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Dealing with Facts

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1. 'The pressing question' in the final chapter of Stephen Neale's book is:

> the degree to which constraints on the logic of connectives place strictures on philosophical theories of, for example, facts, states of affairs, situations, propositions, beliefs, .. causation …

Facing Facts does a wonderful job of telling us what the relevant constraints are. But I suspect that the strictures on theories are less disruptive than Neale suggests. And I think that there are philosophical questions which the book makes pressing but which it does not address.

Neale says that Russell's theory of facts is fine.[1] So we have a prototypical theory. I want to bring to the discussion a different theory of facts from Russell's, which, as I see it, avoids crucial flaws in the prototype but can equally stay out of trouble. I bring this different theory to light by questioning the assumption Neale makes when he says:

> 'I take it that no fact-theorist who intends to get some metaphysical work out of facts wants to deny that [the fact identity connective] FIC is +PSST.'
> (FIC) the fact that ( ) = the fact that ( ).
> PSST is the Principle of Substitutivity for Singular Terms.

Having motivated a theory which does deny that FIC is +PSST (§§2 & 3), I shall cast some aspersions on Russell's rival theory and on Neale's treatment of it (§4), and then say something about where this leaves Neale's assumption (§§5 and 6), and how it affects a central aim of *Facing Facts* (§7).

2. Consider a group of identity connectives, which we can represent with a schematic connective 'ATTIC'. Particular identity connectives are got when 'ATT' is replaced by 'belief' or 'hope' or 'fear', or by any of the other nouns that come from verbs of propositional attitude.

> (ATTIC) the ATT that ( ) = the ATT that ( )

No theorist who intends to get some everyday psychological work out of propositional attitudes will want to assert that ATTIC'S instances are +PSST. For that would disallow the referential opacity of propositional attitude contexts.

On a Fregean account, referential opacity is understood when the 'that'-clauses of 'S ATTs that ( )' are treated as referring to truth-bearing propositions. If propositions are composed from senses of expressions, as Frege taught, then we

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[1] It's fine given that Russell takes FIC to be neither +l-SUBS nor +l-CONV.

  I use Neale's names for inference principles: see the Glossary at 251. I also make use of Neale's abbreviations to refer to items in his Bibliography at 188–194. Here and elsewhere, otherwise unattributed page references are to *Facing Facts* (Oxford University Press 2001).

know that only expressions with the same sense can be substituted in the '( )'-slots in 'S ATTs that ( )'. Since two singular terms may refer to the same object but differ in sense (as 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus', for instance, do), PSST fails for instances of 'S ATTs that ( )' and of ATTIC.

This failure of PSST records the 'fineness of grain' of propositions. But what about facts? Are they to be discriminated similarly finely? Well, it would seem so, if the following 'Fregean claim' to which Neale alludes (68) is accepted:

> Facts are just thoughts (or [propositions]) that are true.

Given a propositionalist account of 'that'-clauses generally, we might reach this claim by endorsing the following schema, connecting 'is true' with 'is a fact':

> (T/FSCHEM) It is true that ( ) iff it is a fact that ( ).

Thus a certain uniform treatment of 'that'-clauses—which dovetails with the idea of propositions as both truth-bearers and objects of attitudes, and which incorporates their occurrences after the words 'It is a fact'—has us deny that FIC is +PSST. (There is more about such a treatment in §5.)

We shall deny that FIC is +PSST if we grant that someone comes to have more facts at their disposal as they learn more. When Frege argued for distinguishing (sometimes) between the senses of co-referring singular terms, he pointed out that it can provide a 'valuable extension of knowledge' to learn that *a* is *b*. Thus an account of facts as true Fregean propositions is recommended for epistemology. Still what Neale's fact theorists want from an account is 'metaphysical work'. So it is worth seeing now that the present account belongs in a theory of truth which is a genuine rival to others with certain metaphysical pretensions.

3. The move from (T/FSCHEM) to the Fregean claim takes one to a claim in which propositions are spoken of as things. The move can hardly be considered inflationary in the present context, in which the properties of FIC are at issue and in which we speak as if there were propositions in order to understand the propositional attitudes. So for present purposes, we might as well come clean and recast the Fregean claim explicitly as something universally quantified[2]:

> (IT) (x)(x is a true proposition iff x is a fact)

Here we have reached something known as an *identity theory of truth*.[3]

To understand why this should have been called an identity theory, notice that when 'is identical with' replaces 'is' on the right hand side of (IT), one sees an alternative to a theory which says that each true proposition *corresponds* to a fact:

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[2] We shall free so to recast it if, for instance, we accept an account of propositions as *pleonastic* in something like the sense of Stephen Schiffer's *The Things We Mean* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[3] For discussion of a variety of different identity theories of truth, and for defence of the present, Fregean theory, see Julian Dodd, *An Identity Theory of Truth*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2000.

one sees a rival to a correspondence theory of truth.[4] According to an identity theory, propositions are the truth-bearers, and insofar as there are facts, they are not further, distinct things to which the true propositions could be said to stand in relation.

It might be questioned whether having something that rivals a correspondence theory of truth is enough to ensure that one has an alternative '*theory* of truth'. And certainly it can seem doubtful whether we could have reached any theory inasmuch as we have relied only on (T/F SCHEM) which can seem trivial. As Neale notes (123), Strawson argued that so long as facts are individuated as finely as propositions, they shed no light on truth (1950a). But a theorist of facts need not confine herself to shedding light on truth. In the present context, the whole interest of (IT) derives from the Fregean background within which its generalization about truth is set. And of course, as far as Neale is concerned, theories of *facts*, not truth, are in question.

4. Where facts are concerned, Neale must think that the metaphysician has a reason to side with Russell against Frege. For Neale's Russell, unlike Frege, supposedly makes use of a fact identity connective that is +PSST. But if we find ourselves on Russell's side having read Neale, then I think that this is only because Neale's presentation of Russell's theory of facts disguises difficulties for it. I shall bring the main difficulty to the surface, and suggest that it actually undermines Neale's claim about the inference principle PSST within the theory.

Neale's presentation (85–8) makes use of a notation in which

    <KIT, the property of being a cat>

serves to portray the fact which, according to Russell, makes it true that Kit is a cat.[5] The notation highlights a view of Russell's which in one place he puts as follows: 'in spite all [her fur] Kit [her]self is a component part .. of a certain complex (an objective proposition, one might say)' (cp. Russell, 1904). Now this view, as Russell acknowledged, ensures that the fact is not itself something we can know.[6] Indeed even the judgment to which this fact is supposed to correspond is one 'we cannot make'. Since Kit herself 'is a constituent' also of such a judgment, it can only be made by someone who (in Russell's sense) is *acquainted* with Kit. 'We'd like to make the judgment', Russell agrees, but 'we are necessarily

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[4] At least to one sort of correspondence theory. Nowadays defenders of correspondence theories tend to think of the entities to which true propositions supposedly correspond (or which supposedly make true propositions true) as a rather disparate bunch, whereas the correspondence theory with which an identity theory immediately contrasts has a uniform conception of facts.

[5] Neale does not complain, as one well might, that the fact as thus portrayed would exist even if Kit were not a cat.

[6] For a helpful account of what by my lights goes wrong in Russell, one should go back to an essay which antedates the last thirty odd years' literature on 'direct reference', and see John McDowell's 'Identity Mistakes', reprinted at 157–170 in his *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

defeated'.[7] The best we can do is to describe something that we cannot know. In order to describe it, Russell says, we have to come up with something like the following:

> the objective proposition asserting, concerning the actual object which is the cat that people call "Kit", that this object is a cat'.

For Russell, then, the move FROM the fact that Hesperus is F TO the fact that Phosphorus is F will take us FROM something asserting, concerning the object that people call "Hesperus", that this object is F TO something asserting, concerning the object that people call "Phosphorus", that this object is F. Here the only substitution is (a) of descriptions (of an actual object), and (b) outside the scope of any 'that'-clause. The substitution is hardly an application of PSST for FIC, since (a) PSST speaks to singular terms, and (b) in FIC complete sentences occupy the '( )'-slots.

Russell's view that 'proper names are usually really descriptions' may take some of the sting out of his conclusion that we cannot know singular facts. But it obviously won't help us in deciding whether Russell treated FIC as +PSST. For if proper names are usually not singular terms, then PSST is a principle for which there is usually no use. When Russell does speak of expressions treated as genuine singular terms, he has this to say:

> If I say "Scott is Sir Walter", using these two names as names, neither 'Scott' nor 'Sir Walter' occurs in what I am asserting, .. and then what I am asserting is a pure tautology. (1918) 246.

The pure tautologousness of 'Scott is Sir Walter', which implies that it says nothing other than what 'Scott is himself' says, seems to show that PSST can actually have no use at all for Russell.[8]

At any rate, Russell's view is that insofar as we can describe singular facts, we can do so only by bringing terms outside the scope of 'that'-clauses. And given that this is his view, it seems misleading at best to attribute to Russell, as Neale

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[7]   The quotations marks in the preceding text surround phrases that Russell uses in connexion with the Bismarck example in his (1918), and the description of an objective proposition displayed below is adapted from one that Russell uses there.

In Ch. 7, op.cit. n.2, Dodd argues that Russell held an identity theory of truth (a non-Fregean one obviously). I think this is probably right. But there is so much instability in Russell's terminology that it is hard to be sure; and I've tried to state Russell's views without committing him to any *wholesale* equation of facts with true propositions. It is no surprise, however, (even if a source of difficulty: see n.5 above) that the notation for Russellian facts which Neale takes over is familiar as a notation for Russellian propositions.

[8]   No doubt Russell's curious epistemology of acquaintance is what ensures that we use so few genuine names. But I think that if we reject the epistemology and allow that ordinary proper names occur in sentences that express complete singular propositions, then we are bound to take Frege's side. Otherwise we wind up saying, as Russell does here, that the names don't occur in what we assert (i.e. that the names' bearers aren't invoked in what we assert: see n.12 below).

does, a theory in which FIC (whose slots are occupied by complete sentences) is +PSST.

5. We saw that Neale puts in place the assumption that anyone who holds an interesting theory of facts takes FIC to be +PSST (§1). And we saw that in order to respect the opacity of ATT-contexts, one must takes ATTIC's instances to be –PSST (§2). Thus Neale must think that any theorist with something interesting to say about facts treats instances of 'the fact that ( )' differently from instances of 'the ATT that ( )'.[9] What are the prospects of according these different treatments?

   In order to know whether Neale might find different things to say about 'FIC' and 'ATTIC', we need to understand the workings of descriptions on the following pattern:

   'the шшш that ( )'
   where 'шшш' is replaced by any of, 'belief' 'hope' 'truth', 'fact', 'falsehood', etc.,
   or 'the шшш' by 'X's belief' 'Y's hope' etc..

(People often speak of '*the* reference of "that"-clauses' [when expounding Frege, for instance]. But this way of speaking makes it easy to forget that typical descriptions composed from 'that'-clauses contain more than a 'that'-clause—that they contain 'A's belief' or 'The fact' or whatever.)

   The simplest account of these would have it that whatever replaces 'the шшш' in a description, there is some one thing that the description denotes (so long as a single sentence recurs at '( )'). But this would obviously be wrong. For consider these four:

   John's hope that ( )
   the fact that ( )
   Bebel's mistaken supposition that ( )
   the proposition that ( )

It is very evident that these descriptions cannot all secure a reference. If Bebel is indeed mistaken in supposing that *p*, then it is *not* a fact that *p*. Say that the description 'the fact that ( )' is *void* in such a case. 'John's hope that ( )' is similarly void, then, if John does not hope that ( ). In general, it seems that in order for a description on the pattern of 'the шшш that ( )' to secure a reference, the sentence from which the description is got by nominalization has to be true. (There is nothing that 'John's hope that p' describes unless John actually hopes that p.) 'The proposition that ( )' appears to be special, at least so far as the semi-

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9   He can then reject the uniform treatment of 'that'-clauses which allows (IT) to be derived from (T/FSCHEM). See Marian David, 'Truth as Identity and Truth as Correspondence', in *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Michael P. Lynch (Bradford M.I.T., Cambridge Ma., 2001). David's paper presents some of the issues around here very helpfully. (I would however quarrel with most of the things he says about Frege on sense and about the possibilities for 'content externalism'.)

technical, philosophically customary use of 'proposition' goes. It seems that (save for possible problems internal to the sentence in the '( )'-slot) this is never void.[10]

We must acknowledge, then, that descriptions of beliefs, facts, etc. (though arguably not of propositions [*modulo* sentences in the '( )'-slots]) can be void. But this gives us no reason to say that such descriptions are variable in their references when they are not void. Nothing here suggests that 'that-p' is ambiguous, taking on a different reference according as it is preceded by 'John's belief' or 'the fact'. And where two descriptions on the pattern of 'the ıııı that ( )' are not void, they may be thought to refer to the same thing (to the sense of the sentence in the '( )'-slot, for the Fregean). Their sharing a reference would enable us to explain the ease with which we move, for instance, from 'John believes that *p*' and 'It's a fact that *p*' to 'Something John believes is true'. To explain this, we want to say that 'that-*p*' behaves no differently after 'John believes' (or 'John's belief') and after 'It's a fact' (or 'the fact').

A question that Stephen Neale is much more competent than me to answer is whether there is a plausible account of these descriptions which can equally explain our intuitions about movements between sentences containing 'that'-clauses. Myself, I find it hard to envisage such an account.[11] But I suggest that Neale is obliged to provide one of behalf of theorists who want 'interesting metaphysical work' from facts. Either that, I think, or he must allow that even theorists who reject the assumption that FIC is +PSST can enter the metaphysical fray.

6. We can all agree that if *a* = *b*, then it's a fact that *b* is F if it's a fact that *a* is F. Insofar as I take issue with Neale, it is only that I deny that the transition between these facts is to be thought of as licensed by an inference principle. On a Fregean account of facts (I should claim), the fact that *a* is F and the fact that *b* is F are object-invoking.[12] If the same object is invoked twice (and everything else is the same), then it is understandable why we should feel inclined to say that there is 'a single fact'. The explanation now can simply be that, as a matter of known fact, *a* is *b*.

Notice that even if we had proper Russellian descriptions in place of 'a' and 'b', our intuition about 'a single fact' would still be in place. As Neale himself points out (at 106) there are 'descriptions understood *de re*' which may or may not

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[10]   'The proposition that ( )' might be treated as derived from something like 'It might be propounded that ( )'. Then its special behaviour would be explained if 'It might be propounded that ( )' is verifiable by its use.

[11]   What I have said of course falls short of any actual account of these descriptions. For one non-Russellian account of them, see David op.cit.n.9, 697.

[12]   In '*De Re* Senses' (reprinted at 214–227 in op. cit. n.6), McDowell gives an account of the philosophical thinking that has helped to put the idea of an object-invoking proposition out of the cognitive reach of most contemporary philosophers. Bennett (1988) is one example of someone who holds the view about Frege which (though I take it to be refuted by McDowell) predominates—namely that 'Fregean propositions are entirely built out of general concepts'.

be Russellian and may or may not be understood referentially. It seems then that PSST as such need not really be at issue at this point.   So we might be happy with facts having all the fineness of grain of Fregean propositions and not be very bothered that it turns out that FIC is –PSST.

7.   One aim of *Facing Facts* was to ascertain how much there is to Davidson's critique of "representationalism" (1–7). What Davidson rejected, under the head of 'facts' in a central part of that critique, was entities correspondence to which can explain truth. Evidently the account which I have uncovered and started to defend also rejects facts of that putative sort. Thus the consequence of resisting the assumption that FIC is +PSST is to arrive at an account which leaves Davidson's critique intact (as well as evading the slingshot arguments that are the main focus of Neale's book[13]). Neale's assumption seems to me to betray a limited conception of the dialectical work that a theory of facts might be supposed to do.[14]

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[13] Someone who thinks that facts are true propositions evidently could have no more reason than Russell (i.e. no reason whatever) to endorse +ι-SUBS or +ι-CONV for FIC.

[14]   For helpful comments on a draft, many thanks to a sympathetic opponent and to a friendly ally —to Marian David and to Julian Dodd.