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ARE THERE FUTURE FACTS?

Introduction

The concept ‘fact’ is often used in relation to events or states of affairs of the present or the past. Facts conceived of as the way things are in the present supports correspondence theory of truth and has no room for the future (often conceived as events or states of affairs yet to be present). Facts conceived as the way things were in the past cohere with the interpretations of states of affairs or events in the present. If any situation arises in the present that negates facts of the past, the facts in question that are negated by the present situation are considered as erroneous/false. Therefore, present states of affairs or events determine facts of the present or accepted facts of the past.

We make propositions about the future. All our future events are couched in propositions about the future. Football matches, examinations, interviews, weddings, travels, etcetera are all planned against the future. But these programmed events about the future are not normally accepted as facts. It is often taken for granted that there are no future facts. The reasons for this lie squarely in the conceptions of facts and future. If facts are nothing more than the events or states of affairs present before us or that we have experienced in the past, then the events or states of affairs we are yet to experience cannot be facts. Also, our conception of the future is one that is bedeviled with contingency, that is, it may come to pass or it may not come to pass. So it makes perfect sense in the case of contingency not to attribute fact to something that has the propensity to fail to become an event or state of affairs.

But are we justified in our conception of fact and future? Are our conception of fact and future not biased? This paper takes a critical look at our conceptions

of fact and future. It argues for a conception of fact that embraces the future. It also makes a distinction between the future conceived from the perspective of nature taken as a whole, and our planned and determined-to-achieve future. Consequently, it argues in favour of the possibility of future facts concerning our planned and determined-to-achieve future with adequate machineries put in place to achieve it.

What are facts?

In the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (2000: 192), Mautner traced the concept 'fact' to its Latin origin – *factum*, meaning a deed or something done, and proceeded to give examples of how the concept 'fact' is currently used. This definition of fact by Mautner can be understood only in the present (a deed or something done presently) or the past (a deed or something done in the past). It certainly cannot incorporate the future. To incorporate the future it has to be redefined as 'a deed or something that will be done'. Unfortunately, Mautner did not include the future in his definition of fact from its Latin origin.

Stanley Rosen (2000: XV) is of the view that facts are how things are. His definition restricts facts to the present situation (here and now), and is silent about how things were in the past, and completely eliminates how things will be in the future. Rosen's silence about the past may be due to the common experience we sometimes have of some of our ideas or pictures of how things were in the past that have changed in the light of how things are in the present. Some of our facts about the past have been modified or changed, or have completely been abandoned due to current events or experiences now taken to be facts. Our facts of the past are facts to the extent they cohere with facts of the present. So, facts of the present determine or stipulate our accepted facts of the past. This may explain why Rosen is silent about how things were in the past, and does not take into cognizance how things will be in the future. So, do we accept Rosen's definition of facts – 'how things are' – to stand for how we perceive and understand things here and now even though this perception and understanding may change in the future? And when present facts stipulate facts of the past and make us retain facts of the past or abandon them, what is the guarantee that facts that will unfold in the future will not make us accept as facts events we have hitherto rejected as facts?

In relation to propositions, Michael J. Loux (2006: 142) stated that the standard answer to the question what facts are is that "facts are those things in the world that make true propositions true." He added that true propositions correspond to some items in the world, and facts in the phrase of 'it is a fact',

‘it is the case’, etcetera make propositions true. Thus facts are entities; a fact is “a categorically distinct and separate thing” (Loux, 2006: 143). Facts become things that are the case couched in noun phrases in the form of declarative sentences. Can we infer from Loux that propositions about the future will correspond to some items in the future world? If yes, do we then suspend judgement about propositions about the future until the future becomes present and the items they correspond to become present, since correspondence deals with present facts? If our answer is also yes, then following Loux we cannot talk of future facts.

However, Charles E. Whitmore (1935: 372) defined fact in a more comprehensive way. He defined fact as “anything of which we can say that we do not see why it should be otherwise.” This definition of Whitmore does not pretend to know things as they are. It is based on human judgement devoid of reasons to the contrary. Also, Whitmore’s definition does not categorically restrict fact to the present even though it seems to suggest so. In other words, if I have no good reasons to say that something is not as I conceive it to be, then that thing (event, idea, conception, state of affairs, and etcetera) will be a fact in the present. It will remain a fact in the past if there are no reasons to the contrary. And, if the thing has to do with the future, it will be a fact unless we have reasons to the contrary.

Modifying Whitmore’s definition of fact, we define fact as any human judgement of anything of the present, past or future, inferred from the present of which we can say we do not have any good reasons why it should not be so.

Sources of facts

Like sources of knowledge, all facts, including ‘immediate’ facts of perception, do not come from a single source. The five external senses, for instance, present to us different kinds of facts. For facts about sound we rely on our ears; and for facts about colours, shapes and sizes we rely on our sight (eyes). Other sources of facts include reason, consciousness, authority, memory, and etcetera. So, the body of accepted facts from which we carry out our actions and thoughts do not all come from the same source. There are diversities and complexities of facts ranging from behavioural patterns, historical events and nature in general. Alex Oliver (2005: 266) listed three theoretical roles for facts which can help us know the sources of facts. First, they are what true sentences refer to as in ‘the cat sat on the mat’. Second, they are the truth-makers of truth sentences as in ‘the cat sat on the mat’ is based on the truth that the cat actually sat on the mat. Third,

as 'causal relata', as in 'Caesar died because Brutus stabbed him.' From Oliver's analysis, we can infer that 'facts' can be used for statements referring to states of affairs or non judgemental analysis of events in so far as we do not have any reason to believe that we are being deceived by one's source of fact. Facts can also be used for propositions that convey truth if there are no reasons to think that the propositions are false. Facts can also be used for rational judgements which are logically deduced about events or states of affairs.

While events or states of affairs are more or less at the present, factual propositions conveying events or states of affairs can be of the present (as in 'we are having an examination'), can be of the past (as in 'we had an examination yesterday), and can be of the future (as in 'we have an examination tomorrow').

Characteristics of facts

From Charles E. Whitmore's "Self-Warrant; The Criterion of Fact" (1935: 372), the following two characteristics of facts can be deduced.

- (1) **Change of Status:** One major characteristic of fact is that it can change its status. With time a fact may be absorbed into a general notion or change its nature in the acceptance of another fact. A fact may even be a fact for a given issue and cease to be for another issue. Richard DeWitt (2004: 32) gave an example of a fact that changed or ceased to be in the history of science. He said that from Ancient Greeks till 1600s it was an established fact that the planets and heavenly bodies "moved with perfectly circular and uniform motion" round the earth based on the belief that the heavenly bodies were made of the element ether that essentially moves in perfect circular and uniform motion. With Isaac Newton came the opposing fact that the heavenly bodies, including the earth, moved round the sun and are not perfectly circular in motion.
- (2) **Probability:** Another characteristic of fact is that it is probable. Any supposed fact is probable in relation to the degree it is true or false. A fact is accepted as such if it conforms to some related previously accepted facts (now in the past) or if it resolves more problems or puzzles than previously accepted facts (as is the case with scientific facts). The probabilistic nature of facts makes what facts are, what we think about them, and what we should do with them problematic. Whitmore (1935: 373) concludes that "no fact is absolutely certain when once it is submitted to verification, and that 'factuality' is really an ideal." One meaning that can be deduced from Whitmore's statement is

that we may have an idea of what fact is, but the fact we experience is fact according to the degree to which it is related to our idea of fact. And, as we acquire more knowledge, the facts we have experienced change their status. This change of status is so dynamic that present facts quickly become past facts, and past facts may be absolved or swallowed up as more recent facts emerge in the future.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that not all facts are empirical. Some other facts are philosophical/conceptual. Let us now look at the difference between empirical facts and philosophical/conceptual facts as we continue our search of the possibility of future facts.

Empirical facts and philosophical/conceptual facts

The scientific method aims at ascertaining empirical facts. These empirical facts are derived by the five external senses, aided by scientific instruments. These empirical facts are used to derive scientific hypotheses, theories and laws using the method of induction.

The logical positivists, committed to a scientifically empirical account of reality, have reduced facts to only that which is empirical. A. J. Ayer (1959) pointed out the causal relationship between facts and propositions. He stated that facts allow us assert propositions because facts and propositions are causally connected:

The relation, it may be said, between the proposition 'I am in pain' and the fact that verifies it is that the fact cause me to assert the proposition, or at any rate to believe it. That such a relation often exists is not to be denied (Ayer, 1959: 242).

Hans Hahn (1959) examined the debate between rationalist and empiricists over a priori and a posteriori propositions and the relation these have to logic and mathematics (1959: 151). He quarried the general conception that observation produces certain facts that reason formulates as the general laws of nature. This formulation of reason is in logical and mathematical forms. Thus thought (reasoning) is presented as having a much more modest function than observation. He contends that this view of thought (reasoning) is mystical and theological. Finally, Hahn settled for a purely empirical standpoint on our knowledge of concrete things: "observation is the only source of knowledge of facts: there is no *a priori* knowledge about matters of facts, *there is no 'material' a priori*" (Hahn, 1959: 152).

From the perspective of the logical positivists, it seems there are only empirical facts. But Richard DeWitt (2004) speaks of philosophical/conceptual facts; and concepts are a product of reasoning. DeWitt makes a distinction between empirical facts and philosophical/conceptual facts. Empirical facts are “supported by direct, straightforward, observational evidence” (DeWitt, 2004: 31), like I perceive a pencil on my desk and I am touching it and even smelling it.

On the other hand, philosophical/conceptual facts are based on our belief about the world or the way we perceive the world in general. Philosophical/conceptual facts are the roots of our empirical facts. For instance, a pencil a person puts in her drawer and she believes the pencil is in her drawer though she does not now perceive it, has some philosophical/conceptual facts as roots to her belief. DeWitt puts it this way:

Our conviction about the sort of world we live in – our belief that the world consists largely of stable objects that remain in existence even when not being observed – is the root of our belief that there is a pencil in the drawer. (2004: 31)

Previously held beliefs (or those of our predecessors) based on facts that are now shown or proven to be mistaken/false are no longer referred to as facts. But, as DeWitt rightly pointed out, the words ‘assumption’, ‘beliefs’, ‘opinions’ are inadequate for our previously held beliefs (or those of our predecessors) based on facts that are now shown to be mistaken/false because in the context of the time they were justified beliefs. In fact, our previously held beliefs and those of our predecessors based on facts that are now proven to be mistaken/false were as justified in the context of the time as our present beliefs based on current facts are justified.

Also, DeWitt argued that though we often make a distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘beliefs’, but there is no clear distinction between them within one’s own worldview. “Strongly held and well supported beliefs appear, from within one’s worldview, to be facts” (2004: 34). The point being made here is that some pre-supposed (purported) empirical facts are based on philosophical/conceptual convictions about the world rather than on the way the world really is. So, when our previously strongly held beliefs or those of our predecessors (past) turns out to be mistaken/false in the present, or our currently strongly held beliefs (present) turn out to be mistaken/false in the future, we will continue to refer to them as philosophical/conceptual facts, to remind ourselves, in DeWitt terms, that “from within the relevant worldview, these were much more than mere assumptions, beliefs, or opinions” (2004: 34)

It is easier to distinguish empirical facts from philosophical/conceptual facts when looking at past cultures than when looking at the culture in which we

currently live. This is because within our own time frame they both simply look like fact to us on the same par. Only through careful reflection and great difficulty can we see that “some beliefs we hold are more empirically based, and some are more philosophical/conceptual” (DeWitt, 2004: 36).

DeWitt is making a case for facts of the past. He is of the view that they should remain as facts within the worldview they were produced just as our facts of the present are facts within the worldview they are produced. So, a future change in worldview may invalidate current facts but they remain facts conceived from within the current worldview. In other words, DeWitt does not allow us judge as incorrect/false past facts from within the current worldviews. We should simply refer to past facts as facts within the worldview that produced them, and if they do not fit into the facts of our current worldview, we simply state that they do not now fit while retaining their fact status. But can we infer from DeWitt that we can call future programmed events facts even when they may not be realized? To answer this question, let us first examine our conception of future.

What is future?

What do we mean by ‘future’? The future is often conceived as that which may be or may not be. This conception is contingent. And issues concerning contingency about the future is as old as Aristotle’s ‘sea-battle tomorrow’ (Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, Chapter 9). Aristotle was concerned with truth or falsehood of propositions which can be established about the present and the past. But as for the future, truth or falsehood of proposition is problematic. Some persons try to solve the problem from the perspective of the law of excluded middle. However, this paper looks at the possibility of future facts. It is not dealing with whether or not facts (of the past, present, or future) have the characteristics of being true or false. This paper is concerned with whether or not we can talk of future facts in the same way we talk of past facts or present facts. Whether facts of the past, present or future can be true or false will be the subject of another paper.

The contingency nature of the concept of future can lead us to look at the future from two perspectives: (1) The future of the whole of nature in general, that is, the future that is unknown to us as nature keeps unfolding, and (2) The future as we have planned it to be from facts of the past and facts of the present.

The future of the whole of nature in general is unknown to us. All we know about the future of the whole of nature in general include certain unpredictable facts. The natural sciences are yet to fully tell us all there is to know about nature.

They discover new things about nature, and come up with new theories by the day. This is because nature is constantly unfolding.

The future as we have planned it to be from facts of the past and facts of the present is restricted to human persons and not the whole of nature in general. Being restricted to human persons only, it deals with decisions and plans about our future. To a large extent, the future that is restricted to human persons is more certain than that of nature in general.

So, while the future means what nature in general will unfold in days to come on the one hand, it also means our plans as human persons for days ahead of us on the other hand. Surely, these two ways of comprehend the future go hand in hand.

For J. H. Randall (1939: 463), our future is not what will be. That is, our future is not what nature will unfold irrespective of the actions of human persons. "Our future is rather the determined possibilities of the present, what is predictable on the basis of our analysis of it." From Randall's analysis we can infer that from present facts we make predictions of future facts. These predictions we make, irrespective of what nature in general unfold in the future, are our future. Our present contain some indeterminate and unpredictable factors and tendencies (since we are still studying nature to fully comprehend it). However, it is from the facts of the present we experience and analyze that we modify facts of the past and derive facts of the future. And just as our present facts contain some indeterminate and unpredictable factors and tendencies (especially of nature in general) so also is future facts taken as a whole (both that of unfolding nature and our determined-to-achieve events). But only the future we can predict, says Randall, is our future. The future as a whole (which include that of nature in general) cannot be predicted by us. Our future which we can predict from our present facts Randall calls "the envisaged future."

Randall's 'envisaged future' connotes prediction of the future. At this juncture, it is important we distinguish between predictions about the future and facts about the future.

Predictions and facts of the future

When we make factual claims of the present we are not just predicting. We are making claims beyond predictions. If there are future facts, then they should be more than mere predictions of the future.

Predictions about the future include empirical facts about nature in general and philosophical/conceptual facts. These empirical facts about nature in general are probable in nature because nature is constantly unfolding itself. Hence, we are

constantly updating our knowledge of nature. The constant unfolding of nature, therefore, makes predictions about the future very improbable.

However, facts of the future include empirical facts about our planned and determined-to-achieve events, and philosophical/conceptual facts. Our determined-to-achieve events, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, are our future facts. And such future facts share the same status as facts of the present, and facts of the past.

The reason why predictions about the future are often equated with facts of the future is because of our forgetfulness to make a distinction in our conception of the future. Although Randall makes the distinction, he failed to notice that our planned and determined-to-achieve events of the future are more than being envisaged. Machineries are often put in place to achieve them by all means. So, our future is that which we are determined-to-achieve with machineries put in place toward achieving it. Such future of ours is more than just being envisaged. It has the same status as the facts of the past and the facts of the present.

Future facts

With our definition of facts as any human judgement of anything of the present, past or future, inferred from the present of which we can say we do not have any good reasons why it should not be so, and our definition of our future as our planned and determined-to-achieve events, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, we can now make a case for future facts.

Our conception of the future is intertwined with the concept of contingency. In contemporary usage, a contingent statement or proposition “can be true but does not have to be true” (Mautner, 2000: 112). Put in a different way, a contingent proposition “is a proposition which, if true, is not a necessary truth and, if false, is not necessarily false” (Parkinson, 1988: 888). In relation to fact or an event, a contingent fact or event is one that occurs “without this necessarily being the case, i. e. it might not have occurred” (Mautner, 2000: 112). So, if a contingent proposition, fact or event is true, then it is not false even though it could have been false, and if it is false, then it is not true though it could have been true.

Now, is the concept contingent applicable to future facts or propositions alone? Empirical facts and philosophical/conceptual facts do undergo changes and are sometimes abandoned as new scientific facts (as the history of science reveals to us) and new philosophical/conceptual facts emerge. Though we are conscious of the possibility of change in status of facts we continue to accept empirical facts and philosophical/conceptual facts until new scientific facts and

new philosophical/conceptual facts emerge. This, therefore, means that past and present empirical facts and past and present philosophical/conceptual facts are probable. They are true or false to certain degree as new facts emerge. Also, in a sense, they are contingent since they have the propensity of being false as new facts emerge in the future. It could be argued that empirical facts, if they are actually facts, cannot be false in the future. But in so far as empirical facts are derived from sense perception aided by scientific instruments, and our senses are imperfect, then there is the possibility that empirical facts could be false as better scientific instruments are produced and new facts emerge by the day.

So, facts in general (past, present, and future) are subject to change in status, probability, and contingency. Past and present facts are constantly threatened with change of status. But we retain them as facts if we do not now have any good reason why they should not be referred to as facts, until their status change in the face of new facts. To avoid bias, we should accept as facts our planned and determined-to-achieve events, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, if we do not now have any good reasons why they should not be realizable, until we are not able to realize them when the time they are to be realized in the future becomes present.

Furthermore, our planned and determined-to-achieve events, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, are more than mere predictions. Predictions deals with nature in general. Nature in general contains indeterminate and unpredictable factors and tendencies. Hence the most we can do as humans is to make predictions all the same with a high degree of probability. Our planned and determined-to-achieve events, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, fall within areas of our life we can control as much as we possibly can. They are, therefore, more than mere predictions.

Conclusion

Since facts of the past and the present both have the tendency of being false as new facts emerge in the future, and they both have the characteristics of change in status, probability, and contingency, then it will be wrong and nothing more than a bias not to attribute 'fact' to our planned and determined-to-achieve events in the future, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, simply because they may not eventually come to pass. Just as facts of the past and the present remain facts until we have good reasons in the face of new facts to suggest otherwise, so also our planned and determined-to-achieve events of the future, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, remain facts

(future facts) until we are not able to realize them when the future becomes present. So, our planned and determined-to-achieve events in the future, coupled with machineries put in place to achieve them, – scheduled football matches, examinations, interviews, weddings, outings, travels, holidays, wars, etcetera – are all facts until we are not able to realize them when the future becomes present.

Summary

Facts are often defined as actual events or states of affairs in the present or in the past. The future is also often conceived as that which is yet to be an event or a state of affair. With these conceptions of facts and future it is taken for granted that there cannot be future facts. The future is bedeviled with contingency and probability. But a critical look at facts shows that facts, be it of the past or the present, are also bedeviled with the problem of contingency, probability, and change in status. So, a critical reformulation of facts coupled with a conception of future that distinguishes between the that of nature in general, and our own future, gives room for the idea of future facts. Though this idea of future facts deals with events or states of affairs yet to be present, it is valid until the future becomes present and the event in question does not occur just as present or past facts remain facts subject to new facts that may render them false.

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