In 2000 Marcel Detienne published Comparer l’incomparable supporting the thesis that, when cultures and tradition are very different «pour construire de bons comparables, il faut […] monnayer une “catégorie-entrée” avec l’aide des gens du terrain (historiens et anthropologues) pour analyser les agencements lisibles dans les configurations culturelles». This “catégorie-entrée” should be necessary to compare cultures totally different. In fact, in different cultures and traditions, the same words not intend to say the same thing. An example is “goodness”.

The aim of this paper is to examine the translation in its etymological sense of “transport in front of”. If translating means to facilitate passages, and if a possible nucleus of goodness is in its generating relations, what does this imply about the translation of goodness in cultures and traditions? It will mean not to look for the most appropriate meaning but to look for experiences of relations and ties in different cultures living together nowadays, without renouncing their specificity. So, with the help of some research developed in the field of cultural anthropology, it will emerge that the capacity to create ties is the way in which goodness can nowadays translate itself in social ties, improving them.

I. The Chiasm of Translation

Marcel Detienne in 2000 published Comparer l’incomparable supporting the idea that, when cultures and traditions are absolutely different «pour construire de bons comparables, il faut […] monnayer une “catégorie-entrée” avec l’aide des gens du terrain (historiens et anthropologues) pour analyser les agencements lisibles dans les configurations culturelles»¹. This “entry category” should help in the creation of a comparison between different cultures that are far among them. It should be a bridge, a sort of mediation.

How could we find a number of common elements joining together some cultures that are deeply different and often at war with one another? Some examples: if in Hinduism the origin of reality, the divine, is at the same time immanent and transcendent, in Hebraism there is a clear distinction between reality and a God who is completely transcendent from the world and from man. One can say that this

refers to the relationships among religions and it does not apply to the possibility of finding some “entry categories”. How is it possible to separate cultures and traditions from their spiritual and religious traits? The fact that it is so difficult to establish which traits enable us to talk about “religion” for the different cultures, shows that we are facing a topic that is not evident. Therefore we could say that it is not needed to find “one” entry category but several “entry categories” are needed, enabling the creation of bridges among cultures but also among concepts and dimensions characterising the human being as such. As a result also some “entry categories” that translate the concepts.

I refer to translation and translating as these “entry categories” must be bridges that create means of access, as the translation does creating bridges between languages and cultures. I would like to specify in which sense my proposal for understanding translation goes.

First of all I propose to understand translation in its wider sense, as we say that a witness is conveyed to the Law Court that is to say he is carried to. The translation creates bridges not only by building linguistic correspondences (provided the numerous differences among cultures, we will always think and say “almost the same thing”) but also “bringing something in front of someone”. This “something” is composed by music, texts, customs and rituals, all that makes up the very soul of cultures. Where is this possibility of talking about translation founded? Well I find it in the German term, Veranschaulichung. As the verb veranschaulichen means “make something for an intuitive understanding”, for example “make a Maths formula intuitive through a graph” or “make the use of a word intuitive through an example”, Veranschaulichung will suggest that one translates to better convey what a culture thinks and says. This word however also shows the motility of translation, as the prefix “ver-” just expresses this root of movement. Therefore not only translating something we give something more to understand in a better way but it also happens in the very moment when we translate, that is to say we bring something “in front of” someone as a witness is conveyed to the Law Court. Not only therefore something is translated linguistically, but even before “something happens” and takes shape in a different form from the one it was initially thought, just as it happens when translating.

The second point concerns how this action to create an intuition can be possible. The answer is that we can “bring in front of” and render what we bring through images and intuitions, as the translation is a metaphorical transportation. Metaphorein, in Greek, means conveying and therefore building bridges. We all know the metaphor and its rhetorical strength. But this strength is owned as it pushes towards another meaning and so it creates a bridge. The term metaphorical is the “ability of conveying”, being able of going from one sense to another, and the translation as a Veranschaulichung is metaphorical for the prefix ver- stating, as we have already said, motility, capacity of conveying.

Third point: what pushes one to convey and bring oneself “in front of”? If we consider all the most famous studies about the metaphor, from Paul Ricœur to Hans Blumenberg, we see that it has always been talked about metaphor and truth. This means that when we build metaphors or when we look for the concept
and the term to be translated so that they are true “bridges” between two cultures, 
we look for the concept or the term that matches the most and therefore we try to 
tell the truth. But not only is the truth stated this way. The cultures bring towards 
the other what characterizes them and what they own about the truest, the most 
beautiful and the best. No one, especially when attacked for the aspects of violence 
that every a culture bears in itself, answers making this violence its most authentic 
nucleus, but everyone always underlines the aspects of truth, goodness and beauty 
characterising one’s own culture.

Once this has been stated can we say that things have been sorted out and 
the translation I am suggesting to understand this way, as a chiasm of metaphor 
and truth, sorts out all the troubles and enables to easily find “entry categories”? 
Certainly not and in addition to the difficulty of finding some “common elements” 
there is always the risk of attributing to the other what we would like to find, 
as Jorge Luis Borges tells in Averroës’ Search where the philosopher, not being 
able to translate into Arabic the Aristotelian terms “tragedy” and “comedy”, 
concludes that «Aristu (Aristotle) gives the name „tragedy” to panegyrics and the 
name „comedy“ to satires and anathemas. There are many admirable tragedies and 
comedies in the Qur’an and the mu’allaqat of the mosque»\textsuperscript{2}.

I do not think that it is possible to find words and concepts that between different 
cultural milieu can state exactly the same thing, but just because we have always 
translated and we have always found a meeting point, I think that the translation, 
understood in the sense I have suggested, is an effective mediation. We need to 
test what it has been said through the topic of our meeting, the good. I would like 
to see most of all in which sense the good is translated into the other cultures by 
means of meetings – not always friendly, on the other hand – they live and so what 
the translation of good means.

I will immediately declare my thesis: in order to translate the good we need to 
check if it can be translated in the sense I have already stated (that is to say as a 
Veranschaulichung) and why we can do it. I will not exhibit what every culture calls 
“good” proposing a series of descriptions of what “good” is but I just will look for 
those elements of “translation” enabling us to talk about the good as such.

\section*{II. Translation of Good: the intercultural perspective}

If in a “Western” context we have some references to talk about it, when we head 
to an Eastern context, specifically to a Japanese one and to the work An Inquiry 
Into the Good by Nishida Kitarō, we see how the most western among the Japanese 
philosophers understands the good in very distant way from the one it is meant by 
western philosophies. The good according to Nishida, is «the development and 

the accomplishment of the will\textsuperscript{3}, that is a unifying activity, a kind of Self able to create relationships and not the will as it is understood by the western philosophy. When introducing the work written in 1911, Kitarō writes:

The reason why I have called this text \textit{An Inquiry Into the Good} is that according to me, even if philosophical research takes the first half, the problems that are to core matter and the accomplishment are those concerning the lives of human beings.\textsuperscript{4}

As the good is closely linked to pure experience, we have to start from that.

Making some experiences, Nishida Kitarō writes, means knowing the concrete real as it is. It is knowing in conformity with the concrete real, leaving out completely any interference by our side. Pure is in its sense the state of experience as it is, without any addition by the reflexive discernment, as in reality some thoughts are mixed to what is called experience.\textsuperscript{5}

Thought and pure experience are not opposed rather if pure experience is at the base of real concrete, as the author writes in several occasions, the thought represents the active moment of pure experience. In this phase of the Japanese philosopher thought one is struck by the insistency on the unification against oppositions of the different dimensions of man that have been put forward by the western thought. When talking about the good, Nishida Kitarō takes both acting and the will into account as an aspect concerning man. The will is always oriented and finalised and therefore unifying the totality of man. The good lies in this unifying push that is not intellectual nor thought but that is ethical and lived. As Michel Dalissier writes in the introduction to the author, «l’œuvre inaugurale \textit{Recherche sur le Bien} (1911), met au centre la notion d’unification […] : unifier ne revient pas à atteindre une unité dernière, mais représente une opération infinie de recherche de l’unité»\textsuperscript{6}. The distance from the western tradition is clear, and it is just this remoteness that asks for the translation we were talking about. Even Scilla Bellucci, when reviewing this text, stated this reminding that Nishida «does not aim at a metaphysic unity, but at a true organic unity that, necessarily, has to find the reason of its coherence inside itself»\textsuperscript{7}. This difference appears when talking about the will, of which the good is the development, will that is «the fundamental unifying activity of conscience» and, therefore, it is also an expression of the unifying strength that is at the origin of reality. In addition, «the will is not activity for something else, but for its own sake». Now, the acting of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} Nishida Kitarō, \textit{An Inquiry Into the Good}, trans. By Masao Abe and Christopher Ives, Yale University Press., New Haven and London 1990, p. 131.
\item \textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ivi.}, p. 11.
\item \textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibidem}.
\end{itemize}
will becomes «good acting, that is to say good, when it complies with the full realisation of the self understood as being part of an eternal unifying movement. In this sense, the good that is development and accomplishment of the self has the sense of following the laws of the reality of the self», that is to say of man. For this reason, «the moral laws are included among the laws of reality and the good can be explained starting from the true nature of the reality of the self». In other words, Nishida adds that «looking for the good and going back to the good coincides with the search for truth» and, as this fundamental step ends, «in other cultures too, mainly in the Greek one expressed by Plato but also in the Upanishad of India, they have understood good in this sense».

If Japanese philosophy invented itself due to the meeting with the West, things are not so different in the Chinese world. Anne Cheng, in fact, talks about Chinese philosophic traditions invented by China looking at itself through the western eyes. And the Western world, vice versa, looks at China to avoid what it wants to discard about itself, most of all the metaphysics stating the transcendence of God and the good. For this purpose, Anne Cheng quoting the Chinese philosopher Feng says:

> From a certain point of view, we can say that “the study of the principles” [...] has its own methodology, that is to say what we call “method to practice studying”. But it is a method that does not aim at the research of knowledge but at the moral culture of the self, not at the search for truths but to the one of the good.

But this is the point: What can we call good?

As in the case of Japan, I will limit myself to just one way of understanding, being impossible to sum up a culture that is thousands years old. This time my quick example comes from Mencius’ period as he perfectly explains the first quotation by Cheng that I have proposed: the West looks at the Chinese thought to find models different from the metaphysical ones. And, having the wish of being quick, here comes out that nothing corresponds to what we call “the good” but that it is ethical. For this purpose, Mencius talks about ren, that is to say sense of humanity that we have to bear in mind when managing the public res, public matters. Any political action and the so-called common one, must be lead by this supreme sense that is the way for the unity of man and nature, the union of Man and Heaven. Even though this relationship is a problematic one, the link between the vital energy of the qi and the moral character of human nature cannot be ignored. This latter will progress in the exaltation of the goodness characterising it, and therefore in the holiness, thanks to the fundamental unity of human nature for the interaction between xing and ming, that is to say the nature «properly human but originally generated from Heaven».

The following rebirth by Confucius of the Chinese

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8 Ivi.
10 Ivi., p. 173.
thought will answer to these assumptions by Mencius and the continuity between «cosmic foundation and moral cultivation»\(^{12}\).

I could multiply the references to other cultures and texts: in the third Canto of *Bhagavadgita*, to Arjuna asking for «the way through which the true Good can be achieved»\(^{13}\), the Blessed God answers that in this world «following a double vocation is rightful […]»: the discipline of the speculative philosophers through the method of the (metaphysical) knowledge, the discipline of the practising ones (the yoga) through the method of the action\(^{14}\). The question follows what has been said at the end of the second Canto. Here two wisdoms are identified, one concerning the speculative side in which one reflects on immortality and mortality, on the beginning and on the end, on the being and on the not-being; the second wisdom, concerning the practical side. In this case, the highest wisdom and the highest thought is the one of the man who frees himself from any sensitive bond and «the man who, abandoning all the desires, comes and goes, free from any bond, who does not say: “It is mine”, nor “I”; this one yields to peace»\(^{15}\). In order to reach the true good, then, one needs to practice these two wisdoms and, most of all, the detachment from all that is material, detachment that is sacrifice through which the Gods’ will is accomplished and, reciprocally, the Gods can accomplish our wellness. This way, «such mutual service will make you obtain the supreme good»\(^{16}\) or Sovereign Good, also this accomplished by means of the detachment\(^{17}\).

I limit myself to a last example, drawn from the African culture, the Bantu. If for the Bantu «all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate», nevertheless, «each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man. Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force: the worst misfortune and, in very truth, the only misfortune, is, he thinks, the diminution of this power»\(^{18}\). All the Bantu philosophy is founded on one principle, the *vital force* that is also the foundation of their idea of the being that on its turn, is linked to the good. In fact, the wise one knows his philosophy, he recognizes the forces in beings. He knows about the growth of beings and their ontological influences. He notes the operation of the general laws of cause and effect between living forces which we treated above in the chapter on Bantu ontology. This ontology, inasmuch as it remains universal and truly philosophical knowledge, is the common good of the whole Bantu society. This universal wisdom is

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12 Ivi, p. 467.
14 Ivi, p. 39.
15 Ivi, p. 35.
16 Ivi, p. 40.
17 Cfr. ibid., p. 41.
accepted by everyone, it is not subjected to criticism, it has currency, in regard to its
general principles, as imperishable Truth. The ethnological views which have been set
out in this book do not constitute.¹⁹

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These few hints are certainly enough to understand that the good, in the
different cultures, is stated in different ways. Facing this diversity, what is the sense
in talking about the translation of the good? Evidently we are facing the same
situation of the Averroes by Borges, and we run the risk of calling “tragedy” and
“comedy” what is not such! Or, just getting back to the translation understood
as a Veranschaulichung, we can try to see what enables to talk about the good. I
have said that the Veranschaulichung is the translation in images that enable one
to understand better and if I had to find something that makes what we have seen
so far been understood better I would say that the good is not “something” but it
is an acting. As it acts and when it does it, it generates relationships, connections
with the whole, it strengthens man and humanity. This is a feature that can be
noticed in the few examples drawn but also in other ideas of the good. In addition
the examples I have proposed are different translations of the good, that is to say
different ways through which “the use of a word is made intuitive through an
eexample”. What these examples have made intuitive is a way of understanding
the good as different but also as the same, or I would say: the same but different.
Different because without any doubt it is impossible to say the same thing, but the
same because it makes the same thing happens, that is to say the strengthening of
what is human and the relationship of man with the whole, with the entirety where
it dwells. The good strengthens the human tearing him from his individualism to
deliver him to the entirety of the living and the cosmos.

But Veranschaulichung, as I stated at the beginning not only is translating making
something intuitive through an example, but it is also a translation of what happens
as it “brings in front of”. But in the examples I have made, doesn’t the good have
just the feature of what moves and does not fix in static essences? It, in fact, more
than being something that we call good, is the vital strength that strengthens man
and that, as a force, lives and moves, grows but it also decreases unfortunately; it
makes itself known in the “good actions” and dies when it is denied. That is why,
even acknowledging the righteousness of the comparative method by Detienne, I
think that the translation – understood as I have tried to propose – is more effective
to grasp what enables or will enable the different cultures to live together: the good
is translated not because it is expressed the same way in the different languages
but because it works the same way, that is to say for the human being. The good is
translated in this, that is it brings itself in front of man enabling him to strengthen
himself thanks to the strengthening of the vital strength characterising it.

It is translated creating bridges and spreading as a vital strength. In addition as
Tempels says, the vital strength that is the being is also the common good, that is to

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 36.
say the good that unites, joins and, through that, creates bridges – is translated. We are not far from what Cardinal Scola wrote in the periodical Philosophical News:\(^\text{20}\):

At this point, it is possible, starting from the consideration of this experience common to every man, to affirm that a relationship is a shared good that, if taken on consciously, can be recognized as the common good, the good of being together inside of today’s pluralistic societies. In fact, human identity documents that a person is essentially a self-in-relation.\(^\text{21}\)

This nucleus of the good, present in more cultures and customs is its capacity of creating relationships, it is the capacity of the good of translating itself creating bonds.

The intercultural look teaches us that, more than finding what we say the same way, we have to look for what acts and operates the same way, and then we find in the cultures and in the customs that good that is the strength operating bonds and discovers the goodness of the existence and the link with the entirety of the living being. Therefore, if translating is favouring passages, and if a possible nucleus of the good is in its generating relationships, the translation of the good will not mean finding words but experiences of relationships and links in the different cultures that nowadays live together, without renouncing to the their specificity.

This idea of the good therefore does not mean that the evil does not exist and the link with the entirety of the living beings does not know negative moments. The daily routine confirms not only the existence of the “negative” but also the failures that cultures face many times when they get in touch. I would like to end then with a last Veranschaulichung of the good, taken from literature. The example comes from the novel Life and fate by Vasilij Grossmann. The book tells about the battle of Stalingrad and the paragraph I quote is taken from the dialogue between the Leninist Mostovskoj and the German Liss, an SS officer, who handles a bundle of papers to the first one, to be read during the night.

Few people ever attempt to define “good”. What is “Good”? Good for whom? Is there a common good – the same for all people, all tribes, all conditions of life? […] In greats hearts the cruelty of life give birth to good; they then seek to carry this good back into life, hoping to make life itself accord with their inner image of good […] As well as this terrible Good with a capital “G” there is everyday human goodness. The goodness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the goodness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink for these water-flask, the goodness of youth towards age the goodness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. […] Some Germans arrived in a village to exact vengeance for the murder of two soldiers. The women were ordered out of their huts in the evening and set to dig a pit on the edge of the forest. There was one middle-aged woman who had several soldiers quartered in her hut. Her husband had been taken to the police station together twenty others peasants. She didn’t get to sleep until morning: the Germans found a basket of onions and a jar of honey in the cellar;

\(^{21}\) Ivi, p. 21
they lit the stove, made themselves omelettes and drank vodka. The eldest then played
the harmonica while the rest of them sang and beat time with their feet. They didn’t even
look at their landlady – she might just as well have been a cat. When it grew light, they
began checking their machine-guns; the eldest of them jerked the trigger by mistake and
shot himself in the stomach. Everyone began shouting and running about. Somehow the
Germans managed the bandage the wounded man and lay him down on a bed. Then
they were called outside. They signed to the woman to look after the wounded man. The
woman thought to herself how simple it is to strangle him. There he was, muttering away,
his eyes closed, weeping, sucking his lips… Suddenly his opened his eyes and said in very
clear Russian: “Water, Mother”. “Damn you”, said the woman. “What I should do is
strangle you”. Instead she gave him some water. He grabbed her by the hand and signed
to her to help him sit up: it couldn’t breathe because of the bleeding. She pulled him up
and he clasped his arms round her neck. Suddenly there was a volley of shots outside
and woman began to tremble. [...] This goodness, this stupid goodness, is what is most
truly human in a human being [...]. The harm from time to time occasioned a society,
class, race or State by this senseless goodness fades away in the light that emanates from
those who are endowed whit it [...]. My faith has been tempered in Hell. My faith has
emerged from flames of the crematoria, from the concrete of the gas chamber. I have
seen that it is not man who is impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil
is impotent in the struggle against man. The powerlessness of goodness, if the secret of
its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless. The
more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. [...] This dumb,
blind love is man’s meaning. 22

The goodness that makes her give some water to the dying man is the vital
strength as it is conveyed, as it brings “in front of”. Maybe it is too little to be an
entry category as Detienne wanted, but it is clear enough to build some links that
regenerate the ordinary living together around the good.

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22  V. Grossman, Life and Fate, translated by R. Chandler, Vintage/Penguin Random
House, UK (Kindle Format), pos. 7842-7962.