The Catholic Way of Death: Contemporary Reflections on Thanatology and Theology

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Introduction – last philosophy

The horizon of death – whether imminent or delayed – transforms all values. In his diverse writings on both theology and philosophy and through a creative re-reading of thinkers such as Heidegger and Husserl, the phenomenologist and theologian Jean-Luc Marion outlines his wish to return to what he regards as a truly Husserlian phenomenology, and one, this essay will contend, that has death at its centre. Starting from the notion of the '*es gibt*' ('there is') in Heidegger, Marion emphasizes Husserl's notion of phenomena as being the 'giver' to consciousness, translating this givenness as 'donation'. Thus phenomena become gifts to consciousness and Marion shows a concern for the gift that is central to the thinking of his former teacher Derrida. It embraces Levinas' reading of Husserl as having suppressed the 'otherness' of phenomena and his own re-emphasis upon the transcendence of the other, such that it shatters our *logos* and comes to us *unmediated*. Nowhere is this transcendence more evident for Marion than in the ultimate gift, Christ the *Logos*, and whilst Janicaud and others argue that Husserl specifically disallowed God as a subject of phenomenology, Marion counters that this bracketing only excludes the philosophers' idolatrous God of onto-theo-ology (2001, p.18), not the self-communicating and loving God of revealed *theo*-logy. In mapping out a phenomenology of love and a phenomenology of the gift of that love as 'being *given* as givenness', a condition of life itself, he proposes a first philosophy befitting a last philosophy (Marion, 2002, p.27). This essay will show how, throughout the genealogy of Marion's thought and that of the thinkers that have influenced it, whenever he speaks of the gift, its dialectical shadow-side, death, is present.

Death in the thought of Karl Rahner

In taking seriously the pluralistic, contextual, and interdisciplinary nature of theology, Rahner anticipated many of the themes that occupy postmodernity. In its insistence that our language about God is inadequate, if not idolatrous, and its revival of the apophatic tradition, it advocates, like Rahner before it, a new, more tentative, speech about God. Rahner has been accused of being 'fascinated by death' (Ochs, 1969, p.14). His writings on the subject of death as a universal phenomenon affecting the person as a whole map a tension between the particular, concrete, and changing (the categorical) and the changeless structures of human consciousness (the transcendental). Thus his use of the notion of *vorgriff auf esse* recognises that in our dealings with the world we are also always dealing with God. Our dealings with God are also through our dealings with the world; our apprehension of an object, will, or value is never mere recognition or choice but a reaching beyond it and through to the whole of being. Indeed, it is only because of this pre-apprehension that we can choose or recognise – the *vorgriff auf esse* is a transcendental condition of all our knowing and willing. Rahner borrows from Heidegger the notion of infinite being as an ever present and necessary background, the horizon for our knowledge of finite things; from Aquinas the idea of this *vorgriff* as a light that in illuminating the individual allows us to understand; and from Maréchal the notion that our being and dynamism is striving towards God such that the mind, never satisfied, is always moving beyond the particular.

Rahner can claim that 'the achieved final validity of human existence which has grown to maturity in freedom' comes to be through, not after, death:

> What has come to be is the liberated, final validity of something that which was once temporal, and which came to be in spirit and in freedom, and which therefore formed time in order to be and not really in order to continue on in time. (1978, p.437)

Death is therefore a moment of profound summation and integration in the life of each person, which confronts them as a mystery that underlines the reality of human finitude, limitation, dependence, and freedom and, insofar as Rahner understands it, demands a response from all – either in wilful resistance or trusting surrender, a reflection of their own response to that original Mystery (here denoting the divine *mysterion*, the original Greek word first rendered as 'sacrament' by Tertullian). This free choice to live either autonomously or theonomously is repeated throughout the lifetime as a constant dialectic in which every positive moral choice is an event of theonomous death and a lifetime of free moral actions represents a personal self-disposal toward God, ratified at death. Theonomous death is thus both an act of freedom (Rahner, 1972, p.92) and an act of Grace, for as the fullest self-communication of God, it is the Grace of Christ that, as one existentially open to divine self-communication, exposes the hearer of the word.

The full meaning of human death is therefore only appreciated in the light of the death of Jesus Christ, illustration *ad extra* of death as both passion and action, natural and personal, and 'there is an identity between the experience of the Spirit and the participation in the victorious death of Jesus, in which alone the real success of our death is experienced and experienced within a believing community' (Rahner, 1984, p.206).

With death thus rooted in the existential experience, Rahner is concerned to dissociate death from the original sin recorded in scripture:

> The biblical story about the sin of the first person or first persons in no way has to be understood as an historical eyewitness report. The portrayal of the sin of the first man is rather an aetiological inference from the experience of man's existentiell [sic] situation in the history of salvation to what must have happened 'at the beginning' if the present situation of freedom actually is the way it is experienced and if it is accepted as it is. (1978, p.114)

Whilst the exercise of our freedom occurs in a history bound by (original) sin and self-communication ('supernatural existential'), the penal character of death as punishment for sin is veiled in *die Verhülltheit die Todes*, that uncertainty as to whether one ultimately dies to fulfilment or emptiness.

For Rahner, accounts of the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul are parallel statements that arise from different ways of speaking of the human (1966, p.352). Death 'puts an end to the *whole* man'(1966, p.347) as the unique combination of that original gift of spirit, embodied and organised in the self and orientated toward God, called to live teleolologically within that gift. But, whilst at death that self loses its previous organizational control, in the hope offered in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ it anticipates a gracious act of restoration not to its earthly form but to a new organization within a radically new *eschatological* liberty. Thus Rahner can affirm that:

> We do not mean that 'things go on' after death, as though we have only changed horses, as Feuerbach puts it, and rode on […]. Eternity is not an immeasurably long lasting mode of pure time, but a mode of the spirit and freedom. (1966, p.347-348)

In later reflection Rahner noted that:

> The conceptual models used to clarify what is meant by eternal life are for the most part insufficient to deal with the radical break that takes place at death […]. The angels of death will gather up all that trivia that we call our history from the rooms of our spirit (though, of course, the true essence of our active freedom will remain). The starry ideals which we have rather presumptuously adorned the higher spheres of life will have faded away […]. Death will have erected a huge, silent void. And we will have accepted this state in a spirit of faith and hope as corresponding to our destiny and being. (2000, p.14-15)

Death then, for Rahner, is a personal act embodying our personhood and freedom and our responsibility of love and faithfulness. It is enmeshed with freedom, time, and eternity not as *liberum arbitrium* but as our capacity to realise and determine ourselves in a definitive way (*libertas*) before God as a horizon of absolute Goodness. Our freedom is exercised in history and therefore connected with time – our internal time enables us to exercise that freedom. It is death that makes that freedom and thereby gives it its meaning by ending it. The end of our time in freedom is definitive and final and marks the passing of our own process of becoming.

The 'death' of Jacques Derrida

It was inevitable that, perhaps by default, long discussion of *différance* and absence would yield death as the dominant theme in Derrida's writing, one that includes concepts such as absence, finitude, *sous rature*, 'the end', closure, and non-presence. Death, following Ricoeur, is thus the maternal metaphor in a family of related metaphors of negation that Derrida uses, such as *khora*, aporia, and chiasmus. Derrida uses this analysis of death and its related metaphors to explore 'the other' of a traditional metaphysics that is always grounded in the positive presence of life, be it in the thought of Plato, Husserl (who grounds phenomenality in life), or Heidegger (whose humanism depends on a particular determination of *Dasein*).

Derrida unearths the paradox at the heart of Husserl's explicit presupposition of *lebendige Gegenwart* – the necessary condition of the absolute presence of non-presence in that living present which recognises death as a phenomenal certainty. This present is thus always deconstructed by an irreducible alterity and our life is characterised by secondariness and contingency; the general economy of life that, for Husserl, was irreducible to any one individual is, for Derrida, an economy of the alterity of his neologism '*la vie la mort*' (1973, p259). For the otherwise transcendental *Ich* this alterity is represented most strikingly by the appearance of the other,

which for Derrida marks the appearance of death, since '[a]s soon as the other appears, indicative language – another name for the relation with death – can no longer be effaced' (1973, p.40).

Therefore, in a metaphysics so associated with life and identity, death represents an 'excluded alternative' (Rayment-Pickard, 2003, p.18) which although repressed by its structures is nonetheless essential to it. This meditation upon death, the contemplation of this repressed other, undermines that metaphysics. So, rooted in these conditions of impossibility, the quest for absolute life, for Derrida at least, collapses in the play of life and death (1973, p.102).

Derrida's theology, it could therefore be argued, is one which moves between life and death, between a theology of the metaphysics of presence and its own repressed other: the theology of the death of God. The theology of *différance* means that:

> God is or appears, *is named*, within the difference between All and Nothing, Life and Death. Within Difference, and at bottom as Difference itself. This
> difference is what is called *History*. God is inscribed in it. (1978, p.116)

Death plays a crucial role in the reversal of Husserl offered by Heidegger (1987, p.131), to which Derrida is indebted. Husserl's phenomenology is determined by the intrinsic meaning of conscious life within an environment of intentional objects but by contrast, in Heidegger's work it is the death of the self that makes the existential conception of the Kantian subject possible (2000, p.308). Death is only an observable phenomenon but *zum Tode sein* is an entirely personal act, a unique and personal responsibility that clarifies the sense of being itself and without which *Dasein's* life is both meaningless and inconceivable. This is not an awareness of a temporal event, but an orientation toward non-being as an often repressed, possible alternative that we experience as the ontological

angst (*Befindlichkeit*) of non-existence, and which provides the ontological ground of care.

The Icon of Death

As Milbank noted (1995, p.138), in *L'Idole et la Distance* (Marion, 2001), Marion distanced himself from Levinas' discussion of *l'autrui* by reference to the notion of gift found in Heidegger's later writings. There he seems to construe the latter's notion of *Ereignis* as establishing a genuine kenotic 'distance' between Being and beings which superseded Heidegger's earlier tendency to fold the two together, such that ontic presence was finally 'appropriated' through the ineffable and temporal unfolding of Being itself. Therefore, for Marion, the ontological difference was a trace of the distance between the Father and Son, with the giving of the first occurring within the ever-yet-greater distance of the second.

In *God Without Being* Marion uses a deconstructive critique of idolatry to outline a theology of Christ as 'icon of the invisible God', a restricted theology that resists the attempt to reduce the divine *aoratos* to a visible image, an idol that subjects the divine to 'the measure of a human gaze' (1991, p.14) or human concepts such as Being. The divine invisibility is the other of visibility, from a separate order of phenomenality:

> The icon shows, strictly speaking, nothing […]. It teaches the gaze […] to find in infinity something new. The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible. The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it must always rebound upon the visible […] the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze. (1991, p.18)

Whereas the 'idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon summons sight in letting the visible […] be saturated little by little with the invisible' (1991, p.17). So it is that the 'crossing out of God's being utilizes the logic of the trace: ~~God~~ is a presence that precisely in being present points to

something that is absent', (Benson, 2002, p.197) and ~~God~~ who in giving 'offers the only accessible trace of He who gives' (Marion, 1991, p.105). Scripture therefore can only provide us with a trace of Christ, non-presence never his full presence, thus defying what Marion considers Heidegger's own idolatry in subjecting God Himself to *Dasein's* category of Being. Marion therefore insists on translating Husserl's *Gegebenheit* as 'donation' or 'givenness', rather than *présence* and for him the 'icon' that is the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is instead present in the gift of Eucharist (1991, p.151).

The problem is, as Benson has already noted (2002, p.193), that all icons tend to become idols and the line Marion draws between the two is not always clear. Despite its imaginative and striking nature, Marion has reinterpreted his relationship to Heidegger in his own mature writings. For Marion every face is given as an icon, a face that reflects our own gaze, 'not to be seen, but to be venerated' (1991, p.19), and he will argue – in conversation with Levinas – beyond the central paradox of Husserlian phenomenology by means of the notion of the revelatory saturated phenomenon which reflects to that beyond its appearance.

The Gift of Death

Heidegger presumed that an endless life would be both unmanageable and care-*less*, with no way of deciding what to do or when to do it. Despite the seeming lack of empirical certainty of our own death, the progressive contraction of our choices towards a single possibility is clear. Thus, Heidegger focuses on one's own death – even time ends with one's own death (2000, p.378), a claim hard to reconcile with the inter-subjectivity of *Dasein's* essential being-with others, since they are unlikely to all die at the same time as oneself.

Derrida noted (1995, p.46) how Levinas reproaches Heidegger both over the fact that *Dasein* is argued from the privileged position of its own

death and that the death it gives is simple annihilation, such that the gift of death is merely being-towards-death within the same familiar horizon of the question of being. Derrida therefore points out that the death of the other – or for the other – is that which

> institutes our self and our responsibility, would correspond to a more originary experience than the comprehension or precomprehension of the sense of being. (1995, pp.47-48)

Indeed, for Derrida, it is the very otherness of the other that opens the space of human ethics (1995, pp.107-110).

Marion seemingly aware of this distinction, embraces the theme, elaborating upon his earlier reflections on the face in *Dieu Sans L'etre*:

> To envisage a face requires less to see it than to wait for it, to wait for its accomplishment, the terminal act, the passage to effectivity. That is why the truth of a life is only unveiled at its last instant: 'One must not reckon happy any mortal before seeing his last day and that he had attained the term of his life without undergoing suffering' (Sophocles[1]). That is why the measure of friendship always remains duration. That is why to love would mean to help the other person to the point of the final instant of his or her death. And to see the other finally, in truth, would mean, in the end, closing his or her eyes. (2002b, pp.122-123)

This involves 'consecrating myself to the infinite hermeneutic of the face, according to space, and especially time', which, entrusted to others, should be pursued even after my own death. Marion inverts objective intentionality with an intentionality of love:

> Only the one who has lived with the life and the death of another person knows to what extent he or she does *not* know that other. This one alone can therefore recognize the other as the saturated phenomena *par excellence*, and consequently also knows that it would take an eternity to envisage this saturated phenomenon as such – not constituting it as an object, but interpreting it in loving it. (2002b, p.126)

[1] Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, II. 1528-30

Like Grace for Plotinus, beauty is not an inherent quality of the face but something that *happens* to it and the saturated phenomenon is a constant revelation. Marion writes: '"love is without end. It is only love in the infinity of the loving (*in der Unendlichkeit des Liebens*)" (2002b, pp.126-127).[2] The face of the other person compels me to believe in my own eternity, like a need of reason or, what comes back to the same thing, as the condition of its infinite hermeneutic.'

Givenness should leave aside that which it affects and receives it. If death were named as the event that suppresses every recipient of givenness, one must conclude that in contrast to the nothing, death can suspend and break givenness because it does not fall under the latter's authority. However, Marion suggests that its relation with death is much more complex:

> The mere fact that one can, at least in words, 'give' and 'receive' death already suggests this. What is not – death – could still happen to him who would disappear on account of the fact of his having welcomed this inverted gift (which is not). (2002a, p.56)

Is this just 'a word game without conceptual justification' (2002a, p.56), as Marion himself puts it? His answer is no, if one admits after Heidegger (2000, p.307) that death determines *Dasein* as the 'possibility of impossibility', and he draws two arguments from Heidegger's characterisation of authentic Being-toward-death:

> anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather, is an impassioned *freedom towards death* – a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the

[2] E Husserl, *Erste Philosophie (1923-24): Zweiter Teil: Theorie der phanomenologischen Reduktion*, Hua. VII, ed. Rudolf Boehm, The Hague: Martnius Nijhoff, 1959, §29, p.14

> 'they', and which is factical, certain of itself, and anxious. (2000, p.311)

Firstly, that death still remains for us (as *Dasein*) a real possibility and not nullity; in fact the possibility *par excellence* since it fixes the event of an ultimate impossibility, one absolutely certain although undetermined and all the more certain *because* it is undetermined. Moreover, since (as inescapable possibility) death only affects *Dasein* it defines its own most possibility – not that of a worldly being to be won or avoided nor that of the self to be maintained, but instead the possibility of the transcendence to be accomplished of *this* being, *Dasein*, in opposition to all other beings. In effect, the possibility of death accomplishes the transcendence in and through itself of Being over being as a whole.

Death is therefore no longer a non-event that would destroy the conditions of its reception by manifesting itself – when it happens 'I am still there to receive it because it appears well before I disappear'. It only appears as 'a possibility that is first because last, one that precedes my all my actualities, rendering them only possible' (Marion, 2002a, p.57). If death has possibility and actuality as its mode of givenness, the fact that it is not actually present does not thereby imply that it is not for us, but rather that it is indeed for us as *not being* (actual), but as *pure possible*. Death is not being (having to actually *be* in order *to be*) but pure possibility at every moment and every direction and as such it can exert itself over us without being or ceasing to be for us.

Marion thus refers to an Epicurean city without walls that for him defines the openness of *Dasein* – as radical possibility death accomplishes nothing less than an intentional exposure, thereby opening our world and therefore finally givenness itself. Death is given to myself and gives me to myself as the possibility *par excellence* – thus Heidegger is describing the phenomenological essence of death, authentic being-toward-death rather than death itself (2000, p.284). It is not a matter of one event among and

subsequent to all the others that happen to *Dasein*, putting an end to them, but *Dasein's* original entry into its mode of being – that of pure possibility without subsistence or usefulness. As originary possibility and authentic being-toward-death, death is given to *Dasein*, 'not as a final blow, but as send-off' (Marion, 2002a, p.58). Death, at least as this *pure* possibility, is *given* to *Dasein* for as long as its life and even as its life itself (also given as pure possibility). For Marion this is the clearest and most visible account of givenness: *Dasein's* ultimate determination as being oriented toward death.

However, it could be argued that if death is the possibility of impossibility, it only opens as possibility in order to suspend every other possibility, giving, therefore, nothing but the suspension of every given and in the end nothing. Givenness therefore encounters its limit.

Marion suggests otherwise. '[I]f death manifests the suspension of all possibility it does not in fact give little or nothing; it *gives* impossibility' (2002a, p.58). As the gift of impossibility, death gives the experience of finitude as an unsurpassable existential determination of *Dasein* – such absolute impossibility only becomes accessible to us in the form of being-toward-death. As a possibility becomes actual the possibility of impossibility remains inaccessible.

This, for Marion, is now verified in *la mort d'autrui*. Often it only illumines the factual interruption of life by an accident lacking ontological reason, one that reinforces the lazy belief of those left behind that life continues and death – whilst actual in the case of others – 'is still neither actual nor even possible' for them (2002a, p.58). The actual death of others opens no access to their death and 'closes access to my own possible death, attracting me to the very degree to which it closes the possibility of my death' (2002a, p.58). So in between the actual death of others as 'a mute fact' and my death as 'the possibility of impossibility' the modes of givenness of the *Ich* transcending its ontic grounds – what Marion calls 'the free play of a pure possibility' – are at stake, rather than the mere absence of

a recipient of givenness or the 'deficiency of worldly actuality' (2002a, p.58).

Marion finds confirmation of this in our invocation of death as a privileged phenomenon of life in poetry, hymn and Scripture. It then seems obvious to him that there we understand our own death in 'short pure possibility' and its 'ungraspable, protean and haunting nature' encourages the anxieties, fears and therapies that constitute the 'everyday pathos of death' (2002a, p.59). In the absolute impossibility which actual death manifests, my death is made more accessible as possibility and therefore *given without measure*:

> Death – nothing escapes it, but it does not escape givenness, not just because one can 'give the gift of death,' but above all because it gives itself on its own […] [it] does not steal from givenness that which (or he who) could receive it; it inscribes it (or him or her) forever within the horizon of givenness (2002a, p.59).

In this anxious relation between death and abandonment, the absence of the giver is not an obstacle, but a path towards Him and one that, for Marion, is travelled sacramentally through the liturgy of the church, both as the present Christ and as *memento mori*, an act of remembrance for a dead leader.

Death, Saturated

For Marion, Jesus Christ appears as an absolute phenomenon, one that 'annuls all relation because it saturates every possible horizon into which relation might introduce it' (2002a, p.238). It does this because its 'moment' escapes the time of the world (such that salvation is seen in terms of an unforeseeable event), its figure the space of the 'earth' (in terms of the unbearable event) – because his kingdom is simply not of this earth' he can only appear in it disfigured (2002a, p.239).

Thus the ~~God~~ that is crossed out by the sign of the crucified uses the sign of the trace to answer 'a question of saturation pertaining to the flesh'

(2002a, p.239). The death of Christ offers the apex of his visibility, such that we are able to claim that, truly, this was the son of God (Matthew 27:54). 'Only the flesh suffers, dies and therefore can live' (Marion, 2002a, p.239). This comment echoes one made by Rahner affirming the 'identity between the experience of the spirit and participation in the victorious death of Jesus, in which alone the real success of our death is experienced' (1984, pp.205-206). Crucially, although this seems to imply that it is our vicarious participation in the Passion which establishes the limits of *Dasein*, Marion suggests (2002a, pp.159-173) that an event is only inadequately given and cannot be the site of the disclosure necessary for participation.

The paradox of the flesh consists in 'the fact that it affects itself by itself. It also manifests itself without having to be inscribed in any relation […] in an absolute mode, outside or beyond any horizon' (2002a, p.239). The saturated phenomenon of Christ assumes this paradox of the flesh and avoids either docetic or kenotic error by always 'subverting the supposedly unique horizon of phenomenality, thereby demanding a never definite plurality of horizons […] indicated perfectly by a similar formulation in the two final chapters of John: "Jesus did still more signs and others in the sight of his disciples, but these are not written in this book" (John 20:30-31)' (2002a, p.239). So, following John 21:25, Marion can therefore claim that '[t]he world cannot welcome the writings that would describe what Christ did' (2002a, p.239), since it is clear that:

> the acts of Christ, even reduced to writings, exceed the horizons of this world, are not of this world, demand other horizons and other worlds. This principle of the plurality of worlds, or rather horizons, governs all dimensions of the phenomenality of Christ's flesh. (2002a, p.239)

With Scripture (John 19:20) thus saturated, such that even four gospels cannot adequately tell the story, Marion *must* return to the hermeneutic of the Face and the fleshly paradox commemorated in its only site of full

presence, the gift of Eucharist (Luke 22:19); if it we could grasp it fully, it would not be a gift.

Concluding thoughts

The documents of Vatican II were influenced enormously by the phenomenological method of Husserl, which was widely influential in post-war Europe; its bearing upon the post-war theological development and pastoral mission of the Catholic community is immense. The pastoral wishes of Pope John XXIII were implemented by theologians and bishops who adopted the phenomenological approach as one that they considered effective both theologically and pastorally in understanding and conversing with the modern world (Kobler, 1985, p.ix).

It is love – conceived as gift – that enabled this move beyond metaphysics and ontological difference. But amid discussion of the gift (Caputo & Scanlon, 1999, pp.54-78) among the 'apostles of the impossible' there remains the puzzle of how to approach such a dazzling ~~God~~. This eagerness to *dépasser la métaphysique* by elevating Heidegger too readily equates metaphysics with philosophy (this same assumption is made by Milbank (1997) and overlooks its possibility to think ontological difference or articulate *un possible rationnel*. Marion (2005) believes that we can address these questions through discussion of 'the privilege of unknowing', an Augustinian concern and a phrase that also appears in the work of Rahner.

Marion's greatest strength has always been in the quality of his interlocutors and his work reflects the complex interplay between the traditional Christian topics of hope and death and contemporary arguments on meaning, symbol and ritual.

In *Étant Donné*, he has successfully removed the divine gift from causality but crucially not from debt, and the gift of death – the very givenness of human existence – in fact leaves its recipient indebted until his

or her last moment and locates him or her within an economy of exchange, a debt which can only be repaid liturgically via a eucharistic move upwards towards the donor (~~God~~) and outwards amongst the community, a move that perpetuates the original giving. We are therefore encouraged to move towards the stranger, just as we are encountered by that most radical stranger, death.

This locates the Eucharist as the site of human hope and recollection of the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, our churches 'destined to receive the eucharistic presence of the risen Face' (2002b, p.81). The Christian hope is its memory and that memory is one of a death: a death that always gazes toward a resurrection (Rahner 2000, pp.14-15). The God of Marion's Christian revelation is the ~~God~~ whom no-one can see without dying, a look that we desire unto death (2002b, pp.80-81).

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