

Richard Kearney's Concept of the Possible God in the Perspective of Antinomic Reinterpretation

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Abstract

This article offers an antinomic reinterpretation of Kearney's concept of the possible God through a systematic analysis of its principles, which are so-called *double identity* and *via tertia*. Firstly, I briefly summarize the main themes of Kearney's concept, represented by his seeking of middle ways between different one-sided antipoles (theism and atheism, metaphysics and negative theology, etc.). Secondly, I discuss the main antinomies following from *via tertia*: 1) God's and man's desire, 2) God's strength based on his weakness, 3) a kenotic theology of the cross coming from the concept of the weak God, and 4) the call for hospitality as an ethical consequence of the previous point. Thirdly, I concentrate on the weaknesses and inconsistencies of a such approach, and finally, I try to show that antinomic thinking enables us to solve these problems and even bring Kearney's concept closer to his original intentions. In conclusion, I briefly offer several possibilities of further developing these themes.

Keywords: antinomy – possibility – antipoles – cross

Abbreviations

ANA – Kearney, R. (2011). *Anatheism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

GWMB – Kearney, R. (2001). *The God Who May Be*. Bloomington: Indianapolis University Press.

Introduction

Richard Kearney's concept of the possible God accounts for a repeatedly and broadly discussed contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion. An idea of the God who may be, worked out in the trilogy *Philosophy at the Limit*² and later developed in his vision of *anatheism*,³ represents an original voice in the quickly changing field of religious thinking. A most characteristic sign of this effort to reflect again (*ana*) upon religious questions can be regarded as an attempt to balance always between two extremes, because he sees each extreme as one-sided and principally unsatisfactory. So, Kearney tries to think newly, in a critically purified way but with understanding for old theological conceptions and vice versa. He creatively develops the main theological themes as well as confronting them with atheistic critics. He situates his own hermeneutics between the romantic one and the radical hermeneutics of deconstruction. And finally, he tries to think about it in the middle of the everyday. I will try to explain in this article that precisely this effort to balance, which Kearney calls *via tertia*, the middle way between different, opposite extremes, constitutes a key to a deeper understanding of his thought.

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² This trilogy includes three volumes: Kearney, R. (2001). *The God Who May Be*. Bloomington: Indianapolis University Press; Kearney, R. (2002). *On Stories*. New York: Routledge; Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*. New York: Routledge.

³ Kearney, R. (2011). *Anatheism*. New York: Columbia University Press; Kearney R. (2012). *Anatheism: God after God*. In J. McCurry, & A. Pryor (Eds.), *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn* (pp. 8–23). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University; Kearney, R. (2016). *Anatheism, Nihilism and Weak Thought: Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo*. In R. Kearney & J. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred* (pp. 128–149). New York: Columbia University Press; Kearney, R. (2018). *An Atheist Exchange: Returning to the Body after Flesh: Conversation with Emmanuel Falque*. In Ch. D. van Troostwijk & M. Clemente (Eds.), *Richard Kearney's Anatheistic Wager: Philosophy, Theology, Poetics* (pp. 88–109). Indiana: Indiana University Press.

If we follow it consistently, it can show us inaccuracies and problems hidden in his conception as well as new possibilities for a more subtle and more differentiated interpretation of the concept of the possible God in Kearney's work itself or in its application in other areas.

Therefore, I firstly mention the main principles of Kearney's possible-God-vision so it can be clear that the *via tertia* may be legitimately understood as the hermeneutic key. Next, I will discuss problematic points resulting from his philosophy as well as trying to explain that the *via tertia* principle, based on the central notion of possibility, constitutes a solution to these problems. Even more, this strictly investigated middle position – later analysed as the *radical centre* – enables us to rethink the concept of the possible God as more precisely differentiated, and able to integrate different objections and develop new philosophical and religious investigations.

1. Concept of the possible God: main principles

“God neither is nor is not but may be”,⁴ is Kearney's famous thesis introducing his concept of God as possibility (*dynamis*) and his whole thinking based on articulating a strictly middle position. This idea shows from the beginning as basically pluralistic. Nevertheless, Kearney does not want to find just a compromise between theism and atheism, but a position in which different opposite poles can coexist in a dynamic dialogue without losing their own character. Kearney believes that thinking based on an exclusive principle “either – or” (God exists or does not exist, he is or is not such-and-such) often leads to closed and one-sided opinions, which rather hide and perplex than explore. As an alternative, he offers logic characterized as “and – and”, where I can hold two different, even opposite opinions; therefore, I can identify the limits of my own position and prepare space for a deep and enriching dialogue through which the investigated theme could appear in its full range. This *double identity*,⁵ a dynamic coexistence of opposites, characterizes decisively his work.

This betweenness means an effort to mediate between theism and atheism, metaphysics and negative philosophy/theology, which are understood as indispensable complementary views on Christian faith which principally cannot be grasped by unequivocal definitions.⁶ As long as God is mystery, each theistic or atheistic one-sided position ends closed in its own constructs, until their dialogue makes them mutually purifying and enriching.⁷ The same is with metaphysics and negative thought. Metaphysics, according to Heidegger, is seen as a systematic effort to solve theological questions ontotheologically (i.e., to talk about God in categories of being) – to say who God is and what he is like.⁸ These metaphysic conceptions, dealing with God as supreme being, says Kearney, try to articulate God's privileged essence, but they also emphasize his transcendence too much at the expense of his presence in the world.⁹ On the contrary, the dynamic, in-the-world-acting God of biblical narratives primarily places upon man ethical demands, wants him to act or not to act in different ways, and therefore he himself enters the world and participates in human history. Let us mention an unsolicited side-effect of this approach, which is subordinating God to theological systematics and causality, which according to Kearney leads to images of God being untenable in 20th century anymore.¹⁰

As a reaction Kearney tries to balance metaphysics with negative thought, where he counts not only classical representatives of negative theology, such as Master Eckhart, but primarily his colleagues Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. He presents, mainly with Marion's help, metaphysics as an insufficient approach replacing God with its own constructs – Marion calls them conceptual idols.¹¹ But negative thought is, according to Kearney, also one-sided, just in the opposite way.¹²

⁴ GWMB, (p. 1).

⁵Kearney, R. (1997). *Postnationalist Ireland*. London – New York: Routledge, (p. 8); Kearney, Richard, (2013), *Irish Mind: Richard Kearney*. [Online] Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9lx_sYzMjc (12th July 2014).

⁶ GWMB, (p. 2f); ANA, (pp. xi, 5f); Kearney, R. (1982). *Faith's New Age*. *The Furrow*, 33 (10), 650.

⁷ So called “dogmatic theism” and “militant atheism” are fixed with an image of God, which is remarkably similar, and which seems to be now untenable. An example that can be proposed is creationism and its critique by Richard Dawkins (see his famous book *The God Delusion*), where both positions suppose God being like an architect, running the world in each detail, although they do not question their own presuppositions. See ANA, (p. xi). So, finally atheism and theism reach opposite poles, but often based on the same simplifications, which Marion fittingly calls “conceptual idolatry”. See Marion, J.–L. (2012). *God Without Being*. Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. xiii, 16, 29, 31f.

⁸ Heidegger, M. (1993). *Was ist die Metaphysik?/Co je metafyzika?* Praha: Oikoymenh, pp. 36f, 68.

⁹ GWMB, (p. 24).

¹⁰ ANA, (p. 57f).

¹¹ Marion, J.–L. (2012). *God Without Being*. Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. xiii, 16, 29, 31f.

¹² GWMB, (p. 1n); Gschwandtner, Ch. M. (2013). *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 265–286.

Respect for God's alterity is so radical that God is much beyond our reach, thus we finally cannot say anything about God, his presence in the world, and our relationship with him. Similarly, Derrida's radical hermeneutics keeps God's alterity untouched, but his uncompromisingness prevents even the most humble God-man relation.

In Kearney's words, waiting for God becomes waiting for Godot.¹³ Kearney cares a lot about keeping the possibility to discern, interpret, and develop our religious experience, because without discerning there is no opportunity to recognize God's calling and respond to it, to participate actively in his work in the world.¹⁴

Therefore Kearney introduces the third-way-philosophy of the possible God as a constant balance at the limit, where we try to represent the unrepresentable and think the unthinkable.¹⁵ Considering religion, Kearney characterizes this philosophy as an ontoeschatological approach: he does not give up systematics typical for ontotheological metaphysics as well as respecting the impossibility to grasp and exhaust the God-man-relationship mystery, which still remains eschatological.¹⁶ This is also the essence of Kearney's *anatheism*: we need to talk about God in any way, but we can do it only when we let our images die, so that a more authentic and deeper experience could arise. This is also the reason why Kearney says that anatheism is not an end but a way. It is a third way that precedes and exceeds the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism. It is not some new religion, but attention to the divine in the stranger who stands before us in the midst of the world. It is a call for a new acoustic attuned to the presence of the sacred in flesh and blood. It is *amor mundi*, love of the life-world as embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, of eschatology in the now.¹⁷

But why should God, understood on the basis of a permanent dynamic tension between different antipoles, be called precisely the "possible God"? The philosophical basis of this decision comes from the philosophy of Nicolas of Cusa. Kearney adopts his central idea of naming God possible (*posse*). They also converge in the many principles of *via tertia*; Cusanus famously described his method as a unity of the opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*). Opposites can be distinguished only at the level of created reality, i.e., finite entities. But God is simple and infinite, nothing like creation, so he cannot be understood by comparison, our natural way of recognizing things. Unless I can recognize him through similarities, I can try it through not-alikeness, opposites.¹⁸ To conclude, actuality and possibility, thanks to Aristotelianism understood as mutually exclusive, coexist in God in unity. Therefore, Cusanus can say that he is what he may be (*posse esse*). This principle of *coincidentia oppositorum* transforms Kearney into his own principle of *double identity*.¹⁹ As well as in Cusa's philosophy where opposites are in unity, Kearney repeatedly says that God reveals himself in paradoxes. These paradoxes can be best explained through four notions: 1) God's and man's desire, 2) God's strength based on his weakness, 3) the kenotic theology of the cross coming from the concept of the weak God, and 4) the call for hospitality as an ethical consequence of the previous point.

2. Four paradoxes of the possible God

¹³ GWMB, (p. 73).

¹⁴ GWMB, (p. 103ff).

¹⁵ The title of Kearney's trilogy *Philosophy at the Limit* reflects precisely that. See Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*. New York: Routledge, p. 10; Barash, J. A. (2007). *Beyond Postmodernism: Reflections on Richard Kearney's Trilogy*. In P. Gratton & J. P. Manoussakis (Eds.), *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge* (p. 142). Evanston: Northwestern University Press. An approach based on experience of limit is developed in his diacritical hermeneutics. Kearney, R. (2012). *Diacritical Hermeneutics*. In M. L. Portocarrero & al. (Eds.), *Hermeneutic Rationality/La rationalité herméneutique* (p. 179ff). Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012; Kearney, R. (2011). *Eros, Diacritical Hermeneutics, and the Maybe*. *Philosophical Thresholds: Crossings of Life and World. Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, 36, 75–85; Caputo, J. D. (2011). *God, Perhaps*. *Philosophy Today*, 55, 56–64; Rundell, J. (2007). *Imagining, Narratives and Otherness: On Diacritical Hermeneutics*. In P. Gratton & J. P. Manoussakis (Eds.), *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge* (p. 103). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

¹⁶ Eschatological in the meaning of giving itself as a promise, concrete but still open. See GWMB, (p. 53); Kearney, R. (2003). *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*. New York: Routledge, (p. 218ff); Manoussakis, J. P. (2002). *From Exodus to Eschaton: On The God Who May Be*. *Modern Theology*, 18/1, 100.

¹⁷ ANA, (p. 166). Otherwise This defines Kearney's anatheism by seven aspects of "ana", seven creative returns: 1) anaesthetics, 2) anadynamics, 3) anaphatics, 4) anaphysics, 5) anaethics, 6) anachorics and 7) anaerotics. See Kearney, R. (2006). *Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology*. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (p. 8). New York: Fordham University Press.

¹⁸ Cusa, N. (2016). *On Learned Ignorance*. (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press.

¹⁹ Cusa N. (1973). *Triologus de possest*. R. Steiger (Ed.), Nicolai de Cusa. *Opera Omnia*. Hamburg: Meiner.

Based on the notion of possibility (*dynamis*), Kearney declares God to be dynamic, primarily manifested in the relationship with man and acting through him. The transcendent God is also immanent, “passionately involved in human affairs and history”,²⁰

And even he says that not only does man need God to become fully man, but also God needs man to become fully God.²¹ This approach changes not only the image of God – he is not the ruler, but the one who offers to man unexpected possibilities – but also the image of the God-man relationship. Man is called to responsibility, yet in loving brotherhood with God, because he is ready to share his sovereignty when he calls man but lets him answer freely, being himself dependent on this answer; it is not a master-slave relationship anymore.²² This fraternal relationship Kearney describes as desire. He understands it – influenced mainly by Levinas’ and Ricoeur’s interpretation of the Song of Songs – as searching for the beloved person. In this way, the Shulamite from the Song of Songs cannot rest and be fully herself until she finds whom she loves. So, to love means to be open to somebody else, different from me. Therefore, the desire itself presupposes the coexistence of two poles, spirituality and corporeality, God and man.²³ According to Kearney, this dynamic is possible under one condition: God’s desire for man is primal to man’s desire for God, and it enables the human one. I can seek for God because he first seeks for me. So, God is the possible God also in this way, that his possibility is the basis of our own possibilities.²⁴ This interpretation of the God of desire as the God of promise causes other aspects of double identity. Desire is in Kearney’s view an eschatological reality in the meaning of the tension between “already now” and “not yet”. Kearney says that desire and eschatology have the same ethical structure, because both lead man away from dependence on history as fatal, unavoidable. Alongside it, man is called to responsibility, which Kearney interprets eschatologically in the meaning of being called for action here and now, but on the basis of an ethical demand which is transcendent, independent of history but forming it. In other words, the eschatological character of God’s desire can change reality without causally arising from it.²⁵

The second typical paradox coming from Kearney’s assumptions is that the possible God, for whom “nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37), is also the weak God. According to Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians,²⁶ God is not present in the world as any magical sovereign power, but primarily in solidarity with the powerless. The essence of this view can be explained through Kearney’s understanding of the Shoah as a litmus paper: “After Auschwitz who can say God?”,²⁷ asks Kearney, and his answer is that the image of the sovereign omnipotent God, who wisely cares about his people, is untenable.²⁸ On the other hand, if this image of God is dead, we can find new space for an alternative in God’s weakness and solidarity with the weak, which Kearney recognizes as much more adequate to the essence of Christianity. But its best expression he finds – paradoxically again – in the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch-Jewish writer who spent along time in the Amsterdam ghetto, was later in the concentration camp Westerbork, and finally was killed in Auschwitz. Etty’s was an experience of the weak God, suffering with the people under Nazi oppression, who still constitutes an inexhaustible source of strength enabling helping others and to see beauty and goodness also there,

²⁰ GWMB, (p. 2). According to Manoussakis’ interpretation, the possible God comes into history, but he does not become dependent on it. See Manoussakis, J. P. (2002). From Exodus to Eschaton: On The God Who May Be. *Modern Theology*, 18/1, 102. See also Severson, E. R (Ed.). (2012). *Gift and Economy: Ethics, Hospitality and the Market* (p. 78). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

²¹ GWMB, (pp. 2, 79, 107f); ANA, (pp. 53, 58); Kearney, R. (1984). *God. The Furrow*. 35/12, 750.

²² GWMB, (pp. 81ff, 103ff); Feld, A. N. (2017) *Thinking in Action: An Inter-view with Richard Kearney*. *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, 16, 161; Gschwandtner, Ch. M. (2013). *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, p. 266.

²³ ANA, (p. 5); Kearney, R. (2002). *Carnal Eternity*. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. 26/2, 423, 426, 428; Kearney, R. (1996). *Narrative and Ethics*. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 70, 36; Kearney, R. (2006). *Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology*. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (p. 15). New York: Fordham University Press; Kearney, R. (2015). *What Is Carnal Hermeneutics?*. *New Literary History*. 46, 99; Cayley, D. and Kennedy, P. (2006). *The God Who May Be: Interview with Richard Kearney*. *Ideas*, p. 7f.

²⁴ GWMB, (p. 53).

²⁵ Kearney, R. (2006). *The Shulamite’s Song: Divine Eros, Ascending and Descending*. In V. BURRUS & C. Keller (Eds.), *Toward a Theology of Eros* (pp. 312, 324ff, 339). New York: Fordham University Press; GWMB, (pp. 58f, 63); Kearney, R. (1999). *Desire of God*. In J. D. Caputo & M. J. Scanlon (Eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (p. 114ff). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

²⁶ “Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1:25).

²⁷ ANA, (p. 57).

²⁸ Manolopoulos, M. (2009). *With Gifted Thinkers: Conversations with Caputo, Hart, Horner, Kearney, Keller, Rigby, Taylor, Wallace, Westphal* (p. 125). Bern: Peter Lang.

Where the world seems to be collapsing under the attack of a destructive ideology. This is exactly the weakness which Kearney connects with God for whom nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37), because he makes the impossible possible again.²⁹In Etty's words, later repeated by Kearney, "You [God] cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last".³⁰

Third, this paradoxical radicality, when God offers himself to man, explores theologically the "scandal of the cross", and the motif of *kenosis*, self-emptying, which is tightly connected with the cross. God made himself so solidary with men on the cross that he himself became poor and suffering. In Paul's words, "he made himself of no reputation (*ekenosen*), and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:6–7). Kearney sees this kenotic character of the cross as the fundamental turning point according to an understanding of God as well as man. The cross primarily does not mean the death of God, but the death of certain images of God, so they could be replaced by the kingdom of God's logic and its radical otherness.³¹ Stanislas Breton, Kearney's important source of inspiration, sees the cross as a new power, paradoxically coming from giving up our own power and the autonomy of our decisions.³²Breton also connects the cross with *dynamis*, possibility, Kearney's key notion, while interpreting the *dynamis* as grace, a gift which can radically but non-violently transform reality, because it frees us from individualism and fake idols to free our power to love and care. Such a cross cannot be more a symbol of the kingdom of glory but the kingdom of love.³³As well as Kearney, he shows the power of the cross as interaction between human and divine, ascent and descent.³⁴And because he connects the cross with *dynamis*, he also sees this God precisely as the one for whom "nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37), because he can act also there, where man does not count on him anymore. Therefore, the acceptance of God's kenotic weakness invites us to accept as our own a relationship with others, which primarily means the ability to take up their weakness and wounds seriously, because these are the places where God dwells.³⁵

A consequence of these three paradoxes appears as an appeal for hospitality to the otherness of others. Its characteristic aspect becomes imagination, an ability to see reality differently to re-make it creatively. Imagination can be interpreted as a certain systematic crowning of Kearney's concept of the possible God; imagination is our answer, whether we recognize, accept and develop God's gift and "impossible activity" in the world.³⁶ We can refer to Kearney's own social and political activities coming from these philosophical presuppositions,³⁷ that such a concept really can have very concrete and fruitful impacts.

3. Inconsistencies and weaknesses of Kearney's concept of the possible God

Kearney's concept of the possible God based on the principles of a third way based on double identity means a vital and productive contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion. Its vitality and productivity mostly come from its balanced, dynamic, comprehensible, and applicable position. Along with it, this concept also brings several problematic points. We can reduce them to two main areas.

²⁹ Hillesum, E. (1996). *An Interrupted Life*. Letters from Westerbork. New York: Holt Paperbacks, (pp. 57, 60, 64, 72, 74); ANA, (p. 58f); GWMB, (p. 2).

³⁰ Hillesum, E. (1996). *An Interrupted Life*. Letters from Westerbork. New York: Holt Paperbacks, p. 178; GWMB, (p. 2); ANA, (pp. 53, 58).

³¹ Breton, S. (2002). *The Word and the Cross*. New York: Fordham University Press, (p. 9); ANA, (p. 134); Kearney, R. (1995). *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: New York University Press, 1995, (p. 253); Kearney, R. (1999). *Desire of God*. In J. D. Caputo & M. J. Scanlon (Eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (p. 131). Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Caputo, J. D. (2006). *The Weakness of God*. Bloomington – Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, (pp. 4ff, 9f, 16, 24ff).

³² Breton, S. (2002). *The Word and the Cross*. New York: Fordham University Press, (p. 18f); Kearney, R. (1995). *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: New York University Press, 1995, (pp. 255, 257).

³³ Breton, S. (2002). *The Word and the Cross*. New York: Fordham University Press, (pp. 56n, 59, 69f); ANA, 133.

³⁴ Breton, S. (2002). *The Word and the Cross*. New York: Fordham University Press, (p. 88); Kearney, R. (1995). *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: New York University Press, 1995, (pp. 246f, 256).

³⁵ GWMB, 106; Kearney, R. (2010). *Capable Man, Capable God*. In B. Treanor & H. I. Venema (Eds.), *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur* (p. 59). New York: Fordham University Press.

³⁶ Cayley, D. and Kennedy, P. (2006). *The God Who May Be: Interview with Richard Kearney*. Ideas, p. 32f.

³⁷ Kearney, R. (2015, April 15). Guestbook. [Online] Available <http://www.guestbook.com>; Kearney, R. (2015, April 19). On Guestbook Project. [Online] Available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wL48TGQfr1M>; Kearney, R. (2018, October 9). *Twinsome Minds*. [Online] Available <http://twinsomeminds.com/>; Kearney, R. (2016). *Twinsome Minds: Recovering 1916*. *Lacunae*, 12, 65–90; Boyle, W. (2008). *Kearney's Choice*. *Boston College Magazine*. 68/4, 42f; Celie, K.-B. & Skaras, A. (2014). Interview with Richard Kearney, Charles Seeling Professor in Philosophy. *Dianoia*. 3/1.

Firstly (i), a certain vagueness; Kearney is not always consistent in his terminology, and some aspects of his thought are not elaborated in full coherence. The second weakness (ii) arises precisely from the strongest parts of his philosophy; an attempt to build up a balanced position also means a risk of mediocrity or mere compromise. In the next part I will try to show that through these two problematic aspects we can rethink Kearney's work as even more inspiring. It is possible to make some vague points (i) more accurate through their strict rethinking in the light of the double identity concept and this new accuracy helps us to show his position to be not just a compromise(ii), but very consistent, "radically central"; in Pauline words, the weakness can become the strength.

As I have said, Kearney's innovative *via tertia* between dogmatic theism and militant atheism, metaphysics and negative theology, pure transcendence and strict immanence, etc. brings also the biggest problems. If we elaborate the objections mentioned above, we can say that Kearney (i) does not always interpret faithfully those positions against which he delimits his own position and (ii) that he does not hold precisely his own principle of a third way and double identity. Both can be best shown in the central concept: possibility – and the same concept offers a key to a more precise and fruitful reinterpretation of Kearney's work, which was proposed above. As Kearney understands possibility as an expression of that middle position, let us have a look more precisely at the one-sided opposites mentioned above (actuality – impossibility, metaphysics – negativity, etc.), between which he posits this concept, how precise he is, and how can we reinterpret such a situation without betraying Kearney's intention.

The first two of such notions are actuality and impossibility. Kearney's definition of possibility between them is not precise enough; according to actuality, possibility has two meanings in his texts. The first is the central position between actuality and impossibility, for example, his major thesis "God may be" as the middle way between "God is" and "God is not". Regarding the other, Kearney often puts possibility as an antipole to actuality; when he, for example, criticizes metaphysics, he tends to position himself much closer to negative theology (metaphysics' antipole) and replaces metaphysics with his own concept of the possible God. The same problem is with the relation between possibility and impossibility: sometimes possibility is the central point, sometimes the antipole (for example, to Derrida's interpretation of impossibility).

His commentators explain persuasively that Kearney soon left his own plan to build a strictly central philosophical conception, which is caused by inconsistent work sometimes with his terminology. As Merold Westphal says, the possible God not only may be, but he also really is. He really loves men, he really works in the world – and, after all, this is a way how Kearney also thinks about him, does he not?³⁸ Is not then the possible God just another one-sided concept? If yes, it would be quite opposite to Kearney's original intention. As an answer to these questions, Kearney accepts this reproach for leaving his balanced position, which was confirmed as his authentic programme.³⁹

This critique indicates an extremely important point: the third part between two antipoles could be rethought as an alternative to both of them *and also* as in tight relationship with them. It is important that such thinking is just a consequent application of Kearney's own double-identity-principle. This principle says that two antipoles can coexist together in mutually enriching dialogue without losing their specific character. According to the following part of this text, let us say that they coexist antinomically.⁴⁰ But what is new is that in this principle there comes a third part: possibility is not just a middle point between actuality and impossibility: it also is in creative tension with each of them, as it uncovers their one-sided limits and the necessity of their deeper rethinking. So, we can say that the binominal antinomy includes a third part, which incorporates both antipoles without annulling them.

But is such an interpretation valid? If yes, does it offer anything new? As an example, let us consider again the relationship of the ontotheological God (metaphysics) and the possible God (Kearney). As Kearney and Cusanus argued, possibility seems to be a more accurate way how to think about God, but (as Westphal rightly objected) the possible God does not replace the previous one. The possible God really is, so possibility cannot be separated from actuality. In consequence, possibility is now extended by the notion of actuality which it contains: God really is as well as he is dynamic, being beyond every systematization. Therefore, we can paradoxically proclaim that in this antinomic thinking God actually is as possibility and that he may be as actuality.

³⁸ Westphal, M. (2006). Hermeneutics and the God of Promise. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (pp. 89, 92f). New York: Fordham University Press.

³⁹ Kearney, R. (2009). *Between the Prophetic and the Sacramental*. K. B. Putt. (Ed.), *Gazing Through a Prism Darkly: Reflections on Merold Westphal's Hermeneutical Epistemology* (p. 140). New York: Fordham University Press.

⁴⁰ Antinomies are understood in the classical theological orthodox meaning of two antipoles coexisting together without mutual excluding (for example, Christ's full humanity and full divinity).

Such a conclusion even more sharply defines Cusanus' vision of God as *posse esse*, where actuality and possibility coexist, but as undistinguishable. The relationship between possibility and impossibility is the same. The possible God is also impossible in some way. If possibility were understood as God's definition, it would destroy the whole conception.⁴¹ Only the *impossibility* to catch God definitely enables the *possibility* to get rid of our idols to make space for an *actual* relationship with him. God's possibility comes from his impossibility and vice versa.

This reinterpretation analogically corresponds with putting possibility between other antipoles, stability and dynamics. Kearney tries to find a place for God between metaphysical static theology based on ontotheology and negative dynamic thinking based on eschatological promise. Kearney's incoherence lies in the problem that he understands his position as a middle one, but along with it he noticeably tends to the negative pole.⁴² Here again, the tripartite antinomy offers a way of changing these weaknesses into strengths without betraying Kearney's position – even more, it enables us to return to the original plan to elaborate a strictly central, ontoeschatological conception.⁴³ Firstly, possibility does not exclude promise, but includes it; Kearney clearly shows this with his preference of eschatological approach. But we must add that he identifies stability too quickly with something opposite to promise. Therefore, secondly, unless we think God stable as *static*, but stable as *faithful* in his promises, we can legitimately consider him stable without denying him dynamic and ungraspable character, since both these poles contain a third point, the notion of possibility; God's faithfulness is also possible and dynamic in the meaning, that it really opens a new unexpected possibility. Kearney himself says it when he repeatedly works with the eschatological tension “already now – not yet”, an actualization of promises here and now which is still never full and definite. As an alternative to this approach he sometimes offers a concept of *microeschatology*. This can be understood as an attempt to keep the conception balanced, when it tries to explore God's acts at the level common day, as the God of small things, which means a new space of concrete spiritual experience without capturing God in any theological system.⁴⁴

On the contrary, Kearney keeps his ontoeschatological thinking consistent, balanced and antinomic in his analyses of desire. As it means a relationship which cannot be fully consummated, because the otherness of the other cannot be grasped, desire disrupts the totality of the metaphysical system and causality, as well as opening space for an actual relationship with God and man and their cooperation.⁴⁵

4. Antinomic reinterpretation of Kearney's concept of the possible God

Now, after these specifications, we can say that Kearney's concept is not overcome but is focused on its original purpose. Actuality and impossibility, stability and dynamics, shake hands in the notion of possibility, where they complete and develop each other without losing their specific role. Along with this, it is still necessary to be precise about the consequences of this new tripartite double identity or *via tertia*.

Firstly, not only the concept of the possible God is antinomic, but also the notion of possibility. It does not contain just one role or interpretation, but it is in antinomic relationship to itself: it is i) not only a ground for a specific concept (the possible God), but also ii) an antipole to other notions (actuality, impossibility, etc.), which iii) it also contains without making them subordinate (actuality-possibility of mutual relationship, etc.). The whole *via tertia* could be therefore described as a dynamic structure, variable according to its inner principles.

Secondly, this dynamic reinterpretation enables us not only to correct Kearney's inaccurate interpretations of other authors (mainly Aquinas, Derrida), but also harmonize them with his own concept much better than Kearney originally thinks. Kearney has been repeatedly accused of not distinguishing Thomistic metaphysics from the Aristotelian.⁴⁶

⁴¹ An example that can help us is the nominalist theology of Duns Scotus and Ockham. Scotus tried to save God's freedom by attributing him absolute possibility. Since he did not want to understand such possibility as chaos, he interpreted its inner structure as logical incoherence. But finally, such an absolutely free God is dependent on human logic. Similarly, Ockham insists on the distinctiveness of God's revelation, but also here logic guarantees the relevancy of theological statements, even about God himself.

⁴² See his interpretation of Ex 3:14 (burning bush) in GWMB, (20ff).

⁴³ GWMB, (p. 34).

⁴⁴ Kearney, R. (2006). Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy (p. 5f). New York: Fordham University Press.

⁴⁵ Purcell, S. (2012). Translating God: Derrida, Ricoeur, Kearney. Journal of Applied Hermeneutics, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Eikrem A. (2012). Kearney on the Possibility and Actuality of God – Critical Remarks. Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie. 54/2, 201; Janicaud, D. (2006). Is the Possible Doing Justice to God? In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy (p. 109). New York: Fordham University Press; Westphal, M. (2006). Hermeneutics and the God of Promise. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy (p. 83). New York: Fordham University Press. Also

Because of ignoring the specificity of Thomas' approach, he interprets the Thomistic God as some static, remote being. This does not fit to Aquinas' thinking for several reasons. His work was inspired not only by Aristotle and the Parisian dialectics, but also by authors like the Areopagite. Thomas himself knew the limits of conceptual thinking, although he did not manage to keep those limits always.⁴⁷

Unlike Kearney's reduction of Thomism to medieval Aristotelianism, he does not separate possibility from God's essence absolutely. In Thomism, God is understood as pure act, but Thomas also says that we can attribute possibility to God in the meaning of the possibility to create or to make something (but not in the meaning of being able to suffer anything or to accept anything which does not belong to God's essence).⁴⁸ I dare not say that there is finally no difference between Aquinas and Kearney, but that they do not contradict in the key problem, if we can understand God as possible in the meaning of dynamics. It means that metaphysics, as with Merold Westphal, can be integrated into Kearney's thinking, if we return it to a place where it belongs. According to Westphal, metaphysics does not have to serve only scholastic systematics, but also an ethical or personal image of God.⁴⁹ In this way, metaphysics can be used, for example, methodologically.

The reinterpretation of Kearney's relationship to Marion and Derrida is the same. If we read Marion more closely, we can see that his negative approach does not lead to God as Nothing (see Master Eckhart), but as hyperessential, radically overcoming human rationality.⁵⁰ So, God is not distant, but just cannot be described and stays unlimited. Marion's approach is not to negate rationality, but to ask how God reveals and gives himself. In such an account, Marion's category of impossibility is not very far from Kearney's possibility. Both are inspired by Nicolas of Cusa and his famous *coincidentia oppositorum*. Marion is therefore quite important for Kearney with his warning not to replace old idols with new idols of possibility.⁵¹ He enables Kearney to keep his concept open and iconic.⁵² Both authors share the motif of gift: God gives man himself to enable him a new, enriching, and hospitable life. On the other hand, this does not deny other differences between them, for example, on the level of ecumenical or ethical questions.⁵³

Very similarly, Derrida does not have to be understood just like a radical deconstructivist, whose hermeneutics prevents any differentiation. Derrida does not give up distinguishing, but wants to keep untouched that which cannot be deconstructed (for example, justice) along with the necessity to make concrete decisions in concrete situations (for example, making concrete laws).⁵⁴ Derrida himself says that he is concerned with the movement between these two poles, which can be never harmonized but whose demands we cannot ignore.

Patrick Burke argues that Kearney in fact does not criticize Aristotelian principles, but the philosophy of Francisco Suarez. See Burke, P. (2011). *Kearney's Other: The Shadow*. *Philosophy Today*. 55/9, 72.

⁴⁷ His famous five proofs of God's existence offer a perfect example of this incoherence. According to Aquinas, we can rationally prove *that* God exists, not *how* he is. Nevertheless, as he often uses causality in his proofs, he indirectly says many important things about *how* God is: he is the first principle, accessible through logic, understandable thanks to the difference between actuality and possibility, etc.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, T. *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei/On the Power of God*. [Online] Available <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdePotentia.htm> (May 20, 2019).

⁴⁹ Westphal, M. (2006). *Hermeneutics and the God of Promise*. In J. P. Manoussakis (Ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (pp. 82, 84). New York: Fordham University Press.

⁵⁰ As examples of this hyperessentiality there can be mentioned the experience of the other in love and even more accurately death and birth, where the first means possibility leading to absolute impossibility and the second its absolute contraexperience, which leads to understanding life as gift. See Marion, J.-L. (2013). *The Question of the Unconditioned*. *The Journal of Religion*, 93/1, 20; Kearney, R. (2004). *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*. New York: Fordham University Press, (p. 29).

⁵¹ See Marion, J.-L. (2013). *The Question of the Unconditioned*. *The Journal of Religion*, 93/1, 17, 19.

⁵² See Marion's difference between an *idol* which tries to replace God and an *icon* which leads beyond itself to God in Marion, J.-L. (2012). *God Without Being*. Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, (p. 7ff).

⁵³ GWMB, (p. 32).

⁵⁴ Derrida, J. (2005). *The Politics of Friendship*. London – New York: Verso.

According to Mark Dooley, Derrida does not obstruct discerning, but even supports it by distinguishing unrepresentable (what is *per se*) and historical, relative (for us). Dooley demurs, that Kearney mingles these philosophical and historical truths. Dooley, M. (2007). *Truth, Ethics and Narrative Imagination: Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*. In P. Gratton & J. P. Manoussakis (Eds.), *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge* (p. 165f). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

In this way Derrida can be much nearer to Kearney's position, as we can see in Kearney's later interpretations and Derrida's less radical statements.⁵⁵

To sum up, if we rethink Kearney's position as a radical centre, it seems to be much more interesting than mere compromise. Kearney's *via tertia* is not a new Hegelianism, for it stays principally open; double identity is dynamic but an internally differentiated dynamism.⁵⁶ It is not true that his philosophy is just some (crypto)metaphysics replacing the old ontotheological one.⁵⁷ Or, if we call it metaphysics, we have to specify it as *antinomic and iconic metaphysic*.

By this proclamation I try to say that Kearney neither gives up with systematic proclamations about God, nor does he lose the dynamism of different antipoles as well as the awareness of God's inexplicability. With such an approach we can say that Kearney's philosophy enables the transforming of metaphysics instead of rejecting it. And what is not less important, such a more strictly understood *via tertia* does not lead to vague proclamations like "it is necessary to keep balance", but it offers concrete ways for further development of this way of thinking.

The first step is based on a paradox, that the *via tertia* prevents any final conceptual definition, but is also present in our everyday experience; therefore, it can be worked out just in concrete situations. Kearney himself shows general principles of his thinking in concrete examples – personal experiences (for example, Etty Hillesum), biblical texts, belles-lettres (Proust, Woolf, Joyce and others⁵⁸), art (mosaic in a baptistery in Firenze, movies, etc.⁵⁹) or concrete acts of hospitality (Vanier, Day, Gandhi⁶⁰). What is very important is that this approach based on concrete experience does not lead to relativity, because, as Kearney shows, these experiences have their own dynamics and identifying signs.

The first sign of it is an experience of limit;⁶¹ there I meet someone or something overcoming my interiority. The other – God or man – is concrete there as well as remaining ungraspable. According to God, although he remains fully absolute (*ab solo ipse*, coming from himself), he is also fully concrete.⁶² Also, man finds himself in a space at the limit; neither is he/she God, nor is he/she determined by pure facticity. Let us say that the human condition also incorporates inner antinomy: we are in creative tension with ourselves, and only this tension makes us full without making us homogenous. Here we can find an argument for Kearney's thesis, that not only God, but also man primarily "dwells in possibility".⁶³ Man is God's partner also in being characterized by possibility.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to make several of Kearney's views more accurate. Firstly, his rejection of almighty God⁶⁴ is too energetic. It could be caused by his "juvenile rebellion" against the contemporary theological mainstream and clericalism in Ireland of the seventies and eighties.⁶⁵ The problem is that the mighty God of metaphysics is much closer to the possible God than Kearney says, presenting them like two antagonists. Apart from an evident linguistic relationship,⁶⁶ there is a fundamental theological connection: both conceptions understand God as dynamic, coming into the world to change it. To paraphrase Kearney's words,

⁵⁵ Kearney, R. & Semonovitch, K. (Eds.). (2011) *Phenomenologies of the Stranger*. New York: Fordham University Press, p. 12; Derrida, J. (2007). *Terror and Religion*. In P. Gratton & J. P. Manoussakis (Eds.), *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge* (pp. 20, 26f). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

⁵⁶ ANA, (p. 94f); Kearney, R. (2014). *God after God: An Atheist Attempt to Re-imagine God*. *Questioni*, p. 234; Caputo, J. D. (2011). *God, Perhaps*. *Philosophy Today*, 55, 61f; Ó Murchadha, F. (2004). *A Conversation with Richard Kearney*. *Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 8/3, 676.

⁵⁷ See Eikrem and Janicaud cited above.

⁵⁸ See mainly ANA, (p. 101ff).

⁵⁹ Mostly discussed in Kearney, R. (2002). *On Stories*. New York: Routledge.

⁶⁰ ANA, (p. 152ff).

⁶¹ See again the title of the Kearney trilogy *Philosophy at the Limit*.

⁶² Recall here his interpretation of Etty's spiritual experience.

⁶³ Kearney, R. (2010). *Capable Man, Capable God*. In B. Treanor & H. I. Venema (Eds.), *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur* (pp. 49ff–61). New York: Fordham University Press.

⁶⁴ Recall here the problem of God after Auschwitz mentioned above.

⁶⁵ On Kearney's own reflection on growing away from (Irish) Catholicism and returning with its critical reinterpretation, see ANA, (pp. xiii, xviii); Kearney, R. (2015). *Why Remain Catholic*. [Online] Available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3SIjWz7Ud8> (29th July 2015).

⁶⁶ Also, Kearney has linguistic concerns reagring differences when he talks about antipoles *power – possibility*. But these doubles can be also expressed as *might – might*. Classical languages also show the same affinity: in Latin *potestas – possibilitas* are both based on *posse* (linguistically derived from *esse*), and the two meanings of the same Greek word *dynamis – dynamis* are self-evident.

The mighty God and the possible God are Siamese twins:⁶⁷ they are not the same, but they are similar in some ways and mutually related. So, it is necessary to say that his refusal of the mighty God cannot be interpreted as a rejection of the possible God's antipole, but as a purification of images which could be incorporated into the notion of God's possibility, like oriental absolutistic might, performing spectacular miracles, etc.

5. Antinomic centre of Kearney's conception and other possibilities how to develop it

A pivotal idea of the whole concept, which holds all the antinomies together, seems to be the cross. It summarizes in radical and fundamental ways everything which was said before. God does not stop being God, but he also gives himself to man. He is radically powerless and still opens new unimaginable possibilities. The cross is a symbol of passion as well as resurrection, life coming to death, and death overcome by life. God nailed on the cross defies every criterion in its autonomy; he stays absolute as well as absolutely concrete in the person of Jesus Christ.

Divine and human meet – to say it in the words of the Council of Chalcedon – inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably – horizontal and vertical meets but do not merge into one, as the symbol of the cross also shows.

It is somewhat perplexing that Kearney *does* analyse these aspects of the cross (at least in connection to *kenosis*), but he *does not* use their potential for developing a more systematic approach – or for making his concept cross-centred. Motives of the cross are not particularly frequented in his texts, mainly in connection to theology after the Shoah. It is the same with Christ's person. Kearney briefly analyses several passages from the gospels,⁶⁸ but there are no signs of a more sophisticated Christology or even Christocentrism. This is perplexing because the cross and Christ's person could connect two really antinomic aspects, namely radicality and openness; the *via tertia* could then become a radical principle of the possible God concept without being exclusive.

Some new signs of this fruitful potentiality can be found in Kearney's later texts on the Eucharist.⁶⁹ Here, these motives and their antinomic character are clearly named, albeit not more precisely elaborated: Kearney understands the Eucharist as spiritual as well as carnal, Christ's sacrifice is as unique as it is universal. Especially, this antinomy of particularity and universality enriches his concept with the new aspect. Thanks to Abhishiktananda's interpretation of Christ's simple sentence "I am" as absolutely fundamental to the Christian experience, he recognizes Jesus Christ as singular but appearing in countless forms.⁷⁰ Similarly, Kearney heads towards a conception which tries to be radically Christian in the meaning of coming to the essence of the Christian message,⁷¹ as well as it could be open to the other. And such a concept basically is a radically centred *via tertia*.

⁶⁷ Two antipoles which need each other. See for example Kearney, R. (2003). Britain and Ireland: Towards a Post-nationalist Archipelago. In B. Coppeters & R. Sakwa (Eds.), Contextualizing Secession: Normative Studies in Comparative Perspective (pp. 97–111). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁸ GWMB, (p. 39ff).

In fact, people who inspired Kearney's work could accentuate the person of Christ properly: Kearney himself refers to Lévinas, who sought Christ's face as a concretization of the face of others, offering him as a prototype of the suffering Jew par excellence. Cayley, D. and Kennedy, P. (2006). The God Who May Be: Interview with Richard Kearney. Ideas, p. 19. Also, the agnostic Merleau-Ponty analyses precisely God's self-forsaking at the cross as an atheistic moment in Christianity. ANA, (p. 89f).

⁶⁹ Kearney, R. (2013). Eucharistic Imagination in Merleau-Ponty and James Joyce. In F. O'Rourke (Ed.), Human Destinies: Philosophical Essays in Memory of Gerald Hanratty. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, pp. 415–433; Kearney, R. (2013). Eucharistic Imaginings in Proust and Woolf. In G. F. Stallings & (Eds.), Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent. New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 11–34; Kearney, R. (2015). Mystical Eucharistics: Abhishiktananda and Teilhard de Chardin. In L. Nelstrop & B. B. Onishi (Eds.), Mysticism in the French Tradition: Eruptions from France. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp. 185–204; Kearney, R. (2015). Toward an Open Eucharist. In M. Moyanert & J. Geldhof (Eds.), Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 133–155; Kearney, R. (2014). Two Prophets of Eucharistic Hospitality: Abhishiktananda and Teilhard de Chardin. In J. O'Leary (Ed.), The Japan Mission Journal. Tokyo, pp. 14–25.

⁷⁰ Kearney, R. (2003). Strangers, Gods, and Monsters. New York: Routledge, (p. 232). See also Kearney's own (mystical) experience from India described in Kearney, R. (2007). Heart Mysteries. The Japan Mission Journal. 61/1, 49–66. Important motives also mentioned in Feld, A. N. (2017) Thinking in Action: An Interview with Richard Kearney. Review of Contemporary Philosophy, 16, 156f.

⁷¹ GWMB, (p. 5f); ANA, (pp. xiv, 5ff).

In conclusion, such a reinterpretation enables many applications of Kearney's concept. These include: 1) As I wrote elsewhere, such antinomic thinking can fruitfully connect philosophy and art, namely music, and more deeply elaborate their own antinomic character.⁷² 2) It offers great potential for ecumenical and interreligious hospitality.⁷³ And least but not last, atheism seems to be a fair answer to the phenomenon of "apatheism", a notion developed by Tomáš Halík, which shows a reluctance to religious questions or fear of them.⁷⁴ An answer based on a radical centre, balance and consistency in one can be understood as the most distinctive contribution of Kearney's God who may be.

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⁷² Härtel, F. H. (2018). *Music as a tool for the theological reflection*. In L. Říhová (Ed.), *Sborník z konference In pluribus unitas V. Chomutov: Luboš Marek*, pp. 257–267.

⁷³ See texts on eucharistic hospitality and Kearney, R. (2005). *Terrorism and Interreligious Wisdom*. *The Japan Mission Journal*. 59/1, 42f; Kearney, R. & Taylor, J. (Eds.), *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*. New York: Continuum, 2011, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Grün, A. & Halík, T. (2016). *Gott los werden? Wenn Glaube und Unglaube sich umarmen*. Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag.

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