ABSTRACT: Dharmakīrti’s theory of negative judgments grew out of extensive discussions and debates on the cognition of non-existent objects (asad-ālambana-vijñāna) among various Buddhist and Indian philosophical schools. As is well-known, a similar debate on the objectless presentations (gegenstandlose Vorstellungen) happened in the early development of phenomenology and analytic philosophy. Among various opinions on this controversial issue, I find that Dharmakīrti and Husserl hold similar views. Both of them have less interest in redefining the ontological status of non-existent objects than Russell and Meinong. Rather they engage themselves in analyzing the experiential structure of negative cognition and come up with a similar conclusion that negative judgments presuppose affirmative perceptions. This study will enrich our understanding of both thinkers.
I. An Indian and Buddhist Controversy

Consider the following statement:

(A1) I walk into Y’s office, and see that Y is not there. Then I realize that he is not in and say “Y is not in his office.”

This might be a common experience we have in everyday life. In the following, I attempt to account for this experience philosophically. With this attempt, I hope to come closer to the understanding of our very experience, which is the “Sachen selbst” that most scholars of phenomenology turn away from by involving themselves heavily in exegesis.

To begin with, let me introduce some controversies in the accounting for this phenomenon in the history of Indian and Buddhist philosophy. As compared to the Western philosophical tradition, Indian and Buddhist philosophy is more “negative” and treats issues such as negation, absence, and non-being more extensively, thereby providing us rich sources for the understanding of the experience of negative judgments.

First of all, some Naiyāyikas (e.g., Uddyotakara) would argue that the very notion of “negative judgment” is self-contradictory, for they believe that negation is something that happens before judgment. It belongs to the realm of perception (pratyakṣa), so they would simplify A1 as follows:

(B1) I walk into Y’s office, and see that Y is not there.

Here the word “see” is understood literally in the sense of perceiving with bare eyes, not in a loose sense of understanding or realizing. Seeing or perceiving is always a positive act on something. This way negation is brought into the realm of perception. Using John Searle’s distinction between propositional and illocutionary negations (Searle 1969: 32-33), we can say that the Naiyāyikas restrict themselves to propositional negation $F (\neg p)$, a position shared by the mainstream Western philosophical tradition. For them, negation turns out to be an affirmation of negative fact. The very nature of affirmation ensures that negation is part of perception.

However, as perception is always of something, the validity of a perception relies heavily on the ontological status of its objects. Truly existent objects guarantee valid perception, while false or even non-existent objects would surely produce false perceptions. The perception of a double moon is false because the second moon does not really exist. The Naiyāyikas face the problem of how one can perceive a thing that does not exist. Reexamining B1, we will realize that it is actually impossible for me to say “I see that he is not there.” Instead I may say “I see the desk, chairs or books in his office,” and may say:

(B2) I walk into Y’s office, and see Y’s absence.

This expression makes Y’s absence the object of perception; absence becomes something. This surprising step was actually what the Naiyāyikas were forced to take. Otherwise they would not succeed in reducing negation to perception. But this unique position that reifies absence or non-being was challenged by many other Indian philosophical schools, which brought the Naiyāyika theory of negation into a difficult situation.

Another approach to the issue is seen in two thinkers: the Buddhist Īśvarasena and the Mīmāṃsāka Kumārila. Instead of focusing on propositional negation, both of these thinkers switch their attention to the illocutionary aspect. On their view, A1 should be revised as:
(C1) I walk into Y's office, and do not see that Y is there.

The expression “do not see” (adāśana) is further defined with the technical term of non-cognition (anupalabdhi). Non-cognition, in turn, is defined as the non-arising of cognitive acts including perception, judgment or inference. These two thinkers would also view the expression “negative judgment” as self-contradictory because non-cognition can be better characterized with the Searlian term illocutionary negation, \(-F(p)\). This illocutionary negation does not have to presuppose propositional negation. Negation is not really involved in the object side as I can either express C1 or say,

(C2) I walk into Y's office, and do not see Y.

The propositional negation, i.e., the non-existence of Y, on the other hand, is built upon the illocutionary negation, i.e., the non-cognition of Y. It is through the very means of non-cognition that one learns about the negative facts such as “Y is not there.” Therefore, both Āśvargena and Kumārila firmly insist that non-cognition is a separate means of knowledge (pramāṇa) “over and above” perception and inference (plus verbal testimony, analogy, and presumption in the case of the latter). (See Yao, forthcoming) However, both of them have difficulty in explaining clearly what is the state of mind when neither perception nor inference is arising, which leads us to the third approach.

The third approach is found in the Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti, who developed his elaborate theory of negative judgments by arguing against the Naiyāyikas, his teacher Āśvarasena and his elder contemporary Kumārila. For our purpose, it is sufficient to summarize some of his key points on the basis of the thorough studies of Kellner (2001, 2003) and Watanabe (2002). First of all, he does not agree with the Naiyāyikas in reducing non-cognition to perception, nor with Īśvarasena and Kumārila in counting non-cognition as an independent means of knowledge. As we discussed earlier, the former view only accounts for propositional negation while the latter only explains illocutionary negation. Instead, he includes non-cognition under inference and treats it as one of the three evidences (hetu) that ensure necessary inferences. Therefore, he would take “negative judgment” to mean literally: Negation is judgment.

Secondly, to make non-cognition a valid inference, Dharmakīrti distinguishes between non-cognitions of perceptible and of “im-perceptible objects.” Imperceptible objects refers to super-sensory or abstract objects, the non-cognition of which, according to him, cannot determine their existence. For instance, from the non-cognition of ghosts one cannot conclude that ghosts do not exist. On the contrary, the absence of perceptible objects is proved if and only if they are not perceived when all the conditions for perception are fulfilled. Dharmakīrti limits himself to the discussion of the non-cognition of these perceptible objects, and only deals with negation of empirical objects or facts. As we will see below, this position has its advantages in avoiding issues involved with negative existential propositions.

Thirdly, the non-cognition of perceptible objects, being an inference, is based on affirmative perceptions. According to Dharmakīrti, we have to know that there is nothing there through inference instead of simply through seeing or hearing. The fact that “there is no pottery on the table” is known through an inferential judgment that is based on the perception of the table instead of the pottery. In other words, the negation of the existence of pottery is
an inferential judgment based on the normal perceptions of things other than pottery, e.g., the table etc.

Applying these points to the case discussed earlier, we have the following formula:

(D1) I walk into Y’s office, and see only the desk, chairs, and books. Then I realize that he is not in and say “Y is not in his office.”

The first sentence indicates affirmative perceptions of things other than Y. On the basis of these perceptions, I come up with an inference as expressed in the second sentence. As all the objects under discussion are perceptible, this statement would reflect Dharmakīrti’s view on the issue fairly well.

II. Husserl’s Contribution

Now how would Husserl address this controversial issue? Husserl’s view on negative judgments can be found in his late work *Experience and Judgment* (EJ), where a separate section is devoted to negation. A more extensive treatment, believed to be an earlier unabridged version of this section, is included in the *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis* (Analyses). Some scattered sources can also be found in his *Logical Investigations*, especially Sections 11, 30-35 of Investigation Six.

As compared to his elaborations on other topics, these minor sections are far from enough to build a phenomenological theory of negative judgments. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that very few secondary sources deal with Husserl’s view on negation. Even when there are a few, such as of Harvey & Hintikka (1991), Krysztofiak (1992) and Benoist (2001), most of them were inspired by relevant discussions in analytical philosophy. It is understand-
If applying Husserl’s phenomenological analysis to the current case, we will have a richer account of the experience, which reveals more details on the structure of a negative cognition:

(H1) I walk into Y’s office, and see only the desk, chairs and books. Then I realize that he is not in and say “Y is not in his office.”

The same as in D1, here the affirmative statement “[I] see only the desk, chairs and books” substitutes for the negative ones “[I] see that Y is not there” or “[I] do not see that Y is there.” The normal unobstructed perceptions of desk or chairs indicate what is going on in the perceptual level when I walk into Y’s office. Definitely I do not perceive that Y is not there, rather I see actual things such as the desk and books.

As we will see below, Husserl’s example can be compared to the case of walking into Y’s office that we discussed earlier. Both cases indicate a prepredicative experience of negation. The Indian and Buddhist philosophers would not dispute with Husserl on the possibility of such type of experience. The key, however, lies in the philosophical accounts of such experience, which is exactly the point of controversy in the Indian side.

Husserl draws two important conclusions from his previous analysis. First, negation presupposes “normal perception” (EJ 91; Analyses 71). Here the “normal perception” refers to the perceptual process that proceeds without obstruction, as is seen in the earlier case when the red ball is perceived. Contemporary interpretations such as those of Harvey & Hintikka (1991: 61) and Krystyfofia (1992: 210) seem not to grasp this point and merge it with Husserl’s second conclusion that I will introduce later. To my understanding, this point rather indicates that negation is secondary as compared to the normal affirmative perception, and it is a modification of the latter. Husserl explicitly states this point elsewhere: “The negative judgment is not a basic form.” (EJ 292) In his example, the negative judgments “it is not entirely red” or “it is not a perfect ball” are built upon the normal perceptions of greenness or dented shape of the back side. Without these subsequent perceptions one cannot negate the original anticipation of redness or spherical shape.
To interpolate the phrase “expecting and believing he is in” is a crucial step to apply the phenomenological analysis to the current case. Without this anticipation, the perceptions of the desk or books do not really fit the context, for these objects are not the subject of concern at all. Only in contrast to the anticipation of Y do these perceptions start to make sense in the way that they disappointed this anticipation.

So far, it seems that Husserl’s accounts of negation are too “negative,” as he characterizes it in terms of the “disappointment” of anticipation and lists it along with doubt and possibility as a “modification” of consciousness. This implies that negation turns out to be “obstruction” or “failure” of normal affirmative cognitions, which makes it an invalid or secondary act, as Husserl explicitly states: “The act of negation of the ego consists in the exclusion of validity, and the secondary intentional character [of negation] is already implicit in this expression.” (EJ 292) This may confirm the mainstream view on the epistemological role of negation or negative judgments in Western philosophy, but does not harmonize with the positive role that negation or non-cognition plays in the epistemological systems of Indian and Buddhist philosophy. Although the Naiyāyikas, Mīmāṃsākas and Buddhists were debating about the way that negation takes place, they did not doubt its important role in their theories of knowledge. They all distinguish negation from the “modifications” of cognition that include erroneous cognition, desire and memory, which are called pseudo-perception (pratyakṣābhāṣa), and consider it a valid means of knowledge, either in the form of perception, inference, or independently as non-cognition.

Despite those “negative” characteristics attributed to negation, does it play a positive role in Husserl’s phenomenology? We do not see an explicit answer to the question in his own writings. Instead,
it is found in some contemporary interpretations. One answer is given by Dieter Lohmar, who understands “negation as categorial intuition” (Lohmar 1992: 188). Offering no direct reference from Husserl to support his interpretation, Lohmar nevertheless is justified to make such a move. As the act that disappoints protentional anticipations, negation certainly belongs to the phase of intentional fulfillment. Categorial intuition, on the other hand, plays an important role in fulfilling intentions. Lohmar explains the relationship between negation and categorial intuition in Husserl’s example of red ball in the following way:

Der Akt der Negation beginnt, als ob die erwartete eigenschaftliche Bestimmung “rot” prädikativ konstituiert werden sollte. Der erforderliche Akt kategorialer Anschauung kann sich aber nicht mehr auf anschaulich erfüllte Sonderintentionen aufbauen. Er muß bereits auf Surrogate aus Erinnerungen und evtl. aus der frischen Retention zurückgreifen. Hierbei zeigt sich die Funktion der inductiven Gewißheiten für die Motivation der Sonderwahrnehmung erfaßt werden, sondern das vorprädikativ bereits fraglich gewordene rote. (Lohmar 1992: 189)

Here it is important to note that the categorial intuition required for the act of negation does not build itself upon “the intuitively fulfilled particular intentions.” Instead, it has to fall back to memory or fresh retention so as to fulfill the original anticipation of the red. Therefore, the subject that is concerned in the negative judgment is not the green color that is actually perceived, but still the red, which demonstrates the function of inductive certainty (induktiven Gewißheiten). The categorial intuition that works closely with memory or retention is certainly not sensory intuition, the once-for-all grasping of sensory objects. In Husserl’s terminology, categorial intuition rather refers to the acts of synthesis or abstraction that may be completed in more than one step. Therefore, he would not agree with the Naiyāyikas who reduce negation to perception, which is closely linked to sensory intuition, but rather agrees with Dharmakīrti’s view that reduces negation to inference, which is in general of an inductive nature in the Buddhist logical system.

Another answer is given by Harvey & Hintikka (1991) and Krysztofiak (1992), who understand negation as “modality” or “creation of possible worlds.” Being inspired by relevant discussions in analytical philosophy, these interpretations are not necessarily faithful to Husserl himself. For instance, Krysztofiak attempted to deal with the so-called “existential negative propositions” (e.g., “Pegasus does not exist”) and proposed his theory of the “creation of possible worlds” as a solution to this paradox, along with some other famous proposals: description theory, free logic, logic of fiction, etc. To my knowledge, however, Husserl himself was not so much concerned with such existential negative propositions, although he lived through the period when this problem was discussed and debated. It would be interesting to examine carefully how he would address this puzzling issue, given his close relationship with the Brentanian and Meinongian traditions. Probably, he would agree with Dharmakīrti again in distinguishing between the negation of perceptible things (e.g., “It is not a red ball”) and the negation of imperceptible things (e.g., “Ghosts do not exist”). The latter type of negation is linked to the paradox of negative existential propositions, but Dharmakīrti admits that his theory of non-cognition is not able to deal with this type of negation. How the Indian and Buddhist philosophers would tackle such an interesting issue will be the topic of another paper.

As far as empirical perceptible objects are concerned, however, the theories as developed by Husserl and Dharmakīrti are powerful
enough to explain the negative judgment regarding such objects. By way of conclusion, let me highlight the main points that are shared by both thinkers:

1) Both of them focus on the negation of empirical objects and show little interest in examining the ontological issues involved with the object side;

2) They both hold that negative judgments presuppose and build themselves upon affirmative perceptions, and hence are secondary in relation to the latter;

3) They both carry out detailed analysis of the experiential structure of negative cognition. Husserl further reveals its protentional dimension. Negation is therefore understood as motivated by disappointment of protentional anticipations;

4) They both take a middle-way position between the propositional and illocutionary views of negation, which makes their theories outstanding in their own traditions.

Despite all these striking similarities, however, it is important to be reminded that their theories of negative judgments were developed in very different traditions. It is very hard to draw direct correspondence between their respective theoretical framework and relevant concepts involved. I hope that my attempt will not turn out to be a failure, being negated by scholars from both traditions.

References


