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Translation of: Interview with Jacques Derrida: The western question of "forgiveness" and the intercultural relation

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Interview with Jacques Derrida

The Western Question of "Forgiveness" and the Intercultural Relation

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Introduction

These two interviews with Jacques Derrida were conducted by Ning Zhang in 1999 and 2000, respectively, in preparation for the publication of his book *Writing and Difference* in Chinese and his first academic trip to China in 2001. In the first interview, Jacques Derrida tries to clarify the ethical concerns with regard to his deconstructive analysis of Western traditions, through his critical reading of the concept of forgiveness. In this interview he gives us a clearer insight into his ideas about the problem of intercultural exchange, especially concerning questions of translation, translatability, and untranslatability, as central issues of his work. In the second interview, which has been transformed into the preface of the Chinese translation of *Writing and Difference*, several key comparative ideas were discussed. We have chosen to translate the part in which Derrida expresses clearly his views on the relation between philosophy and thinking, and this clarifies his by-now infamous statement that there is no such thing as "Chinese Philosophy." Zhang and Derrida also discuss the relation of his work to China. For these reasons, both of these interviews offer a rare and fascinating opportunity to better understand how Derrida perceived himself in relation to philosophy or thinking from different cultures.

First Interview with Jacques Derrida (Paris, June 28, 1999), Conducted by Ning Zhang

Zhang, Ning (ZN): In your recent work and present seminars, you have tackled, in a more and more insistent way, themes such as responsibility, hospitality, friendship … , in short themes which, directly or indirectly, pertain to what is called ethics. This could seem surprising for those who primarily know your earlier works. (Deconstruction is indeed conceived rather commonly as being essentially a-moral.) Yet, we can show without a doubt that a questioning which is ethical (or goes towards ethics) exists from the very beginning of your philosophical journey. … Is there nevertheless not an evolution, or an inflexion?

Jacques Derrida (JD): To try to respond to your question, which is at once necessary and difficult, I will say first that the image of a "deconstruction" that would be amoral or a-ethical is a false and simplified image. I believe that from the start – one could show it – the ethical concern is present, not just simply as the concern to hold a moral or ethical discourse, but as the concern to interrogate that which constitutes the ethics of ethics. From my texts on Levinas in 1964, there are questions on the

ethical and moral responsibility, and what I wrote on Levinas and Foucault shows that the ethical question has always been linked to deconstruction. So, in a way, it is not new. Now it is true that in the recent texts there is a new stress, certainly. But there is no rupture, there is only a change of tone and emphasis.

Second, even now, when themes that seem more ethical, such as hospitality, responsibility in general, violence, forgiveness … , appear, even at that point it is not about proposing a moral. There also, I try, always in a deconstructive style, to interrogate the origin and possibility of the moral, the heritage, in some way, the laws, norms, ethical values or morals. So, on the one hand, deconstruction has always been concerned with morality in a way, and on the other hand, now, the new accent does not consist in making deconstruction either a morality or moral: the displacement is a bit different.

ZN: Today, the problematic of "forgiveness" is in the foreground of your concerns. Can you indicate the conditions under which this theme has imposed itself on you?

JD: I will say this. First, evidently, there cannot be an ethical culture without rapport to evil, to fault, to perjury. In a way, all moral fault is perjury in the largest sense of the word, insofar as a moral fault consists in breaking a promise, at least implicitly. When I do something evil or bad, this means on the one hand that I do something bad (I kill, I steal …) but at the same time, that in doing something bad, I betray that kind of implicit promise that is the feeling of duty. In a certain sense, all crime, all moral fault is perjury. Accordingly, one cannot interrogate morality without interrogating fault and evil, but one cannot interrogate fault and evil without interrogating what could be the confession of a fault and the forgiveness asked. So, in a way, the question of forgiveness is inevitable.

But, at the same time, as I was aware, as you and everybody are, that the culture in which deconstruction is inscribed is fundamentally European (and deconstructing it is a way of interrogating the European limits of this culture), which is to say a culture which has a biblical heritage (shared by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), but also a Greek heritage, it was interesting to ask from where this meaning of forgiveness came, in what this meaning consists and what the contradictions could be that inhabit it.

Consequently, I have started a search in my seminar for that "history of forgiveness," as it were. That history of the concept of forgiveness is something very complex; it passes through the holy scriptures, and so through very different tongues (Hebrew, Greek, Latin) and cultures: the Jewish culture of forgiving is not the same as the Christian culture of forgiving. And then, very quickly, the question of knowing whether the Greeks themselves, for example, had a concept of "forgiveness" arose in the seminar. Some anthropologists of the Greek culture have denied this; they say that in the Greek world there were things close to forgiveness, but there was no "forgiveness." There were things that resembled the understanding of the other, a judgment which carried extenuating circumstances to the other, all kinds of things that are not purely "forgiveness," the idea of which seems to come to us just as well from a Judaic or Christian culture.

And so, interrogating this cultural memory of forgiveness, I became, to jump ahead, very quickly interested by a sort of inherent contradiction within this culture of forgiveness. Just now I was talking about a "history" of forgiveness. There is a text written by Jankelevitch who, with regards to the Shoah, the extermination of Jews in this century, which is obviously a privileged example in all meditations on forgiveness, said that "Forgiveness died in the death camps." In other words, when an evil as monstrous as the holocaust has occurred, there can be no more question of forgiveness; forgiveness as a human thing has arrived at its end.

So in this history of forgiveness I was interested by a kind of contradiction that is the following: On the one hand, forgiveness has to be granted unconditionally; that is to say, it has to be given graciously without conditions, and without expecting a return, without expecting that the other gives something back. And that unconditional value of forgiveness is inscribed, in a way, in the Jewish and

Christian traditions. But most of the time this value is concealed, even in the sacred texts, in the holy scriptures, by another concept of forgiveness that I would call conditional or economic: we forgive *under the condition* that the other asks for forgiveness or apologizes,[1] recognizes her faults, repents as one says – that is a "repentance" – and by repenting, the criminal changes and promises to never do it again. As a matter of fact, that conditional logic of forgiveness most often prevails, in all the texts on the demands of an unconditional forgiveness that we have studied.

I think that this contradiction arises in the texts themselves, it is in the concept of forgiveness itself. Let's say that the deconstruction of forgiveness – since I continue to treat its history in a deconstructive style – concerns a sort of auto-deconstruction of forgiveness: the concept of forgiveness itself "implodes," it contradicts itself. It is around that economy of forgiveness that my work is organized.

ZN: I am always struck by the preponderance of the religious background in contemporary treatments of questions such as forgiveness. It seems that even in the most secular thought, one cannot avoid making reference to God, and so forth, for reasons of intelligibility. That God does not exist in China. The religious context there is very different.

Hence this question: how to think such a problematic in "universal" terms (since it concerns "all mankind")?

JD: Obviously, it is possible that in non-European contexts, the forgiveness that I speak of does not appear at all, or does not appear in the same way.

Despite my ignorance of non-European cultures, what interests me is, I won't say a "comparatism," but all the same the difference and the similarities (the common traits and the differential traits) that one can have between one culture. … I won't say only "European" (since there is not one homogenous European culture: there is a Jewish culture – and even within Judaism there are multiple tendencies – there is a Christian culture and a Greek culture, and then there is a Christian-Roman culture, a protestant culture … all this is a European environment which is differentiated and heterogeneous) and non-European cultures, which have surely – and you explain this very well in your text – similar, analogue values which permit a certain translation up to a certain point, but which, at the same time, limit that translatability because there are things in the system of that culture which do not let themselves be translated. I am thinking of linguistic translation but also of nonlinguistic translation, let's say a cultural translation or semantic translation in the largest sense of the word.

So, I don't believe that this problematic – I come back to the terms in your question – is "universal," and yet there is, notably in the Christian culture, a will to/of universality. When we speak of unconditional forgiveness, naturally we claim to go beyond all social and historical context. And so we simply don't deal with a relativist distribution of cultures. There is in every culture, and notably in the Christian culture, which is a universalizing and cosmopolitan culture – Saint Paul is a great cosmopolitan, naturally an extension, a *project of universalization*.

This links with one of my concerns in this seminar, in this question of forgiveness. My concern is the following: how to explain that in the global geopolitical field today, there are many scenes of repentance and of apologies by groups, political parties, heads of state, nations, regarding collective crimes – the last wars, the last decennia of this century, *even there where* the culture is not Christian and the notion of forgiveness in the Christian sense does not exist. What interests me is to see if today, in the "globalized" fields as they say (globalized [*mondialisé*]), this scene of repentance or forgiveness indeed *becomes* a universal – and if there are thus translations, more or less confused, that operate on the political scene. We have a lot of examples of forgiveness asked/apologies (*pardon demandés*) in Europe during these last decades, from churches, from medical corporations, and so forth. In the political field, there have been a lot of examples of apologies from leaders of state, of heads of Western churches.

But I have also been struck for example by the fact that a prime minister of Japan, Mr. Murayama, has, a couple of years back, in his personal name (but obviously as Prime Minister he does not solely speak in his personal name) expressed "a heart-felt apology."[2] This is not a "Pardon!", but it is nonetheless a kind of *excuse*, for the Japanese crimes with regards to most notably the Koreans. After that there have been, as you know, more negotiations between the Japanese and Korean governments. And each time, we are dealing with translations, in languages and cultures that are non-Christian, of values which resemble Christian values, and where we recognize the contradiction between the unconditional and the conditional. Because these scenes of repentance on the part of heads of state or governments are naturally inscribed in strategies of conditional negotiation. This is done because we want to improve diplomatic ties, we want to improve the market, we want to normalize (as they say) a situation, and all this depends naturally on conditions: this is not unconditional forgiveness. This is to say that as soon as we ask forgiveness, apologize, there are conditions: we apologize, we judge that what we have done is wrong, and that is to say that implicitly we promise not to do it again, we are no longer the same. And naturally, one of the aporias of forgiveness is that when someone who is apologizing says: "I am no longer the same," we can ask: *who* forgives *what*, *who* forgives *who*, right?

ZN: This question is not simple to formulate in the Chinese cultural context … .

JD: That is why I was very interested by all you have written on "Forgiveness and China," where I have noted both similarities and differences, which would demand extremely rigorous analyses, which I am naturally not capable of doing … .

But for example, with regards to these notions of indulgence or leniency (*you*), grace (*she*), leniency (*shu*),[3] or compassion (*cibei*), we can find corresponding words in the biblical languages, but evidently the context and the general logic is not the same. Yet, we can try to translate (in a way that is not just linguistic), as you do, *she* with "grace" or *shu* with "leniency," and so forth.

But at the same time, obviously forgiveness there is not asked *from God*. Here we encounter an analogous difficulty *inside* the Christian context, where it is very difficult to know if the forgiveness is a human thing (that is to say if a human can forgive a human) or if it is always God that one asks forgiveness from. The Gospel says: God will forgive you if you yourself forgive other people. So, the question of knowing if the forgiveness is human or divine is not itself settled in the old Western tradition.

The same goes for political grace. I have been very interested in what you have invoked regarding this subject (the notions of *you* and *she*). As you are no doubt aware, in a great Western political tradition, the right of grace is conferred to the monarch by divine right, by precisely God, and the monarch by divine right, who is above the laws, has the right to pardon, to grant grace to a criminal who is convicted by a human law. This right of grace is obviously of Christian origin, but as you also know, it has been inherited in the secular democracies such as France for example, where the head of state has the right to grant grace as a king, or in semi-secular cases such as the United States, where the president and the governors also have the right to grant grace. There is an immense problematic here that interests me much, which is *theologico-political* in the West.

For example, I often cite the text of Kant who, with regard to the right to grant grace, says that it is a very ambiguous right. It is what is most elevated for a monarch, his pardoning a culprit while placing himself above the laws is a monarch's highest majesty; but at the same time Kant says that this can become the most unjust right. Why? Kant says because the sovereign ought only to have the right to pardon where he himself is a victim of crime. If he is not himself the victim of crime, he ought not to have the right to grant grace.

This simple precaution brings me back to what you have said at a given moment in your text, where you mention Kant, and where you ask [with regards to Buddhism]:

is there an other from whom to ask forgiveness? It is in principle only I myself who by a methodical practice of concentration and contemplation (*zhiguan*) can progressively deliver myself from the consequences of my former actions. Nobody can interrupt this karmic causation in my place. … ”

This probably means that only the culprit can ask forgiveness and only the victim can grant it. But a third person cannot forgive. And hence the question: “*who* forgives *who*?” is a very serious question that we can ask and interrogate in a context, in a Western Christian tradition but also in the tradition that you have evoked here.

I am going to go backwards a bit. Among the political examples I find most interesting, there is what is happening in South Africa. The state has installed a commission (“Truth and Reconciliation”) that was intended to hear the testimonies of the victims of Apartheid, crime against humanity, and also the criminals, and to decide if there could be amnesty or not. I have tried to show how that commission was “christianized” by the one who chaired it, that is to say Desmond Tutu, in which also the value of forgiveness is not the same as that of amnesty. Amnesty consists in effacing a fault before the law, but forgiveness is not a juridical notion, it is not a criminal notion.

I don’t know if, for example, in comparing what we call forgiveness to what we translate by “forgiveness” in a Chinese culture for example, or Buddhist culture in general, we can dissociate, in those cultures, forgiveness from the law (criminal law) or not. In principle, in Western cultures, forgiveness is heterogeneous to law. Here also, to conduct this “comparison,” this differential analysis, we would have to interrogate the connection between what we translate by “forgiveness” and the order of the criminal laws.

ZN: The short text that I presented to you has as its only goal to prepare that discussion. I have departed from the translations in modern Chinese of the French word “pardon” and I have afterwards examined summarily the historical traditions in which these Chinese words continue to be referred to, implicitly or explicitly. This is an exercise which perhaps better permits us to put in relief the *specific* character of this Western experience of “forgiveness.” But in our context, should we not go further?

JD: I see two directions that are not necessarily dissociated, but are nevertheless distinct. On the one hand, there are analyses that are philosophical, anthropological, linguistic, cultural, semantic … : what we do, what we are talking about now, and on which people like you and me have to work: analyzing the texts, the cultures, the memory, and so forth. But that analysis, which is in a way theoretical, is motivated by what is really happening in the world today, where those “translations” *take place*, in reality.

The geopolitical field tends to homogenize itself where, in any case, there are translation problems that pose themselves from the point of view of international law. The interpretation of human rights is a hot issue today on the *real* stage of world history. For example, all the political examples I mentioned earlier, the current examples, come fundamentally from a discourse of human rights and from the concept of a “crime against humanity,” which is a concept that was produced, in a performative way as it were, at the end of the second world war by the Nuremberg Tribunal. In all those situations that I spoke of, reference is made to the notions of “crime against humanity” and “human rights.” Apartheid in South Africa, which is at the center of this commission “Truth and Reconciliation” is defined as a “crime against humanity” by the international authorities.

Is this notion of human rights or crime against humanity universal? It *wants* to be universal, but is it recognized as universal? You know all the current debates that are taking place between the “Westerners” and China on the subject of human rights and the interpretation of human rights. Not only certain Chinese, for reasons that remain to be analyzed of course, claim an interpretation of their own, but even President Chirac declared, in a move which has been widely criticized, that there are different legitimate interpretations of human rights, and that for example the current Chinese interpretation is not necessarily the same as ours, and that hence all this needs to be debated. These

tensions show that in reality there are serious translation problems (that are not just linguistic translation problems), problems of harmonization and homogenization.

And, of course, the question of forgiveness is one of the central questions, since it concerns the connections between forgiveness and the law, the homogenization of international law, and so forth. You know that the current draft of the International Tribunal, which is being discussed in France today [arouses a debate about] the modification of the Constitution, so that France can stick to this project. Not all countries accept this project. I think that China has not accepted it.

This is where the questions are that I call *real translation*, in real history.

This is one way. The other way is the one that the intellectuals, like us, take to study the texts, study the cultures.

ZN: These are two dimensions of what we call the intercultural relation … .

JD: Of course, we have to take into account the multiplicity of cultures, study them as multiples, try to respect their differences. But is there not a moment where we have to avoid ceding to a kind of relativist empiricism?

It is not simply a theoretical question – it is a burning question in the political practice. We know well that it is a question of power, if for example this or that nation-state, with its economic, military forces, and so forth does not accept the norms of another group of nations, there will be concrete problems. For example, every time the Westerners asks themselves if they are not going to interrupt their relations with China, if China does not accept to respect human rights and so forth, that poses questions of hegemony. What happens when the countries that consider themselves the most powerful have at the same time a doctrine they claim to be universalist on this or that, and impose it on other cultures?

These are burning questions that don't wait. They are of an urgency that obliges, even if they won't do it spontaneously, those that one calls the intellectuals – anthropologists, philosophers, legal experts – to try to think all this.

ZN: The question, in China and elsewhere, is always to know from which conditions (which language, which tradition) one can put forward universal criteria, or pretend to.

JD: Of course. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: how to translate? How can each culture appropriate it, as it were? It is formulated in general in Western languages. How can a culture that does not have the same philosophical, religious, premises, and so forth appropriate it?

But a challenge, an equally huge task was presented to China when it adopted a Marxist philosophical discourse. Maoism has also been an immense translation operation, where, at the same time one imported, one marked with an original Chinese seal all that one appropriates. So it is not now that all this begins. It is a continuing revolution … .

ZN: I would like to return to the concept of difference of which you have made a radical use. You have drawn an apparatus that seems to work at all levels: "sexual," linguistic, philosophical, and so forth. Abroad, rightly or wrongly, this approach has often been appropriated by "Cultural Studies" as a means of calling into question Eurocentrism. On the other hand, even though you live and work in the West, you have lived and thematized, worked on the "multiculturalism" internal to the West (Jewish, Greek traditions, and others). How do you perceive the "intercultural relation" with a universe much more distant like China, or the Far East? Is it necessarily just a supplementary aspect of that general difference?

JD: I don't want to speak about "the West" in general, because there are too many differences: there are huge differences even within each European culture, as well as between those cultures. But between what one calls Europe, biblical and Greek, and the Far East, which in itself is very diverse, very heterogeneous – between all this multiplicity, there are certainly analogies, possible passages, that make operations of translation possible. When I say translation, I am not talking only about language, I am talking about cultural appropriation.

And then, there is a point of *radical alterity*, of absolute untranslatability, and we have to take that into account. There is, in each of those cultures or sub-cultures, a point of *absolute* heterogeneity or alterity. But this absolute alterity is not just, let's say, between Europe and the Orient, between Buddhism and Daoism or others. It is between every *singularity*.

And in a way, the problematic of forgiveness teaches that. I can only forgive, or envisage forgiving, there where I am faced with an absolute other that I do not even understand. If I understand the other (why he has done this evil, why he has done me wrong), if I identify with the other, or if the other identifies with me as a victim in asking for forgiveness, from the moment that there is this identification, there is no more forgiveness. For there to be forgiveness, there has to be an absolute difference, untranslatable, so that, perhaps, forgiveness is not possible. In the seminar I have constantly said that forgiveness is impossible. It is possible only where it is impossible.

And so this radical alterity is not only between cultures, between languages, it is also between singularities. And every time there is an evil or wrongdoing, *there is* radical alterity. And forgiveness is an experience of radical alterity or radical otherness. I cannot forgive anyone other than someone I do not really understand, who is infinitely far from me, with whom I cannot identify or who cannot identify with me.

So the question of difference, or rather alterity, poses itself between what one calls cultures, languages, histories, memories, but also between absolute singularities. When I say "singularities," this is to avoid using words or concepts that are philosophically too marked, like the concepts of "individual," "person," "me," "conscience," "unconscious": all these are already philosophical concepts with a history that belongs to one language, one culture. … I prefer not to use them here. I say "singularity" because it is the "poorest" word to say *the unique and other* – that which is unique and other.

Then, can we, in a Chinese language for example, rigorously translate this difference between the unique and the non-unique, between the same and the other? Already the word "other" – radical otherness – I say it quietly, it's not easy to think but I still say it in my language. But is the thought of a radical otherness something that can be thought and said in a Chinese culture? I suppose it can, but I am not in a position to respond to that question.

ZN: The word is translatable, but the concept certainly poses difficulties … .

JD: Like that of transcendence, absolute transcendence … ?

ZN: … and perhaps also that of absolute difference.

JD: And if there is no idea of absolute difference, maybe the idea of absolute forgiveness that I talk about makes no sense either, has no chance to appear as such. *Unconditional* forgiveness, without compassion, without what you translate as "*indulgence*" (*you*), "leniency" [*mansuetude*] (*shu*), "compassion" (*cibei*). … The forgiveness that I speak of has to be *beyond* leniency and compassion. If I forgive because I have compassion, that is, because I sympathize with the other, I share the other's feeling, then there is no forgiveness. Forgiveness is beyond compassion. But at the same time in the biblical tradition there is a strong reference to compassion. … However, forgiveness is beyond this compassion. You see the difficulty.

ZN: It is beyond the humane … .

JD: It is beyond the humane, it is the humane beyond the humane. It is at once humane and the humane beyond the humane.

It is also the question of God and the animal. What becomes of the transcendent God, what is the place for a transcendent God? Is the relation between human and God, as well as the relation between human and animal, distributed in the same way in Chinese cultures? I cannot respond to that. These are questions for me.

ZN: Without a doubt in Buddhist thought for example the differences are less radical … .

JD: You know that in Europe this difference has a history, it has not always been the same. For example, there is more continuity with the Greeks or in the Middle Ages than after Descartes. There is a history of relations between human and animal in the West, it is complicated, and it is not finished … .

Second Interview with Jacques Derrida (Paris, February 29, 2000), Conducted by Ning Zhang

ZN: You have said: "I try to hold myself to the limit of philosophical discourse" (*Positions,* 14). You have entitled the book that is in many ways a continuation of *Writing and Difference*: *Margins – of Philosophy.* If the boundary between the philosophical and the non-philosophical is always relative and shifting, how to think what can remain the "consistency" or continuity (even if it is problematic) of the philosophical gesture in general?

JD: It is true that the boundary between the philosophical and the non-philosophical has to continually be reevaluated or redrawn. There is no stable, clear boundary between the philosophical and the non-philosophical. In a way the nature of philosophy, the properly philosophical movement, consists exactly in taking hold of all the space, in not accepting that there is anything outside of philosophy. The philosopher is someone who thinks that the place of philosophy is not contained, and thus that there are no limits. And so, he tends to integrate, to interiorize the non-philosophical.

So, with regard to that boundary that is never given, one must continually detect where it is set up, one must see it shift itself, one must shift it oneself. This boundary is not stable (as you said, it is moving), so the question arises to know *what is* philosophy. What do we call, in a coherent and systematic way, philosophy?

Obviously, as we are speaking for Chinese readers, I have very often been tempted, and still am, by the Heideggerian assertion according to which, basically, philosophy is not thinking in general, it is linked to a finite history (finite, that is to say limited), tied to a language, to a Greek invention: it is a Greek invention first of all, that afterwards underwent transformations in the form of Latin translations, German translations, and so forth, but that is in the end something European, and if there is a kind of thinking or knowledge that at least has an equal dignity outside of the Western European culture, it would be illegitimate to call that "philosophy." So if there is a Chinese thinking, a Chinese science, a Chinese history, and so on, to speak of a "Chinese philosophy" is a problem for me, inasmuch as obviously this Chinese thinking, this Chinese culture, has not imported European models. If it imports European models, then it also becomes European, partly European. Hence the question of Marxism, of Chinese Marxism, and so forth. But I am tempted to say, without any disrespect towards this non-European thinking, that those ways of thinking can be very strong, very necessary, but that one cannot call them, strictly speaking, "philosophy."

Thus, if one tries to think, strictly speaking, what is philosophy (what you call the philosophical consistency), from that point of view, I have tried quickly enough, at once in the footsteps of Heidegger, but also turning a bit away from Heidegger, to see there an acknowledgment of, or

submission to the authority of what one calls in Greek the *logos*, meaning at once reason, discourse, calculation, speech – *logos* means all that – and also "gathering": *legein*, that which gathers. Thus, the idea of a system. Basically, the idea of a systematic consistency, of a gathering onto itself, is tied to the idea of *logos*. Of course, I have nothing against the system, against the *logos*. But we have to see that it is one possible determination amongst others.

Now I would like to add a little distinction, which is that there are several modes of *legein*, of "gathering," that are not necessarily systems. The idea of system is a particular form of this gathering. There was a moment in the history of philosophy, quite late, where this gathering was thought to have the form of a system, of a "philosophical" system. But even before that moment, which was late enough, the idea of *logos* was at the same time the idea of reason and of gathering, and so the idea of presence and of presence-to-itself. So the unity or continuity of the philosophical gesture, that's what I saw in what I have called "logocentrism," which is to say the fact of gathering all beings, all being in the form of presence, under the authority of or before the *logos*, or as pole, as correlate of the *logos*.

I have tried to distinguish logocentrism from phonocentrism. Logocentrism, then, is philosophy as ontology, that is as a science of what is. And the "-logy," be it ontology or any other science with "-logy," is the idea of a rationality which gathers. And my feeling is that, despite all the differences, all the ruptures, that have taken place in Western philosophy, the pattern of the gathering unity (in its relation to reason and discourse), so the logocentric pattern, has been constant: one finds it everywhere. And so, in all my texts, whether it concerns texts on Plato, on Descartes, on Kant, on Husserl, on Heidegger even, I have tried to show this constancy of the logos, this justification by the logos. And at a given moment I have tried to link logocentrism to phonocentrism, that is to a culture that privileges the voice. Readers have often confused the two. I don't. I think there can be phonocentrism without logocentrism. There could be non-European cultures that privilege the voice, there can be, I guess, elements or aspects of that privilege of the voice in Chinese culture. Very often Chinese writing has seemed interesting to me in its non-phonetic aspects. But in Chinese culture or other cultures there could be a privilege accorded to the voice that is not logocentric.

ZN: But can philosophy be one mode of thinking amongst others?

JD: Philosophy is not one mode of thinking amongst others, at the same level as many others. I think that it has a privilege and vocation, a singular ambition, which is to be universal – and we should take into account the fact that philosophy *wants to be* universal. For that reason, it is not simply one discourse or way of thinking amongst others. But I believe that philosophy as such is not all of thinking and that there can be a non-philosophical thinking, a thinking that goes beyond philosophy. And for example, I believe that when one wants to think philosophy, what philosophy is, that thinking itself is not philosophical. And that is what I find interesting. Deconstruction is in a way a non-philosophical thinking of philosophy.

And one can extend this – this model, this logic, this argument – to many other examples. Thus if, in order to deconstruct it, one asks about a certain figure of mankind, of the human being or of reason, to think the human being or to think reason is not simply "human" or "rational," but it is also not anti-humanist or irrational. Every time one asks questions, as I do, in a deconstructive style, about the origin of reason, about the history of the idea of the human, people accuse me of being anti-humanist, of being irrational, but that's not the case. I think there may be a thought *of* (*de*) reason, a thought *of* the human, a thought *of philosophy* that is not reducible to what it thinks about, that is to say to reason, to philosophy, to the human, but that is even so neither a denunciation, a critique or a rejection. It is not a sign of non-respect for philosophy to say: there is something else to think about and other than philosophy. And actually, to think philosophy, it is necessary, in a way, to exceed the philosophy: it is necessary to be elsewhere. That is what is we are looking for under the term deconstruction … .

ZN: As we are dealing with the presentation of your book in Chinese, to finish I would like to go into the difficult problem of translation. It seems that in your work you have constantly demonstrated at once both the permanent necessity and the impossibility of translation. What's more, one gets the impression that this impossibility is not just a limitation or failure that one has to fight against, but that with you it can also be seen as the product of a deliberate strategy. (We could take many words as example here.) Can you clarify this point?

JD: You are right to ask me this grand question of translation, at once because it will have to appear at the opening of a translation that is very important to me, the Chinese translation, but also because from the very beginning, both for me and for deconstruction in general, the question of translation has not been just one question amongst others: it is *the* question.

First of all because the question of translation is the question of what takes place between different cultures, different nations, thus what passes boundaries. And deconstruction, which is first of all a questioning of the authority of Eurocentrism, of the authority of the nation-state, obviously encounters the question of translation. On the other hand, even within the language we speak, that I speak for example, there are, as it were, internal translation problems. There are words that have multiple meanings, words that are undecidable, and at bottom, all along my work, it has been marked by attempts to think about words that have multiple contradicting meanings, both in the French language and in other languages that I have inherited. We can give the example of *pharmakon*, which means both poison and medicine, *hymen* which means both protection of virginity and marriage, "supplement" which in French means both that which one adds and that which replaces, the word "differance" with an "a". … Each time, those words were very difficult to translate, even impossible to translate, and they posed the question of idiom or language (tr. *Idiome*).

And at a given moment, when asked if I had a definition of "deconstruction," I said: "more than one language." Deconstruction happens there where one has the experience that there is "more than one language." There is more than one language in the world, but even inside one language, there is more than one language. And so this linguistic multiplicity is what keeps deconstruction occupied or preoccupied. First of all, because I don't believe, simply, that there is a difference between thinking and language. We think in a language, and philosophy is tied to a language. Even the most faithful translation is all the same infinitely distant, infinitely different. And that is very good. So translation opens a new history of a text in a new body, in a new culture.

And I am both persuaded and delighted that your translation will be faithful and respectful, and yet that it writes a text which will have a history of its own, being infinitely distant from the French text. It will be another history, another book. The same but yet another, and I will be incapable of following its destiny, not more or less by the way that one cannot follow the destiny of one's own books in one's own language. But in Chinese, I don't know what will become of it.

Nevertheless, I rejoice in my ignorance, in my not-knowing of what will become of this Chinese version that will be something else than just a version. There is the "yes" that we have talked about. I say "yes" to the future without knowing what it will be. I will not be able to read the text, I don't know how it will be read by the Chinese, I don't know what they will make of it in Chinese universities. It is a history, a future, on which I have no grip whatsoever, no real view, but which I greet like a chance. Not just a chance for me, but also for the text. And it is for this that I wish to thank you.

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Notes

1 "Demander pardon" in French literally means to ask for forgiveness, but it also has the wider meaning of "to apologize" or of "apology" (pardon demandée).

2 In English in the original.

3 The first instance of leniency in this sentence is the French *indulgence*, while the second is the French *mansuetude*.