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Buddhist Theory of Meaning (Apoha) and Negative Statements

I

THE STUDY OF THE problem of word-meaning in Indian philosophy has had a very complex and interesting development, much more interesting than is usually realized. It has probably sustained a more continuous polemics than any other philosophical problem.

Speculation about the nature of word had a kind of mystical awe in the early writings of India, viz., the *Rg Veda*, the Brāhmaṇas, and the Upaniṣads. Word was considered eternal and the prime source of knowledge.¹ From Patañjali (ca. 200 B.C.), however, we learn that there were two schools, one consisting of those who believed that the referent of word was the particular, and the other consisting of those who maintained that it was the universal.² Vyāḍi, for instance, believed in the former, while Vājapyāyana held the latter view. However, as we shall see, in the later development of philosophical systems most of the non-Buddhist philosophers synthesized the two views and contended that a word meant both the particular and the universal. The Mīmāṃsā held that a word denoted a genus, and only indirectly referred to the individual.³

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¹ Cf. R. C. Pandey, *The Problem of Meaning in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), pp. 9-10.

² Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, with Kaiyaṭa's *pradīpa*, Nāgeśa's *uddṛyā* and Rudradhara Sarma's '*tattvāloka*' (Banares: Kashi Sanskrit Series, 1954), pp. 35, 38.

³ Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, *Mīmāṃsā-sloka-vārtikam* . . . *śrīmatpārthasārathimīśra-praṇītayā nyāyaratnā-karāḥkhyayā vyākhyayānugatam*, Tailaṅga Rāmaśāstrī Mānavallī, ed. Chowkamba Sanskrit Series, Work 3, nos. 11, 12, 15-21, 24 (Benares: Caukhambā Sanskrit Book Depot, 1898), ākṛti section, verse 4.

But the Nyāya maintained that it denoted three things : an individual, its class residing in it, and its particular configuration or form.⁴

II

Buddhist thinkers of the Dignāga school, however, advanced a theory called "*apoha*" which is somewhat similar to the Western view of nominalism. *Apoha* literally means "differentiation" or "exclusion." Words are the result of mental conceptualization, and therefore they refer to mental images and cannot be directly associated with external realities. Meaning, thus, denotes the referend, the instrument of an act of reference, as distinct from the referent, the object toward which the act of reference is directed.⁵ The Buddhist regards it as only a logical concept, not an external entity inherently residing in the individuals. In other words, *meaning* means the relation of the word and the image of the object. The word cannot directly be associated with external objects ; it cannot, therefore, denote the object. The word has an *a priori* existence, independent of external objects.

III

The Sanskrit term "*artha*" is as ambiguous as the English term "meaning." Of the two main views of *meaning*, one is realist and the other, with some reservations, may be called idealist and nominalist. The division is based on the interpretation of the *tatpuruṣa* compound *śabdārtha*.⁶ It means "meaning of word." The term "*artha*" conveys three things : (1) purpose, (2) cause/means, and (3) object of the senses.⁷ The realists seem to take the term in its third sense, while the nominalists prefer the other two meanings. The realist group includes the Nyāya,⁸ the Vaiśeṣika,⁹ and the Mīmāṃsā¹⁰ systems, all of which maintain that words denote both universals and individuals, and that

⁴ *Nyāya Sūtra* of Gautama, II. 2. 68.

⁵ There still exists some confusion in the terminology of reference, and the term "referend" is used by some authors to denote the "object" instead of the "instrument" of the referential act. Cf. Ledger Wood, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Ames, Iowa : Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1959), p. 267.

⁶ *Tatpuruṣa* or *dependent determinative* is one in which the first member of the compound depends on the last, the syntactical relation of the former to the latter being that of an attribute in an oblique case.

⁷ Cf. Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (New ed. ; Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 90.

⁸ Cf. n. 4 above.

⁹ *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*, I. 2. 3. ff.

¹⁰ Kumārilla Bhaṭṭa, *op. cit.*, *apoha* section.

both are real objects to be grasped by the senses.¹¹ The Buddhist thinkers of the Dignāga school vehemently opposed the realist view on the ground that universals are not external facts—they are *post res*.

Buddhist ingenuity is shown in the argument that the efficient reality (*arthakriyākāritva*) belongs to the extreme momentary particular (*kṣanika*) and that it is this momentary reality that is grasped at the first moment of sense-stimulus. What is cognized by the intellect following the first momentary sense-stimulus is the universal; and it is this conceptualized fact that is apprehended in inference and referred to by words. If words mean the objects of the senses, our experiences of language would be the same as those of the sense-object-contact in perception. Then, the mere pronouncement of words, for instance, honey and fire, would produce efficient effects of sweet taste and burning sensation.¹²

IV

The theory of *apoha* is designed by Buddhist philosophers to solve the problems of the universal (*sāmānya*) and the particular error (*bhedāgraha*), the relation between substance and attribute (*dharmi-dharma*), and the word and its meaning (*śabdārthasambandha*).¹³ The theory seems to be misunderstood as “a negative approach towards meaning.”¹⁴ The charge of “negativism” appears to have been based on the study of non-Buddhist scholars Uddyotakara, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Bhāmaha, and Udayana, who “vehemently criticized” the theory as negative.¹⁵ In fact, the charges of “negativism” have been constantly

¹¹ J. Sinha, *History of Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House, 1956), Vol. I, p. 321.

¹² *Apoha-siddhi* of Ratnakīrti, Haraprasad Shastri, ed. In *Six Buddhist Nyāya Tracts* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1910), p. 9, 12-13. Another edition of *Apoha-siddhi* has been published with nine other logical monographs of Ratnakīrti entitled: *Ratnakīrti-nibandhāvali*, Anantlal Thakur, ed. Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, III (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1957), pp. 53-61.

¹³ Cf. Th. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic* (Leningrad: Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1932). Reprinted in *Indo-Iranian Journal* ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1958), Vol. II, pp. 403 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. K. K. Rājā, “The Theory of Meaning According to Buddhist Logicians,” *Adyar Library Bulletin*, Vol. XVIII, Parts 3-4, p. 11, also pp. 3-13; Sinha, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-333, 883; R. C. Pandey, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

¹⁵ Rājā, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Rājā's *Indian Theories of Meaning* (Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1963), reached me after I had completed this paper. There is an excellent review of the book and a survey of the study of semantics in classical Sanskrit writings by J. F. Staal, “Indian Semantics, I,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 86, No. 3 (July-September, 1966), 304-311. My position, however, remains unchanged, for Rājā has not altered his view of *apoha* and Staal shows no concern with the Buddhist theory of meaning.

refuted by Dharmakīrti and subsequent Buddhist scholars.¹⁶ Here we shall deal mainly with one aspect of *apoha*, namely, the extent to which it is based on the law of opposition (*virodha*).¹⁷ We shall also attempt to establish that a purely negative *meaning* theory would be contrary to the Buddhist metaphysics of extreme momentary particular (*svalakṣaṇa kṣanika*).

V

The *apoha* theory is directed primarily against the pluralistic conception of reality according to which universals are considered to be real. For the nominalist Buddhist, a real is the extreme point instant (*svalakṣaṇa*) which is beyond propositional operation.¹⁸ Everything past, future, imagined, absent, mental, notional, and universal—that is, every thought construction—is unreal. Thus, the object of a judgment or expression, that is, the propositional operation, is not the momentary real (*kṣanika*) which is in constant flux.¹⁹ Thus, all verbal and logical statements express “differentiation” (*apoha*).²⁰ To the realist argument that it is really the universal which is the object of a proposition, the nominalist rejoins that the universal itself is not real but a logical construct (*vikalpa*). It must be conceived as the idea of exclusion of a common counter-correlate. For instance, the common counter-correlative of all cows is non-horse. Thus, the concept “cow” can be determined by excluding all other instances of reality from which it is excluded. “The universal is in its very essence (*lakṣaṇa*) exclusion of the other.”²¹

VI

For Buddhist thinkers negation is based on *a priori* opposition (*virodha*) of unique momentary particular entities. All negations, according to Dhārma-

¹⁶ *Pramāṇavārttika* of Dharmakīrti, the first chapter only with “auto” commentary *svavṛtti*, and sub-commentary of Karṇakagomin *svavṛtti-tīkā*, Rāhula Sāṅkṛityāyana, ed. (Allahabad: Kitāb Mahal, 1943), pp. 248-263; *Jñānaśrimitra-nibandhāvalī* (Twelve Buddhist Philosophical Works of Jñānaśrimitra), ed. with introduction by Anantlal Thakur. Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, V (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), pp. 201-232 on “*apoha*.”

¹⁷ An independent study of the Buddhist theory of meaning or *apoha* by this author is being published by Mouton & Co.

¹⁸ *Pramāṇa-vārtika-bhāṣyam* of Prajñākaragupta, deciphered and edited by Rāhula Sāṅkṛityāyana. Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series, I (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1953), p. 621; Dharmakīrti, *loc. cit.*, p. 262; Ratnakīrti, *op. cit.*, p. 6 (14-17).

¹⁹ E. Frauwallner, “Die Apohalehre,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, Vql. 37, 275 and Vol. 40, 63.

²⁰ Jñānaśrimitra, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

²¹ Prajñākaragupta, *op. cit.*, p. 200 (III. 30).

kīrti,²² are rooted in opposition²³ which can be divided into two classes: (1) efficient opposition or incompatibility (*sahabhāva-virodha*); and (2) logical opposition or contradiction (*anyonyopalabdhīparihāra-sthītilakṣaṇa-virodha*). The former is defined in the following passage: "When [one fact] has duration [as long as] the sum total of its causes remains unimpaired and it [then] vanishes as soon as another, [the opposed] fact, appears, it follows that the two are incompatible, [or efficiently opposed], just as are the sensations of heat and cold."²⁴

The second type of opposition is explained as follows: "There is also [opposition between two terms] when their own essence consists in mutual exclusion, as between the [terms] eternal and non-eternal."²⁵ Some other instances of the second opposition include such pairs as: reality and unreality, existence and non-existence, affirmation and negation, blue and non-blue.²⁶ In the first opposition (incompatibility) two facts exist independently without opposing each other. Their opposition becomes efficient only when they are placed together in one time-space relation. On the other hand, in the second opposition (contradiction) the two opposed facts are so related that neither of the two can be defined or apprehended without excluding the other. The very essence (*lakṣaṇa*) of the one consists in exclusion of the other; for example, blue and non-blue. The first opposition seems to mean negation of terms or entities, as can be seen in the eightfold formula of negative inference explained by Dharmakīrti.²⁷ The second opposition, contradiction, appears to be designated to refer to the negation of propositions. For the very essence of "non-blue" presupposes the proposition "this is blue," and vice-versa. This propositional opposition, however, poses many logical difficulties which are

²² Dharmakīrti, *Svavṛtti*, pp. 35-37.

²³ In translating "*virodha*" by "opposition" we have followed Stcherbatsky's exposition of the law of contradiction. See Stcherbatsky, *op. cit.*, p. 187, n. 3.

²⁴ Dharmakīrti, *Svavṛtti*, p. 35; cf. also Stcherbatsky, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

²⁵ Stcherbatsky's observation thereon is noteworthy. "It is clear that in these words we have a definition of the Law of Contradiction, so much discussed in European Logic from Aristotle through Leibniz, Kant and Sigwart up to the modern logicians. It is therefore of the highest importance to realize the exact meaning of the Indian view. It will be noticed, first of all, that there is no difference between a contradiction of concepts and a contradiction between judgments, the terms *bhāva* = *vidhi* = *vastu*, Tib. *yoḍ-pa* = *sgrub-pa* = *dnōs-pa* being synonymous. . . . The term 'blue' in logic always means the judgment 'this is blue', it is a synthesis of 'thisness' and 'thatness', it is contrasted with the mere reflex of the blue (*pratibhāsa*), an unascertained reflex which has no place in logic. Thus, in the quarrel between Aristotle and Sigwart on the one side, and Kant on the other, the Indian view will fall in line rather with the first party. The contradiction is virtually between the judgments 'this is blue' and 'this is not blue'" (*op. cit.*, p. 193).

²⁶ Dharmakīrti, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁷ Cf. Karṇakagomin, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

discussed by the Buddhist philosophers under the theory of determination (*apoha*) = exclusion = differentiation.²⁸

TABLE OF OPPOSITION (*Virodha*)

Incompatibility or efficient opposition = negation of terms or entities (*sa-habhāva-virodha*), for example, the opposition of the sensations of heat and cold (*śītoṣṇasparśavat*).

Contradiction or logical opposition = negation of propositions (*anyonyo-palabdhi-parihāra-sthiti-lakṣaṇa-virodha*), for example, the opposition of blue and non-blue, existence and non-existence (*nīlānīla, bhāvābhāva*), affirmation and negation (*vidhiniṣedha*).

Furthermore, from a purely logical point of view the Buddhists maintain that every term or proposition is the negation of its own negation (*anyāpoha*). Even an affirmative proposition entails the exclusion of its contradictory proposition. Dignāga explains that a term, for instance, "the blue-lotus," not only excludes all lotuses that are *not* blue but also excludes those blue things which are *not* lotuses.²⁹ Thus, it signifies the exclusion of the non-blue and the non-lotus.³⁰

Thus, what is intended by the theory of *apoha* is neither merely a positive cognition qualified by the exclusion of others.³¹ For instance, the terms affirmation and negation, existence and non-existence, or *A* and *non-A* are mutually exclusive. The relation between the qualifier and the qualificand is not ultimate (*pāramārthika*) but only dialectical (*vyāvahārika*).³² Here we may conclude that the theory of *apoha* is not a "negative approach" to reality but a dialectical approach based on the law of opposition.

VII

Buddhist logicians, in *apoha*, maintained that every term and proposition is discriminatory. This means that the affirmative and the negative are mutually exclusive and so related to each other that the definition of one involves the other. Dharmakīrti said: "There can be no affirmation of a thing (*A*) which

²⁸ Cf. Stcherbatsky, *op. cit.*, p. 195, n. 2.

²⁹ *Prameya-kamalamārtanḍa* of Prabhāchandra, ed. with notes and introduction by Mahendra Kumar Shastri (2nd ed.; Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press, 1941), p. 436; see also Karṇakagomin, *op. cit.*, p. 182 and pp. 260-261.

³⁰ Rājā, "The Theory of Meaning According to Buddhist Logicians," p. 8.

³¹ Ratnakīrti, *op. cit.*, p. 3 (6-8).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16 (1-15); also Karṇakagomin, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

does not exclude the other (*non-A*); nor can there be a negation of that which cannot be affirmed."³³ Hence, whereas affirmation implies negation, negation presupposes the affirmation.³⁴

Now the question arises: if the Buddhists are correct in asserting that the meanings of all words are both affirmative and negative at the same time, then different propositional forms would be meaningless. Propositions are accepted as of two kinds: (1) positive (*vidhi*), and (2) negative (*niṣedha* or *pratiṣedha*). In Indian logic, the negative form is again divided into two: (a) a simple negative (*prasajya-pratiṣedha*), and (b) negative by implication (*paryyudāsa*).³⁵

THE TABLE OF THE FORMS OF PROPOSITIONS

	Negative (<i>pratiṣedha</i>)	
Positive (<i>vidhi</i>), e.g., "this is blue" (<i>nīlo 'yam</i>).	Negative (<i>prasajya</i>), e.g., "the jar is not here" (<i>iha ghaṭo nāsti</i>). "snow is not black".	Negative by implication (<i>paryyudāsa</i>), e.g., "p implies not q". If it is gray, it is not white. If X is a <i>kṣatriya</i> , he is not a <i>brāhmaṇa</i> . (<i>abrāhmaṇa</i>).

The answer to this is that the Buddhists were concerned with the practical importance of the propositions. Karṇakagomin³⁶ explains: "A sentence expressing an affirmative [judgment] asserts a positive [meaning] primarily [and] negation of the other [*non-A*] by implication (*arthāt*). (2) And [a sentence] expressing a negative [judgment] asserts a negation primarily [and] affirmation of the other [i.e., the positive *non-A = B*] by implication. (3) While the sentence expressing 'negation by implication' (*paryyudāsa*), following denial primarily asserts the presence of the other fact. Thus, indeed, is the distinction [between the three forms of statements]."³⁷

³³ *Svavṛtti*, p. 253: *na hy anvayo vyāvṛttimato nāpy ananvayino vyāvṛttih*.

³⁴ "Not" belongs to the class of "propositional words." Cf. B. Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., [5th impression] 1956), pp. 70 ff. Strictly speaking, negation is always negation of a proposition. See D. Sharma, "The Paradox of Negative Judgment and Indian Logic," *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal*, Vol. II, Part 1 (March, 1964).

³⁵ These negative kinds of statements in Indian Logic were originally introduced by the *Mīmāṃsakas*, who were primarily concerned with the problems of the correct application of the Vedic texts in the sacrificial ceremonies. Cf. *Jamini Sūtra*, X. 8. 1. 15. For a very lucid exposition see J. F. Staal, "Negation and the Law of Contradiction in Indian Thought: a Comparative Study," *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* [University of London], Vol. XXV, Part 1 (1962), 59.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 253.

³⁷ The *Mīmāṃsaka* writers were the first to use the terms *prasajya* and *paryyudāsa* in connection with their religious and ritual interpretations of the Vedic negative state-

According to this explanation: (1) The proposition, for instance, "snow is white," is affirmative in which the negation of the other, "snow is black," is implied. (2) The proposition, for instance, "snow is not black," is negative in which the *other* affirmative, "snow is white," is implied. (3) There is negation in the proposition "Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the world." Here we primarily assert that Mt. Everest is the highest mountain in the world but we do so by denying the suggestion that there is any other mountain as high as Mt. Everest.

However, it should be noted that the Buddhist theory of negative inference (*anupalabdhi*),³⁸ corresponds to the simple negation (*prasajya*), and entails the *paryyudāsa* negation. On the other hand, the theory of *apoha* corresponds primarily to negation by implication and involves simple negation. According to Ratnakīrti, negation by implication (*paryyudāsa*) is found rooted (*niyata*) in the immediate knowledge of the thing and thus is commonly applied to both affirmative and (simple) negative propositions.³⁹ This means that, logically speaking, there can be neither a pure affirmation nor a pure negation. This is the reason why one does not go and tie a horse or a dog when asked to tie a cow.⁴⁰ *Apoha* is the basis of discriminatory behavior in everyday life, and differentiation is the prime factor of all reflective thinking. Thus, the Buddhist would conclude that it is differentiation that is manifested by words and reason, and apprehended through language and logic.⁴¹

ments. For instance, the statement: "One must not kill a Brāhmaṇa" (*Dvijam na hanyāt*)—cf. "Thou shalt not kill"—defiance of which leads to sin and calamity, is to be considered as a pure negation (*prasajya*). Whereas if the Vedic text reads that "a particular ritual should be performed in a particular ceremony," it implies that the ritual may or may not be performed in some other ceremony, but must be performed in that particular instance. Cf. *Mīmāṃsā-Nyāya-Prakāśa* of Āpadeva, A. M. Ramanatha Dikshita, ed. (Banares: Kashi Sanskrit Series, 1949), pp. 156 ff. However, according to grammarians, the stress is on the construction of the sentence: *prasajya* is where the negation is essential and the positive element secondary, that is, where negation applies to the verb (but not to the last member of the negative compound). Where the positive element is essential and the negation secondary is *paryyudāsa*. It is to be understood that this negation applies only to the last member of the negative compound. Cf. a grammatical work called *Sārasvata*, Nava Kishora Kara Sarma, ed. (1936), verse 490; quoted by Louis Renou, *Terminologie Grammaticale du Sanskrit*. 3 pts. Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études . . . Sciences historiques et philologiques, 280-282 fasc. (Paris: É. Champion, 1957). I owe this reference to Dr. D. Friedman of the University of London and am indebted to him for many critical suggestions.

³⁸ Cf. D. Sharma, "Epistemological Negative Dialectics of Indian Logic, *Abhāva* versus *Anupalabdhi*," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. IX, No. 4 (1966), 291-300.

³⁹ Ratnakīrti, *op. cit.*, p. 4 (6-7).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Jñānaśrīmitra, *op. cit.*, p. 201: *apohaḥ śabda līṅgābhyām prakāśyate*.