1 Introduction

“You was a good man, and did good things!” Thus, at the very end of Thomas Hardy’s novel The Woodlanders, a country girl pays tribute at the grave of Giles Winterborne (Hardy [1887] 1998, 367). We might well understand the relation between the two clauses as causal rather than purely additive: you did good things because you were a good man. Good people do indeed do good things, after all. And this insight lies at the heart of virtue ethics. In other words, if we wish to do good, we first have to decide to be good, and the rest will follow naturally.

The view of ethics based on virtues is, in the West, one of the earliest conceptual frameworks – or “theories” – of ethics. The content of this framework has not remained unaltered over the centuries, however: different periods and cultures have highlighted different virtues, and still do. A brief outline of this development is given in the following section.

One of the salient characteristics of virtue ethics is that it encompasses both contractual and utilitarian aspects. This division, often made in moral philosophy (e.g. Williams 1985), distinguishes between, on one hand, an ethics based on what has been promised or contractually agreed or is seen as a duty, and on the other hand, an ethics based on the real or imagined consequences of an act. This distinction is relevant to the discussion of the place of virtue ethics vis-à-vis other approaches to translation ethics.

A recent development in debates about translation ethics has been the shift from translation ethics to translator ethics. This move, from a focus on the product to a focus on the producer, brings virtue ethics back into the spotlight. It also illustrates how the interest in ethics has broadened from a micro-ethics concerned with relations between texts towards a macro-ethics concerned with relations between people; or more broadly still, between words and the world.

2 Historical background

This section takes a brief look at some aspects of the development of virtue ethics. For a much more detailed account, see MacIntyre ([1981] 2007), which I draw on here. MacIntyre argues that virtue ethics offers a useful general framework for moral philosophy, because this approach is less liable to the disputes which arise from competing rights or values, or clashing ethical
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rules; he also argues that it is a better framework than one based solely on reason, or solely on emotion. (For a short general introduction to virtue ethics, see Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2018.) The following section will then illustrate how virtue ethics can be applied to translation ethics.

We can start with the fundamental question posed by classical Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle: how should one live? The general context of this question is the classical Greek notion of “paideia,” which can be translated as education but has a broader meaning encompassing culture in a general sense. Paideia was the whole system of bringing up children to develop into ideal citizens. Implied here is the Greek concept of a person as having the potential of development, of not just being but becoming, and hence of becoming better, closer to an ideal, to excellence. Indeed, their word for virtue – “areté” – meant “excellence of character.” On this view the ultimate purpose of a virtuous life is to attain the telos (“goal”) of life, understood as the ideal human nature: as MacIntyre puts it (2007, 63), “human–nature-as-it-could-be” if only it realized its full ethical potential. This is our true “end” as human beings.

A major source of the virtue ethics tradition has been Aristotle’s systematization of it, in his Nicomachean Ethics. His list of virtues is more wide-ranging than the earlier Homeric ones of courage, strength, loyalty and honour, and also more varied than Plato’s four cardinal virtues: temperance, courage, wisdom and justice. Some of those in Aristotle’s list are intellectual rather than moral: theoretical wisdom (sophia), practical knowledge (episteme), intuitive understanding (nous), practical wisdom (phronesis), craft knowledge (techne). Others are virtues of character, moral virtues: courage, temperance, generosity, magnanimity, self-confidence/self-respect, proper ambition, good temper, truthfulness, wittiness, friendship (concern for others), modesty, righteous indignation. For Aristotle, each virtue represented a “mean” between two extremes: courage, for instance, lies between cowardice and rashness.

There is an interesting relation between Aristotle’s view of virtue and his analysis of causality in terms of four causes: material, formal, final (purpose) and efficient (pertaining to the agent). (For an application of these in Translation Studies, see e.g. Pym 1997, 85.) Character (whether virtuous or not) is part of what he called the efficient cause: e.g. the way an artefact or action is influenced by the character – and mind and body – of the person who creates or performs it. Character is partly formed by the agent’s own previous choices, as well as upbringing and training etc. Aristotle’s final cause also has ethical implications: an agent’s intentions can be more or less virtuous. Causation can thus be seen to have a potential ethical dimension. Curiously, the Greek word aitia and its derivatives cover both the sense of a natural/scientific cause and a moral/judicial fault or responsibility. (So does the Finnish word syy, “cause, fault.”)

Different sets of virtues have emerged in different cultural and historical contexts. Religious traditions have foregrounded charity and compassion, humility and gentleness, or obedience and submission, for instance. The Enlightenment thinkers stressed tolerance and reasonableness, good humour and friendliness. MacIntyre (2007, 211f) compares the virtues as understood by Homer, Aristotle, and Christianity with the views of two later writers, Benjamin Franklin and Jane Austen. Franklin lists practical virtues such as industry, silence and cleanliness, whereas Austen values constancy, integrity and amiability (understood as genuine affection for people).

A thoughtful and accessible collection of meditations on historical and contemporary interpretations of different virtues is offered by Comte-Sponville ([1996] 2003), who covers a wide range of virtues, including some borderline cases: politeness, fidelity, prudence, temperance, courage, justice, generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, humility, simplicity, tolerance, purity, gentleness, good faith, humour and love. And there are of course other similar lists. But what might be the relevance of virtue ethics to translation studies?
3 Core issues

3.1 Fidelity and other translator virtues

In the West, a virtue traditionally required of translators has been fidelity. In an oft-cited phrase, Horace referred in his *Ars Poetica* (about 19 BCE) to the “faithful interpreter.” However, interpretations of precisely what Horace meant by this have varied, and there has been much debate on the subject. The original Latin is *nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus interpres*. For some scholars, this means that a faithful or true translator (*fidus interpres*) should take care not to translate word for word; but for others it has been taken as a criticism of “slavish translators” who do translate (only) word for word. (See e.g. Kelly’s magisterial history of the profession, entitled *The True Interpreter*, 1979; Rener 1989, 289–290; and Garceau 2018.) So fidelity has had both a positive and a negative interpretation. Furthermore, the concept has straddled the border between the textual and the interpersonal views of what the ethics of translation should be about. Translation ethics explores the principles governing what makes an ethically good translation, as a text, whereas translator ethics seeks to define the characteristics of an ethically good translator. In contemporary Translation Studies, the publication of Anthony Pym’s *Pour une éthique du traducteur* (1997) marked a distinct shift from the former to the latter, bringing to the fore issues such as the translator’s responsibility and agency.

There are several different approaches to translation ethics (see Chesterman 2001 for a survey). To summarize: an ethics of representation foregrounds the value of being true to the source, and hence fidelity; an ethics of service values loyalty to the client; a norm-based ethics highlights predictability and hence trustworthiness; and an ethics of communication aims at reaching understanding. The following paragraphs illustrate further how different virtues have been interpreted in these different approaches.

Fidelity is a key aspect of the kind of translation ethics that is based on the idea that a translation stands for its original, as a representation of the original text. The key value underlying this ethics of representation seems to be truth: a translation must be true to its original, as a translator must be true to the original author. In this respect, then, a translator must have the virtue of truthfulness. In Newmark’s words (1991, 1), “[t]ranslation is concerned with moral and with factual truth.”

In the tradition of Bible translation this has been a key point: appearing to be unfaithful to the original, i.e. introducing difference, or even being suspected of this, has carried heavy penalties. If you believe that the Bible is literally the Word of God, even the slightest deviation from the original constitutes a sin: for sacred texts, literal translation was therefore the safest solution. For a long time, it was a crime even to translate the Bible at all into a vernacular language (Latin, taken to be a sacred language, was an exception), and moreover a crime punishable by death: this was the fate of the great English translator William Tyndale (1494–1536), among others. Such translations were thought to inevitably introduce changes in the Holy Word. (Compare the view held by many Muslims that the Koran is untranslatable in principle.) A similar risk also accompanied the translation of some non-sacred texts: in 1546 the French humanist Étienne Dolet was burned at the stake, together with his books, because in his translation of a work by Plato he had added a clarifying phrase that the Inquisition interpreted as heresy; because it could be read as denying the posthumous life of the soul.

The strategy of literal translation has also been advocated for literary translation, where fidelity has been a priority value. (See e.g. Berman 1985; Meschonnic 2007.) This view in general stresses fidelity to the form of the original, but at the cost of fidelity to the effect on the original reader, for the stylistic effect of a literal translation is usually very different from that of the original. Translation always involves compromise.
Textually speaking, fidelity has been taken to imply *sameness* between original and translation: a highly problematic interpretation. In linguistic terms, the notion that a translation can achieve total sameness with the original is usually an illusion. It is generally recognized nowadays that this is rarely possible at any level higher than certain kinds of individual lexical items, like technical terms, numbers and the like: yes, English *three milligrams* is exactly the same as French *trois milligrammes*. But the larger the syntactic unit in question, the less likely it is that total sameness can be achieved. So scholars working with the concept of equivalence in Translation Studies nowadays more often understand it not as a sameness but, rather more realistically, as some kind of relevant similarity (see e.g. Pym 2014, ch. 3). Ethically, the challenge is still there: fidelity to the original can easily be taken to mean striving to achieve the similarity that is most relevant to the circumstances in question. So the question becomes: what exactly should a translator be faithful to, and when? Meaning? Form? Style? Spirit? The author’s intention? The intended effect? Something else? Lip movements (as in dubbing)? Under what conditions should one aspect be given priority over others? Many answers have been proposed, often based on different analyses of kinds of equivalence (for a survey, see e.g. Leal 2012). Fidelity remains a central virtue in translation ethics, but debates continue about the various ways in which it can be interpreted.

With reference to modern times, consider the appeal to fidelity that is made in the Translator’s Charter adopted by the International Federation of Translators (FIT) in 1963 (amended 1994, see FIT 1994). It opens with a number of clauses setting out the basic guiding principles of the profession. Section I lists the translator’s general obligations: clause 1 says that the very nature of translation entails that translators work under specific obligations, and clause 2 is on the translator’s responsibility. Then come three clauses all having to do with fidelity, either explicitly or implicitly:

3. The translator shall refuse to give to a text an interpretation of which he/she does not approve, or which would be contrary to the obligations of his/her profession.

4. Every translation shall be faithful and render exactly the idea and form of the original, this fidelity constituting both a moral and legal obligation for the translator.

5. A faithful translation, however, should not be confused with a literal translation, the fidelity of a translation not excluding an adaptation to make the form, the atmosphere and deeper meaning of the work felt in another language and country.

Clauses 3 and 5 thus frame and modify the strict obligation stated in clause 4. There are limits to how far fidelity can stretch, how freely one can translate (3), but fidelity does not mean literalness (5). These principles are highly relevant to much professional translation, but less relevant to situations where a translator sets out to break norms, to intervene in the text, to edit or even censor the text or radically change its meaning. Clause 3 also seems to appeal to the virtues of good faith and honesty: one should not lie about the meaning of the original. It also implies the importance of the virtue of loyalty to one’s profession.

Fidelity has been radically reconceptualized by some scholars (e.g. Venuti 1998) who wish to underline the ethical justification not for preserving some kind of relevant sameness but for allowing a translation to manifest difference, both with respect to the original and with respect to the norms of the target language. Such an approach (usually proposed with respect to literary translation) foregrounds the value of revealing the Other in the original, for instance by exploiting deliberate interference from the source language. The culture of the Other is thus not hidden, not domesticated into normal target language, but openly recognized. Lewis (1985) called this kind of translation strategy “abusive fidelity.”
The virtue of loyalty, too, has been given different interpretations. Most non-literary translation functions as a service: translation is a service to a client, and service ethics focuses on the contractual loyalty involved in this service. Some scholars have taken the notion in a wider sense to include loyalty to the original author and any other relevant agents, such as the readers. Nord (1989, 2007) first introduced loyalty into the Skopos theory of translation as a replacement for fidelity, which she interpreted as a textual relation rather than a social one. For her, loyalty has to do with the responsibility translators have towards all relevant partners, including themselves; so loyalty conflicts may arise (see e.g. Künzli 2007; see also Chapter 5 “Functional translation theories and ethics” in this volume).

Professional codes of ethics also illustrate the relevance of other virtues. The current Code of Professional Ethics on the website of AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, for instance, contains a section entitled “Code of Honour” concerning professional secrecy, not accepting assignments that one does not feel competent to do, and so on (AIIC 2018). There are also clauses concerning complaints procedures and arbitration, which implicitly appeal to the virtue of justice. The Translator’s Charter has similar clauses. The whole issue of translator’s copyright also has to do with justice (see e.g. Venuti 1995a).

The status of fidelity as the dominant virtue for translators has long been questioned by scholars and practitioners in community interpreting (see also Chapter 15 “Ethics in public service interpreting” in this volume). Here, many have commented that, in practice, interpreters often feel they need to do more than “just translate,” but aim to act more as helpers, as aids to a deeper understanding between client and for instance patient or asylum applicant. This might involve altering the register of the language, making it simpler for a client to understand; sensitively reformulating information in order to take account of cultural differences; or adding information for the benefit of either party. Doubts have been raised about the validity of the conduit metaphor for translation and interpreting, according to which the mediator is no more than a neutral channel for the exchange of information. (See e.g. Clifford 2004, and at greater length Inghilleri 2012.) These arguments suggest the value of other virtues such as compassion, which could be seen as representing a more profound kind of communication ethics, beyond merely ensuring that packets of information reach their destination. They also raise more general questions about the difficult relation between professional ethics and personal ethics (see further later).

In an ethics based on norms, the virtues of integrity, honesty and trustworthiness come to the fore: clients and readers need to know that translators will endeavour to meet the norms that they are expected to meet. Without these, a translator risks losing trust, and by extension the public image of the whole profession may be affected. (On the importance of trust in the translation profession, see further Rizzi, Lang, and Pym 2019.) One consequence of this view is the value of clarity, and another is the importance of transparency, which one could interpret as honesty: if a translator decides, for some reason or other, to break the norms or expectations of the client and/or reader, it is considered ethical to do this openly, not covertly. Clarence Jordan’s norm-breaking “Cotton Patch Version” of parts of the Bible (1968–1973), for example, is clearly labelled for what it is – not a close translation but an attempt to retell the stories in a way that seems relevant to a certain group of readers, modernized and domesticated into a contemporary Atlanta dialect. (The full text is no longer available online, but extracts can be found on various sites: see e.g. Cotton Patch Version 1973.)

Making the aims and general strategy of a translation clear, e.g. in a translator’s preface, is an effective way of making the translator’s role visible, so that readers are made aware that they are indeed reading a translation. Aristotle’s virtues of self-respect and “proper ambition” are implicit here. If translators typically exhibit a rather servile habitus, as Simeoni claimed (1998), one
could see this as an unfortunate deficiency in these two virtues, although this conclusion should be tempered by consideration of socio-economic factors such as the power relations between employer and employee. In this respect, it is significant that professional codes of ethics also have sections on translators’ rights.

The virtues of self-respect and proper ambition are also implicit in arguments that translators should be more socially active in promoting their profession (e.g. Venuti 1995b, 311). Koskinen (2000, 99f) makes a useful distinction between three kinds of visibility. First, textual visibility enables the translator to be visible in the text itself, for instance via the use of foreignizing strategies. (A bad translation, written in faulty target language or in “translationese,” also makes the translator visible, of course, but not usually in an ethically defensible way.) Second, paratextual visibility is seen e.g. in translator’s prefaces or afterwords, or in translator’s footnotes. A minimum paratextual requirement in literary and academic translation, for instance, is that the translator’s name should be mentioned on the translation. And third, extratextual visibility refers to the translator’s social role outside a given translation task. This might include marketing and publicity, responses to critical reviews, and also public appearances in general, such as in interviews, letters to the press and public talks. All three types of visibility have ethical implications. Textual visibility has to do with whether it is considered appropriate in a given translation context to hide the otherness of the text. Paratextual visibility concerns the translator’s right to be seen and acknowledged as the producer of the translation, and the need for the translator to be open about unusual strategies or intentions, for example. And extratextual visibility is associated with the translator’s loyalty to the profession, on the assumption that the profession will fare better and gain trust if its representatives are seen in a positive light in the public eye. In Finland, for instance, the literary translator Kersti Juva has become a widely recognized public ambassador for the profession.

3.2 A Hieronymic Oath

Let us now look at one application of virtue ethics in more detail. MacIntyre offers a “first and partial” definition of virtue as follows, relating it to the notion of a practice: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which prevents us from achieving any such goods” (2007, 222).

Practices include all kinds of social activities: MacIntyre’s examples include football, chess, architecture, medicine, among others. Let us also include translation. Here is MacIntyre’s definition of a practice:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity though which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

(2007, 218)

Roughly speaking, then, a practice is any kind of cooperative human activity in which people try to get better at this activity: they strive for excellence. The satisfaction that this striving brings is one of the “internal goods” which come with participation in a practice. A few pages later, we get a clearer picture of what means to enter into a practice (see also Chapter 22 “Ethics in
Virtue ethics in translation

To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and a fortiori the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn. And for this learning and the relationship to the past which it embodies the virtues of justice, courage and truthfulness are prerequisites in precisely the same way and for precisely the same reasons as they are for sustaining present relationships within practices.

(MacIntyre 2007, 226)

In sum, MacIntyre sees virtues as human qualities that help a person to strive for excellence in a practice. Virtues are displayed by individuals, but their effects are social as well as personal. Practices thrive on the virtues of their participants, including of course the relevant technical skills (recall Aristotle’s “craft knowledge”). On this view, an ethically good translator must want to be one, and so strives for excellence in this practice. A “virtuous” translator in this sense is one who can be relied on to seek ethically justifiable solutions. A translator, moreover, who publicly professes to be a professional translator thus commits him/herself to this striving for excellence. This position would thus assume that translator ethics takes priority over translation ethics.

Building on this framework, Chesterman (2001) proposed a “Hieronymic Oath” to be sworn by translators (named after Hieronymus, i.e. St Jerome, patron saint of translators). The idea here was to establish for translators something similar to the classical Hippocratic Oath sworn by doctors, or the Archimedean Oath more recently formulated for engineers (see Archimedean Oath 1990). Here is the original proposal, which included within square brackets the value or virtue underlying each clause. The commitment clause at the beginning was inspired by a point made by Tymoczko (1999, 110, referring to Van den Broeck) that translation is implicitly a “commis- sive act” implying a promise to represent a source text. It also appeals to the virtue of integrity: a solemn promise is being made (“I swear . . . ”).

Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath (Chesterman 2001, 153)

1. I swear to keep this Oath to the best of my ability and judgement. [Commitment]
2. I swear to be a loyal member of the translators’ profession, respecting its history. I am willing to share my expertise with colleagues and to pass it on to trainee translators. I will not work for unreasonable fees. I will always translate to the best of my ability. [Loyalty to the profession]
3. I will use my expertise to maximize communication and minimize misunderstanding across language barriers. [Understanding]
4. I swear that my translations will not represent their source texts in unfair ways. [Truth]
5. I will respect my readers by trying to make my translations as accessible as possible, according to the conditions of each translation task. [Clarity]
6. I undertake to respect the professional secrets of my clients and not to exploit clients’ information for personal gain. I promise to respect deadlines and to follow clients’ instructions. [Trustworthiness]
7. I will be honest about my own qualifications and limitations; I will not accept work that is outside my competence. [Truthfulness]
8. I will inform clients of unresolved problems, and agree to arbitration in cases of dispute. [Justice]
9. I will do all I can to maintain and improve my competence, including all relevant linguistic, technical and other knowledge and skills. [Striving for excellence]
The proposal aroused some interest among scholars, professional translators and translator trainers. One of the first reactions was a short discussion piece in the *Bulletin of Translation and Interpreting* (Fraser, Harris, and Wagner 2002). Some critical points were made, e.g. that too much respect is given to the client, and a revised version was suggested. One discussant thought such an oath could be advertised as a kind of “mission statement” and might also be useful for client education (see also Chapter 28 “Linguistic first aid” in this volume).

### 4 Emerging issues

Virtue ethics appears either explicitly or implicitly in a number of emerging issues in discussions of translation ethics. Several of these relate to the virtue of justice – one of Plato’s four cardinal virtues. “And in justice all virtue is summed up,” wrote Aristotle (1985, Book V, chapter 1, 1129b).

One example is the recent debate on broadening the concept of translation quality, so that it does not encompass only textual matters but also takes account of the working conditions under which a translation is done. Abdallah (2012) argues that factors such as client relations, deadlines and resources available affect the degree of responsibility that can reasonably be attributed to the translator. These conditions are often “not fair,” i.e. unjust. They may even be so bad as to cause cognitive damage to translators (see e.g. Ehrensberger-Dow and O’Brien 2015; see also Chapter 27 “Ethical stress in translation and interpreting” in this volume). At issue here are the virtues of translation agency of managers and clients, rather than of translators themselves.

There is an extension of this debate on the justice of working conditions which concerns the behaviour of clients towards their translators or interpreters after an assignment or period of employment. Translators and interpreters at least have the right not to be killed for translating/interpreting (don’t shoot the messenger . . .): a right that has not always been acknowledged, however. In recent history, Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, was stabbed to death in 1991 because he had translated this novel. The fate of military interpreters who have faithfully served their clients during a military campaign but are then abandoned has been increasingly publicized in recent years. In January 2018, a news item highlighted the shameful treatment of an Afghan interpreter who had worked long and faithfully for the British military in Afghanistan but had been refused sanctuary in the UK (Brown and Williams 2018). (For a survey of such cases, see https://red-t.org/. For an account of the recruitment and working conditions of wartime interpreters and “fixers,” see Footit and Kelly 2012.)

Another emerging topic is language and translation policy. Here too, the underlying virtue is one of justice and how best to achieve it, in addition to social rights and duties. (See e.g. González Núñez and Meylaerts 2016.) Here again, it is not just the translator’s ethical position that is at issue but also that of decision-makers, politicians etc., who may be the translator’s clients and/or writers of source texts, plus the attitudes of the public concerned. This topic is another indication of the way translation ethics has broadened to include other stakeholders. One particular kind of translation policy is censorship, which obviously involves other agents besides the translator. Translators working under censorship are faced with practical challenges which also have ethical dimensions: under such conditions, is it better not to translate at all, to translate only for one’s desk drawer, to get one’s translations published in another country, to manage by self-censoring parts of the works one dares to translate, or what? (See e.g. Ní Chuilleáin, Ó Cuilleanáin, and Parris 2009.) The virtues of courage and honesty come into play here.

A different and in the long term more disturbing issue has been raised by Vihelmaa (2009), who is concerned about the translator’s responsibility to the environment: ecological ethics. To what extent do translators think about the environmental consequences of their modes of working, technical decisions, use of natural resources such as electricity and paper, disposal of waste

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products, etc.? She also comments on a fundamentally ethical question posed by Pym (1997, 11) as the first question of all in translator ethics: should one translate at all? Like Pym, she queries whether everything that is translated contributes to the well-being of society. On this view, translation/translator ethics has a long reach indeed. The relevant virtue here might be humility: man is not the measure of all things, after all. Justice is also involved, but in a wider sense: not only between people but between humans and their environment.

These issues illustrate the way professional ethics merge with personal ethics and highlight situations where there is a clash between the two. Inghilleri (2012) explores this clash in the context of community interpreting, arguing that interpreters should be allowed more leeway to act in accordance with their personal ethical principles when these are in conflict with professional codes which are felt to be inapplicable in certain circumstances and may even conflict with good practice. Professional guidelines specify that the interpreter must be neutral and not take sides, but not everyone agrees that this is the most ethical stance under all circumstances. An interpreter's fidelity to the requirement not to alter the formal legal register in a court of law is also problematic if clients do not understand this register, owing to their poor education level, and the interpreter wishes to help by breaking the same-register norm. (Such a situation is analyzed in detail in Andreotti 2016.) The general fidelity requirement is particularly problematic for activist interpreters and translators, who may be more motivated by ideals such as social equality and justice than by the neutrality or fidelity principles. (See e.g. Pérez-González and Susam-Saraeva 2012.)

This brings us back to the classical Greeks, and the concept of the telos (“goal, end, aim”). One's telos is part of one's personal ethics and thus reflects one's values, ideology, possible religious beliefs, and general goals in life. If one takes one's telos seriously, one seeks to develop the relevant virtues. However, if you find yourself working as an interpreter or a translator in the middle of an ideological or military conflict, there may well be clashes between your personal telos and the aims of your client, for instance. Or you may be a voluntary activist translator, working for a given cause that fits with your telos. Or you may be an engaged scholar, urging translators to translate in a particular way in order to promote a particular view of life that you support, in a given socio-political context (see e.g. Tymoczko 2010). Whereas, in Translation Studies, the skopos refers to the aim of a translation (what is this translation for?), the telos could be a useful term to refer to the more general life goals of a translator (why do you translate?). (See further Chesterman and Baker 2008.)

5 Conclusion

Translation scholars and practitioners are still some way from a consensus on a number of matters concerning the professional ethics of translators and interpreters. There are still open questions that have not been resolved in a way that would be generally accepted. Virtue ethics may offer a means of resolving some kinds of ethical conflict that are highly relevant in translation ethics.

Consider the problem of deciding relative priorities between a contractual view of ethics and a utilitarian view (Williams 1985). Contractual ethics is based on the assumption that certain ethical expectations derive from the status or profession of an agent, or from a previous promise or signed contract. Ethical decisions thus depend on previous events or existing states of affairs. If you tell people that you are a translator, or indeed a professional translator, this will arouse certain expectations. People will expect you to have certain skills, of course, but they will also expect you to behave in a certain way: at least, they will believe that you ought to behave in a certain way. You have certain ethical obligations because you claim to be a translator: for instance, the obligation to translate faithfully. Utilitarian ethics, on the other hand, takes a forward-looking
view: it focuses on the consequences of a decision. This term has historical associations with the value of happiness: according to the classical utilitarian view associated with Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the ethically best action in a given situation is the one that results in the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. However, in using this label for a variety of ethical theories, we do not need to assume that happiness is the only possible, or best, measure of ethical value. If we say that good translation serves as a bridge between cultures, bringing people together across a language boundary, promoting international communication etc., we are thinking in utilitarian terms: these are seen as good consequences of translation.

But what happens when there is a clash between these two approaches? Might an appeal to virtue ethics justify prioritizing one approach over the other, in certain circumstances? For instance, if you, as a judge in court, knew from experience that a given interpreter had the virtues of trustworthiness and honesty, would you allow the interpreter to relax the principle of strict fidelity in order to ensure that the accused fully understood what was said? One could also appeal here to the minimization of what could be called communicative suffering, one form of which would be misunderstanding, or indeed not understanding at all, against the prioritization of a strict fidelity alone.

Virtue ethics could also refer to the telos concept, and the original Aristotelian idea of virtue as a quality promoting the better realization of the human telos. This would take priority, as a higher value, both over status-based duty and over narrowly defined utilitarian goals. In many cases, of course, an action justified by a person’s telos might coincide with an action that could also be justified on a utilitarian view. (See Chesterman 2009 for discussion of an example of such a case, where a translator’s decision to make a semantic change can be defended either on grounds of avoiding the risk of bad consequences, or on grounds of personal integrity.)

Consider now a problem that has already been raised earlier: the conflict between personal and professional ethics. This can be seen as a conflict between different concepts of virtue. On one view (Aristotle’s), virtue is a quality which promotes development towards a personal telos, a telos that might be linked to the objective of working toward the ideal of a just society in a fairer world, for example. On another view (Homer’s), virtue is a quality related to the fulfilling of the duties attached to a social role, e.g. to a person’s status as a professional. In cases of conflict, preference should perhaps be given to the telos view, but in such a way that this is done openly. If priority is given to the status-based view, there is the risk of the slippery slope leading to the “I was just obeying orders” excuse for evil actions. It might also mean going against the virtues of integrity and honesty. True, generalizing here is risky in itself, but with the aid of the virtues of practical wisdom and prudence one might hope that ethically justifiable decisions can be made in individual cases.

Personal ethics are also highly relevant in forms of ideologically motivated interventionist or activist translation, where fidelity (at least in a textual sense) is not the priority (see Munday 2007). A much-studied example is feminist translation (see Flotow 2014 for a survey and Chapter 9 “Feminist translation ethics” in this volume).

How could we, or should we, consider these problematic issues in the light of justice? Is it sufficient, after all, that scholars and practitioners simply take the question seriously: what does it mean to be an ethically good translator?

Related topics in this volume

Functional translation theories and ethics; ethics in Berman and Meschonnic; feminist translation ethics; Venuti and the ethics of difference; translator ethics; professional translator ethics; literary translator ethics; conference interpreter ethics; ethics in public service interpreting; ethics
Virtue ethics in translation

of volunteering in translation and interpreting; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; ethics codes for interpreters and translators; ethics in the translation industry; translating and interpreting in conflict and crisis; accessibility and linguistic rights.

References


Andrew Chesterman


Tymoczko, Maria, ed. 2010. Translation, Resistance, Activism. Amherst: Massachusetts Press.


Further reading

The Translator 2001, 7 (2), Special issue on The Return to Ethics, edited by Anthony Pym.

A variety of contributions illustrating a range of perspectives on the ethical problems raised by translation. The issue includes the Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath.

The Translator 2010, 16 (2), Special issue on Translation and Violent Conflict, edited by Moira Inghilleri, and Sue-Ann Harding.

A collection of papers exploring various aspects of the work on translators and interpreters in the context of violence, such as mediation, agency and ethics: much food for thought.


A simple example of how different values and virtues can clash, and how an ethical translator can demonstrate real responsibility.


An accessible interview-based study illustrating the practical problems posed by cases where fidelity does not seem to be the best option, and outlining some solutions.


A thought-provoking empirical study of how translators react to loyalty conflicts in a typical revision job.