Before the Pleasure Principle: Translation and its Vicissitudes

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In the course of Ornston's (1985) continuing interesting and valuable exploration of the systematic biases of Strachey's translation in the Standard Edition, Ornston offers an arresting translation of his own. Lustprinzip (p. 407) is rendered as "the principle of desire and delight."

While from the point of view of precise translation, "desire and delight" may, perhaps, be the most accurate English equivalent, some additional factors may be worth considering before it is assumed that the translation is Freud's conception. The foremost consideration is that Freud's (1880) translation of Mill's (1866) essay on Plato regularly renders "pleasure" as Lust. The idea of a principle of pleasure and pain regulating mind and behavior was not new and was prominent in the works of the Utilitarians. Freud was at least acquainted with the writings of Mill and Bain, among these. Thus, Lustprinzip was already an interpretation/translation of an established concept. Perhaps there was, as well, an established precedent for the translation of these concepts in the German philosophical literature.

Two other factors, at least, would also be of relevance. One would be the lack of precision in the use of "pleasure" by the English-speaking philosophers, such that, unless great specificity was required, "pleasure" meant any "positive" affect. Second, Freud's concept of the pleasure principle, as Schur (1966) has shown, has more than experiential referents. This consideration would call into question the value of overly precise translation in experiential terms.

These comments are certainly not conclusive, nor are they intended as such. Rather, they call attention to some additional issues in the translation of conceptual terms in Freud's writings. In particular, Freud's own understanding of English and the existence of conventions in translating standard concepts from one language to another pose intriguing questions. Another example of these conventions is the translation of das Ich as "the ego," a custom long antedating Freud's translators.

It is likely that additional examples are to be found in Freud's writings.

REFERENCES
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