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The dangers of clarity

Can Kierkegaard's ambiguities be translated?

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Søren Kierkegaard was one of the greatest prose stylists of the Danish Golden Age, and many of the earliest English translations of Kierkegaard's works were significant literary achievements in their own right. Unfortunately, they were also marred by technical inaccuracies that caused a great deal of confusion in the interpretation of Kierkegaard's thought in that part of the world where a knowledge of Danish was, and still is, rare, even among scholars. This has meant that very few people are in a position to criticize translations of these works, so many of the mistakes in the first translations have continued to appear in subsequent translations. It gradually became apparent that new translations were in order, and in the 1970s, Princeton University Press nobly undertook the task of publishing them. The series of about thirty volumes is nearly complete, and it seems appropriate at this point to reflect on some of the difficulties associated with translating Kierkegaard and the significance these difficulties have for philosophical, or scholarly translations more generally.

The most striking thing about the new translations is that they are decidedly inferior to their predecessors in terms of literary style. It is appropriate that a translator of a philosophical work, when faced with a choice between a translation that reads well and one that preserves the conceptual substance of the original, should choose the latter, and it is natural that the reader, when faced with an excruciatingly awkward translation, should assume that this is the most accurate way the ideas can be rendered in English. But while some of the new translations of Kierkegaard are clear improvements, in a technical sense, on the first English translations, the improvements in others are negligible.

Philosophical translations are problematic in general, not merely because (as Jonathan Rée observed in a recent article in the *TLS*, "Being foreign is different", September 6, 1996) ulterior meanings intrude into the translation process, but also because ulterior *translations* intrude into this process. Translators of philosophical texts, if they are philosophers themselves, often undertake this thankless job out of a kind of pedagogical zeal. That is, the motivation for translating a philosophical text is very often the belief of the translator that he can improve on an existing translation and thus put the reader in a closer relation to the original text. This implies, of course, that the translator is already familiar with the work in translation, and this familiarity can affect his understanding of the original text. He may unconsciously impose earlier translations on this text and, if he is unfortunate, repeat some of the mistakes of these earlier translations.

This is probably the explanation behind the fact that *Philosophiske Smuler* is translated by Howard and Edna Hong as *Philosophical Fragments* in the new edition. The Latinate "Fragmenter" was common in scholarly and philosophical writing in Denmark in the nineteenth century. It was not this expression Kierkegaard chose, however, for what was to become one of his most important philosophical works, but the less pretentious "Smuler". "Smuler" means scraps or crumbs, thus *Philosophiske Smuler* is properly translated as *Philosophical Crumbs*. This may seem like a minor point, and indeed many Kierkegaard scholars would prefer the title to remain *Philosophical Fragments*. The difficulty is that this obscures the fact that the title is clearly an allusion to a popular Danish saying: "Smuler er også brød" (Crumbs are also bread), which is, in turn, an allusion to Matthew 15:27 – something which is certainly relevant to an understanding of the substance of the text. The book purports to be an objective comparison of two diametrically opposed interpretations of the relation of the individual to the truth, the "Socratic" interpretation and what Kierkegaard refers to as "the alternative" to the Socratic. Many scholars have taken the claim to objectivity made in the preface of the work quite literally. It is clear, however, that the alternative to the "Socratic" interpretation is the Christian interpretation, and that Kierkegaard is indeed biased in favour of this latter interpretation. As things stand, it may take contemporary readers some time to appreciate this fact, whereas a proper translation of the title along with a note explaining the allusion to the Danish saying would indicate immediately what was going on.

Kierkegaard, drawn by his cousin Christian in 1840; from *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Kenny (407pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback, £13.99. 0 19 285335 X)

The influence of earlier translations probably also accounts for the fact that the question with which the new translation of the *Crumbs* or *Fragments* begins is: "Can the truth be learned?" rather than: "Can the truth be taught?" Danish has only one word, "lære" for both "teach" and "learn"; it is thus up to the translator to determine which translation is appropriate in a given context. David Swenson, who produced the first English translation in 1939, chose "learned", and the Hongs followed his example both in their revision of the Swenson translation in 1962 and in the new Princeton translation in 1985.

There is considerable evidence, however, that the concern of the *Crumbs* is not whether the truth can be learned, but whether it can be taught. Kierkegaard criticizes the "Socratic" interpretation of the relation of the individual to the truth, on the grounds that it deprives both the teacher and the moment at which the truth is learned of any real significance. The alternative – ie, Christian – interpretation invests the teacher with what Kierkegaard calls "decisive significance", yet according to this interpretation, he argues, the teacher "is not a teacher". That is, Christ, asserts Kierkegaard, "goes beyond the definition of a teacher".

One of the most important issues in both the *Crumbs* and its companion volume, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is whether there can be an intermediary between the believer and Christ, whether Christian truth can be passed down from one individual or generation to another. That is, one of the most important issues treated in these works is whether Christianity is a doctrine that can be taught in the conventional sense. Kierkegaard's conclusion is unequivocally No.

The pernicious effect of earlier translations on later translations has not been restricted to the *Crumbs* or *Fragments*. It is also undoubtedly the explanation behind the presence of a particularly perverse mistranslation of a passage in *The Sickness unto Death* in every English translation of this work, including the most recent. The passage in question concerns the relation between knowledge and the will:

> if a person does not do what is right at the very second he knows it – then, first of all, knowing simmers down. Next comes the question of how willing appraises what is known. Willing is dialectical and has under it the entire lower nature of man. If willing does not agree with what is known, then it does not necessarily follow that willing goes ahead and does the opposite of what knowing has understood (presumably such strong opposites are rare); rather, willing allows some time to elapse, an interim called: "We shall look at it tomorrow". During all this, knowing becomes more and more obscure, and the lower nature gains the upper hand more and more; alas, for the good must be done immediately, as soon as it is known . . . but the lower nature's power lies in stretching things out. (94)

This is the wording of the new Princeton translation. Apart from the fact, however, that the nouns "Erkjendelsen" ("knowledge") and "Villien" ("the will") have been inexplicably translated into English as participles, the wording of this passage is essentially similar to that of the Lowrie translation from 1941 and the new Penguin translation from 1989. The difficulty concerns the passage that reads: "Willing is dialectical and has under it the entire lower nature of man. If willing does not agree with what is known, then it does not necessarily follow", etc. The Danish expression that is translated by "willing" in the second sentence is actually the demonstrative pronoun "denne" ("this"). The passage thus translates literally as: "The will is dialectical and has under it the entire lower nature of man. If this does not agree with what is known . . . ", etc. The subject of the second sentence is not the will, but what Kierkegaard refers to as man's "lower nature". That is, the objection to acting on the knowledge in question comes from man's lower nature, not from the will. This distinction is important, because the dialectical character of the will, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely that it has under it not merely the entire *lower* nature of man, but his *higher* nature as well. The will is not destined, on his view, to serve the lower nature, but can actually bring the lower nature under the control of the higher nature. The question is thus whether the will, in appraising the situation, will side with the lower or with the higher nature.

This is actually one of the easier passages of Kierkegaard's texts to translate. It is grammatically straightforward, and only the proper translation is ultimately coherent. Three of the four extant German translations get it right, so why have English translators consistently got it wrong? The answer is that Lowrie got it wrong in 1941 and that subsequent translators have simply read Lowrie's error back into the original

text. The fact that the mistranslation produces a passage that is both awkward and difficult to understand merely satisfies what Rée referred to as the public taste for "philosophical translations that do not make much sense". There are other cases, however, where the influence of earlier translations of Kierkegaard has not actually reduced the coherence of the passage, but has simply obscured certain subtleties in the original. The first English translations of Kierkegaard were literary achievements in part because they were quite free. Unfortunately, this created the impression that Kierkegaard did not have what one would call a technical vocabulary, and this impression was reinforced by the fact that Kierkegaard explicitly disdained terminological consistency for its own sake.

But there is consistency, and then there is consistency, as Kierkegaard would say. There are many terms that are fairly consistently used by Kierkegaard in technical senses. He distinguishes, for example, between certain Danish terms (eg. "Tilværelse" and "Tilnærmelse") and their Latinate equivalents ("Existents" and "Approximation"). Both "Tilværelse" and "Existents" have traditionally been translated as "existence", but they do not mean the same thing for Kierkegaard. The Hongs are fortunately sensitive to this point and have occasionally included the relevant Danish term in brackets in the new Princeton translation of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Nothing has been done, however, to reproduce the distinction between "Approximation" and "Tilnærmelse", although it is crucial to understanding the substance of Kierkegaard's views on the difference between what he calls subjective and objective truth. We can only approximate both kinds of truth, according to Kierkegaard. We approximate objective truth in knowledge, but we approximate subjective or "ethical-religious" truth, in our lives, by endeavouring to live ethically.

There is a difference, however, for Kierkegaard, between these two types of approximation. We can never be certain, on his view, whether our apparently increasingly accurate impressions of empirical reality are in fact increasingly accurate, and even if we could be certain of this, the approximation process itself would go on interminably. It is not a process that has a definite end; we do not know what a perfect impression of empirical reality would look like. But we do know what moral perfection looks like, according to Kierkegaard. The conscience, which he refers to as our "co-knowledge" ("Samviden") with God, provides us with a picture of such perfection. The process of approximating ethical-religious truth does thus have a definite end, and it is an end each of us is responsible for striving towards, although we all fail to reach it. We can thus approach subjective truth in our lives, in a way we cannot actually approach objective truth.

Accordingly, Kierkegaard does not use the expression "Approximation" in the context of his discussion of subjective or ethical-religious truth, but "Tilnærmelse". "Tilnærmelse" is a compound composed of two words, "Nærmelse", which translates literally as "to approach, to come closer", and the preposition "til", which means "to". "Tilnærmelse" is translated into English as both "approximation" and "approach", and it is clearly the latter Kierkegaard intends when he refers to the degree to which an individual's life expresses ethical-religious truth. It was, in fact, customary in theological circles in Copenhagen in the mid-nineteenth century to speak of "approaching God". Kierkegaard is often criticized precisely for making God unapproachable, and there are certainly passages in his work that appear to support such an interpretation. But it does not survive appreciation of the work as a whole.

Similar difficulties are presented by Kierkegaard's views on knowledge, or, more particularly, by his many discussions of the relation between belief and knowledge. Kierkegaard argues that it is not possible to know that God became man because such a proposition represents a combination of the two mutually exclusive categories of eternal and historical truth. He does occasionally refer, however, to knowledge of Christ, for example, in the *Crumbs*, where the believer is said to "know" Christ "as he was known".

It is clear, however, from the original text, that Kierkegaard does not contradict himself on this point. Danish has four expressions that can be translated into English as "knowledge", "Erkjendelse", "Viden", "Kundskab" and "Kjendskab". Contemporary epistemologists distinguish between propositional knowledge (ie, knowing that something is the case), skill knowledge (ie, knowing how to do something) and acquaintance knowledge (ie, knowing a person or place). These distinctions correspond roughly to the four Danish expressions for knowledge. "Erkjendelse" is seldom used in spoken Danish, but when it is used, it refers in general to the recognition, or perception, that something is the case. That is, it refers to propositional knowledge, as does "Viden" which is a more common expression for such knowledge. "Kundskab" refers to skill knowledge and "Kjendskab" to acquaintance knowledge. The last expression is the one Kierkegaard uses to refer to knowledge of Christ. Knowing Christ, in the sense of being acquainted with him, is certainly problematic according to Kierkegaard, but the problems associated with this kind of knowledge are distinguished from those associated with the knowledge *that* Christ was God.

The difference between acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge is crucial to understanding Kierkegaard's philosophy, yet it is ludicrous to suggest that "Erkendelse" and "Viden" should be translated as "propositional knowledge" and "Kjendskab" as "acquaintance knowledge". Such a practice would yield an extremely awkward academic-sounding text with only the faintest stylistic resemblance to the original. No other solution, such as subscripting, superscripting, using italics, or, as the Hongs often do, including the relevant Danish expression in brackets, is entirely satisfactory. The translation becomes overwhelmed by unsightly marks, unintended emphases, or foreign words, and the rhythm of the text is destroyed. Translators must resign themselves to the fact that even the best translation will inevitably do some small injustice to the nuances of the original.

This is often difficult, however, for translators of philosophical works to accept. No gradation of meaning is so fine that philosophy is indifferent to it. Minutiae are part of the life-blood of philosophical analysis. The pedagogical zeal that leads many philosophers to become translators can thus occasionally even lead them to try to *reduce* ambiguities in the original text. This is the case, for example, with the new Princeton translation of the *Fragments*, where a single Danish expression, "Uvished", appears in English as both "uncertainty" and "incertitude". "Certitude" refers, in philosophical parlance, to subjective conviction, whereas "certainty", when contrasted with the former, refers to an objective state of affairs. The Hongs are very likely correct in their assessment of the substance of the text, but it is not the translator's job to reduce the ambiguity of the original. The ambiguity is part of the original and should be preserved, if possible, in a translation.

The desire to produce a translation that is actually clearer than the original is also inherently dangerous. This can be seen in the Hongs' translation of a passage of Kierkegaard's *Judge for Yourselves*. According to Kierkegaard, the failure to express what he refers to as Christian "truths" in one's existence is to transform Christianity into "a way of speaking ("Talemaade"), which it least of all wants to be". The Hongs have translated "Talemaade", however, more narrowly as "platitudes". "Platitude" is listed as an acceptable translation of the modern Danish "talemåde". It is not listed, however, as an acceptable translation of the nineteenth-century "Talemaade" in the definitive Danish-to-English dictionary of the period. "Talemaade" was defined then as simply a "mode of expression or phrase". The translation as "platitudes" is thus misleading. "Platitude" has pejorative connotations, but the emphasis in the passage in question is clearly on the distinction between saying and doing, rather than on the substance of what is said.

There are instances, however, in which even the most conscientious translator will be unable to preserve an ambiguity that exists in the original text. This is the case with the following passage in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he examines the relation between consciousness of guilt and consciousness of sin. Existence, he argues, is emphasized in the former as sharply as it can be emphasized without breaking with immediacy. Consciousness of sin, on the other hand, represents precisely such a break. Normally the fact that one exists signifies nothing more than that one has come to be and is now part of the temporal, phenomenal world. From the perspective of sin, however, "By coming into existence the individual becomes another person [ie, not the person God intended him to be, but a sinful person], or in the instant he is to come into existence he becomes another person by coming into existence".

The difficulty relates to the passage the Hongs have translated as "... in the instant he is to come into existence he becomes another person by coming into existence". This passage can also be translated as ". . . in the instant he ought to come into existence, he continues to become someone else". This latter translation is in fact consistent with a passage in *The Sickness Unto Death* that reads: "every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming, for the self κατα δυναμιν [in potentiality] does not exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence". The passage from the *Postscript* could thus refer either to hereditary sin or to actual sin in the sense of the repeated failure of the individual to become the person God intended him to become, or it could refer to both. How one translates this passage depends on where one believes the commas should be placed in the original text. Kierkegaard, who prided himself on his use of punctuation as a rhetorical device, includes no commas whatever in this passage; thus it is reasonable to assume the ambiguity in question was intentional. It is simply impossible, however, to preserve this ambiguity in a translation. The best a translator can do is to provide the variant translation in a footnote.

Many translators believe that the best way to ensure fidelity to the original is to make the translation as literal as possible, but an exaggerated concern for literalness has marred many of the Hongs' new translations of Kierkegaard for Princeton University Press. This can be seen if one contrasts passages from these translations with passages from Alastair Hannay's translation for Penguin. The Hongs' "Will the tongue ligament of my spirit never be loosened . . ." is, for example, a literal translation of "Skal da Aandens Tungebaand aldrig løsnes paa mig . . ." but Hannay's "Is my spirit to be forever tongue-tied . . . " is certainly preferable. One could perhaps tolerate what William McDonald referred to in a review of the Hongs' translation of *Either-Or* as "sins against English" if such violations of the integrity of what is known in translation theory as "the target language" resulted in increased accuracy, but literal translations are not always the best translations, even from a substantive standpoint. This is clear from Hannay's introduction to his recent translation of *The Sickness Unto Death*. The new Princeton translation of *The Sickness Unto Death* opens with a definition of the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself", whereas Hannay's translation defines the self as "a relation that relates to itself". Hannay explains in his introduction that "because the Danish for 'to relate' (in the sense of 'to be in relation') (*at forholde sig*) has a reflexive form, translators have rendered this as 'relates itself to itself', which has then been construed as 'relates its actual self to its true self'." He points out, however, that the relation in question "is described in one place simply as 'psychophysical', that is, as just a relation between mind and body" and that it cannot thus be a relation between the actual and the ideal self.

A few words must be said here in favour of Hannay's translations. It is generally recognized that they are superior to the Hongs' in terms of style, but there has been little substantive comparison of the two. The Hongs' translations give the impression of scholarly rigour because of their extensive scholarly apparatus, including a detailed historical introduction, a critical supplement and an index, but they are no better than Hannay's from a substantive standpoint, and they are occasionally worse. Princeton has been promoting them as the definitive scholarly translations, and they have, as a result, been accepted as such by many scholars. *But the translation of philosophical works should ideally be undertaken by a philosopher*, and Hannay is one of the few translators of Kierkegaard who fits this requirement. He is a philosopher of some note an active Kierkegaard scholar and has lived i Scandinavia for more than thirty years.

It is difficult to acquire knowledge of Danish, even for those few scholars who make the effort, because there are few places outside Denmark where Danish is taught. Grants and fellowships available to scholars who wish to study in Denmark seldom cover more than one year – not enough time to learn another language well enough to read a philosophical text in it. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Danish has changed considerably since Kierkegaard wrote. In order to read Kierkegaard's texts, one should thus ideally have a nineteenth-century Danish-to-English dictionary, and these are so rare I know of only two Kierkegaard scholars who own them (one of whom is Alastair Hannay). Most scholars are forced to rely on nineteenth-century Danish-to-Danish dictionaries, which it requires considerable knowledge of Danish to decipher.

Philosophy, as Rée has observed, "has never settled down within self-enclosed national languages", but philosophers occasionally do, and nowhere is this more true than in Denmark. Denmark is isolated both geographically and linguistically, and Danish society is as a result somewhat insular. Danish authors, no matter how cosmopolitan their education may have been, tend to write for an exclusively Danish public, a public that is strikingly homogeneous in its cultural heritage. Kierkegaard railed against the provincialism of Copenhagen, which he was fond of referring to as a "market town", but while a few of his contemporaries published works in Latin or German in the hope of reaching wider audiences, it was for the inhabitants of this "market town" that he wrote, and this, perhaps more than anything else, has made and continues to make translation of his works difficult.

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