Translation as a Philosophical Act and the Risk of Saying: On Tolstoy, Wittgenstein, Gandhi, and the Ethics of Meaning Across Cultures

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Abstract: This article argues that translation is not secondary to philosophy, but a core philosophical act. Engaging with the call to reexamine the longstanding neglect of translation within the philosophy of language, I draw from my experience as a bilingual educator and scholar of philosophy, world religions, folklore, and mythology. Through examples including Tolstoy's Gospel translations, Wittgenstein's language-games, Dostoevsky's cultural specificity, the correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi, some examples from Slavic folk tradition, and world religions' concepts of the sacred, this paper explores how meaning arises not only from linguistic structures – which is important – but from lived experience, appreciation, ethical commitment, and human connection. Translation, this article suggests, is a form of philosophical act based on humility that demands care, presence, multicultural dialogue, historical consciousness, context, and discourse. Drawing on Derrida's theory of translation and examples from philosophy and literature (Nishitani, Tolstoy, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Dostoevsky), along with oral traditions, I make the case that to translate is to risk, to ethically relate, to know not from deductive logic but from intuition and tacit knowledge that lies in the lived experience. In a moment where Analytic Philosophy confesses its crisis, translation may offer not just a new methodology, but a moral horizon.

Keywords: translation, language and meaning, untranslatability, intercultural dialogue, epistemological rupture

Despite its long-standing authority over academic discourse, the philosophy of language has had surprisingly little to say about translation. This oversight is more than a gap in scholarship – it is a philosophical blind spot. For translation itself is not merely a technical transfer of meaning between tongues; it is an ethical, epistemic, and furthermore existential, act. In my own work as a bilingual educator, and as a scholar of religion, folklore, and philosophy, I encounter translation daily – not as a clean process, but as a space of risk, intuition, and negotiation. What does it mean to take translation into the heart of philosophy itself? Collapsing one within the other, according to this article, I infer that translation *is* philosophy: because it is where meaning begins to move, and where truth demands more than clarity – it demands care, and always involves risk.

I want to firstly say how much I appreciate the theme of this special issue. The topic – philosophy's longstanding neglect of translation – is one I regularly raise with my students, when teaching World Religions, Philosophy, and Mythology and Folklore. As a bilingual educator who usually teaches more in English while thinking and reading in English and Russian, I am aware of the way language shapes thought. The idea of "untranslatability" is not just theoretical – it's lived.

In the classroom, sometimes it is hard to explain a concept or object without introducing the broader cultural discourse that gives it meaning. For example, I might use the Russian word *kádka*, a

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small wooden tub or barrel, and find that the closest approximation in English is "bucket" – which is, semantically and culturally, not quite right. My students may understand the word "bucket," but the world around *kádka* – its historical, domestic, and symbolic context – is lost in translation.

This challenge becomes even more acute when teaching philosophy, where the demand for clarity pushes us toward internal coherence (the coherence theory of truth) or correspondence with reality (the correspondence theory). But what happens when the referent – the concept or object – has no equivalent in the target language or culture? In such cases, *kádka* simply does not "exist" for my American students. The word alone is not enough; it needs to be situated in its usage, environment, and cultural weight.

From a semantic and linguistic perspective, meaning is not simply the sum of denotation and reference. Words carry connotation, emotional resonance, historical layers, and pragmatic functions that shape how they are understood in context. The semantic field of *kádka* in Russian, for example, cannot be collapsed into the narrower lexical frame of "bucket" in English. This is where Wittgenstein's notion of "language games" becomes particularly salient: meaning does not reside in isolated words, but in their use within particular forms of life. Wittgenstein writes, "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1922, 1953). What may seem like a trivial translation gap is, in fact, a philosophical impasse – an example of how language, culture, and lived experience are inseparable in the construction of meaning.

The difficulty intensifies in teaching folklore and mythology. Since mythology carries a vast store of religious idioms, symbols, metaphors, and traditions – some of which were once transmitted into religious dogmas and later became canons – folklore, as an artistic phenomenon, takes its roots in mythology, and we can see its thread running through many cultural expressions. Exactly here – in these disciplines – wordplay, metaphor, and symbolism are culturally saturated: what is intuitive in one context may be completely opaque in another.

The idea of "common sense," which John Locke famously interrogated in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1690/2003), proves especially slippery in this context. Locke rejected the notion of innate ideas, arguing instead that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and that knowledge arises from experience rather than presumed universals. What seems self-evident in one culture may be entirely foreign in another.

This becomes a pressing issue because these disciplines are taught within an academic tradition based on subject-object logic. We must recognize all these differences as meaningful, not marginal to the production of knowledge.

Although globalization and digital communication may seem to promise a bridging of cultural gaps, the reality is far more nuanced. The internet, as a globally accessible tool, is a relatively recent development, and its reach remains uneven. Many regions continue to operate under heavily censored or restricted networks – such as China, Belarus, Russia, parts of the African continent, and territories marked by political conflict, including Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, and areas throughout the Middle East. From a global standpoint, it is clear that digital connectivity is not universally experienced, nor is it uniformly accessible.

Even in the most technologically advanced and interconnected regions, cultural nuance, metaphorical language, and semantic context do not effortlessly translate across digital platforms. The presence of a connection does not equate to shared understanding – what travels across screens may still arrive filtered, flattened, or misunderstood.

In fact, folklore continues to thrive in deeply local, oral, and communal forms – across Eastern Europe, India, the African continent, China, and other parts of Asia and the Global South. Many communities actively preserve their oral traditions, passing stories, proverbs, songs, and rituals from generation to generation without written records (Finnegan 1992; Dundes 2007). In West Africa, for example, griots – oral historians, poets, and musicians – serve as custodians of collective memory,

preserving genealogies, moral tales, and histories through performance (Hale 1998). In rural China, elders maintain local epics and myths through seasonal festivals and storytelling rituals (Fei 1992). In Eastern Europe, particularly among Slavic and Balkan communities, folktales and songs are passed down in domestic gatherings and community events, often embodying spiritual, agricultural, and ancestral knowledge (Kononenko 2007).

Yet this preservation is labor – which is to say that it is intentional, ongoing, and often deeply personal. It is the work of memory, of performance, of cultural stewardship (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In recent years, especially amid growing political uncertainty, people have become increasingly cautious and protective of their cultural identities and spoken languages – many of which are at risk of being lost or misunderstood entirely (Nettle and Romaine 2000). In some cases, these languages and traditions are so deeply embedded in context, tone, and gesture that they are untranslatable into dominant world languages, making the worldviews they carry difficult, if not impossible, to fully access from the outside (Venuti 1995; Basso 1996).

Many young people, driven by the urgency of this cultural erosion, have begun using digital tools to safeguard their linguistic heritage. For example, a Nigerian developer created *DiscoverYorùbá!*, an interactive platform that teaches children the Yorùbá language through games and storytelling. With a mission to "restore value back into the Yorùbá language and popular culture," the platform emphasizes that language is not merely communication – it is the bridge to identity, history, and worldview (DiscoverYorùbá! 2025). In this case, the rich tonal complexity, proverbial wisdom, and oral legacy of Yorùbá are being preserved not just through memory, but through technological innovation. These initiatives do more than digitize tradition; they translate memory into action, keeping the ethics and emotion of spoken heritage alive for future generations (Omoniyi 2006).

While digital tools such as online archives and preservation apps offer promise in safeguarding cultural heritage, they also risk flattening traditions that are inherently performative, embodied, and time-bound. Even the most advanced AI systems – designed to recognize patterns in language and data – struggle to grasp the subtleties of oral culture, gesture, or intergenerational memory. These systems cannot replicate the tone of a grandmother's lullaby, the ritual cadence of a prayer, or the layered silences of a folktale that lacks direct translation. As Jeremy Kahn warns in *Mastering AI: A Survival Guide to Our Superpowered Future* (2024), navigating an AI-driven world requires more than technical skill; it demands cultural discernment and ethical awareness. In this context, preserving oral tradition becomes not just a technological challenge, but a philosophical and moral imperative.

These traditions remain rooted in place, rhythm, and collective memory. They are carried not by text, but by people – by breath, by body, and by the intimacy of lived exchange. The rise of English as a global lingua franca may serve practical purposes, but it cannot resolve the deeper issues of semantic precision or cultural specificity. Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a vessel of worldview, of ethics, of temporality. When dominant languages displace local ones, we do not simply lose vocabulary – we lose entire ways of being in the world.

And yet, as a philosopher trained in a different linguistic tradition grounded in the Cyrillic alphabet, and having studied Old Church Slavonic and Latin, I understand why English has been adopted globally. Not because it is simple – indeed, English is riddled with irregularities and idiomatic complexities – but because it possesses a certain structural openness. Over centuries of colonialism, migration, and global exchange, English has absorbed words and discourses from countless languages. It is adaptable and expansive, capable of encompassing academic, legal, spiritual, and literary registers within a single linguistic space.

For those of us trained in other languages, English offers remarkable rhetorical flexibility. But that flexibility comes at a cost. When philosophy is conducted primarily in English, we risk erasing the conceptual depth of ideas that resist easy translation into its framework. At this juncture, translation is no longer merely a technical task – it becomes a philosophical and ethical undertaking, one that requires us to think critically about what is lost, what is silenced, and what must be preserved.

As someone who teaches philosophy alongside folklore, mythology, literature, and world religions, I encounter daily the epistemic and cultural stakes of translation. In these disciplines, translation is not simply a linguistic tool – it is a philosophical act. Translations carry entire epistemologies, shape worldviews, and determine which ideas become legible across borders. In this sense, translation functions as a condition of meaning's possibility, revealing how understanding is always embedded within specific symbolic, ritual, and linguistic systems – structures that resist clean substitution and instead demand dialogical attention.

This is why dialogue is essential. Translation is not a solitary transfer of information; it is an invitation to a conversation across cultures, histories, and distinct ways of knowing. When I teach – especially in English, while having been trained to think in a language shaped by the Cyrillic alphabet and unique phonetic patterns – I am continually reminded that translation is not merely linguistic. It is ontological. The worlds we inhabit through language differ in rhythm, value systems, syntactic structure, and expressive possibilities. That difference is not a flaw to be overcome but a space to be honored, explored, and held open through dialogue.

In this work, scholars who think and speak across multiple languages bring invaluable insights. Not because they "know more words," but because they live the daily tension between conceptual worlds. They understand that meaning is never fixed, and that the space between languages is filled with negotiation, intuition, and care. Their labor reveals that translation is not a technical task – it is a dialogic process grounded in ethical attention and cultural humility. This kind of awareness is often missing from traditions of philosophy that prioritize clarity and precision above all else. Yet in the lived reality of translation, clarity does not always produce understanding – and dialogue becomes the only way forward.

Consider, for example, the Eastern Slavic folktale *The Princess Frog* (*Öàðåâíà-ëÿãóøêà*). There is a moment in the tale that frequently confuses my students: "She struggled hard; but she felt his strength was too great for her to resist; so she turned herself into a spindle at once. He broke it across his knee... And lo! and behold! instead of the two halves of the spindle he held the hands of his beautiful princess, who looked at him lovingly with her beautiful eyes, and smiled sweetly" (*The Frog Princess*, Eastern European Folklore).

Read through a contemporary lens without cultural mediation, this moment may appear unsettling – an instance of magical coercion or gendered power. Yet, when situated within the symbolic world of Eastern Slavic tradition, an entirely different epistemology emerges. The spindle, in this context, is not merely a household object; it is a vessel of domestic knowledge, feminine agency, and ancestral continuity. Spinning has long been a revered practice in Slavic cultures – physically demanding, ritually embedded, and morally significant. Women who mastered the spindle were, and still are, seen as productive, respected members of the household. In this worldview, spinning is not only labor; it is cosmology.

The spindle is deeply symbolic – a tool of transformation, continuity, and feminine power. Wool was, and often still is, hand-spun with a spindle – an artisanal practice that commands both high market value and deep cultural reverence. This labor continues to carry social, aesthetic, and moral significance. To break the spindle in this folktale is not to break a person – it is to break a spell. Without this cultural framework, the scene risks being misread or reduced to literalist assumptions.

To transform into a spindle, then, is not an arbitrary magical gesture; it is an invocation of feminine strength and a return to symbolic form. Breaking the spindle is not an act of violence, but a ritual undoing of enchantment – a restoration of the woman's true self. Without recognizing the symbolic and epistemic role the spindle plays in this tradition, the tale's deeper meaning is lost or distorted. This is precisely where translation – linguistic, cultural, and philosophical – becomes essential. We must not only translate the words of the tale, but also the epistemological world that gives those words their resonance. Otherwise, we risk mistaking metaphor for harm, symbol for violence, and mystery for error.

This single example gestures toward a broader philosophical challenge: how can traditions rooted in different linguistic and symbolic systems speak meaningfully to one another? How do we ensure that, in translation, we do not erase what makes a worldview distinct? These are not merely questions for comparative literature – they are philosophical in nature. They demand that we treat translation not as a simple act of transmission, but as a form of thought.

For disciplines such as Analytic Philosophy, which has long privileged clarity through propositional logic and formal structure, the inclusion of translation introduces a necessary complication. It forces philosophy to reckon with the fact that meaning is often opaque, relational, and embodied. Translation challenges the assumption that all thought can be made transparent – and insists instead that meaning often lives in gesture, symbol, silence, and cultural memory.

In teaching, I have seen how translation can open new philosophical dialogues – not by reducing difference, but by drawing attention to it. Students learn to suspend judgment, to inquire before interpreting, and to view language not as a neutral medium but as a cultural act. In this sense, the classroom becomes a site where philosophy and translation meet – not to resolve one another, but to sharpen each other's questions. This, I believe, is precisely the kind of discursive space the current moment calls for: *a space where translation is not an accessory to philosophy, but a catalyst for its renewal.*

This intersection is vividly embodied in the work of Keiji Nishitani, whose thought moves fluidly between Japanese and German, between the conceptual vocabularies of Zen Buddhism and European existentialism. For Nishitani, philosophy is inseparable from the act of translation – not only linguistic, but philosophical and spiritual. His work exemplifies how crossing languages can deepen, rather than dilute, the questions we ask about self, emptiness, and existence.

And Nishitani is not alone. Many great philosophers and literary thinkers were profoundly shaped by their multilingualism. Leo Tolstoy, for instance, was fluent in French – the language of the Russian aristocracy, English, Old Slavonic, Latin – and later taught Greek to translate the Gospels firsthand. Spinoza wrote in Latin, spoke Portuguese and Dutch, and read Hebrew, weaving together multiple intellectual and spiritual traditions. Simone Weil read Greek, Latin, German, and Sanskrit; her mystical writings reveal a consciousness shaped by this layered linguistic engagement. Walter Benjamin moved between German and French, deeply invested in the philosophy of translation itself. And Wittgenstein, raised in a German-speaking household, wrote much of his later work in English, obsessively reflecting on the nature and limits of language.

In literature, too, we find thinkers who treated language as a philosophical medium. Vladimir Nabokov, who translated his own work between Russian and English, famously prioritized aesthetic and epistemic fidelity over literal equivalence. And Fyodor Dostoevsky offers a powerful case of a writer whose philosophical depth shifts – sometimes drastically – in translation. His tone, irony, and theological subtlety are deeply rooted in Russian idiom and Orthodox thought, and yet his ideas continue to resonate globally.

These thinkers lived in more than one language, and they thought in more than one world. Their multilingualism was not incidental – it was formative. It taught them that no language has a monopoly on truth, and that translation is never simple substitution, but philosophical transformation. In their work, we see how language opens and limits, how it reveals and conceals – and how philosophy itself is always, in some way, an act of translation.

This is not merely a pedagogical challenge; it is a philosophical one. How can we claim philosophy is universal when it so often fails to account for the limits – and the powers – of language and translation? One might recall Immanuel Kant, who famously argued that while logic is formal and universal, it is ultimately limited in what it can reveal about empirical reality. For Kant, the mind actively structures experience through *a priori* categories of understanding, meaning that logic alone cannot grasp the *thing-in-itself* – the noumenal world that lies beyond appearance (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781).

This tension between the formal power of logic and its existential limits is further developed in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his early work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein posits that logic is the scaffolding of the world and that language serves as a mirror of reality (Wittgenstein, 1922). But in his later writings, particularly in *Philosophical Investigations*, he radically revises this view. Logic, he suggests, is not a universal and context-free framework, but a set of language-games whose meaning arises from lived human practices (Wittgenstein, 1953). Language, and by extension logic, is not above culture – it is embedded within it, shaped by *forms of life* and patterns of use.

Few philosopher-writers have wrestled more deeply with the limits of language than Leo Tolstoy. The subject of my doctoral dissertation and a figure I have studied for many years, Tolstoy was profoundly aware of how language can both reveal and obscure truth. Despite being a literary genius and master of the Russian language, he was frequently dissatisfied with his own words. His diaries are filled with reflections on revision, and the archives at Yasnaya Polyana – his estate in Tula, Russia, which I have had the privilege of visiting – contain draft upon draft of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Each one reflects his relentless search for the "right" word – or more precisely, for ontological clarity: a word or form capable of expressing knowledge, lived experience, and moral truth (Tolstoy, *Diaries and Letters*).

If translation is often described as a kind of betrayal, then even writing in one's native tongue can feel like failure. For Tolstoy, this was not merely a stylistic concern – it became a crisis of being. Later in life, he took this crisis even further. He renounced his aristocratic privileges, relinquished the legal rights to his literary works, and declared that they belonged to the people. He publicly apologized for earlier writings, including *Anna Karenina*, which he came to see as products of illusion and vanity. In letters and personal writings, he often lamented the inability of language to capture truth, referring to those earlier works as the detour of a soul searching for integrity (Tolstoy, *A Confession*, 1879).

And yet, as someone who has read Tolstoy in both Russian and English, I can attest: the full weight of his spiritual struggle does not entirely survive translation. In English, *A Confession* reads as somber, perhaps melancholic. In Russian, it is agonizing. The language bears the tremors of a man standing at the precipice of existential collapse. The rhythm, tone, and raw vulnerability therefore resonate in a different register altogether.

The same is true, I believe, of Dostoevsky. His despair is visceral in the original Russian. When I teach a course on *The Struggle for Truth and Religious Search*, I introduce my students to fragments from *The Brothers Karamazov*, particularly the dialogues between Ivan and Alyosha. These texts cannot be approached without contextual preparation. I often spend several sessions exploring the political and spiritual crises of 19th-century Russia, Dostoevsky's own tormented life – including the day he stood on the *eshafot* (ýøàôîò) – a French-derived term that in Russian denotes not merely a scaffold, but a ceremonial site of state violence and existential judgment.

I do not translate this word. *Eshafot* is not simply "scaffold." It carries with it the psychological theatre of death, the machinery of empire, and the ritual of punishment. Within Russian cultural memory, it evokes more than a physical structure – it signifies the symbolic edge of life itself. Translating it risks erasing the terror and the metaphysical resonance it holds.

These reflections return us to the central philosophical question: How can traditions rooted in distinct linguistic and symbolic systems speak to one another meaningfully? How do we ensure that in translating texts, we do not erase what makes a worldview distinct? These are not only issues for literary theory – these are urgent philosophical questions. Translation is not a neutral act of transmission; it is a form of thinking. And for traditions like Analytic Philosophy, long committed to formal clarity and transparency, the encounter with translation introduces a necessary tension. It compels philosophy to reckon with opacity, with ambiguity, with embodied knowledge and cultural memory.

In this light, translation ceases to be a technical concern. It becomes, as Walter Benjamin once suggested, "a mode" of thought – a way of being in relation to meaning, otherness, and truth (Ben-

jamin, 1923). It requires humility, dialogue, and the willingness to listen across difference, even when full understanding is impossible.

Only after workshops like these do students begin to understand what Ivan is truly confronting. Without historical and philosophical context, many interpret Ivan as merely "overthinking," or as a character lost in abstraction. Yet Ivan's crisis is not abstract – it is rooted in history, trauma, and a profound confrontation with evil, suffering, and the silence of God. These dimensions do not easily cross linguistic or cultural boundaries.

The same can be said of Leo Tolstoy, whose own existential crisis – famously recounted in *A Confession* – marked a defining shift in his life and work. As David Patterson notes, "In the fall of 1879, at the height of his fame, Tolstoy came to believe that he had accomplished nothing – that his life was meaningless… He posed what he called the 'question of life' – a question deeper than any scientific or cultural achievement could answer" (Patterson 1983). What followed was a radical moral and spiritual transformation: a rejection of aestheticism, a turn toward ethical clarity, and a redefinition of his relationship with religion, language, and truth.

This transformed Tolstoy became a global moral voice. *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* had such a profound effect on Mahatma Gandhi that he called it the book that "overwhelmed" him and deeply influenced his philosophy of non-violent resistance. He (Gandhi) refers to *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* as one of the books that deeply shaped his thinking. He writes: "Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* overwhelmed me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books seemed to pale into insignificance." (Gandhi 1957)

Martin Luther King Jr. referred to Tolstoy as "a great moral leader, the philosopher of nonviolence" (King 1967). King was especially moved by *Letter to a Hindu*, in which Tolstoy asserts that true freedom can only come through love and non-violence. Jane Addams, pioneer of American social work and women's peace activism, visited Tolstoy in 1896 and cited him as a central influence on her ethical and pacifist thought (Addams 1910). John Dewey likewise drew from Tolstoy's pedagogical philosophy, admiring his emphasis on moral development and experiential learning (Dewey 1916).

In all these figures, we witness not just the legacy of a philosopher-writer, but the resonance of a thinker whose moral vision transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries – even as it depended on them. These readers did not encounter Tolstoy as an "analytic" philosopher, but as a human being struggling with conscience, violence, and meaning. It was this complexity that made defending a dissertation on Tolstoy as a philosopher both difficult and deeply necessary – one that I successfully completed many years ago.

Importantly, Tolstoy also became a translator. Dissatisfied with the ecclesiastical Russian translations of the Gospels, he returned to the Greek originals and produced his own version, published as *The Gospel in Brief* (Tolstoy 1893). In a conversation with Ivan Bunin, Tolstoy famously compared traditional Gospel interpretations to "a sack filled with diamonds and jewels, covered with coal." His translation aimed to strip away the coal and recover the moral essence of Christ's teachings.

For this act of interpretive defiance, Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church and officially declared a heretic. His rejection by institutional religion only deepened his role as a spiritual philosopher. When he died in 1910, the Church forbade any priest from performing the *panikhída*, the memorial rite central to Eastern Orthodox burial. His grave remains unmarked by a cross. And yet, according to family accounts, his wife Sofia Tolstaya secretly paid a priest to perform the rite in private. This quiet act of ritual defiance reflects both the enduring significance of religious tradition and the profound existential risk involved in translation. Translation is always a risk. Tolstoy was willing to carry that burden because he believed his translations were truthful.

Tolstoy's translation of the Gospels directly challenged ecclesiastical authority and its control over sacred language. His pursuit of linguistic and spiritual truth was not merely literary – it was existen-

tial and revolutionary. We must remember, and never tire from recalling it: translations are never neutral. They shape cultures, construct worldviews, and encode ethical values. Sometimes – as with Tolstoy, or Spinoza before him – they provoke institutional backlash. Both philosophers engaged in reinterpretations of sacred texts. Both sought moral clarity beyond doctrinal authority. And both paid a personal price for challenging religious orthodoxy – exiled and excommunicated.

As Jacques Derrida reminds us, "Every text remains in mourning until it is translated" (Derrida, 1985) In *What Is a Relevant Translation?*, he further insists that "translation is not a simple transmission of meaning... it is an act that transforms" (Derrida 2002). A text is never merely a vessel of meaning – it generates meaning through structure, context, and reception. Translation, then, is not secondary to philosophy; it is philosophy. It reveals not only what can be said, but what must be risked in the saying.

In this light, Tolstoy helps expose the artificial boundaries between philosophy, literature, and translation. His work raises questions often evaded by the "philosophy of language": What happens when language fails? How does one express truth in the face of ineffability? What is the moral responsibility of the writer – or of the translator?

Philosophers may continue to debate whether translation introduces distortion or clarification, but in practice, it reveals the fragility of meaning and the necessity of ethical interpretation. Tolstoy's life and legacy remind us that clarity is not equivalent to truth, and that language – far from being a neutral medium – is a moral terrain. For a discipline like Analytic Philosophy, currently facing what some have called a crisis of direction, the integration of translation studies, comparative literature, and lived multilingual experience may offer new pathways for renewal.

In my own teaching, I have witnessed how a dialogical approach to translation opens new intellectual and ethical possibilities. When students encounter the untranslatable, they begin to realize that meaning is not fixed, that truth is not static, and that language is both a bridge and a veil. Translation, in this sense, becomes not merely a technical task, but a philosophical act.

When we ask how translation and philosophy intersect with world literature and the problem of untranslatability, I believe the most important element is the human connection. Ideas do not merely travel through words – they travel through people who care enough to carry them with integrity. Leo Tolstoy did not become one of the world's great moral philosophers through his publications alone. As Martin Luther King Jr. understood, Tolstoy's legacy depended on those who translated, embodied, and transmitted his vision across languages and cultures.

Among these figures was his daughter, Aleksandra Tolstaya, who dedicated her life to preserving and promoting her father's legacy. In 1939, she co-founded the Tolstoy Foundation in New York, providing aid to Russian émigrés and introducing Tolstoyan ideals to new audiences. Though not a literary translator in the strict sense, she played a pivotal role in cultural translation – conveying his ethical vision through memoirs, interviews, and tireless public engagement. Similarly, Vladimir Chertkov – Tolstoy's closest intellectual companion – served as editor, archivist, and global disseminator of his spiritual writings. He was instrumental in compiling the complete collected works, including unpublished letters and diaries, and helped circulate Tolstoy's pacifist and reformist texts internationally. While some have criticized Chertkov's editorial authority, his impact on Tolstoy's global reception is indisputable. Aleksandra and Chertkov exemplify what I consider the human dimension of translation: not simply the rendering of words from one language to another, but the transmission of ethical meaning through empathy, care, and lived commitment.

And what of Tolstoy and Gandhi? Though they never met in person, they shared a profound intellectual and moral connection. Their correspondence began with Tolstoy's essay *Letter to a Hindu* (1908), written in response to Indian nationalist Taraknath Das. Deeply moved, Gandhi – then living in South Africa – wrote to Tolstoy in admiration. He had already read *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, a text that would become central to his development of *Satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance (Gandhi 1957).

Tolstoy replied warmly, and their exchange continued until his death in 1910. Though separated by geography, culture, and native language, they communicated in English – a second language for both. It was not the linguistic perfection of their writing that made their dialogue meaningful, but their shared moral clarity and mutual trust. Their words bridged the divide not because English was ideal, but because the relationship was real.

So powerful was Tolstoy's influence that Gandhi named his experimental community in South Africa "Tolstoy Farm." In that gesture, we see more than admiration – we see philosophy made flesh: a vision of justice, love, and ethical resistance translated into action across continents.

A modern and more recent example of translation as ethical presence comes to mind in the form of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* (2018) by Heather Morris. The novel is based on the life of Lale Sokolov, a Slovakian Jew imprisoned at Auschwitz and tasked with tattooing identification numbers on fellow prisoners. Though the book was written in English, Morris spent three years in conversation with Sokolov, who was in his 80s when they met. He spoke English, yes – but she quickly learned that shared language was not enough. The truth of his story – its trauma, texture, and silences – could not be captured through transcription alone. It required empathy, intuition, presence, and time. As Morris later reflected, "It was never going to be a straight biography. It was going to be an emotional translation of the story he trusted me with" (Morris, 2018).

Words, in this case, had to be earned. Without deep personal understanding, even the "right" language can fail. And that, I believe, is the essence of philosophical translation: truth lives not in isolated words, but in human connection.

As an educator working at the intersection of folklore, philosophy, and religious studies, I witness firsthand the limits of traditional approaches to language – particularly those that prioritize logical structure and semantic clarity over cultural, historical, and ethical nuance. While many contributions in the Philosophy of Language have offered profound insights into reference, meaning, and use, they have often done so with limited attention to the complexities of translation across symbolic and cultural systems. My teaching is grounded in the belief that translation is not merely the transfer of terms between tongues, but the entry point into an evolving discourse – historically layered, ethically charged, and culturally situated. When introducing philosophical or mythological concepts across languages and traditions, I do not simply offer equivalents. Instead, I guide students through how ideas are morphologically constructed, how their meaning is shaped by cultural and political histories, and how they are ethically enacted in lived experience.

In this sense, I see translation not as secondary to philosophy, but as philosophy in action. To translate well is to enter into dialogue, to risk meaning, to acknowledge other worlds of thought. In the classroom – and in scholarship – translation becomes a philosophical practice of care, humility, and connection. It challenges the illusion of transparency often sought by Analytic Philosophy and insists that truth is not only spoken, but shaped by who speaks, how, and for whom. This, I believe, is where new energy for philosophy lies: in the space where language fails and understanding begins – a space that translation helps us navigate. To translate is not merely to substitute words, but to engage in the philosophical work of interpretation: to trace meaning through morphology, to follow a concept's life through discourse, and to carry a worldview across the fragile boundary of language. In this sense, translation is a mode of epistemology, a practice that refuses immediacy and demands reflection, patience, and ethical responsibility.

When we enter Tolstoy's Gospel or face the torment of Ivan Karamazov, we are not just decoding sentences in another tongue – we are stepping into another structure of feeling, a different moral and metaphysical terrain. These texts are not passive carriers of meaning; they are events. Their translation is not completion but encounter.

A philosophy that ignores translation forfeits its own capacity to reflect on meaning, context, and form. Language is not neutral – it is shaped by power, by rupture, by gesture, by silence. Translation does not resolve this – it exposes it. It reveals that meaning is not fixed but relational. As Derrida

writes, "Every text remains in mourning until it is translated." Translation, then, is not about closure – it is about opening. It is where philosophy listens rather than speaks.

In this time of disciplinary fatigue and fragmentation, translation offers not a technique but a path. A path back to the body, to history, to relation. Through translation, philosophy may remember what it has always been: an attempt to speak carefully across difference, to make meaning matter, to carry truth not as certainty – but as care.

Leo Tolstoy's engagement with translation was not simply an act of rendering scripture into clearer language; it was an existential, moral, and philosophical undertaking. In *The Gospel in Brief* (1883), Tolstoy writes, "I regard Christianity neither as an inclusive divine revelation nor as an historical phenomenon, but as a teaching which gives us the meaning of life." His turn to the Gospels emerged not from theological speculation but from the depths of personal despair. As he explains in *A Confession*, he asked himself – and the educated men around him – what the meaning of life was, only to be told it had none: that he was, in his own words, "a fortuitous concatenation of atoms," and that life itself was meaningless and evil. This nihilistic reply drove him to the brink of suicide.

Yet Tolstoy remembered something else: that as a child, and among peasants who lived by faith, life *did* have meaning. He turned not to the established Church but to the Christianity he saw practiced in daily life. "I began to study the Christianity which I saw applied in life," he writes, "and to compare that applied Christianity with its source." In this journey, he uncovered what he believed to be a profound distortion by the Church: "By the side of and bound up with the lofty Christian teaching I found a Hebrew and a Church teaching alien to it. I was in the position of a man who receives a bag of stinking dirt, and only after long struggle and much labor finds that amid that dirt lie priceless pearls."

His translation of the Gospels was therefore an effort to strip away centuries of institutional dogma and recover what he saw as the ethical essence of Christ's message. Fluent in French and Russian, and trained in Latin and Greek, Tolstoy worked directly from the Greek texts, synthesizing the four canonical Gospels into a single narrative. This act was more than literary; it was a direct confrontation with the machinery of language, power, and spiritual authority. It was a rebellion against sanctioned interpretation – a move that ultimately led to his excommunication by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The result, *The Gospel in Brief*, is not merely a harmonization of scripture. It is a philosophical treatise on meaning, ethics, and spiritual clarity. Tolstoy approached translation as a sacred task – not to convert, but to reveal, to interpret, to make truth felt. In this, he anticipates concerns later addressed by Derrida, Wittgenstein, and Gadamer. Derrida's assertion that "Every text remains in mourning until it is translated" (1985) finds deep resonance in Tolstoy's belief that institutional religion had buried the moral treasures of the Gospel beneath layers of linguistic and doctrinal debris. Wittgenstein's claim that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1922, 1953) also applies: for Tolstoy, truth could not be abstracted into metaphysical propositions – it had to be embodied in action and daily life.

Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us that understanding is never a-historical. "We are influenced by our culture, language," he writes, "and so we can't avoid contextualizing it in terms of our culture and history" (*Gadamer, 1975.*). Tolstoy's translation is a vivid enactment of that insight. His work was neither neutral nor detached; it emerged from a Russian ethical and spiritual crisis and aimed to restore not only semantic clarity, but moral and existential meaning.

This issue remains pressing in contemporary classrooms. For instance, the phrase "Life is suffering" is often used to summarize Buddhism, but it strikes students as bleak and fatalistic. Yet this is a misrepresentation. The Pali term *dukkha* encompasses suffering, yes, but also impermanence, instability, and the poignant fragility of existence. In this sense, it aligns more closely with Heraclitus's notion of flux – his claim that one cannot step into the same river twice – than with Western existential pessimism. *Dukkha* is not a resignation to despair but a recognition of change and vulnerability.

Similarly, when we translate *atman* as "soul" in Hindu philosophy, we often import Western metaphysical assumptions that distort its original significance. A better approximation might be "monad" or "energetic principle," especially as it relates to *Brahman*, the universal ground of being. Even more problematic is the term *anatman*, often rendered as "no soul" in Buddhist teachings. This translation invites a deep misunderstanding. Western frameworks assume that negation implies the absence of an already understood referent – so "no soul" is assumed to negate something static, personal, and immortal. But *anatman* is not simply the denial of a self; it gestures toward an entirely different ontology – one grounded in impermanence, interdependence, and the absence of any fixed essence. The confusion here is not merely linguistic – it is philosophical. These are not just lexical differences but competing metaphysical commitments embedded in the crevices of language's differentiations.

This epistemological disjunction makes meaningful translation difficult and leads to widespread misconceptions. That is why, for instance, many Western philosophers and theologians continue to describe Confucianism as merely an ethical or philosophical system rather than a religion. Only when I use textbooks written by Korean-Chinese bilingual scholars – who illuminate the symbolism of the original characters, the cosmological significance of rites, and the meaning of "Heaven" (*Tian*) as a sacred, regulating force – does it become undeniably clear that Confucianism is a religious worldview in its own right.

Thus, translation in the study of religion becomes an epistemological problem. Misinterpretations are not just academic errors; they form the basis for entire systems of mistaken knowledge. In this context, translation is not neutral – it is formative. And at times, it is also (as Antoine Berman has already recognized) deformative.

Tolstoy's work reminds us that translation is always an ethical act. It is not merely a linguistic task, but a moral one – a form of spiritual and philosophical hospitality. To translate, in his sense, is to uncover what has been obscured, to risk saying what matters, and to live accordingly.

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