Philosophical Hermeneutics: A Path to Intercultural Understanding Through Translation

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Abstract *In philosophical hermeneutics, the thoughts of Gadamer and Ricoeur about conditions of attaining to understanding are of utmost interest. Gadamer, by proposing "fusion of horizons" and considering the prejudices of interpreter as basic factors of interpreting and understanding of all phenomena, and Ricoeur, by believing that we as human being only can understand the Self through understanding Other, have paved the paths to attaining intercultural understanding. This study tried to investigate the fundamental role of translation in the intercultural understanding from the window of philosophical hermeneutics, because according to Gadamer all understandings occur in language and this asserts that translation, as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, can, after catastrophe of Babel, take the hearts and tongues of scattered human beings close to each other and as Ricoeur believes, humanity enjoys equivalence in spite of alterity.*

Keywords: translation, philosophical hermeneutics, intercultural understanding, intercultural empathy, culture, civilization, Other, Self.

1. Introduction

Ironically, some myths, however unbelievable, have consequences which are credible and real. After the catastrophe of Babel by which the people were scattered in both languages and cultures, the nostalgic need for returning to the time when all humanity had a single language caused people to think of paths for unity. Travels began to discover lost parts of this single humanity and entered it to globalization and made it identical to search for unity.

According to Smith (2000), entering the global era means both discovering physical lands and connecting them in colonial time, and establishing a global market based on western values in post-colonial era.(as cited in Yangsheng, 2009, p. 240). Although these factors may be essential for making connections among different cultures and civilizations, they are not sufficient for making a united cultural humanity, as the experiences of the two World Wars, rising and escalating terrorism, growth in diseases in world level such as aids and the sinister global warming put assertion on it. In this world of dynamic equivalence, as well as differences, agreement among cultures seems troublesome but inevitable.

To reach this agreement, we need interpreting and then understanding other cultures because without understanding a phenomenon communicating with it is impossible and in case of cultures and civilizations may lead to clashes. Hence, humanity needs paths through which it could be able to attain this understanding and indeed agreement. This agreement and understanding after all needs language, the phenomenon in which people seek for unity. But how language can help people? The answer can be a mediator among languages.

The significance of translation in interconnecting people is so obvious that some scholars as Jumplet name the 20th century as "age of translation" or Benjamin names it the "reproduction" (Newmark, 1981, p. 3) and it seems that experiencing calamities in this dynamic world causes humanity to come closer to each other by translation. It seems that humanity needs something more than mere connections to return to the

pure language and culture which one time under the aegis of a single community they enjoyed. They should be able to understand each other underlined by a kind of hermeneutics. This issue may raise some questions: how does this understanding occur by means of hermeneutics? What are the conditions of attaining this understanding? Can this hermeneutical understanding occur in translation? In the present article, it has been tried to identify the role of the intercultural understanding among different civilizations and attaining *intercultural empathy* through approaches of philosophical hermeneutics and the significance which translation has for reaching this understanding.

2. Language: Foundation for Intercultural Understanding

Newmark (1988) defines culture as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (p. 94). From this definition it can be concluded that culture is identified by its manifestation and is embedded to the language of the community. Therefore, for understanding a culture it is necessary to consider what is made manifest through religion, myth, literature, and language and so on. By this, admittedly, having culture means acting and experiencing cultural phenomena.

Phenomenology, a philosophical school introduced by Husserl, is in search for independent investigation and knowledge to experiences and observations (phenomenon) which directly come to our experience. Husserl asserts that for attaining a valid interpretation of phenomenon we should release ourselves from all pre-judgments and pre-assumptions. In case of interpretation, Husserl's phenomenology has a basic role in distinguishing the intended objects of consciousness and the consciousness of such objects or our psychical acts (Honderich, 1995, p. 382).

Accordingly, for interpreting and understanding cultural phenomena which are manifested in language, the intended meaning (our psychical acts) and the object meant by it is distinguishable. The intended meaning and the object intended have not correlate in a real, out-there world for cultural phenomenon to be meaningful. In fact, there are many expressions whose intended objects do not occur or exist in the real world such as mystical creatures, but the expressions containing them are meaningful and understandable to the people of that culture (Mueller-Vollmer, 2006, p. 30).

However, for reaching cultural understanding, the notion of language is fundamental as Humboldt argues that humans can understand each other because they produce (*erzeugen*) and understand speech (*Rede*) according to the same underlying principles: those of the mind and those embodied in the grammar of the language which they share. (ibid, p.14). Hence, Interpretation for Humboldt is based on an active linguistic competence shared between speaker and listener. "One can understand a word which one hears only because one could have spoken it oneself," (ibid.p.13, 14). In fact Humboldt believes that the deep structure (competence) underlying the language performance of occurred in a dialogue is a major factor in coproduction of meaning and interpretation.

More radically, Gadamer believes that all understandings occur in language-event or through language. Therefore, the path to attaining cultural understanding in order to prevent from any clash in human societies according to Gadamer is a *common language* in which "the point is no longer the fact that I think this and you think that, but rather it involves *the shared interpretation of the world which makes moral and social solidarity possible*"(Gadamer, 2007, p. 96). By this it may be concluded that the interpretation and understanding of culture is analogous to interpretation of text. In fact, as texts manifest their meaning through their syntax, signs, context and etc. the culture also manifests itself through signs, language, myth, structure. Hence, both of them can be understandable by similar methods through interpreting their signs. Therefore, the assumptions underlying philosophical hermeneutics, especially those of Heidegger's, Gadamer's and Ricoeur's are very significant for understanding cultures.

3. Philosophical Hermeneutics: Understanding Cultures under the Aegis of a Single Humanity

The key notion to hermeneutics especially philosophical one is the hermeneutic circle which notifies that art and whole of an understandable phenomenon are interrelated to each other. In fact, for understanding the whole part of a text, the sentences should be understood. But at the same time the understanding of the sentence is dependent on the understanding of both words and the whole text itself. "Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole"(Gadamer, 2004, p. 291).

Accordingly, for understanding humanity as a single whole needs understanding its part i.e. different languages and cultures. On the other hand, these scattered parts need a single whole to become understood. It should be noted that humanity as a single whole also interrelates to history which embraces humanity as its part. Hence, the interrelation of this whole-part results in understanding of a different culture, humanity, and history.

But according to Gadamer (2004), attaining an understanding requires fore-projection of meaning for the thing to be understood. In fact, the person who wants to understand the thing is equipped "with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there" (ibid, p. 296).

Gadamer believes that an interpreter is susceptible to misunderstanding when he is distorted from fore-meanings which are not relevant to the things (text or cultural signs) themselves (ibid, p. 270). Therefore, the cultural interpreter faces a kind of misunderstanding which could lead to clashes of cultures and civilizations. In fact, when he works out these fore-meanings correctly and in a process of hermeneutic movement guides his prejudgments (not presumptions) to the right path which is guided by the horizons of the thing to be interpreted per se, he can remove any harmful prejudices which hinder valid interpretations and consequently cultural understanding.

In case of any understanding, according to Heidegger, the interpreter always is projecting the meaning initiated by his fore-meanings and fore-structures which themselves are constructed or in a better term raised by the horizons projected by the thing. (ibid, p. 296). This hermeneutic circle is constantly revised in a hermeneutic movement toward reaching a "fusion of horizons" and cultural understanding. Attaining an understanding does not occur in a vacuum, or as Gadamer argues in an arbitrary way.

On the other hand, we cannot blindly approach to understanding cultural phenomena without knowing our own fore-meanings about them. Our fore-meanings are foundations for a valid interpretation, but the cultural interpreter is bound to his situatedness and socio-cultural stances in order to project these fore-structures to the horizons of the text. In fact our own fore-meanings are as windows which can prevent the fresh air of the *Other* or can facilitate passing of this fresh air to the amort culture. Gadamer (2004) asserts the importance of prejudgments in understanding:

> "Of course this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it."(p. 271)

On the other hand, understanding involves in dialogues among the interpreter (in the receiver culture) and the object to be understood (the other culture). This is a fundamental prerequisite for every valid understanding. "Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says."(Gadamer, 2004, p. 387)

For Gadamer who sees understanding as conversation and dialogue, attaining agreement in this dialogue is of high importance because each dialogue occurs in hope of agreement and if the dialogue leads to no agreement, it means that the mutual understanding has been abortive. Gadamer believes that

"Understanding is, primarily, agreement (*Verstandnis ist zunachst Einverstandnis*). Thus people usually understand (*verstehen*) each other immediately, or they make themselves understood (*verstandigen sich*) with a view toward reaching agreement (*Einverstandnis*)."(ibid, p. 180)

Hence, in order to know our culture we should, as Heidegger argues in a phenomenological way, release our fore-structures of understanding of ourselves and our culture in understanding "what is there" or another culture's signs (objects to be understood) which is the other side of a hermeneutical dialogue.

Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics is conducted to the trilogy of language, understanding, and dialogue. He, in his philosophical hermeneutics, tries to establish his ontological principles of interpreter's understanding and transference of meaning through prejudgments to the readers of the text. Gadamer was the first one who asserted that all human understandings are in fact a kind of interpretation by stating that the human mind is always in a state of hermeneutical interpretation to the environment round him. In this case, an interpreter is caught among his" situatedness" (socio-cultural situation) and always interprets the world based on that "situatedness". By this he believes that the text basically does not have any established meaning by itself and its interpretation is based on the socio-cultural and historical context which affects the understanding mind of the interpreter.

"Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself [one's horizons] and one's partner[text] in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an 'agreement' about the matter at issue." (Hans-Georg Gadamer, sec. 2.2) Coming to such an agreement means interpretation of a text which takes place between the interpreter's horizons (pre-understanding) addressing some questions to the text and the responses elicited from the text's horizons. This dialogue continues unto the horizons spread to the extent that a "fusion of horizons" occur which leads to hermeneutical understanding.

Intercultural understanding requires this dialogue between cultures and civilizations and in consequence a kind of "fusion of horizons" or "fusion of cultural heritages". In modern world the contact among civilizations is inevitable to the extent that a kind of hermeneutical understanding of cultural signs and symbols in order to expand our horizons into the target culture. Every culture has its own codification system of signs that in the process of hermeneutical interpretation of target culture they should be de-codified and received as something new in the source culture. Language in general and texts in particular are the most salient codified cultural elements which by interpreting them and attaining a kind of understanding and allowing them to be expanded into the source culture, the challenges of clashes among civilization would be removed. Human being, the *Dasein* in Heidegger's words, for knowing himself should be exposed to the *Other*. The translation of these signs and making them understandable for the source culture is one of the most powerful substances in the hands of human.

In the process of intercultural understanding, the question is not what the creators of culture means by creating this kind of culture. Or even what it means by this kind of sign. In case of cultural hermeneutics, the question is how much we are near to this culture and how much we can expand the target culture's signs into our culture and make a kind of "fusion of horizons".

This kind of cultural hermeneutics is dependent to our prejudgments determined by our socio-cultural situation. Therefore, attaining a cultural understanding is in fact is a process of "make-it-to-one's" or letting the target culture becomes part of the source culture. Therefore, any intercultural understanding inevitably involves a kind of "hermeneutic circle" seen as expressing the way in which all understanding was 'always already' given over to that which is to be understood (to 'the things themselves').(SPE, 2003)

Paul Ricoeur(1913- 2005) the French philosopher starts his hermeneutical stances by criticizing the direct and independent understanding of *Dasein* (human existence).He argues that Being of human(*Self*) is understood and known directly and without mediation but it be interpreted and understood by indirect and dependent relations (*Other*) which include texts, signs, myths and etc. In fact, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is founded on this basis that understanding *Self* is something much more than a subject which by solely relying itself   can attain an understanding. This means that understanding cannot be attained through direct

reference to the very potentials of the *Self*, but it should be in search of *Other* to be the mirror of the *Self* for understanding. "Here he spoke of a *soi* that passes beyond the illusory confines of the *moi* and discovers its meaning in and through the linguistic mediations of signs and symbols, stories and ideologies, metaphors and myths."(Kearney, 2004, p. x). Therefore for knowing one's culture and its realia we should transcend beyond ourselves and look at our culture in the mirror of other culture.

For Ricoeur, the task of hermeneutics was to show how existence arrives at expression, and later again at reflection, through the perpetual exploration of the significations that emerge in the symbolic works of culture. More particularly, human existence only becomes a self by retrieving meanings which first reside 'outside' of itself in the social institutions and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is inscribed.(ibid)

4. Translation: A Shortcut to Intercultural Understanding

The myth of Babel tells us clearly that we, as human beings, are not united at least in the notion of language, hence diversity of languages: "Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth"(Genesis, 11:9 of 32). Believe this catastrophic event or not, human being faced the problem of understanding each other, then like each problem hit him, human being searched for a solution, a means for interpretation of the messages: translation. From then on, translation was the cross road to connect world views, minds, and hearts each of which, according to the myth, was unified between people of the world. According to the Holy Bible the *empathy* among people causes that they imagined of building a tower to reach the heaven and endanger the all-embracing power of the Lord. But what is the cause of this *empathy?* As the Holy Bible says it was the one-language among people that united them to offend the Domain of the Lord: " And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do."(Genesis, 11:5 of 32)

The Holy Quran, on the other hand, asserts this *empathy* among humanity although it accepts the scattered humanity:" O Mankind, We have created you from a male and female, and set you up nations and tribes so you may recognize [and cooperate with] one another."(The Holy Quran 49: 13) In fact The Holy Quran identifies this scattering as the prerequisite of communal unity of people, benevolence of the Lord to the people to know each other, to interpret their culture, to respect their differences, not as their disagreement, misunderstanding and quarrel. (Tabatabaei, 1988, p. 202). If according to the Holy Quran humanity is one, in real situation we see that languages are many. Hence this is a great obstacle to the *empathy* among this single humanity.

Implications of these Holy Words threw light on linguistics and translation theory. This gives rise to interpretive definition of translation. Accordingly, to some scholars, especially hermeneutical ones, translation is an act of interpretation which participates in afterlife of the *Other*, therefore; translation is innovative as much it give birth to the *Other* to shine through, to be interpreted as possible (Venuti, 2000, p. 11). From this the definition of translation becomes more general than conveying messages only. Even more general definition of translation is that of "interpretation of any sign; 'to understand is to translate' ". (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 11) .Gadmer (2004), in a definition similar to other hermeneutic scholars argues that "every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him." (p. 386).

By these definitions it can be given that in every act of translation the translators in fact make understandable to themselves the hidden meanings. The interpretive definitions of translation give this chance to translation theory to expand its scope while it goes beyond conveying the message only to conveying the culture and world of the other as well. Therefore in case of intercultural understanding, in fact we are translating the *Other* to the *Self* through "fusion of horizons".

In fact, translation is the place where every unknown cultural phenomenon becomes understandable by a kind hermeneutic circle in which a translator equipped with his prejudices approaches the other culture to

first interpret and then understand it. In this hermeneutic circle the translation make facile the dialogue among cultures, a dialogue which starts from the horizons of the receptor culture (the *Self*) and elicits the *Other's* horizons. It is in the domain of translation where the hermeneutic circle leads to agreement among cultural horizons. "Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself [one's horizons] and one's partner[text] in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an ‘agreement’ about the matter at issue." (Hans-Georg Gadamer, sec. 2.2) Coming to such an agreement means interpretation of a text which takes place between the interpreter's horizons (pre-understanding) addressing some questions to the text and the responses elicited from the text's horizons. This dialogue continues unto the horizons spread to the extent that a "fusion of horizons" occurs which leads to hermeneutical understanding.

Gadamer(2004) believes that "Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people"(p. 386). The case of translation makes this cultural dialogue feasible in the way which translation becomes the linguistic mediator for people of different cultures to reach an agreement on the subject matter. Translation is itself an interpretive act in which an understanding takes place between two different cultures. Hence, if we accept that every understanding takes place through language, in case of two different languages, we only stocked with translation. It is in translation where different horizons (worldviews) are merged and intercultural understanding occurs. Hence, every act of translation is an act of hermeneutics.

Translation has the potentiality of creativity by delving the *Other* to be relieved for *Self* to be interpreted and understood. Benjamin complaints that "our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works […]. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue." (Benjamin, 2000, p. 20). Accordingly, translation should not be stuck in the Self by only communicating the messages between cultures and retaining a loose connection to them, because intercultural understanding needs knowing the Other by accepting its foreignness and difference. No cultures are identical, however all cultures are equivalent to each other. In fact the only thing which may make them untranslatable to each other is "the looseness with which meaning attaches to them."." (ibid, p. 23).

Steiner, in words similar to Benjamin's, describes the role of translation as" a teleological imperative, a stubborn searching out of all the apertures, translucencies, sluice-gates through which the divided streams of human speech pursue their destined return to a single sea."(Steiner as cited in Htim & Munday, 2004, p. 134)

Therefore, according to these scholars, the remedy is translation to make human being understandable to each other, the role of translation as a cultural ambassador, something that travels to and fro among cultures to convey messages which are unknown, to interpret the parts which are susceptible to misunderstanding and as a result to the clash of civilizations. Hence, in this scattered time we need to return to this nostalgic *empathy*, to return to the *pure language* to understand each other and attain an intercultural understanding by the powerful role of translation.

But here a problem may arise which can be how much a language and culture is *hospitable*? Just Ricoeur argues any good translation accepts some elements of openness to the *Other* and lets the other shine in the self. This action results in *linguistic hospitality* which is nesting the word and world of the *Other* into one's home (on translation, p, xvi) while this shining lights from the other may cause us to find the hidden parts of ourselves and on the other hand we shed a light on the *Other* respectively and this action continues to attain intercultural understanding through translation. The implications for this *linguistic hospitality* are those of existing different languages and cultures which need a peacemaker as translation to reconcile them and spread their horizons across borderlines (civilizations) as etymologically the word translation meaning traveling across borderlines (trans- from Latin means across).

According to Ricouer this certification to inevitable variety of languages and cultures throughout the globe implies the illusion of returning to the pure language *After Babel*. Variety is the basis on which humanity is established. (Kearney, 2004, p. xvii). This argument is against the central notion asserted by Benjamin who

determines the task of translator "to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of work." (Benjamin, as cited in Venuti, 2000, p. 22). In fact returning to a *pure language* by the act of translation is the fundamental concern of Benjamin's philosophy of language, a belief which is more stuck in myths than in the reality of human life.

In a world founded on a dynamic equivalence, on differences for completion not quarrel and misunderstanding in almost all aspect of human life, teleological standpoints like Benjamin's and Steiner's seem absurd. Among these differences we need only agreement, *empathy*, dialogues between cultures and civilizations through the fusion of horizons, openness to *Other*, hermeneutics of the self, and *empathy* which require translation both at the inner and outer levels. As a consequence, translation has been the major preoccupation for Ricoeur and his ethical hermeneutics of the *Self*-- knowing oneself through others-- so what makes this possible is translation for three major reasons. First, how can we covey the meaning from one culture to another? Second, are there any alterity or differences between the *Self* and the *Other*? Third, why there is plurality of languages for a single humanity? (On paul ricouer , p 73)

Ricoeur's assertion of the unity of humanity is a path to the problem of intercultural understanding and *empathy* among civilizations as he suggests *linguistic hospitality* and opens his arm to the catastrophe of Babel and diversity of languages and cultures among people because he believes that what is unique for this single humanity is creativity which allows him to translate-interpret cultures without neglecting the alterity by the conviction that all languages are translatable.

"Certainly everything does not come out in a translation, but something always does. There is no reason or probability that a linguistic system is untranslatable. The belief that the translation is feasible up to a certain point is the affirmation that the foreigner is a man, the belief, in short, that communication is possible."(Ricoeur as cited in Garcia, p.78)

5. Conclusion

Bassnette and Lefevere (1998) in their book, *Constructing Cultures*, argue that culture and translation are interrelated to each other especially in today's global and internationalist world. In fact, investigations on both of them are going to graft local cultures to the global one. They also argue that there are different common investigations in which translation and culture are merged: "There needs to be a pooling of resources to extend research into intercultural training and the implications of such training in today's world." (p. 138) This interrelatedness of culture and translation occurred after a change in the paradigms of translation theory and much more emphasis on longer units of translation and extra-textual led by movements in linguistics and anthropology as sociolinguistics and cultural studies, hence cultural turn in translation theory and practice came into force. As Bassnett (2007) argues: "The study of translation practice, we argued, had moved on and the focus of attention needed to be on broader issues of context, history and convention not just on debating the meaning of faithfulness in translation or what the term 'equivalence' might mean"(Kuhiwczak & Littau, 2007, p. 13).

This shift in translation paradigm has expanded the realm of translation theory to boundaries of cultures and causes translation not only to convey linguistic messages among languages but also to make cultures understandable to each other as well as to hold out an olive branch to the humanity. "In a paradigmatic departure, the translation of […] became a transaction not between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic "substitution" as Catford had put it, but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. " (Trivedi, 2007, p. 3).

Therefore humanity needs negotiation and dialogue because of differences. Analogously speaking, the single humanity is like a puzzle with scattered parts. Each part has a potential to project the humanity forward. Hence, humanity requires cooperation, agreement, and understanding to fulfill the unity of human beings *After Babel* because

"[t]he problem of understanding is of increasing interest in recent years. Certainly this is not unrelated

to our very uneasy social and world-political situation and the sharp increase in tensions at the present time. Everywhere one looks one finds that efforts to reach an understanding between zones within a nation, between nations, blocks of nations, and between generations, are failing. It would seem that a common language is lacking, and the concepts that generally serve as guidelines for discussion—I have in mind, for example, concepts like "democracy" and "freedom"—only function as emotional appeals that make oppositions more rigid and the tensions more extreme—the very tensions one is seeking to reduce." (Gadamer, 2007)

These reasons are why Languages are always translated and retranslated; therefore, different cultures, in an inexhaustible attempt, try to make understandable everything foreign to them. They need dialogues and translations which provide this means with them and should take advantages the myth of Babel to merger their horizons into Other by translation.

In fact, in translation the *Other* finds the opportunity to shine into the receptive culture and be its guest. Translation is not a mere reproduction of another culture to the receptor culture but it serves as a forum for different cultures to understand each other. Here it should be noted that understanding is something different from adulating other culture as superior to one's own, understanding means respecting in spite of appreciating differences. "To understand what a person says is […] to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his [cultural] experiences (*Erlebnisse*)."(Gadamer, 2004, p. 385)

Hence, we have already the Tower of Babel, though virtual one, i.e. translation. By translation we can enjoy our differences, alterity as well as equivalence. Therefore we should disencumber ourselves with any trace of xenophobic   misunderstandings. The act of translation is an adventure in an unknown land and translator is a creative adventurer, who constructs comparables, who discovers the *Self* in the *Other* and let the *Other* to shine in the *Self* by his benevolent *linguistic and cultural hospitality* (See on translation p, 36). "It is in this resemblance or similarity in diversity created by the work of translation that the 'universal project' of a single humanity and the multitude of cultures are reconciled."(Garcia, 2008, p. 81)

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