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David Morgan Spitzer (ed.) *Philosophy's Treason. Studies in Philosophy and Translation*. Vernon Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-62273-506-8[1]

Abstract

Philosophy's Treason: Studies in Philosophy and Translation is a collection of texts organized by David Morgan Spitzer. This critical review attempts to portray the content of the book in question not so much through a description, but as a critical engagement in the discussions forwarded by different authors of the texts that constitute the chapters of the book. Various highlights of this review refer to the concept of translation and untranslatability, the translation of philosophy, the development of a theory of translation, the idea of commensurability, and a critical insight into the translation and interpretation of Heideggerian philosophy.

Keywords: translation of philosophy; philosophy of translation; untranslatability; Translation Theory; commensurability

The book *Philosophy's Treason: Studies in Translation and Philosophy* consists of a collection of texts dedicated to translation and (Western) philosophy, organized by D. M. Spitzer. Each chapter of the book was written by a different author, with a postscript by Douglas Robinson and an introduction by David Morgan Spitzer. The main focus is on the relationships between philosophy and translation, and on providing insight into the translation of philosophy. The fact that translation can be understood as philosophy, as Spitzer (2020) claims in quoting Emily Apter, isn't always developed in a consequent manner. It seems that some texts in the book are intent on not trying to establish a concept of what

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translation is, though. As simple as that might not be, it is the required starting point of any theory or philosophy of translation. This anti-theoretical line of research is unfruitful (Stolze 2018: 36) in the sense that no theory of translation can be derived from it (Stolze 2018: 36), which only further enhances the long-lasting state of vulnerability of the translator and obstructs the development of more sound translation teaching, besides other possible positive outcomes (Bell 1987: 403–404; Göpferich 2010: 177; Pym 2003; Stolze 2018: 11–12; Esqueda 2018:1269).

Spitzer (2020) himself uses the term *translation* with two different meanings in the intruduction part: at one point, the reader is acquainted with how Tales, the Asian philosopher, initiated Western philosophy by speaking "in a new way in Greek by translating from ancient cultures" (2020: V). In this case, the concept of translation refers to a transformation of an idea into another – a vague definition of what thought itself is – which Spitzer (2020) claims would be at the base of the Western philosophical tradition. In other moments, translation shares a common-language reference, that of a new formulation of a given text in a different language, but Spitzer (2020) leans clearly towards the broad, unclear concept of translation throughout his introduction.

Philosophy has traditionally (but certainly not for the past century) framed language as ancillary since it has always sought to establish and guarantee parity between what is said and how human beings exist in an extra-linguistic reality. Philosophy is (was, if one agrees with Heidegger and Nietzsche) also the chronological development of how this line of thought came into contact with itself, so to speak. Spitzer's movement would then skew the effort of a philosophical thought on translation from *caput*, because in taking that stance of the unclear concept, we would only be positioning ourselves in the traditional pathway of a philosophy of mentality, now renewed upon the grounds of an unclear metaphor, unconscious of itself. The transformation of an idea into another is what thought itself is, after all, at least from the perspective of the personal, subjective experience of consciousness. If my construal is right and that were the case, we would only be falling into an even more unwanted form of philosophy, which does not seem to be Spitzer's goal.

Spitzer (2020) also asserts that philosophy has always been treasonous to itself, in the sense that it has always sought to suppress the "translational drive" that would underline the activity of human thought (2020: X; XV). The introduction sketches out a study of how this repressive (in a Freudian way) trait of philosophy led to the self-centeredness of Western thought. It forwards the idea that philosophy, in its dimension of explaining and allowing for something to be visualized, would be correlated with a reticence, on the part of philosophers, to acknowledge translation as a knowledge-producing activity, that is to acknowledge the radical difference that is on the base of the activity of thought. Spitzer (2020) also asserts that philosophers have always been persecuted and lived as outcasts because of their treasonous nature (XII). What oppressors and tyrants never appreciated in philosophers was not the fact that they were not reliable people, but rather that they always sought out that parity between what is said and the reality people live in, even if that might stumble upon the interests of politically empowered agents or go against the established order. The oldest metaphor, that of Prometheus chained to a rock, would be a safer choice when it comes to this political aspect of philosophical thought. The metaphor of treason doesn't hold well here, and one goes back back to the matter of the concept of translation – no sound line of argument, much less theory, of/on translation would benefit from an unclear, aimless concept of what translation is. Translation is not just explanation, because, again, then we would only be setting ourselves on the starting point of the Theory of Knowledge, and in doing so, positioning ourselves in the field of

epistemology, rather than the translation proper. It is important to keep this in mind, for only so could a possible philosophy of translation be properly sought after.

The concern with the ways in which biased or ideological thinking seeps into the interpretation of texts originated in other languages and cultures is crucial to the quality of translational activity. The deconstructionist notion that no translation is possible does not lead to any fruitful outcome here, though. That notion aims at providing a critique to the concept of translational equivalence, but it achieves nothing because the concept of translation as equivalence is maintained in it as a negative. Paulo Oliveira's note 76 on page 40 could also be read in that direction. Here we are reminded of the questions posed by Mauricio Cardozo in Chapter 6, page 120, the answer to which would be ominously negative. His chapter discusses common problems related to Translation Studies in Brazil and around the world: the discussion surrounding what would constitute the translation proper as construed by James Holmes, as well as the lack of a common language (117), problems to which Translational Hermeneutics has been forwarded as a solution (Cercel 2018; Stolze 2003: 28-40; Piecychna and Stolze 1/2018: 99–106).

The connection between untranslatability and equivalence is explored by Sabina Folnović-Jaitner (Chapter 4). She is interested in blurring the notion of untranslatability by proposing that maintaining untranslatable content in philosophical translations would be tantamount to comprehensive equivalence, due to the specific character of the reader of such texts. The conceptual adequacy of Folnović-Jaitner's proposal stumbles upon the fact that philosophical texts present massive differences, which makes any attempt to characterize them as such appear quite arbitrary, even if there is mention to this. However fruitful this proposal might be, it is important here to take into account countries where the access to foreign languages is precarious, in particular to languages other than English. It is the case of Brazil, where the reproduction of philosophical concepts in, say, German, Greek or Latin could create significant obstacles to the reader in the sense of a slower cognitive processing of the information. Here, again, the concept of equivalence assumed within the concept of untranslatability brings about problems, because development is built upon inadequate conceptual description.

Paulo Oliveira (Chapter 2) states that, while the deconstructionists provided no alternative to the logocentric notion of meaning they criticized, the philosophy of Wittgenstein might provide us with new insight. This could promote further development of a theoretical account of translation. He reminds us of the pragmatic turn in Wittgenstein's thought and proposes that what we actually translate relies upon our understanding of what is translated, an idea that is at the core of Translational Hermeneutics (Stolze 2018: 249–267; Stolze 2003: 104–105; Cercel 2013: 151–218). He stresses that the translator's comprehension has to do with the way according to which that understanding is constituted, related to the actual use of language, and not with the logical content of the proposition. He comes to the question of truth and meaning in translation, and in doing this he also opens a rich interpretation pathway into the concept of textual truth, in saying that truth, in that hermeneutical context, should be understood as 'meaning' (37). He seems to echo contemporary Translational Hermeneutics in stressing that if we agree to all this, then the concept of understanding should be central to any theory of translation.

Another outstanding contribution is authored by Natalia S. Avtonomova (Chapter 5), translated into English by Tatevik Gykasyan. Avtonomova translated the philosophical works of Derrida and Heidegger into Russian; she discusses issues related to the difficulty in translating certain culture-bound philosophical terms, of which *Dasein* can be taken as a paradigmatic example (as noted by Folnović-Jaitner on 84). Avtonomova reminds us that "the centuries-old practice of translation stands against

untranslatability" (107), and that the task of the translator is the "elaboration of commensurabilities" (107) that allow us to establish meaning analogies between texts in different languages. This remark needs to be considered in all its importance because if translators are not conscious of what their role and function is, then all they can do is operate as a machine, establishing propositional equivalence between terms whilst ignoring the fact that these equivalences correspond to no natural nor a priori truth. Rather, they are the result of a long history of cultural and intellectual exchange between different cultures, a history which will never be over. In this key, this is one of the few texts of the book which effectively provides us with theoretical tools to be used in the development of more sound translation theory. However outdated this may be, the establishment of commensurabilities between different languages would be, *at the same time*, a necessary condition for and necessary consequence of the establishment of commensurabilities (if no parity is possible) between language and whatever there may be outside of it. This could also be considered the starting point of a (possible) philosophy of translation, in the sense of a philosophical thought reliant on translation.

Another such chapter is the one authored by H. L. Hix (Chapter 1). He gives an account of translation by means of conceptual dichotomies present in the Western philosophical tradition. Hix lists these dichotomies as ratios, which are: the part-whole ratio, the means-ends ratio, the fact-value ratio, and the matter-form ratio. Hix derives some basic propositions from each of these ratios, for example, "translation could be perfect only if language were perfect in the correlation of its parts with the parts of the world" (6), or that "producing in the target language a copy of an original in the source language isn't the only end translation achieves" (7), which are then analyzed and related to one another. This approach is elaborated in a philosophical manner of deduction and propositional analysis (but not in the sense of formal logic analysis), which is interesting for those seeking to familiarize themselves with different forms of philosophical writing stylistics.

The post-script by Douglas Robinson (2020), on the other hand, may lead the reader to confusion and error. Robinson drafts out possible pathways into the translation of the term *Dasein*, but his argument hinges on the association of the Heideggerian idea of inauthenticity with commonsense language usage *per se*, a correlation that doesn't seem to be found in Heidegger's *oeuvre*. The problem here is that Robinson employs Heidegger writing stylistics (the rejection of common language use) as an axiom for logical deduction, all of which seems very unfitting in regard to Heidegger's philosophy. Here we can remind ourselves of the philosopher's positive take on *Redewengungen*, a German word for a popular saying or figure of speech, a mark of the idiom and everyday language usage, in §46 of his *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, and Goldschmidt (2016) shed light into Heidegger's esteem for the common German man, the *Bauer*, a word that can be roughly translated into English as "peasant". Another debatable interpretation is that Robinson associates *Dasein* in its authenticity with an "authentic I" (2020: 152), a construal that seems to stem from an inaccurate reading of *Being and Time* (cf. *Being and Time* §25 and §64). Cabestan (2010) has aptly shed light into the intricate dynamic between *Dasein* and the Self. Those conceptual distinctions should be taken into consideration for any sound reading of the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*. Taking all this into consideration, we are going to focus here on the most problematic aspect of the argument forwarded by Robinson, which is an accusation made against Heidegger, which is then followed by an *ad hominem* critique of the German philosopher, Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti.

It seems that Robinson does not fully grasp the modality aspect of Heidegger's existential philosophy, according to which existentials are to be understood as modes of being, possibilities, not actualities (Heidegger [1923] 2012: 21–23; Vattimo 1996: 25). Departing from an inaccurate interpretation of a passage in *Being and Time*, Robinson argues that Heidegger would have had implicitly affirmed that there are people who shouldn't be considered as actual others, but as leftovers, as a sort of rest of humanity, suggesting that the philosopher might have actively contributed, through his writings, to the extermination of undesired individuals in Nazi society. This leads ultimately to the affirmation that Heidegger, Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti would be "post-romantic elitists who love power and despise the weak and the ordinary" (157).

Contrary to this construal, in a close reading of the text the "dehumanization" here in question would be an effect of the forgetfulness of Being itself, which would lead to the concealment of Being in its ontic aspects. This means that this "*Rest der Übrigen*" in *Being and Time* refers to the fact that, when we use the words "humanity" or "human", for example, it is possible that we are talking about others as a mere object of thought, that our sense of others relies upon mere abstraction or objectification. That is, after all, a main concern for Heidegger in *Being and Time*, and the reason behind the choice for the term *Dasein* rather than *Mensch*, a line of inquiry the philosopher started in his summer courses at the Freiburg Universität, later published under the title *Ontology (The Hermeneutics of Facticity)*. It is very telling that the subsequent sentence in the cotext, which Robinson ignored, conveys that very idea: "Dieses Auch-da-sein mit ihnen hat nicht den ontologischen Charakter eines «Mit» – Vorhandenseins innerhalb einer Welt" (Heidegger [1927] 2002: 118). To translate it, one should be aware that it is precisely that unauthentic interpretation of *Mit-Dasein* that Heidegger (1927) wanted to see undermined, at least in the context of *Sein und Zeit*. We do not question here the fact that this notion does seem to be at odds with his Nazi past and his antisemitic remarks as found in the *Schwarze Hefte* (Hoepfner 2014; Trawny 2016, 2020, 2021). One ought not to forget the basic hermeneutical principle of finding the meaning of a text within its particular universe of discourse, rather than the *possibilia* of the abstract system of language (Porta 2007: 62). In this sense, Robinson's text leads the reader to interpretive error.

Heidegger's *oeuvre* demands a solid grasp of not only his terminology, but also the overall existential-ontological dynamic (if one can put it that way) envisaged for it. The controversial aspects of Heidegger's thought have long been overlooked, but his body of work must still be approached with restraint and prudence. Peter Trawny has provided a sober account of the different tendencies in the critical reception of Heidegger's thought (2021: 19-20) in regard to the publication of the philosopher's personal notebooks, designated as the black notebooks (*Schwarze Hefte* in German), and he himself has developed a well-balanced line of interpretation to the philosopher's *oeuvre* (*cf.* bibliography). Another important reference, albeit not as sober (Cassin 2022: 16), for a critical reading of Heidegger's thought is Barbara Cassin's *Eloge de la Traduction*, where the sophist French writer, as she would prefer it (Cassin 2022:16-20), construes a more grounded and solid critique of Heidegger's thought based on his remarks on the Greek and German languages and their significance for philosophy (Cassin 2022: 69, 143, 155). The present review concludes at this point, primarily due to limitations inherent to the genre. The dialogue could continue, though. *Philosophy's Treason: Studies in Philosophy and Translation* is a good starting point for the reader who is interested in the rapport between Philosophy and Translation, even with the caveats involved. One could not say it too many times, though, that there is still a long way to go when it comes to the philosophy of translation, and the translation of philosophy.

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