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PRACTICAL WISDOM AND THE WOMAN’S VIEW

The aeroplane swoops up and over the landscape far beneath, scenery that is spread out for us to enjoy with clarity and brilliant brightness of tone and colour. This is futurism as painted by Olga Biglieri Scurto, who took the name of Barbara, and on whom Brezzi has written1. This image can also represent the feminist vision of Francesca Brezzi, who looks from “above” in the metaphorical sense of looking with wisdom in order to see women’s lives that are often neglected, ignored or misunderstood. Brezzi is an excellent commentator upon Ricoeur and also seeks to make philosophy work for women. Brezzi sees the woman as agent of her own destiny and she researches and writes about such women from the past in order that they should not be forgotten and so that they can inspire us. If we look at Francesca Brezzi’s work, we can gain a sense of what Western philosophy may mean to women now, and what it can do to support women, both now and in the future. She analyses the philosophies of difference of Irigaray and others in order to correct the imbalance that exists between the study of male thinkers and that of women thinkers. Paul Ricoeur could have contributed to a possible philosophy of women and men, yet he did not develop any explicit debates about women thinkers, although he worked with Arendt and others and fully supported them.

How can this have happened, that a philosopher of Ricoeur’s stature did not engage with male: female dichotomies, although he clearly championed the rights of women in so many ways? I will explore Ricoeur’s position briefly, firstly for its intrinsic interest and also in order to show how Brezzi has addressed directly these problems of how to place women in philosophy, with her fresh vision of the landscape.

It is not well known that, early on in his philosophical journey, Ricoeur worked for twenty years (c.1952-1968) to develop a philosophy of negation, which he subsequently abandoned and never published, except for one article2. Ricoeur was not seeking to understand women in his search to understand negation: his interlocutors were Hegel (who placed the negative at the heart of dialectic) and Sartre (who placed negativity at the heart of human existence). Negation in its many forms was a key concept upon which he lectured repeatedly during his time at Strasbourg, Sorbonne and Nanterre, and I believe it provided him with the impetus to begin his turn towards language in the late 1960s3. In my book on negation I suggest that he

2 The essay Negativity and Primary Affirmation, 1956, appears in the second edition of History and Truth (not published in English until 1965); Négativité et affirmation originaire was first published in Aspects de la dialectique, Recherches de philosophie, II, Descée de Brouwer, 1956, pp.101-124.

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replaced his quest to develop a philosophy of negation with structural analysis of negation in language. He studied the many ways in which the negative appears inside language forms, by dismantling structures such as metaphor and parable. By this means he developed the negative through depth semantics in language studies as part of his linguistic and also his philosophical work⁴. Yet I also suggest that his struggle with Aristotle’s negative resembles modern philosophical approaches to the negative attitudes towards women.

I believe Aristotle’s view of the negative holds the key to the start of this debate about women, if not to its conclusion. He wanted a model of negation that pre-dated Aristotle and hoped to find in the Pre-Socratics a more dialectically balanced approach to the negative, one that would show how the negative is part of the human experience and should not be rejected. In the 1950s Ricœur critiqued Aristotle with regard to the negative, and his approach resonates very strongly with that of Sister Prudence Allen, a feminist philosopher. Aristotle’s logic focussed upon the need for binary opposition that becomes contradiction; this came from his dualist, either/or epistemological model⁶. Aristotle proposed the law of the excluded middle:

I mean the axioms from which all demonstration proceeds, e.g. “everything must be either affirmed or denied” and “it is impossible at once to be and not to be”, and all other such premises⁸.

Ricœur searched for a positive model of negation and studied philosophers who preceded Aristotle, in an attempt to explore thought before Aristotle “fixed” it into binaries with his laws of contradiction. Negation in its many forms was a key concept upon which he lectured repeatedly during his time at Strasbourg, Sorbonne and Nanterre. Although she does not make use of Ricœur’s work, Sister Prudence Allen finds much evidence that resonates with Ricœur’s negation theory: she sees how Aristotle developed a sex polarity logic that believed the woman to be the negative and weaker half of a binary pair in which the male is superior⁷. Aristotle appeared to focus on what he saw as woman’s weak role in conception, and extrapolate from that to woman’s weakness generally⁸. In his early work on negation Ricœur identified the same mechanism in Aristotle’s understanding of negation that Allen identified in Aristotle’s understanding of woman. Yet Ricœur did not seem to see this model of negation as being influential upon the way we see women.

Unlike Aristotle, Ricœur did not see woman as the negated half of a male dominated culture, and also differently from Aristotle he believed that negation is in fact at the core of our

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⁴ A. Scott-Baumann, *Ricœur and the negation of happiness* New York, London 2013: Bloomsbury. This book represents five years of research in the Fonds Ricœur archives. This research was funded in its final year by a Leverhulme Fellowship 2012-13. There is much more work to be done on Ricœur’s concept of negation, with the need for improved access to the archives.
⁵ Kant, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche adopted this dualist model. Deleuze sought to develop a more/less model, and was also a monist, thereby causing confusion.
⁷ Like Ricœur in his analysis of difference in Plato, Sister Prudence Allen found that Plato offered a potentially more promising model than Aristotle, a model of sex unity that could have shown woman to be as effective a thinker in philosophy as man, but Plato’s model was displaced by Aristotle, partly because Aristotle came after, and also partly because Plato saw the woman as the other i.e. the one we can never understand.
being. He hoped to demonstrate that the negative impulse has an affirmative power that, if we recognise it, allows us to deal with the inevitable and existential complexities of being human: we often define ourselves by means of “not-ness”. We are not who we want to be, we do not have what we want to have and we cannot unite fully with God. Ricoeur described various different forms of negation, such as: saying no, denying the existential implications of being discontented about who we want to be and also both willing and suffering from loss, lack and privation. These ways of thinking are integral to our humanity. I believe the idea of negation provided him with the impetus to begin his turn towards language in the late 1960s9.

In my book on negation I suggest that he analysed negation structurally as it appears inside language forms, by dismantling structures such as metaphor and parable, and thus developed the negative through depth semantics in language studies as part of his linguistic work10.

Using his binary approach and very differently from Ricoeur, Aristotle excised the negative from his scientific model of the world as matter, because he believed matter had no negative. Although at an epistemological level Aristotle eliminated the negative when defining terms, he also wished to understand what makes things happen in life, the change, energy, potencia, the possibility of new life, something that appears to come from nothing and is not explained by his materialist approach. This was made more difficult by Aristotle’s elimination of the negative as that-which-is-not, because the concept of not-being is closely related to the negative: something which does not exist may come to be, as in new life11. We shall see later that this becomes Brezzi’s great strength, the possibility of a woman becoming something she was not to start with.

Although she does not make use of Ricoeur’s work, Sister Prudence Allen finds much evidence that resonates with Ricoeur’s negation theory: she sees how Aristotle developed a sex polarity logic that saw the woman as the negative and weaker half of a binary in which the male is the superior12. Aristotle focussed on what he saw as woman’s weak role in conception, and extrapolated from that to what he perceived as woman’s weakness generally13. Ricoeur did not comment on Aristotle’s commentary about women, despite knowing the texts; however it is striking that in the early work on negation he identified the same mechanism in Aristotle’s understanding of negation that Allen identified in Aristotle’s understanding of woman.

Aristotle thereby eliminated the negative from his scientific model of the world as matter, because he believed matter had no negative. At an epistemological level Aristotle eliminated the negative when defining terms, yet he also wished to understand what makes things happen in life, the change, energy, potencia, the possibility of new life, the way an acorn comes from an acorn, something that appears to come from nothing and is not explained by his materialist approach. This was made more difficult by Aristotle’s elimination of the nega-

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11 Does a phenomenon contain within it the potential for new life, as the acorn contains the potential of the oak tree? Ricoeur saw connections between this argument and Aristotle’s insistence upon eliminating the negative.
tive as that-which-is-not, because the concept of not-being is closely related to the negative: something which does not exist may come to be, as in new life. With the work of Brezzi we see how woman, if acknowledged, can come to be and can create new forces.

Later in his career, after resolving the search for a philosophy of negation into a linguistic hermeneutics of the negative at the heart of meaning, Ricœur worked with many women philosophers, most famously Arendt and also Cixous and Guérê. He made little explicit reference to women in his philosophy, yet it is clear that his work resonates with women’s experiences and very occasionally we find Ricœur talking or writing specifically about woman. He was of course highly sensitive to the viewing of the “other” and commented – for example – on the effect upon girls’ and women’s education of the confrontational secularism that he witnessed with regard to French laïcité. Yet we do not receive a possible philosophy of woman and man from Ricœur, despite the fact that many of his ideas can be used to ask questions about the possibility if such a thing. Ricœur never undertook to incorporate a feminist philosophy in to his work, so I should not chastise him for failing to achieve something he never set out to do; making the woman a clear presence in his writings.

With Brezzi, on the contrary, the woman is present in a clear and colourful way, wise and practical, present in all her physicality as “matter” – which Aristotle only allowed her in a negative way (weak, wet and passive). Brezzi gives us women who were active agents in their own lives, however tragic; Etty Hillesum, Olga Biglieri Scurto, Luce Irigaray, Martha Nussbaum and many others. She reaches back in time to Diotima, Antigone and others. She uses modern women, especially Irigaray, to interrogate the lives of women in the past. So is this all there is to it? If we write about women, will that help to instate them at the centre of life, where they deserve to be? Can we all be like Francesca Brezzi? If it were that easy, we would all have done it. There must clearly be a special ingredient or two – and it is Brezzi’s analysis of difference. Ricœur was a master of clarity with regard to difference, but again, not with regard to women. As Irigaray tells us in Speculum, in the cultural field the subject is male, and under that circumstance the woman becomes and remains an object when she tries to be an active agent in a world which is the man’s world. Is this why many of us do not act like Brezzi – we lack the ability to envision the world as a woman’s world and we lack the confidence to take our place there?

Brezzi asserts this necessity to act in her book on Barbara:

Le but ultime, pour la philosophie, sera la constitution d’une éthique qui, posant comme pierre angulaire les passions toujours réprimées et suffoquées, non dites, représentera une éthique nouvelle, l’éthique de la différence sexuelle et une religion nouvelle qu’Irigaray esquisse par des métaphores audacieuses, suggestives et somptueuses14.

Brezzi is both philosopher and activist and by her actions she makes use of what is necessary in order to lead women into the centre of life. She therefore uses both theory and practice, practical wisdom, and her GIO is an excellent example of this. The Osservatorio Interuniversitario sugli studi di genere, parita e pari opportunità brings together the three

15 F. Brezzi, Quand le futurisme est femme: Barbara des couleurs, cit. p.66.
state universities of Rome in order to establish deeper collaboration among the universities and enable them to focus together upon issues of gender, in the teaching curriculum, in the research agenda and in new courses. This organisation functions to support the students and the staff. We see then how different Francesca Brezzi is from the male sage as characterised by Irigaray in her book *In the beginning she was*. Irigaray shows how the sage:

>...distracts his attention from life that no longer becomes. The relation to her, to nature or woman, and to their divinity, is lacking*. 

Brezzi, by her writings and her actions, is a brilliant role model of an active, engaged woman. She takes the best of Ricœur and others and goes beyond them. She invites women to allow themselves self-affection, as Irigaray also does. In doing so she makes it more possible that we can support other women and also men to live together colourfully, justly and with love and creativity. In order to achieve this we have to make the metaphorical journey in one of Barbara’s futurist aeroplanes, so that we can see the patterns of possible female development clearly from above. Reading Brezzi, talking with her and working with her will help us to do that.

16 L. Irigaray, *In the beginning she was*. Bloomsbury, NY London 2013, p. 80.