The Translator

Special Issue

THE TRANSLATOR

The Return to Ethics

Guest Editors

Anthony Pym

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STUDIES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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THE TRANSLATOR

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The Return to Ethics
Guest Editor: Anthony Pym

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The Return to Ethics in Translation Studies

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Translation Studies has returned to questions of ethics. The observation is simple enough. At the beginning of the 1990s, say, the talk was still of describing translations, of moving away from the prescriptive or normative age when one of the aims of Applied Linguistics was to tell translators how to translate. Ethics was an unhappy word in those days of over-reaction. In 1994, after I had given a lecture on the subject to four lost cats at the Collège International de Philosophie, Jean-René Ladmiral confided, as we waited for a straggling metro, that he thought there should be no ethics of translation. A metaphysics or meta-science perhaps, but not an ethics. The ethical Antoine Berman, the object of that lecture, seemed unlikely to become the posthumous hero he is today. And where should one find, in today's world, enough certitude to tell anyone how to translate? As if it were a question of catching the right train. Yet the questions no longer stand there.

This return to ethics is part of a very general social trend. Major cross-cultural problems have been presented by technological advances in biology and medicine, with issues ranging from cloning to euthanasia questioning the very identity of the human subject. Globalizing economies go hand-in- hand with calls for global economic, environmental and human-rights regulators. Outbreaks of minor nationalisms have seen many bombs dropped in the name of an international justice that satisfies few. The internet is in need of governance. Literary scholars have developed a sophisticated discussion of ethics, in search of their own worth in an age that seems not to need literature. Visibility has become an ethics-laden catch-cry for women, sexualities, minorities of all kinds, and hybridity, breaking up the sameness once needed for universal principles. At the same time, many of the politicians of the recent past – and not just the bad guys – turned out to have less than clean hands, undermining any remaining belief that 'we' are always on the side of justice. The certitude of the great nineteenth-century ideologies is no longer there.

Few of these problems concern translation directly. Yet they all increasingly entail decision-making on a level above that of the individual culture or nation. In all these cases there is deep doubt as to how to decide, and keen

awareness that the norms of tradition, established practice, cultural specificity, or the past no longer suffice. In all these cases, ethics has become a cross-cultural concern. As it has in translation studies.

Defining the field

Although many translation scholars now agree to discuss ethics, most would disagree about how to define the field. In his contribution to this volume, **Andrew Chesterman** distinguishes between what he sees as four current models: the ethics of representation (of the source text, or of the author), an expanding ethics of service (based on fulfilling a brief negotiated with a client), a more philosophical ethics of communication (focused on exchanges with the foreigner as Other), and a norm-based ethics (where ethical behaviour depends on the expectations specific to each cultural location). To these four, Chesterman would add an ethics of 'commitment', an attempt to define the 'good' ideally attained by translation, embodied in an oath that might work as a code of professional ethics for translators. That makes five possible ways of talking about ethics. As Chesterman readily admits, these five frequently overlap. Yet the various approaches converge as attempts to explain how and why translators should 'do the right thing' (or 'avoid the wrong thing'). The rough grid thus formed might help us locate the various approaches sampled in this volume.

To represent what?

A strong tradition in ethical questions is to consider the translator responsible for representing a source text or author. If something is in the source but not in the translation, the translator is at fault and is thus somehow unethical. This general approach was questioned many years ago by Georges Mounin (1957), who pointed out that there were situations in which the translator could not simply represent the words, nor the grammar, nor the style, prosodics or semantics. A long line of theorists have similarly discussed translation as an art of sacrifice, of knowing what to omit and what to retain, in a situation of inevitable loss and axiomatic inferiority. Ethics would then reside in having some kind of principle able to justify making the sacrifice one way or another. Mounin claimed that such a principle should privilege something as vague and as mystical as the "poetry of the (poetic) text", the "global meaning" (1957:148, 150). Umberto Eco, writing in 2001, does not really take us much further, claiming that the translator's representational fidelity should be to the source text's "guiding spirit (whatever that means)" (2001:117; see John Style's review in this volume). Henri Meschonnic, in 1973, gave a rather more theorized description of what is to be translated, emphasizing the textuality of the source text, its status as a specific practice, and the possibil-

ity of then, within historical limits, rendering "the marked for the marked, the non-marked for the non-marked, figure for figure, and non-figure for non-figure" (1973:315-16). This would more generally be described as "significance" (1985) or "what a source text does": the thing to be translated becomes "what a way of thinking [*une pensée*] does to language" (1999:23). Such vocabulary is only partly carried through in **Jean-Marc Gouanvic**'s contribution to this volume, where 'significance' is seen as "the literary intertext that crystallizes the interests specific to a field". Gouanvic adds the wider concepts of field and genre to the previous focus on textuality, demonstrating that since the construction of meaning is quite different in science fiction and the realist novel, the modes of translation may be quite different yet equally representative of the source's significance.

The ship of representation might thus seem to be riding out various storms of dynamic textuality. For as much as a deconstructionist critique points out that there is no stable source entity to be translated, there are certainly the traces of activity that can be continued. As Gouanvic puts it "the ethics of the target text is submitted to the future that the source text offers" (a notion that recalls Benjamin, Steiner, and indeed Derrida). Representation need not be restricted to an archeology of the dead.

A service to whom?

Representation might also be understood in the sense in which a lawyer 'represents' a client, involving 'to speak on behalf of', 'to say what should be said in the circumstances', but also 'to fulfil a brief', usually 'to win the case'. Such might be representation as seen from the perspective of *Skopostheorie*: the translator renders whatever translational service is required by the client, and to do so well is ethically correct. In order to judge the ethical virtues of a translation, one should thus locate the explicit brief (commission, *Auftrag*) formulated by the client or in some way appropriate to the target situation. This ethics of service is increasingly common in professional circles, especially in the localization industry, where it goes hand-in-hand with criteria of efficiency and acceptability to a specific target locale. But such things are rarely argued about in terms of ethics, perhaps because they are too close to common sense. Only Peter Newmark has taken real issue with the trend, arguing that "the days of 'my employer right or wrong' should be as dead as those of 'my country or my cause right or wrong'" (1994:70). For Newmark, the translator should remain representationally committed to "the truth", "logic", "morality as it evolves", "style" and "universal pure/clean (*rein*) language", not those of the text but of an apparently universal "reserved area". Newmark's position was actually put to the vote at a conference of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting in 1994, and lost by a large majority amid what Newmark describes as "dark

mutterings about 'thought police' and 'political correctness'" (1994:71). But as Newmark correctly observes "in spite of democracy, minorities later appear to be right" (*ibid.*). That position, at least, is partly vindicated in this volume.

One might expect the ethics of service to be most vigorously argued by **Christiane Nord**, since her past work has been close to *Skopostheorie* tenets. Yet we find in her contribution to this volume that the client's brief is not enough for an ethical translation, since there are other communication partners involved: "If the client asks for a translation that would mean being disloyal to either the author or the target readership or both, the translator should argue this point with the client or perhaps even refuse to produce the translation on ethical grounds". Loyalty here thus requires a general compatibility on the interpersonal level, including to the representational responsibility not to contradict "the source-text author's communicative intentions". Much depends here on the way the translator and/or client "has to decide what kind of function the target text can possibly achieve in the target culture". Once that decision is made, the translation cannot be ethical or unethical in itself; it merely fulfils the intended function well or badly. Here it is instructive to see Nord the theorist defending Nord the co-translator of a German New Testament, speaking from within a very real situation in which various reviewers did not understand or appreciate the 'intended function'. Nord would claim compatibility with all communication partners except perhaps those reviewers. But then, as Monacelli and Punzo argue in their article, communication is an experiential reality; we can only speak about it from within its practice; an ethics seeking defence in a crystal-clear brief is condemned to its own positionality.

Notions of service are certainly also at stake in **Arnaud Laygues**' study of how a novice translator was exploited by her publisher/co-translator, at least to the extent that the briefs were not clear and the roles of the various agents were poorly delimited. One might conclude, within an ethics of service, that more ethical work conditions would be attained by defining more explicitly what is required of the translator. However, Laygues recognizes this as a partial solution only: in this case there was a more important lack of interpersonal ethics underlying the professional veneer. Similarly, in **Alev Bulut** and **Turgay Kurultay**'s work on the role of interpreters at disaster sites, an ethics of service far outweighs any constraint to represent any particular source text, yet clarity in the definition of professional roles is not enough. When the aim is to save as many lives as possible, the translator's reward is not a question of being paid as a correctly denominated professional. What is at stake is a very humanist giving of the Self to the Other, in the name of what are unashamedly called, perhaps in the space but not the thought of Newmark, "universal cultural values".

Alterity vs deontology

Chesterman distinguishes between an ethics of service and an ethics of 'communication', where the latter would more emphatically entail a relation with people rather than with texts. This is indeed the general trend we have seen operating in Nord, Laygues, Bulut and Kurultay, who are ultimately concerned with the purposes of entire communication situations. Yet there is a lot happening behind the scenes here.

One basic division not made clear in Chesterman's grid is that between 'ethics' as the general field of relations between Self and Other (let us call it 'alterity'), and 'deontology' as the stuff of rules and regulations, the 'codes of ethics' (*codes de déontologie*) specific to a professional group. This distinction seems to hold more sway in French (where the words for the two sides are more separate) than in the other languages in play in this volume. **Gouanvic** and **Tack** raise the distinction explicitly; **Basamalah** underscores the ways deontological codes such as the Nairobi Recommendation are inadequate to "properly ethical relations" with developing countries; **Alexis Nouss** uses the same distinction in defending Berman: "when ethics is the welcoming of alterity, if it is to be itself it has to be infinite and cannot be expressed in terms of accuracy". **Laygues**' notes on Buber, Marcel and Levinas (presented as a review article in this volume) usefully sketch out the philosophical tradition behind this commitment to alterity, which could also be referred back to the creaky Kantian dictum that humanity should be treated as an end, not just as a means. In the ethics of alterity, the translator would welcome the foreign text *as a person*, giving of themselves and respecting otherness, in a way that goes well beyond generalized deontological rules and calculations (one recalls Nord's notion of loyalty as an inter-*personal* category, to replace fidelity as an inter-*textual* notion). For Nouss (1998), this philosophical ethics excludes discussion of, for example, rates of pay. For Koskinen, reviewed here by Lieven Tack, a properly postmodern ethics of translation cannot be based completely on economic relations, on the concerns of a profession, which can only restrict the translator's ethical subjectivity (2000:120). On this point both Nouss and Koskinen take issue with Pym. A brief response might be in order.

One answer here is that an ethical relation to the Other should inform all deontological positions in this field. It is not hard to take the official codes of ethics, reveal their limitations and contradictions (as in Pym 1992:160-62, Chesterman 1997:187-89), deplore their inadequacy (cf. Basamalah in this volume), and then move to higher ideological realms. Yet the reverse movement should also be possible, from alterity to deontology. That is, once we have established the kind of general relation to be obtained, we should be able to generate terms and principles for a multiplicity of professional relations, as Chesterman would be attempting to do in this volume. If not, we

allow the ideals to ring out with hollow tones, perhaps like the French politician Bernard Kouchner who had the children of Paris sing for Sarajevo in its darkest hour, making the French feel engaged but hiding the fact that they only accepted a small number of refugees. Such was the old trap of humanist ideals, allowing pretty words to cover over the inconvenient numbers. Further, without a movement back to the deontological, to actual guidelines and modes of calculation, we leave the symbols without the power of the professional groups most prepared to enact ethics as a practice. The role of professional associations appears essential for tasks such as eradicating exploitation within the profession (Laygues) or professionalizing fields of practice hitherto left to chance (Bulut and Kurultay). Without them, the noble ideals flounder, as the same Bernard Kouchner discovered as head of the UN Civilian Mission in Kosovo. Altruistic alterity is a very fine thing for the well-fed, but we must also work with professionals and cultures driven, legitimately, by self-interest.

The ethics of alterity, of whole communicative situations with the Other, is undoubtably the area into which most other approaches are currently feeding. Not by chance, many of the papers closest to this position actually address interpreting, especially various forms of dialogue interpreting, where the people involved are mutually present and intuitively carry more ethical weight than do their texts (cf. Mason 1999). As we learn more about the dynamics of interpreting, we are revising the schemata traditionally used to assess the longer-distance communication involved in translating literature (Gouanvic) or the Bible (Nord).

Under what name?

Chesterman's list of current ethics includes 'norm-based' approaches. Different cultural locales have different criteria for what constitutes a 'good' translation. This relativism stood at the base of the reaction against the many linguistic approaches to translation that prescribed representation and nothing more. Instead of theorizing what should happen then descending to earth only to deplore the state of translations, descriptivists set out to assert the actual diversity of the translational field. In this, their approach remains pragmatically valid if and when the description can be incorporated into some movement in the reverse direction. Consider, for example, **Salah Basamalah**'s position in this volume: "if ethics is seen as a system of values giving a global understanding of human beings, then a culture is nothing less than the ethics of a way of life". On this view, there would be as many ethics as there are cultures and sub-cultures; the various copyright regimes that restrict the translation of works in developing countries would belong to a rich-world norm (the owners of knowledge are interested in protecting knowledge); the struggle against copyright restrictions is both in the name of cultural diversity and a part of ethical diversity. And yet, riding above the description of

these differences, Basamalah is clearly calling for change, in the name of a further ethics of 'rights' and 'solidarity'. Description need not remain at the level of isolated descriptions; it may strengthen claims about what should be done, without any necessary passage through an ontology of universal laws (cf. Toury 1991).

Although there are serious epistemological problems with such double movements, studies of norms remain tremendously useful in the field of ethics. When **David Katan** and **Francesco Straniero-Sergio** analyze the translation shifts in their corpus of talk-show interpreting on Italian television, they reveal cases of misrepresentation and interpersonal manipulation that would certainly not be justified by any ethics of representation or alterity. Yet that kind of interpreting is an evolving social practice, with practitioners who are better or worse at it, so it is quite possible to go from the corpus and the evaluations to a series of underlying principles, in this case the interpreter's capacity to perform, to provide 'comfort' in terms of the show, and to domesticate the foreign. This is then described as an 'ethics of entertainment', since it conforms to the evolving norms of the genre. With similar empiricism, **Maria Sidiropoulou** studies the translation of an urgent political message, identifying pragmatic shifts that are not found in background norms of translation for other text genres, concluding that the anomolies detected were produced in the name of a specific ethical parameter, in this case 'urgency'. Or again, consider the example, used by Bulut and Kurultay in this volume, where a Turkish interpreter presented German Red Cross personnel as members of the German 'Red Crescent', since the domestication saved time and might thus help save lives in the aftermath of an earthquake. This would be justified by no ethics of representation, alterity, or perhaps even service (would a client or user prescribe such a shift?) yet is ethically correct in view of the norms and criteria of that specific situation.

In all these cases something vaguely ethical can be construed from the empirical, as we move from what happens to questions of why it might happen (the implication of causality is necessary but not our main concern here). Or, in Chesterman's terms, a kind of 'ought' can be derived from 'is'. What should we say, though, of Gouanvic's example of the manipulative translation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* into French, which was made to serve the interests of the Nazi Occupation in Belgium? Would that too be a valid ethics? Or are we really prepared to condone all those talk-show interpreters who truncate and twist the subjectivity of their foreign guests so as to slot them into the dictates of genre and Berlusconi commerce? One suspects that the derivation of 'ought' from 'is' works, more or less, only for as long as the 'is' falls within some kind of just or intellectually laudable cause, and even then it is at the cost of tremendous conservatism. When the cause is not so clear, when right and wrong are mixed and all around us, we are made very aware that communication, once again, is an experiential rather than

ontological reality: we have no neutral position from which to make our descriptions in the first place, so the movements are never really just one way or the other.

A further problem with deriving 'ought' from 'is', especially if some essential virtue is to be attached to the result, resides in issues of demarcation. Things work well enough for as long as we are in the probabilistic centre of a norm or the qualitative density of a prototype. But as soon as we drift toward the edges of virtue we are increasingly likely to run into claims that 'This is not a translation', 'You are not a translator', and the like. We see this in the study by Laygues, where the roles of the co-translator, revisor and publisher were poorly defined and overlapped in nefarious ways; we might also sense it in various reactions to the above examples of comforting talk shows and German Red Crescents.

This kind of problem, in fact the constant play of translation's identity and offers of equivalence, is theorized in **Claudia Monacelli** and **Roberto Punzo**'s application of fuzzy logic to situations of military interpreting. Ethics is seen here not as a matter of applying rules but as 'immediate coping' with constant disequilibrium. The ideals are accepted as fictions, and yet we proceed: "the fictionality of communication, the emptiness of interpreting, does not lead to 'acting out' ethics but to embodying it". On this basis, the use of fuzzy logic (as opposed to norms or probability) might handle many problems of the border, addressing situations that both are and are not translation, or equivalence, or fidelity. Instead of lamenting the lack of clarity in our social definitions, fuzzy logic shows us how common sense effectively handles such problems. Monacelli and Punzo approach the translator from radical constructivism, in terms of Francisco Varela's 'know-how', which "takes the middle way between spontaneity and rational calculation". Unabashedly difficult for non-initiates, their article might partly be contextualized in this volume by **Derek Boothman**'s review of Varela's lectures on 'ethical know-how', all the more justified here in view of Varela's passing away on 28 May 2001.

The return to ethics, if it is to have any substance, must be a return to thought of a very applied nature (this too was in Meschonnic back in 1973). Ethics must take root in the historical individuality of what translators do, and only then in appeals to abstract or timeless principles. As Lukács argued in a slightly different context, "ethical beauty requires both aspects" (1967: 21). Not by chance is there a lot of practice in this volume: anti-globalization, the denouncing of exploitation within the profession, the theorist defending her own translation, the specific concerns of popular genres, the culture bubbles of talk shows and the horrors of earthquakes, military interpreters who are actually working in the Balkans, and urgent political pleas from prison. Things are happening, good and bad, and translators are involved in numerous different ways. They are acting in the world, applying

strategies, taking risks, manipulating illusions. Further, they are doing so in ways that rarely concord with ethics as mere vigilance, effectively impeding action, condoning no more than intellectual distance and dissent. That seems no longer to be where we stand.

The return to ethics

It might be possible to start a trend by naming a trend and finding a dozen or so friends to echo it for you, in return for publication space. That is not the case here. There is no particular agreement in this volume on specific ethical principles, nor even on correct approaches. Yet there is a common and widespread accord to discuss ethical issues in a variety of new lights. No longer can we simply shun the deontic as if it were merely prescriptive; few would now argue that there should simply be no ethics of translation; that train was missed long ago.

If we were to search for some general principles behind the articles in this volume, the following might serve as an orientation:

- No one here is going back to something that was done thirty years ago. We are no longer concerned with the ethics of linguistic equivalence, or of fidelity, or even of their simple negation, since it is no longer easy to identify the object of such relations. Those concerns are maintained, but in quite different forms and at higher levels.
- As a consequence of the above, the categories brought to bear on these issues are increasingly wider, going well beyond what were once called 'units of translation' and their texts. Ethics is now a broadly contextual question, dependent on practice in specific cultural locations and situational determinants.
- There would seem to be increasing agreement to focus on people rather than texts, and to do so in terms that cannot be reduced to textually inscribed subjectivities. This may be attributed to the growing interest in interpreting, especially dialogue or community interpreting.
- There is a correspondingly greater acceptance of the researcher's positionality, involving a certain engagement in social practice rather than aspiring to detached neutrality (although in making this observation I am clearly not neutral).
- Perhaps paradoxically, there are also brave aspirations to universal values, of a kind that would have been sacrilege in the heyday of critical deconstruction. This may be because the struggle against globalization produces globalizing categories. It might also be understood as a reaction against the antihumanism of detached analysis and play on signifiers. Whatever the case, it seems now granted that one can take position and act in terms of general values or causes, albeit within a certain range of political acceptability.

We are certainly not all going to agree on neat answers to any of the questions formulated above, let alone on the 'reserved area' that Newmark tried to map out. But disagreement is a very good reason for dialogue. In the growing respect for the beliefs of the Other, including even Newmark's beliefs, those who failed to get votes in the past might yet participate in the more vigorous and vital debates of our future.

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Proposal for a Hieronymic Oath

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Abstract. *Four current models of translation ethics are described, based on the ideas of representation, service, communication and norms. There are problems with all these models: they are in several respects incompatible, and have different ranges of application. An alternative approach is therefore offered based on Alasdair MacIntyre's ideas about virtues and the deontic force of excellence in a social practice. This leads to a fifth possible model, an ethics of professional commitment, comparable with Maria Tymoczko's suggestion that translation is a commissive act. At the centre of such a model there might be an official oath, comparable to the Hyppocratic Oath for the medical profession. I end with a proposal for a Hieronymic Oath for translators.*

In the Hopi Indian culture, the Spider Grandmother is the mythical figure who oversees the spiritual development of humankind. She gave two basic ethical rules, not just to Hopis but to all humanity. "She said, 'Don't go around hurting each other,' and she said, 'Try to understand things'" (Heat-Moon 1984:187).

These two ethical principles – one negative and one positive – may take us a long way toward an ethics of translation. This paper first offers an analysis of the current state of affairs, and then offers an alternative proposal.

1. Four current models of translation ethics

I will start by crystallizing the multiplicity of ideas about translation ethics into four basic models. There are overlaps between some aspects of these models, but I will mostly disregard them here.

Ethics of representation. This model of translation ethics goes way back to the ideal of the faithful interpreter, and to the translation of sacred texts. The ethical imperative is to represent the source text, or the source author's intention, accurately, without adding, omitting or changing anything. A contemporary manifestation of this ethic is to be found in the EU translation services: political reasons dictate that EU documents in whatever official EU

language are legally equivalent to any other language version, perfect repre-
sentatives of each other, and that no single version is privileged as a source
text, in theory (for a detailed discussion of the EU translation situation, see
Koskinen 2000a).

Another line of inheritance of this ethic has to do with the long tradition
of representing the Other, the relation with alterity. It comes to the fore par-
ticularly during the German Romantic movement and in subsequent theoretical
contributions stressing the value of allowing the Other to appear in its own
light, without being domesticated: cf. the general arguments of Schleier-
macher, Berman (e.g. 1984) and Venuti (e.g. 1995). These theoretical positions
stress that every translation is an interpretation and inevitably incorporates
difference. The translator's ethical dilemma is then how to choose and trans-
mit a good – or the best – interpretation. To represent is to interpret.

If a translation *mis*represents the Other, the result may be a prejudiced,
biased, ideologically suspect version, which has unethical consequences for
intercultural perceptions and relations. An ethics of representation thus
highlights the values of fidelity and truth: the translator must represent the
source text, or source author's intention, or even the source culture, faithfully
and truly, like a good mirror. So-called 'abusive fidelity' (Lewis 1985) allows
the Other to appear as Other, as different, in a foreignizing or minoritizing
translation. Postmodern approaches problematize the possibility of faithful
representation and stress the ambivalence of the relations between source
and target texts and cultures (see, for example, Koskinen 2000b), but here
too the central ethical problem is fundamentally one of representation, of
something 'standing for' something else. In this sense, the representation
model of ethics is actually a semiotic one: a translation is a sign of the original.

Ethics of service. A very different kind of approach is based on the concept
of translation as a commercial service, performed for a client. This is the
kind of ethics that underlies (usually implicitly) much of the thinking on
functional models of translation, especially those of Holz-Mänttäri (1984)
and the *Skopos* theorists. A translator is deemed to act ethically if the
translation complies with the instructions set by the client and fulfils the aim
of the translation as set by the client and accepted or negotiated by the
translator. A prime quality of good translator-servants is thus loyalty; they
are loyal above all to the client, but also to the target readers and to the original
writer (cf. Nord 1991:29). They are also efficient (they do not waste time or
money – especially the client's), and perhaps also as invisible as possible.
They provide a commercial service, and clients expect value for money. An
ethics of service also underlines the value of time, of meeting deadlines, etc.

Ethics of communication. This general model of ethics has received more
attention during the late 20th century, for example in the work of Levinas.
Here the emphasis is not on representing the Other but on communicating

with others. To recognize the Other as a 'subject', with whom one can indeed communicate, is a primary ethical act, for Levinas, because this step takes you out of your own ego-confined world (for an accessible but very brief introduction to Levinas, see Melby 1995:119f.; see also Levinas 1982, 1987). In translation theory, the focus is naturally on communicating across linguistic or cultural boundaries.

A recent contribution that highlights the ethical aspects of such communication is that of Pym (1997, 2000; for a detailed critique see Koskinen 2000b). For Pym, the goal of cross-cultural communication is the mutual benefit deriving from cooperation, and the ethical goal of translation is to further intercultural cooperation between parties who are "Other" to each other. An ethical translator therefore translates in such a way as to optimize this cooperation. (An ethical translator might also decide, notes Pym, that it would sometimes be more beneficial not to translate at all, but recommend some other means of eventually communicating, such as learning the other language.) An ethical translator's primary loyalty, on this view, is to the translator's profession, situated in an intercultural space, and hence to the whole system that makes cross-cultural communication possible, rather than to source text or culture or to target readers or culture. For Pym, the investment in translation (by client or translator) should not exceed the eventual mutual benefits accruing – here his position is similar to that taken by an ethics of service.

From the point of view of communication, the ethical translator is a mediator working to achieve cross-cultural understanding. Understanding of what? Of each other, ultimately. But this is achieved via an understanding of texts, messages, signs, intentions, meanings, etc. There is a well-known conceptual minefield here, which I will not explore in this context, but with respect to translation we can usefully speak of understanding in the following sense: understanding a translation means arriving at an interpretation that is compatible with the communicative intention of the author and the translator (and in some cases also the client), to a degree sufficient for a given purpose.

Norm-based ethics. This model of translation ethics has arisen either explicitly or implicitly from descriptive translation studies and norm theory. Following Toury (e.g. 1995), descriptive translation studies investigates the norms that determine or influence translation production and reception. These norms state what acceptable translation products should look like, and how they vary from period to period and from culture to culture. The norms thus represent expectations, mainly in the target culture, about what translations are supposed to be like in that culture at that time. The norms are generally accepted (in a particular culture) insofar as they appear to serve prevailing values, including ethical values such as truth and trust (see Chesterman 1997:169f.). Behaving ethically thus means behaving as one is expected to behave, in accordance with the norms, not surprising the reader or client.