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*H-France Review* Vol. 14 (October 2014), No. 170

Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricoeur and the Negation of Happiness*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. xvi + 184 pp. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN978-1-78093-636-9.

Review by Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, Carnegie Mellon University.

The British publisher Bloomsbury has brought out several important studies of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy over the past few years. Many of these studies, some written by well-established Ricoeur scholars such as David Pellauer or Dan Stiver, take advantage of the documents in the Fonds Ricoeur, an archive maintained at the Institute of Protestant Theology in Paris, which houses numerous original, unpublished texts by Ricoeur, along with his personal library. Alison Scott-Baumann's book is part of this new scholarship informed by the Ricoeur archive, and it is all the more authorized and informative as the author belongs to the scientific board of Fonds Ricoeur, and has had, in this capacity, access to key documents. Based on these documents, she proposes a theme that is original in itself, as it cannot be traced to any of the better-known works by Ricoeur: negation. The book is as much an argument that Ricoeur was interested in the complex subject of negation—even when he seemed to be treating other topics—as it is a presentation of what negation meant to him.

Yet despite its focus on negation, which inevitably reifies it, the book prudently stays away from a particular definition of negation. Indeed, we are not dealing with a concept or even theme, as much as with what Michel Meyer would call a "problematic," or Martin Jay a "force field," including several questions, interests, and ideas.[1] At the most basic level, negativity represents Ricoeur's trademark style of philosophical reflection, which involves trying to understand a phenomenon by what it is not first, and then by what it is. Elsewhere, however, negation is also an ontological condition, a linguistic concept, and a political phenomenon. Such widely different senses can create a rather unwieldy field of inquiry, but one of Scott-Baumann's contributions is to offer a careful reconstruction of the evolution of Ricoeur's inquiry into these matters. While reviewing the intellectual progression of Ricoeur's views on negativity, Scott-Baumann also offers an invaluable review of the entire Ricoeur archival corpus, connects it to his published works, combs it for crucial philosophical influences—from the main suspects, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger—and identifies distinct historical periods over which this work was composed. The result is that her book presents a comprehensive and coherent account of not just the concept or theme of negativity, but also of Ricoeur's philosophy.

This strength of the book is, ironically, also its weakness, when the author over-emphasizes and projects continuity across areas of Ricoeur's work where it might be more productive—both in the sense of capturing the intellectual diversity of the philosopher's work, and in the sense of taking him to task on matters of inconsistency—to consider the discontinuities. Scott-Baumann comes close to acknowledging such discontinuities when she discusses the "linguistic turn" in Ricoeur's thinking, and the shift in focus taking place in his interests from the late 1960s to the 1970s. The shift is marked by the introduction of "structuralism in his thinking about negation" (pp. 45). Negation plays a significant part in structuralist theories of language, which rely on binaries and dichotomous logic. The concept of difference, for instance, was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure to explain the creation of meaning in language, not as corresponding to a perceivable reality but *inside* the linguistic system per se, as one sign is different

from another, or one phoneme is different from another. In Ricoeur's essay, "Structure, Event, Word," this conception of negativity as difference is at the core of his views on the creativity of language.[2] His triptych structure-event-word is designed to identify language as simultaneously a set of restricted combinations (structure), an individual's intention to communicate a particular meaning through certain uses of language (event), and the novelty of linguistic expression as something grafted on the conventional (word).

Ricoeur's language theory is a sophisticated mix of structuralism, phenomenology, and select insights from Chomskyan generative linguistics. Several of his essays—"Structure, Event, Word" is only one example, but perhaps the most compelling one—articulate this combination in a way that foregrounds coherence across these paradigms. Indeed, Ricoeur was a dialectician-magician when it came to creating a dialogue among different schools of thought, and organizing productive encounters among seemingly incompatible theorists (*Oneself as Another*, for instance, is a brilliant example, unique perhaps for its synthesis of philosophy of language, philosophy of action, as well as phenomenology and ethics[3]). However, one can wonder whether these fusions are designed to smooth over interesting tensions, productive points of conflict, even incompatibility. Ricoeur's status as a great classic (or, as Baumann would put it, herself uncomfortable with this, a dead white man), should not discourage investigations into inconsistency in his philosophical thought.

Is the language-based concept of negativity identical, or even compatible with negativity defined in a moral sense? This is potentially a conflation that can obfuscate more than enlighten, and I think the author herself goes back and forth between approaching negativity as a strategy of difference—and one that can be potentially enriching—and a dimension of what Ricoeur called "the fallible man." When Scott-Bauman faults modern culture for its inability to respond to negation, she argues from a moral perspective herself. She insists that there is a "difference between negativity as a general attitude of hopelessness or desperation, and negation as an act of will, a rejection or contradiction, often expressed in language rather than through physical action" (pp. 30). But what is at stake in recognizing this difference? Is it that Ricoeur acknowledged it, or precisely that he himself did not? This question is not always clearly addressed in the book.

By far, the most interesting and original aspect of this book is its reach into socio-political issues. Scott-Bauman identifies as a philosopher-activist, and she is a passionate activist indeed, who cares deeply and feels strongly about matters such as educational policy, health, and social justice. Particularly compelling is the connection she makes between negativity as embodied in the philosophical concept of the "unhappy consciousness" and the condition known as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The concept of "unhappy consciousness" captured a malaise that reflects the negative sensibility of modernity—measuring one's worth by precisely what one lacks, or un-worth. As Scott-Baumann points out, the "consumer culture...is an unhappy consciousness machine [that] has influence over my ability to buy happiness, to buy drugs for happiness and shop for normality" (pp. 79). Drugs such as Ritalin—which is the standard treatment for ADHD—serve to confirm the existence of ADHD by offering a remedy that seems to offer normality to individuals who have been deemed abnormal. In reality, Scott-Baumann reminds us, Ritalin has the same effect on everybody, regardless whether they have been diagnosed with a disorder: enhanced power of concentration, increased alertness, reduced need for sleep. Gesturing toward Ricoeur's work on ideology and utopia—a connection that would have benefitted from elaboration—the author suggests that negativity, manifested here as abnormality, becomes an ideological distortion. Children who could be seen as energetic become, are viewed instead as "hyperenergetic," and the opposition is enabled by the mechanism of negativity that sponsors identifications as "fallibility" rather than "capacity," to use the Ricoeurian vocabulary. Readers might object to Scott-Baumann's dismissal of the scientific validity of ADHD—I do not—but will still have to pay heed to her somber lesson about the risks of defining one's worth as un-worth.

The style of this book deserves a few comments. On the one hand, it is a highly readable, relaxed, occasionally almost colloquial style, markedly different from much philosophical discourse that can be forbiddingly abstract and cryptic even for expert readers. On the other hand, the informality sometimes becomes awkward and leads to oversimplifications of arguments and ideas. Consider this example: “Hegel was not easy to get rid of and in fact Ricoeur concluded, unlike his peer Deleuze who believed it was possible to be free of Hegel, that it could not be done” (p. 10). The tendency to oversimplify is the unfortunate consequence of an otherwise refreshingly simple style, and it comes out also in Scott-Baumann’s contextualization of ideas, or historical positioning of Ricoeur’s concepts. For example, after reviewing in three sentences the main artistic works reflecting the mark of negativity in modernist aesthetic—in broad strokes, listing Picasso, Valery, Joyce, Beckett, and Sartre—the author introduces Hegel with stylistic fillers rather than carefully constructed argumentation: “There was much going on, especially in Paris. Another element in this heady mix was Hegel” (p. 13). Reading Hegel’s shaping influence on French philosophy in the 1950-1970 decade is an ambitious goal, and one well worth pursuing (as we know from reading other books that have also tried to do too much, and her discussion of Hegel is an example of what happens when an argument takes on too heavy of a claim: nuances get lost, both in content and in presentation).

Throughout the book, Scott-Baumann reads Ricoeur through the lens of his formative influences, a method especially adequate given Ricoeur’s own style of philosophizing, which only reaches a conclusion and formulates a thesis after long detours through the history of philosophy. At the same time, Scott-Baumann’s hermeneutic is also constrained by taking into account more marginal influences, at least in the sense of the availability of material about them. In this category I would include Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, who was discussed, apparently, by Ricoeur in a little-known text available at Fonds Ricoeur. Given the significant differences between Ricoeur and the Frankfurt Institute theorists, it would be fascinating to learn more about Ricoeur’s response.

It would be quite interesting to read Ricoeur’s work on negativity, not just through the lens of his direct sources of inspiration, or interlocutors, but also in conjunction with contemporary scholars who had similar philosophical convictions. Kenneth Burke, for instance, offered his famous definition of “man” in a series of philosophical propositions, of which one is: Man is the inventor of the negative.[4] Placing negation at the origin of his philosophical anthropology, Burke explained negativity as the mechanism that allows human beings to envision what is not already known, visible, and recognizable to us. Negativity, thus defined, is the engine of change. Burke also analyzes negativity as the expression of moral injunction (thou shalt not), but only to point out that we break injunctions. Burke’s views are not only compatible with Ricoeur’s belief in fundamentally positive concepts (such as recognition or forgiveness), but also with his belief in change and redemption as the main currents of our moral and political life. By raising such questions and opening up such possibilities, Alison Scott-Baumann has made a useful contribution not just to Ricoeur scholarship, but precisely to the philosophical-activism that she embraces.

## NOTES

[1] Michel Meyer, *La problematologie; que sais-je* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2010); Martin Jay, *Force Fields between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (London, Routledge 1992).

[2] Paul Ricoeur, “Structure, Event, Word,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1992).

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[4] Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action. Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

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ISSN 1553-9172