

Review on Eugene Orlov's
"Aristotelian Philosophical Terminology"
 («ФИЛОСОФСКИЙ ЯЗЫК АРИСТОТЕЛЯ»:

Монография / Е.В. Орлов; отв. ред. В.П. Горан; Рос. акад. наук, Сиб. отд-ние,
 Ин-т философии и права. – Новосибирск: Изд-во СО РАН, 2011. – 317 с.)

ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE
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Books published at the periphery of Russia, outside Moscow or St. Petersburg, have traditionally been original, unpredictable and well-researched. This was the case before and after 1917, and still is valid after 1992, particularly when the topic is as challenging and ambitious as the language of Aristotle. The author of the volume in question, apparently a specialist on Aristotle, displays excellent command of Greek, good knowledge of English and familiarity with the overall Aristotelian scholarship.

This time the reputable publishing house of the Novosibirsk branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences introduces the work as “an attempt of a systematic analysis and classification of philosophical terminology in Aristotle whose key terms are being placed in the context of interpretation of the original text” (2011:2). What is the “original text”? That is the grand Shakespearean or Homeric question. The lost and found notes of Aristotle’s students in remote antiquity eventually would become the corpus of Aristotelian teaching, his legacy, as we know it: a byproduct of the two millennia of **collective transmission** via **numerous translations, lost and found** – Greek, Latin, Persian, Syriac, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, French, English, German, Slavic and many others. Given the circumstances, could one speak of the “original text” or the **proto-text in general?** And particularly on the basis of the very late, allegedly improved, Russian renditions? Decidedly not. This is the basic objection to the very task bravely undertaken by E.Orlov.

Such recognized Russian authority on Aristotle as Alexey Losev for the same reason lamented the fact that it was actually impossible to arrive at the philological precision of Aristotle’s text. To attempt to judge his language, based on the comparative analysis of a few of Russian rather recent translations and some English ones is more than puzzling.

Since there is no “original text” of Aristotle himself how to explain the longevity and popularity of the Greek sage? Perhaps, the “translation” of his teaching by his own students, i.e. the laconic interpretation and recording of Aristotle’s lectures, managed to transmit through centuries the essential ground-breaking philosophy, early science, cosmology and world view, relevant even today. But whose translation from Greek is more correct? Is the Russian rendition better than the English one? These are impossible questions which Orlov raises with his undertaking.

The aim of translation (incidentally confirming the validity of the very Aristotelian concept of the **Universal**) is to **transmit the same concepts**, ideas, views of the world in a different linguistic code, making them accessible in Chinese and Arabic, French and Urdu, Russian and Armenian, Mongolian and German... It is possible despite the differences in linguistic form since the transmitted meaning/thought happens to be the same. Taking professors' notes is also an art of translation. Aristotle's famous Spartan or Attic laconic style is the act of abbreviation/translation of his lectures done by his students of the ancient Lyceum. We may still judge the stylistic and cultural Zeitgeist of Aristotle's time via those recovered translated notes. Unlike the contemporary philosophical discourse, modern and post-modern, whose goal lies in bamboozling the interlocutor via incomprehensible terminology, Aristotle's mediated texts breath order, simplicity, clarity and accessibility, without alienating the general educated reader. Their Spartan laconicity is the result of careful and masterful "translation" and deep understanding of the teaching of their revered ancient mentor.

E.Orlov though aims at the impossible: applying the dictionary Greek meanings of the language he obviously loves and knows quite well, tries to unearth the "real" Aristotle, as well as edit the available translations into Russian and English. As a non-native speaker of English, Orlov cannot appreciate fully the analytical possibilities of the grand *lingua franca* of today, the rich polysemy and the economy of the modern substitute of Latin. Instead of creating the comparative table of Russian and English translations, it would have been more useful to focus solely on the comparison of the Russian version. The painstaking deconstruction of the universally accepted terms, insisting on possessing the "right" term strikes with futility. What strikes the most is the tackling of such *recognizable* and *universally established signs* as **Logos** or **Episteme**. In most languages, the "Word" is the universally accepted equivalent for "Logos". It is enough to recall even the laborious Biblical utterance, "In the beginning there was the Word," done incidentally by the Greeks who accepted monotheism. Were they also wrong? Why then not to translate the same term into Russian as "SLOVO" and, when speaking about the soul, not say "*besslovesnaia dusha*" rather than insist on the Greek borrowing – "Ne *imeiuschaia logos?*" (2011:133). Instead of "*pravil'ny logos*" one could say in Russian "*pravil'noe utverzhdenie/suzhdenie*," "*pravilny nravstvenny zakon/ustav*, making the discourse clear and truly Aristotelian?" Russian neologisms or "orlovisms", such as *bes-logosny* or *logistichesky* just needlessly complicate the discourse, but blindly follow the post-modernist incomprehensible style.

Orlov creates a puzzling mythology of possessing the **Real Aristotle** by having selected certain few 20th-century Russian translations. For instance, on p.156, Orlov writes "This is what Aristotle himself writes." But the "real quote" is nothing but A.Sagadeev's commentary on Losev's (?) – Item 145 of his bibliography. His "real" Aristotle is taken from one of the numerous secondary sources and a late Russian commentary. Is the reader being mislead knowingly? Does the author really think so? The author does admit the Russian translation of Aristotle, "*Iz sbornika Sviatoslava*" came in 1073 via Bulgarian sources (p. 155). It would have been useful to see the

evolution of Russian philosophical terminology had there been a fuller panorama of the pre- and post-revolutionary Russian versions.

Surprisingly, the author is more critical of the well-known successful English renditions, accepting the often failed Russian versions at face value. For instance, Russian translators Boroday and Kubistky both use the same failed archaic term “*skazyvaiutsia*” when a proper Russian “*imenuit*” or “*nazyvaiut*” is available. “*Mozhet byt*” in Boroday’s 1990-version stands for the perfect Russian “*vozmozhnoe*” which Orlov does not edit. On p. 191, “*samka protivna samtsy*” could have been easily replaced by “*protivopolozhna*” or “*protivostoit*”; on.249, “*uverenie*” could have been translated as “*protses dokazatel’stva*” – this is what is actually meant if one wishes to make oneself understood. The author replaces standard English terms by his own neologisms, often borrowings, contaminating the Russian language. For instance, on p.281 the fashionable “*kontsept*” is mocking the established perfect “*kontseptsia*” or on p.287, “*distinktsia*” humorously replaces the Russian “*razlichie*”. One wonders if this is the fault of a young generation of poorly qualified proofreaders, whose command of the native tongue leaves much to be desired, or the blind following of the postmodern trend and the overall decline of the Russian literary style.

Despite the obvious flaws, the book still provokes a new debate on Aristotle, Aristotelianism and the pathway of transmission of his teaching. Is it via Byzantium, Rome, Alexandria, Damascus, Samarkand, Bukhara or Andaluz? That is the question. Only in this context it could have been possible to unearth the better versions of the lost Greek.