Positive & Negative Predication: Distinction Through Unity

Alexander Porto

May 2024

§1. In the history of philosophy, the distinction between positive and negative predication has been collapsed. The collapse has caused us to search for a way through Parmenides' gate: we have constructed scaffolding to see over its boundaries. Kant gave us the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual knowledge; Hegel gave us determinate negation; Frege gave us the negation stroke; Husserl gave us bracketing and disappointment; G. Spencer-Brown gave us a calculus of distinction. Despite this, we find ourselves—alongside Wittgenstein—wondering how it can be the case that we are able to think what is not the case. We are puzzled by the fact that we can *think nothing* without the thought lacking content. I suggest that this confusion is unnecessary. Throughout this work, I exercise the thought that the distinction between positive and negative predication is mistaken. I rather suggest that to think what is or is not the case necessarily depends upon an exemplar distinction that is experientially recognized and learned in the world. All the same, our capacity to understand natural distinction likewise depends upon our practical and pervasively conceptual capacities to express it in language. I conclude by suggesting that what makes positive and negative predication distinct is a fundamental unity in conceptual form through its capacity to play distinct functional roles in linguistic practice.

Shapes of Negation

§2. The concept of negation continues to confront to us as a confounding aspect of judgment: we wonder how it is the case that we are somehow capable of making judgments of nothing. Frege says:

> It must be possible to negate a false thought, and in order to be able to do that, I need that thought. I cannot negate what is not.

which Wittgenstein restates as:

> This is not how things stand, and yet we can say *how* things are *not*.

Call it: the Frege-Wittgenstein problem.

Now, I think that we ought to formulate the Frege-Wittgenstein problem as follows:

> We are capable of recognizing an implication relation where there should not be one. For if the thought is false (if we can say what is *not*), then it implies *nothing*.

That is, we already go some distance in alleviating our troubles with negation when we make explicit the thought that what negation does (how it is used) is *indicate a picturing relation*. Negation necessarily licenses inferences. It shows distinctions.

It is my purpose in this writing to respond to the Frege-Wittgenstein problem of negation—in its developed and convoluted forms—with a picture that is not misshapen by its historically problematic forms. I will develop the thought that once we look at the role of negation in thought—which I take to be nothing other than covert linguistic episodes—, then what at first appears opaque and perplexing about negation becomes clear and straightforward.

§3. Narboux gives us a clear picture: the threefold puzzle of negation:

1. First Puzzle. How can *not-p* (say, "The book is not on the table") so much as negate *p* at all since if *p* is not the case (as *not-p* claims) then nothing corresponds to *p*?
2. Second Puzzle. How can *not-p* (say, "The sweet is not a color"; "There is no reddish-green") so much as negate *p* at all when *not-p* does not reject *p* as false but instead rejects it as unintelligible, since if *p* is unintelligible (as *not-p* claims) then *p* is nothing but scratches or sounds?
3. Third Puzzle. How could "not" fail to be equivocal if "*not-p*" in some cases requires, yet in other cases precludes, the intelligibility of *p*? Yet how could "not" be equivocal if "*not-p*" is always tantamount to a rejection of *p*?

The first puzzle is Frege's problem: it is the idea that to be able to negate what is not the case requires it to be the case, which cannot be right. The second puzzle is Wittgenstein's problem: it is the idea that negating categorial atomic facts rests on nonsensical grounds. The third puzzle is how the Frege-Wittgenstein problem has been taken up in recent years: it is the idea that use of the negation stroke foundationally negates what stands to the right of it.

§4. The first fold of the puzzle is finding ourselves torn between requiring the capacity to think what is not without falling into nonsensical thought and the capacity to think logically without failing to think what is not. This, on Narboux's account, renders "falsehood and negation impossible" (p. 159). For correctly thinking that:

> The book is not on the table.

we illogically think nothing in a two-way manner:

> (i) The book is on the table.
> (ii) The book *actually* not being on the table implies nothing being true (i.e., that the book's not being on the table negates nothing).

Now, (i) appears necessary to the original thought, but is itself not the case. So the requirement of what is not the case for the statement which is negated to be true. But (ii) contradicts the necessity of (i) by being the case without the existence of (i) at all (as the book is not on the table). Narboux makes explicit the risk of circularity in the first fold:

> We are led to misinterpret the requirement that what is negated should make sense as the requirement that it should *consist* in *a* sense, only to realize that this move does not get us out of trouble (p. 160).

This is an ancient aspect of the puzzle. Rödl states:

> Aristotle, in Metaphysics Γ, (. . .) displays how someone pretending to reject the law of non-contradiction says nothing at all.

§5. The solution to the first fold comes about in two ways: (1) recognizing that the logical relation of negation in the first fold (p OR ~p, when p is a proposition in the first fold) is asymmetrical. We find this thought articulated in Kimhi, who demonstrates that in order for the assertion:

> The book is not on the table

to be true, it is (logically) necessary that:

> The book is on the table

serves as the modal foundation of the former assertion. That is, to have any judgment at all presupposes our capacity to judge modally and subjunctively: we cannot think *~p* without already being capable of knowing that it would be possible. This is clear when we think about assertions in everyday discourse. (2) Recognizing that just because the logical relation is asymmetrical, both assertions nonetheless stand categorically (determinately) to one another that allows them to be logically read as isomorphic. They mutually make the other determinate by being bound up in the same sub-grammar.

It is as if we were perplexed by saying, while playing chess, that:

> I am going to score a goal by kicking the ball

and believe that we cannot understand why we were perplexed. We should have seen straightaway that the statement did not categorically belong in the sub-grammar. We can see how it is now possible to correctly state:

> Not-(I am going to score a goal by kicking the ball, *in chess*)

without needing to justify how we proposed a rule that does not (even, cannot) exist. The point is this: our grammar naturalizes the peculiarity of the asymmetry of the relation, but we do not need to bind ourselves to our grammar to wrestle with something that is not there.

We can frame the goal-chess example in a different way. We can ask someone:

> Did you score a goal in chess?

and they could (truly) respond:

> I did not score a goal in chess (or simply: no)

Now, we should not fall into the metaphysical trap of imagining our interlocuter to be confused (*Why did you ask me that? You know how to play chess*). Instead, we should immediately see that we've made a category mistake. Whereas, if we ask:

> Did you castle?

and they (truly) respond:

> No (or: It is not the case that I castled)

our sub-grammar remains intact. There need be no confusion about negating nothing when the judgment is a category mistake. The first fold of the puzzle of negation is no longer puzzling.

§6. The solution to the second fold is similar. For, the proposition:

> There is no reddish-green

to be true, all that we require is a picturing account of truth. We need to see straightaway that true propositions give us a map of our surroundings. And because there is no item in our surroundings that is truly reddish-green, then by making the proposition we are simply mapping the area.

But this is not necessarily a category mistake. Because it happens to turn out sometimes that our maps are incorrect and can be subject to change. So, we can say that it is a normative mistake with regard to the most adequate map we've got in use.

§7. Now, the third fold, which Narboux takes to be the most puzzling, will be answered at the apex of my argument. By way of a promissory note, the key is to see at once that negation is not taken to be a univocal natural linguistic item that is open to equivocality. It is instead to see negation as existing—in our linguistic practices—along a phylogenic tree of inferential processes.

Predication & Distinction

§8. The puzzles of negation can be put to rest when it is made explicit that philosophy has been treating negation as something at the same time equi- and univocal, whereas varieties of negation license varieties of inference. Negation is used imprecisely: there are distinct functional processes that have been bent into a singular term. By introducing the various inference licenses that come from varieties of negation, my treatment does not render negation as something equivocal or univocal. The puzzle of negation becomes alleviated when what one does with it is made explicit: that it is a processesal natural linguistic item. And the clarity of negation comes from at once seeing that it can do numerous things.

§9. There is a primary negation. Call it: determinate distinction. It exists in the world, independently of our thinking it. Determinate distinction is nothing other than the recognition that the proposition:

p v *~p*

is the judgment of 1.11 and 1.21 of the *Tractatus*.

For, when one correctly judges *that-p* (or its counterfactual), the world is pictured (in a correspondential sense). When expressed, it maintains the transcendental form of the proposition.

(This is what G. Spencer-Brown says when talking about drawing circles on a torus: that the world neither is nor could be pictured as containing circles if the logical space of reasons were otherwise.)

§10. Hegel called this form of judgment *determinate negation*. It is the Aristotelian contraries. It is nothing other than making ground-level inferences of material incompatibilities. Suppose I showed you one side of a white sphere. Upon turning it, I showed you that the other side was red. Now, the tautology that the sphere is neither *not-white* nor *not-red* is nothing more than an imprecise form of the expression that a two-colored sphere is, by virtue of what it is, materially incompatible with it being a one-colored sphere. Brandom states:

> Square and circular are exclusively different properties, because possession by a plane figure of the one excludes, rules out, or is materially incompatible with possession of the other [. . .] What is impossible is not that two incompatible features should be exhibited at all. After all, sometimes it is raining, and sometimes it is fine. What is impossible is that they should be exhibited by the same unit of account.

The reason for introducing determinate distinction is to show straightaway that judgment is first a separating process. It is also to show that the negative act of judgment is what makes thought possible. And it is to show that judgment begins as an isomorphic picture of the world.

§11. Suppose there is a community of people that has not yet learned about categorial language (in the botanical sense). In their world, there are only spherical items in nature which are (what we would call) red, white, and red-white. Call the community: s-persons (for sphere). Now, suppose a member of the c-persons community (for categorial) visits the s-persons. The s-persons hear the c-person say unfamiliar words when looking at different items: *Rot*, *Weiß*, and *Rot-Weiß*. One s-person writes down the words and begins to label all of the spheres according to each term. Suppose an arbitrary preference developed among the s-persons that had not existed prior to the visit from the c-person: that there are certain economically valuable spheres and certain valueless spheres. *Rot* spheres are the most valuable; *Rot-Weiß* are somewhat valuable; and *Weiß* spheres are valueless. By imposing an arbitrary economical system on natural items, the s-persons have shown that they have mastered c-vocabulary and are

now, for example, capable of making determinate distinctions between the three types of items. This natural-recognitive process of applying different linguistic terms to natural objects is the first judgment. It is what makes thought possible. And our toy example shows that the linguistic picturing expressions (*R*, *W*, and *R-W*) are isomorphic with the items expressed: for, if a *W* item did not correspond in isomorphism to the term *W*, then one would use one of the other terms.

This is a thoroughly Hegelian idea. Brandom states:

> In Hegel's version, empirically describable states of affairs are intelligible as determinate only insofar as they stand in relations of material incompatibility and consequence ("determinate negation" and "mediation") to one another.

So, we can say that determinate distinction is the kernel of linguistically-instantiated natural judgment.

§12. We must also see that there are higher orders of negation. The higher orders of negation are the knowledge of rational animals. They take the form of singular inference-licensing processes. They depend upon our picturing practices. Call higher-order negation *picturing-negations*. And there are varieties of picturing-negations. Call the varieties of picturing-negations: *the family of judgments.*

You will notice that I have collapsed the distinction between judgment and negation. I will now show why this is necessary.

The family of judgments is the linguistically expressed acts of predication, of which negation is a member. The predicative use of negation is mistaken as long as one thinks of it pertaining to one expression of judgment, rather than as sharing a predicative role as a process that displays different kinds of picture. For example,

> It is not the case that it is raining (i.e., *not-raining*)

only expresses:

> One has mastered the contexts in which to use the term *raining*

and:

> One judges something other than *raining.*

That is, when a judgment act yields a negative inference, there is a two-way movement that renders it both generative and reductive. The proposition:

> ~*p*

is sensible if and only if the modality of *p* is recognized. Otherwise, it would be nonsense.

§13. The generative movement of negative inference is that one calls up a local instance of judgments in the correct context (in the normative and nomological

sense). That context shows the alethic and modal possibility for truth-functional assertions to be made. That is, it allows persons to communicate with others. For, the capacity to correctly judge *that-~p* hinges on something other being the case, of which *~p* is the correct alternative. Our family of judgments always visit together.

I would like to say: insofar as one is able to use ordinary empirical discourse to make reports about judgments, one is also equipped with everything they need to be able to say (and know) that things could have been otherwise.

By judging something to be the case (or not the case), we are already engaged in the process of making material inferences—in fact, we cannot judge at all without material inference, for we would be unable to infer under which circumstances our judgment would be relevant. By making reports of our judgments (and by knowing that judgment can be used in reports at all), it is necessary that we would be able to judge that things *could have been otherwise*. So, we must have conceptualization active in experience in order to exercise the criteria for knowing which kinds of reports we ought to make. Seibt (1990) states:

> Knowing that an object is not green if it is red under standard conditions, but that it can be green if it appears blue under non-standard conditions; that one can make a green object look blue; that a colored object is also extended: all this and more belongs to the meaning of color predicates.

And as Brandom shows, even when we do not take the auxiliary modal hypotheses to be true (e.g., that one was mistaken about judging *that-~p*), being able to make a report of such an experience in the first place requires that it be possible that the auxiliary *would be true in other circumstances*. Negation calls up modality in shared linguistic practices. So the generativity of negation.

§14. The reductive movement of negative inference is that it calls up categorially structured conceptual knowledge by compressing the family of judgments into relations of material incompatibility. It is where the horizon of categorial truth materializes as pure process, as something eligible for correct picturing relations to be established.

This is clear when we think about everyday language.

If it were a sunny afternoon and someone approached us and said *it's not raining*, we would see correctly that he's said nothing (i.e., that he's said something with no sense; said something with the misleading appearance of a proposition; has expressed a tautology).

But I would like to emphasize what is done with such a statement. And I think that what is done is the expression of an inference ticket for correctly judging a determinate distinction.

In the everyday language case I just used, it doesn't make sense to analyze the pseudo-proposition as a truth-functional statement. It only makes sense to ask

what the statement was supposed to exclude by compression. And once we see what it excludes, it becomes clear that it is no longer negation: *I was trying to be sarcastic; I was expressing surprise; I was making a proposition.* A consequence of the kind of treatment I am suggesting is that the expression of judgment is always bound up with normative-pragmatic intentions.

So it is with predicative statements. But what about thinking nothing (thinking what is not the case; thinking a true thought about something that is false)? Suppose I (truly) said: *it is not raining in Pittsburgh right now*, i.e., the thought of what is not the case is true. Now I think that an evaluation of what is being done would show that an unperspicuous distinction has been drawn. It is not that we are thinking nothing. It is instead that we are thinking of something else being the case and that something else lets us infer the negative judgment. What I mean is that, just as in the earlier example, negation is expressive but not truth-functional. So truly thinking what is not the case (or saying it out-loud) is not itself a truth-functional statement but rather a lazy way of justifying an inference. For, we can only see the sense in:

> ~*p* is true

if and only if we already understand—and take into account—the conditions that contextualize the inference. For example, we already have a picture of what it takes for the true thought of something that is not the case to be true (say, raining is something other than sunny, snowy, windy and overcast, etc.). Our inference (it is true that it is not the case *that-p*) is contingently true on all of those compressed contextual conditions. Logic ought not lose sight of the recognition that use of the negation stroke hangs together with compressed exclusions that are nonetheless modally available to judgment.

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the truth that what precedes p- and n-predication is the recognition of material distinctions in the world that exist independently of our judging it. And that implies that separation is logically prior to predication in the world simpliciter, but that negativity and positivity are nonetheless an asymmetrical unity in the family of judgments.

Unity Through Distinction

§15. The point that I would like to make is this: when we recognize that judgment is a linguistically articulated dynamical process, a process which involves determinate distinction and two-way negation, it becomes possible to know that negation is the form of the unity of judgment.

The unity of the form of judgment is the judgment *überhaupt*, the judgment without contrary (for nothing can be contrary to a distinction).

Recognizing that the two-way movement of negation is the unity of the form of judgment allows us to make a statement about the origin of judgment. The origin of judgment is judgment without contrary. Rödl says:

> A judgment without contrary is complete within itself; there is no

opening in it for something other than what it judges to be included in the thought of its validity.

Referring a judgment to the power of knowledge is referring it to an ordered body of general knowledge.

§16. But it should be clear that the two-way movement of negation, the unity of the form of judgment, *is nothing other than judgment überhaupt, without contrary.* All of our inferential capacities to participate in a pervasively conceptual world depends upon the mastery of the first distinction. Without it, judgment—experience, thought, knowledge—could not exist.

§17. So, the form of the unity of judgment allows us to see that judgment is nothing other than the two-way generative-reductive movement of thought.