Affirmation and Negation,

One of the foundations of philosophical thought is the notion that our ideas and beliefs form a system. We do not just have a steady stream of unrelated mental events and experiences. Rather, there are patterns in our thinking. Those patterns can be mapped and examined. As self-aware beings we are capable of examining ourselves. I maintain that each of us benefit from such self-examination. This is what philosophers have valued since antiquity as self-knowledge.

There are plenty of obstacles and misleads on the path to self-knowledge. It seems to me that the mind/ego is a defensive system that often hides from full view, even from ourselves. With patience and intelligence we can overcome those obstacles. We can overcome them because we have available methods of logical and associative analysis. Our thoughts and words leave clues because they are related to other words and thoughts.

Take affirmation and negation as an example. When I ask learners to share personal beliefs in this course lots of different ideas show up. Some of these are affirmative in character in that they assert or affirm an idea or value that the individual holds to be true. Some are negational in character in that they deny or negate some idea or value. Now there is plenty to say about the roles of affirmation and negation in logic, but I am drawing out one particular point. Any negation statement that you make logically implies some affirmative idea that you have.

When someone says; "I am against X" or "Y is just plain wrong" or "I hate Z" and so on, they are making what I have characterized as evaluative statements. Let me be clear that I am not excluding evaluation. Developing strong evaluative judgement is one of the highest capacities a person can have. I have, however, hammered away at the idea that evaluation should only follow effective analysis. Sometimes, though, we are just compelled to stand up against that which we oppose. So what does this tell us about ourselves?

Follow the logic backwards from any negation statement or thought and you will find an affirmative belief. The negations do not stand alone. What we are against is always a reaction to something in the world compared to what we are for. The trick is to track back to what you are for.

Try it for yourself. Pick your pet peeve. "I just cannot stand....[fill in with the political party, political philosophy, religion, attitude, behavior, lifestyle, and so on of your choice]." Think your way back to the affirmative idea which motivates this negation. You see, the object of the negation is always an interpreted opposition to what you affirm. If we succeed in recognizing all of the ideas that we affirm, then we have an account of the contents our own mind. If we succeed in recognizing the relations among all of the ideas that we affirm, then we have an account of the system by which our mind operates.

Some people operate as if their negations were their primary beliefs. As if listing (loudly) all of the things that they are against is a projection of their identity. I think that this is a shadow of our identity. The negations are reactions, which is why they project out to others as conflict. Our affirmative selves are the primary. Even primitive fear is a reaction to the thought (or the

instinct) that life is worth living. Step back from the negation and you will find that affirmative self. Expressing affirmative self that with passion is powerful and you are likely to find more consonance with other minds than you thought possible. So, in so far as you are able in this course, try to find the affirmatives in you and build upon them.

P.S. Of course, as I share my thoughts and observations you are welcome to challenge and differ!

In good spirit,

Jon