“Art, esthetics, ideal”: an ethics for literary translators in the age of translating machines

GABRIEL GONZÁLEZ NÚÑEZ

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, United States

The advent of effective machine translation has raised several issues for translators, including the question of how a human *translator ought to translate in this age of translating machines. In this context of new ethical questions, the present essay argues that an answer may be found in Pedro Figari’s (1912) philosophical essay on esthetics. Following Figari, the current essay argues that literary translation is art, that as such it can produce an esthetic emotion on readers and that the purpose of such art and esthetics is an ideal in the form of the continuous betterment of the human condition.*

Keywords: machine translation, human translator, ethics, Figari, art, esthetics, ideal

“It seems unreasonable
to ask translators to save the world”
(Pym 2021: 21)

Introduction

The story is told of Diogenes who, after he was “forced to flee” or perhaps “banished” from the ancient Greek city of Sinope due to some irregularities with coinage, decided to live “a simple mode of life” (Laërtius 1853:224). The simple life made him arguably a difficult person and he often went about taunting others. Once he lit a candle, or perhaps a torch or a lamp, and went around in broad daylight saying he was “looking for a man” (Laërtius 1853:224). When Diogenes reportedly said “anthropon zeto,” he was intimating that the people around him lived in such a way that they could not be considered humans. His quest was in some ways ahead of its time, because centuries later, technology has advanced to the point that we might rightly ask what makes our own activity uniquely human (Medlir and Lamont 2021).

Classical philosophers such as Diogenes were concerned with an important question: "How should one live?" This is an ethical question about human activity. Along similar lines, ever since the emergence of Translation Studies as a field of scholarly inquiry, translation scholars have been interested in the ethical dimension of translational activity (Koskinen and Pokorn 2020). Such scholars have in essence been asking: "How should one translate?" (Lambert 2023:33). This question has been explored by theorists through different approaches, including those that value representation, service, communication and established norms (Chesterman 2001:139–142). While such ethical explorations have traditionally focused on translation itself, increasingly there is a focus on translator ethics, i.e., on how translators should behave as translators (e.g., Pym 2012). Ethical considerations on this front become more complex as machine learning technologies have yielded machines that can translate. The advent of these translation technologies has raised a number of issues surrounding ownership, confidentiality, collaboration, productivity and professional identity (Bowker 2020). It has also raised concerns about how translating machines—whether neural machine translation or large language models—ought to be designed so that the technology is human-centered, i.e., human-augmenting, and not machine-centered, i.e., human-replacing (Carpuat et al. 2025). In this brave new world of translating machines, many questions arise. The question of how a human translator ought to translate is one that merits exploration (Pym 2020:157).

The answer may well merit an entire book, but this short essay will address a narrower form of that question: "How should a human translate a literary text?" The argument might be made, of course, that the old ethical approaches still hold. While this may be true to some extent, in a context where machine translation is increasingly the norm, new questions beg for new answers. Some of them have to do with the ethical problems machine translation creates for literary translators. These are questions about ownership, confidentiality, collaboration, etc. There are, however, other types of questions. They have to do with the human dimension of translation in a machine translation world. What is it that a human brings to translation that a machine does not? Is there an ethical element that humans, because they are human, bring to the task of the translator? This is a set of questions about what it means to translate *as a human* now that translating machines have become commonplace. In short, what is the ethical way a human ought to translate because he or she is a human (not a machine)?

The human element of translation seems a lot more relevant in some areas of translation than in others. The highly formulaic instructions for assembling a dining room table at home? It probably doesn't matter whether the translating was done by an actual human or a machine imitating a human. A novel where a number of literary devices, including allegory and intertextuality, are deployed to explore the consequences of self-indulgence? It probably matters that a human translate this kind of texts, particularly

because the language through which these texts explore the human condition can produce potentially transformative esthetic effects. Faced with such texts, neural machine translation tends to produce flatter, more literal translations (Guerberof-Arenas and Toral 2022) and large language models can fail to properly handle cultural terms (Al Rousan et al. 2025) and can struggle when asked to work with low-resource languages (Peng et al. 2023). As Ayvazyan et al. have observed, "as soon as you get into long sentences, archaic diction and playful implicatures, the difficulty increases and the [translation] technologies falter" (2024:234). Thus, in areas of translation where the human element seems particularly relevant, such as when translating literature carefully crafted by humans in order to poignantly explore the human condition, it behooves us to ask what a human translator ought to do. Or at least, how he or she ought to go about the business of translating literature in a human way.

This essay will focus on addressing that last question. To do so, it will first address what has already been proposed in Translation Studies about ethical behavior, with a focus on the ethics of literary translation. Then the essay will argue that as pertains literary translation, a key to human translation may be found in Pedro Figari's biological philosophy regarding esthetics. The essay will consequently argue that literary translation is art, that as such it can produce an esthetic emotion on readers and that the ethical imperative of such art and esthetics is an ideal in the form of the continuous betterment of the human condition.

Ethics: A (few) Translation Studies perspective(s)

Before proposing an ethics for literary translators in the age of translating machines, one must consider how scholars in Translation Studies have approached ethics. The first step in such a consideration should be agreeing on a basic understanding of the concept of ethics. On this point, José Lambert reminds us that ethics, at least as a branch of Western philosophy, has to do with "studying society as it should be rather than as it is, from the Greek 'ethos' meaning *custom*, *disposition*" (2023:14). Of course, when philosophers and scholars speak of ethics, they "mean not just any custom, habit, or character, but a desirable one" because it is *good* (Lambert 2023:14). In turn, Kaisa Koskinen and Nike Pokorn highlight that the term ethics is polysemic and it may refer to either a "code of moral rules," a "system or theory of moral values or principles," or "the philosophical study of morality" (2020:2). In these understandings, the common factor is that ethics is about the rules, system, or theory of morality. Incidentally, a distinction is sometimes observed between ethics as having to do with the collective and morals as having to do with the individual (Lambert 2023:13), but this is not always a clear distinction, as can be seen in the use above of morals to

describe ethics. Whatever the case may be, in the field of Translation Studies, ethics tends to be understood as "the subfield that aims to understand what is good and bad, right and wrong in *translatorial* praxis" (Koskinen and Pokorn 2020:3). Consequently, in terms of this essay, one may think of an ethical literary translator as one who has good or desirable customs, habits, or character when it comes to the practice of translating literature.

In the field of Translation Studies, a highly influential understanding of ethics comes from Andrew Chesterman (2001, 2020), who surveyed the main ethical currents within the field and proposed that they can all be understood as comprising an ethics based on virtue. A virtue-based ethics holds that one ought to seek to do good, which requires that one must first decide to be good (Chesterman 2020:13). What is good is determined by a number of values, which Chesterman outlines within Translation Studies to be truth (leading to an ethics of representation), loyalty (leading to an ethics of service), understanding (leading to an ethics of communication) and trust (leading to an ethics based on norms) (2001:139–142; see also Chesterman 2020:15–16). He has also identified some emerging values in the field, including justice and ecological responsibility (2020:20–22).

When considering virtue ethics, it is hard to argue that it is inadequate for a world in which humans translate alongside machines. Having values that are considered virtuous is, after all, a distinctly human trait that stems from our own self-awareness and consequent desire *to be*. Algorithms do not have values—only programming. Programming will predetermine functioning within very specific parameters, e.g., collating the work of human painters to create a new painting based on specific prompts. It is true that programming can tell the machine to behave in a way that its programmers might consider desirable. However, it cannot make the machine decide to be good by doing good because the machine has no consciousness, sentience, or soul (whichever of these overlapping terms one might prefer). Thus, ethics for literary translators in the age of translating machines must be a virtue-based ethics, one that requires the conscious decision to be good by doing good.

Because we are exploring humans as translators, it is helpful to move from general translation ethics to a focus specifically on the ethics of translators as such. Anthony Pym has defined "translator ethics" as "an ethics not of translations as things but of the people who make decisions concerning translations" (2020:147). This ethics is based on interpersonal relations, which limits it to the translator who engages with other humans as a translator (Pym 2020:147–148). It operates within "a framework of cross-cultural dialogue," which is where Pym sees translators as exercising their agency (2012:166). In considering the work of translators as agents of such cross-cultural cooperation, Pym argues that the first ethical question is whether something should be translated at all (2012:12, 134-135). Overall, it is hard to contend against this starting point. The first ethical decision would logically be whether one should act, and in the case of a literary translator, whether they

should translate. Pym posits that the answer to this initial question is that the translator should engage in translation when it leads to cooperation, or mutual benefit, between cultures (Pym 2012:136-139). Once translators decide to translate, they should not do so at any cost. The benefits of cooperation should be weighed against the different costs of translation (Pym 2012:139-150). This entails some risk analysis, one that might take into account different strategies to reduce risk (Pym 2021:13-15).

Both Pym and Chesterman are concerned with how translators ought to make ethical choices as they go about their work. Chesterman bases his proposed ethics on philosophical notions about being good, while Pym bases his own proposed ethics on ideas found in neoclassical economics. For Chesterman, translation ethics ought to be about doing good in order to be good, while Pym argues that the ethics of translators ought to focus on cooperation because it leads to mutually beneficial outcomes. There is a great deal of overlap in these proposals. In fact, one might argue that Pym's cooperation ethics can fit well within Chesterman's virtue ethics, much the same way translator ethics can fit within the broader ethics of translation. Consider that Chesterman argues for an ethics based on values, but his list of values is open-ended. One might rightfully consider cooperation a value, and thus a translator that decides to engage in translation in order to advance cooperation between cultures is making a values-based decision: the translator decides to translate because they value cooperation. Where Chesterman and Pym's proposals seem to diverge is the motivation: Should one cooperate because it is a good thing good people do or cooperate because everyone will be better off through it? This distinction may make a difference, particularly on what cost the translator is willing to pay to facilitate that cooperation.

In addition to a general ethics of translation and a narrower ethics of translators, one might consider if ethics have been proposed for literary translators. In weighing this issue, Cecilia Alvstad concludes that "there is no comprehensive ethical framework which can help translators evaluate the consequences of different solutions to various ethical dilemmas" (2020:191). Even so, on surveying the Translation Studies literature that is relevant to literary translator ethics, she finds four main approaches.

One approach is based on Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). According to Alvstad "although DTS provides no prescriptive advice on the ethical advantages and disadvantages of different solutions, translators will find abundant information in its descriptive studies on how other translators have solved similar problems" (2020:185). This would fall within Chesterman's value-based ethics. In essence, literary translators who value trust may look to DTS to know what norms they ought to follow in being trustworthy translators.

Another approach is the "ethics of difference" popularized by Lawrence Venuti and based on Antoine Berman and Friedrich Schleiermacher (Alvstad

2020:185-186). It too fits into the value-based ethics of Chesterman, who considers it an ethics of representation based on the value of truth.

An additional approach is found in George Steiner's hermeneutics, where translation is construed to be "a four-step hermeneutic motion": 1. the translator believes there is something that ought to be translated in the text, 2. the translator extracts meaning from the text, 3. the translator brings that meaning across to the target culture and 4. the translator directs the reader back to the source text (Alvstad 2020:182-183). It is in this fourth step where Steiner proposes an ethical imperative for literary translators: "The enactment of reciprocity in order to restore balance is the crux of the métier and morals of translation" (1998:300). This reciprocity is an ethical imperative in the sense that, inasmuch as the act of translating a literary text has extracted something from the text and added it to the target culture, that same act of translation must add something back to the source culture. Steiner (1998) proposes several strategies to create reciprocity or restore balance (e.g., by granting prestige to the source text) but ultimately finds that this ethical imperative is hard to fully realize and there often is imbalance between both sides. So it is that ethics is often an ideal toward which to aim. We will return to this idea.

Another ethical approach that literary translators may take is found in Henri Meschonnic's poetics (Alvstad 2020:181-182). Meschonnic defines ethics not "as a social responsibility, but as the pursuit of a subject striving to constitute itself through its activity, but where the activity of the subject is the activity by which another subject constitutes itself" (2011:35). Or, in plainer words: "Ethics is what one does with oneself, and with others" (Meschonnic 2011:45). Thus, an ethical act is one that transforms the subject, arguably for the better, and in the case of literature, that transformation is double: "the subject who writes and the one who reads" (Meschonnic 2011:36). In the case of translators, one might surmise the transformation also includes the one who translates. In Meschonnic's view, true translation only occurs when the target text does the same thing as the source text. This becomes an imperative for ethical translators: "we must do, with the means available in the target language, what the text has done to its source language" (Meschonnic 2011:85). This should not be confused with the functionalist approaches explained by Nord (2018), where purpose is the steering principle. Here, the text must act in the same way in both source and target languages, hence the importance of maintaining prosody, structure, wordplay, etc., as the totality of these things is what the text is doing. And how the text behaves is what allows it to effect transformations in people. At the heart of Meschonnic's insistence that an ethical literary translator will respect the poetics of the source text, i.e., how the text uses words to do what it does, is a crucial idea, namely, that texts can do things to people. They can transform individuals, and in the aggregate, societies. We will return to this idea as well.

Ethics for literary translators: A biological perspective

Grounded on the ethical considerations of previous translation scholars, this essay will now look sideways at esthetics in order to propose an ethics for literary translators. Specifically, it will suggest that Pedro Figari's (1912) philosophical essay on esthetics, *Arte, estética, ideal* [Art, Esthetics, Ideal] can provide ethical guidance in areas of translation where the human element seems particularly relevant, such as in the translation of literature. Before continuing, a word on Figari and his work seems necessary.

A turn-of-the-century Latin American intellectual, Pedro Figari Solari (Montevideo, 1861-1938) was a lawyer, politician, educator, author and painter (see Sanguinetti 2013). Today, he is mostly remembered for his work as an impressionist painter. Notably, Figari was *not* a translator or scholar of translation. His concerns were wide-ranging but focused greatly on art and esthetics.

In 1912, he published the first edition of his book *Arte, estética, ideal*, where he outlines some of the ideas that inform the present essay. The essay is considered a treatise on esthetics, but as Arturo Aldao points out, the scope is much broader (1960:vi). It is a work of "antropología filosófica" [philosophical anthropology], where the author's reflections are grounded on our nature as biological beings (Aldao 1960:vi-vii). Tellingly, the third French-language edition of the book changes the name to *Essai de philosophie biologique. Art, esthétique, ideal* [An Essay on Biological Philosophy: Art, Esthetics, Ideal] (1926). The definitive Spanish-language edition was published as a posthumous work that retains the original title and separates the lengthy essay into three volumes, one for each of the three elements in Figari's thought (1960). Even so, the key observation here is that Figari's philosophical proposal arises from his understanding of the human being as an "organismo biopsíquico" [biopsychic organism] that exists in the physical world (Aldao 1960:x). In other words, Figari's philosophy is rooted in the fact that as humans we are self-aware, biological beings that exist in physical surroundings. For Figari, that reality carries with it ethical duties, which he couches in the language of esthetics but that can be applied generally. This makes Figari's thinking pertinent to artistic activity, but the present essay will apply Figari's biological philosophy specifically to literary translation as carried out by humans.

To understand why Figari's thought can be applied to literary translation, one must first understand his expansive view of *arte*, or art. To him, art is not limited to the creation of esthetic products; rather, art is the application of biological intelligence to the improvement of our state in the world. This is not as unusual a definition as it may initially seem. At the dawn of the 20th century, one definition of the word *arte* was "todo lo que se hace por industria y habilidad del hombre" [all that is made through man's work and skill] (Real Academia Española 1899:96). Figari builds on this baseline definition. He

first explains that not every action undertaken by a human amounts to art. In his view the essential component of art is the deliberate application of intelligence toward improving our natural state (Figari 1960a:13-14). He illustrates this with a few examples: putting on a coat is not art, but weaving a sweater is; eating is not art, but making an arrow to hunt for food is; walking is not art, but engaging in a dance routine is (Figari 1960a:13). Notice that art is the *application* of intelligence toward a purpose, which can be distinguished from the actual product that may result from said application, e.g., the weaving of a sweater (art) as opposed to the sweater itself (the product of art). This definition of art moves well beyond the products of fine art, especially because it rejects the idea that art, to be art, cannot serve a practical purpose (Figari 1960a:35-39). In fact, Figari's conception of art encompasses science too, inasmuch as science is the systematic application of human intelligence to furthering knowledge for the benefit of humans (Figari 1960a:28-35). It becomes evident, therefore, that Figari's concept of art is large enough to encompass literary translation. Inasmuch as a literary translator deliberately applies their intelligence to solve the problem of communication, they are engaging in art and the end result, their translation, is a product of art.

What this concept of art does not include is the application of *machine* intelligence. Figari argues that art is a possibility for modern humans, primitive humans, and even higher species of animals, but he does not afford the same possibility to their tools. At this point it may be worth remembering that computers are indeed tools. In the end, what we metaphorically call "intelligence" in a machine is but a series of computations or mathematical operations. These are extremely complex operations that require immense computing power, but ultimately, they are the calculations of a tool. A highly sophisticated tool, but a tool nonetheless. Of course, in Figari's day the idea of a thinking tool was merely an exercise in fantastical imagination. Even so, it is doubtful Figari's biological philosophy could be applied to machines: our own self-awareness and the subsequent conscious decision to improve our (inter)actions are essential components to his understanding of art. The difference between an abacus, a calculator and a computer is one of degree, but even at their different degrees, one thing these machines have in common is that they are not self-aware, no matter how good some of them are at mimicking human behaviors.

In Figari's biological philosophy, art is a necessary stepping stone for humans to reach esthetics (Figari 1960b:179-180). As humans we apply our intelligence to create many things, but not everything we create is beautiful. In other words, not all art is esthetic. This is so because not all products of art can produce an esthetic reaction in us. For example, an arrowhead is a product of art that would not normally produce an esthetic reaction (Figari 1960b:178). Similarly, lines of programming code written by a human are a product of art that is not necessarily esthetic. Interestingly, not all esthetic emotion is the result of art either. For example, twilight in the countryside can

be perceived as esthetic, but it is not artistic because no human intelligence created it (Figari 1960b:178). Similarly, a machine can write a poem that imitates humans well enough to sound esthetic (Nair 2025), but because it is not the result of human intelligence, it is not artistic. In Figari's thought, what matters is not that esthetics exists in the world but that as humans we make things that can create esthetic reactions in others.

The concept of esthetic reaction is important to Figari's philosophy. He argues that as we go about, we employ a combination of both objective and subjective strategies to interact with our surroundings (Figari 1960b:49). Because of how we have evolved, we are predisposed to idealization (Figari 1960b:91) and that results in certain things causing in us "estados psíquicos que llegan a veces hasta la propia emoción intensa" [psychic states that can occasionally even become intense emotion] (Figari 1960b:87). We experience such emotional states, including esthetic emotion, because as human beings we are unable to process the world through reason alone (Figari 1960b:113). In essence, we cannot help but think *and* feel. From time to time, what we feel is esthetic. The nature of this esthetic emotion is such that as humans we intuitively seek it in a way similar to how we seek physical nourishment (Figari 1960b:92). Figari mentions as examples of esthetic emotion the feeling a person might experience observing a sculpted marble, watching a painted cloth, or hearing a series of structured sounds (1960b:87). In terms of translation, one might add that reading a combination of words on a page or a screen can produce an esthetic emotion. Therefore, a literary translation can be esthetic. This esthetic emotion, which is stirred within humans when experiencing certain things, is called beauty.

Where Figari's thought reaches an ethical dimension is in his concern for the ideal. Philosophically, the ideal—a major concern for many Uruguayan intellectuals in the early 20th century (Aldao 1960:xix)—can be understood as an ethical aspiration to higher forms. As espoused by fellow Uruguayan philosopher José Enrique Rodó, the ideal can be seen as "a striving towards the highest standards in human endeavor and values: good behavior towards the self and others; beauty in art; truth in intellectual work" (San Román 2018: 146). Figari sees the search for such an ideal as a consequence of our biological nature. As we interact with our surroundings, we are driven to gradually improve those interactions and consequently our place in the natural world (Figari 1960c:9-11). This leads to the ideal:

> ¿Qué es el ideal, pues? Es la aspiración a mejorar, determinada por el instinto orgánico en su empeño de adaptarse al ambiente natural. En ese esfuerzo de adaptación que se manifiesta de tan distintas maneras, el propósito es uniformemente el mismo *mejorar*. (Figari 1960c:15)
>
> What, then, is the ideal? It is the aspiration to improve, as determined by an organic instinct seeking to adapt to its natural environment. This

> effort to adapt is manifested in many different ways, but in all of them, the purpose is the same: *to improve*.

The ideal is ever elusive, as there is no final, fixed point where no further evolution toward improvement is possible (Figari 1960c:19-20). Just as importantly for purposes of this essay, there are as many ideals as there are human beings. For each, the ideal will depend upon their specific circumstances and the aspirations that might arise in them (Figari 1960c:19-20). However, those millions of aspirations will include, in their fulfilment, some kind of esthetic emotion (Figari 1960c:20). This is where the three ideas converge. Figari sees in that pursuit of *being better* a moral or ethical imperative: "¿qué puede ser más lógico, más moral ni superior que el aplicar su intelecto a llenar esa aspiración orgánica?" [what can be more logical, more moral or higher than the application of one's intellect to fulfilling this organic aspiration?] (Figari 1960c:18-19). Thus, Figari's proposed ethics are in essence an imperative to seek for the ideal.

Figari thought of his biological philosophy as applicable to any human endeavor capable of producing esthetic emotion. His ethics are generally applicable to artistic activity, which includes literary translation. (In other words, literary translation is a subset of artistic activity, the subset this chapter seeks to explore form an ethical standpoint.) Figari's approach, as applied to literary translation, provides a moral imperative that is grounded on human biology. As human organisms, we seek to improve our interactions with the world. Literary translators do this when they translate (an activity that requires the application of intelligence) as a way to increase communication and ease the flow of ideas between peoples and cultures. Such literary translators are especially well positioned to create an esthetic emotion in their readers, which among other things, can result in a more impactful experience. When readers find a translation beautiful, they experience a pleasing emotion that is more memorable than no emotion at all. This experience need not be life changing—a kernel of impact will do, but the impact matters. The point here is that a literary translation can become transformative for a reader, not just because of the ideas it presents but also because of the emotion that the words can stir. With that understanding, the ideal, the ethical imperative, for the literary translator is to continually improve their skill so that they can better produce those esthetic emotions in others. Thus, the literary translator need not go out to save the world, but they are ethically bound to attempt to improve it.

Of course, this is a guiding principle more so than a set of instructions. Very specific questions can be asked regarding the application of this principle and the answer may admittedly vary depending on the specific circumstances. One might rightly wonder whose world the translator should seek to improve. In a general sense, the betterment sought is that of the world we all share: the human translator ought to seek to improve everyone's world.

In a practical sense, not everyone is involved in a translational exchange, so the betterment can be limited at the very least to the individuals involved in such an exchange. Here, there is some alignment with Nord's (2018) call for loyalty and Pym's (2021) for cooperation: Figari's (1960) call for betterment of necessity requires that other humans be considered. Once the needs and the well-being of those other humans are taken into account, then it falls upon the literary translator to rely on their own experience and knowledge to determine how to craft a translation that can improve the human condition. It is precisely the human translator's experience as an organism in the physical world that can help them determine how to best deploy the transformative potential of language to create the necessary esthetic effects. And also, as will be seen below, to determine whether a translation should be carried out at all.

Applying the ethics: a few test studies

As has been stated above, Figari's biological philosophy is intended to apply to human activity generally and was not designed for literary translation alone. Therefore, it may be helpful to test whether this ethics can be fruitfully applied to literary translators. To that end, a few test cases will be analyzed in this section. These have been analyzed by other scholars through different lenses and offer the advantage of coming from the real world.

Case 1 will focus on translating *Mein Kampf*. The book is part autobiography, part political manifesto, which makes it literary in nature (uncomfortably so, in more ways than one). About the book, Pym says:

> In some parts it is certainly expressive, manifesting a strong first-person character, as befits an autobiography. In other parts, it gives a vision of history and is thus referential. Finally, its overall function is undoubtedly to convert readers to the cause of National Socialism… (2023:58)

Under Figari's ethics, there is threshold question that the literary translator ought to ask: should I translate this at all? Here, consideration of the book's purpose should be had. The book, as stated above, is intended "undoubtedly to convert readers to the cause of National Socialism" and the translation could serve that same purpose. The literary translator then needs to weigh whether a translation with such a purpose would help improve the interactions of people with their environment, which no doubt includes other people. The answer to this question is no. The book is likely to be unhelpful—it has even proven to be hurtful—so the literary translator should pass on this task. The list of odious literary artifacts where one should decline to translate is long.

With other works, it may not be as simple as with, say, antisemitic literature. There are texts that may be perceived as helpful by some and

hurtful by others. Case 2 will focus on such a text by considering the translation of *En Cuba*. Part travel writing, part poetry, part interviews and part essay, the book is literary non-fiction. About the book, Nord says:

> In his book *En Cuba*, written after a first visit to Cuba following the Revolution in 1959, the Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal presents a subjective, politically biased view of Cuban society. He is enthusiastic about the changes brought about by Fidel Castro's government. At no moment does he pretend to be objective, and the reader cannot fail to be impressed, even though they may not share Cardenal's views. (2008:116)

Once again, the threshold question is whether the translator should translate this at all. Different translators will come to different conclusions, and functionalist approaches grant that such will be the case sometimes. Every person is differently situated and may aspire in different ways to improve the world. One translator may find Cardenal's view of Cuba and Fidel Castro as unhelpful and likely damaging. Such a translator should not accept this task. Another translator may believe that the changes brought about by Castro in the island are positive and inspiring. Such a translator should accept this task.

After weighing whether the translation can result in betterment or improvement for the readers—and if the answer is yes—then the next question is how one should go about translating. In this sense, Figari's ethics do not propose that specific solutions be used (e.g., transposition) or that a single approach is preferable to others (e.g., foreignization). Rather, what is proposed is that the translator apply their intelligence toward a translation capable of producing an esthetic emotion in the reader. (It goes without saying that emotion does not mean sentimentality.) There is something poetic and engaging about *En Cuba*, and the literary translator should aim to produce a poetic and engaging text in their target language as well. How to create such a text will depend on varying contextual factors that ought to be considered individually and collectively, and that is where the human translator provides an expertise that machines cannot. This esthetic goal is independent of the stated purpose of the specific translation commission. In this ethics, the ultimate goal of an artistic activity, such as literary translation, is improving human interaction with the world.

A more recent example of an ethical dilemma is found in Case 3, which addresses the translation of "The Hill We Climb" into Dutch (but the scenario applies in any language other than English). About this poem, Lambert explains:

> Amanda Gorman, an American poet and activist and (importantly here) a young, black, female spoken-word artist, became an international sensation after reading her poem 'The Hill We Climb' at US president Joe Biden's inauguration in January 2021. Shortly after the

> inauguration, publishers scrambled to distribute the poem worldwide with a host of translations soon commissioned. (2023:169)

What followed was an international controversy when it was known that the translator commissioned to transfer the poem into Dutch was not a young, black, spoken-word poet, in other words, the translator did not share the original author's life experience. The controversy was such that the commissioned translator decided to step down from the project.

This case highlights the question of whether someone should take on a specific task. Under Figari's ethics, one ought first to consider whether the task of translating this poem will bring about an improvement in the translation's readers. Given the context of the poem, it is likely that most translators would conclude that translating this poem can potentially bring about some improvement for readers of the translation.

But what of the controversial question: should a translator pass on the translation if they do not share the author's experiential background? Here Figari's ethics require taking a step back and assessing whether the translator has the requisite skill to carry out that goal. If the translator does not, then the translator should not. The reason is simple: without such skill, the ethical goal that prompted taking on the translation is frustrated.

The point is that the translator should have the requisite translation competences to do this well. What is debatable is whether a similar life experience is necessary to develop the competences that will allow for the effective application of the translator's intelligence to the task at hand. In this particular case, however, one need not even get that far in the analysis. It is likely the original Dutch translator lacked at least some qualifications: they were not a poet (at least at that point), they had never published a translation and their English language skills were limited. A translator with such a profile is unlikely to perform the translation well if the aim is to be able to create the esthetic emotion that was so essential in this particular poem.

Figari's ethics of the ideal provide a way forward, however. A properly qualified translator should take on the task of pursuing the ideal of constant improvement of the world through translation. An unqualified translator, in turn, can choose to pursue the improvement of their own skill so that they can effectively carry out such tasks in the future. In the alternative, they may turn to other translation (or artistic) tasks. In other words, the ethics of the ideal calls on literary translators not only to seek to improve the interactions of others with the world but also their own. As the translator seeks to constantly improve their skill, their ability to perform literary translations will improve, which in turn increases the probability that their translations will create the desired esthetic emotions.

The three cases above help illustrate how Figari's ethics of the ideal can guide literary translators. The criticisms might be levelled that such an ethics provides only the broadest of directions. A threshold question is presented—

should one translate?—but if the answer is yes, then only a general notion of pursuing an ideal is presented. To be clear, that is what this ethics proposes. The ethical obligation to pursue the ideal in literary translation—through the application of human intelligence to deliberately improve our interactions with our surrounding world—is not intended to be a code of rules about when to apply specific solutions. Thus, the approach is not prescriptive in terms of what strategies to use but rather suggests that specific strategies are context dependent and that the betterment of the human situation ought to be the guiding principle behind those strategies, whatever they might be. Should the translation be more literal or free? Should the translation bring the reader to the text or the text to the reader? It depends on what will better help improve the reader's interactions with the world.

Conclusion

In sum, this essay is broadly concerned with human literary translators in a world of translating machines. The essay is built on the assumption that literary translation, when engaged in by humans, has an ethical dimension that we ought to take into account. It is on that ethical component where humans and machines divert. Machines can be programmed to act in specific ways, but it is simply the application of rules expressed through mathematical computations. Because as humans we are self-aware, we think *and* feel in ways that machines do not. For that reason, human ethics cannot be reduced to mathematical computations. A human ethics of literary translation must take into account our nature *as* humans.

This is where Figari's "philosophical anthropology" can provide some illumination. In essence, he argues that our nature as living, biological beings makes us seek to improve our state through the betterment of our interactions with the world. That is to say that as humans we seek to improve our condition. When we apply our intelligence, through deliberate actions, to improving those interactions and, consequently, our own state, we are engaging in art (in a broad sense). The result of these efforts, in specific circumstances, can lead to an esthetic emotion, one which we both enjoy and seek after. The ideal is the constant, volitional effort to seek the improvement of our actions and circumstances so that the esthetic emotion may be realized. The pursuit of the ideal is an ethical obligation.

As regards literary translation, one may think of an ethical literary translator as one that has good or desirable customs, habits, or character when it comes to the practice of translating literature. For a literary translator, then, the desirable custom or character is applying their intelligence only in ways that improve our interactions with our surroundings and thus our human condition. This is an artistic endeavor which, in some cases, may result in an esthetic emotion. Ideally, this is what literary translators should seek after.

The ideal, and the ethical imperative, is for literary translators to continually seek to improve themselves and their art so that their translations can create esthetic emotions.

Such an ethics would be at odds with some of the ethical proposals that have been put forth in Translation Studies. It would not align well, for example, with those approaches that argue one should always translate in a specific way, for example, in the "ethics of difference" championed by scholars like Venuti (1995). An ethics of the ideal requires that every literary translation be approached with two questions in mind: ought this to be translated?, and if so, how can one translate this in a way that is most likely to produce an esthetic emotion that will improve, even if for a moment, the reader's situation? The answer to that question may sometimes be to translate in order to highlight difference, but on other occasions it may be to translate in order to highlight similarity.

Because an ethics of the ideal does not result in an approach to literary translation that mandates always translating in the same way, it is partially incompatible with Meschonnic's ethics of the poetic. Meschonnic finds that it is ethically imperative to respect the poetics of the source text because the totality of a text's literary strategies and composition are what allow it to do what it does. However, this approach fails to realize that a set of strategies in one language may have a different effect in another language; in other words, respecting the poetics of the source text may result in a target text that fails to create the same esthetic emotion in the target readers. Here is where an ethics of the ideal can lead to different outcomes. A literary text, in order to produce in the target readers an esthetic emotion, may need to deviate from the poetics of the source text and adopt a different poetics. Even so, while both approaches may differ in their outcomes, they share an important philosophical element. They both agree that texts can produce changes in individuals and, by extension, in entire societies.

This ethics of the ideal also differs from Steiner's "ethics of reciprocity" in that the restoration of balance does not seem to even be a consideration in Figari's biological philosophy. He developed his philosophy with general human activity in mind, so it does not address issues such as balance and reciprocity. However, there is a place in Steiner's reflections that aligns with Figari's own thinking, namely, in the notion that there is an ideal toward which to aim. For Steiner, this is balance and for Figari it is the improvement of human action. Both ethics, in the end, point the literary translator toward a duty of ever striving for better.

An ethics of the ideal is not likely to fully align with utilitarian approaches to ethics, such as the "ethics of cooperation" proposed by Pym. But here there is ample room for overlap. In both ethical approaches, there is an initial question as to whether something ought to be translated at all. In a cooperation approach, if the answer is that the translation would lead to mutual benefits between cultures, then the literary translator should proceed.

In an approach of the ideal, the literary translator would look for a different answer. They would only translate if doing so would result in improving the interactions of humans with their surroundings, which includes other humans. Of course, if the result of the translation is increased cooperation between people, this qualifies as improved interactions, so the two ethical approaches will often lead to similar conclusions. However, an ethics of the ideal is broader in the kind of literary texts it will consider ethical to translate. Any text that can help improve the situation of a human in their specific context should be translated. This implies that the key calculation is not a cost-benefit analysis that posits the cost translation versus the benefit of cooperation but rather an assessment by the translator as to the extent to which he or she can actually bring about improvement. (The translator may decide that a modest, temporary improvement is enough justification.) Thus, what matters in the ethics of the ideal is that the translator strive toward continual improvement of both their own actions and those of the readers of their translations.

Where an ethics of the ideal may be most comfortably situated is in a context of virtue ethics as described by Chesterman. Ultimately, Chesterman's approach is the most wide-ranging, as it allows for different values and presumably different outcomes, in the search for the good. For some literary translators the guiding value might be truth, loyalty, understanding, trust, justice, or ecological responsibility. By bringing Figari's biological philosophy into ethical considerations, a new value can be proposed, that of the ideal. This is an ethics in which literary translators engage in a lifelong process of developing their art in the pursuit of esthetics for the betterment of the conditions of humans. It fits within a virtue-based ethics because it requires the human that is translating to decide to be good by doing good.

This matters in an age of translating machines. By pursuing "art, esthetics, ideal" as an ethics in literary translation, we focus our work as literary translators on that which makes us human: the continual search for the improvement of ourselves and other humans. This striving for the ideal in literary translation may very well stop Diogenes on his tracks: In the midst of all these translating machines, here are the humans; they are the translators constantly improving their craft to translate texts that will improve the ways in which they and others experience the world.

Declaration of AI use

The author did not use any AI-assisted tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

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