

USAGE OF THE WORD "FACT": A Dialogue

Has anyone seen a fact?

You can't see facts.

I can see a dog and that is a fact.

If you mean you can see a dog is a fact, that may be correct, but I cannot see that fact. If you mean the dog is a fact, that is incorrect.

There is a dog in front of me, and that is a fact.

Fine, but I cannot see it.

You can't see the dog?

I can't see the fact that there is a dog there.

Alright, look at the following: There is a dog right there.

I see it.

Aha! You see a fact.

Hm?

I put down "There is a dog right there," and that is a fact, and you said you saw it.

The statement is not a fact although what it says is a fact. And you can't see what it says?

No

Look at it again. It says, "There is a dog right there."

I see that in the sense that I see the statement and I see it in the sense that I understand what it says, but I do not see what it says in the sense of visual perception. I cannot see, or touch, or do anything to what it says — or to a fact.

You can't do anything to a fact? You can hide them, reveal them, find them . . .

H-m-m. Let's see. Seems to me you do that sort of thing with

facts, not *a* fact. I have heard of juries finding facts, but never a fact. Sure, we speak of a finding of fact or a fact finding, but that's a different idea. We could say, "one of the facts that was found," but that does not mean the one fact was found; it is a fact among others which were found.

Well look here. Suppose I'm a law teacher. I say, consider the following facts: "Smith threw a rock at Jones, but Jones ducked and the rock hit Brown." Then I say, "Under those facts, Smith is liable for battery to Brown." Then I say, "Now let's change a fact. Let's say that Smith hit Green instead of Brown." I just did something to a fact. I changed it.

Seems to me you changed the facts, not a fact. But I don't see how you can change a fact. If something is a fact, it is unchangeable. You can change what you say about it, but you cannot change *it*.

I think I have you!

Oh?

You changed the referent on me. The statements I made concerning Smith, Jones, Brown, and Green were facts. You shifted to talking about *things* which are facts. There are statements which are facts and things which are facts.

There are no things which are facts. It is not the thing which is a fact. A tree, or a dog, or a riot is not a fact.

Wait a minute. I say, "The students are uneasy and about to burn down the building. That's a fact we have to face."

Well, now that is an interesting . . .

And another thing. You said I cannot change a fact, but you played with the word "it." You said, "If something is a fact, it is unchangeable. But "it" refers to "something" and not to "fact." I can change a fact but not something.

Nice try, but perhaps "it" refers to both "something" and to "fact." Of course you can change something. You can cut a dog's hair, cut down a tree, and so on. But if something is a fact, then you cannot change it.

Perhaps, but how about that fact you have to face, the student unrest. That's a little trickier. I am not facing the student unrest, but the fact *of* student unrest or *that* there is student unrest

"Fact" is referring to a state of affairs, or better yet, it's being used in a statement that is just a way of talking.

Well, one last try. Back to my statement about Smith, Jones, Brown, and Green. Is that a fact?

You can say, "Here are the facts," or "Take these facts," or "These are the facts."

Well, can't you see *them*? Maybe you cannot see *a* fact, but you can see those facts.

I've never heard anyone talk that way. It just doesn't make sense to talk that way.

But if I were to hand you the statement of facts, I could say, "Look at these facts."

In that sort of case, you could even say "I saw the facts," but not, "I see or saw a fact."

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TALK

I talk a lot.
If I didn't,
I'd have to listen
And that would make me
Very nervous
Because then I might hear
Something I didn't like
Or didn't understand
Or didn't believe,
Etc.

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