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The Role of Shame and Remorse in the Moral Development of Children

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Abstract

Relying on the works of Fredrik Westerlund, Raimond Gaita, and Christopher Cordner this thesis will attempt to locate the significance of shame and remorse in the moral lives of children. It will compare them to other moral responses, like love and care, by examining them in the context of interpersonal morality. Whilst pointing out to the detrimental influence of shame, capable of distorting relationships, the thesis will argue for the transformative capacity of remorse. With the help of children's literature, it will contextualise the views of the above philosophers and show the possibilities of moral improvement and transformation in the lives of children, arising from the experience of remorse. Finally, the thesis will map out in order to compare the educational environments where shame and remorse flourish, fleshing out what is morally significant about such environments.

Keywords: shame, remorse, moral transformation, moral education, love, children

Aims and Objectives

This thesis will seek, from a philosophical perspective, to examine the role of shame and remorse in the moral development of children. In the philosophical literature on emotions, while there is abundant research on how shame and remorse are supposed to be generally understood and how they morally influence our behaviour (though I would emphasise that there has not been so much research on remorse as compared to shame), there have been very few concerted efforts to locate them in the moral lives of children.[1] Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to arrive at a nuanced understanding of how shame and remorse impact children in a morally formative manner.

Central to this thesis are questions such as: Can shame and remorse lead to moral growth and transformation? If so, in what way can they do that? Moreover, how can we differentiate and compare their moral influence on children? In pursuing these questions, we will come to see their distinctive role in the formative stages of a child's life. Additionally, this thesis will try to map out in an informal manner (through the use of stories) the kind of educational environments that are conducive to shame and remorse and what is at stake in having (or not having) such educational environments. Therefore, the subject of moral education (in relation to shame and remorse) will occupy an equally prominent role in this thesis. Finally and most importantly, in situating our understanding of shame and remorse in an interpersonal understanding of morality, this thesis will examine shame and remorse in light of our moral concern for others – how they can increase our moral sensitivity towards others or disrupt our ability to form relationships with them.

Philosophy and Literature

To make sense of the questions mentioned above, I will rely upon children's literature and one film (in particular), *Le Fils* or *The Son* to espouse the philosophical notions of shame and remorse that this thesis will be taking up. This turn towards literature is deliberate. The use of literary examples is not altogether uncommon in Philosophy.[2] Literature and even films, for that matter) reflect reality with great lucidity. Not only do they do that, but they also do not shy away

[1] Unlike philosophy, in psychology, much attention has been paid to shame and guilt in relation to moral development. Nevertheless, remorse has received scant attention.

[2] More notably, we find this in the works of Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond, to name a few philosophers.

from the chaos and complexities that characterise our existence. Consequently, they provide a (much-needed) challenge to our philosophical thinking about ideas and concepts, especially as they relate to our everyday realities. By situating my study of shame and remorse within the context of literary examples, I will analyse them as they occur in the lives of the children (of the novels concerned) intertwined as they are with other facets of their existence. Some of the stories that will be examined include *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse, Pippi in the South Seas, To Sir, With Love*, and *The Flying Classroom.* It is true that a reader may find my interpretation of these stories and, consequently, my understanding of shame and remorse (as gleaned from these stories) biased and, at best, flawed. However, far from being concerned about the correctness or reliability of my interpretation, what I hope to do is to show how these stories shed light on significant aspects of shame and remorse (that may or may not have hitherto been read or understood) as they relate to the moral growth of children. Moreover, these stories will allow for the contextualisation of the views of those philosophers who provide the framework for my examination of shame and remorse. Thus, the crossover that takes place between philosophy and literature, will certainly infuse the study with a degree of the interdisciplinary, in that it allows for insights from, for example, literary texts and psychologists to augment philosophical meanings and structures. Rather than relying on traditional philosophical argumentation (which, to a great extent, will, however, be necessary), it will also attempt to arrive at open-ended perspectives on shame and remorse through insights gained from reading these children's stories. Lastly, this being work concerning the intersection of the emotional and the moral in the lives of children, I hope to be able to make a contribution to the growing debates in the Philosophy of Childhood.

Thesis Overview

Chapter I: Locating Shame and Remorse in an Interpersonal Understanding of Morality

I will begin by situating my analysis of shame and remorse, as the title of this chapter suggests, within the more general framework of interpersonal morality rather than delving straight into an analysis of shame and remorse. There are two specific reasons for this approach. Firstly, this will enable us not to lose sight of the broader picture of morality: how we relate to and interact with others and how shame and remorse impact our general moral responses such as our ability to care for others. Secondly, this will be useful in drawing connections between shame and remorse and other emotional responses (as we shall see in the subsequent chapters). As such, the notion of morality being relational is not unfamiliar; it is found in the works of philosophers like Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, K.E. Løgstrup, and the care ethicists, to name a few. In this chapter, therefore, I will try to broaden the basis of understanding interpersonal morality by referring to the views of these philosophers. This will provide the critical context against which my examination of shame and remorse will be conducted. Accordingly, in the first section, I will present a defense or justification of interpersonal morality followed by a brief note on shame and remorse, which will constitute the second section, in order to indicate the general direction of my thesis. The third section is the nodal point of this chapter, where I will discuss interpersonal morality in relation to different ethical frameworks – those compatible with it and those contrary to it. I critique Kantian ethics, virtue ethics, and care ethics and end the chapter by summing up the views of Buber, Levinas, and Løgstrup.

In their perception of morality, it is the acknowledgment that goodness resides nowhere else but in the interpersonal relation with each other, that binds Buber (Buber 2008), Levinas (Levinas 1981), and Løgstrup (Løgstrup 2020) together (even though they may have their own nuanced ways of expressing it). They understand morality to be conditioned by the interdependent nature of our existence, with love assuming a central role. Their understanding of morality underscores, what I find to be, the limitations of other ethical theories (for example, Kantian ethics) that fail to seriously consider the significance of our interdependence. Ultimately, such theories run the risk of prioritising intellectualisms on moral matters (making the self the sole originary point of

moral action) at the cost of missing out on the relational aspect of our moral lives. I shall carry out my analysis of shame and remorse in the moral lives of children within the general framework of interpersonal morality as espoused by the three philosophers (with special emphasis on Buber) owing to, what I would consider to be, the possible limitations of such theories. More specifically, I shall seek to examine the manner in which shame and remorse enrich (or fail to enrich) children's moral lives from this interpersonal perspective. As the chapter locates shame and remorse in an interpersonal understanding of morality it will prepare us for the examination of these two emotions in the subsequent chapters, which will be conducted in light of our general moral responses to each other, in light of love and care.

Chapter II: Shame, the Interpersonal Context, and Morality

This chapter will contain an analysis of shame. In the philosophical literature on shame, there is a distinction between those philosophers who think of shame as being essentially bound up with a negative evaluation made by others and those who do not see the presence of others as being crucial in shame. While the aspect of 'exposure' or 'being seen' in a critical light by 'someone' is common to both groups, in the first, the role of the critical evaluator is taken on by other people, and in the second, it is the self that assumes this role (there may or may not be an audience that triggers this self-assessment). Thus, in the first two sections of this chapter, I will explore the distinction between the *interpersonal analysis* and *self-evaluative analysis* of shame.[3] In examining the first kind of shame, Bernard Williams will be my point of reference, whereas Gabriel Taylor will be predominant in the discussion concerning shame as essentially self-evaluative.[4]

In Taylor's account of shame, we find that the role of the 'other' or 'audience' is limited compared to the *interpersonal analysis* of shame. According to her, while there may be an audience present who views someone critically, what ultimately causes that person to feel ashamed is her own evaluation of what the audience thinks of her. In the third section, I will

[3] To clarify, this distinction – the *interpersonal analysis* and the *self-evaluative analysis* – has been made by Fredrik Westerlund to classify the philosophers working on shame (Westerlund 2019). His work has inspired my interpretation of these two positions, but my interpretation may or may not necessarily reflect his views.
[4] To note, some philosophers who fall into the *interpersonal* category are, (Sartre 1993; Deigh 1983; Calhoun 2004; Zahavi 2014; Sánchez 2015; Rochat 2009) and some who fall into the *self-evaluative* category are, (Rawls 2005; O'Hear 1976; Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2012; Vallelonga 1998; Lewis 1992).

critique Taylor's account (this will be a more general critique of the *self-evaluative analysis* of shame), showing that it fails to give the audience a proper place in our experiences of shame. I will argue that it cannot capture those instances of shame in which the audience can affect us directly (which do not involve a self-assessment concerning our values). This section will additionally problematise the relation that Taylor draws between shame and values and her corresponding claim that shame is an emotion of 'self-protection.'

Thus, having seen the limitations of the *self-evaluative analysis,* in the fourth section, I will go back to the *interpersonal analysis* and examine four philosophers and their views on the relationship between shame and morality. While Williams points to the primacy of shame in character transformation, Dan Zahavi and Alba Montes Sánchez, inspired by Sartre, assign a dual function to shame: in shame, the gaze of others can objectify a person, or it can present new possibilities before that person, freeing her from her self-perceived limitations. Finally, Fredrik Westerlund portrays shame in a negative light: he considers shame to be a self-centered or egoistic emotion, as he claims it is connected with our desire for affirmation and our concern with how we appear to others.

Accordingly, the fifth (and final section) will critique Williams', Zahavi, and Sanchez's views on shame and morality, presenting Westerlund's account as my departure point for the next chapter on shame and moral development. In focusing upon Westerlund's account, I wish to draw attention to how he characterises the interpersonal motives and structure of shame as well as this emotion's relation to our desire for acceptance and fear of rejection. His account sheds crucial light on how shame can affect our fundamental desires to be loved and to avoid rejection.

Chapter III: Shame and Moral Development

This chapter will attempt to show the negative ramifications of shame on moral development. Fredrik Westerlund's interpersonal account of shame will serve as the backbone to this chapter in which he explains shame as being connected to our desire for affirmation and our sense of how others perceive us. It arises when we see ourselves as non-affirmable or unloveable in the eyes of others, ultimately ego-centric and morally dishonest because it does not entail concern for others and for what is morally significant. In the first two sections of the chapter, I shall introduce his account and show how he differs from other interpersonal understandings of shame (namely

Zahavi and Sánchez's accounts). The remaining sections of the chapter will analyse childrens' experiences of shame at different phases of their lives taken from different books and children's novels such as the foster child in Hugo Strandberg's book *Forgiveness and Moral Understanding* who grows up in an atmosphere of shame under strict and unforgiving parents; Pippi Longstocking in Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi in the South Seas* whose lack of shame enables her to be more morally sensitive and internally attuned to discouragement than her peers who are crippled by a debilitating sense of shame; Uli von Simmern in Erich Kästner's *The Flying Classroom* whose shame over his lack of courage drives him to do something rash and dangerous; and finally, Jack in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* whose masked shame is caught in a web of conflicting emotions and sentiments. In all the examples, there is a close connection between shame and social affirmation and the corrosive impact of this emotion on the moral lives of the children concerned.

Westerlund mentions two important takeaways with regard to shame: that even though shame is a 'morally blind and empty emotion,' the desire for social affirmation as it relates to shame is one of our most basic desires and very powerful in influencing our lives both individually and collectively. Thus, how we respond to shame has significant consequences for our moral lives. In the narratives I have presented, the corrosive impact of shame can grip a child from an early age and control her life unconsciously, thereby affecting her moral relations with others. It can co-exist or stand in competition with other feelings and emotions. But in this, a person who responds to another from a sense of shame rather than remorse or a loving concern stands in danger of being concerned only with oneself (with how one is perceived) and losing touch with the moral reality of the situation and the people concerned. Finally, my presentation of the negative ramifications of shame on moral development highlights the importance of caring and forgiving environments, free from shame, for a child's moral growth.

Chapter IV: What is Remorse?

This chapter will move away from the subject of shame to that of remorse. Having presented the negative ramifications of shame, I will move on to the more positive point of my thesis, in which I will examine the defining role of remorse in moral development. The purpose of this chapter is purely exegetical: it will present a reconstruction of Raimond Gaita's views on remorse, thereby acting as a lead-in to the next chapter on remorse and moral development. Apart from addressing

questions like – What is remorse? When do we feel remorse? What is the place of remorse in our moral lives? – this chapter will look at two philosophical frameworks that condition the concept of remorse: Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and Wittgenstein's notion of 'An Attitude towards a Soul.' I will argue that both frameworks reveal the kind of response that remorse brings up: that, at its core, it has structural similarities with love. According to Buber, love is not a 'feeling' that dwells in a person but rather a relation; it is found in an 'I-Thou' relationship (Buber 2008). This is contrary to the contemporary philosophical discussions on love, which focus on love as an emotion (Brogaard 2015; Liao 2015; Velleman 1999) or a psychological phenomenon (Pismenny and Prinz 2017). Moreover, for Buber, a loving attitude involves a whole-hearted (unmediated) response to or engagement with the other. I will demonstrate how remorse is similar to such a response because it constitutes a (whole-hearted) awakening to the reality of another. Additionally, I will show the necessity of the concepts of spontaneity and unmediatedness found in Wittgenstein's notion of 'An Attitude towards a Soul' for the understanding of remorse.

Thus, in this chapter, rather than giving a straightforward account of remorse, I try to problematise our understanding (of it) by drawing out its similarities with Buber's *I-Thou* Attitude and Wittgenstein's 'An Attitude towards a Soul.' Following Gaita, I show the centrality of the victim to be crucial in our experiences of remorse. Were it not so, as pointed out by Gaita, our remorse would quickly devolve into corrupt types of attitudes, preventing our genuine attempts at apologising and reconciliation. Finally, as a preliminary introduction to remorse, this chapter is foundational to the subsequent chapters on remorse and moral development.

Chapter V: The Place of Remorse in a Child's Life

This chapter will focus on care ethics with its relational perspective on morality. Moral education and moral improvement in children will be examined not from the point of view of character building nor from learning how to make proper moral judgments but from that of wrong-doing and remorse. It will show how remorse in the face of wrong-doing can cause positive moral transformation, explore how wrong-doing in children can open up significant moral lessons that will educate them (provided they respond or are taught to respond appropriately to their wrong-

doing). To this end, the concept of remorse (as elucidated by Christopher Cordner and Raimond Gaita) will be analysed. Remorse as a response to wrong-doing awakens the wrong-doer to the reality of the person she has wronged and it is on seeing the suffering of her victim that the wrong-doer is prompted to make amends. With its focus on the wrong-doer being affected by the victim's reality, remorse fits into the care-ethical tradition, which takes caring relations as the starting point of morality.

This chapter will move away from a description of morality focused on moral progress alone to an approach to morality that puts the other, uppermost. Contrary to the virtue ethical tradition and the Kohlbergian tradition it will argue for a moral transformation that results from being affected by the suffering of the person that one has wronged and how the source of moral change and moral actions can lie in one's encounter with others. This is not to dismiss the Aristotelian notion of virtues, character-building and habituation, but rather to widen the domain of moral education – to show how moral education can take on different layers, how caring relations provide the conditions for goodness, love and virtues to arise. The emphasis will be on learning to care for the *other* and developing virtues within these caring relationships, rather than character development alone.

This chapter has five sections. The first two will discuss remorse and inner transformation. Although, much has been written on how remorse transforms the wrong-doer's relations with her victim and other people, in Cordner's and Gaita's writings on remorse, not much has been said about the wrong-doer's inner transformation. In the third section I will discuss how remorse can have implications for one's moral identity. The fourth will elaborate further on this subject of transformation – how the wrongdoer's relation with her victim becomes transformed, and how this inner transformation pertains to her emotions, motivations and intentions. The last section will present a discussion of the place of wrong-doing and remorse in children's lives in which I will analyse a children's picture book called *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* written by Kevin Henkes.

Chapter VI: Can Remorse be Taught?

Since remorse constitutes an awakening to the person one has wronged, it would be challenging to imagine 'educational techniques' or 'methods' that could bring about this awakening. In other

words, it would be difficult to say anything concrete or normative about the educational environment that would surround remorse. Nevertheless, far from advancing any educational methods, in this chapter, I aim to show the possibility of such an environment where remorse can flourish. For this very purpose, I examine a film called *Le Fils* (directed by the Dardenne brothers) and a book called *To Sir, With Love* (written by E. R. Braithwaite). The protagonists (Olivier and Braithwaite) of both these examples are teachers, who, in their respective ways, foster an atmosphere of learning conducive to the awakening experienced in remorse. Much of what they do and how they teach resonates with what the care ethicists say about education and learning: showing a great degree of creativity in their responses to their students. This chapter has four sections. Section (1) is a brief retelling of *Le Fils*, followed by a discussion of four important aspects in section (2) – Moral Attentiveness, Tensions in Caring, Francis' Reciprocity, and Olivier's Creative Act of Forgiveness. These aspects capture how Olivier cares for and responds to his students, in particular, his influence over Francis Thorion (the film's other protagonist). Similarly, section (3) contains a brief retelling of *To Sir, With Love.* Moreover, the four aspects that are discussed in section (4) – Creative Pedagogy, Dissonant Voices, Tensions in Caring (Part II), and An Atmosphere of Trust – capture Braithwaite's struggle to win the trust of his students.

The fact that Olivier and Braithwaite do not despair when they fail at teaching or communicating with their students but that they try to find new ways of reaching out to them says something about their moral guidance. It has less to do with their knowledge of right and wrong, their goodness or (moral) expertise, and more to do with acting for their students, striving for their sake, whatever that may take. Creative in their responses, therefore, because of having shed off all pre-conceptions this inevitably humbles them – in that they are willing to be vulnerable, to put themselves at risk, and be open to change. Thus their authority over their students lies not on any power or strength but on trust. In this way, they are able to provide a secure learning environment to their students, rife with greater moral possibilities. By examining the film *Le Fils* and the book *To Sir, With Love*, I try to show the possibility of an educational environment conducive to remorse. Both Braithwaite and Olivier stand up as examples of care for students, caught under the difficult circumstances of their lives. Although the circumstances of the students under both Olivier and Braithwaite are unusual, both sets of students, however, share a common feature in that they are society's rejects. We see how Olivier, as a result of his

attentiveness, manages to lead Francis (literally and metaphorically) to a place where he can be reconciled with his past. With Braithwaite, we see that his journey in trying to secure the trust of his students is no less challenging. Unlike Oliver, his struggle is with breaking through his students' scepticism and suspicion towards him. Once he achieves this by making himself vulnerable to them, he is as much transformed by them as they are by his teaching. More importantly, we see how the possibilities that he enables for them would otherwise have remained out of their reach.

Concluding Remarks & Future Research Implications

I shall foreground a few general themes that have emerged in the course of conducting this study on shame and remorse. This has been done with the intention of providing greater clarity to and bringing together what I have attempted to do. It will also indicate the conceptual implications of the themes that I have taken up and possible directions for future research related to children.[5]

In looking at the general themes, one of the main ones that have emerged repeatedly in this thesis is the significance of love and care in educational environments (Noddings 2002; 2013); especially on the part of teachers and parents. Through its analysis of remorse seen in relation to moral education, this thesis has shown that however skilled a teacher may be, with neither love nor care underpinning her relationship with her students, there is every possibility that the educational process of a child will be irreversibly distorted. At the beginning of his teaching tenure, Braithwaite experiments with all forms of educational techniques (Chapter VI) without actual concern for the well-being of his students. Yet, this does not win him his students' trust. In fact, they become more rebellious. We also saw how an atmosphere of shame and unforgiveness deprives the foster child of the freedom to be herself and live a whole-hearted existence (Chapter III). Instead, she is concerned with her parents' approval all the time. Ms Rosenblom's attitude, too, destroys the self-esteem of Pippi's peers (Chapter III). In contrast, we saw how, under the guidance of Mr Slinger's caring responses, Lilly comes to experience remorse and undergoes a moral transformation (Chapter V). Moreover, it is (only) when Braithwaite treats his students as equals and starts caring for them for their own sake that they open up to him and genuinely accept his authority as a teacher. Furthermore, in the caring environment upheld by Olivier, Francis' growing reciprocity towards his teacher is undeniable (Chapter VI); Francis also becomes increasingly interested in carpentry because of his teacher's influence. In the latter examples, there is growth on the part of the students as a result of the caring atmosphere established by their teachers, a growth that cannot be captured so much in the language of virtues

[5] These themes are not altogether new. They have appeared in the works of Nel Noddings, David Hansen, Gaita, Cordner, and Westerlund. However, it seems crucial to bring them up in relation to the connection I have drawn between shame, remorse, and moral development in children.

as in terms of a broadening of vision and learning to think beyond themselves (especially evident in Lilly's case).[6]

The second theme that has emerged in this thesis is that of creative responsiveness[7]: how love or care enables one to be creative in one's responses toward others. According to Hansen, "Creativity as responsiveness denotes a form of openness to the setting, which may or may not complement or fit harmoniously with what is preset, prefigured, or anticipated" (Hansen 2005, 58). Such creative responsiveness that emerges from a willingness to be wholly present with others at the cost of letting go of one's presuppositions and pre-set plans has been evident in Mr Slinger's actions for the benefit of his students, whereby he rejects conventional educational methods primarily to implement those that are tailored to his students' needs. Consequently, the high point of his creative responsiveness occurs in his act of forgiveness towards Lilly. We also saw this creative responsiveness at play in how Olivier treats Francis. Like Mr. Slinger, he is moved to forgiveness (in a creative manner) by his care for Francis. Moreover, as already discussed, though it is hard for Braithwaite to care for his students in the beginning, yet when he does so, he becomes creatively invested in seeing the world from his students' point of view. It would also be critical to note that this creativity on the part of these teachers influences their students' relationship with others and the world at large. For that matter, Pippi's remorse may be understood to be a creative awakening: to her wrongdoing towards Mr. Slinger. Braithwaite too impacts his students to the extent that they are able to demolish personal racial prejudices; seen in the last scene when they visit Lawrence Seale's house (the only coloured boy in class) to attend his mother's funeral.

The third theme that I will be looking at, which is (possibly) the most important one, is the concept of goodness that arises from (or is revealed by) the experience of remorse. In Cordner's and Gaita's writings on remorse (Cordner 2008; Gaita 2004), what matters most at the end of the day, what is most morally significant, is our realisation of the significance of others and our care and concern for them; anything that comes in the way of relating to others with care could be said to be detrimental to our interpersonal moral lives. Buber, Levinas, and Løgstrup, too, locate

[6] Of course, I do not mean to say that caring environments always result in moral growth. Rather, I wish to emphasise the kind of growth (described above) that is enabled by such environments.
[7] This concept was first introduced in Chapter VI and used by Hansen to describe the significance of teachers being open-minded in their relationships with their students.

goodness in our moral responses to each other, elicited by the claims made by others upon us (and vice-versa) (Buber 2008; Levinas 1981; Løgstrup 2020). The examples of de Kock (Chapter IV) and the stories of Lilly and Kostelnička have shown us that this process of awakening to the significance of others (after having wronged them) and reaching out to them involves an openness (to the other) and a willingness to let go of one's preconceived notions or assumptions of what is right and wrong. On encountering Jenůfa's merciful behavior towards her, Kostelnička lets go of her pride, self-righteousness, and the obsessive importance that she attaches to her public reputation. Similarly, when encountering Mr Slinger's creative act of forgiveness, Lilly lets go of her anger and resentment towards him. What, then, defines goodness, as understood through the perspective of remorse, is certain humility before others.[8]

The last and final theme concerns the interpersonal motives of shame and remorse, which have been elicited throughout my discussion of them. We saw that while Westerlund anchors the motives of shame in "our intense concern to appear affirmable in the eyes of others" (Westerlund 2019a, 72), the motives of remorse have exacted a specific articulation within the thesis. And I am confident that at the end of my discussion, it has become sufficiently clear that in remorse, our attention is completely taken up by concern for the well-being of those we have wronged. As we looked for motives, we have also argued that the *way* or *spirit with which* we relate to others matters a great deal. Hence there is a substantial difference between helping others because we want to appear good in their eyes or because we act out of a sense of duty (Chapter I, section 3.1) or because we genuinely care for them. Cordner and Gaita have not spelt out the motives in their writings on remorse. They only bring attention to the fact that by relating to others in a particular spirit, implying a loving spirit, this very response facilitates an embracement of the humanity of others in a manner that can never be possible in any other way. And in my final analysis, it is the credentials of this loving spirit that forms the element of what constitutes, motive in remorse.

[8] This point has been made by Cordner in *Ethical Encounter* (Cordner 2002, 104-29).

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