

THE CONCEPT OF NEGATION (NISEDHA)

The paper attempts to analyse the concept of negation with a view to understand (i) its precise nature and (ii) delimit its various uses in a logical discourse.

I

To start with, it is necessary to distinguish negation from cognate words like 'absence' (*abhāva*), 'non-apprehension' (*anupalabdhi*) etc. which occur prominently in a philosophical discussion. First of all negation has to be distinguished from absence or non-existence. Strictly speaking 'absence' is a word which is used in an ontological context where as 'negation' has its application in the field of logic. We can talk of absence of a thing *in* or *on* or *as* another thing. For example, we can say, (i) 'There is no water *in* the glass', (ii) 'There is no pot *on* the table' and (iii) 'The pot is not (*as*) the table.' But this should not be called negation of one thing by another thing. Negation is applicable to things. The use of the word 'negation' is thus meaningful only in those contexts where we point out distinction, contrariety or contradiction between two terms. One term can negate another term or, if it is a complex one, it can be self-negating. For example, the term 'black' is negative of the term 'white' but the term 'square-circle' is self-negating. Absence, as distinct from negation, refers to the non-existence of a thing *in* or *on* or *as* another thing. Here is a necessary involvement of spatio temporal considerations but these considerations have no place in negation as they are extra-logical elements.

We have also to distinguish between negation and non-apprehension. 'Non-apprehension' is a word used in an epistemological discourse. Some thinkers in India have regarded non-apprehension as a source of knowing (*pramāṇa*) the absence or non-existence, which is different from and independent of other sources of knowing like perception (*pratyakṣa*) etc. 'Knowledge of absence' is not absence of knowledge, but a sort of knowledge of positive facts. Perception etc. are sources of knowing the positive or existent facts and are incapable of knowing the negative or non-existent ones. But there are negative facts much as there are positive facts. Thus non-apprehension is that source of knowing which enables us to cognise absence

of things. Whether non-apprehension has to be regarded as an independent source of knowing depends upon our view of the nature of absence and the relation it holds with its substratum. But it will be out of place to discuss that issue in this context. It is sufficient for our purpose to realize that a talk about non-apprehension is meaningful only in the context of absence and it seems to have no bearing either on the act of negation or on its cognition. Whether in a proposition any one term negates the other, or does not negate, we know on the basis of presence or absence of negative mark. This can be done either by using a negative mark e. g. 'This pen is *not* white', or by putting a negative mark along with the predicate, e. g. 'This pen is *non-white*.' Apparently the latter proposition seems to be affirmative but it is negative only. The above two forms of negation do not have the same logical value. To say that 'This pen is not white' is not the same as to say that 'This pen is non-white.' In the former proposition it is simply stated that the pen is not white. It is a case of denial of predication. Whiteness is denied of the pen. But in the latter proposition it is not only stated that the pen is not white but implicitly it is also suggested that it is of some colour other than white. Here there is predication of a negative term. It denies one predication but leaves open the possibility of another type of predication. So it is not the case of denial of predication. The former proposition contains a closed statement whereas the latter contains an open one.

So far as the mode of apprehension of the negative relations is concerned, it depends upon the nature of the relations between the terms in question. For example, whether 'black' and 'non-black' are negative of each other or not does not require any empirical evidence, but to know that black is negative of white necessarily depends upon experience. In other words, the terms whose mutual relations we know on the basis of analysis of their meaning, the cognition of their negative relation *ipso facto* depends upon that analysis only.

Similarly the word 'negation' should be distinguished from what is called 'truth-functional negation'. It seems that truth functional negation is not negation proper but a *confutation* of propositions. 'Sugar is not bitter' is a negative proposition and 'It is not true that sugar is bitter' is, strictly speaking, not a negative propositions

but a truth-functional statement about a proposition. It states that the proposition, 'Sugar is bitter' is not true. The function of negation is to show the distinction or opposition between two terms, but the truth-functional negation refers to the truth value of a proposition, or perhaps, it refers to the truth-functional relation between two propositions. 'Sugar is not bitter' is a proposition in which the term 'sugar' negates the term 'bitter'. But the sentence, 'It is not true that sugar is bitter' is not a simple proposition but a meta-proposition. Here no term negates another one. It only expresses the rejection of the proposition, 'Sugar is bitter.'. Its linguistic structure may give us the impression of its being a negative proposition but it is not so because it involves the act of *confutation* rather than that of *negation*. Since in order to make a proposition negative it is not necessary that the terms within it are negative of each other, the sentence, 'It is not true that sugar is bitter' cannot be regarded as a negative proposition. The confirmation or confutation of a proposition does not refer to the relation of the terms involved in it, but points out its relation with another proposition. So when we say that, 'It is not true that sugar is bitter', this in fact points out truth value of two propositions, viz, 'Sugar is bitter' and 'Sugar is not bitter', and expresses confutation of the first and confirmation of the second. To sum up, we affirm or negate a term with respect to another term, but strictly speaking, we do not affirm or negate a proposition, we only confirm or confute it. This confirmation or confutation in no way depends upon its affirmative or negative character. Affirmation or negation takes place *within* the proposition but confirmation and confutation are *of* the proposition. And, therefore, to take negation in truth-functional sense is to overlook the distinction between negation and confutation.

II

From the above analysis it is evident that the word 'negation' has a meaningful use only in a logical discourse, as distinct from other cognate words like 'absence' and 'non-apprehension' which have, respectively, ontological and epistemological uses. The act of 'negation' always pertains to terms and indicates their distinction. One term can be distinguished from the other iff they are different or other. To say that 'a' is *other than* 'b' may mean that (i) 'a'

and 'b' are not identical, or (ii) 'a' and 'b' cannot be *together*. To say that 'a' and 'b' are not identical may mean that they are not identical in *denotation*, or they are not identical in *meaning*. The first possibility can be expressed as 'A in not A', or 'A is not the same as B'. It is a case of mutual exclusion between two terms. Two terms can be said to exclude each other if the denotation of the one does not coincide or intersect with the denotation of the other. The second possibility can be said to refer to the denial of synonymy; in both cases it is denial of sameness.

In the denial of togetherness, the case is slightly different. One can deny sameness of two terms and yet can maintain their simultaneity. But if we even deny the possibility of their simultaneity, then it will be negation of a different sort. For example, we may have two terms having a built-in impossibility of going together because of their contradictory meaning. Phrases like 'square-circle', 'son of a barren woman' etc. are of this type. There may be phrases which do not have such an inner contradiction but may contain an empirical impossibility of coming together, their conjunction is conceivable but not real in the present situation. 'Sky-flower', 'golden mountain' etc. are phrases which belong to this category.

If the above distinctions are logically neat and tenable, it may be interesting to work out their delucative properties.

Dept. of Philosophy
Delhi University

S. R. Bhatt