ON TRANSLATION (II)

A brief discussion of my book and the ideas about translation behind it.

My aim in writing my book (*Protagoras and Meno*)[1] was to translate these two dialogues as accurately as I possibly could. I believe that that these translations are the most accurate available. (That may seem a bold claim, but it follows straightforwardly from the assumptions of almost any translation. If I thought that any part of either text could have be translated more accurately some other way, then that's how I would have done it.) I think that they differ in approach from some of the more common styles of translation of Greek texts,[2] and not just cosmetically. They aim to make a contribution to ancient philosophy by advocating a distinct approach to translation in general and by proposing new interpretations of several philosophically important passages in these dialogues in particular.

In my view many of the problems in the interpretation of Greek philosophical texts should be dealt with during the process of translation itself, not afterwards. As it is, too much interpretation has to be done after translation because the translations do not make clear sense and have to be carefully explained to students, who cannot be expected to understand them without a great deal of purely linguistic guidance. Plenty of examples spring to mind. Consider the way we teach Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In my experience as a teacher, students often cannot understand translations of that text unless I first explain to them the meaning of a large mass of strange terms (or familiar terms put to strange uses): temperance, continence, virtue, munificence, liberality, happiness, etc. Teaching the text thus becomes partly an exercise in teaching vocabulary instead of philosophy — and it is an illusion that those two things might be the same. Puzzling through linguistic questions in the original Greek is certainly part of getting to grips with the philosophical ideas (sometimes); but puzzling through artificially obscure English is

[1] I wrote the translations and the notes and glossary; my supervisor at Oxford, Lesley Brown, wrote the introduction.

[2] That's not to say that my approach is unique. On the contrary, I consider myself to be working within a tradition, exemplified by W. C. K. Guthrie, Robin Waterfield, Rex Warner, Desmond Lee, and others. At any rate these are the people that I learnt most from about how to translate Greek. But in some important respects I depart from all of them (if I did not, then there would be no point in my translating these texts anew.) I am less traditional in my renderings of Greek ethical vocabulary than any other translator.

entirely different, and in my view of limited or no value. I think we should read the texts in Greek, or in English, but not in a language that tries to be both while lacking the advantages of either.

Strictly, I am a pluralist on this matter. I accept that in some pedagogical contexts we may want texts that are partial translations, i.e., that contain Greek terms or English terms of art that stand for Greek terms. If a teacher who is expert in Greek is explaining a text of Plato or Aristotle to students who are not, then a partial translation can be useful, because the instructor might prefer to give their own view of what the Greek terms mean rather than have to work with someone else's view. That practice is common in ancient philosophy and so are the texts that cater to it. But there are two things to note about it. First, the fact that partial translations can be useful in that way does not alter the fact that they are partial. A partial translation is by definition not a complete or accurate translation, because terms left in the original Greek (or in the form of artificial terms of art) do not qualify as translation at all, and so are not even aiming to be accurate. Rather, such texts arise precisely when the translator feels at a loss as to how to translate the terms accurately, or is otherwise reluctant to offer any definite view on their meaning. Second, partial translations are useful in some contexts and in some ways, but not in others. They are no use to teachers who are not expert in Greek and therefore in no position to explicate them, and they are no use to students who are not being led through the text by teachers who are expert in Greek — in other words, they are useless to a large proportion of potential readers and teachers of these works.

My versions aim to be complete rather than partial translations. They contain no Greek terms and virtually no terms of art. (I suppose 'sophist' is technically a term of art; but I might also claim that it is really a proper noun.) They at least aim to be accurate, rather than giving up on that task. No doubt they contain mistakes. But my view is that it's better to try, and fail, than not to try. I worked on the principle that the English text should be as clear as the original, and should have the same meaning, in normal English, as the original, rather than preserve elements of Greek that mean nothing to Greekless readers or several different things according to the choices of expert readers. As such, these translations are not primarily intended for teachers of Plato who are expert in Greek and want to explain the Greek terms or Greek grammatical idioms themselves or for

classes taught in that way. Instead they are intended for instructors who want to teach the texts in English, and to students who are not being assisted by teachers who are expert Hellenists. But secondarily they are also intended to be useful to people (students or professional scholars) who *are* expert in Greek, but in a different way; namely, in so far as they make clear and sometimes novel proposals about what the Greek text means. In fact, in this respect they are more useful than the partial or 'literal' translations, which typically have the goal of not telling expert readers anything that they don't already know. (Here I was influenced by my own experience. When I was learning Greek I always found complete translations in idiomatic English much more instructive, purely philologically, than partial or 'literal' translations. The former offered solutions to linguistic problems that I was not yet competent to solve on my own. Literal translations, by contrast, are written in such a way that intermediate level students of Greek can easily construct them by themselves. They leave the problems unsolved.)

I'm aware that plenty of scholars do not agree with my philosophy of translation. This is an important aspect of the book. It means that my translation might, in some small way, contribute to the debate over how to translate, and especially how to translate ethical ideas across cultural and historical barriers. As I said, I am pluralist in these matters and am at most claiming that there should be some space within ancient philosophy for translations like these, and for the more optimistic approach that these versions strive to put into practice, and that I will now elaborate a little further.

It should be apparent that my translations are easier to follow than most others. One might assume that my main aim was to make Plato more 'readable,' or to 'modernize' the text, as if that were an end in itself. Furthermore, those scholars who favor literal translation often lay claim to more than the pedagogical usefulness I discussed above. They sometimes claim that readability implies a compromise with accuracy, while awkwardness is a natural result of accurate translation. I think that this bolder claim on behalf of literal and partial translation is a major mistake, and that it represents a misunderstanding of what readability is and what it implies. I do think, as it happens, that Plato writes in a fairly easy style (especially in the earlier dialogues) and, yes, I tried to convey that style. But that is irrelevant to what makes a translation 'readable.'

Readability is not a stylistic matter. In my view the reason that translations of Plato (and Aristotle) are difficult for students to understand, when they are, is most often not because of their style but because they are inaccurate, plain and simple. Here is how I made the case for this view in recent discussion:[3]

We should dispense with the idea that readability is an aesthetic feature of a translation. As a translator, I have no direct interest in the aesthetic qualities of a translation of [Plato]. A passage of English is readable simply if it is clear. That's really all we mean by 'readable'. And it's hard to read if it is not clear. Again, that's all we mean. Now, if you want to convey the meaning of the original accurately, you have to start by conveying *some* meaning or other *clearly*. If you aren't conveying *any* meaning clearly, then *a fortiori* you certainly can't be conveying *the* meaning *accurately*. It follows that any accurate translation must be readable (i.e., clear) and that no translation that is unclear (i.e., not readable) has any chance at all of being accurate — unless the original itself conveys no clear meaning. And I don't think the latter condition holds for any part [of these dialogues].

Take for example my translation of the Greek term *aretê*, which is often translated 'excellence' (especially in versions of the *Meno*). I have most often used the English gerund 'being good.'[4] That makes the arguments much easier to follow than versions that use 'excellence.' And my version is easier to follow not because 'being good' is more colloquial or modern than 'excellence' but because the word in question does not mean 'excellence,' and does mean (something much more like) 'being good.' (For the same reason my version is also usually easier to follow than translations that use 'virtue'; it gets somewhat closer to what the Greek is saying.) Likewise for any translation of any

[3] The full discussion can be found in the February and March 2008 threads of Michael Pakaluk's *Dissoi Blogoi* ancient philosophy website (dissoiblogoi.blogspot.com) under the heading "translation workshop".

[4] This was not my innovation. It was used a few times by Waterfield in his translation of the *Gorgias*, and throughout the entire *Meno* in the *Reclam* German translation (where the translator specially coined the term *gutsein*, i.e., 'good-being'). Also, plenty of translators have for some time used 'goodness' to translate *aretê*, at least in some contexts, and 'being good' is a synonym of that translation. In fact, I now regret not occasionally using 'goodness' in my own versions, in contexts where it would have been syntactically more convenient. At the time of writing I had not yet quite shaken off the very unhelpful dogma of 'consistency' in translation.

recurring term, syntactical feature, or idiom: if it systematically produces a ‘more readable’ result, then it does so only if it is more accurate, and for no other reason.

There is a simple principle at work here. An accurate translation of a frequently occurring term or idiom will make sense of its instances, exactly as a correct decipherment of a given element in a secret code will make consistent sense, while an inferior decipherment will make proportionately less sense, and a incorrect decipherment will make no sense at all. There may be exceptions to this principle, of course, but it holds good as long as the original text made sense in the first place. This has little or nothing to do with style. It just follows from the fact that the more accurate a translation the closer it gets us to the thought of the original, and the original thought typically makes very good sense. All translators of modern, living languages — who, unlike translators of Plato, are fully bilingual and perfectly placed to translate as accurately as is humanly possible — invariably take this principle for granted. That is why ‘literal’ translation of the kind we routinely tolerate in ancient philosophy is universally regarded as unacceptable in the context of modern translation entirely regardless of the grammatical or cultural distance between the two languages.

This important and in my view very sound principle is often neglected in ancient philosophy because the study of dead languages and ancient cultures has been strongly influenced by theories of linguistic and cultural relativism, and because those theories can be advocated in a vacuum (i.e., the people best placed to refute them are all dead). Translators sometimes think that it is acceptable for our translations of these ancient texts to make only rather limited sense to us (prior to complex further explanation) on the grounds that many of the terms or even syntactical idioms are just untranslatable. Ethical terms, in particular, can seem to be untranslatable to those who accept a progressivist ethical theory, i.e., one that commits us to the idea of strong cultural and historical development in ethics. Such theories have had a long hold over ancient philosophy. They go back (at least) to German classical scholarship of the nineteenth century (and crop up in Nietzsche’s famous genealogical theories) but have been more recently and most robustly advocated by Bruno Snell and Arthur Adkins — and it is the latter’s work (especially *Merit and Responsibility*) that has most influenced, directly and indirectly, Anglo-American methods of translation. According to Adkins, ancient Greeks were

basically pre-ethical; their notion of the 'good' man (note the quotation marks) was fundamentally different from our own and had little or nothing to do with moral goodness. He thinks that Homeric Greeks were literally amoralists (hence his famous saying: "Scratch Thrasymachus, and you find Agamemnon") and that even as late as Thucydides we find almost no trace of familiar ethical interests, or of the idea of specifically moral goodness. On this view the idea of moral goodness, and our feelings about it, arose at a precise moment in recent history, under the influence of particular thinkers like Socrates and particular political changes like the rise of democracy: morality in its modern form did not exist in earlier periods.

When I was working on *Protagoras and Meno* I found that even very recent editions and translations of the dialogues — Taylor's *Protagoras* (1988), Canto-Sperber's *Meno* (1999), Sharples' *Meno* (1985), Waterfield's *Meno* (2005) — and the great majority of scholarly articles on the dialogues accept and follow large portions of Adkins' extraordinarily bold view. I have also found that his theories and its consequences are often taken up by people who are not aware where they came from. The widespread tradition of treating *aretê* as meaning 'excellence', for example, is deeply embedded in the ideas that Adkins champions: it aims to expunge the moral connotations of term 'virtue', and is tailored to advocate the progressivist view of ethics through translation itself. (As anyone familiar with the practice knows, the idea behind it is not just that the Greeks talked about excellence all the time, which would not be all that remarkable, but that their notion of general excellence *was as close as they ever came to the concept of moral goodness* — which would be utterly astonishing if it were true.) As a translator's convention it is widely followed even by people (students, for example) who have never read Adkins and don't know its origins or what it commits them to. More generally, the progressivist view of ethics has generated the idea that we just shouldn't expect Greek ethical terms to correspond to English ones — that the fit will be very loose and approximate at best — and that we should therefore be suspicious of translations of Greek ethical works that sound at all normal. So it has served as a constant background excuse for weird and clumsy and lazy translation.

It will be obvious that my translation is in part premised on rejecting Adkins' view entirely. I have several reasons for that rejection. The first is that I never found the

arguments for it very convincing considered in themselves. As I see it, Adkins' argument works by taking numerous small excerpts from Greek texts and imposing one very distinctive interpretation on them (strongly influenced by the theory itself) even when other more plausible readings readily suggest themselves. The argument is thus circular. (There is a good example of this circularity in the effect of Adkins' reading of the Simonides poem from the *Protagoras*, which many scholars subsequently followed. Adkins treats the poem, according to a very idiosyncratic reading of it, as constituting strong evidence for his theory. But in other contexts, i.e., in the writings of other scholars on the poem, it is Adkins' theory that is now treated as a good reason for reading it in that odd way.) Second, I am influenced by scholarly and philosophical critics of the progressivist model, especially by Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*. Third, I always found that the process of translation itself — which is a crucial test — does not bear out the progressivist view, and provides ample evidence for the fundamental similarity of Greek and allegedly 'modern' ethical concepts. As I see it, if these ethical (or quasi-ethical) Greek terms are untranslatable, then the attempt to translate them should lead to insuperable difficulties. But it doesn't. Conversely, the conspicuous failure of 'excellence' to make sense of the philosophical arguments about *aretê* is strong evidence that something is wrong with the theory behind it. I have also been influenced by the fact that the progressivist view has been contradicted by the evolutionary — that is to say, Darwinian — account of human character. A large amount of evidence compiled in several independent scientific disciplines — all of it since Adkins — now suggests that human ethical dispositions are not built and rebuilt from scratch by cultural developments, but are substantially innate, stable (at least in their variations around common themes) and universal. Of course, there has to be room in any sensible meta-ethical theory for cultural variation, but there is certainly no room in the Darwinian consensus for Nietzsche's and Adkins' idea that human beings until very recently had no interest in justice per se *at all*, and no attachment *at all* to distinctively 'moral' virtues and no interest *at all* in the morally good man. Some Darwinians claim on what seems to be good evidence that our sense of fairness and feelings about fairness, for example, are literally millions of years old. This cannot be squared with any reading of Adkins' progressivist view, which places the birth of our interest in fairness in the 400's BC. It

can be squared with the much more modest idea that different societies express our innate interest in fairness in different ways and have significantly varying notions of what exactly counts as fair. (And it is important to remember here that we easily notice even very small differences.) But that has nothing in common with the progressivist view, which is not about variation in moral attitudes but about the origin of morality *in toto*. As such it is a rival of the Darwinian explanation of that origin and completely incompatible with it. Some ancient philosophers seem to me to be unaware of these important developments; some are aware of them but insist — without any plausibility — that they have no bearing on our readings of ancient ethics or on the meta-ethical theories of philosophy. In my own view the Darwinian claims could hardly be any more relevant to these questions and need to be acknowledged and (if we wish to dismiss them) properly addressed. Once again, I strictly take a pluralist view on this, claiming only that there should be some space for exploring the evolutionary view within ancient philosophy. My approach — and my whole current line of research — doesn't stand or fall on these theories being correct, merely on their being worth looking into, which they manifestly are.

Incidentally, what I am here calling the 'Darwinian' view, namely that ethical dispositions are both natural (or partly natural) and as old as the species, rather than a recent and cultural invention, is held in that broad outline by the very ancient thinkers that I am applying it to. Plato's proposal in the *Meno* is that ethical intuitions ('hazy opinions about how to be good') are innate rather than learned, and immeasurably ancient. Aristotle likewise proposed a strong form of ethical nativism, and the vast antiquity and universality of our moral interests is both asserted and brilliantly accounted for in the famous story in the *Protagoras*. My view is thus historically sensitive, and sympathetic to the assumptions of the philosophers I write about, and objectively a modest position for an ancient philosopher. I agree with the Greeks on this question. Indeed, it always amazed me that the progressivist view — which is supposed to be based largely on what Greeks say about themselves — was able to overrule such an impressive weight of completely unambiguous ancient testimony.

To return to our wider discussion: literal translation is also sometimes advocated on the basis of strong linguistic relativism. The idea is that preserving the exact syntax or

the precise grammatical forms of a language (even if the result is bizarre in English) shows the reader something very important about the original thought. That would be true if and only if the vocabulary and grammar and syntax of one's particular language constrained and shaped the content of one's thoughts in some very important way. That idea was advocated in the 1950's by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf,[5] for example, and seems to have had a major influence over ancient philosophers. (My former teacher Jonathan Barnes takes very seriously the idea that we can deduce from Greek color *vocabulary* the astonishing fact that Greeks had a radically different visual *experience*, generated by their different color concepts.[6] That kind of claim comes straight from the work of Sapir and Whorf.) But strong evidence compiled by recent work in linguistics and cognitive science has suggested that the theory of linguistic relativism is, basically, wrong.[7] Therefore the case for literal translation of the syntactical and grammatical kind has been greatly weakened.

If these various theories do not stand up to scrutiny, as I believe, then we in fact have no solid grounds for thinking that Greek ethical terms or syntactical idioms are untranslatable, and instead we should strive to make our translations of these texts sound normal and familiar. We must be sensitive to cultural variation, but not use it as an excuse for failing to translate as well and as accurately as we can. If a fairly detailed suite of human ethical concepts and dispositions are stable across time and culture, then we should expect Greek ethical terms to be fundamentally familiar to us. Therefore the normal rules of translation apply (i.e., the ones used by translators of modern languages): if our translations of these texts do not make good sense to us, then that suggests only that they are inaccurate. Conversely, we should assume that the only way to make our

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[5] E.g., B. Whorf, *Language Thought and Reality*, MIT, 1956; E. Sapir, *Culture, Language and Personality*, UC Berkeley, 1964.

[6] In a recent bestseller in the UK that set out "popular misconceptions," each headed by a question, one of the questions was "What color was the sea in ancient Greece?" The answer, the author claimed, was *grey* — on the grounds that Homeric Greek doesn't seem to have a word for blue! My colleague Ajume Wingo also speaks a language that has no word for blue. But I was not shocked when he reported to me that the sea had, nevertheless, always looked blue to him.

[7] The overthrowing of linguistic relativism began with Chomsky's theory of innate grammar, which is now the, or at least a, mainstream scientific view. I am more directly influenced by Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1995), and *The Stuff of Thought* (2008). Pinker argues that linguistic relativism is a combination of true claims that are modest and unremarkable, and striking and revolutionary claims that are false. This may not be right; but it is at least worth looking at his arguments.

translations accurate is to devise translations of words, phrases, and idioms that systematically make the resulting text as intelligible as possible. That is the approach that I favor — at the very least with the idea that it should be allowed to exist among other approaches that have enjoyed a very, very long occupation of the field.

I hope this gives some account of why I feel that the book potentially makes a contribution to the discipline beyond providing people with a user-friendly English text of these dialogues. In effect, I regard it as an exposition of a distinctive theory of translation, and as making a quite good case for that theory. It adopts the theory by what it attempts to do, and it provides evidence for the theory in so far as it succeeds. I hope that the theory will be noticed even though it is implicit. I myself never read a translation of any ancient text without noticing the principles upon which it has been written. When I find a novel approach to a problem that has interested me, I automatically evaluate the success of that approach by the results it has produced in the translation.