Review Article: www.earlymoderntexts.com, by Jonathan F. Bennett

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Abstract: A review, with recommendations, of Jonathan Bennett's "translations" of classical early modern texts into language more accessible to undergraduates.

In a 1994 issue of *Teaching Philosophy*, Jonathan Bennett announced a project to "translate" classical early modern works to make them more accessible to undergraduate students. Even though many of these texts (*e.g.*, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) were originally written in English, Bennett sought to make them more available to undergraduate students by rewriting the texts to make them more readable.[1] Today, all of Bennett's versions are available on his website: www.earlymoderntexts.com. Bennett's website includes not only the more popular texts (*e.g.*, Hume's *Enquiries*, Kant's *Prolegomena*, Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*, Descartes's *Meditations*) but also more obscure texts (*e.g.*, Berkeley's *Alciprhon*), and texts by less mainstream writers such as Jonathan Edwards, Malebranche, Newton, and Reid. According to Professor Bennett, the website receives approximately 5,000 visits a week, so it has obviously become an important presence in the world of early modern philosophy.[2]

The creation of these versions has involved an enormous amount of energy and work. In every case where I have compared the original to Bennett's versions, the translation has been done with incredible care and sensitivity. This project has been entirely a labor of love, since the texts are available at no charge. Whatever one thinks of the project (and it is controversial), Bennett deserves enormous admiration for his creativity, energy, generosity and dedication to helping students learn the material that he loves so much and has spent so much of his life studying.

Few professors would disagree with the reality of the problem that Bennett attempted to solve. He felt that many students come to col-

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lege having "never learned properly to read anything; and the habits of impressionistic approximation which they picked up [in high school] are not seriously opposed in many [university] departments."[3] Bennett felt that early modern philosophical texts were challenging enough for anyone but are made even more forbidding for these non-reading students because of "difficulties of syntax, length and complexity of sentences, words that are no longer current, still-familiar words used in meanings that they now do not have, [and] arcane references to other philosophers which today's students will seldom understand or be required to follow up."[4] Anyone who wants to test Bennett's concern should ask a few students to read aloud some passages from the English originals of these texts; typically they stumble over words and have a hard time making sense of the sentences. Now imagine these students reading two dozen pages of this material in their dorm room while listening to their iPod, and ask yourself whether they are getting all of the fine points.

Bennett's solution is to offer more accessible "translations" of both the original English language texts and also of non-English texts. His goal is to preserve the content, but to "remove the irrelevant barriers to understanding."[5] His versions of the English texts use shorter sentences and more contemporary language, he adds explanatory material in the text, deletes material he thinks is distracting, and uses some typographical features to make the structure of the text clearer. He does the same to the non-English language texts, but, of course, since these are translations, the changes are less controversial.

Here are two short side-by-side comparisons of famous passages:

Hobbes's Leviathan (Book I, Chapter 13). Bennett's version	**Hobbes's original text**
This makes it obvious that for as long as men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in the condition known as 'war'; and it is a war of every man against every man. For WAR doesn't consist just in •battle or the act of fighting, but in •a period of time during which it is well enough known that people are willing to join in battle. So the temporal element in the notion of 'when there is war' is like the temporal element in 'when there is bad weather'. What constitutes bad weather is not a rain-shower or two but an inclination to •rain through many days together; similarly, what constitutes war is not actual fighting but a known disposition to fight during a time when there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is PEACE. [Note that Bennett sometimes uses symbols such as "•" to indicate that several items are presented as part of a series.]	Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man. For WARRE, consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as it is in the nature of Weather. For as the nature of Foule weather, lyeth not in a showre or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many dayes together: So the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is PEACE.

The second example is from a non-English language work, Bennett's version of Descartes's *Mediation* (Med. 2). Here Bennett has turned Descartes's text into a dialogue.

Bennett's version (including Bennett's bracketed note to the reader)	**Descartes's text, as translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch[6]**
[This paragraph is presented as a further to-and-fro argument between two people. Remember, this isn't how Descartes wrote 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.	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.

Bennett's project raises at least three interesting questions:

1. Do students actually find Bennett's versions easier to read and comprehend? This is an empirical question, and I can only offer some impressionistic attempts to answer it. I did an experiment with a class of thirty-eight first-year students at Villanova University. As an extra-credit final-exam question, students were given a passage from Hobbes (consisting of the sample used above and the two paragraphs before it), and asked to summarize it and also to rate it for difficulty

of comprehension. Half of the students received Bennett's version, and half received Hobbes's original (and I tried to match the two groups in ability). The students had plenty of time, so they did not feel rushed in doing the extra-credit question. As the following table illustrates, more of the students found the original "somewhat difficult" to read. When I looked at what the students had done with the passage, however, it was much harder to tell the difference. Given a short passage, high motivation, and plenty of time, students seemed to be able to get the meaning out of either passage.

Student perceptions of how difficult the material was to read.

	Somewhat difficult	Somewhat Easy	Easy
Bennett version	4	9	5
Hobbes original	17	3	1

George Rainbolt (Georgia State University) performed a different experiment by teaching two sections of the same intro course, one using the Bennett versions and the other using original texts, and he found that "students were much better able to see philosophical problems when they used Bennett's texts."[7] Ron Messerich, of Eastern Kentucky State University, noticed a major difference in his intro students when he switched from using the original texts to Bennett's versions (he does not use Bennett's text for upper division classes):[8]

> Before the switch to Bennett's texts, students rarely asked questions that referenced specific passages in the assigned texts, and their essay exam answers seemed to be based solely on what I said in class. For the last three years using Bennett's texts, students on a fairly regular basis ask questions about specific passages and their essay answers use examples and reasoning from the texts that I did not mention in class.

These are hardly scientific studies, but they suggest a hypothesis. If students are highly motivated, have short assignments, and have plenty of time to do them, they may be able to get as much out of the originals as from Bennett's versions. But if the students are less motivated, have poor time management skills, have pressure from other courses and employment, and are distracted by things such as text-messaging, IM, and FaceBook, they may learn the material better if they have a text that they perceive as easier to read.

2. Do Bennett's texts "dumb down" the material? Bennett anticipates the charge that his project makes the reading inappropriately easy by quoting Antony Flew, who remarked to him that, "nothing is spoon-feeding which leads the students to do more work than they would otherwise have done."[9] On the other hand, there is clearly a virtue in challenging students with materials that are difficult to read. Robert Boyd Skipper (who does not discuss Bennett specifically), acknowledges that students resist reading difficult texts, but argues that faculty members must work through this, not around it, and must challenge students with substantial portions of original texts. He believes that students can and will respond, and conversely, that "to take an intellectual task from students is to steal some of their education from them."[10] My own view is that in teaching students, as in dealing with young people generally, it is always important to pick one's battles. If one cares about having students learn to read difficult texts in archaic language, it is certainly not a bad thing to invest the energy in doing so. On the other hand, I am not convinced that there is anything irresponsible about avoiding this particular challenge.

3. Is it possible to preserve the "content" while eliminating the barriers to understanding? Bennett's project assumes that the content of the text stands apart from the language, and can be preserved even while varying the language. My colleagues who work in the continental tradition tell me that this effort is misguided, and that it is impossible to abstract a pure philosophical content apart over and above the text itself. As one colleague said to me, "the students are reading Bennett, not Hobbes." While I understand the spirit of this remark, most of us assign works that were translated from non-English languages. I would think that there is more distortion in a translation of Plato's ancient Greek than in one of Bennett's revisions of Hobbes or Locke, but it is surely better for students to read Plato in translation than to not read him at all.

Recommendations

Obviously Bennett's work raises deep pedagogical and practical questions and ultimately each faculty member will need to make an individual decision. I can at least make two recommendations:

1. Bennett's non-English language translations (*e.g.*, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Malebranche, and Spinoza) are especially attractive. On the one hand, students are not going to read the original texts anyway, so here one is choosing between different translation styles rather than between an original and a rewritten version. Also, Bennett's versions are available on-line, at no charge, while the modern and (more readable) translations of these texts are usually only available commercially.

2. Bennett's versions are more appropriate for introductory courses than for advanced courses. In the case of introductory courses, most of us need to make compromises in one way or another. Having students learn to read archaic English is not an unimportant skill. But if they major in Philosophy or English, they will presumably learn it in their upper division courses, and if they do not major in humanities they may never need these skills in later life anyway (except possibly for deciphering the instructions for their income tax forms). Learning to

understand complex philosophical arguments, however, will benefit them in whatever they do. So it may make sense to spend more energy on the substantive issues than on the purely historical challenges.

My own conclusion is that it makes sense to leave aside the ideological objections to Bennett's project and to use these texts opportunistically, depending on the nature of the students and the course, and the cost and quality of other available options.

Notes

1. Jonathan Bennett, "On Translating Locke, Berkeley, and Hume into English," *Teaching Philosophy* 17:3 (1994): 261–69.
2. Jonathan Bennett, e-mail message to author, April 15, 2008.
3. Bennett, "On Translating," 261.
4. Jonathan Bennett, "Why Is This Worth Doing?" in *Some Texts from Early Modern Philosophy*, http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/f_why.html (accessed April 24, 2008).
5. Bennett, "On Translating," 262.
6. Descartes, "Meditations," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16.
7. George Rainbolt, e-mail message to author, April 10, 2008. (I asked Professor Bennett for the names of some individuals who used his materials, and he was kind enough to send me a list of names. Professor Rainbolt and Professor Messerich were the only ones who responded in any depth.)
8. Ron Messerich, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2008.
9. Jonathan Bennett, "On Translating," 161.
10. Robert Boyd Skipper, "Aliteracy in the Philosophy Classroom," *Teaching Philosophy* 28:3 (2005): 261–76, 265.

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