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Ethics in translation and for translators

Ethics as a branch of philosophy is concerned with how we make decisions as to what is morally good. It covers a vast territory that moral philosophers further divide into the sometimes overlapping areas of meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. **Meta-ethics** deals with questions about ethics itself. Such questions are often quite abstract and seemingly far removed from the moral decisions people need to make in their day-to-day personal or professional lives. They include: Who or what is the source of morality? One person might believe, for example, that moral values like truth and honesty exist because that is God's will, while another person might hold that moral values are based on human conventions. We might also ask whether there is a single set of moral values that applies to all humanity, or whether it is reasonable for each society to develop its own values, its own ideas of what is good and should therefore be promoted and defended. Meta-ethics thus touches on issues that pervade the study of translation: What, if anything, is universal? What is particular? Who decides? Such questions have typically been asked with regard to 'meaning' in translation studies. And in much the same way as contemporary, and especially postmodern approaches to translation reject the idea of universal, objective and transcendental meanings, they have also come to reject the idea of a single, unchanging source of truth on what is good. As Kaisa Koskinen puts it: "The contemporary world view has little space for any preordained conditions, stressing issues like individuality and the plurality of choices" (Koskinen 2000:13). What is more, globalization, technological change and increased interconnectivity – and the concomitant need to work with differing conceptions of moral values like privacy – have also contributed to a situation in which ethical pluralism, defined as the "acceptance of more than one *judgment* regarding the interpretation and application of a shared ethical norm" (Ess 2006:215; emphasis in the original), has become compelling. In a similar way, the rise of what has become known as the 'ethics of alterity' means that for many theorists, ethics is about responding affirmatively to difference, rather than expecting to understand everything and everyone on one's own terms.

Normative ethics is more directly concerned with principles that guide right action. Normative theories traditionally fall into three main types: consequentialist theories hold that whether an action is morally right or not depends solely on the consequences of that action. One variant of consequentialism known as utilitarianism holds that actions are right to the extent that they promote pleasure or happiness. Deontological models, in contrast, define what is ethical "by reference to what is right in and of itself, irrespective of consequences" (Baker 2018:309). Associated, in particular, with the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, they are based on fundamental principles or rules that specify duties and guide ethical actions. Virtue ethics, finally, is less concerned with guiding individual actions, and more concerned with the kind of person one should seek to be. It thus emphasizes moral character, but is also related to well-being or human flourishing – *eudaimonia* in Aristotelian ethics – which is based on humans striving to be the best they can in their unique functions as humans. Even if these distinctions are not always watertight, normative theories have been found to be helpful in teasing out the ethical dilemmas that arise in translation and interpreting scenarios, and in characterizing general approaches to ethics adopted in these professions. Kermit (2020), for example, shows how the professionalization of Norwegian sign language interpreting was accompanied by a transition from a predominantly utilitarian ethics, according to which interpreters pursued optimal outcomes for their clients sometimes at the expense of usurping client autonomy, to a predominantly deontological ethics, in which interpreters' actions became increasingly constrained by a newly adopted code of conduct.

Professional codes of conduct, which epitomize the deontological approach to translation ethics, also bring us firmly into the area of **applied ethics**, that is, the study of ethics as it pertains to more concrete situations, including the exercise of particular professions. Indeed, adherence to a code of ethics is seen as a necessary condition for an individual to be construed as a professional in the first place, and such codes serve important functions in protecting and promoting the rights and interests of both translators/interpreters and their clients (Phelan 2020). Strict reliance on codes has been flagged as a danger by a number of scholars however. Tymoczko (2007:219), in particular, has warned that the narrow micro-textual and contractual focus of many codes of ethics can be used to inscribe translation professionals with dominant ideologies and blind them to their wider potential for ideological and political empowerment. Such concerns are undoubtedly related to the question of how a theorist understands the scope of translation ethics. Rudvin (2020) argues that scholars like Baker (2018) and Tymoczko (2007) tend not to see a discontinuity between personal and

professional ethics, and to make a case for translators' active engagement at a societal level, whereas others, including Chesterman (2001) and Pym (2012), while acknowledging the translator's responsibility for the immediate effects of their work and to the wider profession, are less inclined to see translators as engaged in long-term projects of social change.

Chesterman's models of translation ethics

Whether widely or narrowly focused, reflection on ethical issues as they arise in the translation and interpreting professions has been growing since the end of the twentieth century, spurred on by important publications that addressed the ethics of literary translation and public service interpreting in particular. Drugan (2018) provides a useful account of the evolution of the field. In what remains a very significant contribution, Chesterman (2001) attempted to capture turn-of-the-millennium thinking about translation ethics using four models: the first focuses on representation. Central values in an ethics of representation are accuracy and fidelity. "The ethical imperative", according to Chesterman (2001:139) "is to represent the source texts, or the source author's intention, accurately, without adding, omitting or changing anything." Representation is a chief concern in approaches to translation that grapple with the difficulty of ensuring ethical treatment of the Other. Theorists such as Venuti (1995), for example, have argued for an approach to literary translation that shuns assimilation and instead allows the foreignness of the source to become manifest in target texts. Chesterman's second model is based on the idea of "translation as a commercial service, performed for a client" (2001:14). According to this model, which Chesterman associates with functionalism in translation, translators act ethically by complying with the client's instructions and fulfilling the translation brief as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible, respecting deadlines and providing value for money. A key value here is loyalty, to clients, target readers and the original writer. Chesterman's ethics of communication comes back to the idea of how translation operates in encounters with irreducibly different Others. The concern here, however, is not with how we represent, but with how we communicate with the Other, and the philosophical touchstone is the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. Chesterman sees this model as sharing common ground with Pym's (1997/2012) (non-Levinasian) ethics of cooperation, in which translators, by practising their profession ethically, ultimately ensure the maintenance of intercultural communication. Chesterman's fourth model is norm-based. Here, behaving ethically means behaving the way one is expected to behave as a translator. Chesterman is careful to point out the

incompatibilities between and the gaps left by the models he proposes, where the latter includes lack of consideration of the world's responsibility towards translators. Finally, he draws on virtue ethics to explore an alternative way of looking at ethics and translation, defining a virtue as "an acquired human quality that helps a person strive for excellence in a practice" (Chesterman ibid.:145), and proposes that the most important virtue a translator can possess is the desire to make the right decision: "the translator must *want* to be a *good* translator, must strive for excellence in the practice of translation" (ibid. emphasis in the original).

Recent developments

The decades following publication of Chesterman's article have seen a number of noteworthy developments. Firstly, virtue ethics has grown in importance, partly in tandem with increased interest in the ethics of care and the pursuit of social justice, which are central to public service interpreting, translator activism and translation in international development and crises (O'Mathúna and Hunt 2020; Rudvin 2020), but also as a response to increasing globalization and technologization. Against a background of contemporary translation business practices characterized by the general disempowerment of translators, Moorkens and Rocchi (2021), for example, ask whether the translation business can be reformed to allow for the flourishing of the human translators on which it relies. Increased participation of non-professionals in crowdsourced translation and the growing use of machine translation have also led commentators (e.g. Pym 2012) to focus on trustworthiness as a key virtue that distinguishes (professional) human translators from others. And the virtue ethics framework is a fruitful one within which to explore one of the dilemmas of the contemporary workplace, where translators and especially post-editors are asked to provide just 'good-enough' work, despite a deep-set desire to strive for excellence. Secondly, increased technologization has opened up new or exacerbated already existing ethical concerns, some of which are related to the narrower contractual ethics of service, others of which speak to wider issues of translator well-being and equality and social justice. The former include renewed interest in the values of: confidentiality, for example of client data that has been shared in digital form, and which can be easily compromised if those data are shared over a network, perhaps with a machine translation provider; privacy, which can be breached using contemporary monitoring technology; and respect for intellectual property rights, which may be eroded with the help of tools that systematically dispossess creators of their data or reuse data without permission. The latter concerns include the deployment of technologies and related policies and

discourses in practices that either efface human involvement in translation workflows or create intolerable working conditions for translators. It also includes the risk of contemporary machine translation doing long-term aesthetic harm to creative texts or authors, amplifying bias inherent in the data on which it is trained and thereby promulgating discourses that do a disservice to those who may already be disadvantaged, or being implicated in errors that cause real harm to stakeholders. Most of these issues are broached in the contributions to Moorkens, Kenny and do Carmo (2020). Thirdly, some scholars have begun to turn their attention to the issue of the world's responsibility to translators and interpreters. Baker (2006), for example, considers the precarious situation of translators and interpreters working in conflict zones, and there is a small but growing body of work concerned with translator well-being in more conventional settings (see Moorkens and Rocchi 2021). Fourthly, translation scholars have begun to engage with sustainability as an ethical value, both of translation itself and the moral goods it engenders (ibid.), and as it relates to human beings' moral relationship to the environment and its non-human contents. Cronin (2020) sees translation, and especially translation technology, as deeply implicated in the models of continuous economic growth that are causing on-going harm to the planet and argues for radical change to avert further environmental catastrophe.

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Further essential reading

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