

## Means, Ends, and the Critique of Pure Superheroes

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The characters Ozymandias and Rorschach from *Watchmen* seem to represent opposite sides in the debate in philosophical ethics between consequentialists, who believe that the ends sometimes justify the means, and deontologists, who want us not to think in terms of ends and means at all. Closer examination, however, reveals that neither character is really true to their stated philosophies.

Near the climax of *Watchmen*, Rorschach and Nite Owl confront Ozymandias in his Antarctic fortress, and Ozymandias starts explaining his insane plan, which will perhaps save the world, but at the cost of millions of lives. While the smartest man in the world is offering up the last crucial bit of plot exposition, Rorschach looks for a weapon. He can find only a fork, but he tries to stab Veidt with it anyway. Ozymandias blocks the blow and sends Rorschach to the floor, all the while continuing his monologue. After Rorschach gets up, he tries to make another move on Ozymandias but is blocked by Bubastis, the genetically engineered supercat. Ozymandias doesn't even need to turn to face Rorschach, let alone miss a beat of his monologue. Not sure what else to do, Rorschach tries talking: "Veidt, get rid of the cat." "No I don't think so," Ozymandias replies magnanimously. "After all her presence saves you the humiliation of another beating."<sup>1</sup> Ozymandias's speechifying is a great foil for the taciturn Rorschach. An even starker contrast comes when Veidt is finally confronted by someone more powerful than he – Dr. Manhattan, the comic's only true superhero. While Rorschach doggedly attacked a foe he knew he couldn't beat, Ozymandias immediately suggests compromise. If the others stay silent, they can enjoy the benefit of Veidt's new world. Everyone accepts the compromise – after all, they can't undo the attack on New York – except Rorschach, even though it means his certain death.

<sup>1</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. XII, p. 9.

The contrast between the two characters' willingness to compromise shows a deep divide in their underlying ethical worldviews. Ozymandias appears to be what philosophers call a *consequentialist*: he believes that all actions should be judged by their consequences, implying that the ends will sometimes justify the means. He is the kind of guy who, when he has to make a decision, carefully lists the pros and cons and goes with the option that has the most pros on balance. At least, that's the way Ozymandias thinks of himself. **Consequentialism** is how Ozymandias rationalizes the bizarre murderous scheme that was revealed in the Antarctic fight. But consequentialism has a long and noble philosophical tradition, and the great consequentialists of the past would certainly disavow Ozymandias as one of their own.

Rorschach, on the other hand, appears to be a *deontologist*. **Deontology** says that we should not think of morality in terms of ends and means at all; instead, we should act only in ways that express essential moral rules. Rorschach deontologically rationalizes his actions, such as stabbing away at Veidt using anything he can find, even though he knows he can't succeed. The outcome doesn't matter; what matters is doing the right thing. But deontology also has an old and noble philosophical tradition, and the great deontologists of the past would certainly disavow Rorschach as one of *their* own. Acting to express moral rules does not mean seeing the world in black and white.

[...] *Watchmen* is an intensely philosophical comic, and **concepts** like consequentialism and deontology were clearly on Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbons' minds as they created the book. I hope to show that their attitude toward both consequentialism and deontology in *Watchmen* is profoundly negative. Yet these are actually only stepping-stones to the real point of *Watchmen*. The ultimate target of the comic's critique is *authoritarianism*, the **idea** that anyone should set himself or herself up as a guardian of society. Superheroes serve as the images of power and authority in *Watchmen*. The ideologies that the heroes pretend to follow are rationalizations of that power, and the corruption of the superheroes serves as a critique of both power and its rationalizations.

### “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian, nothing ever ends.”

When Ozymandias is being chased by Dr. Manhattan, he lures Manhattan into an intrinsic field gizmo (like the one that first created the big blue man) and activates it, which seems to zap Manhattan into vapor, disintegrating Ozymandias's beloved kitty Bubastis in the process. Afterward, Ozymandias says offhandedly, “Him, you know, I wasn't really sure that would work.”<sup>2</sup> (Actually, it didn't.) This is a great Veidt moment in a couple of ways: it shows his willingness to make big sacrifices for even bigger ends, and to gamble on probabilities. He doesn't deal with a world of black and white, of evil and good, as Rorschach does. Everything is gray, but

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

some gray areas are darker than others. To do the right thing, Ozymandias simply chooses the lightest shade of gray.

In the history of philosophy, this sort of weighing, calculating consequentialism is most associated with the doctrine of *utilitarianism*. Although the basic idea behind utilitarianism has been around forever, the doctrine didn't really begin to flourish until the work of the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73). The core idea is simple: “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”<sup>3</sup> Utilitarianism is built from consequentialism by adding elements, as one adds ingredients to a soup. The first new ingredient is *hedonism*: the good that one is trying to maximize in the world is happiness. The utilitarian is not worried, as Rorschach is, about being sure that every criminal is punished. Punishment is only a good policy if, as a consequence, it makes someone happier by preventing future crime. The other new ingredient is *egalitarianism*. Everybody's happiness is weighed equally. Thus, if an action will make five people happy and one person unhappy (all by equal amounts), you should do it, even if the one unhappy person is your mom – or your favorite genetically engineered cat.

Now, utilitarians are well aware that one cannot in advance know which things will really maximize happiness for all. So most utilitarians don't recommend that we simply try to calculate the best possible outcome each time we make a decision. Instead, we should rely on the rules and habits that the human race has developed over time for acting morally. Thus, the version of utilitarianism that is appropriately called *rule utilitarianism* says that one should live by the rules that would maximize happiness for everyone if they were followed consistently. So Veidt might adopt a rule for himself such as “Never kill,” not because killing never brings more happiness than unhappiness, but because a person who lives by such a rule would generally bring more happiness than unhappiness.

The version of utilitarianism called *virtue utilitarianism* asks you to develop the personal characteristics that are likely to maximize happiness for all if you really made them a part of you. Thus, Veidt could spend his time developing a sense of compassion, because compassionate people generally bring more happiness than unhappiness to the world.

Utilitarianism has had many critics over the years, and it looks like Moore and Gibbons are among them. We can see this first of all in the structure of the story. According to the standard comic book formula, Rorschach is the hero of the story and Ozymandias is the villain (though, of course, nothing is really that simple in *Watchmen*). Rorschach is the first person we see, and the plot is structured around his investigation of several murders. The audience uncovers the truth behind the murders as Rorschach does. Ozymandias, on the other hand, is behind the murders, and when he is found out, he reveals his elaborate plot involving the further death of millions. Ozymandias also has one of the key flaws that marks comic book

<sup>3</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 7th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879), chapter 2. Available (free) at [www.gutenberg.org/etext/11224](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11224).

villainy: he is a megalomaniac who wants to take over the world. He may say that the purpose of his plan is to “usher in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart.”<sup>4</sup> But we know the first thing he thinks about when he sees his crazy scheme succeed is his own glory. “I did it!” he shouts, fists in the air. And he immediately begins planning his own grand role in this utopia.

If Ozymandias is the villain, then perhaps utilitarianism is a villain’s ideology. It certainly looks as if consequentialism contributed to his corruption by allowing him to rationalize self-serving ends and blinding him to the profound injustice of what he has done. The potential for consequentialism to promote rationalization is obvious: once one starts in making sacrifices and trade-offs, it gets easy to make the sacrifices that will serve one’s own interest. The deeper harm that consequentialism seems to have brought, though, is letting Veidt believe that he can *force* people to sacrifice their well-being – indeed, their lives – for the greater good. Veidt thus fails to consider basic justice or fairness. Is it fair that the citizens of New York are forced to sacrifice their lives and sanity to end the Cold War, when no one else is asked to make such a sacrifice? The means for preventing this kind of unfairness is typically the doctrine of human rights, which tells us that there are some things the individual cannot be asked to do against his or her will, even if it is for the greater good. One of the most common criticisms of consequentialist doctrines such as utilitarianism is that they are unable to embrace a doctrine of universal human rights. And in *Watchmen*, we certainly see the consequences of failing to take the rights of New Yorkers seriously.

### The Utilitarians Strike Back

At this point, utilitarians will object that they are being unfairly maligned. Veidt is at best a parody of the ethic they recommend. Far from rationalizing self-serving interests, utilitarianism is the least selfish doctrine around, because one’s own happiness counts no more than anyone else’s. As Mill wrote forcefully, “I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned.”<sup>5</sup> More important, utilitarians would object that their theory does indeed allow for justice and human rights. Mill was a passionate defender of liberty and an early advocate for women’s right to vote, so it was very important for him to argue that utilitarians can account for justice. He did this by using the tools of rule utilitarianism: to make decisions effectively, individuals and societies must adopt rules for themselves. Experience shows that individuals and societies that recognize rights are more likely to maximize happiness than are those that don’t. If Veidt had been a real utilitarian, he would have recognized this and adopted stricter rules about killing people.

<sup>4</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. XII, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2.

Moore and Gibbons don't address these nuances – as we shall see in the last section of this chapter, they are primarily interested in showing ethical theories as ways of rationalizing power. They do, however, offer another critique of utilitarianism that can't be dealt with by adjusting the fine points of doctrine. It is important to note that the critique doesn't come from the alleged consequentialist Veidt but from Dr. Manhattan. In one of the most moving sequences in the book, Veidt asks Manhattan, with unexpected plaintiveness and insecurity, whether he's really the good guy he thinks he is: "Jon, before you leave . . . I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end." In the next panel, we see Dr. Manhattan from Veidt's point of view. The blue man, standing inside a model of the solar system, arms down, palms out, smiles and says, "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends."<sup>6</sup> Then he leaves Earth for good. Dr. Manhattan's warning is borne out four pages later, when we see Seymour, the inept assistant at the *New Frontiersman*, reaching toward Rorschach's journal looking for something to fill up space in the next issue. If he grabs it, Veidt's scheme could be ruined, and all that suffering would be for nothing.

Utilitarianism asks us to look to the future and sum up the consequences of our actions, but the future is infinite, and you can't crunch the numbers when every one of them turns to infinity. Perhaps in five years something will happen that undoes the good that Veidt did. Then, ten years after that, something good will happen that could only have happened given Veidt's actions. The problem here isn't just that we can't know the future, but that there is too much of it. Even if we had an infinite mind to encompass the infinite future, what would we see? An infinity of happiness and an infinity of suffering? We can't do anything to change a ratio of infinity to infinity.

And even if we could, what of it? Utilitarianism gets its motivation from the basic instinct that pain is bad and pleasure is good. Individually, you and I seek pleasure and avoid pain. Utilitarianism tries to remove the selfishness of this by asking us to seek pleasure for everyone. In doing so, it tries to make ethics a little more objective: less about what *you* want and more about what is good in itself. But if we keep going with this impulse to objectivity, everything loses its meaning. What does it matter if there is more pain or more pleasure in the world? We are now in the perspective of Jon Osterman after his accident: if you take too abstract a perspective, nothing seems valuable at all. This is a defect in Ozymandias's worldview. Unlike other characters – Rorschach or the Comedian – Ozymandias has never really confronted the question of the meaning of life or the possibility that life is meaningless. All of his personal revelations are about the source of suffering in the world, not about the possibility of morality. He learns that evil is not just a matter of crime, but comes from geopolitical forces. But he never questions the nature of evil and good itself. This is the real significance behind Moore and Gibbons's decision to name this character Ozymandias and to use the Shelley poem as the epigraph to chapter XI. Ozymandias takes a bigger view but never the biggest view.

<sup>6</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. XII, p. 27.

**“Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not  
compromise in this.”**

So Ozymandias is a tragic villain, a man whose overwhelming ego and failure to appreciate the dark nature of life led him to think the end can sometimes justify the means. That means Rorschach is the hero, right? Well, no. Rorschach is a foil for Veidt in every respect: the unkempt, taciturn, right-wing outsider against the slick, eloquent, left-wing celebrity. But just being a mirror to the villain doesn't make you the hero.

As we saw earlier, Rorschach often uses deontology to rationalize his actions. We see this in his constant mantra “in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise,” which is an echo of the deontologists' slogan: “Let justice be done, though heaven should fall.”<sup>7</sup> Deontology goes beyond saying that the ends never justify the means. It actually says that at least in moral decisions, you shouldn't think in terms of ends and means, or consequences, at all. Once you start thinking about means and ends, you've left the realm of morality altogether, because you're only thinking about how to get something you want, either for yourself or someone else. According to deontologist Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), morality begins with the good will. Anything else you might value in life – intelligence, strength, even happiness itself – can be used for evil. The only thing good, really, is the *will* to do good, the mental act that says, “I am going to do the right thing.”

By the same token, if you are doing something solely to achieve some end, you are not doing it because it is the right thing to do. This applies not only to ends we think of as selfish, but even to those we think of as ethical. Think about a cruel and selfish act, like the Comedian shooting his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend at the end of the war. A deontologist would think that part of why this is wrong is because of the Comedian's motivation. He's not trying to do what is right; he's merely trying to accomplish an end that is convenient for him, getting rid of a person as if she were extra baggage. Now think about an unselfish act, such as the redemptive moment at Bernard's newsstand when so many passersby intervene to break up the fight between Joey and her girlfriend Aline. If one of them was jumping in simply to make himself look good or even to feel good for helping somebody, that would simply be acting for an end. But if someone helped because it was the right thing to do, even if that person had no desire to do so, that tells us that his or her act was moral (in a deontological sense). Interestingly, the people who intervene don't talk about pity; they give more deontological explanations, such as, “It's all that means anything.”<sup>8</sup> They have to act because they're moral people in a dark world that can only be lit by the good will. They're doing the right thing because it's the right thing. Kant would smile.

<sup>7</sup> Rorschach offers many variations on the “never compromise” mantra. The two that come closest to the deontologists' slogan given previously are *Watchmen*, chap. I, p. 24, and chap. XII, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. XI, p. 20.

But Rorschach is not a hero, and his deontology is not Kant's. It is a shadow of deontology that is used to rationalize fascist thuggery. I wish I could show this simply by pointing out that Rorschach is a psychotic killer, but in comics, as in Hollywood, crazy vigilantes have a certain cachet. To see the real problems with Rorschach and his use of deontology, we need to look at his hypocrisy, the way his deontology degenerates into "dichotomous thinking," and his failure to recognize the intrinsic value of persons.

Rorschach is not only a flat-out hypocrite, but his hypocrisy reveals his real commitments. Rorschach's supposed commitment to deontology takes a back seat to the need to project strength in the face of moral decline. Although he delivered the announcement that he ignored the Keene Act on the dead body of a serial rapist, he shows admiration for the Comedian, who attempted to rape the first Silk Spectre and confessed to having done many other "bad things to women."<sup>9</sup> After trashing Moloch's apartment, Rorschach says, "Sorry about the mess, can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs," a classic bit of consequentialist reasoning.<sup>10</sup> To heighten the irony, Moore and Gibbons even depict him stealing a raw egg from Moloch's fridge, carefully cracking it open, and drinking it. Rorschach also professes admiration for President Harry Truman, because Truman was willing to sacrifice the lives of millions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to avoid even bigger losses in the war – basically the same trade-off Ozymandias makes.<sup>11</sup> The pattern behind all of these exceptions is telling. In each case, Rorschach slips into consequentialist reasoning in order to justify a hypermasculine display of power and violence. This shows that his real worldview is simply fascist. All of the elements of classical fascism are there: obsession with moral decline, idolizing the masculine and fearing the feminine, and belief that democratic authority has failed and must be replaced with something more direct.<sup>12</sup>

A deeper abuse of deontology comes in Rorschach's obsessive *dichotomous thinking*, the mistake of looking at the world in black and white. Rorschach is thus guilty of committing a *fallacy*, a mistaken but very tempting way to reason. *Watchmen* goes out of its way to show that where Veidt could at least see shades of gray, Rorschach is a simple dichotomous thinker. His initial attraction to the fabric he made his mask from, for instance, came from the fact that black and white never mixed.<sup>13</sup> Rorschach seems to think that dichotomous thinking comes with deontology. All of his statements of deontological principles also say that he sees the world in black and white: "There is good and there is evil and evil must be punished, in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., chap. II, p. 27; chap. VI, p. 15; and chap. II, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., chapter V, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., chap. VI, supplemental material, Walter J. Kovacs case file, excerpt of an essay by Walter J. Kovacs.

<sup>12</sup> Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," in *Five Moral Pieces*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt Trade, 2002), pp. 65–88.

<sup>13</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. VI, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., chapter I, p. 24.

But dichotomous thinking is not at all a part of deontology. Kant taught that we should not do things for the sake of ends, but for the sake of doing the right thing. Still, this does not mean that “the right thing” has to be something simple-minded or rigid. For Kant, doing the right thing meant obeying what he called the “**categorical imperative**,” a rule he phrased a couple of different ways. The first was to “Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.”<sup>15</sup> This sounds weird, but it is really just asking you to remember a question your mother asked you as a kid: “What if everyone did that?” For instance, if you pinched some candy from the drugstore, Mom probably said something like, “Listen, honey, I know it seems like no one is hurt, but what if everyone shoplifted candy? The store would go out of business and then no one would have any candy.” Using a universalization test like this allows for much more subtle ethical reasoning than Rorschach is capable of. What if everyone was a crazed vigilante who punished every infraction with death?

The biggest reason Rorschach is not a real deontologist is that he fails to show respect for persons. Earlier, we said that Veidt’s worldview fell short of being moral because he failed to recognize rights, the moral rules that prevent us from sacrificing an individual for the greater good. Kant captured this in the second formulation of his categorical imperative: “Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.”<sup>16</sup> Again, this sounds weird, but what it boils down to is “Don’t treat people like mere tools to achieve your ends.” When Veidt destroys New York, he is using the city’s inhabitants as tools for ending the Cold War, thus violating their basic rights as persons.

Rorschach likewise fails to recognize the rights we typically grant people – for example, the right to a fair trial. Really, Rorschach drew the wrong lesson from his existential moment burning down the home of that child butcher. According to Kant, we are obligated to always respect the basic rights of persons, because only a person is capable of exercising a good will, and a good will is the only thing that is truly good. Rorschach saw some of this as he “looked at the sky through smoke heavy with human fat.”<sup>17</sup> He saw an existentialist version of Kant’s claim that the only thing good is the good will. In Rorschach’s version, “existence is random, save what we imagine after staring at it too long” and therefore we are “free to scrawl our own design on a morally blank world.” What Rorschach didn’t see, but Kant did, is that this requires us to respect the people who are capable of scrawling a moral design on the world.

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), trans. Jonathan Bennett (2005), online at [www.earlymoderntexts.com](http://www.earlymoderntexts.com), Second Section. This quote appears on p. 421 of print editions (with standard Academy pagination).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>17</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. VI, p. 26.

### “Who watches the watchmen?”

So, neither consequentialism nor deontology comes off well in *Watchmen*. The characters use the ideas as thin rationalizations for corrupt behavior, and, at least in the case of utilitarianism, the ideas themselves are shown to be flawed. But critiquing consequentialism and deontology is not the main goal for Moore and Gibbons. Their deepest concern is obviously expressed in the aphorism that gives the comic its name and that appears in fragmentary form throughout the book: “Who watches the watchmen?” The line finally appears in full form at the very end of the book, but in a strange way. Moore and Gibbons give the original source, Juvenal’s *Satires*, but then mention that it is quoted as the epigraph of the Tower Commission Report (which resulted from investigations of the Iran-Contra scandal during President Ronald Reagan’s administration). This is a detail people tend to pass over, if only because the report was written before many current readers of *Watchmen* were even born. Perhaps this obscure bit of 1980s history appears only because Moore and Gibbons were reading the newspapers, rather than Latin poetry, during the era of Reagan and Thatcher. And the poem in which the line originally appears is about the difficulty men have keeping their women in line – a bit of patriarchy that is not a big concern for the comic. The Tower Commission, on the other hand, is exactly the sort of thing the comic is about.

*Watchmen* depicts an alternate universe in which the Watergate scandal never takes place, a man with superhuman powers allows the United States to win the Vietnam War, and Nixon is now in his sixth term in office, thanks to a new constitutional amendment. Covert criminal activity of the sort the Tower Commission exposed seems to have driven this history: Moore and Gibbons strongly imply that the Comedian assassinated Woodward and Bernstein and further hint that in this world, Nixon and the Comedian were involved with the Kennedy assassination. Ultimately, this is all intended as a warning about how a free society can collapse into authoritarianism, something Moore had previously depicted in *V for Vendetta*.<sup>18</sup> In that comic, he showed England sliding into fascism after limited nuclear exchanges in Africa and the European continent, followed by environmental and economic collapse. In 1988, when DC Comics reprinted a colorized run of the series (including the ending, which had gone unpublished because the magazine it ran in originally was canceled), Moore wrote a melancholy introduction lamenting the power of Thatcher’s Tory Party. Given what has happened, he realizes he was mistaken to believe that “it would take something as melodramatic as a near-miss nuclear conflict to nudge England toward Fascism.”<sup>19</sup> Basically, Moore was not satisfied with the picture of a decline of a democracy into authoritarianism in *V*, and *Watchmen*, which was first serialized in 1986, is in part a correction of this.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Moore and David Lloyd, 1982–1985, *V for Vendetta* in *Warrior*, issues 1–26 (Brighton, UK: Quality Communications).

<sup>19</sup> Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* (New York: Vertigo, 1988), p. 6.

Ozymandias and Rorschach are a crucial part of this picture, since the superheroes in *Watchmen* are images of authority. Moore told the BBC program *Comics Britannia* that “What *Watchmen* became was entirely a meditation about power. We were thinking about how to some degree each of these characters represented some sort of power.”<sup>20</sup> Rorschach and Ozymandias are important because we see in them that anyone can be corrupted. Leftist or rightist political views are really of little consequence, because they are merely ways that the powerful rationalize what they are doing. Consequentialism and deontology are merely further rationalizations of these ruling ideologies. It is thus not surprising that neither view really gets a fair shake in *Watchmen*. Moore and Gibbons aren’t interested in whether the views can be tinkered with to the point that they are a reasonable guide to behavior, because that is not how these ideologies function in the real world. Notice also that the most moral characters in the comic, the two Nite Owls, are basically nonideological. They don’t have big moral ideas but rather rely on a basic sense of decency [. . .]. Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl, specifically shies away from making grand decisions that affect the whole world because one person simply isn’t competent to do so.<sup>21</sup> The real lesson behind the entire comic is that no one, no matter what his or her ideology, should be entrusted with too much power.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> BBC Bristol, *Comics Britannia* (2007), [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/comicsbritannia/comics-britannia.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/comicsbritannia/comics-britannia.shtml); click on “Alan Moore Interview II.”

<sup>21</sup> *Watchmen*, chap. XII, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this theme, see chapter 3 in this book, “Super-Vigilantes and the Keene Act,” by Tony Spanakos.

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