

Chapter (I)

Introduction

Abstract:

Translation theorists have so far devoted scant attention to the translation of philosophical texts. The author of the present article, drawing on his own experience in the translation of two books of philosophy, attempts to illustrate some of the typical problems found in this field. Two kinds of problems are identified: the use of technical terms, often of the philosopher's own invention, which may be almost untranslatable, and the difficulties inherent in the use of a literary, metaphorical language, with all the consequent ambiguity and stylistic questions involved. The terminological problems are illustrated by reference to the translation of a book on Aristotle, while the literary issues are illustrated by reference to a text.

The translation of philosophical texts has received relatively little attention in the literature on translation theory, although there are some classic statements by Renaissance writers and a few scattered articles or remarks in more recent theorists (see, for example, Gill 1998). This paper aims to make a modest contribution to the discussion, opening up a few issues with reference to two books translated by this author from Italian into English in recent years: (Natali's *La saggezza di Aristotele*, and Cristin's *Heidegger e Leibniz: Il sentiero e la ragione*).

The translation of philosophical texts may first of all be quite clearly separated from that regarding the mass of what are called technical texts .Although philosophical texts do use a kind of technical terminology, or even jargon at times, they cannot be classed together with strictly technical texts such as those of medicine, law or engineering. Philosophers frequently invent their own terms, or assign new meanings to old terms, or use ordinary words in a new, technical sense, etc. All of this means that the translator has to pay very close attention to the author's words, comparing and contrasting the different uses of one and the same word in different contexts. Philosophers also use many literary devices, and indeed some philosophical works have attained the status of great literature (the dialogues of Plato, for example, or More's Utopia; in modern times, one of the most 'literary' philosophers is Santayana, but one should also mention Sartre and Camus). The translator must therefore also be prepared to face literary and rhetorical passages when they occur. The upshot is that the translator has to deal adequately with a text that may be partly technical) sometimes even quite technical, with formulas and all – as in essays on formal logic) and sometimes literary or even poetical (philosophical texts in verse are a special category, of which the most notable example is Lucretius' De Rerum Natura).

Let us now turn to examine the problems posed by the two books in question.

Aristotle's words

The Penguin translator of Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric begins his introduction with these words:

The translation of Aristotle must be reckoned amongst the greatest, but also amongst the driest, of the pleasures that the study of the Classics affords the scholar. There is hardly a paragraph that he wrote which does not contain some stimulating or arresting thought, some consideration of a familiar problem from a new perspective, or some fruitful discovery of a new problem where all previously seemed to be blandly clear. The freshness of the intellectual content is unvarying, for all that its relevance to the contemporary debate may constantly change. (Lawson-Tancred 1991: xi).

A similar claim might be made for works about Aristotle's ideas, insofar as they partake of the master's rigor and logic. But though such translating work is rewarding, it has never been easy.

One of the controversies that has bedeviled the translators of Aristotle ever since the Middle Ages is the question of how to translate his technical terms. Leonardo Bruni, called Aretino, in his little treatise *De interpretatione recta* (1420 ca), discusses all the basic issues of translation and pays particular attention to the problems inherent in translating Aristotle's Ethics and Politics. He especially objects to the use of borrowings from Greek in the Latin translations (such coinages as *aristocratia*, *democratia*, *oligarchia*, *politia*). And he exclaims: "Quid de verbis in Graeco relictis dicam, quae tam multa sunt, ut semigraeca quaedam eius interpretatio videatur? Atqui nihil graece dictum est, quod latine dici non possit!"(quoted in Folena 1994: 62).

Bruni's battle, however, seems to have been in vain. The borrowings from Greek eventually passed from Latin into all the modern

languages, which would be much the poorer without them. But the specific problem of translating Aristotle's words remains. Though theoretically it is true, as Bruni says, that anything that can be said in Greek can also be said in Latin (or English or French or any other language), still there are terms in Aristotle's works that seem hardly translatable without a long paraphrase or explanation, or without simply giving the modern term a new meaning to bring it as close as possible to the original meaning of Aristotle's expression. This is the case, for example, of *eudaimonia*, usually translated as "happiness", although the two concepts can be made to overlap only by assigning Aristotle's conception to the English word, adding explanatory footnotes where necessary, and in effect giving the familiar English word a foreign ring; the alternative is to use the Greek term in English, requiring the reader to learn a new, foreign word to correspond to a foreign concept.

Both strategies have been used in Natali's book. Natali makes frequent recourse to Greek words, which have the advantage of being clear labels for Aristotle's concepts, and even the reader whose knowledge of Greek is rather limited should have little difficulty in learning to recognize the few dozen key terms that recur throughout the book; but the Greek terms have also been assigned English equivalents (corresponding to Natali's Italian translations) that may alternate with the original terms. Moreover, Natali's translations from Aristotle are quite literal, and more precise than elegant; in the English translations based on them, some revisions or additions have been made in the interests of clarity or readability, but the basic interpretation remains that of Natali. Wherever possible, the passages translated from Aristotle have also been

checked against the original Greek texts and compared with other, published English translations.

One example of the importance of Natali's translation strategy should suffice. In a key passage of the Nicomachean Ethics (1144a 10, found on page xxx of Natali 1989), he translates to aristonas la cosa migliore, i.e. "the best thing", whereas Rackham (Aristotle 1934: 369) uses the much more loaded expression "the Supreme Good" (those capital letters are eloquent!). Rackham's translation is already a clear interpretation, while Natali renders the passage more problematical and less categorical, opening it up to alternative readings.

But let us return to the delucidation of Aristotle's words. Some knowledge of ancient Greek is necessary in order to understand Aristotle's philosophy, since his ideas and concepts are necessarily expressed in and by the words he uses, and these words often have connotations or even denotations that have no direct equivalent in modern English or, indeed, in any modern language. Therefore a discussion of Aristotle's philosophy inevitably involves a delucidation of his terms; viceversa, a clarification of his terms serves as an introduction to some of his key concepts.

The Greek term *phronesis* usually translated as "practical wisdom", and *sophia* as "theoretical wisdom", though Joachim (1951: 13) also uses the terms "practical science" and "practical knowledge" for *phronesis*. Later on, he comments:

‘Wisdom’ will serve as a translation for *phronesis*, but there is no English equivalent for *sophia*. ‘Philosophy’ represents rather the science of the philosopher than his *eisis* or state of mind. (Joachim 1951: 189).

He then proposes the curious translations “speculative genius” for *sophia* and “practical (political, moral) genius” for *phronesis* (*techne* being “creative or productive genius”) (Joachim 1951: 189-190), but none of these translations is reproduced in his Greek-English index. In this book I have usually preferred to use, for *phronesis*, the literal translation of Natali’s expression, *sapere pratico*, i.e. “practical knowledge”. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the translation of *phronesis* as “practical knowledge” rather than “practical wisdom” makes clear its logical connection with scientific knowledge. As Natali points out, there are many points of similarity between Aristotle’s treatment of ethics and his theory of knowledge in general; even the form of the practical syllogism is modelled on that of the more rigorous type of scientific syllogism. It is, however, no less an application of reasoning and logic, in this case to actions and habits. The whole thrust of Aristotle’s treatise is that it is possible to achieve a certain (albeit approximate) knowledge of practical ethics, which can serve as the basis for correct choices and, ultimately, for a wise mode of living.

From a strictly linguistic point of view, knowledge (*sapere*) and wisdom (*saggezza*, *sapienza*) are very closely related in the Italian language, as all these words derive from the same Latin root. The fact that Italian has two words for “wisdom” has caused a further complication, however; Natali always uses *saggezzato* to translate

phronesis and sapienzato mean sophia. Where the context made the meaning clear, the English version has only “wisdom”, but wherever necessary the appropriate adjective (“practical” or “theoretical”) has been added.

Occasionally the Greek term has been added to the text, always in the interests of clarity.

The Italian philosopher Abbagnano (1971: 762) has commented thus: To contemporary philosophers the word saggezza, like ‘sapienza’, seems too solemn a concept for them to stop to clarify it. Nonetheless, wisdom (saggezza) remains connected, for them as for the ancients, to the sphere of human affairs and can be said to consist of the old or new techniques that man has at his disposal for better conducting his life. (original translation).

It should perhaps be pointed out that the Italian term scienza (from Latin scientia), used to render the Greek episteme, has been translated at times by “science” and at other times by “knowledge”. In Aristotle’s usage, much that he calls a “science” is what we would term a body of knowledge, although of course every science is also accumulated knowledge. If at times the use of the word “science” sounds peculiar to modern ears, it is sufficient to remember the etymology of the word (from Latin scire = to know). The concept of episteme is often opposed to that of doxa, “opinion”, although for Aristotle the word we translate as “opinion” does not necessarily imply any pejorative connotations.

Very often, indeed, he starts his ethical arguments with a discussion of common opinions, which may even be part of the traditional

wisdom .One important concept is that of *techne*, which is variously translated as “art”, “craft”, or “technique”. It is basically any ‘productive activity’; the sculptor makes a sculpture, the joiner makes a table, the tailor makes a coat, etc. Sometimes the object produced may be less concrete, as in the case of the poet, who produces a poem (a series of verbal expressions). Or it may even be something difficult to define, as when a doctor produces a ‘state of health’. Here the result of the productive activity is not always easy to observe; yet medicine is a *techne*, and it does produce results. It is not a science in the theoretical sense, since its aim is not to discover truth but to apply knowledge to produce practical results. It is a “technique”, founded on knowledge, aiming at solving practical problems. It is a way of doing things, which may also involve a certain technology. Natali translates *techne* by the Italian word *tecnica*, which means both “technique” and “technology”, as well as “technical knowledge”. There is

no English word that covers all these meanings simultaneously; thus the translator has had to choose now one equivalent, now another, deciding in each case which meaning seemed to be paramount in the context.

Another translation problem regards the correct equivalent for what Natali calls the *giusto mezzo* (in French *juste milieu*, cf. Gauthier 1967), literally the “right mean”. This expression is not attested in English usage, so far as I know; two other expressions, “the golden mean” and “the happy medium”, are found. I have used the expression “the golden mean” only occasionally, as it derives from Horace’s *aurea mediocritas*, not directly from Aristotle. Likewise, I have seldom used the traditional English expression “the happy

medium". The usual translation here is simply "mean", although "golden mean" is sometimes used to avoid confusion in passages where the discussion also regards the distinction between "means" and "ends". It is unfortunate that English uses two such similar words to indicate concepts that are so different (Italian uses the same word, *mezzo*, which is why Natali adds the adjective *giustoto* identify the concept of *meson*). The Greek word *teloscauses*, instead, no particular problem; it is usually translated as "end", though sometimes the word "aim" is used. The concept, in any case, is clear.

The doctrine of the mean seems to be related to the natural dichotomies embodied in our languages. We are accustomed to thinking of polarities in which one term is positive and the other is negative – "good" vs. "bad", "right" vs. "wrong". This leads us to think that what is "good" or "right" is an extreme, an absolute quality. But Aristotle starts from other pairs of opposites, in which both extremes are equally bad. A common example of this is the opposition between "hot" and "cold", both of which extremes are to be avoided, in favor of a moderate, or mean, temperature. It is a peculiarity of language that very often there is no obvious term for the median characteristic; "rashness" and "cowardice" are clearly both "bad", but what do we call "the right amount of fear"? There seems to be no word for it, though the concept is clear enough . Aristotle faces this difficulty on several occasions.

In this translation I have generally used the traditional translation of *areteas* "virtue" (Natali uses the term *virtù*), although there are

times when it must be replaced by the term “excellence”. The arete of anything is simply its proper or peculiar excellence; thus the excellence proper to the human soul may be called “virtue”. Aristotle further distinguishes between moral and intellectual virtues ‘using the term “virtue” for the latter term in a way that strikes us as unusual. Although the expression is frequently found in translations of Aristotle, it may help to clarify matters if we think of “intellectual virtue” as being “intellectual excellence”.

As Guthrie (1960) points out, arete is an eisis, or habitual state. Aristotle himself, in the Metaphysics (1022b 10ff.), defines this as a state or disposition, being well or ill disposed, and that either with regard to itself or in relation to something else; for example, health is a state of being, since it is such a disposition.

Another term that is defined by Aristotle is aitia, “cause”, which may be of four kinds: (1) “the material constituent from which a thing comes to be”; (2) the “form or pattern of a thing”; (3) the “agent whereby a change or state of rest is first produced”; and (4) the “end, or the wherefor” (Metaphysics, 1013a 27ff.). These, of course, are Aristotle’s famous four causes (material, formal, efficient and final), which are taken for granted throughout his discussion of ethics (although in ethical terms he deals mainly with efficient and final causes).

As the term teleion recurs frequently in Aristotle’s ethical discussions (where he speaks of “complete virtue” and a “complete life”) it may be useful to give here Aristotle’s own definition of it:

Thus, things are complete which in their own kind are perfected in these various ways: because in goodness they either lack nothing or cannot be excelled or have nothing proper to them outside of them; and, in general ‘because they cannot be excelled in their own kind or have nothing proper to it outside of them. (Metaphysics, 1021b 31ff).

To finish this excursus through Aristotle’s words, let us see what he has to say about arche (in Latin principium, in Italian principio), rendered in English sometimes by “principle” and sometimes by “starting-point”. Aristotle distinguishes six different meanings: (1) the “first point whence a thing’s movement proceeds”; (2) the “point whence a thing develops best”; (3) the “guiding part of any process”; (4) the “external source whence a process or movement has developed”; (5) the “decisive factor which moves whatever is moved or changes whatever is changed”; and (6) “a principle of knowledge, the basic idea for understanding any body of knowledge: such as, the premises of proof. [...] What all beginnings have in common is that they are points of departure either for being, or becoming, or knowing” (Metaphysics, 1012b 32ff). Emanuele Severino (1995: 28) glosses the term as meaning variously “center of radiation”, “dominant point”, “principle” and “origin” (original translation); it was used by philosophers long before Aristotle but plays a key role in Aristotle’s thought, though – as can be seen – no single translation does full justice to the term.

One problem regards the translation of the Italian word uomo and the generic use of masculine pronouns. The most obvious and usual

translation of uomo is “man” which, like its Italian equivalent, can refer both to a male human being and to human beings in general. This translation has frequently been used in this text, despite certain misgivings which have led to its being sometimes replaced by other terms, such as “people” or “human beings”. The traditional term has, however, been accepted as reflecting also Aristotle’s views on the matter, since clearly his lectures and writings were intended for an exclusively male audience, though one could argue that today his doctrines are equally relevant to both sexes. Likewise, the generic “he” has been used as a matter of convenience, though sometimes sentences have been rewritten in the plural form with “they .” Very often Italian manages to avoid the problem completely because in that language it is not necessary to express personal pronouns in the subject form and the possessive adjective “suo” may mean indifferently “his, her or its”. (It might be felt that the Italian uomo is less offensive than “man”, deriving as it does from the Latin homo, human being, and not from vir, but by now the Italian term has come to have the meanings and connotations of both Latin words).

Aristotle is not only careful in his use of technical or semi-technical terms; he also pays great attention to language in general, even quoting poetry, idioms and common expressions to illustrate the meaning of words, just as a modern analytical philosopher might do. And in general he keeps close to the ordinary meanings of words, as in his discussions of the virtues. As Greenwood (1973 : 64) points out, “Aristotle has all the ordinary Greek thinker’s reverence for language as a divine creation and a guide to reality.” The only cases where he seems to depart from ordinary usage are in his

philosophical attempts to define and systematize the concepts of “virtue” and “happiness”.

Heidegger and Cristin Similar problems arise in the translation of Heidegger's philosophy which, like Aristotle's, is very closely linked to his idiosyncratic use of words. No one can fully understand Heidegger's thought without some knowledge of the key German words he uses and the meanings he attaches to them. Therefore, in translating Renato Cristin's book *Heidegger e Leibniz: Il sentiero e la ragione* from Italian into English, the German words have frequently been left in their original form. Often too, however, they have been translated, and the translation has aimed to be as accurate and consistent as possible.

However, Cristin's text, much more than Natali's, makes use of a literary language and even poetical devices to express meanings that often take the form of images and intuitions. This aspect of the text can be illustrated by the following passage (Cristin 1990: 57-58).

Il sentiero dell'essere conduce, quindi, in un ritiro e un ritorno continui ‘dal fondamento all'abisso e da questo al puro Aperto dell'essere. Il fondamento si inserisce in una trama ontologica che lo lega alla sua negazione, al baratro, in una armonia dinamica tra offerta del terreno stabile e mancanza di qualsiasi appoggio, tra esposizione e sottrazione del fondo. La ragione è resa precaria, il fondamento è cioè abisso nella misura in cui non costituisce un substrato concettuale e categoriale sul quale erigere l'edificio della metafisica, ma fa crollare e precipitare ogni architettonica filosofica nell'incertezza e nell'instabilità in cui l'essere si dona ritraendosi. I bagliori del precipizio sono dunque i riflessi della terrestrità del

fondamento: pensare la ragione e la causa implica dunque immergersi nell'esplorazione dell'abisso.

This passage is highly metaphorical; even the technical terms are metaphors (fondamento, abisso, sentiero, precipizio). The exposition does not proceed by a chain of logical reasoning, but by a series of intuitive, metaphorical statements.

The sentences are carefully constructed and have a literary ring. Sometimes devices such as alliteration and assonance are used for greater effect (ritiroritorno). Here the translator must pay close attention to the rich, suggestive texture of the writing.

The translation follows (Cristin 1998: 49):

The pathway of Being therefore leads to a continual retreat and return 'from the foundation to the abyss and from the latter to the pure Open of Being. The foundation is inserted into an ontological plot that links it to its negation, to the chasm, in a dynamic harmony between the provision of solid ground and the lack of any footing at all, between the exposure and the suppression of the ground. Reason is rendered precarious; the foundation is the abyss to the extent that it is not a conceptual and categorial substratum on which to erect the edifice of metaphysics .Indeed, it causes every philosophical construction to collapse and fall headlong into the uncertainty and instability in which Being offers itself by withdrawing itself. The gleaming of the precipice is therefore the reflection of the earthliness of the foundation: to think reason and causes therefore means to immerse oneself in the exploration of the abyss .

The translation stays quite close to the structure of the original text and reproduces its metaphors, even recreating equivalent patterns of alliteration (e.g., retreat-return). The reader is expected to respond to the metaphors by meditating on their deeper meaning.

The purpose of this short paper has been to point out some of the problems encountered in the translation of philosophical texts from one language into another. Two types of problems have been discussed: the thorny question of terminology, and the sometimes literary nature of the text. It goes without saying that the translator of such texts must not only have an excellent command of both languages involved, but must also be well informed about the philosophers he or she is dealing with. It is to be expected that reading and research will take up almost as much time as the actual translation work. Such research may never be fully remunerated, but the learning involved is its own reward, and the end result of such challenging translation work may prove to be extremely gratifying.

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