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Eschatology and Christian Ethics: *An Argument for Disabled Beatitude*

“However, as it is written “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” - the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

No one can say with certainty what life will be like in the world to come; only that such a life will far surpass our worldly expectations. Catholic eschatology studies four elements of the afterlife: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Eschatology is not an exact science; it presupposes far more questions than answers. The primary purpose of this paper will be to evaluate the pre-requisites for beatification, the state of being for souls elevated to heavenly status. Tradition Catholic eschatology draws heavily from the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Well versed in Aristotelian philosophy, Thomas proposed a definition of beatitude contingent upon deliberately *human* actions. For Aristotle, humans who strove toward virtue and away from vice in her or his life were magnanimous, that is, they lived the best possible life. For Thomas, striving for virtue remains a critical component of human happiness. However, reason alone does not provide *all* the pre-requisites one needs to place themselves in a position to openly receive the gift of charity, the grace which allows one to become beatified. In other words, reason is not what defines a deliberately *human* act. Thus, contrary to the arguments put forth by contemporary ethicists and theologians, this paper will seek to argue *in favor* of disabled beatification, particularly for the souls whose mental illness prohibited their use of right reason in this life.

To begin, I will elucidate malignant theology, that is, a theology which excludes those with mental illness from a life of spiritual flourishing, both in the here and now, and in the afterlife. Here, I will outline some of the symptoms of mental illness, particularly those of

Schizophrenia. Shortly thereafter, I will elucidate the God Catholics purport to worship, and the implications such a definition has on the wider study and care of the mentally ill. I will then suggest a path forward for the beatification of the mentally ill, carefully outlining Thomistic philosophy and theology by drawing upon Richard Cross, Kevin Tiempe, and Michael Romero to do so. I will conclude with general takeaways that must be shared with all caregivers of the mentally ill.

The Problem of Malignant Theology

Consummate bliss, satiated desire, eye to eye contact with the Godhead; these are terms that loosely define what Catholics recognize as beatitude.¹ Derived from the Latin *beatitudo*, beatitude can be translated as happiness. However, this happiness is not the happiness found in our fast paced, materialistic world, a world Jason Reimer Greig describes as running on “clock time.” Those living in “clock time” are measured by their material and productive functions alone.² How many material goods can one buy in her or his lifetime? In essence, a life measured by “clock time” is a life devoid of introspective thought and a willingness to recognize a metaphysical reality beyond time and space.

Though clock time applies best to the era of smartphones and supercomputers, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275 AD.) also questioned the legitimacy of those living by the tenants of clock time. In his best known and most comprehensive work, *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas devotes considerable space to the question “*In what does our happiness lie?*”³ In short, Aquinas

¹ Brian Davies, “Happiness, Human Action, and Morality,” in *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 156.

² Jason Reimer Grieg, “The Slow Journey towards Beatitudo: Disability in L'Arche, and Staying Human in High-Speed Society,” in *Journal of Moral Theology*, Vol. 6. Special Issue 2 (2017), 181-2.

³ Davies, “Happiness, Human Action, and Morality,” 156.

refutes any definition of happiness where happiness is achieved via the mastery of clock time. Those who abide by clock time may find their happiness in riches, honor, fame, or power, but these goods, though good in and of themselves, are devoid in meaning when compared to a human's ultimate end good, God.⁴ Unlike God, none of those goods are infinite. Moreover, unlike God, none of those goods fulfill our seemingly un-satisfiable desires. Thus, Aquinas maintains that true human happiness consists in ultimate knowledge of God, a knowledge that, for various meta-physical reasons, will not be made known in its entirety until heaven.⁵

Nevertheless, Aquinas also says that this knowledge of God begins in the here and now.⁶ Contrary to stereotypical notions of hell, the Catholic Church does not purport to know of a single soul in hell. However, the Catholic Church does purport to know of many souls in heaven. These souls are known as Saints. A large basis for this reasoning stems from a central tenant of Catholic eschatology, namely, humans are free to make a fundamental choice either to receive the love of God or reject the love of God through their actions on earth. This choice, best reflected in one's ability to reject or embrace a life of mortal vice (i.e., murder, adultery, etc..) is what roughly determines how God is to judge us immediately following death.

A serious problem arises from this definition and acquisition of beatitude, namely, how are those lacking reason, particularly those suffering from mental illness, called to flourish, both in the here and now, and in the life to come? Does not their illness preclude them from freely choosing to love or reject God?

⁴ Davies, 156.

⁵ When one is beatified, their will and intellect is transformed in such a way so as to comprehend the seemingly unknowable God. Our human mind and the language we use to cultivate its development, cannot and does not know all aspects of God.

⁶ Davies, 158.

For many in pastoral care of the mentally ill, the answer has, for far too long, been a resounding yes. Take for instance the lived experience of Monica Coleman. Though her use of reason remains intact, Monica suffers from severe recurrent major depression with anxiety.⁷ This illness limited her ability to emotionally flourish. Monica experienced suicidal inclinations and self-doubt throughout much of her graduate school experience. To make matters worse, Monica became a victim of malignant theology. As a practicing Christian, Monica turned to pastors for spiritual direction, hoping they may explain the source of her suffering. At the time, Monica not only suffered from an illness unbeknownst to her (the illness was undiagnosed), but she also suffered severe rape-induced trauma.⁸ The first male pastor showed little interest in the matter, instead attending to a baseball game playing on a tv behind Monica.⁹ A second male pastor questioned Monica's role in her own rape, asking "why was he in your apartment to begin with?"¹⁰ Then, a female pastor suggested Monica's depression was a "tool of the enemy [the devil]" that could be "cast" out in the name of Jesus.¹¹ After the three respective consultations, Monica was left questioning everything. In this case, malignant theology precludes Monica from a flourishing life until she learns to accept the apparent role her actions have in her own suffering.

For those suffering an illness which prohibits the use of reason, the potential problems of malignant theology can be even more detrimental. For Monica, malignant theology presents a

⁷ Monica Coleman, "Diagnosis," in *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith*. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 283.

⁸ It took many years for Monica's illness to be correctly diagnosed and treated. Though it is not the subject matter of this paper, it is worth mentioning Monica did not receive adequate treatment for her illness due to systematic racial inequalities in the United States healthcare system. For an in-depth treatment of potential points of critique at the American healthcare system, see Lisa Sowle Cahill *Theological Bioethics*.

⁹ Monica Coleman, "Silence," in *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith*. (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 178.

¹⁰ Coleman, "Silence," 179.

¹¹ Coleman, 180.

clear path forward, namely, she must embrace her guilt, ask forgiveness, and seek radical transformative healing from exorcism. If Monica does not embrace her guilt, she risks facilitating of vice, thereby, limiting her chances of beatification. In the case of those suffering from schizophrenia, they do not have the ability to fully embrace guilt. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical manual of Mental Disorders, Schizophrenia is characterized, though not exclusively, by delusions, hallucinations, and catatonia (general unawareness of physical stimuli).¹² In other words, Schizophrenia is generally characterized by psychotic symptoms that severely disrupt nominal interactions with the world. Take for instance the lived experience of Paolo Scotti, a victim of schizophrenia. In his account, *Recovery as Discovery*, Paolo described “fearing for [his] life” because he believed everyone around him “wanted to harm or kill me.”¹³ Paolo even believed his house was wire-tapped and that people could implant evil thoughts into his mind. These psychotic episodes brought Paolo to the psychiatric ward of a general hospital where he, like Monica, was “made to feel responsible for [his] misfortune.”¹⁴

Without proper medicinal care, how could Paolo embrace a metaphysical reality? Put another way, how could malignant theology account for those whose use of reason is profoundly limited or altogether absent? The answer, as we have seen, is that malignant theology proposes no solutions, aside the embrace of guilt, for those, like Monica, who still are able to do so. When it comes to pastoral or medicinal care for those who lack the use of reason, malignant theology teaches us that we can deflect blame and rest on our laurels. Flannery O’Connor once defended the holiness and meaning of the Eucharist with the flamboyant statement “If it is just a symbol,

¹² E. Fuller Torrey, Chapter 2 “Defining Schizophrenia: View from the Outside” in *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Family Manual*. 7th edition, (Harper: New York, 2019), 61.

¹³ Craig Winston LeCroy and Jane Holschuh (eds.), Chapter 1 “Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders,” in *First Person Accounts of Mental Illness and Recovery* (Wiley: Hoboken, 2012), 10.

¹⁴ LeCroy & Holschuh, Chapter 1 “Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders,” 11.

to hell with it.” What if there is no path forward, no real option for the mentally ill, in both the here and now, or in the afterlife? Indeed, if there is no path forward, as this malignant theology displayed, we may view the mentally ill as a mere symbol of suffering, nothing more than victims, victims who either cannot receive care, or who must embrace their guilt before they do so. This malignant theology is woefully incongruent with the metaphysical reality presented in the Incarnation, God becoming human.

The God Catholics Worship

As we have seen with both Monica Coleman and Paolo Scotti, there have been longstanding misunderstandings about the nature of God that have directly led to the spiritual death and marginalization of the mentally ill. In order to better account for the beatification of the mentally ill, it is worthwhile to accurately define the God who beatifies.

Writing amidst the backdrop of feudal Europe, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 AD.) developed a soteriological treatise titled, *Cur Deus Homo*, loosely translated, Why God Man? In it, Anselm argues that God demanded satisfaction for the sins of our Biblical parents, Adam and Eve. The original sin bore an infinite debt against the infinite goodness of God. Therefore, Anselm proposed the following solution: what if there were a human who could repay the debt rightly incurred by humans, who was, at the same time, utterly infinite, thereby meeting the criteria for the debt itself? Through the Incarnation, Jesus Christ became both fully God and fully Human. Therefore, Anselm concludes, God offered Godself as Jesus on the cross as expiation for humanity's sins. As infinite, Jesus repaid the full proportionality of the debt incurred. As human, Jesus repaid the debt on behalf of all other humans.

This soteriological proposal is problematic for several reasons. Above all however, it portrays God as a feudal lord demanding a bloody sacrifice for the wicked sins of humanity.¹⁵ This view of God is wholly incongruent with the ministry of Jesus Christ portrayed in the Gospels. Jesus lived amidst the Roman Empire, whose laws and cultural norms perpetrated the marginalization of the mentally ill. For instance, in the Gospel of Mark, a Gerasene man suffered from mental illness, so much so that those around him believed the man to be possessed, forcing him to live in a cave chained hand and feet with iron. Individuals like the Gerasene man were segregated from society, deemed “unclean.” Jesus, completely defied cultural expectations and directly confronted the Gerasene, healing him of his inequity and restoring him to society.¹⁶ This action repudiated the belief “that sickness was a punishment for sin” because Jesus, a man of clean spirit, was willing to directly touch the ill.¹⁷ Moreover, Jesus restored peace, *shalom*, to the Gerasene. He also restored *shalom* by forgiving Mary Magdalene, a prostitute, sharing parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and by radically claiming to be the Son of God.¹⁸

These actions infuriated the nominal power structures of the time. Jesus actions as the Messiah, the anointed one, threatened to upend every aspect of Roman Society, not by sword and might, but by plowshares, love. Thus, Jesus was falsely accused of inciting riot and division amongst the Jews, condemned, and put to death by Pontius Pilot, not because it was

¹⁵ It is unfortunate that far too many Christians embrace this notion of God. Take for instance Mel Gibson’s famous *The Passion of Christ*. Most of the movie is dedicated to the physical suffering Jesus endured, with little attention given to *why* Jesus was killed in the first place. Though the movie may be used to elucidate the horrors of crucifixion, I do not believe it supports a theology rooted in agapic, trinitarian love. It dangerously suggests that followers of Christ may have to endure suffering similar to Christ in order to be loved by God. On the other hand, it may also suggest that because Christ died once and for all for humanities sin, we have no responsibility to act virtuously.

¹⁶ Mark 5:1-20. NIV

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The History of Jesus,” in *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, (New York: Crossroad, 2017,) np.

¹⁸ Johnson, “The History of Jesus.”

predetermined by God in a grand scheme of debt repayment. Rather, Jesus died because of his earthly ministry; it was the price he paid, and a price his followers would soon pay, for constructing the reign of God, a reign of unconditional, unmerited love, in the here and now.¹⁹ Jesus' ministry destroys malignant theology and demonstrates a path forward for the mentally ill, both now, and in the afterlife.

A Path Forward

There is a path forward for the mentally ill. This path is best elucidated by Kevin Timpe, Richard Cross, and Miquel Romero.

In his essay, "*Defiant Afterlife*," Kevin Timpe sought to "resist the claim that having a disability is sufficient to preclude complete union with God in the afterlife."²⁰ To support his claim, Timpe highlighted the work of theologian Richard Cross. Cross wrote extensively on the Incarnation and its implications for disabled beatification. In the Incarnation, Cross suggests that the human nature fully embraced by Jesus Christ became "a total prosthesis;" a type of mechanism Jesus depended on to sustain his very essence or nature.²¹ Just as one without a natural heart relies upon an artificial or donated heart to pump blood throughout the body, so to does Jesus rely upon human nature to pump the divine life to the world around Him. If we believe Jesus to be the ideal human, the very model to strive to become, then it follows we are, in a way, impaired. Recall that the beatified enjoy the privilege of contemplating God as God truly is in His essence and existence. This is not possible given the corporeal limitations inherent in

¹⁹ Johnson, "The History of Jesus."

²⁰ Kevin Timpe, "Defiant Afterlife - Disability and Uniting Ourselves to God," in *Voices from the Edge*, 2020, 3.

²¹ Kevin Timpe, "Defiant Afterlife," 17.

our nature.²² Jesus could see God as He was because Jesus was both human and divine. During the beatification “process,” human nature is naturally elevated to a state where one can understand and contemplate God’s essence and existence. In other words, God gives us a quasi-divine prosthesis. Thus, Cross suggests that human persons are “normatively” substances that “include and depend on prostheses” to enjoy ultimate flourishing with God. This *does not* mean that all humans are disabled. Rather, Cross takes our impairment to mean a *dependence* upon the Divine.²³ All humans, disabled and non-disabled, are dependent upon God.

For the mentally ill, Cross’ grappling with the Incarnation offers an exciting way forward. To be dependent upon the Divine, Cross would argue, is an inherently good thing. It means that in Heaven, we will remain impaired, in so far as we are reliant upon God to flourish. This leaves the door open for disabled beatification, only, and only if, the disability in question does not prohibit the use of that prosthesis. If the disability only makes one more reliant upon God, then there is a possibility the disability remains.²⁴

Still, it would seem that without the use of right reason, one could not take advantage of the prosthesis suggested by Cross. Romero emphatically rejects this position. As a Catholic, Romero’s work on disabled beatitude reflects an appreciation of the 7 Sacraments. Before elucidating the Sacraments however, Romero re-iterates Thomas Aquinas’ contributions to the philosophical and theological dimensions of beatification. Contrary to longstanding notions of Thomistic thought, Aquinas and Aristotle do not share the same teleological conception of

²² Think about the limitations of language to explain God. No word or set of words can explain the infinite God, because language, in itself, is not infinite.

²³ Timpe, 18.

²⁴ Tiemepe, 23. Tiemepe seeks to push back against the notion that disability, in all its varying forms, is a necessarily bad thing that must be eliminated if we are to enjoy God. Since it is not the subject matter of this paper, I am neither arguing for, nor against, this position, though I will give an opinion later. See *Paving The Path*.

human nature.²⁵ Aquinas, unlike Aristotle, does not take the distinctive human nature to be “rational,” but rather, “intellectual.”²⁶ The use of reason is *one* act of the intellectual soul, *not* its only act, that helps to characterize the human being from an animal.²⁷ If humans were characterized by the use of reason alone, those deep in sleep would cease being human.²⁸

Romero continues,

“That is to say, for Aquinas, the definitive, specifying aptitude of the human being is our innate capacity for intellectual apprehension of intelligible truth – a capacity that can be supernaturally perfected (in act) to know and love the Creator, toward a mode of intellectual apprehension that exceeds our nature.”²⁹

There are two important considerations for our present purposes. First, all human beings, regardless of their gender, race, or medical condition, possess the potentiality to actualize their knowledge of a metaphysical reality beyond themselves (i.e., God). Second, the “mode of intellectual apprehension that exceeds our nature” to which Aquinas refers, is precisely the type of actualizing process that takes place in the eschaton for beatified souls. No amount of prayer or good works can achieve it; it is a freely given grace or gift. However, all human beings have the potential to work towards actualizing this intellectual apprehension of God through living a life of virtue and placing themselves in a position to freely receive the gift.

If you remain skeptical that those suffering cognitive disability cannot actualize their potential knowledge of God through the acquisition and living out of virtue, I do not blame you. Moreover, if this was your only experience of Aquinas, you may be led to conclude that cognitively disabled individuals have no chance of actualizing their potential in *this* life. Instead,

²⁵ Miguel Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” in *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 80, no. 1 (2016), 59.

²⁶ Miguel Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” 57.

²⁷ Romero, 57.

²⁸ Miguel Romero, “Profound Cognitive Impairment, Moral Virtue, And Our Life in Christ,” in *Church Life Journal*, 2022, 85.

²⁹ Miguel Romero, “The Happiness of ‘Those Who Lack the Use of Reason,’” 56-7.

the cognitively disabled must somehow wait to be “healed.” This is precisely where the Roman Catholic Tradition offers a distinctive element of faith in the seven Sacraments that refutes both those conclusions.

No level of intellectual disability can alienate one from the grace of God.³⁰ For the same reasons the Catholic Church supports infant Baptism, so too does the Catholic Church support the Baptism of the cognitively disabled. This is because the grace conferred through Baptism “makes possible a supernatural life by way of the infused virtues,” a process no level of cognitive ability can change or merit.³¹ All who are Baptized in the name of Christ are made “beneficiaries of Christ’s passion” and are freed from the pangs of original sin.³² In other words, this grace begins to perfect the *intellectual soul*, which is not damaged by, nor can it ever be damaged by, corporeal afflictions.³³ No physical limitation can weaken the intellectual soul because the intellectual soul is linked to our dignity, a dignity derived from being made in the very image and likeness of God.³⁴ Thus, though I may have a missing limb from a car accident, I still possess the same amount of dignity as one with all limbs intact, or for that matter, even a fetus in the womb. Each person in this scenario has an intellectual soul gifted to them by God, at the moment of their conception, that is not contingent upon their respective developmental and/or corporeal limitations.

For all who are Baptized, God infuses a supernatural disposition to act virtuously, *whether we know it or not*. This disposition is neither enhanced, *nor limited*, by cognitive

³⁰ Miguel Romero, “Profound Cognitive Impairment, Moral Virtue, and Our Life in Christ,” 80.

³¹ Romero, 87.

³² Brian Davies, “The Sacraments of the Christian Church,” in *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 336.

³³ Romero, 89. For a more in-depth discussion and definition of intellectual soul, see Davies, “Human Beings and Divine Government,” in *Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary*, 128.

³⁴ Romero, 86.

ability.³⁵ Aquinas maintains that though we are free to choose or reject God, by partaking in the Sacraments (especially Baptism), God moves the human will toward that which is good, true, and beautiful, Godself.³⁶ Put simply, the graces conferred begin actualizing our potential to know God by making God somehow more palpable, accessible, and tangible, for all those who partake in the Sacraments. To be fair, this is a conclusion derived from faith, and not by something measurable scientifically. You cannot place two people, one Baptized and one not Baptized, side by side and quantitatively conclude that one knows God or chooses God (by say, going to church) more often than another. What Catholics can reasonably hope is that God reveals Himself, in some mysterious way, *more readily* to those who are Baptized.

Though it is a matter of faith, what might the positive effects of the Sacraments look like in the life of a cognitively disabled individual? For this, it is prudent to mention Vicente Romero, Miguel's older brother. Though he is thirty-eight years old, Vicente's cognitive ability is that of an infant. Still, Vicente is one of the most virtuous people Miguel knows. Indeed, Vicente was baptized into the Catholic Church at a young age and participated in further Sacraments (i.e., the Eucharist, Confirmation etc.).³⁷ Though no one can say with certainty how Vicente knows God, Vicente displays numerous virtues that are holy and Christ-like. For example, Vicente displays the virtue of temperance when he chews slowly, the virtue of courage when willing to trust in the goodness of his family even when they bring him to strange appointments, and the virtue of prudence to distinguish that some things are good and some things are bad.³⁸ Once again, no one is seeking to argue that Vicente displays these virtues *only*

³⁵ Romero, 90.

³⁶ Romero, 90.

³⁷ Romero, 84.

³⁸ Romero, 91.

because of the Sacraments. However, Miguel believes, as do I, that Vicente loving actions reflect a “knowledge that is not his own” and a “principle of desire that his not his own.”³⁹ This knowledge and desire is a gift from the Creator, transmitted through the infused virtues yes, but also by Vicente’s loving caregivers who model Christ every day. All humans, regardless of their use of reason, possesses the ability to receive this knowledge and desire. Therefore, Vicente has as good of a chance, as would Miguel, of preparing himself for beatification because he is living a life of virtue, even if he does not acutely know he is doing so.

Paving the Path

Disabled beatification is possible because the human being is not characterized by reason alone. We each possess a natural disposition for God via our intellectual soul that cannot be corrupted by any physical limitation of the body. Moreover, there are infused virtues given to those who participate in the Sacraments that actualize our intellectual soul’s potential to contemplatively know, love, and serve God in this life, thereby, preparing humans for beatification. God is not a feudal lord who demands punishment for our sins. God is pure love, a love that transcends our worldly notions of justice, a love which knows no bounds, and a love which can and should be experienced by all peoples. This God refutes malignant theologies that seek to use God as a type to justify oppression, marginalization, and inadequate medicinal or pastoral care of the mentally ill.

However, I do not believe caregivers of the mentally ill should rest on the presumption that Sacraments heal the mentally ill in all their iniquities. No Sacrament can fix the grave institutional failures of the mental health system. Moreover, there will be some families and

³⁹ Romero, 91.

mentally disabled persons who do not accept the Catholic faith, or who have no exposure to the faith whatsoever. For these individuals, I have a faithful hope that our loving God will reveal Godself in time, whether now, or in the eschaton. I do not believe this is a radical conclusion, given there are many in the Church today walking back on the “no salvation outside the Church” cliché. With that said, any care system for the mentally ill, whether medicinal or pastoral, must be willing to leave the door open for the spiritual development of patients, because as we have seen with Vicente, even those labeled “infantile” can and do contemplate the metaphysical reality of God in their own unique way.⁴⁰ For some, it might be sitting down to do a research paper on beatification. For others, it may be the simple peace experienced in the presence of your loving Brother or Uncle.

There is also a question of healing in the eschaton that should be researched further. As we have seen, the actualization of the incorruptible intellectual soul is the means by which we come to know, love, and serve God in there here and now and in the beatified state. Thus, I do not believe mental illness is, at its core, a “problem” which must be “healed away” in the Resurrected State. Still, regardless of our cognitive ability, we all need a divine prosthesis, a divine healing if you will, to know God as God is in Heaven. Moreover, I also believe that God will take into consideration our desires in Heaven. Indeed, no one can see with certainty what the beatified state will look like. What we do know is that God will wipe away every tear and will satisfy all our desires in a way material goods simply cannot. At any rate, God awaits us. Do we want God? Do we want to bring others to God? That is the question those treating the mentally ill must answer in their concrete actions every day.

⁴⁰ This view is in line with JP II. See Kevin D. O’Rourke and Boyle, *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teachings*, Chapter 62 (Psychotherapy).

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