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Mary Wollstonecraft and the Beginnings of Pro-animal Education

ABSTRACT

Amidst the many topics important for the shaping of character of adolescents in *Original Stories*, Mary Wollstonecraft places such important issues as our attitude towards animals. She wants to convince the readers that not only should we not hurt animals but also offer them our aid. The education that sensitises us to the fate of animals is an important element of moral education. Being kind for the beings of other species is what makes us better, more compassionate. And reversely – being cruel towards animals turns us into brutes capable of hurting also people. Tormenting animals is moreover inconsistent with God's will and leads to the infliction of completely unnecessary and senseless suffering. Which is why it deserves severe condemnation.

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1. BACKGROUND – HUMAN – ANIMAL RELATIONS IN THE THOUGHT OF THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY

Modern age failed to bring about progress in the human – animal relations. Quite to the contrary, the 17th century witnessed an approach depriving animals of any kind of protection against the suffering and cruelty inflicted by humans. A French philosopher, René Descartes, claimed that animals are merely machines constituted by muscles, tendons, and fibres creating complicated mechanisms functioning entirely and exclusively on the basis of the principles of mechanics. Such an animal – a machine, does not experience pain but merely reacts to stimuli in a programmed manner. Thus, it may not be harmed and our way of relating to it has nothing to do with ethics, for which reason no restrictions should be imposed on humans. Descartes himself admits that this solution is convenient for humans and, *inter alia*, concludes as follows: “my view is not so much cruel to beasts but respectful to human beings, as long as they are not committed to the superstition of the Pythagoreans, whom it absolves from any suspicion of crime whenever they kill or eat animals” (Descartes, 2005, p. 61). However, what was most important was not the consumption of animals but the possibility of experimenting on them with the use of vivisection. Hence, Cartesianism found numerous followers, in particular among the scientists of the era.

Nevertheless, already the contemporaries of Descartes saw the dangerous consequences of the concept turning animals into things, allowing anything to be done to them, including the worst kind of cruelty (which was not perceived as such). In his letter to Descartes from 1648, Henry Moore wrote: “In fact none of your views touched the sensitivity of my spirit to such an extent as the murderous and destructive thesis expressed in the *Discourse on the Method* where you refuse to provide beasts with the revitalising spirit and capability to consciously experience (*vitam sensumque*)” (Descartes, 2005, p. 52).

In the epoch of Renaissance these doubts were expressed even more frequently and forcefully. Vivisection was opposed, among others, by Wolter and Alexander Pope. David Hume, on the other hand, claimed that although we are allowed to use animals we should do it in an appropriate manner. According to Peter Singer, this slight change for the better resulted from the fact that: “The tendency of the age was for greater refinement and civility, more benevolence and less brutality, and animals benefited from this tendency along with humans” (Singer, 1977, p. 210).

In 1780, a piece of work appeared that was extremely important with regard to the improvement of the welfare of animals – *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* by Jeremy Bentham. The author stands against treating

animals as things and finds a similarity between their situation and that of slaves, hoping that they will also finally be freed from human tyranny. Bentham does not seek those elements that distinguish humans from animals but those that bring them closer together. He questions the differentiation between two types of beings by stating the following:

What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, ‘Can they reason?’ nor ‘Can they talk?’ but, ‘Can they suffer?’ (Bentham, 2007, p. 311 n.).

Thus, what is regarded as common is the capability to experience suffering. Our relation to animals is a question of ethics. What is more – we should impose restrictions on our behaviour towards them, perceive them as creatures capable of experiencing pain, and avoid its infliction on them even if it is not beneficial to us (or even causes certain inconvenience). This is due to the fact that we have immediate moral obligations towards them.

This stance is seen as critical, as the protection granted to animals against cruel treatment was thus far based on indirect duties. The approach derived from Aristotle was forcibly expressed by Thomas Aquinas, according to whom: “whoever is practised in the affection of pity towards animals is thereby more disposed to the affection of pity toward men” (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1985, vol. 13, p. 240). And vice versa – cruelty towards animals may transform into cruelty towards men. By ensuring good treatment of creatures of other species we take care of our own good. Animals as such do not have a moral significance, they are merely tools used to shape or distort human character. During Renaissance this stance was shared by Immanuel Kant. Tom Regan even refers to such an approach as the “Kant’s position” and believes that it can be brought down to the following statement: Do not treat animals in a way that may lead you to the mistreatment of people. (Regan, 1980, p. 94)

In English thought a similar view was expressed in the 17th century by John Locke, according to whom: “they who delight in the suffering and destruction of interior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or being to those of their own kind” (Locke, 1922, p. 91).

Thus, Renaissance brings improvement in the situation of animals, however the avoidance of cruelty towards them is related to two different motivations. The so-called “Kantian position” returns to the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas,

which ordered good treatment of creatures of other species in order to avoid the mistreatment of humans. Bentham, on the other hand, proposes a new justification based on the value of animals as such.

2. ORIGINAL STORIES BY MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT – AN EDUCATIONAL CHILDREN’S BOOK

Among the people particularly meritorious with regard to the shift in our attitude towards animals, we find the already mentioned Bentham, as well as an English writer and feminist – Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797). For instance, she is mentioned by Singer in *Animal Liberation*. He recalls Wollstonecraft as a proof that the involvement in the struggle to improve the fate of animals was often connected with the activity for women’s rights or liberation of slaves: “As for early feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, in addition to her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a collection of children’s stories entitled *Original Stories*, expressly designed to encourage kinder practise towards animals” (Singer, 1977, p. 234).

What is this book like, what attitudes towards animals does its author teach, and how does she try to justify them? *Original Stories* appeared for the first time anonymously in 1788 in Joseph Jonson’s publishing house. The second issue of 1791 already indicated the author’s name contained illustrations by William Blake. In line with the subtitle, the book has a form of a story from the life and conversations between the main character – Mrs Manson – the guardian and teacher and her two proteges: fourteen-year-old Mary and twelve-year-old Caroline. Therefore, it is not a work addressed to small children but rather adolescents. The discussed subject matter is serious, even somber, and some of the cited stories may be seen as deeply sad or even cruel.

The form itself – story-telling and conversation – results from educational assumptions made by Wollstonecraft and, what follows, also by Mrs Manson. In their view, effective education does not rest on boring lectures but, first of all, on providing examples, both good and bad. Such examples included in the stories concerning particular characters have an effect both on the imagination and feelings of proteges and go directly to their hearts (Wollstonecraft, 1906, p. 14). Thanks to this it is easier to remember them and implement in life. As a result, the objective of controlling the affections by reason is achieved, which leads to truth and goodness. And this the full title of the book: *Original Stories from Real Life with Conversation calculated to Regulate the Affection and from the Mind to Truth and Goodness*.

The teaching methods described by the author also refer to the view of the already mentioned 17th-century English philosopher, Locke, who claimed that we do not possess any congenital knowledge and its only source is constituted by our experience. Hence Wollstonecraft's conviction that children's characters can be properly shaped. For instance, she writes of the process of education as of the polishing and grinding of a precious stone, namely the still raw children's mind that requires masterly treatment. (Wollstonecraft, 1906, p. 14). This entangles great responsibility of teachers and educators. Their most important tasks rests in shaping characters and teaching virtue, which is the only true and permanent good. The most important virtues are love of truth, religiousness, generosity, temperance in pleasures, capacity to make sacrifices, and endure adversities, i.e. fortitude, but also, and maybe most of all – compassion. What is important, compassion and the resulting readiness to offer help is directed also to animals. In teaching virtue, animals are often presented as certain symbols, as Janet Todd notes: “ants and bees exemplify thrift and forethought, tulips superficial beauty, and breakfasting pigs human gluttony” (Todd, 2000, p. 127).

Thus, these are both positive examples reflecting such virtues as thrift and forethought, as well as negative. The mentioned pigs fighting for food during breakfast Mrs Manson shows to Mary and Caroline to make them aware what an ugly feature gluttony is. By doing so, the teacher does not condemn the pigs themselves but people mimicking their behaviour. This results from differences between humans and animals that I will discuss in detail later.

However, in *Original Stories* animals are not depicted only as symbols of virtues and faults. They are protagonists of a few stories contained in the book, and our attitude towards them is an important subject of lessons given to the girls by Mrs. Manson.

3. ANIMAL TREATMENT AS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF MORAL EDUCATION

The education to which Wollstonecraft refers is mainly moral, consisting in learning and practising the previously discussed virtues. Among them, an important position is taken by compassion for animals or, more broadly, their good treatment. This topic appears already in the first three chapters of the book. Chapter one is entitled *The Treatment of Animals. The Ant. The Bee. Goodness. The Lark's Nest. The Asses*, chapter two : *The Treatment of Animals. The Difference between them and Man. The Parental Affection of a Dog. Brutality punished* and, finally, chapter

three: *The Treatment of Animals*. *The Story of crazy Robin*. *The Man confined in the Bastille*. Although the latter mainly discusses close relationships between humans and animals as the only companions in their misery. The poignant and tragic story of Robin who lost all his property, freedom, the entire family, and, finally, his loyal dog – the only companion in his misery at that time – first of all depicts the suffering of a person following the loss of a pet. The dog itself dies quickly from a shot by a cruel nobleman, who does so to hurt Robin. A similar situation is envisaged in the story about a prisoner of the Bastille who is deprived by a prison guard of the company of the only living creature in his cell – a spider. The killing of the spider comes as a torture to the prisoner who is now left in complete solitude. For this reason I intend to focus mainly on the first two chapters.

Moreover, in chapter seven a nightingale appears, however only to represent true beauty disguised in a meagre creature. A beautifully singing nightingale is an inconspicuous bird, not characterised by a fancy appearance. Virtuous people may be similar with their internal beauty hidden underneath modest looks.

Chapter eight, on the other hand, mentioned Pompey – the loyal dog of Jack the sailor. The pet accompanied him in a French prison. It licked the wounds on his legs, helping them heal. This is yet another example of a loyal dog – a truly devoted companion of the man. These stories undoubtedly create a positive image of an animal as a creature capable of reciprocating the goodness received from people, becoming attached to its carer and helping him while in need. However, such tales of animals that loyally accompany their masters are abundantly present in literature. What is more interesting, in Wollstonecraft's book are the considerations regarding our attitude to animals in general, also to wild ones and those that do not evoke our affinity.

4. PROPER ANIMAL TREATMENT AS AN EXERCISE FOR CHARACTER

In chapter one we read about events taking place during a morning stroll in the garden: the girls recklessly kill the encountered insects. Mrs. Manson purposely strays from the path and wets her feet with the morning dew to draw her students' attention. Manson explains to the astounded teenagers that she exposed herself to such an inconvenience in order not to step on a snail crawling along the path. Mary expresses her opinion that there is nothing wrong in killing animals that we find hideous. The teacher is troubled by her statement and thinks it proves there is a serious lack of education in both girls.

Next, she argues that we do not have the right to hurt even such animals as snails, ants or other insects. If they are a nuisance to us, for instance by destroying our garden we are allowed to dispose of them, however in a quick and painless manner. Under all circumstances we are to avoid pointless cruelty towards animals. “It is first, to avoid hurting any thing; and then, to contrive to give as much pleasure as you can. If some insects destroyed, to preserve my garden from desolation, I have it done in the quickest way. The domestic animals that I keep, I provide best food for, and never suffer them to be tormented.” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 21) – Mrs. Manson instructs her protegees.

Therefore, we are obligated towards all creatures to refrain from cruelty and, to the extent possible, inflicting pain. Having domestic animals under our care, on the other hand, imposes additional duties on us – we should ensure their best maintenance and prevent them from suffering (also in an active way, for instance by ensuring them medical treatment when they fall ill). According to the teacher, we tend to have more affection for domestic than wild animals and want them to be happy. Of course, we can see here quite an arbitrary division into those species that evoke our liking, hence are treated in a better way, and those that we tend to be less keen on. Nonetheless, I think it is worth focusing mainly on the said principle of avoiding cruelty and not hurting any animals, even the smallest ones and perceived as pests. Wollstonecraft wishes to propagate this principle among readers through her protagonist.

Another opportunity to do that is the incident witnessed by the girls and their care-taker – a silly boy shooting at larks. The girls find two wounded birds. Unfortunately, one of them cannot be saved and Mrs. Manson ends its suffering by breaking its neck. She explains to Mary and Caroline that leaving it to die in agony would be cruel. The other bird is taken by the girls to help it heal.

Next, the strollers encounter another boy who had removed a lark’s nest from a tree. And nearby they notice the female crying desperately. Caroline, touched by the despair heard in the cries made by the bird, offers the boy money for placing the nest back in its original place. Both girls are moved by this incident and glad at the very thought of the female’s relief when its young are returned to it. While describing their experience Wollstonecraft writes that the bird’s crying caused that the girls: “first felt the emotions of humanity” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 22).

At the end of the walk, the characters come to the aid of a hungry donkey that was locked away from its mother by a reckless man. The girl open the door and let it eat its fill.

To summarise the events of the morning Mrs. Manson observes that only a man: “feels disinterested love; every part of the creations affords an exercise for virtue...” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 23). Thus, helping animals awakens our compassion and humanity and becomes the opportunity to shape our characters by learning and practising virtues, such as the virtue of sympathy. It is certainly no coincidence that this issue is discussed in the first chapters of the book. When Mary and Caroline notice the suffering of animals and hurry to help them they become sensitive and ready to show mercy to people. Their teacher will later provide plenty of opportunities for them to do that.

Such a justification for the need of avoiding the infliction of suffering or providing help to animals when they suffer refers to the previously described views of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, later recalled in Renaissance by Kant. Proper relationships with animals teach us sympathy for the suffering and offering them our help. Therefore, encouraging of such behaviour in children is beneficial for human communities, as is teaching them not to be cruel or cause unnecessary pain in any other species (i.e. exactly what Mrs. Manson does), thus preventing them from finding pleasure in inflicting suffering. Otherwise, this could become dangerous also for humans. Through Mrs. Manson Wollstonecraft states the following: “I myself knew a Man who had hardened his heart to such a degree that He found pleasure in tormenting every creature whom he had any power over.” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 27).

Such a person will be inclined towards hurting the weaker ones, for instance children. This is illustrated by the story of a boy tormenting guinea pigs in the period of his childhood. As a grown-up he was not able to be a good father. Not only did he neglect the duty to educate his children or serve as a good example, but was also cruel towards them. As a result, they turned away from him when he grew old and the brute ended up dying alone in a ditch.

Thus, in the discussed chapter Wollstonecraft writes of the so-called indirect duties towards animals. Since, as it is explicitly stated by Mrs. Manson, their proper treatment is an opportunity to practise virtues and, which is proven by the example given above, preventing a person from becoming hard and insensitive. Here, the teacher invokes her own experience from her childhood when she looked after animals living in her family home and was glad whenever she could help them. “This employment humanized my heart, while, like a wax, it took every impression” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 26) – as she straightforwardly puts it.

5. RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION REGARDING ONE'S RESTRAINT FROM MANIFESTING CRUELTY TOWARDS ANIMALS

Apart from benefits concerned with the institution of a character, Wollstonecraft also points to certain religious aspects of acting properly towards animals. Religion takes up an important place in *Original Stories*. It constitutes a foundation for the moral system and gives meaning to our life, including suffering, of which the book provides numerous examples. However, the book does not offer complex theological considerations but merely the reiterated conviction concerning the existence of the supreme being, the maker of the entire world and all the creatures. “Although it favoured Locke’s notation of the newborn mind as a blank sheet over the idea of original sin, it gave a powerful impression of juvenile corruption similar to the old Christian one, but owing to society not God” (Todd, 2000, p. 126) – as Todd observes.

The reference to religion helps to fight this corruption and rectify improper habits and behaviours, also in relation to animals. While scolding the girls for killing insects Mrs. Manson says that even the smallest creature is the God’s work that had been granted its own place in the world. Hence, we must not perceive them only from our human perspective and exterminate them whenever we feel like it. Both ants and bees had been ensured suitable living conditions, as God cares about all of his creatures, and we should follow his kindness.

Wollstonecraft thus outlines a clear hierarchy of beings, which is as follows: God – angels – adults – children – animals. God is the most perfect being, whereas humans are in a way alike thanks to their reason. What separates humans from animals is of course the reason, or more precisely, the capability to govern emotions with its use or acquire wisdom and virtues. Hence, children’s place in this hierarchy falls between humans and animals. The said qualities are not yet sufficiently developed in them and require work in order to learn their proper use. Animals, on the other hand, do not possess such capabilities at all.

“Animals have not the affections which arise from reason, nor can they do good, or acquire virtue. Every affection, and impulse which I have observed in them, are like our inferior emotions, which do not depend entirely on our will, but are involuntary” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 25) – as Wollstonecraft believes.

Animals are driven by emotions that they do not control and instincts, mainly the instinct for self-preservation. They are not capable of restraining their emotions with their reason, which on the other hand makes them incapable of acquiring virtue.² Thus, their actions are not subject to moral judgement. They should be

² This reasoning is applied by Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Right of Women*, where

treated like small children who can show us their love not really knowing why they are doing so. However, they are not able to form a friendship, since this is a virtue which requires utilisation of the reason. Thus, one might say that animals are in a way inferior to humans. When asked about it by Mary, however, Mrs. Manson replies that indeed – animals are inferior to the man but the man is inferior to angels. Moreover – the difference between angels and humans is greater as compared with that between the man and animals as the latter two beings may be further perfected, while angels have already reached their perfection.

Therefore, although the man's position in the hierarchy of beings is higher than that of animals this does not mean that he should use this situation to their detriment. In the conversation with Mary Mrs. Manson notes that she is stronger than her but this is not a reason enough for her to kill her. To the contrary – being stronger and better imposes on us certain obligations towards animals, just as it is the case in the relation of adults towards children. Even more so because the good God cares about all of his creatures, therefore harming and killing animals for no important reason is inconsistent with his will. This is why Mrs. Manson says this to Mary: “And when such a great and wise Being has taken care to provide every thing necessary for the meanest creature, would you dare to kill it, merely because it appears to you ugly?” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 20).

Hence the simple hint on how to behave towards beings of other species: “The answer was short – be tender-hearted; and let your superior endowments ward off the evils which they cannot foresee” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 26). Being better, as I already mentioned, is therefore the obligation and task that we should thoroughly fulfil in order not to become bad persons. As it is said: “Providence has since made me a instrument of good – I have been useful to my fellow-creatures”. (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 26). We might even conclude that God himself imposed on us certain obligations towards animals that must not be neglected. It is worth putting an effort in their fulfilment consisting in understanding the behaviour of these creatures deprived of the ability to speak. By doing so we follow God, who understands their language.

Nonetheless, according to Wollstonecraft, taking care of animals should be treated first of all as our path towards moral self-improvement. Looking after animals teaches us to bring aid to those in need. Mrs. Manson, who as claims: “never wantonly trod on an insect, or disregarded the plaint of the speechless beast” (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 26) learnt this way to feed the hungry, treat the sick and

she argues that refusing women their rationality deprives them of moral autonomy and brings them down to the level of animals.

assure rest to the tired. Such self-improvement is the only way to salvation. At this point, religious justification meets with the previously discussed Kantian position.

On the one hand, the religious perspective accentuates the explicit difference between reasonable humans and animals devoid of reason, while on the other it shows that the beings of all species are Godly creatures of which the good God takes constant care. Therefore, if the man wishes to follow God, he should at least attempt not to hurt them. And in his honoured position in the world he should mainly see the obligation to do good and morally self-improve, also through practising the virtue of sympathy towards animals.

6. THE SUFFERING OF ANIMALS

Wollstonecraft firmly rejects the concept of an animal – machine. She sees the non-human species as capable of experiencing both pain and pleasure. She even suggests that she hopes that her domestic animals are happy. Besides physical pain, animals experience psychological suffering. For instance, Mrs. Manson talks of extremely strong maternal feelings in cats and dogs. She argues that a she-cat or a she-dog can even die after losing its babies. She tells the story of a dog whose young were drowned in a stream. The miserable dog-mother found them and brought one by one to the cruel master. It placed the dead puppies at the master's feet, looked at them sadly and died itself a while later. Doubtlessly in this case the animal did not suffer physical harm and the cause of its death was strictly related to the tremendous psychological pain after the loss of its young.

However, the suffering of animals significantly differs from that experienced by humans. Human suffering has a meaning, or it is possible to give it the meaning. One of the virtues that Mary and Caroline should master is fortitude – the ability to endure both physical and mental pain. Mrs. Manson scolds Caroline, who cries after being stung by a wasp. She is of the opinion that a person should be able to cope with pain, hunger or cold. The lack of this skill is a proof of a weak reason. A human can control the body and the emotions. Enduring suffering may constitute an opportunity to strengthen one's character. Fortitude is an important virtue that allows us to maintain our peace in adversity. Thus, suffering may teach us something and create opportunities for self-improvement. This is exactly what distinguishes us from animals. They are incapable of drawing conclusions from such experiences. For them pain is a strictly negative state with no positive results. Hence, animal suffering does not have any meaning, it is always a bad experience. It is impossible to justify in any other way but as a certain higher

good that it serves. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid it whenever it is possible. With this regard, the duty of man is to restrain from inflicting suffering on animals and relieving it if possible, including humane killing of a severely wounded or ill specimen. However, for animals directly dependent on our care we can do even more – ensure them some pleasure.

“This Word, I told you, was a road to a better – a preparation for it; if we suffer, we grow humbler and wiser: but animals have not this advantage, and man should not prevent their enjoying all the happiness of which they are capable”. (Wollstonecraft, 1904, p. 26) – as Mrs. Manson instructs her proteges.

For man, life on Earth is first of all a journey towards salvation. The aim is to enjoy complete happiness during eternal life. Animals do not have this opportunity. They can enjoy happiness only here and now. Thus, man should not stand in their way.

In the tales included in *Original Stories* people often experience physical and mental suffering, which serves a certain purpose. Through suffering, some draw conclusions regarding their improper behaviour, others practise fortitude. The experienced misfortunes can also test their faith in God or act as a warning to others. With animals it is different. For them, pain is nothing else but pure evil. They cannot draw any conclusions from it. That is why cruelty towards animals cannot be justified. Moreover, tormenting animals is irreparable. Man can always count on divine justice and award in the eternal life. An animal cannot. When suffering it loses its only chance for happiness or bits of pleasure. Hence, its pain can only be seen as completely pointless and superfluous, and the cruelty aimed at it as purely evil.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Wollstonecraft is not as radical as Bentham and refers to the hierarchy of beings established in western tradition, where animals are seen as creatures deprived of reason and thus placed lower than man. She clearly highlights the differences between humans and other species. However, she does not refuse the latter the capability to experience pain and suffering, have feelings and emotions or even the capability to be happy. She believes that our way of relating to animals should be a subject of reflection and moral evaluation and, what follows, also of moral education. For this reason she so broadly refers to treatment of animals in her book. Teaching children proper behaviour in relation to other species is to make them better people – more compassionate and willing to give aid to the suffering.

However, the requirement to avoid the infliction of suffering on animals also stems from the fact that they were created by God who cares about all his creatures. By following his acts man should also know perceive animals as beings that deserve to have the best life possible.

In my opinion though, what is the most interesting is opposing tormenting of animals by depicting the pointlessness of their suffering. In this context, those who torment the beings of other species are seen as particularly cruel and deserving condemnation. It is even possible to notice a stronger thesis put forward in *Original Stories* – man should endeavour to ensure animals pleasure and happiness either by eliminating their suffering, or (in the case of animals directly dependent on man) supplying them everything that is necessary to enjoy a good life. By doing so he imitates God, who cares about all his creatures, even the smallest ones such as insects.

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