

Desacralizing Philosophical Translation in Japan

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The following is an English rendering of a paper delivered at the Fourth Symposium of the Doi Michiko Foundation for Kyoto Philosophy, held in Kyoto from 16 to 18 December 2002. The spirited discussions of those days made me conscious of the many limitations of what I have written and raised questions I had only dimly thought about before. It would take too long to satisfy the demands of a rewrite and I therefore present it as is in the hope that others may find some stimulus to think about the questions it raises.

PERHAPS THE main reason philosophical texts are not widely read in Japan is that they are not written to be widely read. Quite the contrary, they are written to be classified as sound philosophy or as solid contributions to the history of philosophy. The keepers of the classification are the older generation, who were so classified by the generation that preceded them. Its journals are for specialists and as such mirror the every-increasing narrowness of specialization. Simply put, the system is self-closed by definition, and maintains its vitality in proportion as it increases its closure and exclusiveness. Like the uroboros that swallows its own tail, institutional philosophy feeds off itself, as if in the effort to grow as small as possible and eventually disappear.

All indications are that it is succeeding. In universities across the country departments of philosophy are shrinking or simply being absorbed as curricular specializations in other departments. Despite the swing towards generalized education in liberal arts programs, the amount of philosophy read in classrooms has declined dramatically. Opportunities for being guided in the reading and discussion of the classics of philosophy continue to dwindle. And even in philosophical curricula proper breadth of exposure to the richness of the tradition continues to lose ground to the fetish of concentration on particular thinkers.

The maldistribution of philosophy feeds its growing elitism, much the same as the maldistribution of food and clothing among the poor transforms those who

have it in abundance into an elite. What ought to be common possessions have become luxuries. In short, what we have here is a transgression against the basic spirit of philosophy. And because the transgression is institutionalized, the fault does not lie principally with individual students of philosophy, but with the dominant myth that they have inherited. The only hope is in some form of de-institutionalization. Institutions, after all, have a way of growing to the point that they actually begin to work against their founding purpose. If it is the case that the philosophical establishment in Japan has crossed that critical threshold and is actually promoting the ignorance of philosophical thinking, then nothing short of a demystification of the dominant myth can restore its original spirit. If philosophy has fallen into a rut in Japan and failed to produce sufficient numbers of original thinkers capable of making an impact on the general modes of thought of the age, surely the bulk of the explanation lies within the general perception of the philosophical vocation itself.

The circumstances of philosophy in Japan today are nothing new to the history of Western philosophy. There is hardly a single major movement from the pre-Socratics to the present day that has not had to contend with accusations of elitism or snobbery for its peculiar and unintelligible use of language.¹ The reasons often ride on the shirtils of other complaints about social insignificance, political naïveté, and the like. But the complaint about the failure of philosophers' language to communicate can be pulled away for a closer look.

There are two distinct but related questions here: how bad writing corrupts thinking, and how esoteric language inoculates thinking against criticism by outsiders. In the case of Japan, where imported philosophy outweighs native production, these questions immediately draw us in to asking about how philosophical texts are translated, and this is the standpoint from which I would like to think about them here. In fact, many of the problems with the decline of philosophy may begin from the fact that this is so little discussed, or at least that the discussion has so little influence on the young generation of translators. To be fair, I know of no encyclopedia of philosophy, in any language, that treats the problem of actual translation of texts as a philosophical problem. At any event, in Japan's academic world, translation is seen as a technical issue, not a proper philosophical question. Footnotes and glosses in translations about the subtleties of the original text typi-

¹ The bulk of my attention here is to the present day, but even the great vernacularizers of the Middle Ages who broke with the convention of writing only in Latin, were aware of this tendency. Did not Dante identify with the souls suffering in the first terrace of purgatory because of his pride of learning, his tendency, as Giovanni Villani comments five centuries later "to be rude, as philosophers are, and not know how to speak with the unlearned"? *Cronica di Giovanni Villani*, ed. by F. Gherardi Deagomanni, 4 vols. (Florence, 1844–5), IX, 136. Or again, when we see Ramon Llull a century before translating his own books between Arabic, Latin, and Catalan, composing abbreviated and simplified versions of his own complex texts, and alerting his reader to the different levels within a single book (such as in the opening remarks to the *Llibre del gentil i dels tres savis*) it was precisely because of the ill repute in which philosophers were held by ordinary people.

cally are great in content and show an admirable grappling with the content of the text. But they rarely go beyond arguing for the rendition of some term or other or demonstrating the translator's competence and trustworthiness. More than that is not asked, and it is almost impossible to judge what if any translation theory is at work. As far as I can tell, this is typical of the genre of philosophical translations as a whole.

Against this background, I would like to argue the case for a radical liberalization of the standards of philosophical translation in Japan. It is time great numbers of aspiring philosophers were set free to err on the side of creativity and rhetorical elegance, which have been longstanding victims of the largely tacit but powerful assumptions regarding translation. The step is an audacious one only because it is unfamiliar. Once taken, however, I am convinced that it will help to free the thinking of the young generation of philosophical minds who typically begin their careers with translating texts, and at the same time increase the reading public of philosophy. Accordingly, the object of my argument here will be the sacred cow of fidelity to the original text.



The idea that texts are more beautiful, or at least richer, in the original is a truism that no translator of philosophy would dare challenge in public, but it does not settle well for either readers or translators. No doubt the absence of translation is by far the more compelling reason to read texts in Western languages. Communicating with scholars from abroad and publishing one's papers in foreign journals is one thing. Grappling with philosophical ideas in one's own is another. Even where one has a fairly good mastery of the languages, the associations, connections, and reflections prompted by reading in Japanese far exceed the stimulus of a text in a Western language. The question is why the valuation of translation does not take these more into account.

Even before we talk of liberalizing the idea of translation, it has to be recognized that Japanese translations of Western philosophical texts are full of mistakes that can be traced back to an insufficient understanding of the original language. Examples of failure to understand grammar and idiomatic usage as well as the historical echoes of particular words and metaphors are commonplace. Ordinary language gets converted into technical jargon and technical terms lose their links with other branches of learning, and as a result even the aim of being faithful to the original, independently of where the Japanese reads "naturally" or not, is not met. The distinction between elegant prose and bad prose is erased; the flowing stream of James and Bergson are made to read like the clotted prose of Adorno and Heidegger.²

Before you accuse me of gross exaggeration, let me state another, equally obvious fact: there is nothing particularly Japanese about this. Western philosophy has been producing its share of bad writing and bad translations for centuries, and has never been without its critics for doing so. (Even the word *translation* is a mistranslation.³) I find no reason to single Japan out here for a slap on the wrists, and have no doubt that a solid counter-argument could be made about the translations of Eastern philosophical texts by Western scholars. If there is any difference, it is that the prolonged alienation of philosophy from the intellectual mainstream has hardened its stylistic habits into a grounds for self-identity. It is hardly my place to issue a call for repentance. All I can do, with one foot in Japan and one foot outside, is try to identify the *philosophical* reasons why this state of affairs is allowed to continue.

In doing so, I mean to resist the temptation to lay the bulk of the blame on the psychological, social, and educational deficiencies of Japan's linguistic culture. The web of dominant conventions that govern an academic career in Japan are part of this culture, and the translation of Western philosophical texts cannot be understood without it looking at standing demands that really have nothing to do with the content of the translations. Not even the contents of the philosophy being translated are likely to overturn the myth or break through it, because it is prior to the translator's work and gives it a place in the social relationships. This myth is a kind of *arché* whose criticism amounts to a kind of anarchism. The standards of professional certification will, of course, have to loosen and change before philosophy enters the mainstream of Japanese intellectual life. But nothing I have to say about the matter, and certainly nothing in a talk as short as this, is likely to advance the process. I therefore choose to look at the execution of translation as a philosophical choice rather than a mythical one.

By far more difficult for me to resist is the temptation to argue by anecdote. Over the past 20 years in seminars I have read with students, line by line, a number of classical texts of philosophy and hermetic literature, as well as great poetic classics like the *Faust* and the *Divine commedia*. In addition to collaborating on and monitoring any number of translations of contemporary Japanese philosophy into European languages, I have tried my hand at a few texts myself. It would only take me a few minutes rummaging through my class notes and pulling books down from the shelf to produce the sorts of outrageous examples of soulless prose, mis-

² There is, of course, the argument that elegance impedes clear philosophical thinking, so that someone like Brand Blanshard can come down hard on Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Kierkegaard for the fact that their style cloaks unclear thinking. *On Philosophical Style* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1969).

³ Leonardi Bruni (1369–1444) misread a line in the *Noctes Atticae* of Aulus Gellius where *traducere* meant “introduce, lead into” as “carrying over” and hence “translating.” The etymological mistake carried over to French and Italian in the fifteenth century and was simply repeated in English but covered over in the German *Übersetzung*.

translation, and textual misunderstanding—from my own work and that of others in more or less equal amounts—to make a case about how philosophical translations betray their sources. I am not sure a solid case can be made for inducing principles from a sampling of examples, and in any case the exposure of faults is likely to end up obscuring the respect I have for the works I am most critical of, not to mention heightening the embarrassment I already feel for my own failures. Instead, I will look back at this experience, which I am certain I share with many of you, and try to recover the underlying principles at work in Japanese translations of Western philosophical works.

I have no intention here of trying to make any contribution to “translation theory.” To do so would be to stray from the far simpler objective of arguing for the liberalization of philosophical translations. I would only note in passing the growing awareness during the twentieth century that translating from one language to another needs to be understood in the wider context of what George Steiner called “inner translation,” that is, the semiotics of hearing what people say and saying what one thinks. Consciousness creates a certain disequilibrium with the world. Reflection processes the world not as the fact of what is but as what it *might* be; we are always reading into what perception gives us, and this builds up a pressure of frustration as the world resists our hopes for it. Speech is our way of keeping that pressure from exploding.⁴ While the need for speech—the translation of what we say to ourselves into what can be communicated to others—is universal to consciousness, its definition, both in amount and in content, is cultural and temporal. The cultural difference is well known to easterners who have lived in western countries and vice-versa. What is too often overlooked is the fact that a similar disequilibrium comes into play when I read something written before I was born. I translate it, even if it is in my native tongue. In fact the past is a foreign country, whose distance from us is perhaps even more than that which separates the contemporary language of Europe from that of Japan.

The point for us here is that, when translation between languages is not aware of these prior levels of translation, in effect it projects all the pressures towards the foreignness of the foreign language, which greatly contributes to its gaining an inviolable character. An extensive enterprise of philosophical translation like Japan’s should do something to heighten the awareness of these questions. If linguistic theory stops at the relation between thought and expression, and translation is seen as largely a technical question, the bridge between translating and

⁴ George Steiner’s *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), is a masterly review of the field and has probably influenced my remarks here far more than I shall credit him. The delicious irony of the Japanese translation is that the most telling examples of the book, which show a often brilliant attention to detail, are virtually nonsensical in Japanese, not through any fault of the translator but because Steiner requires a knowledge of French, German, and English for his argument to be followed.

thinking is weakened. In the same sense in which Goethe's poetry is unthinkable without his efforts at translation from Romance, Slavic, Iranian, and Germanic tongues, I believe Japanese philosophy will never mature until it becomes more self-aware of what is going on when it translates.



I am not going to be detained here by arguments that translation from one language to another is out and out impossible. As Ortega y Gasset rightly notes, translation without interpretation is a naïve fantasy, and surely not everything is translatable. But interlingual translation is no more impossible than the transition from ideas to speech, where what is held in silence is important to understand what is communicated, but which we negotiate all the time in varying degrees of success.⁵ Formal arguments against the translatability between languages have accumulated at least since the fifteenth century, and while there is good antidote there to mechanical theories of translation, the level at which the final position is true is uninteresting to philosophy.

Self-criticism is the soul of philosophy. And as Whitehead used to tell his students, "to be refuted in every century after you have written is the acme of triumph."⁶ I would add: to be refuted in several languages only sweetens the victory. Nothing finite is self-supporting and philosophical problems are no exception. Translators who enshrine a philosophical text in the contingencies of its birth place in the effort to give it an infinity beyond the reach of the time and culture of the language they are writing in are claiming an infinity for it that will only kill it in the end.

Of course, there is nothing to stop a particular philosopher from tying his thought to the language he is writing in, and tying it so tightly that translation becomes impossible without keeping the original terminology or forcing one's own language to the most unnatural of contortions. Let us take an extreme and celebrated instance. When Martin Heidegger took the ordinary German word *dasein*, which simply means "being there" (在る⁷), applied it to the *human* way of being

⁵ "A being incapable of renouncing the saying of many things would be incapable of speaking. Every language has a different equation of manifestations and silences. Every people keeps silence on certain things *in order to* be able to say others. For *everything* would be unsayable. Hence the enormous difficulty of translation: in it one tries to say in one idiom precisely what the language tends to silence." José Ortega y Gasset, "Miseria y esplendor de la traducción." *Obras completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1970) 5: 444.

⁶ *Science and Philosophy*, 122.

⁷ The Japanese term seems to capture the sense of "being present" of *dasein*. It should be noted that the adoption of 有 (and 非有 or 无) as the equivalent of *ὄν* (and *μὴ ὄν*) or *being* (and *nothingness*) is a later usage often erroneously read back into the Chinese classics, where 有 had the sense of "having at hand" or "being around" (and 無 its negation). In any case, even though modern Japanese maintains the dual sense in the abstract character 有, it also distinguishes between 何々が有る and どこかに在る. Since Heidegger understood the substantive *Dasein* to

present, and then converted it into a noun (在ること), not only was he asking his German readers to adjust to an unnatural use of the language, but forcing his translators to carry that unnaturalness over into their own. The first English translation used the German *Dasein*. Heidegger himself stated repeatedly that he preferred simple English terms to forced neologisms, but in the end the German term won the day. The Japanese, ignorant of his advice, gave us the term 現存在 that is of use only to readers of Heidegger and that ordinary Japanese dictionaries, if they carry the word at all, associated with the original German word *Dasein*. The worst of it all is that in the translation, the ordinariness of “being there” is lost.

The failure of the translation to communicate is partly due to Heidegger’s binding of his ideas to his own language, but things do not stop there. The irony here is that by trying to twist Japanese around the use of ordinary words as technical jargon, it ends up rejecting Heidegger’s originality and imitating his weakness. Heidegger turned his own linguistic limitations (he could not even read English) into a virtue, believing that philosophy could only be done in two languages, German and Greek. While more polite to the Orient, he most assuredly did not expect any serious critique, let alone development, of his thinking, through Japanese translations. In a late interview that he asked to be published only after his death, he spoke about

the special inner affinity of the German language to the language of the Greeks and their thinking. This is confirmed to me again and again by the French. When they begin to think, they speak German.⁸

The translator who contorts his own language in order to accommodate Heidegger assumes that his words can be treated at their lexical value, isolated from their living environment, and to that extent agrees with his assessment. To treat the text as sacred is to administer a sedative to one’s feeling for one’s native language. It seems that this is how Heidegger would have wanted it, but that was his weakness and the Japanese confirms it in trying to ignore it.

I do not mean to enter into a discussion about translating Heidegger, nor to insist that his is the only way to bind philosophy to language. There is no need to, since the pattern is a familiar one: the original question about the close bonds between a philosopher and his language, which any translator has to ask himself about again and again, is radically altered by the assumption that for one language to be translated into another, it must enter a state of suspended animation. In

refer to a human mode of being, one solution would be to translate it as 在ること, adopting the polite reading of the kanji as いる rather than ある.

⁸ Interview published in *Der Spiegel*, 23 (1976): 217. See the comments by Walter Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), vol. 2, 179–82.

doing so, the translator deludes himself into being tied to *the same context* that the original text's language is tied to.

This infliction of suspended animation is what I am calling "sacralization." It applies not only to the original text but also to the translation, which becomes sacred by association with it. To this extent the translated text harbors a basic contradiction: the translation is done as if transcending the very things that give the original its vitality, in order that its otherness might be preserved in the translation. In this way, the demands of style in the translation language are slackened out of a sense of fidelity to the original.

Complaints about bad writing have, as I said, long accompanied philosophy. But only rarely is the nature of translated philosophy taken up as a serious part of self-criticism. As a young graduate student studying Hegel, I remember picking up Walter Kaufmann's recently published rendition of the notoriously difficult Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which he ventured to assert was "easier to follow than the original."⁹ Not only did he render the text in fluent and natural English, he produced a facing page of commentary explaining what he was doing and why. Though I lacked his nearly native feel for German to appreciate many of the fine points, I was struck by the difference with the standard translations in English and French we were made to consult in class. I saw connections and leaped to new ideas that were absent from my previous reading of the text. I think that forever changed my idea of what translation should aim at, and I wrote to tell him so. In ensuing correspondence, I expressed my wish to do doctoral studies with him, but in the end he encouraged me to go to Cambridge. I do not regret the decision, though I often think I would have been much better equipped to handle translations of Japanese philosophical works in later life if I had had the chance to work with Professor Kaufmann.

There are, of course, those who champion dense and halting style almost as a philosophical virtue.¹⁰ By far, however, the majority of great philosophers who

⁹ Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 364. Kaufmann's very critical views of translation and philosophical style are scattered throughout his books, but one of his most impressive appreciations of translation deals with Martin Buber's rendering of the Old Testament, highlighted by his harsh words for Heidegger ("As a stylist, Buber is above comparison with Heidegger whose prose.... is gradually becoming more and more indistinguishable from the paradoxes published here and there."). See "Buber's Religious Significance," *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (La Salle: Open Court, 1967), 665–85.

¹⁰ The American gender theorist, Judith Butler's appeal to Adorno in her defense is a contemporary case. Though I esteem her ideas highly, I have a certain sympathy for a recent critic when he writes: "Her prose is unnecessarily dense and long-winded, and almost never fails to use jargon even where much more accessible vocabulary is available.... However, although Butler's writing is like an explosion in a dictionary factory, if one takes time to dig through the rubble one finds that her ideas are actually quite straightforward." David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2002), ch. 7. The Japanese translator, Takemura Kazuko 竹村和子, notes the "difficulty" of the prose, and opts in the end for noninterference, on the ground that the translation may be cited. 『ジェンダー・トラブル: フェミニズムとアイデンティティの攪乱』 (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1999), 292, 295. It is precisely the predominance of "accurate citation" over legibility that I wish to argue amounts to a failure

have bothered to write about style have done so to applaud clarity and berate obscurity. A short example from C. D. Broad is typical:

I have an extreme dislike for vague, confused, and oracular writing; and I have very little patience with authors who express themselves in this style. I believe that what can be said at all can be said simply and clearly in any civilized language or in a suitable system of symbols, and that verbal obscurity is almost always a sign of mental confusion.¹¹

Such opinions are much more acceptable when directed at original texts, but somehow translations have had a privilege of exemption in philosophical circles that they have never enjoyed in literary ones. Vague and confused translation language is assumed to be the fault of the translated language, and there the matter ends. The problem is, the reader of the translation almost never trips over the style at the same places as the native reader of the original. In other words, the translator's policy of "non-interference" and "objectivity" can only be based on a lack of understanding of the enormous amount of interpretation that goes on in translating between languages. This is so independently of the quality of the original style. Indeed, reproducing the same quality of bad writing in languages as different as Japanese and European languages, would take the highest literary skills, perhaps even higher than carrying over the flavor of a translucent, flowing style. Few if any translators of philosophical texts possess this, and it is not reasonable to ask it. But neither is it reasonable to swallow without criticism the idea that translations that are tough to plow through are the result of either a flawed original or the distance between the two languages.

A translator sanctifies the text out of misplaced respect for the author. The amount of effort that goes into producing a translation only heightens the respect, and few translators would affront common sense with the arrogance to stand shoulder to shoulder with the text with the thought of improving it. This posture of enchantment before the original text is precisely the cause of the disenchantment of readers with the resultant translation. When a text is difficult to understand, it is assumed that the original is difficult. To the extent that the translation stumbles and grates on one's native sensitivities, there is no repressing the feeling that the translation is flawed, but even this does not bring the original into question. If anything, the flaws in the reproduction make the original shine all the more, like a distant and unapproachable star. This seems to me getting things backwards. Any sense of reverence communicated through a translation that tolerates irreverence towards one's own language and one's own demand for clarity is

to even think about more than the surface problems of translation.

¹¹ C. D. Broad, "Critical and Speculative Philosophy," in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements* (First Series), ed. J. H. Muirhead (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1924), 81.

simply misplaced. And this can happen only because of the shared assumption that the work of translation was done in an objective, non-interfering manner. What is more, it all but removes the possibility of translation leaving a mark on literary style, the way, say, translations of Shakespeare left an indelible mark on the German language and introduced his name into classical German literature,¹² or even the way nineteenth-century Japanese had to make grammatical adjustments in order to accommodate translations of foreign texts into the language.¹³

In classifying this as a kind of sacralization, I mean that philosophical texts are being misclassified. Homer's epics and the Koran are good examples of quasi-sacred texts, whose translation merits the kind of respect it seems to me Japan accords ordinary philosophical works, and also from the comatose state texts are reduced to in order to be translated "faithfully."¹⁴ Their very survival across time sets them off from ordinary historical discourse. The appropriate form of translation for this is literal, the belief that the word-for-word technique is the ideal way of submitting oneself to the original text and eliciting the full meaning of the text. Very little, if any, classical Western philosophy belongs in the category of the sacred text in this sense. For the translator to take it as such is to make a fundamental hermeneutical mistake. I have the impression, however, that young students of philosophy in Japan, hoping to make a career in the discipline, take this sacralization as a matter of common sense. It further seems to me that this fixed idea of what constitutes a "faithful" reproduction of a text not only does not broaden the reading audience for philosophical texts—which is, after all, the point of translation—but actually stimulates philosophy's appetite for swallowing its own tail.



Based on what has been said, desacralizing philosophical texts means adjusting the current notions of what constitutes "fidelity" in translation. For purity of argument, let us assume an accomplished translator—that is, someone who does not need the translation. He can read the original with relative comfort. Such a person knows there are better ways to come to grips with a text than the arduous and often unrewarded task of translating. Aside from earning credibility as a translator, the point of the translation is to make it accessible to those who would not otherwise

¹² Documentation of this process has been offered by Kenneth E. Larson. See, for example, "The Origins of the 'Schlegel-Tieck' Shakespeare in the 1820s," *The German Quarterly* 60 (1987): 19–37.

¹³ Yanabu Akira 柳父章 has studied this question in depth, demonstrating how even very basic elements in the sentence structure of Japanese as it is written today came from the attempt to reproduce Dutch works in Japanese.

¹⁴ Strictly speaking, one should include here forms of language deliberately stiffened for ritualistic purposes, where the aim is to draw one away from the changing world. But unlike sacred classics like those mentioned in the text, these always require a certain archaic flavor, which can only be translated by an archaism that makes the meaning still more foreign to the translation language.

have access to it, or at least who would prefer reading a work in their own language, even a clumsily worded version of it, to reading the original, even though they may occasionally return to the original to confirm critical passages or check an oddity in translation. This being so, it is only natural that the translator's idea of fidelity should coincide with the fidelity expected by the reader: an accurate reproduction of the surface of the text in a second language that can stand up to the critical eye of those who compare it with the original. Interpretation and paraphrase, it is assumed, should be left as far as possible to the reader. The greatest fear of the reproducer is that he will not feel as comfortable in the text he has traveled to as he would like to be, and that under the obligation not to leave anything behind, he will carry his misreadings back to the native soil of his own language, often unaware of the mistakes he is making.

But this is not the only reason a translation can go bad, though the fear of erring in this respect is so real that it often obscures other, equally important reasons. One can also be unfaithful to one's readers by presenting them with a hybrid prose on the assumption they will be able to see through to the alien grammar behind it and then chalk up the offense done to their native language as a necessary evil. The catalog of such sins makes interesting reading—especially for the Japanese student of philosophy who is likely to have his own list ready to hand—but repentance is seen to be unrealistic. Why bother, when there are no serious consequences to one's reputation as a specialist in philosophy for not doing so? Individual consequences, perhaps not. But consequences for the way philosophical texts are read in the intellectual mainstream, and hence for the future study of philosophy itself, enormous. Besides, it is unfaithful to the original. When one wrestles with a translated text, one is *at least* doing what one does when one struggles to grasp the connections, the flow of the argument, the association of ideas, and the subtle implications that do not reach the surface of the text in an untranslated original in one's own language. To be denied this is to forfeit even the minimum expectations one has when writing one's own philosophical prose. Willy-nilly, the impression can hardly avoid building up over time that philosophy is something cut off from the way language works in general.

This leads to a third, but somewhat subtler form of infidelity in translation. Here we have to do less with the particular text at hand or the readers who will be handed it in their own language than with the failure to see how questions of translation are themselves fundamental philosophical problems. Simply put, as I have been insisting, the translation of a philosophical text is faithful to philosophy itself to the degree that it is aware of the role of language in communicating thought; and to the extent that it is not aware, or does not allow its awareness to interfere with the translation process, it is unfaithful.

The range of problems that language presents to the expression of philosophical thought is broad, but here I would like to consider how dealing with them affects

the actual work of translation. To begin with, there is an awareness of what is at stake in killing off polysemic elements. All neologism—be it by distorting language into nonsense, combining existing languages, or creating new terms—is aimed at controlling polysemy, which is something natural to language. At the opposite end of the spectrum there is the developmentally rich polysemy of humor, irony, and sarcasm, without which a great deal of the classics of philosophy gets glossed over. Here polysemy is a form of hermeticism that *includes* the reader, and a translation that is unaware of the fact is likely to reproduce it as an *exclusive* hermeticism, that has the neologism's effect of restricting access to the initiated. The multiplicity of meanings can be hidden in a term, in a phrase, or in the flow of the argument. Which is primary will depend on the context, but without attention to all three, the layers of meaning are likely to be lost more often than preserved. To put it radically, insofar as one can read a philosophical translation and reconstruct the original from the surface of the text, the original has not been understood and that translation is incomplete.

Second, there is the problem of leaning on existing translations from a third language, increasing the possibility of repeating mistakes. This is very common in Japanese translations, especially of classical texts but also including philosophical works. Time and again I have found mistakes in translation that could not have come from the original but only from a misunderstanding of a peculiar English usage. Einstein said that a genius is someone who is good at concealing his sources. I suspect that this applies to not a few of those in the pantheon of Japan's great translators. In any case, I think we have to look at the assumptions behind this use of other translations for the assumption that everything open on one's desk is somehow removed from the living stream of language and that attention to the surface of the text is adequate. (When it comes to the concrete question of how this affects Japanese prose style, I find myself often standing out in the margins looking in, and must therefore defer to those who can move more freely between the lines of the text. Though even my limited acquaintance is enough to give me a sense of discomfort, often enough I trip over language simply because it is *too good* for me.)

Though I am highly cautious of consulting existing translations in a third language, there is one case in which it is most helpful, namely to serve as a supplementary lexicon for individual terms that cause difficulty. Dictionaries themselves are another matter. They are the daily bread of the translator, but they are not idols. They are to be devoured, not worshipped. I have the impression that trust in their omniscience, or at least irrefutable authority, is the closest thing to original sin in the world of Japanese philosophical translations, though they are perceived as a *via saluationis* for those wandering aimlessly in the forest of words. That said, I think that problems of infidelity to the linguistic dimension of philosophical thought are exacerbated not because one relies too much on dictionaries, but that one relies too much on too few of them. To the native, words are always more than the sum

of dictionary definitions. To the translator, always less. One way to compensate for the imbalance in the way the translated language and the translating language face a text, to break free of belief in the infallibility of the bi-lingual dictionary is to temper their use with etymological and historical dictionaries of both languages being studied. But even this is not enough. To assume that, given the suitable capacity, anything from two centuries ago can be captured in one's own native language leads not to accurate translation but to the paralysis of style. Language, after all, is not dead—unless you kill it, and then it is no longer language. To all appearances, philosophy in Japan is a mass grave of such executions.

In this same regard, I find appalling the growing habit of introducing foreign words into a text as a solution to apparently untranslatable key terms. This belongs to the general failure to appreciate the style of the original. The fact is, Western philosophers often write badly and use strange terminology to cover their faults, but this is no excuse for writing barbarous prose in one's native language out of a sense of "faithfulness" to the original. The translated text of a Western philosophical work is, after all, a new language. It is not simply an "equivalent" rendition of one language into another. The struggle to find everyday, intelligible expressions for alien idioms and grammatical usage is a contribution to language. Just as children, the oppressed, the excluded, minorities, and so forth rebel against dominant forms of language, so is the introduction of a foreign thought into one's own linguistic world an interruption of the status quo. To ignore this, or pretend it is not happening, is to displace language from the only place where it can live and breathe.

At the same time, as Lawrence Venuti has argued compellingly, simply to "domesticate" the original text to the biases of those who read it in translation is a disservice that borders on the immoral. To remove all sense of the unfamiliar by assimilating the text without remainder into familiar language is particularly unhealthy for philosophical thinking. I take seriously his argument that

...fluent translation may enable a foreign text to engage a mass readership, even a text from an excluded foreign literature, and thereby initiate a significant canon reformation. But such a translation simultaneously reinforces the major language and its many other linguistic and cultural exclusions while masking the inscription of domestic values. Fluency is assimilationist, presenting to domestic readers a realistic representation inflected with their own codes and ideologies as if it were an immediate encounter with a foreign text and culture.

.....

Foreign philosophies can retain their difference in translation when they differ to some extent from those that currently dominate the discipline at home, or when they are translated so as to differ from prevailing domestic interpretations of their concepts and discourses.

Venuti therefore sees translation not as a contribution to the existing literary canon, but as an “experiment” that “challenges the domestic hierarchy of philosophical languages.”¹⁵ I have no quarrel with this, except insofar as it is turned into an excuse for unreadable translations. In the case of philosophical translations into Japanese, the fear of ideas being assimilated is far less a threat than the fear of ideas simply ending up unintelligible, and that unintelligibility being seen as an index of profundity of thought.

I began speaking of fidelity with the assumption that the translation is not needed for the translator. Actually it is, in three very different senses. First, the majority of translators only really read and understand the book, even in a surface sense, once they have translated it and re-read it in their own language. There is a difference between reading 10 pages in 10 or 20 minutes, which a fluent reader would do, to reading 10 pages in 10 or 20 hours, which I suspect a high percentage of translators do. This being the case, it is unreasonable to expect that even the minimal “feel” of the flow of the text can be translated. The river flows so slowly it is virtually frozen. This is part of the reason why only a fraction of philosophical translation is great, most of it passable, and a solid mass of it downright awful.

The conclusion I draw from this is alarmingly simple. I am not suggesting that one subtract anything from the translation, leaving out what is unclear or too difficult to render. Neither am I suggesting that one add phrases and sentences along the way to clarify the meaning. I find both these practices appalling. The addition and subtraction I have in mind is of a different, less invasive sort.

First, I would stress the need to add the stage of radically editing a completed translation for readability. Much translation is not bad because it is inaccurate in a first sense, but because it is incomplete, a first draft that deserves to be poured over and rethought with the same care that a good writer gives his own prose. This is a courtesy to the readers and also, as I have been insisting, a courtesy to the original text.

Secondly, there is a need to subtract the style of translated philosophy from one’s own writing style when composing one’s own philosophical texts. The permanent temptation in philosophy, a temptation which I stated at the outset is fast becoming a chronic condition in Japan, is that its idiom becomes a kind of obsolete dialect. The tendency of philosophers to focus their efforts on dealing with each other’s writings rather than with the fundamental problems of philosophy has to be resisted as part of the devotion to self-criticism.

¹⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 12, 115, 123. The work deserves careful reading both for its critical approach to existing translation theory and as a contribution to the discussion of the ethical dimension of the “globalizing” ethos of much academic work.



I do not mean to suggest by the foregoing that all infidelity in translation is destructive. There are also mistakes and misreadings of texts that make possible entire new ways of seeing and thinking. Examples of this are well known, from communist misreadings of the Hegelian dialectic and Shinran's misreadings of Chinese texts. I would even include here young Nishida Kitarō's misreading of James' notion of "pure experience," which he tore out of its native context and turned on its head to make it a principle for the unity of consciousness.¹⁶

By the same token, I can hardly agree that all clumsy neologism and contorted style is without purpose. In 1948 one of Britain's most widely read and popular philosophers, C. E. M. Joad (1891-1953), attacked what he saw as the unnecessarily complicated writing of A. N. Whitehead, which he contrasted with the fluent, readable style of H. Bergson:

I do not wish to suggest that philosophical thinking is, or ever can be easy, but it need not be made unnecessarily obscure. For obscurity may be of two kinds. There is the expression of obscurity and there is obscurity of expression. The first is pardonable; there is no reason—at least I know of none—why the universe should be readily intelligible to the mind of a twentieth-century Nordic adult; the second, which is the result of bad craftsmanship, is not.¹⁷

We do not have to swallow Joad's call for more "Philosophical Vulgarisateurs," nor to lump all philosophers together, to reject what he rejected by the term: the objection to philosophers writing about non-philosophical topics, the claim that philosophers should not stray from their gardens to write about current moral and political problems, and the objection to philosophers writing in non-technical language.

At the same time, we cannot overlook Whitehead's brief rebuttal:

Philosophy in its advance must involve obscurity of expression, and novel phrases.... Language has been evolved to express "clearly and distinctly" the accidental aspect of accidental factors. But... there are always questions left over. The problem is to discriminate exactly what we know vaguely.¹⁸

¹⁶ This point has yet to be sufficiently examined, but Tsurumi Shunsuke 鶴見俊輔, in a recent book has expressed the same reservations regarding Nishida, whose style he finds typical of Japanese translations whose reliance on foreign terms and technical jargon that "fail to evoke a sense of the everyday" from their native language. 『読んだ本はどこにいったか』 [Where did all those books I read go?] (Tokyo: Shioda Shuppansha, 2002), 41–5, 76–9.

¹⁷ C. E. M. Joad, *Decadence: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948). The same point is repeated in his *Guide to Philosophy* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 559, where he contrasts the crystal clarity of Bergson with the developing thought of Whitehead.

This is substantially the same reply that Nishitani Keiji gave in response to the attack on the style of the Kyoto-school philosophers by the literary critic Kobayashi Hideo as “a bizarre system of thought composed neither in Japanese nor in a foreign language.”¹⁹ For my part, I am sympathetic to the arguments on all sides, though not to the choice of conclusions—either a condemnation or exoneration of the accused.

Faithful translation, at least as I am understanding it here, always involves some balance of mimesis and poesis, between the attempt to preserve the original vitality of the text by trying to enter in and repeat the experience of the author, and the attempt creatively to read it from one’s own point in time (what Nietzsche called *erdichten*). While it is a matter of philosophical style how one strikes the balance, both are different again from the mere mechanical reproduction of the surface I have criticized above. Original philosophical texts are always closer to a musical score than they are to a bouquet of flowers. The music can be played again and again, with varying degrees of interpretation but never purely. The only kind of flowers that can be safely translated across time are dry flowers, and this is because they have been cut off from their roots.

In either case, translation creates waste; it always diminishes the original, even when the style is an improvement in a literary sense. This is not simple falsification, but belongs to the same drive towards the future that makes all translation necessary, beginning with the translation of one’s own thoughts and desires to oneself and others. There is always “more than words can tell,” a mythical element in all logos.²⁰ Mistranslation is one kind of lie; good translations are another. But both fragment and destroy in order to rebuild. The attempt to avoid all such deformation, or pretend that it can be avoided, is by far the greater lie.

That said, translation is tempted by two forms of betrayal, each of which is a form of linguistic madness. On the one hand, there is the belief that too much is forfeited for it to be done, and the perfect translation would be to teach people to read the original. The extreme case of this is Borges’s Menard, who struggles so long with the text of Don Quixote that he ends up reproducing it word for word in the original. On the other hand, there is the belief that the text belongs to the translator and his age, that its native context is no longer relevant. In the extreme, the loss is ignored and the book read as a contemporary work. The text becomes like the prisoner in Paul Valéry’s *Histoires brisées* who is exiled to a land where everyone

¹⁸ A. N. Whitehead, *Science and Philosophy*, 131.

¹⁹ Documented in my *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), 34–5, 187–8, 286–7, 329.

²⁰ As Jacques Derrida has suggested, the story of the Tower of Babel is not just about the fragmentation of language but is “le mythe de l’origine du mythe, la métaphore de la métaphore, le récit du récit, la traduction de la traduction.” *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), 203.

knows him as someone he is not, and whose only salvation is to forget who he really is. Most translation falls somewhere in between.

When it comes to philosophical texts, surely some writers suffer in the translation more than others. For example, I have argued that the writings of the Kyoto-school philosophers Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, do not suffer in the translation, surely nothing of the scale of what great stylists like Bergson and James suffers in Japanese. What is more, there is a sense in which for their permanent contribution to philosophy to be secured they *must* be read in translation, and these readings must be allowed to reflect back critically on the readings of those who work with the original texts.²¹ Despite all my complaints, I am persuaded that what philosophies lose in translation is generally trivial compared to what they gain. There are translations so bad that nothing happens at all, except that it is ignored. But a mostly competent translation is an event at least as important as the fact that the books are still read. The real issue of translation does not require the ability to do the work. It is self-evident or it is esoteric. I believe it is the former, and that twentieth-century Japanese philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Nishida and his leading disciples is one of the clearest examples of this.

If philosophy were only the history of philosophy, perhaps the need to desacralize our translations would not be so great. But insofar as philosophical texts excite the mind to connections not previously seen and enlighten aspects of the present that would otherwise go unnoticed, to pretend that their translation is no more than a crutch for the linguistically impaired is to forfeit the soul of the translator's vocation. Translation is not just memory, it is also anticipation. And are these not the two impulses that combine to pull us out of animal consciousness?

²¹ *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 20–1.