

# ON FORMS OF COMMUNICATION IN PHILOSOPHY

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In previous work, I have drawn attention to certain systematic differences among philosophical traditions as regards to the literary forms that are prevalent in each. In this paper, however, I focus on the commentary form. I raise the question of why the use of commentaries abounds in most traditions except those transmitted in the English language and suggest that problems of translation are central to this issue. I argue that the appearance of commentaries in a philosophical tradition is a criterion of such untranslatability that emerges in a broader cultural, economic, political, and religious context. Features of the relation between language and forms of communication in the history of philosophy are here explicated, concentrating especially on the German case.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In my "Textual Deference," I drew attention to certain systematic differences among philosophical traditions as regards to the literary forms that are prevalent in each.<sup>1</sup> It is above all the commentary form, and the associated conception of philosophy in terms of an attitude of deference towards certain canonical texts, which was dominant in almost all philosophical traditions of the past. In regard to the canonical texts of philosophy written in English, however, an exception arises. Here the commentary as tool of philosophical inquiry and interpretation has been in practice never used. Various hypotheses can be put forward to explain this exceptional position of English-language philosophy. On

the one hand is the hypothesis favored amongst philosophers on the Continent: that there are no commentaries on works of philosophy written in the English language because one writes commentaries only on *great* philosophical works. On the other hand is the hypothesis favored amongst Anglo-Saxons: that one writes commentaries only on works of philosophy that are *unclear*. Here I wish to draw out some further features of the relation between language and forms of communication in the history of philosophy, concentrating especially on the German case.

## II. ON CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY AND THE RISE OF NATIONS

Like International Standard Time, so the various major national languages of Europe were creations of the nineteenth century. Political and economic forces conspired with changes in the technology of communication, in public education, and in the science of linguistics, to bring about a hitherto unexperienced degree of standardization of both written and spoken language. Where, for earlier generations, it might have been difficult for the inhabitants of neighboring villages to make themselves understood, this gradual settling of national languages brought common standards of linguistic reference throughout the territories delimited by national borders. In addition, these common languages became to a large extent protected from the seemingly inexorable processes of linguistic change to which all natural languages had been subject hitherto. Thus the novels of Jane Austen are almost as intelligible to us today as they were to Austen's own contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

Economic and intellectual forces have conspired also to ensure a high degree of intertranslatability between the languages of Europe. Such forces—which can be seen at work also in the rise to predominance of Latin and more recently of English as the languages of science—are of course as old as international trade in both commodities and ideas. But they, too, can be seen to have worked themselves out especially strongly in the last 100 years, and this has meant that the newly standardized national languages have become fixed in such a way as to ensure an easy mutual translatability. Each is, as it were, calibrated in ways which make it for normal purposes unproblematically commensurable with the others, so that we might infer by abstraction to a sort of International Standard Language.

## III. PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

The existence of mutually commensurable common languages of standard English, say, or standard German, does not however imply that

every sort of English or German by which we are today confronted is calibrated on this common scale. Already the poet's use of language should make it clear that there are linguistic styles and forms which run skew to the scale and are subject to standards other than those of common intelligibility. The difficulties we face in translating poetry from one language into another are in fact consequences of more deep-seated difficulties we, or the poet, would face in translating his utterances into sentences of the standardized core of his own language.

A similar difficulty arises when it comes to translating religious uses of language into the corresponding standard core. Both poetic and religious utterances manifest, we might say, special sorts of heightenings and deformations of the standard language, heightenings and deformations that are introduced for special reason. Demagogic uses of language at the interface of religion and politics, too, enjoy special rhetorical powers precisely because their linguistic forms transcend the bounds of natural comprehension. And one does not need to turn to the case of Luther, or even of Abraham a Sancta Clara, to see that this is the case.

Such exaggerated or non-standard linguistic forms have in many cases lent historical importance to the social and political movements of which they are the expression. This has meant in turn that there has arisen the need to come to grips with the corresponding texts in a scholarly manner and in the commonly intelligible terms of the standard language. Translation into this language is, however, *ex hypothesi* ruled out, and scholars have in such circumstances been forced to resort instead to other means, above all to the preparation of *sentence-by-sentence commentaries*.

#### IV. COMMENTARIES AS CRITERION OF UNTRANSLATABILITY

In "Textual Deference" I list six conditions for the appearance of commentaries around a given text in a given culture:

1. The text must enjoy a certain density or inaccessibility or seeming incompleteness or foreignness, so that it is not readily understandable to all.
2. The language of the text must serve in this culture as the object of a special intrinsic fascination.
3. The exact words of the author must be of importance as such (it must for some reason be seen as worthwhile to grapple with the difficulties posed by these very words).
4. The text must enjoy a certain cultural or national or religious significance in its own right. (This is sometimes at one remove, where a minor text inherits significance from its author, or is granted retrospectively a special

historical significance, for example because its language is no longer known, or is known only partially.)

5. The text is possessed of a certain universal or encyclopedic character.
6. Tradition or authority is treated in the given culture as a principal court of appeal in the evaluation of scientific or other sorts of assertions.<sup>3</sup>

A commentary, as here understood, is comparable to a translation in that its preparation is primarily a language-oriented exercise. Thus it differs from a work of interpretation (or from what, in the context of analytic philosophy, is termed 'secondary literature'). History is rich with commentaries on religious and poetic texts, and it is significant that such commentaries are especially thick on the ground where we are dealing with works (of, say, Dante, or Wolfram, or Stefan George) where religious and poetic elements are fused together. Simplifying somewhat one might say that a commentary provides a guide to those shortfalls in the calibration of a work by which its translation is ruled out. They bring us closer to the text—by intimating to us precisely where we do not understand it.<sup>4</sup>

Commentaries are a natural outcome of departures from the common intelligibility of the standard language, and especially of that sort of departure which manifests itself in a special kind of intended emotive power or effect. The presence of commentaries can, accordingly, provide us with a certain criterion of untranslatability. It is not, of course, a perfect criterion: there are varieties of what we might call transient untranslatability which it does not catch. These arise, for example, where new or exceptionally complex thoughts are formulated outside the standards of any internationally accepted common scale. In other cases, however, the growth of a commentary literature around a given text is a reliable indicator of its departure from standard linguistic norms.

The works of Aristotle gave rise to commentaries initially in reflection of the peculiar density of Aristotle's Greek and then subsequently in response to the absence of direct equivalent forms in Arabic or Latin. The production of commentaries on Aristotle (as also on the writings of Boethius, Aquinas, Petrus Lombardus, and so on) in the medieval era can be explained as a reflection of the special religious purposes to which these works were put. Thus medieval Aristotle commentaries reflect the desire to establish a conformity between commentated texts and the prevailing doctrines of the Church. In the case of the Lombard they reflect the peculiar density of his *Sentences*—a compilation of teachings of the Church Fathers woven together with opinions of medieval masters—the preparation of a commentary on which was a compulsory requirement for every master of theology until well into the sixteenth century.

## V. COMMENTARIES AND GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

Our prime concern here is the role of the commentary genre in relation to the canonical writings of the German philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, just as Anglo-Saxon philosophers have embraced the commentary form when dealing with Greek or Latin philosophers outside their own tradition, so, too, they have used this form when dealing with German-language writings. Thus it is not only Vaihinger and Fischer who wrote commentaries on Kant's *Critique*, but also Kemp Smith, Paton, Ewing, and Wolff. Commentaries on Hegel's *Logic* were likewise prepared by Stirling, McTaggart, Stace, Mure, Harris, and some of the latter have themselves come to enjoy the quasi-honorific status of philosophical texts in their own right; they have not been dismissed as mere aids to reading. Most noteworthy for our purposes, however, is Heidegger's *Being and Time*, a work that has thrown up a veritable forest of commentaries, including commentaries written in English for the benefit of English-speaking students.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this turn at least in part on the fact that the German of this work is not translatable into English—even if a passage like

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',<sup>7</sup>

(which I select at random), might be said to consist, in some degree, of English words. But now consider the German original of this passage:

In 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' . . .<sup>8</sup>

There is, surely, a sense in which language such as this is untranslatable into any normally intelligible German. Moreover, the case in question preserves the above-mentioned connection to rhetorical effect. Anyone who has ever taught Heidegger is aware of the power of his writing to bring about effects in students similar to those of religious conversion.<sup>9</sup> These effects bear testimony to features of Heidegger's writings which must be estimated as significant achievements. Just as there are great as well as second-rate poets, so also there are great as well as second-rate

exponents of that sort of philosophy which depends on stylistic deviance and exaggeration, and there is no doubt that Heidegger was a master of philosophical incomprehensibility.

## VI. THE ROOTS OF GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

If I am right in thinking that the growth of a commentary literature around a given text is an indicator of the untranslatability of that text, of its departure from standard linguistic norms, then the prevalence of commentaries on prime German philosophical texts acquires a new significance. Significant also is the fact that the major writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel are closely associated even in the German popular mind with the development both of German nationalist feeling and of the German nation itself. (And recall that it is these philosophers whom Heidegger, in his desperate and pathetic bid to become the *philosophus germanorum* of the Hitler era, went out of his way to ape.)

Certainly there are many important German thinkers—one thinks for example of Humboldt, Herbart, Helmholtz, Hertz, Hilbert—whose philosophical writings are not marked by the characteristic stylistic excesses of a Hamann or a Hegel. But what such thinkers have in common is clear: all of them came to philosophy from some extra-philosophical discipline where normal, scientific standards of clarity and cross-territorial intertranslatability prevail. And now it is important to notice that—as contrasted with what was the case for example in England and France—the language and style of classical German philosophy was established precisely at a time when the forces of science, or of scientific rationality, were outweighed by other forces of a religious and political sort. For things would surely have been different if Leibniz, who wrote in Latin and French, had set the literary standards of the German philosophical tradition, rather than Kant and Hegel.

Romanticism, too, played a role in this connection, the growth of Romanticism in Germany being itself in part explicable as a side-effect of the German national enthusiasm against Napoleon, which became associated in the popular mind with a rejection of such baleful French ideas as those of the Enlightenment. The detrimental effects of Romanticism on the language of German philosophy were reinforced by the fact that this philosophy was to so large an extent the product of the universities, where in England and France important philosophical movements had developed in the teeth of university opposition.<sup>10</sup> The university philosophers scattered through the German principalities

were, certainly, affected by external forces, but these, too, were for historical reasons all too often of a religious and political nature and were transmitted to the philosophers themselves through their respective religious and political patrons. From the sixteenth century there existed in Germany Lutheran, Calvinist, Catholic, and later secular universities side by side, scholars being often constrained to move from one to another in the wake of one or other form of religious or political persecution. This, too, contributed not a little to the extremist linguistic habits of the German philosophers. German philosophers were thereby also, again to a much greater extent than was the case in the centralized kingdoms of England or France, organized into *schools* and *movements*, a development which was supported by the fact that the lines of religious and political division would often coincide not only with each other but also with the lines of philosophical division. The German philosophical world was accordingly characterized by swings of fashion from one metaphysical current to another. Thus, and simplifying somewhat, we can say that mysticism in the fourteenth century gave way to Cusanianism in the fifteenth century. This gave way in turn to humanism and to Reformation and Counter-Reformation thought, to Paracelsus and Böhmean vitalism and to Pietism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to Counter-Enlightenment, *Sturm and Drang*, and Romanticism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all of these giving way, in turn, to Hegelianism, Neokantianism, and so forth, and on to *Lebensphilosophie*, phenomenology, Heideggerianism, critical theory, Marxism, and postmodernism, in our own day.

We can formulate these matters also in economic terms: the formative period of native-language German philosophy was a time when the princes were for financial reasons especially keen to attract to their respective universities philosophers who would themselves attract the largest possible numbers of students. The move from Latin to German as medium of instruction can be seen from this perspective as a form of trading down as a means of securing wider markets. Financial pressures helped to give rise also to a new sort of philosophical brand differentiation, reflecting itself in the construction of competing though superficially interchangeable 'metaphysical systems', a mode of doing philosophy 'from above' and with universalistic pretensions of a sort which seems so odd from the perspective of most Anglo-Saxon philosophers today. More important from our point of view, however, is that such brand differentiation extended itself not merely to the philosophical content of the various systems on offer, but also to their linguistic packaging—of the extent that the demonstration of linguistic ingenuity became in many cases more important than the content of what was being said.

## VII. PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS

I leave it to the reader to draw from these remarks the obvious parallels as concerns the state of philosophy in post-war France.<sup>11</sup> Here I wish to note only that, as seems clear from the above, historical investigations into the roots of modern German philosophy can uncover at least some of the underlying causes of the linguistic excesses of the heirs of Kant and Hegel. As we can see from an examination of different patterns of cultural evolution in different spheres, the precise time at which a cultural phenomenon is born is almost always fateful for the style and shape of that phenomenon in its subsequent development. Thus if it is true that the language native to classical German philosophy came to be established at a time when political, economic, and religious forces set the scene, a time when the true source of knowledge could be seen as lying not in science and reason but in feeling, passion, sensibility—sometimes even in instinct and blood—then consequences can reliably be drawn for the subsequent development of philosophical writing in this language. Kant was certainly not, in his doctrine, a friend of unreason. But bad language makes for bad philosophy, and from our present point of view it seems not too far fetched to see his “I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” as finding its *linguistic* echo not only in *Sein and Zeit* and in Rosenberg’s advocacy of the ‘myth’ of the German Nation, but also in Derrida’s efforts to erase the vocabulary of Western political thought on behalf of a new, twisted identification of ‘justice as deconstruction’ and of a mystical vision of a democracy that must remain ‘always insufficient and future’, always inarticulable and non-existent.<sup>12</sup> As for Heidegger and other German ‘decisionists’ of the 1930s, so also for Derrida, politics becomes a matter of what “cannot be described or defended; it can only be treated as an article of irrational faith, a messianic dream.”<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Barry Smith, “Textual Deference,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1991): 1–13.
2. On the phenomenon of linguistic stabilization, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Random House, 1988), 70ff.; see also Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).



3. Smith, op. cit., 5.

4. I here ignore the large number of commentaries on codes of secular and canon law which have arisen as an answer to the practical needs of jurists. The phenomenon of legal commentaries raises special and interesting problems of its own; see Leonardo A. Zaibert, "On Deference and the Spirit of the Laws," *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 82 (1996): 460-71.

5. I here summarize the arguments presented in my "Thesen zur Nichtübersetzbarkeit der deutschen Philosophie," *Zur philosophischen Aktualität Heideggers*, Vol. 3, *Im Spiegel der Welt: Sprache, Übersetzung, Auseinandersetzung*, ed. Dietrich Papenfuss and Otto Pöggeler (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1992), 125-47; idem, "Über die Grenzen der Übersetzbarkeit," *Übersetzen, Verstehen, Brücken bauen: Geisteswissenschaftliches und literarisches Übersetzen im internationalen Kulturaustausch*, ed. Armin Paul Frank, et al. (Berlin/Bielefeld/Munich: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1994), 295-301; idem, "Philosophieren und Kommentieren: Überlegungen zu ihrem Verhältnis," *Vernunftbegriffe in der Moderne: Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress 1993*, ed. Hans Friedrich Fulda and Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1994), 857-68.

6. I list here only four examples: Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's 'Being and Time': A Section-by-Section Interpretation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Eugene Francis Kaelin, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader for Readers* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1988); *A Companion to Martin Heidegger's 'Being and Time'*, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Lanham, Md., and London: University Press of America, and Pittsburgh: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, 1986); Hubert L. Dreyfus, *A Commentary on Martin Heidegger's Being and Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 240. In the Joan Stambaugh translation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) this becomes:

In hankering, being-in-the-world-already-among . . . has priority. Being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in is modified accordingly. Entangled hankering reveals the *predilection* of Da-sein to be 'lived' by the world in which it actually is. Predilection shows the character of being out for something. Being-ahead-of-itself has gotten lost in a just-always-already-among.

8. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 195 (trailing dots in the original).

9. These effects are very well described in Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986).

10. See Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 5ff.

11. The present piece forms part of a larger investigation into the relations between German and Austrian philosophy (and between Continental and analytic philosophy in general). See my "German Philosophy: Language and Style,"

*Topoi* 10 (1991): 155–61; *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (La Salle, and Chicago: Open Court, 1994), esp. chap. 1; idem, “The Neurath–Haller Thesis: Austria and the Rise of Scientific Philosophy,” *Austrian Philosophy Past and Present: Essays in Honor of Rudolf Haller*, ed. Keith Lehrer and Johann Christian Marek (Dordrecht, Boston, and Lancaster: Kluwer, 1996), 1–20; and Balázs Mezei and Barry Smith, *The Four Phases of Philosophy* (Amsterdam, and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998). Compare also the following papers by Kevin Mulligan: “How not to read: Derrida on Husserl,” *Topoi* 10 (1991): 199–208; idem, “Post Continental Philosophy: Nosological Notes,” *Stanford French Review* (Special number on Philosophy and the Analytic-Continental Divide) 17 (1993): 133–50.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London and New York: Verso, 1997).

13. Mark Lilla, “The Politics of Jacques Derrida,” *New York Review of Books* (25 June 1998): 40.