German Philosophy: Language and Style

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§1. Introduction

The remarks which follow are intended to address a certain apparent asymmetry as between German and Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Put most simply, it is clear to every philosopher moving backwards and forwards between the two languages that the translation of an Anglo-Saxophone philosophical text into German is in general a much easier task than is the translation of a German philosophical text into English. The hypothesis suggests itself immediately that this is so because English philosophical writings are in the main clear and intelligible, and therefore easy to translate. The texts of German philosophy, on the other hand, both classical and contemporary, seem in many cases to be marked by stylistic obscurities or idiosyncracies of a sort which make them not translatable in the strict sense at all. When, not long ago, I attempted to demonstrate a version of this untranslatability thesis at a conference in Bonn celebrating the 100th anniversary of Heidegger's birth, my lecture was shouted down by a large contingent of Japanese Heideggerians in the audience who insisted with great vehemence that 'of course Heidegger is translatable' on the basis of the fact that, as they pointed out, there exist already seven different translations of *Sein und Zeit* into Japanese.

As we shall see, the strong thesis of untranslatability cannot survive critical examination in its unrestricted form. This is first of all because it is an over-simplification to regard 'translatability' as an absolute, all-or-nothing matter. That part of the German language which is directly or easily or literally translatable into English, for example, is presumably not identical with that part of the same language which is directly translatable into Danish or Korean. Any treatment of untranslatability will stand in need also of a certain temporal or historical relativization in virtue of the fact that what can be translated unproblematically from one language into another may change with time, for example as one gets used, progressively, to styles or forms derived from another language which at first seemed alien. In many cases a special translation tradition must be created before a work can be successfully translated, and the Japanese (like the Italians) may well be further advanced in this respect in relation to the works of classical German philosophy than are the Anglo-Saxons. In considering the strong thesis of untranslatability, however, and in directing our attention thereby not so much to the concepts or ideas as to certain stylistic peculiarities of the German and

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Anglo-Saxon philosophies, we may be led to a new and quite generally valid understanding of the different ways in which features of linguistic style can interact with other aspects of philosophy, both for good and ill.

§2. Two Languages of Philosophy

Of course in speaking of 'German' or 'Anglo-Saxon' philosophy we are of necessity dealing at best in rough-and-ready generalizations to each and every one of which exceptions will very easily be found. Neither the German nor the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy constitutes a single homogeneous edifice of thinking. The two opposing sets of stylistic features to which we shall direct our attentions are, however, so conspicuous and so pervasively present in the two literatures as to make generalizations in this respect not only permissible but even inevitable, though of course great care must then be taken when it comes to the application of such generalizations to specific cases.

The strong thesis to the effect that many classical and contemporary texts of German philosophy are not translatable into English is widely shared by Anglo-Saxon philosophers. This thesis is held, for example, in relation to the writings of Hamann, Fichte, Hegel, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Feuerbach, Dilthey, Klages, Heidegger, Adorno and Bloch, and also in relation to the writings of such non-German philosophers as Lukács, Althusser, Derrida or Lyotard who are otherwise closely associated with the German tradition. The thesis of non-translatability is, be it noted, not sustainable at all in relation to thinkers such as Leibniz, Brentano, Frege, Stumpf, Hilbert, Reinach, Schlick, Carnap, Nelson, or Cassirer. Such philosophers utilized a clearer and more straightforward style, at least partly in virtue of the fact that they moved to and fro between philosophical and non-philosophical disciplines and learned thereby to apply linguistic standards different from those which have been dominant among German philosophers in the more restricted sense.[1]

Many a classical text of German philosophy has of course received an English translation of a sort. Among Anglo-Saxon philosophers, however, the view prevails that we have to do here to a quite unusual degree with unsatisfactory compromises as between faithfulness and readability. Significantly, this view is to be found not only among the enemies of German-influenced philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon world. The friends of this philosophy, too, rightly complain about the quality of the available translations, and with an intensity which points to the fact that one has to do here with difficulties of principle which go beyond the usual problems with which a translator is faced.

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1. For reasons which I have attempted to set out elsewhere, the assertion of untranslatability does not hold, either, of the principal representatives of Austrian philosophy such as for example Mach or Wittgenstein. See, on this, my "Austrian Origins of Logical Positivism" in B. Gower, ed., *Logical Positivism in Perspective*, London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987, Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1988, reprinted in K. Szaniawski, ed., *The Vienna Circle and the Lvov-Warsaw School*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: Kluwer, 1989, and also K. Mulligan, "Genauigkeit und Geschwätz" in H. Bachmaier, ed., *Wien - Paradigmen der Moderne*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990.

§3. The Grounds of Untranslatability

When considering the thesis of untranslatability it is above all necessary to avoid a confusion of untranslatability and incomprehensibility. The language of a mathematical proof or of a legal document may be translatable, but it need not be generally understandable, and we wish to avoid the trivial reading of the untranslatability thesis to the effect that certain texts are unintelligible for the generality of readers (or for the generality of Anglo-Saxon readers) simply because they employ a special or an especially complex technical terminology. We wish to avoid also the opposite reading, favoured by many representatives of German philosophy, according to which this philosophy appears untranslatable to Anglo-Saxons because their inferior language is unable to cope with the depths and subtleties of a German text. And we wish to steer well clear also of the extreme hermeneutic position according to which no text is translatable (or even understandable) at all. Rather, we want to seek out data concerning the role of different styles and forms in philosophy which will put us in a position to establish the reasons why certain texts might appear or be less translatable than others.

The asymmetry of translation as between Anglo-Saxon and German philosophy rests first of all on quite general and as it were innocent syntactic differences between the English and German languages. English is non-inflected. Thus it must typically manage with shorter sentences than German, which has retained a stronger influence of Latin forms. In translating from English into German one can, therefore, employ short German sentences in direct renderings of the (relatively) short sentences of the original. Both the form and the style of the original can thereby be preserved to a very high degree. Because the language of German philosophy is especially strongly marked by the development of complex ideas within a single sentence, many English translations of German philosophical texts in contrast either appear simply unreadable – because the translator does not know how to divide up the (by English standards) over-long sentences into shorter bits – or they appear flat and muted, because the result of such division destroys the climactic character of the original.

Problems may arise in translating German texts into English also because the repertoire of possibilities for building up complex words is much more limited in English than it is in German. Where, therefore, a literal translation is possible in the one direction, when translating in the other direction one must also for this reason do violence to the text.

The thesis of untranslatability cannot be exclusively a matter of certain simple syntactic differences between English and German however, since in many extra-philosophical fields there obtains a near-perfect equality in ease of translation in either direction. For many technical and commercial purposes there has obtained at least since the 19th century a mutual translatability not only between English and German but indeed between all the world's major languages, reflecting

a process of language-standardization that is at least in part comparable to the standardization that has been achieved in the realm of traffic signs or weights and measures.

The translation difficulties we are addressing here have, therefore, to do with certain characteristics of English and German *philosophy*. They turn in part on the fact that Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Saxon-oriented philosophers have allowed themselves to be more strongly influenced by the just-mentioned developments in the direction of linguistic standardization than have their German counterparts. The most talented Anglo-Saxon philosophers in our own century have indeed sought to distance themselves, step by step, from earlier, more literary associations of their discipline, committing themselves instead (and in different degrees) to the new formal logic and to the regimentation of language and meaning that goes together therewith. Everything that smacks of philology or exegesis, everything that has to do with an aesthetic fascination with language as such, and every inclination to enjoy struggling with difficulties of language for their own sake, has therefore waned, at least in the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Indeed it can paradoxically be asserted that the philosophers of 'linguistic analysis' are *ex officio* allowed to see no special (for example aesthetic) charm in the language with which they deal: the latter is either merely an instrument, or it is a pre-packaged object of investigation.

A German philosopher, in contrast, may unshamefacedly enjoy a living relationship to his own language. He may revel in the possibility of utilizing an idiosyncratic and (from the Anglo-Saxon point of view) wilfully obscure style. Or he may attempt to force language into new and peculiar forms, for example in order to breathe new life into the concepts he wishes to employ, or in order to set loose normally unnoticed etymological powers lying hidden beneath our everyday linguistic forms.[2] Untranslatability may then follow as a matter of course, for example because we are dealing not with utterances having standard meanings but rather with a peculiar sort of etymological word-play, whose constituent jokes have no available correlates in the target language. Consider, for example, the following passage, selected at random from *Sein und Zeit*:

> Ich Nachhängen hat das Schon-sein-bei . . . den Vorrang. Das Sich-vorweg-im-schon-sein-in . . . ist entsprechend modifiziert. Das verfallende Nachhängen offenbart den *Hang* des Daseins, von der Welt, in der es je ist, "gelebt" zu werden. Der Hang zeigt den Character des Ausseins auf . . . Das Sich-vorweg-sein hat sich verloren in ein "Nur-immer-schon-bei . . .". Das "Hin-zu" des Hanges ist ein Sichziehenlassen von solchem, dem der Hang nachhängt. (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 195; trailing dots in the original.)

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2. Thus Hermann Glockner writes in the Introduction to his *Hegel-Lexikon* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1935, p. XIII): 'It is well known that Hegel in many respects speaks his own language and that this language, which one does not at all "understand" without further ado, must be read with the same "philological" dedication that one brings to ancient or medieval philosophy.'

The point of this passage – which is incidentally already untranslatable into any normally intelligible German – turns upon a pun on '*Hang*', which in German means both 'slope' and 'tendency' (as in 'tendency to criminality'). The standard English version reads:

> In hankering, Being-already-alongside . . . takes priority. The "ahead-of-itself-in-Being-already-in . . ." is correspondingly modified. Dasein's hankering as it falls makes manifest its *addiction* to becoming 'lived' by whatever world it is in. This addiction shows the character of Being out for something. Being-ahead-of-oneself has lost itself in a 'just-always-already-alongside'. What one is addicted 'towards' is to let oneself be drawn by the sort of thing for which the addiction hankers[3]

– of which the most that can be said is that it consists, in some degree, of English words.

§4. Philosophy and Poetry

'Ein Denker', as Heidegger said, 'ist umso denkender, desto dichtender er ist.' And indeed already the phenomenon of poetic language will make it clear to us that there are linguistic forms and practices which lie apart from the standardized and readily translatable parts of a language and which have been deliberately constructed to serve criteria other than those of general understandability. The difficulties we face in translating certain sorts of poetry into another language are for this reason correlated with similar difficulties which we, or the poet, would encounter in translating his works into readily comprehensible sentences of his own language. Something similar holds also in relation to many religious usages, as also to certain demagogic or ideological uses of language on the fringes of religion and politics. All of these can be seen to lie apart in certain crucial stylistic respects from our normal everyday forms, and it is precisely from this that they gain their special powers.

A modified version of the thesis of the untranslatability of much standard German philosophical fare might therefore consist in this: that there are certain stylistic features otherwise characteristic of poetic and other similar uses of language – features associated, for example, with special rhetorical or emotive powers – which are present in the language of German philosophy but which have no acceptable equivalent in the language of current Anglo-Saxon philosophy. In the case of some philosophers the peculiarities of style mentioned above have almost certainly arisen because the individuals in question were out to disguise a certain shortfall in the content or in the argumentative rigour of their writings (so that they sought ways to ensure, for example, that one could read into them whatever one likes). The young Karl Marx accuses Hegel (perhaps also Kant and Fichte) of something like this in his "Hegel-Epigramme".[4]

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3. *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, p. 240.

4. See Marx–Engels, *Werke. Ergänzungsband*, Erster Teil, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968, pp. 607f.

Many German and German-inspired philosophers, at least since Hegel, have in addition taken the expressionistic values of 'authenticity' and 'immediacy' more seriously than the properly academic values of self-criticism and sobriety. For this reason, too, their writings may be untranslatable in the sense that the result of translating them may not look like 'philosophy' in the standardly accepted Anglo-Saxon sense.

Against the charge, however, that he does not sufficiently sharply draw the line between philosophy on the one side and poetry, demagogy and religion on the other, a German philosopher might defend himself with the thesis that Anglo-Saxon philosophers have too readily embraced in their philosophy the alien standards of everyday language or of the language of modern science. They have thereby robbed themselves of certain possibilities of a genuinely philosophical language:[5] to write philosophy and to write business letters are, after all, two entirely different things.

The linguistic difficulties of German philosophy may be seen from this point of view as connected with the fact that philosophy has to do with questions radically more complex and subtle and radically more upsetting to established ways of thinking than those standardly found graspable by Anglo-Saxon thinkers. The Anglo-Saxon can be seen in this light as having shirked his responsibility to deal with the truly philosophical questions, an adequate treatment of which must necessarily go hand in hand with a certain obscurity of language and style.

It is indeed common in Germany – and not only among philosophers – to hold that it is a positive advantage if a philosophical text is marked by special difficulties of understanding. A genuinely philosophical language should call forth in its readers a special attitude of intellectual exertion (called *'Denken'*), and not just anyone is in a position to hear this call.

§5. Philosophy and Science

In spite of all of this, however, the typical Anglo-Saxon philosopher will still insist on linguistic simplicity. And he will tolerate no talk of any special persons or traditions or epochs enjoying a special relation to the language of philosophy. His conception of philosophy will be orientated much rather around ideas concerning objective meaning derived from Bolzano or Frege. For such a philosopher, even if he rejects a Platonistic ontology of ideal meanings, will still conceive his philosophical writings as consisting of objective and therefore unproblematically translatable propositions (theses, arguments, refutations). Moreover, he will insist that a modest vocabulary and syntax not only contributes to ensuring optimal intelligibility but allows also the rigorous formulation of more complex chains of argument than a more literary language would permit.

In a language of this sort there is of course not much room for the philosopher to manifest himself in his peculiarity as an author. There is not much room, either, for the manifestation in one's

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5. Such a view was defended already in 1794 by Georg Gustav Fülleborn in his *Beyträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Züllichau und Freystadt: Frommann, Viertes Stück, p. 138ff.

philosophizing of a historical consciousness or for the conscious adoption of any sort of linguistic relativism or for any sort of culturally specific philosophy. In Hamann, Herder, Hegel, Humboldt and Heidegger, in contrast, the temptation to adopt one or other kind of linguistic relativism crops up over and over again, and this and related ideas are conceived of as being so central to philosophy as to serve as justification for idiosyncratic modes of language-use on the part of the philosopher himself.

To this we must add the fact that German philosophers (and those inspired thereby) have frequently sought to create philosophical master texts or philosophical works of art. For mainstream Anglo-Saxon philosophers, in contrast, the idea of treating philosophy as art simply does not arise. Such philosophers seek rather to formulate and defend philosophical assertions which can survive rigorous criticism. Certainly the Anglo-Saxon philosopher strives to achieve a definitive statement of the problems which concern him; but the standards and expectations prevalent in Anglo-Saxon philosophy ensure that, however definitive a work might be in this respect, it will inevitably come to be ordered among other works as one more piece within the larger structure of an evolving philosophical argument. It will not stand out as a master-text, an object of almost holy reverence, in a way that is still possible in the German tradition.

The writings of, for example, Aristotle are so important for Anglo-Saxon philosophers precisely because they contain problems, theories and arguments which are today, just as much as 2000 years ago, able to stand up to systematic logical examination. There is of course a certain trade-off here between exegetical concern for Aristotle's text (reflecting a desire to establish the precise nature of the problems by which Aristotle was confronted) and logical concern for these problems themselves (or for what one takes to be these problems). From the Anglo-Saxon perspective, German philosophers might be said to have erred too much in the direction of exegesis (or 'hermeneutics'). German philosophers themselves, on the other hand, might accuse Anglo-Saxon philosophers of having shown themselves too ready to force Aristotle into the framework of their own favourite logical ideas, ideas which might be held to be alien to Aristotle himself.

There are, certainly, German philosophers who have conceived of their philosophy not in aesthetic but rather in scientific terms. Thus Kantians and Fichteans have argued for a conception of philosophy as a 'theory of science' or as a *Fundamental- or Grundwissenschaft*, and the concept of philosophy as a 'strict science' was indeed coined by Karl Leonhard Reinhold already in the 18th century as part of a reaction to the non-scientific 'popular philosophy' of the Enlightenment and of the British empiricists. Hume, for example, quite deliberately attempted to write in a popular way, and was accordingly dismissed by German philosophers as 'shallow' and 'journalistic'. Certain members of the Vienna circle, too, saw their activity as philosophers in part as a contribution to the movement for popular education, and thus they quite deliberately employed in their writings an easily understandable and translatable everyday German. (This may explain in part the fact that

Viennese positivism, uniquely among movements of thought having their origin in the German-speaking world, was able to exert so powerful an influence on the mainstream of contemporary American philosophy.)

Brentanians and Reinachians, Friesians and Nelsonians, critical realists and logical empiricists, have it is true kept alive the fire of a scientifically-oriented philosophy in Germany into the present day. These movements are however manifestly such as to lie outside the mainstream of German philosophy, and it seems to be generally true that the more a philosophy is oriented to formal logic or to the empirical sciences the less it is to be counted as belonging to this mainstream. At least since the Romantic era it has been another, anti-scientific tendency which has constituted the principal axis of German philosophy, a tendency which is represented in our own century above all by the later Heidegger. This anti-scientific tendency has of course for understandable reasons been often associated with a deliberate obscurity of writing-style, as its representatives did their best to distance themselves from 'mere scientists' and 'technicians'.

Added to this is the fact that many German philosophers conceive their philosophizing as a contribution to the wider intellectual life of the age. Thus they conceive themselves as preachers[6] or '*Zeitkritiker*',[7] or they give themselves over to the task of '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*'.[8] And where the activity of philosophizing presupposes political or related forms of engagement, as it does for instance also in much of current French philosophy, philosophers of the past, too, will naturally come to be judged according to their political beliefs or associations. Contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy has in contrast enjoyed a systematic indifference to concrete political affairs. Frege's anti-semitism could for this reason be perceived by his Anglo-Saxon admirers as entirely without significance for the evaluation of his properly philosophical achievements.

Clearly, then, the discipline of philosophy is conceived more narrowly in the English-speaking countries than in Germany or France. Thus much of Bertrand Russell's later literary output is typically classified in the Anglo-Saxon world as 'essays' or '*belles-lettres*'. A German writing on similar topics would in contrast be regarded as having been writing on philosophy. Moreover the German conception of philosophy would include much of what, in the Anglo-Saxon countries, might more properly be called 'history of ideas'. For these reasons, too, a work of German philosophy may be counted as untranslatable from the Anglo-Saxon point of view.

§6. Philosophy as Esoteric

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6. On Heidegger as preacher see Karl Löwith *Mein Leben in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1986), p. 27.

7. Neither word nor activity is translatable into English. A literal rendering would be 'time-critic'.

8. Roughly: 'coming to terms with the past (or with one's own past)'.

The phenomenon of seemingly deliberate obscurity in the writing of philosophy is not new. Already in the ancient world Heraclitus was referred to as 'the dark one' and the classical schools of philosophy were marked by a doctrine according to which those writings directed towards the 'outside' were required to be more understandable than the esoteric 'inner writings' which contained the most important doctrines of the school. In the writings of the medieval mystics, too, we can see a re-emergence of older esoteric forms, and the same holds, I want to claim, for much of what one understands by German philosophy today. The cultivation of an esoteric style goes hand in hand with other phenomena which are conspicuously absent from the world of English-language philosophy. Thus it is associated with the construction of concordances or lexica to particular works and authors, and even with the preparation of breviaries (thus for example Kant- or Hegel-breviaries) of a sort which one might more readily associate with religious or poetic authors. Most importantly it is associated with the construction of *philosophical commentaries*, a literary genre almost unknown to Anglo-Saxon philosophy, at least in the sense that works of philosophy written in English have given rise to no significant commentary literature whatsoever, and this in spite of the fact that the commentary genre has otherwise played a uniquely important role in almost every major tradition of philosophy.[9]

A commentary comes to be written on a text, trivially speaking, when it has for some reason become necessary to make this text more accessible, above all for reasons having to do with the difficulty or impenetrability of the text itself. A commentary in the strict sense is distinguished from interpretative works of secondary literature in that it is based not primarily on the ideas or arguments of its object-text but rather on the very words of this text, the latter being presented in the very order in which they originally appear. Thus it is as if the language of the object-text has its own special 'authority', as in the case of an ancient esoteric ritual or legal process, and it is important that the reader comes into direct confrontation with this language in order, as it were, that he might grasp its peculiar spirit and ethos.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, now, it is works of literature, not philosophy, which are seen as possessing an authority of this sort and which have therefore given rise to a commentary literature of great historical significance. In Anglo-Saxon philosophy, in contrast, the word of an author is of only secondary import. The main axis of Anglo-Saxon philosophizing is oriented rather around experience and problems, not texts and persons.

§7. Conclusion

Why, then, has so much of German philosophy for so long and so intensively felt itself bound to texts and authorities? And why is philosophy in Germany so often a matter of '*philosophizing*

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9. See my "Textual Deference", *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 28 (1991).

through' an author (whether Kant or Hegel or Heidegger)? Why is German philosophy to such a large extent a philosophy wherein questions like:

'What *problems* are you dealing with, then?'

or

'Is what you say here *true*?'

or

'What, then, is your *own* view on this matter?'

are unable to gain a foothold?

The textual orientation of the main stream of German philosophy is certainly in part dictated by the fact that this philosophy was always, in the middle ages as also in the modern era, to a very high degree a product of the universities. The most important philosophical movements in England, in contrast (as also in France), arose initially against the opposition of the universities. German-speaking university philosophers were thereby able to take over the teaching forms and methods of their scholastic predecessors in unbroken continuity, and the commentary, whether spoken or written, was in German philosophy faculties a prescribed form until as late as 1800. Even Kant gave lectures always in the form of commentary on other works, never on his own philosophy.

Gradually, of course, philosophy came to be a matter for the universities also in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The teaching of philosophy in these countries has however to a much greater extent than on the continent been tied not to the formalized lecture(-commentary) but rather to tutorials and seminars involving comparatively small numbers of active participants. The job of philosophizing is learned thereby in Anglo-Saxon universities principally through the activity of argument and discussion.

In German universities, in contrast, philosophy continues to be learned, in general, through lectures or homilies involving little or no discussion, so that the student of philosophy is rarely called upon to become active in his philosophizing. This is marked in the fact that in German one still refers to those enrolled in a lecture course as 'hearers' (*Hörer*), whereby one often gains the impression that the hearers of lectures in philosophy are not in fact familiar with the desire to *understand* the content of what they hear.

Even the teaching of the history of philosophy becomes impossible under such conditions, at least if this is understood in the Anglo-Saxon sense as an objective and as it were atomistic treatment of the ideas and arguments and problems which have arisen at different times and places. Rather we have an outcome in which philosophy, history of philosophy and textual commentary have become fused together into a single whole. To philosophize is to insert oneself into this whole, in order to contribute thereby to its further growth. Sometimes there will come along a philosopher (Hegel, Gentile, Heidegger) who will conceive it as his task to bring this development to a climax. The whole enterprise may thereby from time to time acquire a certain vital teleology. On the other

hand, however, the conception of philosophy as a slowly growing textual mass can on occasion skid out of control, as the dadaistic posturings of Derrida *et al.* have made all too abundantly clear.