

NON-COGNITION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF COGNITION

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Except Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika (hence forward to be referred to simply as 'Nyāya') and Sāṅkhya-Yōga all other orthodox schools of Indian philosophy admit non-cognition of the cognisable-called in Saṅskrit as 'yogyānupalābhī' as an independent source of cognition over and above perception, inference, analogy and verbal testimony. The object supposed to be cognised by this instrument of cognition is the absence of the object that is not cognised although it is cognisable. The peculiarity of this difference of views between the two groups of philosophies is that while Nyāya, a member of the group admits the independent reality of negation and negative fact while deying the necessity of noncognition as an independent instrument of cognition for cognising the latter. Mīmāṃsā and Advaita, which maintain the necessity of noncognition as an independent instrument of cognition deny the independent reality or reality itself of negation and the negative fact. Negation is at best only an aspect of the locus which it appears to qualify in the negative cognition, according to Mīmāṃsā and Advaita. In the view of Nyāya negation is as real as the positive entity negated. Negative propositions and judgements are treated almost on par with positive judgements and propositions by Nyāya. The only distinction between negation and its positive counterpositive recognised by Nyāya is in respect of the peculiar called 'svarūpa' (or self-relation) by which negation or absence is supposed to be related to its positive and even negative loci. No positive entity can be related by this relation to any of its loci (though the relation of inherence may in a sense be regarded as related to one of its relata-the locus-by this relation). Why Nyāya holds such a view of this peculiar relation of negation is an important question but it will not be considered in this paper.

With regard to the cognition of negation Nyāya opines that the negated object and its negation are both cognised by the same sense-organ. For example if an object or its colour are perceptually cognised the absence or negation of these objects is also perceptually cognised. No other instrument of cognition is needed for this cognised. This does not mean that the absence of an object can be cognised at the place where its presence is cognised. Unless the cognition of an object at a place, is absent the absence of the object cannot be cognised at that place. Thus non-cognition of the presence of an object at a place is necessary for the cognition of the absence of the object at that place. This is the view of Mīmāṃsā and Advaita too. Nyāya, however, denies that the non-cognition needed for the cognition of the absence is a new means of cognition yielding a cognition differing from the four familiar modes of cognition. The cognition of absence is (generally) perceptual and it depends mainly on sense-object-contact but its subsidiary cause is non-cognition of the positive counterpositive of the absence. Thus in Nyāya view the cognition of absence is direct and immediate and not mediate like that yielded by inference and verbal testimony. Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta while defending the independent instrumental character of non-cognition do not say that the cognition resulting from this instrument is mediate like that of inference and verbal testimony. They have to admit that the cognition is immediate but the immediacy characterising this cognition is of a different type than that which is characteristic of perception. There need not be any objection to such a view. Even Nyāya admits different types of immediacies like those characterising inference and verbal cognition respectively. Why should then different types of immediacies also be not admitted? As a matter of fact the technical sense given to the term 'immediacy' by Nyāya can be used even by Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta to describe the cognition of absence as immediate. According to this sense a cognition not depending on another cognition is immediate Perception is such a cognition because it needs only sense-object-contact and not any cognition to produce it. Inference which necessarily depends upon the cognition of the relation of the middle and the major terms to generate it is not immediate. The cognition of absence depends only upon non-cognition, not upon cognition and so it too is immediate both in the Nyāya's and other views.

Here it may be asked, 'Does anybody ever seek to cognise (or have) the negation of a thing? If not where is the need of an independent means of cognition

over and above the usual one?' It is true that normally no one looks for the absence of a thing as, only a thing or a positive entity when obtained satisfies one's desires. But there are also instances testifying to the felt need of a cognition of certain absences. A man suffering from excruciation pain caused say, by a serious wound desires nothing more than to be relieved of the pain and so have the consciousness of being free of pain. Similarly the fear of snakes-in a snake-infested place may make a person living there to look for a shelter which is free of snakes. Generally it is the aversion to an object that engenders the need for the absence of the object and so to the cognition of its absence as the preceding condition of the need. No desire for an object, positive or negative, can arise unless there is the cognition of the object. It may be contended against this that the aversion to or dislike of a thing it is not same as the desire or need for the absence of the thing so that the former may prompt one to seek the cognition of the absence of the object of dislike. And even if dislike of a thing is the same as the liking for the absence of the thing the need for an independent cognition of absence cannot be justified. The mere absence of the cognition of the disliked thing would be sufficient to satisfy the person disliking the thing.

This contention can be justified if mere absence of cognition of a thing can always do duty for the cognition of the absence of the thing. But this is not the case. For instance a certain place where a tree is standing there are absent all things other than the tree. But a man looking at the tree does not cognise any of these absences unless he happens to be interested in having the place free of everything other than the tree. This incidentally answers another question that is likely to be raised against the view of non-cognition as a cognitive instrument. The question is that, since in the above instance innumerable objects remain uncognised the absences of all these objects must be cognised by the man looking at the tree. The answer to the question is that because the man is not interested in cognising these absences he does not cognise them (specifically). A question similar to this question can be asked regarding the (perceptual) cognition of positive things too. If a man is seeing a tree his eyes are in contact with the tree but they are also in contact through the connection known as 'being in contact with that which is the inherer of (called in Nyāya terminology as *saṃyukta* - *samavāya*)' with the various qualities of the tree. Colour, smell, feel etc. are inherent in the tree

which is in contact with the eye. But when the tree is being perceived its qualities at least those other than colour, are not perceived. Why so? The only reason for this is that although the sense-object-contact, the main cause of perception, obtains in the case (both the object and its qualities being connected by means of different contacts with the eye) yet there is no mind-object-contact or engender the perception of the qualities of the object. In simple language what this means is that unless the mind attends to an object the mere contact of the sense-organ with the object cannot produce the perception of the object. Of course the mind's contact with an object is mediated though its contact with the sense-organ. In the case of absence too it can be urged that unless a perceiver attends to or is interested in a certain absence he or she would not perceive it even if the counterpositive of the absence remains uncognised.

Another likely question here is, 'why isn't the absence of a ghost or any invisible entity in a certain place not perceived there? There is no perception of any such entity at any place but this does not entitle us to say that we perceive the absence of the entity at the place.' The question is answered by introducing the adjective 'cognisable' to qualify non-cognition. As a result the cognition of only the cognisable can be regarded as the instrument of the cognition of the absence of the latter. The cognisable is that whose existence at a place can entitle a perceiver at the place to claim that if the thing existed there it cannot remain unperceived. Ghosts, chimera etc. are not such that if they were present at a certain place they cannot remain unperceived. Of course cognisability is relative to the cognitive capacity of the perceiver and the availability of instrument of cognition of different degrees of sensitivity. In the olden days when electron microscopes and huge telescopes were not invented, amoeba, viruses, galaxies etc. were quite beyond the capacity of human observation and so nobody could even imagine that such things existed. But now nobody can say that these things do not exist as these can be observed with the help of sensitive optical instruments. So the noncognition of a thing in certain conditions cannot ensure the cognition of its absence in every possible condition.

But can a thing that is cognisable according to the meaning of the term given remain uncognised so that its absence may be cognised? If an observer is looking at a dim star through a huge telescope the star is cognisable to him and so

is cognised by him. It cannot be the case that the star though cognisable through the telescope is not cognised by an observer looking through the telescope. Of course if the star is located in a different part of the sky than the one being explored by an observer then it will not be cognised by him. If cognisability of an object is understood as its cognisability at a particular place by an observer having definite capacity to cognise it at that place then such a cognisable object cannot be absent at the place where it is cognisable. In this account of cognisability even the place where the cognisable object is located is taken to be relevant to its cognisability. This may be so in the case of electrons rotating round the nucleus of an atom. An electron jumping from a larger or smaller orbit to a smaller or larger orbit round the nucleus may not be cognisable or observable between the orbits even if observed through most powerful electron microscopes. The particular position in space within the atom of the electron is found to be quite relevant to the observability or otherwise of the electron. But this is not so in the case of other common objects. It is to be noted here that it is not the absolute absence or nonexistence of an object that is supposed to be cognised by means of its non-cognition. Only the non-existence at a certain place of an object, on the basis of its non-cognition at that place is taken to be cognised. So if an object which is cognisable by its nature is not cognised at a particular place by a competent observer then its absence at that place is cognised by the latter at that place.

In this account of non-cognition the general term 'cognition' has been used all along without specifying whether the cognition is perceptual, inferential, verbal or analogical, Now if a certain object is not perceived to be present at a certain place its absence cognised at that place would have to be regarded only as perceptually cognised. If this cognition is not regarded as perceptual then it cannot be regarded inferential, verbal or analogical either, simply because the advocates of non-cognition as a separate means of cognition cannot but regard the resulting cognition as of a unique kind. But it seems rather odd to maintain that if a perceptible thing is not perceived to be present at a place its absence is not perceived at the place but cognised in a unique manner. Moreover if an entity which is supposed to be imperceptible by nature is sought to be inferentially ascertained but no valid inference proving its existence is available then the resulting cognition of the non-existence of the thing cannot but be inferential.

Similar in the case of historical events it can be urged that if no verbal or documentary evidence for them is available then the absence or non-occurrence of the events is arrived at only inferentially. It cannot therefore be laid down as a rule that the absent cognition of a thing and the cognition of its absence must be of the same kind. Perhaps this difficulty can be overcome by elucidating cognisability in terms of perceptibility, inferibility etc. so that non-cognition would be defined as the non-perception, non-inference etc. of that which is supposed to be perceptible, inferible etc. by nature. Things like electron are known to be imperceptible by their very nature. So they are sought to be inferentially known and they are so known as valid inferences proving the reality of electrons are available. This does not seem to be the case with ghosts which are supposed even by those who believe in the reality of ghosts, to be imperceptible by nature. So ghosts-if they exist-must be inferible. But no valid inference to prove the existence of ghosts can be propounded. So the absence of such an inference yields the direct and immediate cognition of a unique kind of the absence of ghosts. The point of this explanation is that the cognition of the absence of a thing is in all cases direct whatever may be the type of the cognition of the thing which is said to be absent or non-available.

It needs to be pointed out here that cognisability as defined above must characterise the object whose non-cognition is to be treated as an instrument of cognition. If a certain thing for example were by nature inferible it can certainly be inferred so there cannot be absence of its inferential cognition leading to the cognition of its absence. What is known to exist and be cognisable cannot be unknown. But one may falsely believe a certain kind of thing to exist and so to be accessible to a certain kind of cognition. On investigation it may be found that the belief in the reality and the cognisability of the alleged thing is false. As a result it may be concluded that there is no such thing.

An obvious objection to the above defence of non-cognition as an independent source of cognition is that the cognition of absence may quite well be regarded as a kind of immediate inference. From the non-cognition of a thing it is easy to arrive at the cognition of the absence of the thing. The premise of this inference is the absence of the cognition of the thing. But we have already noted

above that mere absence of a cognition cannot lead to any result, least of all to an inferential conclusion. Absence cannot be a premise though knowledge of absence can. But before this knowledge is exploited to yield the knowledge of the absence of the thing we have to find out how this knowledge itself is acquired. The object of this knowledge too is an absence viz ; the absence of the knowledge of a thing. One may be ignorant of a thing's existence without being aware of the fact. From the absence of a thing the presence of the absence of the thing can be inferred but even here the logical transition is from the cognition of the absence to the cognition of presence although the absence of a thing can be equated with the presence of the absence of the thing. Such is not the case of the absence of the knowledge of a thing. The absence of the knowledge of a thing can never be equivalent to the knowledge of the absence of the thing. Even an inanimate object like a stone is devoid of the knowledge of an object yet it does not have the knowledge of the absence of the object or of anything whatsoever. so cognition of absence cannot be subsumed under immediate inference in any way.

It has thus been established that there is the cognition of absence which is unlike the cognition of any positive entity and that this cognition is immediate and is produced by the non-cognition of the counterpositive of the absence. But this is not sufficient to prove the necessity of the cognition of absence. Even without it, it is possible to cognise positive entities as excluding or being excluded by other positive entities. For example a table without a certain book could be apprehended as an entity excluding of the relation with the desired book. In this cognition exclusion of the relation may be treated as a temporary aspect of the table. There doesn't seem to be any need for cognising any absence in order to cognise the bare table. The exclusion which is an aspect of the bare table may be regarded as identical with it (although manifested only when a book or any other object is not cognised to be present on the table). If the need for an independent instrument of cognition like non-cognition is to be justified then it needs to be shown that there can be a cognition which has absence as its main object or that without the non-cognition of an entity or entities it is not possible to cognise an entity which may be positive or negative in nature. The traditional Indian philosophers have not thus tried to justify the independent instrumentality of non-cognition. So we are suggesting the following as justification for treating

non-cognition as a new source of veridical cognition.

First, there is the cognition of the absolute non-existence of a fictitious, or irrational entity like the hare's horn, the barren woman's son or the square circle. These entities are never and nowhere cognised. There cannot be an entity like the barren woman's son or the square circle. But in the sense that if there existed such entities they would certainly be cognised the latter can be regarded as cognisable. The utter absence of the cognition of these entities leads to the cognition of their absolute absence. Such an absence is not associated with the presence of any positive entity which is always the case with other kinds of absence. For example if a book is found to be absent on a table something else may be seen to be present there, but if nothing is found placed on the table then at least the qualities of the table will certainly be seen to be present in the table. But if a fictitious entity is cognised as absent, the absence is cognised as absolute, that is as spatiotemporally unlimited. The absent entity is known to exist nowhere and at no time. Advaitins talk of such an absolute absence in the case of nescience (called 'avidyā'). When knowledge of truth arises nescience is supposed to be absolutely sublated so that even its past existence-not to say of the present and future existences-stand dissipated. This utter non-existence is not associated with any kind of positive existence.

Nyāya does not admit absolute absences of this type although some other types of absolute absences or non-existences are quite acceptable to it. The reason for this reluctance is that Nyāya is wedded to realism and so the admission of the absolute absence of the unreal would land this school into some kind of idealism. The significant denial of the unreal presupposes some kind of reality of denied entity as the denial is related to the denied entity as its counterpositive. the denial of the barren woman's son, a certain unreal, is not the same or even equivalent to the denial of the sky-lotus, another unreal. If these denials are to be distinguished from each other then the respective counterpositives need to be distinguished from each other and this is possible only if the denials are taken to be the denials of different entities. To avoid being entangled in such unrealistic assumption, Nyāya seeks to give a realistic interpretation to the negation of the unreal. To deny that there is a sky-lotus or the barren woman's son is to deny that there can be a lotus that blooms in the sky or that there can be a son related to a barren woman as his

mother. In this analysis of the negation every entity involved as a constituent of the analysis is real. Nyāya is thus able to avoid the admission of absolute negations of the unreal as also the granting of some kind of entitative status to the unreal that is denied. But as is obvious, such a view is not quite commonsensical, we do feel very strongly that entities like the barren woman's son or the square-circle do not and cannot exist. Such denials cannot be equated with common denials in which a certain predicate is denied of a certain subject. The denials of unrels are existential denials. Since such denials are universal and absolute they are not spatiotemporally limited like the denials of real entities. This may also be one reason why Nyāya does not admit the possibility of the existential denial of the unreal.

However there are other kinds of denials which are universal in scope and so spatio-temporally unlimited, that have been admitted by Nyāya. For example the denial of genera or generic universal in their individual inheres by the relation of conjunction. A genus does not have the conjunctive relation with any entity, least of all with the individuals which it inheres in. So this denial of the genus by the conjunctive relation has to be regarded as universal or spatiotemporally unlimited. Everything in the world can be qualified by this denial. Unlike the above-mentioned denial, no unreal entity is an element in the structure of this denial. The genus, the individual and the conjunctive relation that go to make up the structure of the denial are all real. The denial can be regarded as a kind of occurrence-denial (called *saṃsargaābhāva* in Nyāya terminology). The peculiarity of this denial is that its cognition does not depend upon the non-cognition of its counterpositive. The denial being universal it can coexist even with its counterpositive. Both the denial and its counterpositive, the generic universal, coexist in the individual because although the genus is located in the latter by the inherence-relation it is not located there by the conjunctive relation. Such denials (or more precisely such absences) cannot be taken to be perceptually cognised as ordinary denials are. Only by means of inference based on the cognition of non-conjunction of everything with a genus can such denials be supposed to be cognised.

It may be noted in this connection that although both the kinds of denials mentioned above are universal or spatiotemporally unrestricted in scope yet their respective universalities are not of the same kind. Referring to the absolute denial

of a sky-louts it would not be sensible or pertinent to say that the sky louts is not here or at this time. but while denying that a genus is not cojoined with the individual it inheres in, one can say quite meaningfully that like its individual inheres other objects also are such that the genus is not cojoined with them. This means that the universal denial of the unreal cannot be treated as a qualifier of any locus while the other kind of denial can be so treated. As stated above this may be one of the reasons why Nyāya which has envisaged many kinds of universal denials or negations has refused to admit the denial or negation of the unreal, as such a denial stands by itself and seems to have no relation with anything as its locus or qualificand.

So far we considered absolute negation as an object whose cognition cannot arise unless the counterpositive of the negation remains absolutely uncognised. But there can be other objects too whose cognition can be had only through non-cognition. Such an object is the non-dual Brahman which is absolute truth according to Advaita. Brahman is devoid of all attributes, characters or relations through which alone any positive entity is cognised as an entity of determinate nature. But according to Advaita any kind of determination is limitation or negation. Besides whatever is other than a thing cannot be supposed to determine its being. The attributes, characters etc. of a thing are not identical with it and so they cannot determine its being. Brahman is therefore absolutely undetermined. Spatially, temporally, attributively and substantively there cannot be any determination of Brahman-the ultimate reality. But if the known means of cognition of positive entities are thus precluded from apprehending Brahman is it for us just a thing-in-itself? What Advaita has to say on this question is not quite clear. At many places Śaṅkara says that Brahman is not totally unknown ('Nayamékāntenaviṣayah') but there are also statements by him and other Advaitic authors that Brahman is inaccessible to all means of cognition. Such apparently-conflicting statements can be reconciled if we regard Brahman to be positively unknowable but negatively knowable. The positive knowledge of Brahman is of course quite unlike the positive knowledge of any empirical object. Empirical knowledge is objective and determinate and it apprehends a thing only under some mode or other.

The positive knowledge of Brahman is its realisation or the realisation of one's identity with it. Such knowledge is devoid of all duality and is attainable only when there is release from wordly bondage. But the negative type of knowledge of Brahman is possible to have even in the empirical state. This is what the upniṣadic remarks like 'He is not this, He is not that?' ('Neti Neti') referring to Brahman through negations seem to suggest. The negation of each and every attribute and property leads to the cognition of that which is other than all these. Here non-cognition operates as the sole means of the negative cognition of Brahman. It is true that the Advaitic authors do not speak of a negative type of empirical knowledge of Brahman nor do they treat non-cognition as the means of this cognition. This may be because these authors have not cared to make a distinction between the positive and the negative knowledge of Brahman which is highlighted by a large number of statements of Śaṅkara as well as the upaniṣads. If Brahman is utterly unknown then nothing can be said about it and so Vēdānta as an intellectual discipline will cease to exist (or be rendered meaningless). The criticism which postkantians, specially the Hegelians have urged against the concept of the thing-in-itself could be levelled against the concept of Brahman too if it is regarded as absolutely transcendent. If however negative knowledge of Brahman is taken to be the ultimate one then it will have to be admitted that even in the state of highest spiritual realisation the cognition of wordly entities as objects of negation would persist. So it has to be conceded that there is the empirical cognition (though of a very superior type) of Brahman preceding its highest spiritual realisation which is fully positive in nature.

It may be asked, 'How can there arise the negative empirical cognition of Brahman if the falsehood of all empirical objects and properties is not cognised and this cognition cannot arise unless the ultimate spiritual realisation of Brahman takes place? The falsehood of the false is known only when the truth is known. This question gets answered if the nature of the reflective inquiry which is conducted by Vēdānta and which is described as 'manana' constituting the second stage of the spiritual discipline laid down by the upaniṣads as a graduated procedure for attaining Brahman, - realisation is taken into consideration. By means of serious and sincere reflection the worthlessness as also the illusory nature of all empirical categories is realised. This leads to the future realisation that truth-

absolute truth-must be quite other than all the illusory objects of the world.

Traditionalist interpreters of Advaita may view the above view as a gratuitous imposition on Advaita as in no Advaitic text or its commentary this view or some view similar to it is found advocated. But then the vehement advocacy by Advaita Vedāntins of the independent instrumentality of non-cognition as against the Nyāya view of the latter cannot be satisfactorily explained. The Upaniṣadic emphasis on negative knowledge of Brahman as distinguished from the positive spiritual realisation of the identity of the self with Brahman is also inexplicable if the traditional view is upheld as correct.