to ascribe any role to the meaning of a sign in logical syntax. For the purpose of the implementation of a logical notation, the description of expressions is necessary and sufficient (TLP, 3.33).

Wittgenstein specifies the process through which the formalization of the proposition can be achieved without Russell's theory in 3.315. Two aspects of such process should retain our attention: (i) as a step in the implementation of logical notations, the process does not depend on a particular linguistic convention but on the nature of the proposition. Russell's paradox vanishes in the *Tractatus*, without the introduction of allegedly logical *a posteriori* principles which could have forbidden illegitimate combinations of propositional elements. The vanishment of the paradox is rather achieved by the clarification that a logical accident against which insurance would be required could not have happened anyway. (ii) Correlatively, the starting point of the formalization of the proposition is necessarily *a posteriori* and the formalization process necessarily happens *a posteriori*. Propositions and images are facts (TLP, 2.141 – 3.14), and there is no such thing as an *a priori* true image (TLP, 2.225). The starting point of a logical analysis could not have been an *a priori truth*. The formalization of components parts and of the whole proposition could not have led to *a priori* propositions supposedly meant to restrictively limit that which can be said. Wittgenstein thus showed that the establishment of a correspondence between elements of distinct classes to solve the alleged problem of the correspondence between true negative propositions and negative facts is superfluous and misleading.

Wittgenstein's dissolution of the alleged correspondence problem

In sections 2.04-2.06 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein reconceives the notion of "world" by means of the distinction between facts and states of affairs and the notion of the space of possible states of affairs. The totality of actually holding states of affairs *is* the world (TLP, 2.04). Facts are acknowledged as determining the world as a whole by determining both what is the case and what is not the case (TLP, 1.11-1.12). Similarly, the totality of holding states of

affairs is also acknowledged to determine those which do not hold (TLP, 2.05). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein does *not* claim that there is a totality of non-holding states of affairs. Wittgenstein distinguishes a state of affairs that holds from one that does not by calling the former a positive fact and the latter a negative fact. Yet the distinction of the positive and the negative does not apply to states of affairs. The distinction between facts and states of affairs matters to disarm the difficulty mentioned by Russell which can arise in a discussion about negative facts.

Wittgenstein provides us with means to dissolve the aporia as follows. First, as with positive facts, equating negative facts with things, the ones named by the words used to designate those things, is misleading. A negative fact is not some *thing*, or an *entity*, that could and would be missing for or to someone. Rather, for example, something can be absent or lacking to someone, and that negative fact can be noted, envisaged, or remarked. Second, similarly to positive facts, each negative fact does not involve only one entity in isolation from all others. The absence of something from a given place can be remarked as we can imagine that a given thing could have occupied that place, as *could have held* a state of affairs that does not hold in a given situation. Third, as facts, states of affairs do not mutually depend on each other (TLP, 2.061): facts are independent of each other, that is to say, necessarily logically independent from each other (TLP, 6.37). Fourth, that a state of affairs holds or not cannot be inferred from whether another state of affairs holds (TLP, 2.062). Thus to affirm both that contradictions are formal and that a priori propositions are vacuous could not have involved a contradiction.

Insofar as a depicting state of affairs, a proposition, necessarily depicts a state of affairs which could have held, the way in which a true negative proposition can and does suffice to express a negative fact can be explained. Exactly as we can *use* a scale to measure, we can *use* a proposition to determine whether reality is as depicted by that proposition (TLP, 2.1512). We can provide to ourselves a correct answer to a determinate closed question concerning the truth of a fact by comparing reality to the proposition. The determinacy of the result of this comparison is involved by the determinacy of the result of the operation of negation (TLP, 5.2341; Narboux, 2009: 124). This point also settles the question of the bipolarity of the proposition in the *Tractatus* as the relevance of the realizability of the operation of negation could not be entailed

by its achievability. As remarked by Diamond (2019: 223), the notion of bipolarity is of limited usefulness. Propositions of logic (TLP, 5.44, 6.1, 6.121) and propositions (TLP, 3.14, 3.141, 3.251) could neither be mutually exclusive nor indistinct. We can determine whether a depicted fact holds by means of a depicting fact. In a given situation we can obtain a correct answer to a given question that we can pose to ourselves by determining whether holds or not a given depicted fact (the state of affairs) depicted by a depicting one (the proposition). If the depicted state of affairs holds, then the fact is positive. If the depicted fact does not hold, then the fact is negative. True negative propositions are thusly adequate to express negative facts. Surely this is not a possibility that could have awaited to be established by means of a philosophical conception. But this *plain* assumption has been philosophically rendered clearer by Wittgenstein with the *Tractatus*.

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Acknowledgement

This paper has been centrally inspired by achievements of James Conant, Cora Diamond, Juliet Floyd, Jean-Philippe Narboux, and Peter Sullivan, concerning the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I am grateful to them. I am also grateful to Donald Cornell, for his very helpful suggestions and remarks on earlier versions of this text.