

On Translating Locke, Berkeley and Hume into English

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The title is absurd, of course: all three wrote beautiful English, which I love. Still, they need to be translated. Let me explain.

1. A problem

I have recently been collaborating with my colleague Stewart Thau in teaching a 200-level course on early modern philosophy. The students are given a 'Guide to Reading'; for each class's reading assignment, along with about six questions on the assignment, one of which is then selected as a mini-quiz in class at the start of the next lecture. Failures and no-shows in the quizzes have an effect on the final grades.

This system was devised partly to get the students to attend the lectures and to do the assigned readings in advance. Devising the quiz questions led to the 'Guides', which were clearly needed: because of archaisms, technical terms, and more ordinary words that lie outside the range of most students. The students *could* look up such words in dictionaries, but they *don't*. Against the charge that we are spoon-feeding the students I have a defense once given to me in conversation by Antony Flew: Nothing is spoon-feeding which leads the students to do more work than they would otherwise have done. Anyway, it seems clear

that this reading-guide-and-quiz system had some success.

However, some quiz questions which seemed to me easy were not answered really rightly by any member of the class. In those cases, there was something that the text contained—clearly enough, to my eye—which the students unanimously failed to pick up. Thinking about these results, and discussing them with students, I have become convinced that at my University and therefore at most: **The majority of our 200-level students cannot read Locke, Berkeley or Hume in the original; nor can they read Descartes or Kant in the standard translations.**

We all know why. Their schooling has been such that they have never learned properly to read anything; and the habits of impressionistic approximation which they picked up there are not seriously opposed in many departments of the University. Part of what students have to get from their first experiences of philosophy—something they need before they can get anything else at all—is discipline in attending to the detailed meaning of the words on the page. For most of them, this is a new activity which they find extremely difficult.

The texts of the great early modern philosophers—English originals or standard translations—are bad materials on which to acquire this new skill, because they also involve so

many other obstacles and difficulties—ones which are quite irrelevant to the *central* objective of getting the student to attend to the texts for the intellectual content.

I challenge any teacher of lower-level history of philosophy courses properly to test his or her students to find out whether they are *really reading* the portions of text that are assigned. It is not enough to rely on one's general impression, based on end-of-semester examinations, that the students eventually have some understanding of the material. If we are to ask them to read texts, we should make sure that they do *read* them.

Possible defense: 'By confronting them with materials that are a bit too difficult, we serve the students well by encouraging them to stretch themselves.' That is a pretty story, but who could honestly believe it? What in fact happens, I am fairly sure, is that the students experience the too-hard texts in about the same way that they experience most of what they 'read'. That is, they continue with the idea that to read a page is to get a general impression of what is going on in it, and perhaps to pick up a few of its notable phrases—this being an idea that they have acquired at school and, sadly, are confirmed in by much of the University. By asking them to read materials which they cannot properly read, **we do them positive harm**; we increase the hold on them of a disastrous idea of what reading is, and thus also of what thinking is.

2. A solution

What is needed, then, is to present them with 'translated' versions of the early modern texts (or of chosen small portions thereof), in which the content is preserved but the irrelevant barriers to understanding are removed. I have been doing this lately. I shall illustrate the sort of 'translating'; I mean in terms of a paragraph from Locke. Please read this—the

opening of the *Essay*—with care:

Since it is the understanding, that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion, which he has over them; it is certainly a subject, even for its nobleness, worth our labour to enquire into. The understanding, like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself; and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance and make it its own object. But, whatever be, the difficulties that lie in the way of this enquiry; whatever it be that keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves; sure I am, that all the light we can let in upon our minds, all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings, will not only be very pleasant, but bring us great advantage, in directing our thoughts in the search of other things.

Can you put your hand on your heart and say that most of the undergraduates you teach could—and furthermore *would*—read that paragraph and take in its content? I think not. Here is a 'translation':

Since it is *the understanding* that sets man above all other animals, and enables him to use and dominate them, it is certainly worth our while to enquire into it. The understanding is like the eye in this respect: it makes us see and perceive all other things, but does not look in on itself. To stand back from it and treat it as an object of study requires skill and hard work. Still, whatever difficulties there may be in doing this, whatever it is that keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves, it will be worthwhile to let as much light as possible in upon our minds, and to discover as much as we can about our own understandings. As well as being enjoyable, this will help us to think well about other topics.

The original is not one of the hardest, and that ‘translation’ is relatively unintrusive, compared with some that are needed; but it could make the crucial difference to whether the passage is properly read by the average sophomore.

Locke is well known to be difficult to read, but Hume is no push-over, as will become clear when you start thinking about him in relation to students’ needs. We teachers find the opening of Section II of the first *Enquiry*, for example, so familiar that we cannot easily grasp how many obstacles lie in the way of an undergraduate’s understanding it. Please read the passage carefully, and imagine you are reading it aloud to undergraduates:

Every one will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment. The utmost we say of them, even when they operate with greatest vigour, is, that they represent their object in so lively a manner, that we could almost say we feel or see it: But, except the mind be disordered by disease or madness, they never can arrive at such a pitch of vivacity, as to render these perceptions altogether undistinguishable. All the colours of poetry, however splendid, can never paint natural objects in such a manner as to make the description be taken for a real landskip. The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation.

They won’t get it, I submit. Here is my proposed ‘translation’:

Everyone will freely admit that the perceptions of the mind when a man feels the pain of excessive heat or

the pleasure of moderate warmth are considerably unlike what he feels when he later remembers this sensation or earlier looks forward to it in his imagination. Memory and imagination may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses, but they cannot create a perception that has as much force and vivacity as the one they are copying. Even when they operate with greatest vigor, the most we will say is that they represent their object so vividly that we could *almost* say we feel or see it. Except when the mind is out of order because of disease or madness, memory and imagination can never be so lively as to create perceptions that are indistinguishable from the ones we have in seeing or feeling. The most lively thought is still dimmer than the dullest sensation.

3. Omissions and additions

In handling that paragraph from Hume, I omitted the ‘landskip’ sentence because it is a mere flourish, not centrally relevant to the main line of thought, not a real help, and thus possibly a hindrance. Such omissions are rare, and only concern minor and unnecessary details. Here is another example, also from Hume. He wrote:

I know not whether the reader will readily apprehend this reasoning. I am afraid, that, should I multiply words about it, or throw it into a greater variety of lights, it would only become more obscure and intricate. In all abstract reasonings, there is one point of view, which, if we can happily hit, we shall go farther towards illustrating the subject than by all the eloquence and copious expression in the world. This point of view we should endeavour to reach, and reserve the flowers of rhetoric for subjects which are more adapted to them.

The student reader will lose nothing, I suggest, by being given only my version of that passage:

I do not know whether the reader will easily grasp this reasoning. I am afraid that if I were to go on longer about it, presenting it from a greater variety of angles, it would only become more obscure and complicated.

On the other hand, if the student must read the longer version something is likely to be lost, namely his or her attention and patience.

The following passage from Berkeley contains something that undergraduates don't need. Read through, unprompted by me, and see if we agree:

The extension therefore which exists without the mind, is neither great nor small, the motion neither swift nor slow, that is, they are nothing at all. But, say you, they are extension in general, and motion in general: thus we see how much the tenet of extended, moveable substances existing without the mind, depends on that strange doctrine of abstract ideas. And here I cannot but remark, how nearly the vague and indeterminate description of matter or corporeal substance, which the modern philosophers are run into by their own principles, resembles that antiquated and so much ridiculed notion of *materia prima*, to be met with in Aristotle and his followers. Without extension solidity cannot be conceived; since therefore it has been shown that extension exists not in an unthinking substance, the same must also be true of solidity.

The sideswipe at the Aristotelians is a mere hindrance when one is trying to introduce undergraduates to Berkeley; or so I believe. When it is removed, however, the final sentence seems to fit a little awkwardly with the rest; and that reveals that the remark about abstraction is really an aside. Here is what I propose:

So if there is extension outside the mind, it must be neither large nor small, and extra-mental motion must be neither fast nor slow. I conclude that there is no such extension or motion. (If you reply 'They do exist; they are extension *in general* and motion *in general*, that will be further evidence of how greatly the doctrine about extended, movable substances existing outside the mind depends on that strange theory of abstract ideas.) So unthinking substances cannot be extended; and that implies that they cannot be solid either, because it makes no sense to suppose that something is solid but not extended.

Sometimes I add a phrase, a clause or even a sentence which I think the original author would have been willing to include at that point, but which does not correspond to anything in what he did write. These additions are marked by ·small dots·. Here are a few examples from Descartes's *Meditations* (for which I give my versions without the more literally faithful translation from which I worked):

(1) When the wax is in front of us, we say that we *see* it, not that we *judge* it to be there from its color or shape; and this might make me think that knowledge of the wax comes from what the eye sees rather than from the perception of the mind alone. But ·this is clearly wrong, as the following example shows·. If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I have just done, I say that I *see* the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax; yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal robots? I *judge* that they are men. (CSM 2:21)

(2) Then again, although these ideas do not depend on my will, it does not follow that they must come from things located outside me. Perhaps they come from some faculty of mine other than my will—one that I

do not fully know about—which produces these ideas without help from external things; this is, after all, just how I have always thought ideas are produced in me when I am dreaming. Similarly, the natural impulses that I have been talking about, though they seem opposed to *my will*, come from within *me*; ·which provides evidence that I can cause things which my will does not cause·. (CSM 2:27)

(3) Though it is true that my knowledge is increasing, and that I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential. Indeed, this gradual increase in knowledge is itself the surest sign of imperfection ·because if I am learning more, that shows that there are things I do not know, and that is an imperfection in me·. (CSM 2:32)

(4) It remains for me only to ask *how* I received this idea from God. I did not acquire it from the senses: it has never come to me unexpectedly, as do most of the ideas that occur when I seem to see and touch and hear things. Nor is it something that I invented; for clearly I cannot take anything away from it or to add anything to it. ·When an idea is sheerly invented, the inventor is free to fiddle with it—add a bit here, subtract a bit there—whereas my idea of God is a natural unit which does not invite such interference·. The only remaining alternative is that my idea of God is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me. (CSM 2:35)

Each of these is no doubt open to dispute. What seems to me indisputable is the basic idea of small, helpful amplifications of texts that are to be read by undergraduates.

4. Other helps

Especially in Descartes's *Meditations*, a little help of another sort is also needed. The subtle dialectical form of that work is not something that undergraduates can be expected to grasp without help, so that in my version I provide a few pointers where they seem to be acutely needed. This is John Cottingham's satisfactory translation of a certain transition of thought in Descartes:

... how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. . . .

In my version, I try to make Cottingham's good prose smoother and more natural (not being under his constraints regarding fierce accuracy), but my present point concerns the transition between the two paragraphs. Hardly any students will see what is going on, so I help them:

... how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to brain-damaged madmen who are convinced they are kings when really they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or

that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. Such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I modelled myself on them.

What a brilliant piece of reasoning! [At this point, Descartes is sarcastically launching into a criticism of the whole of the preceding paragraph.] As if I were not a man who sleeps at night and often has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake—indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. . . .

No doubt the teacher will eventually explain such things; but if the students are asked to read the text in advance of the lecture, they should be given some help at that stage. Otherwise, they are merely being encouraged to glide down the page impressionistically; which is to say that they are being harmed.

In one place I go a little further with stage-setting, while being quite conservative with content. Here is the Cottingham version of a famous episode early in the second Meditation:

Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I myself may perhaps be the author of these thoughts? In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.

But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

The to-and-fro aspect of this is second nature to us now, like breathing out and breathing in. But most undergraduates will never have seen anything remotely like it, and it will utterly confuse them unless they keep themselves safe by merely gliding over the surface. My version of this passage offers them help. It includes everything that follows, including the bit in square brackets:

This [paragraph is a rapid-fire series of considerations going first one way and then the other, like a tennis match. It is set out here as though it were a discussion between two people, here labelled 'Hopeful' and 'Doubtful'; but that is not how Descartes presented it.]

Hopeful: Still, how do I know that there is not something—not on that list—about which there is no room for even the slightest doubt? Is there not a God (call him what you will) who gives me the thoughts I am now having?

Doubtful: But why do I think this, since I might myself be the author of these thoughts?

Hopeful: But then doesn't it follow that I am, at least, *something*?

Doubtful: This is very confusing, because I have just said that I have no senses and no body, and I am so

bound up with a body and with senses that one would think that I cannot exist without them. Now that I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world—no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies—does it follow that I do not exist either?

Hopeful: No it does not follow; for if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.

Doubtful: But there is a supremely powerful and cunning deceiver who deliberately deceives me all the time!

Hopeful: Even then, if he is deceiving me I undoubtedly exist: let him deceive me all he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing while I think I am something. So after thoroughly thinking the matter through I conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, must be true whenever I assert it or think it.

5. A cry for help

This project is proving difficult. It requires three things. **(1)** A good understanding of the original texts. Some of this understanding, of course, is achieved *through* the project: some long-familiar passages turned out to be more opaque than I had ever realized. The attempt to present a text in sophomore English, as I call it, is a fine discipline. **(2)** A decent level of active competence in English, and a good ear. Thirty years ago Gilbert Ryle taught me the most useful thing I have ever learned about writing: what doesn't read well to the ear doesn't read well to the eye. Valuable as this rule is in every context, it is especially so here. The object of the exercise is to get the texts into a form that is in touch

with the rhythms of good, natural, careful speech—the sort of thing people say, not the sort they type. **(3)** The ability to stay awake, alert, and level in one's standards for how intrusive or radical to be. A mildly archaic turn of phrase which passes muster in mid-afternoon may seem to cry out for revision the next morning; and these fluctuations have to be controlled.

If the work is done properly it should be useful to more teachers than just Thau and myself. The ultimate aim is to get something along these lines published, and one publisher is already interested. But things would go better if this were a co-operative venture. I would be glad to hear from teachers of philosophy about what texts they would most like to see handled in this way. More important: I would love to hear from teachers who are willing to use some of these 'translations', report on what success they have with them, and give me guidance about how to improve them—either in particular passages or in general approach. If you are interested in doing this, please contact me. . . .

[What follows is a now out-of-date email address, and a list of texts that I had 'done' at that time. **Added in 2012:** About ten years after this paper appeared The interested publisher asked some philosophy teachers for their opinion on this project, and their response was uniformly negative and sometimes hostile. There were in any case other good reasons for not putting these versions into books and instead using the internet—www.earlymoderntexts.com—which is what I began to do about ten years after this paper appeared.]