Amijee, Fatema (2021). "Something from Nothing. Why Some Negative Existentials are Fundamental," in: *Non-Being: New Essays on the Metaphysics of Non-Existence*, edited by: Sara Bernstein and Tyron Goldschmidt, Oxford University Press (2021), 50–68.

Fatema Amijee

Seemingly obvious claim (of Parmenidean pedigree): All fundamental facts are positive.

Negative facts, say, concern absences of objects or lacks of properties.

My claim: Some fundamental facts are negative.

fundamental = part of the set of facts that allow us to explain / ground all other facts

Metaphysical explanation (ME) …is said to be irreflexive, asymmetric, transitive, and necessitating, also backed by **or** identical with one **or** several different **grounding** relation(s).

To stay neutral on these issues, I (mostly) avoid grounding talk & just talk about (M)E.

All *unexplained facts* are fundamental. *Some fundamental facts may be explained* (by themselves, symmetrically by other fundamental facts, or by being part of an infinitely descending sequence of fundamental facts).

My claim (refined): Some negative facts are fundamental **because they are unexplained**.

Negative facts can be … …about *non-existent individuals* (Dumbledore doesn't exist), …about *individuals that lack certain properties* (Dr. Raja/being a US citizen), …contingent or necessary *negative existentials* (There are no unicorns).

With Rosen, I assume that necessary negative existentials (*NEN*, e.g., "*No triangle has four angles*") can be explained by essences or strong laws. My *focus*, therefore, is **on contingent negative existentials (CNE)**. (e.g., "*No human is 10ft tall*").
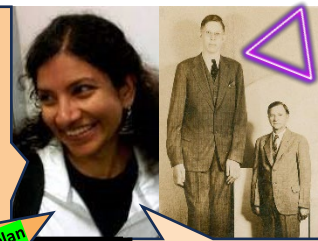
Side remark: One could suggest that grounding *CNE*s doesn't require necessitation. No such account exists currently, though. So unless one is provided…
→ **Burden of proof shifted (again)!**

Worse, if a totality fact is *not* part of the ground of why there unicorns don't exist (say), that there aren't any *doesn't follow*.
Without it, it is *not ruled out* that one forgot to mention an item in the domain that *is* a unicorn (*necessitation fails*).

On **view c)**, contingent negative existentials are grounded not in their instances, but in something else, e.g., in what the universe actually is.

Colin Cheyne

There is a positive way the ONE (universe) is and this way makes it true that there are no unicorns. For there to be any, the One would have to be different.

Charles Pigden

On **view d)**, held (e.g.) by Daniel Muñoz, contingent negative existentials lack a ground because they are *zero-grounded*.

An example of something that is zero-grounded is the *empty set*. According to Kit Fine, there is a zero number of members from which it is generated.

Problem: zero-many grounds exist in *all* possible worlds, *CNE*s only in some. Why do the former ground *CNE*s only in some worlds (*necessitation fails*)?

Daniel Muñoz

We must distinguish between the presence or absence of disabling conditions…

Pace Muñoz, **this** is not what's worrisome.

my plan
Ⅰ review *motivations & arguments for the view I reject*, i.e., that there can't be any fundamental *CNE*s,
Ⅱ present good *reasons to include a totality fact* (itself a CNE) in the explanans for any CNE,
Ⅲ *rebut alternative views*,
Ⅳ *debunk arguments against* positing *fundamental negative totality facts*.

Also: negative existentials are *in no obvious way like sets*, nor could they be *derived* from (and thus grounded by) zero-many facts (like theorems in logic can be derived just by using the axioms).

The problem is this: If they are zero-grounded, all (different) totality facts (implausibly) have the same ground: *nothing*!

What about **OR** & **HD**, then?

@OR: P2 is false: totality facts *are required to* fix domains.

In some (but not all) worlds, one can say, suitable facts ground the grounding.

The argument in **HD**, i.e., that accepting fundamental CNEs undermines free modal recombination, fails, too.

For one, by an analogous argument, we should also do away with fundamental positive facts.

You can't get rid of one without getting rid of others, too (& without creating new negative facts). **[@P1?]**

Really, HD applies to things, not to facts.

Side remark: *Negative facts expressed by sentences containing empty names* (e.g., *Santa Claus*) or *negated predicates* (e.g., *not red*) can be explained by drawing on positive facts or by drawing on CNEs, or they can be reduced to the latter. Thus, they don't give rise to special problems.

Facts are worldly entities, made up of constituents.
Report: There is a widespread consensus that none are negative.

Bertrand Russell

Ⅰ Behold some conceivable arguments for this. If, in Ⅳ I successfully reject them, what remains is an unsubstantiated intuition.

Even if we had a clear distinction between absences & presences, totality facts are *about*, but not themselves, absences. They concern the fact that a set of entities exhausts what there is.

The ONE is all there is, you say? That's a *totality fact*, so you are not actually doing away with it.

Ralf Bader

Proposal: If what is needed for the grounding relation to obtain is an absence, such an absence is a condition, not a ground.

Variant: There are no unicorns in the actual world (*w*) and that's essential to *w*.
→ **Burden of proof shifted!**

Show me an account of essential properties on which such properties are absences!

Side thesis: Accounts that seek to explain why our world is the actual world (& not different) must explain why what exists is all there is, which (surprise!) requires appeal to totality facts.
Illustration: This is so on both versions of Leibniz's account.

Granting, for now, that these arguments are fine, let's ask: how, then, does one explain negative facts?

(Again:) *NEN* can be explained by appeal to essences or laws.

Explaining *CNE*s, I claim, requires appealing to yet another *CNE*.

If so, *CNE*s can't be eliminated from any explanatory sequence. Let's see why!

Argument from Ockham's razor (OR):
P1: Facts at the fundamental level should not be posited unless required.
P2: Facts expressed by CNEs are redundant. (*God, after creation, had no need to also ensure that certain things don't exist. After creating Zebras as mammals, God had no need to ensure that they are not fish. Such facts come for free.*)
P3: Redundant facts are not required.
C: Facts expressing *CNE*s should not be posited at the fundamental level.

Argument from Hume's Dictum (HD):
P1: There are no necessary connections between distinct entities. (*This principle underlies recombination, a principle for generating the space of possible worlds as containing all possible combinations of fundamental entities.*)
P2: Positive facts and *CNE*s that rule out what those positive facts affirm are necessarily connected. (*Possible worlds that contain a positive fact must contain the corresponding CNEs as well.*)
(?) C: The facts mentioned in P2 are not distinct entities. **(?)**

On **view b)**, the totality fact serves as *background condition* to the explanation of the negative existential, not as partial ground.

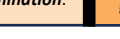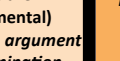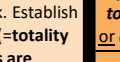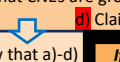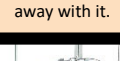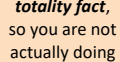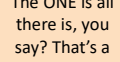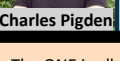**Needed**: clear distinction between background condition & ground.

On **view a)**, *negative existentials are not fundamental*. For each such fact, something further is needed to explain them.

High cost: no fundamental level (at least not for such facts).

Worse: at every level of the (infinite) explanation, the totality fact appealed to is the same, viz. *there is no other item in the domain than the ones listed*.

Result: The *explanation* is not irreflexive (it *goes in circles*).

Even if someone provided a distinction, *a problem remains* [analogous to what we saw happened in view a)]: If the totality fact features as a condition, we can ask: what explains *it*. Such an explanation will again have to appeal to that same totality fact, and thus go in a circle.

→ **Burden of proof shifted (again)!**

Everything is dependently originated! 👍

Proponents of a) must explain, thus,
i) why explanation is sometimes reflexive, sometimes not, &
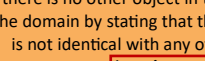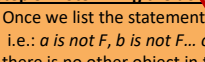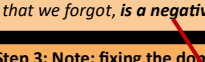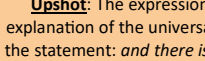ii) how it is that totality facts can (partially) explain themselves.
→ **Burden of proof shifted!**

Fine, Fine. Provide one and we'll talk. 😊

My view: Yes, every statement expressing a totality fact is logically equivalent to a universal generalization. **However**, they do not express the same fact. **Accordingly**, what grounds totality facts need not be the same as what grounds universal generalizations (i.e., instances + totality fact).
I don't have a story as to how it goes, though.

Kit Fine

The case is not closed, but given the lack of good alternatives, for now, **my view prevails!**

a) Infinite regress of explanations: totality facts are part of the ground for any *CNE* (including themselves).
b) Deny that to ground *CNE*s, totality facts must be part of the ground.
c) Claim that *CNE*s are grounded not in their instances, but in something else.
d) Claim that *CNE*s are zero-grounded.
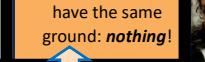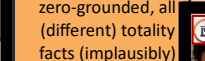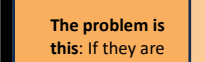
Plan: show that a)-d) don't work. Establish my view (=totality facts are fundamental) through an *argument from elimination*.

Question: Are there *alternative ways* to explain *CNE*s that do not appeal to a totality fact (i.e., to another *CNE*)? What are the options?

If, to explain *CNE*s, we must appeal to *totality facts*, then such facts either *are* or *aren't part of the explanatory ground*.
If, to explain *CNE*s, *we don't need* to appeal to *totality facts*, then their explanation is either *reflexive* (zero-grounded) *or* appeals to *other facts*.

Upshot: The expression we need to complete our explanation of the universally quantified statement, i.e., the statement: *and there is no other thing in the domain that we forgot*, is a *negative existential*, too. That's why!

Step 3: Note: fixing the domain requires adding a totality fact:
Once we list the statements about all the instances (a-o, say), i.e.: *a is not F, b is not F… o is not F*), we need to ensure that there is no other object in the domain that we missed. We fix the domain by stating that there is no object in the domain that is not identical with any of the ones we listed. Here is how:
$$\text{'} \sim \exists x\ (x{\neq}a\ \text{AND}\ x{\neq}b,\ …\text{AND}\ x{\neq}o)\text{'}$$

Step 2: explain the universally quantified sentence by its instances
A universally quantified negative sentence such as '$\forall x {\sim} Fx$' is true iff none of the objects within the domain of discourse satisfies the predicate—if no object within the domain we are talking about is F.

Step 1: Quantifier equivalence: (*pace* Fine, see Ⅲ) Every negative existential is logically equivalent to (&expresses the same fact as) a universal statement: '$\sim \exists x Fx$' (read: *Nothing is F* [F being some predicate]) is equivalent to '$\forall x {\sim} Fx$' (read: *Everything is not F*).