

## As a matter of fact

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### Abstract

In this day and age, facts seem to be equally relevant and irrelevant, depending on your view of the so-called post-factual society. In this article, I look closer at facts by using the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, supplemented by J.L. Austin and others. I analyze facts in terms of a) true and real, b) a propositional trait and a narrative trait, and c) independent and dependent on the knower/teller of facts. The analysis forces facts to be viewed not as definition in themselves but as appearing under particular circumstances. These circumstances are characterized by being induced by a profound form of skepticism and calling for *objective certainty*, a term I borrow from Gunnar Svensson.

**Keywords** facts, Wittgenstein, objective certainty, hinge propositions, skepticism

### A philosophical journey through facts – step one

§1 The world is everything that is the case.

§1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.

§1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts.

§1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also all that is not the case.

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*)

For anyone interested in facts, reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* must surely be a wonderful place to start. Here, facts obviously play a crucial role in the text and find themselves in the midst of Wittgenstein's ideas on logic, pictures and the composition of the world. In short, facts are not things and are not names (or words) but seem to be a form of logical (for lack of a better word) judgment expressed as a comprehensible picture of a particular case or state-of-affairs. The key, as I read it, is that facts make sense of, mostly by denoting, the articulation of a propositional truth (and by that a simultaneous rejection of the possibility of the opposite). Recognizing this unquestionable truth that the proposition articulates, i.e., what makes a fact a fact, is a formal activity and not, as such, an ostensive (empirical) or analytic (reflexive) activity. If the proposition is a fact, it does not need further investigation; it simply shows itself as self-evident; it simply is 'the case'.

Fact as an epistemic version of a comprehended, framed ontological reality but with a slightly different take on fact, we find simplistically expressed in a short remark by Spinoza.

The significance of true and false seemed to have first arisen from narration. That narration was true which was in accord with the facts which it concerned; that was false which was not in accord with the facts of the case.

(Spinoza *Cogitata Metaphysica*: p. 132)

Here, facts are clearly a defining element in the establishment of truthfulness and falsehood and are related to narratives, that is occurrences or events that transpire. From the Latin word *facere*, which means 'to act' or 'to do', grammar gives us the perfectum participium form of the word, i.e., *factum*, which means 'that, which is done'. In Spinoza's version 'that, which is done' is equivalent to 'that, which has occurred', giving fact the structure of a narrative. The narrative then can be either true or false, depending on its rela-

tion to that which really transpired, i.e., the actual event. The true fact is the real fact, so to speak.

The narrative, which (in some way) is assembled by facts, is judged or, better said, called true or false by someone. That is, that which has occurred is known to someone in the sense of someone knowing of it being true, 'in accordance with the facts', or false, 'not in accordance with the facts'. The facts then come to merge the epistemic of knowing with the ontologic of being by basically, in some form, representing that which is known in the form of that which has really taken place, that which is the case. To know therefore becomes to 'identify or inhabit the facts', i.e., to recapture an authentic narrative or, better said, to give a truthful account of a real event.

This step is the first step in our comprehension of facts. Facts represent an epistemically correct account of a transpired reality. However, the propositional character of the single fact, with its stalemated configuration, or picture, in terms of a state of affairs, on the one hand, and the narrative composition of several facts in the character of a temporal (or historical) event, on the other hand, might indicate the need for some further clarification.

### **A philosophical journey through facts – step two**

In "Unfair to facts" (2007/1961), Austin takes these points about facts and narratives one step further in his attempt to illustrate the significance of multiple uses of 'a fact' or 'facts' instead of a limited and inadequate use of fact as simply 'fact-that'. Austin makes the claim that facts have both a narrative structure and a propositional structure. The narrative includes a sequential element (a drive) that shows itself through activities such as effects and affects. While the propositional structure restricts itself to the picture composition, having a logical space but not as such an acting component. Thus, on the one hand, we can understand facts as true or false propositions, but on the other hand, we actively use facts in the creation of propositional narratives that 'color' the facts with intensions, explanations, expectations, etc..

In part, this idea is also present in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in the sense that facts tell us what is 'possible reality' and what is not. Facts can be read to possess almost a form of transcendental capacity, filtering or qualifying reality as meaningful and accessible. This (transcendental) capacity can be traced in the factual as truth func-

tions (§5), as the totality of elementary propositions (§5.5561), as language (§5.6 + §3.34), as the philosophical I (§5.641), as (Newtonian) mechanics (§6.341 + §6.343), but most of all as logic (§5.557, §5.61, §6.12, §6.124, §5.526, §6.13).

In the *Tractatus*, facts are primarily to be understood as picture-like descriptions that have a truth value carried by logical connectives (or operators), and the realness of the descriptive fact is assured by what the sciences (natural sciences) can investigate and establish. However, I think that there is a good basis for claiming that this rather limited use of facts is more complicated and that Wittgenstein, without making a finalized argument about it, is aware of this. The perspective I called the transcendental capacity of facts, which also has influence on the role and comprehension of facts and descriptive language, is further explored and made more explicitly present in the Wittgenstein notes following the *Tractatus*, as we can see in the following quotations from *Philosophical Remarks*.

33. If I expect to see red, then I prepare myself for red.  
I can prepare a box for a piece of wood to fit in, just because the wood, whatever it's like, must have a volume.  
If there were no connection between the act of expectation and reality, you could expect a nonsense.

/.../

34. Our expectation anticipates the event. In this sense, it makes a model of the event. But we can only make a model of a fact in the world we live in, i.e. the model must be essentially related to the world we live in and what's more, independently of whether it's true or false.  
If I say that the representation must treat of my world, then you cannot say "since otherwise I could not verify it", but "since otherwise it wouldn't even begin to make sense to me".

(Wittgenstein 1964/1975: p. 66-71)

In the same text collection (originally, a text Wittgenstein wrote in 1930 in order for B. Russell and Moore to convince the board at

Cambridge University of the soundness of Wittgenstein's work and whereby renew his research grants.) we find the following:

24. How is a picture meant? The intention never resides in the picture itself, since, no matter how the picture is formed, it can always be meant in different ways. But that doesn't mean that the way the picture is meant only emerges when it elicits a certain reaction, for the intention is already expressed in the way I now compare the picture with reality.

(Wittgenstein 1964/1975: p. 65)

One aspect that we must be open to here is that the role of the knower, i.e. the knower or teller of facts, is worth looking in to. In early comprehensions of facts, the knower is the one giving the account, calling the fact a fact if you will. In Austin's historical perspective, this comprehension is visualized as the knower; the teller of facts literally is someone standing trial. Thus, the trustworthiness of the fact is dependent on or at least related to the teller, the knower of the fact. In the end, the propositional narrative, that which is given as an account, is not simply a question of the facts being the case / being in accordance with what transpired but is simultaneously an expression of someone's comprehension or grasp of what is the case / is in accordance with what transpired. (Austin 2007/1991)

Some thinkers take this relational position in an actor-oriented and constructionist direction, stating the factual as that which is given as a recognizable effect or impact on an individual's or group of individuals' construction of reality. Here, facts appear as an informative part of a constitutive communicated process: "[Facts are] what is, what is said, what has been said, what people wish and what people do. Facts are action." (Henriksen, et.al. 2004: p. 19) In this process, facts do the job of keeping the construction of reality, so to speak, real (or 'not illusionary'). (Ibid: p. 20)

At the same time, facts, due to their propositional nature, also (or as above, simultaneously) find epistemic strength in the account itself. The trustworthiness of the fact is not just a question of its role in the construction or comprehension of the account-giver's reality but is also a feature in the propositional structure itself; it is, so to

speak, something in the factual proposition that determines it as a fact, independently of who claims or states the proposition as a fact. Ayer makes this position quite clear and defines this feature as the possibility for empirical verification.

[A]ll propositions which have factual content are empirical hypotheses; and that the function of empirical hypotheses is to provide a rule for the anticipation of experience. And this means that every empirical hypothesis must be relevant to some actual, or possible, experience, so that a statement which is not relevant to any experience is not an empirical hypothesis, and accordingly has no factual content.

(Ayer 1987/1946: p. 56)

With Ayer's quote in hand, we once again recognize the strong connection between fact and reality. The factual claim, the fact, is dependent on reality in the form of bringing the fact an element of truthfulness. This dependence holds regardless of who makes the claim and what purpose it services. It is a criterion for a fact that its truth value is recognizable through a reliability / consistency with the reality of the case. For Ayer, this criterion is seen in the light of empirical evidence and scientific investigations. However, for a philosopher like Moore, facts and, more precisely, realism in the epistemics of facts can be translated into the reassurance of a truism, particularly a truism of a common sense kind, that is, a statement everyone accepts without supporting statements or a claim that everyone is acquainted with that is stated in plain language, where the denial of the statement leads to a performative inconsistency (although not necessarily a logical one). (Moore 1925)

Both Ayer's and Moore's positions can be viewed in terms of Frege's thoughts on sense and reference. Here, we can understand facts as propositional statements for which we have no reason to doubt or question what the statement denotes or the way the denotation is preformed and comprehended. In short, acknowledging a fact (as a fact) is to meaningfully accept the sense of how that fact simply references the truth. (Frege 1892) Henriksen et al. simply states "Facts are simply facts" (2004: p. 19), and Nørreklit (a Wittgenstein scholar and the architect behind the model in

Henriksen et al.) elaborates in more epistemic detail and stresses the realness of facts:

Facts are therefore just a part of the class of truths. Facts are those truths or circumstances that we have investigated and reached clear and convincing evidence for. Hence a fact is not just circumstances in the world but, at the same time circumstances that we have actual knowledge about. A real factual circumstance is reach e.g. through controlled observation. Hence a fact is circumstances in the world + a social construction based on observations.

(Nørreklit 2012: p. 26)

Returning to the connection between the propositional trait and the narrative character of fact, the epistemic relation to and dependence on reality is equally valuable and necessary. The account of an event, the narrative, needs to adhere to the truth. It must be indisputable, unquestionable or, as previously said, authentic if it should be accepted as a fact, or if not certain, it has to be possible to dispute the account and show it to be unquestionable false (i.e., the negation of the account being a true fact). Austin talks of "a particular truth known by observation or authentic testimony" (2007/1961: p. 164), which again points to the truth value being determined by the realness of the case.

In summary, as we complete step two of our comprehension of facts, there seems to be a consensus for a claim similar to the following: a fact is that which is known about the world. However, we also seem to develop this idea through two different lines of thought, with step one involving the propositional and the narrative. In step two, the two lines of thought are characterized as traits independent of the knower of the fact and traits dependent on the knower of the fact. At the same time, both lines of thought articulate some form of conceptualization of truth and stress the essentiality of some form of relationship between facts and reality. Thus, even if there is no consensus on what precise knowledge constitute facts, how we come to know them and in what way we know that which we know, we are able to add to the definition above that a fact is a) that which we take for certain and b) that which we without question take to be the case.

### A philosophical journey through facts – step three

Here, we are not able to say what a fact is in terms of giving a limited definition of its constituents. However, the philosophical journey has thus far given us some criteria for when someone is stating or acknowledging something to be a fact. These criteria are clustered around an ontological element (real) and an epistemic element (true), and they involve a propositional trait, a narrative trait, and characteristics that are independent of the knower/teller and characteristics that are dependent on the knower/teller.

Although we are developing a slightly understanding of facts, what we have so far can hardly qualify as a comprehensive theory or model, but then again, such models or theories are seldom the result of philosophical investigations. What we are obtaining are various criteria that are not exclusively defined but allow us to investigate the circumstances under which these criteria may apply and, perhaps more importantly, understand problematic circumstances in which they do not apply. In order to do that, we embark on our next step in the philosophical journey and try to more coherently conceptualize these circumstances.

As demonstrated, Wittgenstein supersedes the 'pure' descriptive idea of facts, which is represented by the metaphor pictures, to include aspects such as possibilities, anticipation, capabilities and sense-making. Alongside this movement, his philosophical thoughts in general develop from the more 'pure' descriptive or epistemically limited position into the inclusion of the influence and quintessence of becoming aware and confident of rules, learning the game of evidence, navigating in practical settings, decoding other people's states of mind, etc. (Wittgenstein 1953/1992; Wittgenstein 1969/1992; Wittgenstein 1992/2011)

The posthumously constructed collection *On Certainty* (1969/1992) is vital for many readings of Wittgenstein, who seeks a break with the classic 'linguistic turn'- early and late versions. As described in Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner (2007), there is great diversity in interpretations but also a form of consensus on Wittgenstein having a focus on what we might call a subjective philosophy, philosophy of mind, or to some extent even an existential philosophy. However, having said that, I think that it is important not to read a psychology or gnostic ontology into these thoughts and notes of Wittgenstein (something he himself cautions us against)

but to keep in mind that his perspective is continuously epistemic and that it is the rationality (or logic) of man (or mind) that he investigates, fighting skepticism and improper or inadequate metaphysical claims. (Gefwert and Lagerspetz 2009, Svensson 1992)

In philosophy we are always in danger of giving a mythology of symbolism, or of psychology: instead of simply saying what everyone knows and must admit.

(Wittgenstein 1964/1975: s. 63-65)

As Wittgenstein explores the purity and use of propositions in his writings, with logically defined truth and corresponding equivalent to reality, he finds this use to be polluted with perplexities, often normative perplexities, which blur the difference between, e.g., value statements and descriptive statements. These explorations take him and his interpreters in many directions, and one such exploration finds Wittgenstein imagine some *core concepts or primaries*, called hinge propositions, that, on the one hand, a) appear as alternate sides of a coin, being both descriptive and normative at the same time, and, on the other hand, b) (to use a metaphor) grow in you as a form of bone structure, and, although having an empirical genesis, in practice constitute themselves as a priori conditions. (Wittgenstein 1969/1992; Glock 2009; Telléus 2013)

The idea of hinges was primarily introduced by Danielle Moyal-Sharrock at the start of this century, using *On Certainty* and, e.g., §341 (“*That is to say, the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn*”). Moyal-Sharrock is concerned with different forms of hinges, e.g., circumstances of *local hinges*, defined as grammatical (in Wittgenstein’s sense) rules for a community of people at a given time, and *personal hinges*, defined as the logical bedrock of the speaker under normal circumstances. (Moyal-Sharrock, 2001) She makes clear that according to her reading, hinges are not empirical, although they might appear to be (what she calls the *doppelgänger*), and she also stresses the point that they are not judgments (Moyal-Sharrock, 2013).

Moyal-Sharrock’s reading of and ideas on hinges have quickly led to much further debate and interpretation, creating a whole paradigm of ‘hinge epistemology’ (Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock eds.

2016; Adam Carter 2017), with a disharmony between an empirical and a necessary component in the comprehension of hinges (Harré 2015) as one central theme and the role of hinges as principals or foundations (Kusch 2018) or the rationality of treating them as such as another theme (Sosa 2017, Zhang 2018).

Returning to the *core concepts* or *primaries* and not turning to hinges, enables another collection of readings that trace and investigate similar ideas and situations. Here, Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond are central figures in exploring the triangular relationship between language, human life and reality. (Diamond 1991, Cavell 1979) Both of these thinkers find inspiration in Wittgenstein and address the fragile but vital harmony / disharmony between modes of identification such as thought patterns, habits, generalities, etc. on the one hand and 'reality', the surprising, the unknown, etc. on the other hand. To navigate this harmony / disharmony, we need a *core* or *primary* of some kind that must also be flexible, perhaps even unstable, which turns the comprehension of the core or primary away from something fixed or tangible toward something like "possibilities of thought" (Lawlor 2011: 359). This move also shows the way in which philosophy, or perhaps better said the philosophical attitude (of, e.g., Wittgenstein), is in itself a key to conceptualizing this core or primary.

Recently, a group of Wittgenstein researchers following Diamond and Cavell explored Wittgenstein's use of the concept 'form of life' as a possible core constellation or comprehension. (Sättle, 2016) The readings are rather imaginative, since Wittgenstein's use of the concept is so sparse, but in both *Philosophical Investigations* (§241) and *On Certainty* (§358), there is basis for connecting form of life with something given, something fundamental, something necessary and something enacted.

Thus, what has this third step given us in terms of understanding facts and the circumstances for their presence? I think the point of looking at these readings of Wittgenstein is to better articulate the important element of separating the conditions for facts being knowledge from the conditions for facts being facts. Even though facts appear to us as knowledge (an accurate, truthful recollection or representation of an event), what makes a fact a fact, what makes us acknowledge something as a fact, is not equivalent to what

makes a fact knowledge, what makes us acknowledge something as knowledge.

All the particular things, events, propositions, agreements, etc. that constitute the particular facts appear in epistemic discourses, and these particular facts adhere to epistemically definable criteria. However, amongst these facts, there are irreconcilable differences, and these facts are viewed as knowledge by virtue of irreconcilable realization of the epistemic criteria. However, we still have a concept of facts; there is so to speak a family resemblance. To make this approach work, we need to understand the use of fact and the appearances of facts, not simply as knowledge but under circumstances similar to those addressed by the readings in this third step.

To summarize those circumstances in a way that can cluster the criteria we have articulated concerning facts (reality, truth, propositional, narrative, and independent/ dependent on knower/ teller) into a meaningful *core concept*, I borrow a notion from Gunnar Svensson, namely *objective certainty*.

The perception that the one, who fulfills an objective epistemic norm and thereby has authentic knowledge, naturally imagines that only knowledge can remove doubt. However, according to Wittgenstein's investigation, the particular form of doubt, that we have called "skeptical doubt", is not conquered by knowledge but by objective certainty, and objective certainty is not a form of knowledge.

(Svensson 1992: 95)

### **At the end of the journey**

The philosophical journey through facts must end for now with facts being what we know about the world, not simply in terms of acquired and acknowledged knowledge but as something of which we are certain and *objectively so*. Facts are the answer to the deep and profound skepticism (of so-called radical skepticism) that is the cornerstone of many philosophical investigations, notably that of Descartes but, in this paper, obviously that of Wittgenstein. Facts are not facts because we hold the knowledge they convey to be true and to be knowledge of reality but because they are something that

we hold on to when we are confronted with unknowns, with doubts or with absurd opposing views.

Understanding facts in this way allows us both to have a world full of facts and to have one with none. The so called post-factual society, in my view and in this light, can clearly be analyzed as a 'natural' consequence of the nihilism and anti-metaphysics of modernity itself (del Noce 2006). It also points to the close relationship between skepticism and facts and showing us that although facts overcome skepticism, they do this through a process of knowledge, but through philosophy; however, that is another story.

Anyway, all the above could have been said much more simply by recalling a classic way in which we humans use the notion of fact. To resolve a disagreement, ambiguity or confusion, we throw a punch, that is we make an undisputable and undoubtable claim, a truism, an account, a proposition, a possibility that must be acknowledged, by simply saying: *As a matter of fact...*

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