

Ricoeur on Plotinus: Negation and Forms of Populism

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Abstract

Plotinus developed a metaphorical approach to language that allowed him to offer a transcendent vision of God, a paradox that made clear how ineffably and incontrovertibly unclear God is – as is our relationship with Him. Ricoeur bridged the centuries by working intensively upon Plotinus in the 1950s-70s. He was seeking a philosophy of negation to help him understand the ways in which modern humans define themselves by lack, loss and longing and asked himself: 'what is not-ness?' Eventually Ricoeur abandoned his search for a philosophy of negation that would explain the negative turn in modern life, and developed a model of language and of dialectic within which the negative was embedded. By fully integrating negation into various language forms (metaphor, dialectic) he was implementing the conviction that we have to accept that the negative (that which we want to reject) is an integral part of each of us: blame cannot be attributed to others. Through his negation project Ricoeur applied existential thinking to negative theology and gave its structural strangeness a new application. Using Plotinus he ensured that opposing existential concerns can in fact be brought into discussion, when we accept the impossibility of the unity for which we long. I propose that he even created a strange kind of analogue between negative theologies and existentialist problems, adapting the powerful provisionality of Plotinus' dialectical and metaphorical devices, to help him address modern crises. Laclau believed that these crises can be solved, and Butler and Lorey concur, all three arguing for close attention to language, rheto-

ric and the people's potential. In this context we can instructively apply Ricoeur's adaptation of Plotinus to consider the emerging patterns around the Mediterranean, which we wish to negate and really must act upon: a mounting refugee crisis, the instability created by wars and an increasingly insecure workforce. The first step for a nation to take is to be able to talk about such matters and research on university campuses suggest that this is being inhibited by government regulatory practices. Attempts to reverse this trend render the extraordinary worlds of Plotinus and Ricoeur immensely useful. Using Plotinus he ensured that opposing existential concerns can in fact be brought into discussion, when we accept the impossibility of the unity for which we long. If we contrast this with the non-dialogic, argumentative and polarised discourse of populist political parties across Europe and round Plotinus' Mediterranean, we can see how potent it could be to re-introduce Ricoeur's response to Plotinus into modern discourse.

Keywords: Ricoeur, Plotinus, Negation, Populism

1. Introduction

Our world is unrecognizable from that of Plotinus. We walk around with wires coming out of our ears while we commune with small bright tablets in our hands, oblivious to the world around us and able to reach millions with a photograph of a kitten or the hint of a scandal. Plotinus knew the stars and the soil and his innermost thoughts, which are still of great interest but which have affected relatively few. Despite these shocking differences between his time and ours, one feature of this transformed digital world that can usefully be compared and contrasted with that of Plotinus is his and our use of language. Plotinus used metaphorical structures to present God as possessing both positive and negative and mutually contradictory fea-

tures, such as being both attainable and unattainable. Now many of us are convinced of a different Godhead: we believe that our communications and knowledge are stored in some beautiful, heavenly way, in the 'cloud' (Hu, 2015). This metaphor makes attractive the jumble of wires and electrodes that enslave us and rationalises the addiction.

Yet the online world enables us to behave almost without moral inhibitions in terms of the ways in which we use language: we can be aggressive, abusive and extremely opinionated with no evidence base and there need be no consequence of our actions. It's in the cloud, it's safe up there, don't worry about it. Two features of this addictive digital madness are remarkable and they are interconnected: our ability to influence many people and the fact that it is easier to catch people's attention by shocking them than by being reasonable, by 'moving fast and breaking things' as Taplin put it (Taplin, 2017). Thus many who use the internet in order to influence others will choose to be shocking precisely in order to reach the largest audience possible. Most significantly this form of communication is profoundly unbalanced; it does not facilitate communication, rather it suppresses it by its essentially non-dialogic nature. Moreover, unlike television or radio, the digital world is ungovernable and impossible to regulate and thus has no need to adhere to a moral standpoint, rather it offers the certainty of being right for no reason because other people 'like' what we 'post.'

All the more reason to study Plotinus now, because of his extraordinary capacity to encourage discourse that invites a provisional meontological debate. Meontological thinking, by going beyond an ontology and challenging the possibility that we can even have a belief system, confounds any certainty we may have about our position in the world. This can expand into a dialectical flow that opens up between ideas and remains open as long as possible to allow maximum exploration of problematic issues and possible bridging. Populist dis-

course, by contrast, brooks no dissent, is intolerant of ambiguity and uses passion and conviction to create binaries of 'us' and 'them' and give the impression of authority and authenticity. Using Plotinus, Paul Ricoeur ensured that opposing shores can in fact be connected, in contrast with the polarising Manichean dichotomies of the populist type that preclude connections. Such integrated thinking is only possible once we accept the impossibility of the unity we long for and the reality of the negative within us¹. Paul Ricoeur's work on Plotinus and the negative can contribute to a re-evaluation of the value of Plotinus. Ricoeur, surrounded in Strasbourg by the negative impulses of the Second World War, worked from 1946-1970 on negation and the negative. He published very little on this, but kept his notes in good order and they are available in the Fonds Ricoeur archives. His work on Plotinus and the negative can show us, like the eleven beautiful bridges in Isfahan that span the Zayanderud River, that there are many different ways to bridge the centuries.

2. Plotinus and Ricoeur on negation

Plotinus offers a resolution to the problem of nothingness both ontologically and by using metaphorical structures. We cannot know God and our knowledge of this is the ultimate nothingness to which we must surrender, and yet for Ricoeur something new opens with this ontological closure because Plotinus offers the possibility to consider nothingness in its positive aspects as well as its negative ones: the apophatic approach is life-giving because of God. This

¹ This work has recently become accessible through creation of the Ricoeur archives in Paris. Ricoeur abandoned his attempt after 20 years. I was able to research Ricoeur's negation for five years and through a one year Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship I published my findings Please see my 2013 book *Ricoeur and the negation of happiness* for more detailed analysis of Ricoeur's various explorations of different models of the negative, including Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plotinus and Kant. New York, London: Bloomsbury. Archives Ricoeur/Fonds Ricoeur, BIB.IPT: Inv 1, dossier 96 «La Négation» Cours (c.1952-1970).

provides both an *idea* and a *method*: the idea and the method will need to be kept together for theological purposes. For Ricoeur's work on metaphor and other language forms that use the negative they also need to be separated from each other.

The idea we have from Plotinus is that *nothingness* can be rich and wonderful by making it possible for us to accept our disunity with God (and Plotinus believed that this would eventually lead to unity). By extension Ricoeur will invite us to see this as a way of accepting our disunity with others and of struggling to improve the situation by using language ethically.

The method is based upon hermeneutics – *hermeneutically understanding the negative*; a method that offers various different types of negative impulse – privation, abstraction and negation. There is much contestation among scholars about what these three mean. Jugrin's 2014 analysis of the academic field shows considerable disagreement, although some concurrence about the way in which abstraction encapsulates best that which exercised Plotinus. In terms of modern application, privation may be the one closer to existential angst because it shows an ontological gesture towards definitions that allude to possible, potential and currently missing features. Ricoeur explored all three terms in lectures that span twenty years (c. 1950-1970). Towards the end of this period he offered negation as the dominant mode that encompasses three features that he identified in modern European society, haggard, hungry and suspicious after two world wars; our tendency to measure ourselves by loss, lack and longing.

Ricoeur focussed upon the apophatic tradition, using the term 'negation'. Ricoeur proposed to his students in 1959 in Strasburg, to explore the apophatic tradition in philosophy, which he detected as starting with the pre-Socratics, evolving in Plato and Aristotle, reaching its culmination in Plotinus and in modern times coming to domi-

nate European thought through the philosophy of Hegel. Ricoeur was particularly exercised by Aristotle's creation of binary models of structure and logic which he believed denied the possibility of the negative: 'everything must be either affirmed or denied' and 'it is impossible at once to be and not to be', and all other such premises (*Metaphysics* III 996b 26-30). Aristotle believed that there is no negative in physical nature: yet both Ricoeur and Derrida see that there is a preferred half in each binary logic pair and that the less preferred half can become negated, diminished, absented. Ricoeur believed that Aristotle, through use of division and contradiction, created the conditions of possibility for negating and social exclusion:

This famous problem of division is at the centre of a truly Aristotelian theory, which will play a significant role in the philosophy of negation, the theory of specific differences, by means of which one moves from a genus to a species by means of a negative action which consists in excluding a portion from the definitional field of the genus, in order to exaggerate the difference. This is what is in gestation².

In Ricoeur's later philosophy (such as *Oneself as Another*) there is room to see how this 'portion that is excluded' can become the other person, who is by definition not me and is therefore different from me. In fact while we are 'excluding a portion from the definitional field of the genus, in order to exaggerate the difference', the exaggerated difference can provide a mechanism for 'othering'. This

² AR/FR, BIB.IPT: Inv 1, dossier 96 «La Négation» Cours feuillet 8631 - *ce fameux problème de la division est à l'origine d'une théorie proprement Aristotélienne, qui jouera un rôle considérable dans la philosophie de la négation, la théorie des différences spécifiques, selon laquelle on passe d'un genre à une espèce par une opération négative qui consiste à exclure du champ de signification du genre une portion, et à faire saillir la différence. C'est ce qui est ici en germe.*

can lead to forms of negation such as we see with anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and with homophobia and sexism.

In his early work on negation, Ricoeur believed that a partial antidote to Aristotle's binary logic was the work of Plotinus. Plotinus worked through three different variations on the negative: the first is privation (*steresis*). We see in *Enneads* 2.4.13.12 the lack of a quality that one would expect e.g. we can expect a blind man to be sighted; privation has the possibility of positive possession of qualities, so this has ontological property as it relates to the characteristics that make a being into that being, or could/ should/ would give that being the expected characteristics that we would predict. Privation thus makes use of the alpha privative which denies the existence of something that should be there (Aristotle). Plotinus *Treatise* 6.3.(19) shows how privation is parasitic: it depends for its existence on that which it denies. Privation makes assertions about absences of phenomena and can only exist by making such assertions. Yet this can also be a positive component: it contains understanding of that which could be, although it is currently not in existence. Ricoeur adapted this model of the negative for modern existential use, in which the human is the centre, not God. Thus he sees how we often define ourselves by that which we have lost or that which we lack and that for which we long.

Plotinus also uses abstraction (*aphairesis*): *that which is not*: purification, notness as non-attributable; nothing can be attributed to or compared with the uniqueness of the notness of God; this characterises the first of two types of mystical experience for Plotinus i.e. mystical union with the One. Negative theology systematically dismantles the layers of physical existence to reveal the essential beginning. The second form of mystical experience is the intuitive knowledge of the intelligible realm... this resembles Husserl, of whom more later, and functions as a conceptual tool for proposing the essence of nonbeing, not being limited by that which it denies.

Thirdly, negation (apophasis) which we find in 6.7.38.1; 6.9.5.30; similar to abstraction, which shows how Aristotle used it to argue logically for lack of something. Negation is the term Ricoeur used to frame his ideas, perhaps because he was grappling with Aristotle and his logic of contradiction and also because negativity summed up the pessimistic mode of post-war Europe. All three terms (privation, abstraction and negation) bear a Wittgensteinian family resemblance. Because of negation's similarity with abstraction, and with the *via negativa*, which was a deep and fulfilling spiritual tradition, Ricoeur also saw the potential in the apophatic mode to enrich language. He sought to facilitate the use of linguistic forms like metaphor to create a deep understanding of the negative as a positive force and to anchor the negative within our daily speech acts.

For Ricoeur and his contemporaries there was a great deal at stake in the mid twentieth century – phenomenology was about to be swept aside by structuralism. Structuralist methodology provides excellent analytical tools, but structuralist thought brought its bullish assertion that language structures exist and determine the way we think and act. This could be construed as a renunciation of the part that humans play in creating their own language and thus renders human agency less culpable than it might be considered to be after the atrocities of war: in structuralism, it is almost as if language is to blame for people's actions, not the actors themselves. Ricoeur was influenced by the desire to understand ourselves based upon a very different approach: Husserl's phenomenology argued that through our perceptions we create the world we see and this can lead to great clarity but also to the self-doubt of 'phenomenological distress' - not knowing what or how I think about what I believe that I see (Ricoeur, 1969). After Marx, Nietzsche and Freud this involves doubting our perceptions, our motivations and therefore our capacity to be responsible agents. Husserl refused to engage with this hermeneutic of sus-

picion so Ricoeur returned to Hegel, then Kant, to struggle with Descartes' subject: object dualism, which is an artificial binary and yet integral to human thought habits (Scott-Baumann, 2009).

Ricoeur concluded that in order to think more clearly within this human habit of creating dialectical discourse we create dualistic tensions: he argued that we tolerate the positive/negative tension between the linguistic terms of a statement (developed by structuralism); we tolerate the tension between literal and metaphorical interpretations of the world around us (developed by Ricoeur into 'semantic and impertinent' insistence upon similarity in the face of difference) – and we tolerate the tension that the metaphor can create between being and not-being (is and is not: you are *not me* and our differences should not negate our relationship). At the heart of each of these polarised approaches he saw the positive/ negative pattern that we use to permit ourselves to reject or accept certain phenomena. We have existential tendencies to measure ourselves against who we are not, what we have lost and what we desire, rather than what /who we *are*. Ricoeur used a more mellow form of existentialism (warmed by his religious belief) to shape his hope that we can bear witness, attest to potential for good and enact improvements in the world. Yet I contend that the tools he developed can help us even without religious faith, and of course he developed other tools, such as the hospitable nature of good translation from one language to another (Scott-Baumann, 2010).

3. Affirmative negatives

By the mid-1950s Ricoeur concluded that there are at least three possible forms of negation, still dominated by Hegel, yet beginning to adopt a Kantian turn;

1. Otherness implied in the objective distinction between something and something else

2. Lessening of existence, subjectively experienced in the feelings of need, loss, regret

3. Transcendental negation: I am not what I am. I am not, as thought and freedom, what I am as finite point of view and as limited power of life.

In addition to these three truth-seeking properties of negation, which can become dangerously entangled in each other, when, for example, we erroneously use 2 and 3 to affect 1, Ricoeur was fascinated by Plotinus' use of metaphorical structures to present God as possessing both positive and negative features, such as being both attainable and unattainable. Here there is a metaphorical expression of will and essence, in which the soul (or the human spirit as *nous*) is a desire both for absence of difference, for unity (with self and with God) and for proof of lack of unity. Ricoeur shows also how this legitimises the heuristic value of metaphor – saying what something is by saying what it is not:

The metaphor here consists of postulating a duality and then suppressing it³.

Ricoeur also describes a movement within Plotinus that resembles metaphor:

a discourse that suggests something, by giving the energy to go beyond it, yet retains something of that which it has passed, to show what it is moving beyond⁴.

³ AR/FR –Bib. IPT, Inv. 1, d96 'La négation' Cours. Feuillet 9236-9258: 9243 96F/025.

⁴ AR/FR –Bib. IPT, Inv. 1, d96 'La négation' Cours. Feuillet 9236-9258: 9243 96F/025.

Such discourse creates a provisional, temporary meontological debate. This can expand into the dialectical gap that Ricoeur opens up between ideas and keeps open as long as possible to allow maximum exploration of problematic existential issues. Ricoeur applies existential thinking to negative theology and gives its structural strangeness a new application, namely the capacity to make ignorance, provisionality and frustration into useful features of our thought. Using Plotinus he ensures that opposing existential concerns can in fact be integrated, when we accept the impossibility of the unity we long for. I propose that he even creates a strange kind of analogue between negative theologies and existentialist problems. He balances the trilogy identified by Plotinus and clustered around not knowing the One, namely privation, abstraction and negation, with the trilogy that Ricoeur himself sees as clustered around modern human negation, which is seen in modern society as identifying ourselves through loss, lack and longing. Ricoeur concluded that we measure ourselves by what we have lost, what we do not possess and what we desire Ricoeur, instead of adopting a more hopeful approach. Ricoeur takes the ideas of Plotinus' differently defined negative impulses and uses them to show how deeply modern society is mired in negative impulses. By this argument Ricoeur also shows how very pessimistic modern society is in its approach to its dilemmas, when contrasted with Plotinus' liberating use of the negative to free us from the literalist constraints of trying to imagine God. Of course these are two different problems – existence versus salvation – and whereas Ricoeur, as a man of faith, would see the relevance of the latter for resolving the former, he accepted that this was not available to many modern individuals.

Other problems also faced Ricoeur in his attempt to use Plotinus to address the 'negative proof of being, the empty ontology of lost being' that Hegel had developed and that had become so pervasive in modern continental philosophy (Husserl by Ricoeur, 1950/1967: 210,

229). One of these is the question about God; if I have no God then (it seemed to Ricoeur in the 1950s-70s) there was always the possibility to become Sartrean in one's denial of God and even make an attendant hubristic attempt to replace God with one's own despair. Another problem is the issue about the many types of negation that Ricoeur located when attempting to develop a philosophy of negation, most of which he found contradictory and even self-contradictory; Heraclitus and Parmenides, Plato, Plotinus through to Hegel, Freud, Marx, Heidegger and Sartre and many others. He analysed the dichotomous approach adopted in many cultural traditions, where he was wary of the positive/ negative extremes adopted: he wrote for example about the way in which Plato exaggerated the differences between Heraclitus (flux and conflict) and Parmenides (stability and oneness), differences perpetuated by many later thinkers, including Heidegger. He was impressed by the way, in contrast, Plotinus used language to hold contradictory approaches without difficulty and indeed with the benefit of tolerating ambiguity. Plotinus tried to explain Parmenides' 'One' by describing all forms as emanating from the One who is 'beyond being', the Godhead as unknowable – a mystical position that tried to show how diversity and unity are the same and also different (*Enneads*, 5.1.8).

I want to explore the possibility that we can use these insights – Plotinus filtered via Ricoeur – to better understand the populist impulse that is convulsing Europe. This may even provide us with some tentative solutions. Populism is an overused term that may need to be abandoned because it cannot tolerate the epistemological burden placed upon it. Behind such distorted uses of language there are, of course, complex economic realities that have created inequalities, injustices and iniquities across the social spectrum. However, in this discussion I will use the term 'populism' as a form of shorthand to explain the linguistic phenomena that surround politics in this digital

age of soundbites and verbal posturing. Anselmi points out that attempts to reduce what is happening to a simple single category are both desirable and impossible. It is of course crucial that the simplification arising from intolerance of ambiguity that we see in populist discourse, must not be replicated in academic attempts to pin populism down. First, a brief overview of the major attempts to define and explain populism will be useful. What I can focus upon here is the way language is misused in order to exploit and perpetuate these situations. We respond or react, when faced with language without ambiguity, aggressive, violent and hate filled, far from the ambivalence of Plotinus. Anselmi argues that populism is much more than this, yet also includes a form of discourse: passionate, assertive, authoritative, charismatic and above all non-dialogic, which recalls Ricoeur's work on violence and language (Ricoeur 1967/74).

4. Populism

So what is populism? A common feature agreed upon by most commentators, is that populism is based upon a dichotomy of unexplained extremes: the belief that a 'pure' people is being deceived by a 'corrupt' elite, as well as the people demanding retention or re-possession of popular 'sovereignty' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Mudde and Kaltwasser also present populism as a 'thin ideology', i.e. unlike fascism, democracy or communism, in that it cannot stand alone and is parasitic upon another ideology: currently in Europe this 'other' ideology is often liberal democracy. It can even seem as if some democracies, while appearing disgusted with its demagoguery, nevertheless need populism as their shadow and collaborator. Laclau (2005) hopes for radical, positive left wing politics, whereby hope can inspire us and we can cast off the false binaries of difference (inequalities that cause friction) and equivalences (similarities that bind groups together) that he sees as intrinsic to political movements and

therefore also to populist discourse. If we despair of how this idealistic aspiration can become reality, then perhaps this shows that we are too much in thrall to populist discourse.

Laclau challenges Mudde and Kaltwasser and many other key writers for their tendency to denigrate populism. Laclau argues, on the contrary, that populism presents a legitimate version of the ways in which language and naming are used to replace conceptual analysis of realities, such that populist discourse can become a reality of its own, even when it represents unreality. Laclau shows us that, as Freud identified through mass psychology, we all have the populist impulse in us and thus that populism is simply a way of constructing the political that is part of us all in our social functioning. He also shows us, by analysing Canovan's work, that populism can be explained by analysis of the linguistic terms used to attempt to define it, but that this will fail because the essence of populism is in fact not separable from politics, but should not be relegated to the margins and is in fact at the core of political actions (Laclau, 2015: 7). The importance of language is clearly crucial, as we see in Minogue's description of populism as comprising an ambivalent (and therefore fundamentally unclear) relationship between rhetoric and ideology (Laclau, 2005: 11). This, for Laclau, reflects well the actual state of political realities when we attempt to map them onto our lives. The people, for Laclau, is the central category of all political action and thought: he accepts that the use of language is distorted by populist movements, as by all political groups, and pleads that we 'never succumb to the terrorism of words'.

There are different sorts of negative impulse to deal with here... privation (*steresis*) is ontological in form, so it fits Ricoeur's model of lack, loss and longing as defining the human condition. We long for a time with no populist rhetoric and believe it will never come. Abstraction (*aphaeresis*) and negation (*apophasis*) are more epistemological

in direction. We deny the populist voice its validity, or accord it too much power, as with the BREXIT referendum. Ricoeur developed other models of negation to resolve the existential post-war crisis, and these can all help us to understand Plotinus' potency for our problems. I propose that he even creates a strange kind of analogue between negative theologies and existentialist problems. In the course of his philosophical research Ricoeur found various different sources of negation, ranging from Parmenides' repeated use of the negative in order to assert the non-existence of the negative because of the Oneness of everything and the non-existence of anything else, to Plotinus' mystical forms of metaphor that painted the apophatic path of not-knowing God, in order to get to God. Adapting Aristotle, Ricoeur identified that the human condition consists partly of both willing and suffering from three negatives: loss, lack and privation. He identified the complexity of the situation, while finding it impossible to bring all the incompatible forms of negation together from their varied sources.

From Plotinus we derive negation as ontology and meontology, the study of what is not, or of what we do not know. Ricoeur wanted to leave behind the signs, *semata* (σηματα), and the symbols of Parmenides' Poem in order to seek the foundation, the radical origin of human existence. He travelled from ἀπειρον/ the infinite/ *apeiron* of Anaximander, through Plato's Good (beyond essence) to the One of Plotinus. Here he would explore ontological negation, through which he would then pass on the apophatic way, which shows that God does not exist in any way that we can understand. God is not to be understood and this is good; for a religious person, negation takes on a positive, apophatic form at this point. Here also is the negative impulse developing into dialectical argument and debate as integral and indeed core to Ricoeur's ethical work, including a turn back to the impossibilities of phenomenology and the Kantian struggle with percep-

tion. This develops into negation as a critical ethical philosophy, as in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Ricoeur, 1969/74: 310–314) and *From Text to Action* and, most crucial of all, the use of dialectic beyond Hegel's absorption of the negative, seeking instead less comfort, an oscillating provisionality that informs Ricoeur's turn back from hermeneutics to phenomenology, his first approach, with the close attention to the other, be it an aspect of one's split self, another person, an idea, a language or even and especially a belief. In all these patterns meontological debate can stretch out into the gap that Ricoeur opens up between ideas and keeps open as long as possible.

5. Plotinus as a spur to activism

A case study will help to illustrate my point. Students on campus in European universities have historically been able to open up spaces between ideas and keep the discussion open for as long as possible, in order to discuss difficult issues that may, initially, be too delicate to discuss beyond the university. However there has been increased concern from government and media that students on university campuses in Britain are actively inhibiting free speech. This led to a sense of moral crisis such that the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR), a cross parliamentary group, conducted an investigation into the matter of free speech on campus (JCHR, 2018). In fact research shows clear empirical evidence that securitisation on campus has played a major role in any chilling of speech that takes place (Heath-Kelly, 2017). Moreover the JCHR invited me to give evidence, agreed with my research findings (Scott-Baumann and Perfect, 2018) and requested the Charity Commission, who are in charge of charity regulation of student unions, to loosen their grip on the student unions in the interest of free speech. There is also evidence that the securitisation strategy known as the 'Prevent Duty Guidance' is having a chilling effect on Muslim students in particular (Scott-Baumann, 2017

a and b). This was a concerted attempt to challenge a use of negation that erroneously seeks to offload governmental fault and blame lack of free speech upon students. It is a populist device that asserts that the will of the people is being thwarted by privileged young people inhibiting free discussion of difficult issues that it would be in the interest of the nation to discuss. Yet in fact it is the Charity Commission, acting on behalf of the government that imposes a list of proscribed topics ranging from whale hunting to the state of prisoners held abroad, and Israel/ Palestine, and it is the Prevent Duty Guidance that, acting on behalf of the government, discourages discussions around Islam and Muslims, which includes the Middle East and foreign policy (Charity Commission, 2000; Hooper, 2017; Home Office Prevent Duty Guidance, 2015; Scott-Baumann, 2018).

I recommend, following Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey, that we construe this situation as an affirmative basis for emancipatory politics, precisely because it also poses an indefeasible existential threat. The young will inherit this world and we are not allowing them to debate it. We can locate the Mediterranean that Plotinus knew (coastlines now tormented, attempting to both welcome and rebuff migrants) inside our own British cultural imagination and demand social justice for those among us who are 'othered' and thus alienated (Scott-Baumann, Contractor, 2015). By creating safe spaces for the study of our incoherent responses to confusing situations and facilitating currently forbidden discussions on British campuses about Syria and its neighbours, we will acknowledge that Plotinus' impermanence and difference define our existence and are necessary negatives. Ricoeur developed this approach partly through his use of Plotinus and his interpretation of Plotinus as part of a phenomenologico-hermeneutic tool can give us the confidence and the curiosity to enjoy provisionality, not-knowing and a refusal to inhabit starkly dichotomous debates of positive/ negative tension. As Laclau asserted,

vagueness and indeterminacy are integral to the lives we lead (Laclau, 2005: 67).

6. Conclusions

What is 'not-ness'? Ricoeur wondered, as had Plotinus, whether this can be a positive attribute, like colour or texture... Ricoeur challenged the established dichotomy presented by many thinkers from Plato to Sartre, and he challenged them at the heart of the debate about negation by criticising their polarisation of Parmenides and Heraclitus, wherein the former is completely focussed and positive and the latter completely negative and chaotic. For Ricoeur this was another way of trying to understand the modern negative turn, initiated by Hegel and exemplified by Sartre and which he found desperately unproductive. Yet he published very little on this topic.

In the late 1940s Ricoeur wanted to develop a philosophy of negation. His stated aim was to find the source of the negative. He hoped that at its core he would find the human spirit affirming itself. He was also perplexed by the idea of nothingness; is it a 'bad' thing that we should deny, as Parmenides argued, or is it a good thing as understood by Plotinus in the powerful humility of the apophatic way to God. Alternatively, could the negative be an inevitability of existence, to be managed as best we can, as Sartre saw it? Or, is it simply our fear of pain and death?

He lectured and wrote notes for over twenty years on negation. He found the roots of this thought in his early training in pre-Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian and Neo-Platonist philosophy and used this to identify specific problems within modern philosophy, starting with Hegel, then Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. Is negation the opposite of something? Is it the other person? Is it nothingness?

Ricoeur concluded that there are many forms of negation from different sources; negation can, for example, be manifested by *the other person* –whom I will never understand (Plato); it, negation, can itself be rejected, *negated* (Parmenides and Aristotle); it can be *the powerful contrast* between ideal and real (Hegel); it can be *willed spiritual deprivation* (Plotinus on not being able to know God) and it can be *existential nothingness* (Sartre). Plato considered that statements which seem false are presumed *false and different*, and other people as *non-being and different*, because in neither case do we fully understand them. This renders negation, in the Platonic sense, vitally important as we need to acknowledge its important role in identifying whether we know the truth about something or not, yet Plotinus took this further into unknowing. However, for the ancient philosophers, negation was more to do with knowledge. It was often epistemological and not the direct ontological threat to personal identity and thought that it has become for us now. Ultimately Ricoeur concluded that the different sources of negation stemming from Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Kant and Hegel are incompatible: this tension contributed to the development of his dialectical model, which permitted him to hold incompatibilities in some sort of stability while analysing them, as in his work on structuralism and hermeneutics. However he found it impossible, in the end, to develop a philosophy of negation, because of the difficulty in making the assertion that he desired, namely that there is a power of affirmation, of 'yes' hidden in all negation. Yet as a result of twenty years spent with Plotinus and many others he was able to reject a Hegelian approach, which risks removing the frightening yet creative energy from the negative within us all by absorbing it, containing it within a dialectical form in which all is as it should be and has the totalising effect that Parmenides sought.

What Ricoeur achieved instead of a philosophy of negation was an immensely valuable critique of modern philosophy from Descartes

onwards, by using the classical problematics from Plotinus and others. The One (Godhead) as sought by Plotinus and defined by him as ineffable, is inextricably linked with the negative, because God must be 'not understood', 'not known' in order that we can hope for a glimmer of understanding about Him. If we know nothing, bit by bit, we may end up with a gleam of the stripped clean God, or the stripped clean Platonic Good. Ricoeur developed a philosophy that invites us to seek out the good, and also the other, the negated, the hated and the rejected possibilities. This approach is based partly upon the Neoplatonic method of challenging dichotomous, polarised language and seeking the benefits of the metaphor (and other forms of language) that bring together that which is through that which is not. This methodology of not knowing can help us to face populism as an integral part of ourselves, rather than as an alien aberration to be censured and rejected⁵.

This phenomenon is visible in daily politics, as I show with my research and activist engagement with government on free speech on campus. We should use this extraordinary way of thinking to challenge our futures, as seen in the governmental duel between Brexiters and Remainers, neither of whom make their position clear except in its being diametrically opposed to the 'other side', an unfortunately banal, unrealistic and dangerous example of Aristotle's binary logic. This is not to argue that those who fear Brussels or immigrants are right or wrong, rather it is to propose that the omnipresent negativity that distorts these arguments needs to be addressed. One way of attempting this is to engage with the discourses around us: the non-dialogic rhetorical devices used in populist discourse can be understood and countered with reasoned debate if we can have the confidence and courage partly available from accepting our own negative

⁵ AR/FR –Bib. IPT, Inv. 1, d96 'La négation' Cours. Feuillet 9208.

ways of thinking (our fear and our sense of loss, lack and desire) and partly from a Plotinian acceptance that it is impossible to know properly what we try to grasp. We have to be tolerant of ambiguity and embrace unknowing, nevertheless working pragmatically and ethically towards societal improvements. The internet has created amplification of all these problems, which are not addressed by any of these thinkers. Whether or not we can subscribe to Laclau's belief that populism can facilitate a new, active era of politics in which equivalence and difference are addressed directly depends entirely on whether we, the people, take up this challenge; control the internet and influence our governments as part of a truly populist movement.

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