ON TRANSLATION (I)

[This is a longer version of the note that was published with my translation of *Protagoras* and *Meno*. Here I say a little about my views on 'literal' translation.]

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The *Glossary* provides a list of some of the important words and phrases used in the two dialogues. It is aimed at students of ancient philosophy who are reading other Greek texts and works of scholarship on those texts, as well as at people learning ancient Greek. It shows how I have translated some of the key terms, and gives various other possible translations in each case, and in particular, where applicable, the *traditional* translations, which are widely used, and which it is important for serious students of Plato to be familiar with. I mean the traditional terms like 'virtue', 'excellence', 'vice', 'temperance', 'prudence', 'justice', (for *dikaiosúne*), 'wisdom' (for *sophía*) and various others. Roughly speaking, this translation is similar in style, and method, to the excellent translation by W. C. K. Guthrie that it replaces in this series, except that I have converted most of that traditional terminology into more modern equivalents. So, in non-technical passages, the two translations are often very similar; in the more philosophical passages, they are completely different, and this version tends to be a little easier to understand. Apart from that, I follow Guthrie in aiming to produce clear and normal-sounding English, in the belief that that is the only route to accuracy, and the only way of enabling the reader, or student, to study Plato's ideas and arguments closely. The following is a more detailed account of some of my views on translation, for people who may be interested in such things.

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The traditional renderings of Greek philosophical vocabulary just mentioned are not accurate, or literal. To my knowledge, no translator who uses them ever claims that they are. They are often based so closely on the Latin translations that they require an actual knowledge of Latin to be fully understood. In other cases, they are the earliest English translations, first devised in the sixteenth century. They are used, in spite of their acknowledged inaccuracy, because of the very important advantages of continuity of terminology with medieval philosophy, as well as with the huge body of scholarly

commentaries and articles on Greek texts. So I should alert the reader to the fact that I have decided not to use them here (or at any rate not all of them) and instead to translate the Greek terms into standard English, without any regard to either the Latin equivalents or the earlier English tradition. The same policy has been followed, to varying degrees, in other translations of Plato, and seemed reasonable here partly because there are plenty of English translations of these two dialogues — some published very recently — that *do* use the traditional terminology, so that there was certainly no point in writing yet another one.

The problem with the traditional terms, as every scholar knows, is that they are, in some cases, obsolete or moribund as English words (or never genuinely accepted into English in the first place), and therefore very unclear and at times faintly comical (e.g., 'temperance', 'virtue', 'holiness', 'munificence'); in other cases they are still widely used, but have shifted in meaning over the centuries, to the point of being inaccurate in the roles that we impose on them in these texts (e.g., 'justice', 'happiness', 'wisdom', 'evil', 'fine', 'political'). The result of these two effects is a weird hybrid (part Latin, part sixteenth-century English, part modern English) that tends to be extremely difficult to understand, making it correspondingly difficult to follow the arguments at all closely.

Besides the Latin-based philosophical terminology, it is pretty common in translations of Plato (even the most recent) to find a form of English that is, more generally, latinized. This is probably a matter of stylistic consistency; but it is also a long-standing aesthetic preference. By 'latinized' I mean, loosely, that high register (often latinate) words — *tolerate*, *compose*, *proceed, engage in discussion*, *assert*, *assent, proposition*, *investigate*, *despise*, *inquire*, *respond*, *benefit, commit injustice, act justly* — are often preferred over more ordinary and more common equivalents — *put up with*, *put together*, *go on*, *talk*, *say*, *agree*, *idea, look into, look down on, ask, answer, do good, do wrong, do what's right.* In this version, I tried to present tone and register accurately, which means tending more to the second sort of vocabulary. Plato takes great care to capture the register and feel of spoken Greek at least most of the time. Ideally then, an English version should not contain too much that an English speaker could never say, and, conversely, should generally favour common forms. High-register English, though elegant and dignified and pleasing in various other ways, by definition often contains things that we do not say, or

which, if used in spoken language, make the speaker sound pompous, stiff, or crazy. That makes it a from perfect representation of Plato's style. A more demotic register also brings the small accidental bonus of often making the translation of particular terms more *literal*. The following examples will show what I mean. All the higher register versions are taken from Jowett's or Guthrie's translations of the two dialogues. They illustrate the tendency to set Plato's tone impossibly high; a tendency that those translators show most of the time, but not always (and much less in Guthrie's case). Conversely, the final column represents a style I try to use much of the time, but not exactly all of the time.

Greek	literal	Jowett or Guthrie	here
légein, phánai	to say	J, G: to assert, to contend, to maintain [that]	to say
epi-títhesthai	To set upon/to lay into	J: to pursue his attack upon	to lay into
eis-bállein	to throw in	G: to insert	to throw in
an-échesthai	to hold up [of]	J, G: to tolerate	to put up with
haúte toútou aitía	That [is] the cause/explanation of that	J: I have explained to you the reason of this phenomenon	there's your explanation for that
di-ex-eltheín	to go out through	J, G: to recite	to go through
apo-rrhoaí	from-flowings	J, G: effluences	out-flowings
dia-lek-tikó-teron	more-talk-through-ish-ly	G: more conducive to discussion; J: more in the dialectician's way	in a more talk-it-through kind of way
hos ego phemi	As *I* say	G: on my submission	if you ask me

This gives a rough idea of one minor respect in which my version differs from what is, in a loose sense, the orthodox high register of Platonic translation — and in this I am following the lead of certain other recent translators, especially those who have written for this series. I have explained this point in some detail because readers of translations often want to know how *literal* they are, either because they like, or don't like, literal translations. So I warn the reader that I certainly do like to translate literally, in the way

illustrated by these examples. In this respect this translation is more literal than any other published version of these dialogues that I am aware of. But in some other respects this is not a literal translation in the *standard* sense (which, as it happens, is not always a sense that has much to do with literalism) and I should say something about that.

The basic aim of translations that ancient philosophers conventionally *call* 'literal' is to make it as easy as possible for students of Greek to see how they have been put together: to grasp and track the conversion from one language to the other. Such translations are, essentially, written for people who are working with the Greek text and need help with construing the Greek sentences, at a very basic level. Various conventions contribute to that reasonable goal. But it is important to note, first, that these methods do *not* make a translation more accurate. That should be entirely unsurprising, since there is no connection at all between being *easy to map on to* the original language and being *accurate in conveying the meaning* of that original, as anyone fluent in two or more languages knows perfectly well. But what really is surprising is that most of these 'literalist' conventions do not make the translation any more *literal*, either.

(1) First, 'literal' translations tend to follow the very *high register* that systematically undermines literalism, for the reasons that I have just explained. (2) Second, 'literal' translations generally use the *traditional* terminology fairly rigidly, since that is what students will find in their dictionaries, even though it does not, in any sense at all, make the translation more literal. 'Virtue', for example, is not a *literal* (or very close, or accurate) translation of *areté*, nor is 'just' of '*díkaion*', 'wise' of '*sophós*', or 'but' of '*allá*'. (3) Third, 'literal' translations tend to apply the rule that, at least with important vocabulary, one Greek word should appear as one English word, as often as possible, to keep things simple for the student. That policy is semantically arbitrary, and typically goes against literalism. (You will see in the chart above that the *phrasal* translations of Greek verbs are frequently much more literal than the single-word versions, and the same applies to many compound nouns and adjectives.) (4) Fourth, 'literal' translations tend to use a statistically anomalous amount of *archaic* English words and grammatical idioms, since those are, again, the ones that students (and translators) find in the (old) dictionaries and (old) grammar books, and of course in earlier translations. But preferring older

expressions over their exact modern equivalents obviously has no connection at all with either literalism or accuracy. The following illustrates what I mean:

Greek	archaic (or now rare, esp. in spoken English)	standard modern English
houto	thus (referring back); in this way	that way; like that; in that way
touto	this (referring back)	that
gar	For (at start of sentence)	Because...; That's because...; I mean,...; What I mean is...; colon
ho + participle hoi + participle	he who those who	someone who people who
allá (in middle of sentence)	but (e.g., I am not Greek, but Persian)	semi-colon or period (e.g. I'm not Greek. I'm Persian)
—	I am; I would; I will; we have; they are; we would, etc. (even with verbs non-emphatic)	I'm; I'd; I'll; we've; they're; we'd, etc.
3rd person imperatives	(e.g.) Let him say what he wants	(e.g) He should say what he wants..; he's got to say what he wants...
polloí légousi	many say; many men say	lots of people say
polu	much (e.g., he has much money)	a lot (e.g., he has a lot of money)
hoi polloi	the many	most people
hina + subjunctive	that he may... 'let's take the train, that we may read on the way'	so he can... 'let's take the train, so we can read on the way'
ei + optative, optative + an	(e.g.) if he were to ask X...I should answer that Y	if he asked X...I'd answer that Y
ei tis...	if one.../ if a man... he as general pronoun	if you...; if someone you, they as general pronoun
tauta	these things (referring back)	those things
ta toiauta	such things; things of this sort	things like that; those kinds of things
—	he to whom I gave the book	the person I gave the book to
to zetoumenon	(e.g.) that which we seek	(e.g.) what we're looking for; the thing we're trying to find

The middle column contains vocabulary and idioms absolutely typical of 'literal' translations. Such translations tend to avoid the equivalents in the third column very strictly, simply because they are not found in the lexicons and Greek grammar books, or in earlier translations, and are therefore not part of the traditional language of Greek-teaching. In *none* of these cases can it be argued that the more modern versions are less literal. In a few it can be argued that they are more literal. On the whole they are neither: they are just more modern. Plus, they are usually clearer. Plus, strictly speaking, they are more *accurate*, since the older versions imply to the reader that Plato is writing in language that is deliberately and conspicuously archaic *for his readers*, which of course he is not. For these reasons, I think it makes more sense to update our conventions in this trivial way than to continue to write translations in an obsolescent dialect of English.

In these first four respects, then, 'literal' translations are systematically *less* literal, or at any rate no more literal, than translations that are not tied to the same principles. The use of high-register language and traditional terminology makes the result much less literal than it could be; the policy of one word for one word is likewise a sure-fire technique, especially when applied to verbs, for producing a much less literal version than is possible; and the grammatical archaisms that live on past their natural life in 'literal' versions of these texts are completely neutral with respect to literalism.

If 'literal' translations live up to their name at all it is in the matter of *syntax*. They generally copy the syntax of the Greek as closely as possible within intelligible English. But even then the emphasis placed on syntax is arbitrary, and it is very hard to argue that this really makes any translation more literal. Copying the syntax often forces you to depart from other features of the original language, e.g., word order. Take this two-word sentence: *Tauta eipen*. *Tauta* means 'these (or those) things', *eipen* means '[he/she] said'. Now, a 'literal' translation will typically give this as '*He said these things*'. Notice that this flips the word order. The demonstrative now comes last instead of first; the verb comes first instead of last. It also, for that reason, gets the emphasis wrong. We can also translate it like this: '*That's what he said*'. This is, according to our arbitrary conventions, a less literal translation, because it slightly alters the syntax; but on the other hand it retains the word order (demonstrative first, verb second) and, as a result gives the correct

emphasis. So, what makes the second less literal? Nothing. Word order is just as real a feature of the original as the syntax, and is often (as here) an important part of the sense. This arbitrary emphasis on *syntactical* literalism is again a pedagogical matter; students first learn rules of syntax, and then, at a more advanced level, come to understand the significance of subtler things like word order, so the syntactically closer translation is *easier* for students to track from Greek to English. But it is in nevertheless no more literal. Both features were there all along, whether students could see them or not.

 I do not mean to concede, incidentally, that 'literal' translations are always more useful to students, even though that is their defining aim. It depends entirely on what level the students are at. We gain from a translation only in so far as it tells us things that we don't already know. Translations that reproduce the original syntax and that convert the vocabulary very rigidly and simply, and in the terms familiar to us from the lexicons, are certainly extremely useful to *beginners*, who are still learning to construe the Greek at a very basic level. But students with a good intermediate knowledge of the language could write such translations themselves without too much trouble (perhaps not from scratch, but certainly with the aid of a dictionary and a few older translations). If they want to learn more, they need something that goes beyond their own capabilities. Indeed, some 'literal' translations go so far in accommodating the limitations of beginners that they seem almost to have been written with the deliberate aim of reproducing exactly what it feels like to have a rudimentary knowledge of Greek and a limited grasp of the meaning of the text. The idea seems not so much to inform or instruct the beginner as to make them feel right at home, and to flatter them with the suggestion that they have little or nothing more to learn. I find it extremely hard to understand how this very strange convention evolved.

 Plato's philosophy, in Greek, is (for the most part) clearly written and deliberately easy to follow, with strong and intelligible lines of thought, even if he sometimes makes very striking and unusual claims. For that reason, I take the goal of any translation of any particular term, phrase or idiom to be this: that it should systematically produce good sense from the sentences and arguments that use it in the original language. That is my first principle. So it is the resulting English versions themselves, taken in their entirety, rather than any more detailed argument that I could make here, which should make it

clear why I have settled on the particular English words or idioms that I have. All other arguments about how some term or other should be translated are secondary, and have to be based on this same consideration anyway. To give just one example: the fairly common claim that *areté* means 'excellence' (rather than 'virtue') is sometimes regarded by students of Greek philosophy as being well established by a very wide range of considerations, linguistic, historical and cultural. In reality, it is simply based, reasonably enough, on the fact that there are some contexts in Greek philosophy where that translation *seems to make good sense* of the claims being made (or at least, seems to make more sense than 'virtue'). All the historical and cultural claims are themselves based on those uses of the term. But that means, obviously, that it is answerable to the same rule in the opposite case: in the countless contexts where it *doesn't* make sense of the claims being made, it should be regarded as a bad translation. All criticisms that I know, of any instance of translation (rather than merely stylistic ones) have to work, ultimately, from this principle that an accurate translation maximizes the sense of the body of textual evidence. But in practice not all translations themselves stick to the rule. The traditional vocabulary (for the reasons given above) often fails to make good sense; indeed, it quite often fails to make any kind of sense at all — but we make excuses for it, as we might for old friends, or wayward relatives, because of the powerful bonds of tradition and familiarity. So it is a misconception that using this vocabulary makes a translation more *disciplined*. The requirement of producing good sense is by far the most important restriction on the translator, and the *only objective source of discipline*. Abandoning it, in deference to tradition or literalism, real or imagined, in effect removes that restriction and makes the translation far too free.

Likewise, the principle, adopted by some translators (for the sake of simplification, but also sometimes wrongly associated with literalism) that any important Greek term should always be translated *the same way*, allows the translator too much freedom, in my view. In those common cases where a term has three or four distinct meanings, or uses, that policy gives the translator licence to translate the term in a single, reflex manner, regardless of how well it makes sense of the text, without having to report the varieties in the word's meanings.

Some translations, out of caution, leave actual Greek words in the English text, or use established translator's jargon, or close copies of original idioms, that are very unclear, because they simply *stand in for* the Greek, rather than translating it. That is one way of avoiding errors. Those translations call on the reader to have their own very sophisticated knowledge of the Greek vocabulary and idiom. My worry about that method is this: doesn't that mean that such translations are only intelligible to people who don't need them, and presumably aren't reading them? Perhaps that is unfair; I'm aware that teachers both of Ancient Greek and Ancient Philosophy sometimes like there to be hellenisms in an English version, which can then be carefully explained to students, by them and *according to their own preferred interpretations*. I can certainly see the rationale behind that. Many such translations of these dialogues already exist and they serve that purpose very well. But obviously, that approach would be of no use to general readers — at whom the Penguin series is partly aimed — since they do not have teachers expert in Greek on hand to help them. And even in more academic contexts, I do not see why translators, should not, sometimes, translate. For one thing, a full translation of a continuous text is the only place where interpretations are properly checked and tested — i.e., by their making, or not making, sense — and is therefore the proper place for them to be set forth. If as translators we hide our full and clear translations of vocabulary and idiom in glossaries, or footnotes, or secondary literature, then we avoid that test, like chefs writing and discussing recipes but never cooking or tasting the pudding. Also, it is a common illusion that non-interpretative translations (i.e., those that contain Greek or semi-Greek expressions) leave the interpretation to the reader, or student; in my experience, they are often just plain unintelligible to the student, and leave all the explication to the professors. In that sense, texts of ancient philosophy can resemble sacred scriptures: carefully left in a supposed pure form, they then have to be explained by a sort of academic priesthood. This seems to me an undesirable and frankly bizarre development. It was my aim to enable both the general reader, and the student, as far as possible, to understand these two very readable and accessible and (in my view) enjoyable dialogues without too much trouble, and to be in a position to think about their arguments, and interpret them in that other sense, i.e., *philosophically*, without first having to get the translation itself translated or explained to them. Accordingly, this version expects

readers to know English only, and to rely fully on the translator's understanding of Greek vocabulary and idiom.

Consequently, some scholars might disagree with some of the renderings offered here, which are generally clear, and determinate, and therefore, I admit, potentially wrong. It is important for readers to know this. One aim of the Glossary, and some of the notes, is to alert scholarly readers to such things in more detail. In the main text I preferred to offer decisive views that some people will disagree with than to dodge the possibility of error by offering no views at all.