

RUSSELL'S POSITION IN THE PROBLEM OF NEGATION

Myung Kwan Choe *

IT SEEMS that we must conclude that pure negative proposition can be empirically known without being inferred. "Listen. Do you hear anything?" "No." There is nothing recondite about this conversation. When you say "no" in such a case, are you giving the result of an inference, or are you uttering a basic proposition? I do not think this kind of knowledge has received the attention that it deserves. If your "no" gives utterance to a basic proposition (which must obviously be empirical), such propositions may not only be negative, but apparently general, for your "no" may, if logic is to be believed, be expressed in the form: "all sounds are unheard by me now."¹

This somewhat long citation is to justify my raising question of negation in Bertrand Russell. Russell seems to have contributed a lot to this problem of negation by giving us some clear-cut and unique views on it, which bear the characteristic of his whole philosophy. Russell seems to proceed prudently in dealing with the problem, sometime wondering and finally coming to a determined position. At an early stage of *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* he says,

When we say "y does not precede x", it might seem that we can only mean: "the sentence, 'y precedes x', is false". For if we adopt any other interpretation, we shall have to admit that we can perceive negative facts, which seems preposterous, but perhaps is not, for reasons to be given later. ²

And at some other places of his writings he seems to establish the legitimacy of negative facts.

* Professor of Philosophy

1. Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p. 162-163.

2. *ibid.*, p. 40-41.

In this paper, first I am going to compare some other philosophers' views on negation with that of Russell and trace Russell's position among them.

I. Problem of Negation

(1) Experience of Negation

Suppose I see a flower. Looking at it I say, "This flower is white". Also I say, at times, "This flower is not red". In this case, the proposition "This flower is white" is clearly a direct expression of what I see with my eyes. Is the proposition "This flower is not red" too a direct expression of what I see? Do I see or perceive its not-being-red as well as its white colour? Or do I not see but think of it? On the ground of what I see, i.e. on the ground of "This flower is white", do I think of "This flower is not red" to be true?

These are some fundamental features of the question we are concerned. We may state our question in a general way: What is our primordial experience connected with such terms as "no", "not", "it's false that....." (Russell's version of the type of statements which involve "no" or "not")?

Husserl regards an empirical fact of negation as a case when one has *Enttäuschung* (disappointment?) an *Erwartungsintention* (anticipatory intention?) being unrealized.³ Suppose, for example, I see a red ball. If I come later to perceive the other side and come to have another consciousness which disappoints the first *Erwartungsintention* in which I believed the ball to be red and round, if, for example, green instead of red and hollowed surface instead of smooth and round one appeared, then a conflict (*Widerstreit*) occurs between the first *Erwartungsintention* and the new intuition. These not only conflict each other, but, according to Husserl, the new intention covers (*überdecken*) and overwhelms (*überwältigen*) the first *Erwartungsintention* with a full vividness. That is to say, the *Erwartungsintention* that the ball would be 'red and round' comes to be overwhelmed by the perception that it is

3. Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Hamburg, 1954), cf. p.94-98.

'green and hollowed', and the former becomes to be void (*nichtig*), though it remains as an *aufgehobene* (abandoned?) moment. Husserl thinks that thus covered, overwhelmed and naughtily (*nichtig*) *aufgehobene* consciousness is the fundamental phenomena of negation. Hence, he says, "*Negation ist eine Bewußtseinsmodifikation.*"⁴ From the beginning a negation is not a fact of predicative judgment, but its prototype appears already in a pre-predicative (*vorprädikative*) realm of passive experience.⁵

It is not the case, however, that this theory can meet every possible experience of negation. When I see a red flower and a white one at the same time within a same field of vision, I may say, "This white flower is not that red flower" or "This flower is not red". In this case there is no need of neither *Erwartungsinention* nor its being overwhelmed and abandoned as naughty. One same flower cannot be both white and red at the same time-space co-ordinates, but it can be the case that for two different flowers one is red and another is white. Therefore it is oftentimes the case that the difference between the consciousness of the one and the consciousness of the other can be grasped as negation in our perception.

Rickert gave an account of the difference between the one and the other in connection with negation. According to him, the one can be the one in so far as it is distinguished from the other, accordingly identity requires difference (*Verschiedenheit*), i. e. otherness (*Andersheit*). But this *Andersheit* is not a sheer negation, but it has a positive character. Therefore, in Rickert, "Otherness is logically prior to negativeness."⁶ "Negation may perhaps find out the other but it can never invent the other."⁷ The thesis of the other is not an antithesis as a negation of the one, but a positive *Heterothesis*.

At this point, Russell seems to be searching more sharply into the relation between negation and difference. Let us repeat his example:⁸ Suppose I take sugar thinking it is salt; when I taste it I am likely to exclaim "this is not salt". In this case there is a clash between idea and sensation. I expect the taste of salt, and I get the taste

4. Edmund Husserl: *Ideen* (Göttingen, 1928), 106.

5. *ibid.*

6. Heinrich Rickert: *Das Eine, die Einheit und die Eins* (Tübingen, 1924), p.20.

7. *ibid.*, p.21.

8. Bertrand Russell: *Human Knowledge*, p.138 ff.

of sugar. Here everything is positive. But, at the very moment of tasting, I have a shock of surprise. I experience the difference of these two. This difference is a positive relation that might be called "dissimilarity", and it is a fact. The truth and falsehood of a judgment are determined by this fact. The truth of the judgment "this is not salt" can be established by the fact that that particular taste is different from the taste of salt, i. e. by the fact of difference. Hence the judgment. "this is not salt", has two aspects. Subjectively it rejects the idea of salt, and objectively it implies another taste different from that of salt. Thus Russell strictly distinguishes what a proposition expresses from what it states. Here, again, is a sharp line between what is subjective and what is objective. In other words, a negative proposition expresses rejection of an idea in its subjective side, and objectively it states the difference between the idea and the sensation. Russell says,

Thus when I say truly 'this is not blue', there is, on subjective side, consideration of 'this is blue', followed by rejection, while on the objective side there is some colour differing from blue. ⁹

Now, if it could be doubtful that a negation consists only of the difference between *Erwartungsintention* and perception, it might also be doubtful that a negation consists only of the difference between idea and sensation. Can we not distinguish two different sensations of temperature at the same time? Suppose I put one of my hands into a hot water and another into cold one. In this case, the difference between hotness and coldness is not the difference between idea and sensation, but apparently difference between one sensation and another. Can I not say, then, "this water is not cold"? The more is a conductor of an orchestra excellent, the more sharply may he be able to discern differences among tones emitting from various musical instruments.

(2) Affirmation and Negation

There are various theories of the relation between an affirmative judgment and its negative judgment. We may roughly classify these theories as follows:

- i) Theories which insist upon priority of affirmation to negation (Bergson, Sigwart,

⁹. *ibid.*, p 122.

Windelband, Bauch, Russell).

ii) Theories which insist upon the coordination of affirmation and negation (Rickert, Brentano, Pfänder).

iii) Theory which regards negative particle in negative judgments as belonging to predicates (Schröder: "*Die Verneinungspartikel in verneinenden Urteil gehört zum Prädikate.*"¹⁰)

iv) Theory of mutual implication between affirmation and negation (Lipps).

Of these I shall say briefly only about the class (i) as Russell seems to belong to this class.

According to Bergson, affirmation relies directly upon objects while negation can only aim at objects indirectly. He says, "*Une proposition affirmative traduit un jugement porté sur un objet; une proposition négative traduit un jugement porté sur un jugement.*"¹¹ There is first an affirmative judgment, say, "an object A exists", then a negative judgment is possible as a rejection of this.

Windelband distinguishes mere theoretical judgment which is made of *Zusammengehörigkeit* of presentation-relation from value judgment which is *Wahrheitswertung*.¹² Theoretical judgment is the object of value judgment. After all, a negative judgment is such one that consists of evaluating afterward affirmative theoretical judgment through the form of question which is a hypothetical union of presentations.

Now Russell clearly states, "Perception only gives rise to a negative judgment when the correlative positive judgment had already been made or considered."¹³ Russell posits two kinds of language: primary language and secondary language. Primary language is also called object-language because "in this language, every word 'denotes' or 'means' a sensible object or set of such objects."¹⁴ Now "the word 'not' is only significant when attached to a sentence, and therefore presupposes language. Consequently, if 'p' is a sentence of the primary language, 'not-p' is a sentence of the secondary language."¹⁵ When one exclaims 'this is not sugar', this is a denial, and

10. E. Schröder: *Vorlesungen über die Algebra der Logik* (Leipzig, 1890), I, p.335.

11. Henri Bergson: *L'évolution créatrice*, p.287-288.

12. Wilhelm Windelband: *Präludien* (Tübingen, 1921), I, p.29.

13. Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge*, p.138.

14. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p.19.

15. *ibid.*, p.64.

belongs to the secondary language. "The assertion which is the antithesis of denial belongs to the secondary language; the assertion which belongs to the primary language has no anti-thesis." 16

Even in words too, "there is a distinction between 'object words' and 'syntax words'. 'Cat', 'dog', 'Stalin', 'France' are object words; 'or', 'not', 'than', 'but' are syntax words. An object word can be used in an exclamatory manner, to indicate the presence of what it means; this is, indeed, its most primitive use. A syntax word cannot be so used." 17 "Some words denote objects, others express characteristics of our belief-attitude; the former are object-words, the latter syntax-words." 18 "If, feeling a drop on my nose, I say 'it is raining', that is what may be called 'primary' assertion, in which I pay no attention to the sentence, but use it to refer directly to something else, namely the rain. This kind of assertion has no corresponding negative." 19

These citations may suffice to show that for Russell a negation is a secondary business which presupposes an affirmation.

(3) Questioning and Negation

Many philosophers think that a negative judgment is possible only through an act of questioning though affirmations of negation may not necessarily presuppose questioning. Windelband thought that such an affirmative judgment as "this rose is white" is possible through a combination of presentations without any questioning, but for a negative judgment as "this rose is not red" there must first be a question "Is this rose red?", and the judgment is set up as a negation of this. That is to say, in an affirmative judgment presentation and evaluation are performing a fundamentally inseparable function, but in a negative judgment a question precedes and negation follows.

Maier also regards a negative judgment as an answer to a question. If, according

16. *ibid.*

17. *Human Knowledge*, p.519.

18. *ibid.*, p.521.

19. *ibid.*, p.137.

to him, there is a negative proposition "*Es brennt nicht*", it is the case that first there was an affirmative judgment "*Es brennt*", then this turned out to be a question (*Frage*) "*Brennt es?*" and after this an answer "*Nein*" comes out as the answer to this *Frage*.

Of course it is often the case that an affirmative judgment can be reaffirmed after having turned out to be a question. In this case the affirming judgment and denying judgment are on the same level. Hence Maier distinguishes the first kind of affirmative judgment which can be turned out later to be a question from the second kind of affirmative judgment which is an answer to a question. He calls the former "*positive Urteile*" and the latter "*bejahende Urteile.*"²⁰

Russell seems to distinguish, as Maier did, a judgment before questioning from a judgment after questioning. But he is somehow peculiar in that he regards the judgment after questioning as the secondary language which expresses the truth or falsehood of the sentence in question. As we observed above, Russell holds that the assertion "it is raining", being primary language which designates an object, has no corresponding negative. "But if you say to me 'is it raining?', and I then look out of the window, I may answer 'yes' or 'no', and the two answers are, so to speak, at the same level."²¹ If I answer 'yes', I am not saying 'it is raining', but "the sentence 'it is raining' is true"; for what was presented to me by your question was a sentence, not a meteorological fact. If I answer 'no', I am saying "the sentence 'it is raining' is false". This suggests that perhaps I could interpret 'it is not raining' as meaning "the sentence 'it is raining' is false."²²

What Russell is here trying is to deny negative facts as such and to reduce them to a purely logical structure. Meanwhile, it is sufficiently clear that Russell thinks of the secondary language involving the syntax-word "not" as an answer to a question. We may say that for Russell the secondary language with "not" is only possible when a question precedes it and as an answer to it, i.e. every negation is possible only when a question precedes it.

20. Vogelsberger, *Hauptprobleme der Negation*, p.29

21. *Human Knowledge*, p.137.

22. *ibid.*

II. Epistemological Ground of Negation

(1) Negation and Belief

Hereafter I shall review only Russell's view omitting those of other philosophers.

As we considered above, Russell, in distinguishing the object-words from the syntax-words, says that the latter are those which express characteristics of our belief-attitude. He also says, "what you believe and what you desire are of exactly the same nature."²³ Now, what is belief? Belief is ".....something that can be pre-intellectual and can be displayed in the behavior of animals."²⁴ "A belief..... is a certain kind of state of body or mind or both."²⁵ Hence "a belief is an impulse towards some action, and the word 'not' inhibits this impulse."²⁶ This inhibition is nothing but rejection, "and 'rejection' means, primarily, a movement of aversion."²⁷ Therefore "not" can be replaced by "disbelief" which means inhibition or aversion. ".....When I say 'Socrates is not alive', I am merely expressing disbelief in the proposition that Socrates is alive."²⁸ Therefore two attitudes of belief and disbelief are positive states of organism, and they don't need "not".

(2) Negative Facts

Some philosophers try to find the criterion of true negative judgment and false negative fact in value, but Russell tries to find it in facts. Russell says, "I take it as evident that the truth or falsehood of a belief depends upon a fact to which the belief 'refers'."²⁹

Now what are facts? "It is raining", "the sun is shining", "the distance from London to Edingburgh", these are all facts. "This is white" is a particular fact, "All

23. Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge*, edited by Robert Charles Marsh, p.218.

24. *Human Knowledge*, p.161.

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*, p.519-520.

27. *ibid.*, p.519.

28. *Logic and Knowledge*, p.212

29. *ibid.*, p.285.

men are mortal" is a general fact, "Socrates was alive" is a positive fact, and "Socrates is not alive" is a negative fact.³⁰ "Facts belong to the objective world."³¹ Now "Socrates was alive" and "Socrates is not alive" are both statements about Socrates. But a single name like 'Socrates' is not a fact, while a fact is what is expressed by a whole sentence.³² "We express a fact, for example, when we say that a certain thing has a certain property, or that it has a certain relation to another thing; but the thing which has the property or the relation is not what I call a 'fact'."³³ Therefore a "thing" is not a fact. What we believe is not a single thing.

And a fact is just a fact, so "it is obvious that there is not a dualism of true and false facts."³⁴ "A fact cannot be either true or false."³⁵ Therefore "it would be a mistake, ...to say that all facts are true."³⁶ However, beliefs or statements have the duality of truth and falsehood which facts do not have. Now what determines truth or falsehood of a proposition is a "fact". For one fact there can be two beliefs or propositions, and these are determined by the fact as true or false. A fact thus determines truth or falsehood of a proposition about it, but the fact is not itself truth. Truth is not in a fact, but "truth is a property of beliefs."³⁷ And "the difference between a true and false belief is like that between a wife and a spinster: in the case of a true belief there is a fact to which it has a certain relation, but in the case of a false belief there is no such fact."³⁸

Now, as we observed above, Russell changed "not" into "disbelief". Here a question arises. What will be the criterion of the truth of a sentence expressed with disbelief when this sentence is true? If a belief rests upon a fact, should not a disbelief too rest upon a fact? But a disbelief was an attitude when there was clearly no fact. How can a disbelief rest upon a fact which is not? At this point Russell seems to posit negative facts. He says, ".....the absence of a fact is itself a negative fact; it

30. *ibid.*, p.183-184.

31. *ibid.*, p.183.

32. *ibid.*, p.182-183.

33. *ibid.*, p.183.

34. *ibid.*, p.184.

35. *ibid.*,

36. *ibid.*

37. *Human Knowledge*, p.164.

38. *ibid.*, p.166.

is the fact that there is not such a fact as A loving B.”³⁹ “Socrates loves Plato” is a positive fact, and “Napoleon does not love Wellington” is a negative fact. But one should not think that a negative fact includes another constituent corresponding to the word “not”. The difference between a negative and a positive fact is ultimate and irreducible. The proposition “Socrates is alive” is false because of a fact in the real world. “A thing cannot be false except because of a fact, so that you find it extremely difficult to say what exactly happens when you make a positive assertion that is false, unless you are going to admit negative facts.”⁴⁰ And he says, “.....I do incline to believe that there are negative facts and that there are not disjunctive facts.”⁴¹

How then can we define negative facts? Russell replies, “you could not give a general definition if it is right that negativeness is an ultimate.”⁴² He only suggests that “facts, and forms of facts, have two positive qualities, positive and negative.”⁴³

We feel lost when we find that Russell sometime obstinately tries to eliminate negative facts and at other times seems to believe firmly in them. Should we take the former attitude of his as his final position because he says,

.....The Prophet announced that if two texts of the Koran appeared inconsistent, the latter text was to be taken as authoritative, and I should wish the reader to apply a similar principle in interpreting what is said in this book.⁴⁴

and applying this statement to our problem? But his position in establishing negative facts seems to be so firm that no one may neglect this aspect of his theory.

We may conclude, not without ground, that for Russell “not” belongs to the realm of mental world and negation is a fundamental structure of human mind peculiar to it. In this connection the following passages may be a little bit suggestive.

The non-mental world can be completely described without the use of any logical word, though we cannot, without the word ‘all’, state that the description is complete; but when we come to the mental world, there are facts which cannot be mentioned without the use of logical words..... Thus while the word ‘or’ does not occur in the basic propositions of physics, it does occur in some of the basic propositions of psychology, since it is an observable fact that people sometimes believe disjunctions. And the same is true of the words “not”, “some”, and “all”.⁴⁵

39. *Logic and Knowledge*, p.288.

40. *ibid.*, p.214.

41. *ibid.*, p.215.

42. *ibid.*, p.216.

43. *ibid.*, p.287.

44. *Human Knowledge*, p.6.

45. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, p.92-93.