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Charles S. Peirce's Natural Foundation for Religious Faith

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el llamado “*Neglected Argument for the Reality of God*” (“Argumento olvidado en favor de la realidad de Dios”) de Charles S. Peirce. Peirce formuló el *Neglected Argument* como un “nido” (“*nest*”) de tres argumentos diferentes pero desarrollados secuencialmente. Tomado en su conjunto, el *Neglected Argument* tiene como objetivo mostrar que participar en una forma de vida religiosa, el adorar y actuar de acuerdo con la hipótesis de Dios, es una reacción humana subjetiva, no basada en evidencias aunque naturalmente fundada, y que es este (supuesto) fundamento natural lo que hace que sea razonable aceptar la hipótesis de Dios como realmente verdadera, cimentando así una forma de vida propiamente religiosa. Sostengo que el *Neglected Argument* de Peirce carece de toda fuerza apologetica seria, dado que no consigue justificar, sobre bases independientes, la afirmación de que todos nosotros somos conducidos de manera natural (y, por tanto, inevitable) a formular, y luego a adorar y a actuar de acuerdo con, la hipótesis de Dios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Charles S. Peirce; fundamento natural; argumento olvidado en favor de la realidad de Dios; fe religiosa.*

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze Charles S. Peirce's so-called “*Neglected Argument for the Reality of God*”. Peirce formulated the *Neglected Argument* as a “*nest*” of three different but sequentially developed arguments. Taken as a whole, the *Neglected Argument* aims to show that engaging in a religious way of life, adoring and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God, is a subjective, non-evidentially grounded though naturally founded human reaction, and that it is this (alleged) natural foundation that makes it *reasonable* to accept the hypothesis of God as it being actually true, thereby grounding a properly religious way of life. I argue that Peirce's *Neglected Argument* lacks any serious apologetic force since it fails to justify, on independent, non-question-begging grounds, the claim that we are all naturally (and thus inevitably) lead to formulate, and later adore and act in accordance with, the hypothesis of God.

KEYWORDS: *Charles S. Peirce; Natural Foundation; Neglected Argument for the Reality of God; Religious Faith.*

I

The aim of this paper is to analyze Charles S. Peirce's defense of religious faith as stated in his paper "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God", first published in issue seven of the *Hibbert Journal* (1908) and later compiled in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (CP §6.452 – §6.493).¹ Peirce refers to his reasoning as "The Neglected Argument" because he claims that it has been completely ignored in theological and religious discussion, despite his own reflection that "its persuasiveness is no less than extraordinary; while it is not unknown to anybody" (CP §6.457).

Though it is clear that Peirce's intention was to read the Neglected Argument as a single comprehensive argument, he formulated it as a "nest" of three different but sequentially developed ones. They are sequentially developed in the sense that the first can forego the other two and the second can dispense with the third, but the third is constructed upon the previous two and the second is constructed upon the first. In brief, the first argument states that anyone who engages in an inner and free meditation upon the world will inevitably be moved to formulate, and later to adore and act in accordance with, the hypothesis of God. The second argument aims to show that despite being a subjective, non-evidentially grounded reaction, the kind of adoration attitude referred to in the first argument is not arbitrary but is *legitimated* in the sense of it being the inevitable result of our own natural human condition. More concretely, the second argument claims that the hypothesis of God is an "instinctive hypothesis" of human beings, since this instinctiveness is what best explains the (alleged) fact referred to in the first argument that any person who engages in an inner and free meditation upon the world will inevitably end up adoring and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God. The third argument aims to show that its being an instinctive hypothesis makes it *reasonable* to accept the hypothesis of God as it actually being true. Taken as a whole, then, the Neglected Argument aims to show that engaging in a religious way of life, adoring and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God, is a subjective, non-evidentially grounded though naturally founded human reaction, and that its (alleged) natural foundation makes it *reasonable* to accept the hypothesis of God as it actually being true, thereby grounding a properly religious way of life.

In the next section I will offer a more developed characterization of each of the three arguments that shape the Neglected Argument. In the following section three, I will argue that Peirce's Neglected Argument

lacks any serious apologetic force since it fails to justify on independent, non-question-begging grounds, the claim that we are all naturally (and thus inevitably) lead to formulate, and later to adore and to act in accordance with, the hypothesis of God. However, a brief clarification is needed before proceeding. By “apologetic force” I am not just referring to the ability of Peirce’s Neglected Argument to conclusively prove or convince its readers about the *truth* of some given theological or religious factual statement, such as that God actually exists or that the world is such and such and not otherwise. Rather, I am referring to the ability of the Neglected Argument to legitimate the individual in engaging in a properly religious way of life, to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God. This is in agreement with what seems to be Peirce’s overall view on religion, as stated in other of his texts, where he claims that religion is not, or at least not primarily, an evidential issue. In his 1898 lecture “Vitally Important Topics”, Peirce stated that “matters of vital importance”, which include religion, “must be left to sentiment, that is, to instinct”, rather than rely on evidence and argument (CP §1.637). If correct, my analysis here shows that even conceding that being moved to engage in a religious way of life is not an evidential issue but ultimately a matter of “instinct”, the Neglected Argument by itself does not succeed in legitimating religion as it being grounded on “instinct”.

II

Peirce’s first argument, which he refers to as the “Humble Argument”, *describes* a psychological process he names as “musement”, which is nothing more than the engagement in an inner and free – *i.e.*, non-directed – meditation upon the world. According to Peirce, musement “will inevitably suggest the hypothesis of God’s reality” (CP §6.465) to any person who gets immersed in this kind of reflective activity. In its turn, meditation upon the hypothesis of God will move the individual to realize about “the august practicality” and “the beauty of the idea” of God (CP §6.487). This, Peirce says, will inevitably arouse adoration and a feeling of lovingness towards the hypothesis of God in any individual. In its turn, such feelings will inevitably move the individual to desire to act in accordance with the hypothesis of God, converting it into “an ideal of life” (CP §6.465);² and, given Peirce’s pragmatist notion of believing, to act in accordance with the hypothesis of God is already to believe it. This is how, according to Peirce, we are all inevitably lead to religious belief

by simply engaging ourselves in an inner and free meditation upon the world. In Peirce's words:

From speculations on the homogeneities of each Universe, the Muser will naturally pass to the consideration of homogeneities and connections between two different Universes, or all three. [...] This is a specimen of certain lines of reflection which will inevitably suggest the hypothesis of God's Reality. [...] I do not think that I either am or ought to be less assured, from what I know of the effects of Musement on myself and others, that any normal man who considers the three Universes in the light of the hypothesis of God's Reality, and pursues that line of reflection in scientific singleness of heart, will come to be stirred to the depths of his nature by the beauty of the idea and by its august practicality, even to the point of earnestly loving and adoring his strictly hypothetical God, and to that of desiring above all things to shape the whole conduct of life and all the springs of action into conformity with that hypothesis. (CP §6.465 – §6.467)

Some further clarifications and comments on Peirce's first argument are relevant at this point. First, and most importantly, if we were to dispense with Peirce's peculiar terminology and use contemporary philosophical analytic jargon, we would say that the first argument is not a philosophical argument at all but simply the *description* of a psychological process. With the first argument, Peirce is not, strictly speaking, *arguing for* the conclusion that anyone who engages in an inner and free meditation will end up embracing a religious stance, but rather he is simply *affirming* that, as an empirical fact, the formulation of the hypothesis of God and its later acceptance is the subjective though inevitable reaction of engaging in an inner and free meditation.

Second, Peirce's use of the term "belief" in the first argument assumes his pragmatist conception of believing which, roughly speaking, equates believing that P with acting in accordance with P — *i.e.*, "Now to be deliberately and thoroughly prepared to shape one's conduct into conformity with a proposition is neither more nor less than the state of mind called Believing that proposition, however long the conscious classification of it under that head be postponed." (CP §6.467). So even if Peirce was affirming that the first argument grounds *religious belief*, it is important to bear in mind that, by itself, it does not (and neither does it attempt to) justify us in accepting that the hypothesis of God is actually true — *i.e.*, that the world is such that God actually exists. Peirce was obviously aware of this, which is why he specifically claimed that his reasoning is not an "argumentation" but an "argument" (*cf.*, CP §6.456 – §6.457) — *i.e.*, the practice of

musement, the engagement in an inner and free meditation, moves the subject to act in a certain way despite it not being an evidentially grounded reasoning. The sort of adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God referred to in the first argument is an inner, non-evidentially grounded subjective reaction of each concrete person, and as such does not arise from the world being such and such and not otherwise — hence it cannot justify the claim that the world is such that God actually exists.

Third, even if the subject is moved to adore and to act in accordance with the hypothesis of God after recognizing its “august practicality”, this does not mean that such adoration is the result of a voluntary decision on the part of the subject, as something the subject consciously decides after making a pragmatic calculus. Again, the kind of adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God which, according to Peirce, results from the engagement in musement is a subjective, though inevitable and thus non-voluntary, reaction of the concrete person. This clearly distinguishes Peirce’s Neglected Argument from classical pragmatic arguments in the line of Pascal’s Wager or William James’s “The Will to Believe”, according to which religious belief is something we should voluntarily embrace after realizing of its putative beneficial consequences.

The second argument states that the hypothesis of God is an instinctive hypothesis of us, since this instinctiveness is what best explains the (alleged) fact referred to in the first argument that *anyone* who engages in an inner and free meditation will *inevitably* be moved to formulate and later to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God — *i.e.*, “[...] that the strength of the impulse is a symptom of its being instinctive” (CP §6.476). In Peirce’s words:

The second of the nest is the argument which seems to me to have been “neglected” by writers upon natural theology, consisting in showing that the humble argument is the natural fruit of free meditation, since every heart will be ravished by the beauty and adorability of the Idea, when it is so pursued. Were the theologians able to perceive the force of this argument, they would make it such a presentation of universal human nature as to show that a latent tendency toward belief in God is a fundamental ingredient of the soul, and that, far from being a vicious or superstitious ingredient, it is simply the natural precipitate of meditation upon the origin of the Three Universes. (CP §6.487)

It is important to emphasize that the second argument, by itself, has no evidential value, and hence it does not offer any justification for accepting the claim that the hypothesis of God is actually true. Even if we were to concede to Peirce that we have some sort of natural tendency to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God, this will not by itself justify us in forming the belief that the world is such that God actually exists — again, the sort of adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God that Peirce is describing is an inner, non-evidentially grounded though naturally founded reaction of each concrete person, and as such it does not arise from the world being such and such and not otherwise; hence, it does not justify the evidential claim that the world is such that God actually exists. However, the second argument suffices to show that the kind of loving feeling and adoration attitude referred to in the first argument, despite being a subjective, non-evidentially grounded reaction, is not arbitrary but is in fact *legitimated* in the sense of it being the inevitable result of our own natural human condition. Once its natural foundation is conceded, no one could deny having such a reaction. Of course, its (alleged) natural foundation explains the fact of *having* that reaction but is not, strictly speaking, a *justification* for nurturing or surrendering to that reaction, since it may still be argued that one should somehow attempt to refrain from surrendering to it because of its inadequacy for some independent ethical or evidential reasons (*e.g.*, that it is in fact ethically wrong to act in accordance with the hypothesis of God; or that God does not actually exist and so engaging in a religious way of life is simply surrendering to a primitive impulse that lacks of any objective foundation).

The third argument aims to show that its being an instinctive hypothesis, its natural foundation, makes it reasonable to accept the hypothesis of God as it being actually true. It relies on the premise that the instinctiveness of a hypothesis, its natural foundation, is a sign of its being true. Peirce's argument for such a premise can be summarized as follows. There are lots of available hypotheses that may be suggested as an explanation for some given phenomenon. We may of course be wrong in our initial hypothesis; nonetheless, Peirce says, the point is that there is no need to test all the possible hypotheses to reach the correct hypothesis, the one which best explains the phenomenon. After a few attempts, we find the correct hypothesis. The best explanation for this, according to Peirce, is that we have a sort of natural insight which, despite not being infallible since we are obviously liable to err, allows us to identify in a

relevant way the hypothesis that would fit best with “the general elements of Nature” (CP §5.173). In Peirce’s words:

Animals of all races rise far above the general level of their intelligence in those performances that are their proper function, such as flying and nest-building for ordinary birds; and what is man’s proper function if it be not to embody general ideas in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognition? To give the lie to his own consciousness of divining the reasons of phenomena would be as silly in a man as it would be in a fledgling bird to refuse to trust to its wings and leave the nest, because the poor little thing had read Babinet, and judged aerostation to be impossible on hydrodynamical grounds. Yes; it must be confessed that if we knew that the impulse to prefer one hypothesis to another really were analogous to the instincts of birds and wasps, it would be foolish not to give it play, within the bounds of reason; especially since we must entertain some hypothesis, or else forego all further knowledge than that which we have already gained by that very means. But is it a fact that man possesses this magical faculty? Not, I reply, to the extent of guessing right the first time, nor perhaps the second; but that the well-prepared mind has wonderfully soon guessed each secret of nature is historical truth. All the theories of science have been so obtained. But may they not have come fortuitously, or by some such modification of chance as the Darwinian supposes? I answer that three or four independent methods of computation show that it would be ridiculous to suppose our science to have so come to pass. [...] There is a reason, an interpretation, a logic, in the course of scientific advance, and this indisputably proves to him who has perceptions of rational or significant relations, that man’s mind must have been attuned to the truth of things in order to discover what he has discovered. It is the very bedrock of logical truth. (CP §6.476)³

Having established that the instinctiveness of a hypothesis, its natural foundation, is a sign of its being true, Peirce feels justified in concluding that “[...] it is the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature’s, he has no chance of understanding nature at all.” (CP §6. 477). Now, in light of the second argument, the hypothesis of God is “the more facile and natural”, and so, given the aforementioned premise, we are actually justified in accepting it. The third argument, then, allows Peirce to conclude that the adoration of and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God is not just a subjective, non-evidentially grounded reaction, though somehow legitimated due its natural foundation, but that it is in fact *reasonable* to accept the hypothesis of God as it actually being true. And although as happens with any other established scientific hypothesis, it will not be reasonable to accept the hypothesis of God as it being an absolutely incorrigible hypothesis, it is still reasonable to accept such a hypothesis with enough confidence as to constitute “[...] a living, practi-

cal belief, logically justified in crossing the Rubicon with all the freightage of eternity” (CP §6.485).

III

As we have seen, the three arguments that shape the Neglected Argument are sequentially dependent in the sense that we can dispense with a later one while still maintaining an earlier one, but we cannot dispense with an earlier one while still maintaining a later one. Thus, we may reject Peirce’s third argument by denying the claim that the instinctiveness of a hypothesis, its natural foundation, is a sign of its truth, while still accepting the first argument and the second argument and thus that the kind of loving feeling and adoration towards the hypothesis of God that is taken to emerge from musement, despite it being a subjective, non-evidentially grounded reaction, is not an arbitrary reaction but one *legitimated* as it being the inevitable result of our own natural human condition. However, we cannot accept the third argument, the claim that it is *reasonable* to accept the hypothesis of God as it actually being true because of its natural foundation, if we do not accept beforehand the claim made in the second argument regarding the instinctiveness of the hypothesis of God, its natural foundation. In what follows, I will not enter into discussion about either the third argument or Peirce’s more general claim that the instinctiveness of a hypothesis is a sign of its truth, mainly because I think that the Neglected Argument faces an inner and more important difficulty regarding the first argument which renders irrelevant such discussion — a difficulty which, as I will argue next, the second argument aims to overcome without success.⁴

The first argument does not aim to demonstrate the coherency of the hypothesis of God or to increase the plausibility of it being true; it simply assumes beforehand that such a hypothesis is internally consistent and metaphysically possible. As I said before, and despite Peirce’s terminology, the first argument is not, strictly speaking, an argument, but is rather simply the description of the psychological process by which, according to Peirce, anyone inevitably comes to formulate, and adore and act in accordance with, the hypothesis of God. Therefore, the most serious objection that can be raised against the first argument is simply to deny, as an empirical fact, that it is actually the case that *absolutely everyone* who engages in an inner and free meditation *inevitably* ends up adoring and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God.

A denial of the kind mentioned in the previous paragraph will not be a mere *ad hoc* denial of the first argument since we can easily observe that Peirce's affirmation is at best a highly disputable claim, if not an outrightly false one. Our observations clearly indicate that it is not actually the case that by an exercise of free and inner reflection absolutely everyone inevitably becomes moved to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God. Consider, for example, the conceptual difficulties arising from the notion of God. These difficulties are already well-known to any intellectually competent person, be they religious or not, who has seriously and sincerely meditated upon the notion of God (*e.g.*, the paradox of omnipotence and the paradox of omniscience). Of course, there have been philosophers who have proposed solutions to these paradoxes, but the relevant point here is that, as an empirical fact, they have not managed to convince everyone, as evidenced by the still ongoing discussion around these paradoxes and their alleged solutions, and thus that there are still serious and sincere intellectually competent thinkers who take these paradoxes as being sufficient proof of the conceptual inconsistency of the very notion of God. Reflection on the hypothesis of God, then, moves these people to deny such a hypothesis as it being internally inconsistent. Besides, even among those who concede that the hypothesis of God is internally consistent, there are still people who deny that meditation on the notion of God arouses in them the emotional reaction of adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God that Peirce claims. Here it is worth mentioning the position named as "anti-theism", which claims that the existence of God is (or would be, if we were not assuming His existence beforehand) something at least undesirable if not directly bad (for a recent sympathetic approach to anti-theism, see Loughheed (2020), especially chapters 3-6; for critical discussion on anti-theism, see Azadegan (2019), Kahane (2011), and Penner (2015)). It is interesting to note that defenders of anti-theism deny neither the properties traditionally attributed to God, such as omnipotence, all-goodness, omniscience, eternal existence, and so on, nor that these divine properties are, in a sense, *impressive*, claiming instead that their reflecting on these divine properties does not generate in them any adoration towards the notion of God and even less moves them to engage in a religious way of life — in fact they claim quite the contrary, that such reflection moves them to feel aversion for the hypothesis of God.

Of course, the theological paradoxes may just be apparent and the hypothesis of God could be an internally consistent one after all. Likewise, defenders of anti-theism may be wrong in their arguments and their

claimed aversion to God simply unfounded. However, these observations suffice to show that Peirce's affirmation that it is actually the case that by an inner and free meditation we are *all inevitably* moved to adore and act in accordance the hypothesis of God is far from being as unerring as he claims, and that without offering a convincing explanation as to why there are serious and sincere intellectually competent thinkers who are not moved to adore the hypothesis of God, his affirmation is just an *ad hoc* claim.

The relevance of the second argument now enters into play. As mentioned previously, the second argument states that the kind of adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God referred to in the first argument is the inevitable result of our own natural human condition. The second argument allows Peirce to claim that "[...] the N.A. [Neglected Argument], if sufficiently developed, will convince any normal man" (CP §6.484). More importantly, it is the second argument that allows Peirce to deny the testimony of those who are not led to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God by an exercise of free meditation on the grounds of their not being "thoroughly sane" (CP §6.484).

Now, the problem is that the second argument is constructed entirely upon the first argument, meaning that it already assumes beforehand the disputed claim that we are all inevitably moved to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God. If the second argument were constructed on independent grounds, without relying on the first argument, and if it convincingly showed that such adoration and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God is in fact a subjective, non-evidentially grounded though naturally founded human reaction, then Peirce would have been justified in discrediting the testimony of those who deny having such a reaction as their insincerely attempting to deny their own natural (and thus inevitable) reaction. In that case, the second argument would justify the acceptance of the first argument, since once its natural foundation is conceded, no one could deny having such a reaction. However, Peirce's reasoning goes the other way round, making the first argument the basis for the second argument. As we have seen, Peirce justifies the claim that adoring and acting in accordance with the hypothesis of God is a naturally founded human reaction in terms of it being the best explanation for the already assumed empirical claim that such a reaction is in fact inevitable in all concrete persons. The natural foundation stated in the second argument is, then, simply grounded on the assumption that everyone will inevitably be moved to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God, and hence it cannot respond to the objection

raised against the first argument and explain away the well-attested empirical fact that there are serious and sincere intellectually competent thinkers in whom an exercise of free and inner reflection does not move them to adore and act in accordance with the hypothesis of God.

Without the inevitability claim, there is no room for either the second argument or the third argument, and the Neglected Argument is then reduced to a weaker formulation of the first argument, which is now just the description of a non-founded, arbitrary reaction in (perhaps some, but not all) concrete people. This weaker formulation, taken by itself, lacks any serious apologetic force. With this, I am not attempting to deny or diminish the existential and properly religious value that the practice of meditation may have for those who are moved in this way to engage in a religious way of life; and neither am I saying that being moved to engage in a religious way of life in the way Peirce describes is something illicit or improper. In fact, I think that what makes the Neglected Argument so appealing at first is that it relies on a psychological process that I assume most religious people would probably easily recognize themselves to be or to have been immersed in. However, the Neglected Argument lacks the apologetic force that Peirce attributes to it.

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NOTES

¹ I use the common convention of quoting Peirce's works according to *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (hereafter abbreviated as "CP"). The first number indicates the volume number, while the numbers after the dot indicate the reference of the paragraph(s) cited.

² Peirce is assuming here that there is a conceptual connection between adoring X and taking X as a model of action. He does not explicitly argue for

this claim but, *ceteris paribus*, it seems a rather reasonable one. Thus, for example, we would find it strange if someone were to tell us, “I adore John but if I were in John’s situation I would never act as he does”.

³ The same argument can be found in Peirce’s “Three Types of Reasoning” (1903): “But how is it that all this truth has ever been lit up by a process in which there is no compulsiveness nor tendency toward compulsiveness? Is it by chance? Consider the multitude of theories that might have been suggested. A physicist comes across some new phenomenon in his laboratory. How does he know but the conjunctions of the planets have something to do with it or that it is not perhaps because the dowager empress of China has at that same time a year ago chanced to pronounce some word of mystical power or some invisible jinnee may be present. Think of what trillions of trillions of hypotheses might be made of which one only is true; and yet after two or three or at the very most a dozen guesses, the physicist hits pretty nearly on the correct hypothesis. By chance he would not have been likely to do so in the whole time that has elapsed since the earth was solidified. [...] Take a broad view of the matter. Man has not been engaged upon scientific problems for over twenty thousand years or so. But put it at ten times that if you like. But that is not a hundred thousandth part of the time that he might have been expected to have been searching for his first scientific theory. [...] However man may have acquired his faculty of divining the ways of Nature, it has certainly not been by a self-controlled and critical logic. Even now he cannot give any exact reason for his best guesses. It appears to me that the clearest statement we can make of the logical situation —the freest from all questionable admixture— is to say that man has a certain Insight, not strong enough to be oftener right than wrong, but strong enough not to be overwhelmingly more often wrong than right, into the Thirdnesses, the general elements, of Nature. An Insight, I call it, because it is to be referred to the same general class of operations to which Perceptive Judgments belong. This Faculty is at the same time of the general nature of Instinct, resembling the instincts of the animals in its so far surpassing the general powers of our reason and for its directing us as if we were in possession of facts that are entirely beyond the reach of our senses. It resembles instinct too in its small liability to error; for though it goes wrong oftener than right, yet the relative frequency with which it is right is on the whole the most wonderful thing in our constitution.” (CP §5.172 – §5.173)

⁴ For a critical discussion on Peirce’s third argument, see Behrens 1995. For discussion on the more general claim that the instinctiveness of a hypothesis is a sign of its being true, and its connection with other philosophical claims that Peirce defended, see Delaney 1992, Shanahan 1986, and Trammell 1972.

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