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What Can a Conversation between Ayn Rand, Socrates, and the Apostle Paul Teach Us about Our Highest Good?

In the following essay, I will bring Ayn Rand, Thrasymachus, Socrates, and the Apostle Paul into conversation about what it means to be just. There will even be a surprise guest who will direct our focus to where it needs to be in order to make sense of economics and the value of money. Doing this will allow us to consider the role of religion in economics. It will also allow us to determine how religion shapes the economic life of a nation. This will then allow us to consider some current economic problems and how such considerations have a direct bearing on providing solutions. In the end, it is not merely enough to connect religion and economics but a specific claim from religion needs to be affirmed. And that is the need to repent from mistaken views of justice and the good life.

Economics is the study of the distribution of limited resources. And religion is the study of our highest good. We can immediately see how these relate. We would want to use our limited resources not for some lesser end but for our highest end. But what if we are operating in a philosophical system that reduces us to merely material beings (Rand)

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or within the skepticism of modernity that says we cannot know our highest end?

In her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged* we find Ayn Rand telling a narrative designed to extol the virtues of capitalism. Having left communism, she had firsthand experience of totalitarianism and central planning which led to such disasters in the 20th century. As an atheist, she found no room for religion in economics. Hers was a purely materialist explanation of society and the individual. Instead, she appeals to virtues that are needed to support her form of ethical egoism.

In the character of Francisco d'Anconia we get a speech that reflects Rand's entire philosophy of economics. It is a speech in which d'Anconia sets himself in opposition to the Apostle Paul writing in 1 Timothy 6:10 that money is a root of all kinds of evil. D'Anconia sets out to prove that not only is this incorrect, but just the opposite is also true. Money represents the best achievement of human civilization and the individual. It is the expression of the highest achievements of the human mind. Here I will rely on readily available online resources for my quotes from Rand, Plato (Socrates and Thrasymachus) and the Bible.

This precursor to the pop-culture reference "greed is good" looks to upend the communist worldview. Rather than money causing evil in society, it is those who do not produce money who are the real problem. Those who look to control money without themselves contributing to the production of money tear down society. Here is how d'Anconia phrases it:

"So you think that money is the root of all evil?" said Francisco d'Anconia. "Have you ever asked what is the root of money? Money is a tool of exchange, which can't exist unless there are goods produced and men able to produce them. Money is the material shape of the principle that men who wish to deal with one another must deal by trade and give value for value. Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears, or

of the looters, who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce. Is this what you consider evil?”¹

Here we see already the virtues at the heart of Rand’s philosophy. Work and production to create value. Hers is an appeal to the very first commandment given to mankind: “Be fruitful and multiply having dominion.” That “having dominion” is fleshed out by d’Anconia in terms of the mental inventiveness of humanity. The wealth of nations is its production of knowledge. Without work, there can be no production of value. For those who do not work but live from the work of others, there is a kind of theft being perpetrated against the workers.

But to work requires hope. And d’Anconia says it this way: “Your wallet is your statement of hope that somewhere in the world around you there are men who will not default on that moral principle which is the root of money. Is this what you consider evil?”² When working for money in a system where money is devalued or inflated to worthlessness, the lack of hope undermines the motivation to work. And the idea of hope tells us all we need to know about an individual and society. What does a given individual hope for? Hope is desire but for the future. It is not merely present desire fulfilled. Animals have anticipation but not hope.

Sometimes “hope” becomes synonymous with “what I don’t expect.” So that a person will say, “I hope that will happen but don’t count on it.” This is a hopeless view of hope. It is in reality no hope. It is more like saying that although I desire this to come to pass it will not. With this loss of hope comes a loss of motivation to work for the object of hope. Why work if you won’t attain your goal? Or if the work is so costly as to make the goal lose all value?

¹ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Part II, Chapter II: “The Aristocracy of Pull.”

² *Ibid.*

There is also a way of speaking about hope that makes it into an unrealistic flight of fancy. This is a form of magical thinking that disconnects cause and effect or work and the goal. In this false hope one expects outcomes that do not match up with work. This has the same effect as no hope in devaluing work. The belief is that one can achieve the goal with no work or little work. Furthermore, false hope misidentifies the good worth working for. And so both no hope and false hope undermine work. No hope says the good cannot be achieved by work and false hope says a false good can be achieved with little or no work. But d'Anconia connects work to a basic drive in human nature and money as the representation of this drive.

True hope connects work to what is actually the look. Unlike no hope, it sees the necessity of work to achieve goals. But unlike false hope, it does not rest on a mistaken view of the good. Many times, false hope looks to an otherworldly satisfaction in something like heaven or the beatific vision. It disconnects work and this life from the highest good and therefore empties work of meaning. D'Anconia strives to connect work to the good:

Have you ever looked for the root of production? Take a look at an electric generator and dare tell yourself that it was created by the muscular effort of unthinking brutes. Try to grow a seed of wheat without the knowledge left to you by men who had to discover it for the first time. Try to obtain your food by means of nothing but physical motions—and you'll learn that man's mind is the root of all the goods produced and of all the wealth that has ever existed on earth.³

In this sense, work is distinctly human. The activities of animals do not require or involve hope. Even the ant who stores up food for the future needs only instinct. But d'Anconia connects work to the mental products of humanity. The true wealth of the nations is knowledge. And

³ *Ibid.*

this knowledge is symbolized in money. We can use examples to show how human knowledge excellently conceived is what elicits praise and confers value. This can be shown in the various fields of human life including agriculture, health, art, and business. Those persons who produce knowledge in such fields are sought out and their knowledge can be shared for the benefit of all. Unlike money, knowledge is communal in that the more you share the more there is. Unlike money, knowledge is inalienable (cannot be taken by the thief so that you no longer have it).

But now we begin to feel that something is amiss in Rand's vision. Perhaps we have followed her thus far and we see the value in work with hope toward what is good. But has she given us a correct definition of this good? And has her appeal to knowledge become a kind of "know how" that is merely pragmatic in its aims? Knowledge also has a corporate meaning that all persons with various talents can contribute to its production. Whereas the making of money as a talent is often vested in a very few and many times they do not show aptitude in other areas of human life.

D'Anconia tells us that not only is the Apostle Paul wrong but that the opposite is true about money: "Run for your life from any man who tells you that money is evil. That sentence is the leper's bell of an approaching looter. So long as men live together on earth and need means to deal with one another—their only substitute, if they abandon money, is the muzzle of a gun."⁴ The idea seems to be that money is the means of dealing with one another. It is a medium of value. This is reminiscent of Locke's description of money. Gold has intrinsic value as a rare metal that has many uses and does not rust. But we do not want to haul gold around with us. And so currency, perhaps tied to gold, becomes the more efficient means of exchange. But in any exchange

⁴ *Ibid.*

“money talks” only in the narrowest sense. What must happen is that those involved in the exchange come to an agreement. And this agreement is an expression of the use of reason. It might not be sound thinking as we reflect back on some of our purchases or investments. But it is thinking nonetheless and puts another layer of difference between this activity and the animals.

The use of money is the expression of coming to an agreement through reasoning together rather than using force. And Rand points to other virtues that money expresses:

But money demands of you the highest virtues, if you wish to make it or to keep it. Men who have no courage, pride, or self-esteem, men who have no moral sense of their right to their money and are not willing to defend it as they defend their life, men who apologize for being rich—will not remain rich for long.⁵

In this way, she believes that work for money is the embodiment of the virtues necessary for civilization. This requires taking personal responsibility and putting in the effort needed to provide for oneself and family. It produces ingenuity where people look to decrease effort through inventiveness. And it encourages industry rather than sloth and generation dependence.

But the problem noted above keeps growing. What is the highest good toward which all things aim? That is the knowledge we want. Her virtues appear to be circular. We need these virtues to produce the kind of society that values work and money. And we value work and money because these require such virtues. In other words, a virtue is a means to an end. It is not the end itself. And what one person counts as a virtue another might count as a vice when they have opposing beliefs about what is good.

D’Anconia uses his analysis to claim that not only is the civilization of money the best the world has seen, but its decline can also be

⁵ *Ibid.*

measured as we see a misuse of money. Although he relates this to the virtues and the crumbling of those virtues it is really an expression of the decline of reason and the use of force. Robbery which occurs by violence rather than theft, which occurs by stealth.

Do you wish to know whether that day is coming? Watch money. Money is the barometer of a society's virtue. When you see that trading is done, not by consent, but by compulsion—when you see that in order to produce, you need to obtain permission from men who produce nothing—when you see that money is flowing to those who deal, not in goods, but in favors—when you see that men get richer by graft and by pull than by work, and your laws don't protect you against them, but protect them against you—when you see corruption being rewarded and honesty becoming a self-sacrifice—you may know that your society is doomed.⁶

The final conflict in Rand's estimation is between those who work to produce and those who take by force. Whatever its lofty ideals and claims, the communists of the 20th century realized brutal regimes that relied on violence and oppression. She had direct knowledge of this. And what she thinks she sees is a return to a pre-civilized violence of the state of nature:

You stand in the midst of the greatest achievements of the greatest productive civilization and you wonder why it's crumbling around you, while you're damning its life-blood—money. You look upon money as the savages did before you, and you wonder why the jungle is creeping back to the edge of your cities. Throughout men's history, money was always seized by looters of one brand or another, whose names changed, but whose method remained the same: to seize wealth by force and to keep the producers bound, demeaned, defamed, deprived of honor.⁷

According to Rand, without the virtues summarized in her money speech civilization will collapse. But is this the case? Are there other virtues locked in a dialectic with one waxing then waning but neither finally

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

winning? If so it is because neither side has identified the good toward which we work or for which we help others. Perhaps d’Anconia gets us to a starting point for thinking about this when he says: “Or did you say it’s the love of money that’s the root of all evil? To love a thing is to know and love its nature.”⁸

Love involves knowledge of the nature of a thing. And what is good is according to the nature of a thing. What is good for a rabbit depends on the nature of a rabbit. What is good for a horse depends on the nature of a horse. And so what is good for a human depends on the nature of a human. And as we have been going we have been noticing where human nature is distinct from the animal. It came to a focus point not simply in money, work, or hope, but in reason. Humans use reason to think. They may not always think well and even may go some time without exercising thought at all. But tell a human they are thoughtless, merely a brute beast, and they will take great offense.

Just like we could know a person by what he hopes for, so too we can know a person by what he loves. What he loves tells us all about what he believes is good for himself and others. And it is here that we see d’Anconia finally falter: “But money is only a tool. It will take you wherever you wish, but it will not replace you as the driver. It will give you the means for the satisfaction of your desires, but it will not provide you with desires.”⁹

Ayn Rand does not help us with what we should desire. Does she mean that whatever we desire is what is actually good for us? The good is just the desired? That is the ethical egoist speaking. And from there her brand of ethical egoism might, like Epicurus, look to enlightened self-interest. But does this just become the view of self-interest? In such a view, one is best served by appearing to be virtuous before others but

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

in reality to be vicious and doing whatever can be gotten away with to advance satisfy desire. This is the view of Thrasymachus and d'Anconia seems to have led us back here.

Like Epicurus, Thrasymachus was an ethical egoist. He believed that justice as social coercion is whatever the strong can get away with. It is not by being unjust, but being thought to be just, that a person is able to be happiest. This is a form of enlightened self-interest that is self-preserving enough to not get caught. So he says: "And that is what I mean when I say that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger."¹⁰ And he modifies it to affirm that it is in one's own self-interest to be unjust: "justice is the interest of the stronger, whereas injustice is a man's own profit and interest."¹¹

But, in standard form, Socrates turns this on its head. The goal of the government is the benefit of the governed not of the governing. If those who are governing allow the governed to fall apart then soon they no longer have a government at all. And so justice is not for the stronger (the government) but for the weaker (the governed):

Then now, Thrasymachus, there is no longer any doubt that neither arts nor governments provide for their own interests; but, as we were before saying, they rule and provide for the interests of their subjects who are the weaker and not the stronger—to their good they attend and not to the good of the superior.¹²

This being the case, the question naturally arises why anyone would want to govern. And there are only three reasons why a person might govern:

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, Book I, 338e.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 344c.

¹² *Ibid.*, 346a.

And this is the reason, my dear Thrasymachus, why, as I was just now saying, no one is willing to govern; because no one likes to take in hand the reformation of evils which are not his concern without remuneration. For, in the execution of his work, and in giving his orders to another, the true artist does not regard his own interest, but always that of his subjects; and therefore in order that rulers may be willing to rule, they must be paid in one of three modes of payment: money, or honour, or a penalty for refusing.¹³

But a just man will not wish to take money and does not need honor. So the only way to get a just man to govern is with a penalty for refusing. But now we can connect to the problems that emerged with d'Anconia and are present in Thrasymachus. Neither has told us what it is that is good. Both seem to think that the good is what is desired. And so the satisfaction of desires is good. But that does not tell us what we ought to desire or if our current desires actually are good for us. We have all had the experience of desiring something we also know to be harmful. So by what standard can we say that the satisfaction of desire is good? This becomes circular in saying that the good is the satisfaction of good desires. What is good? D'Anconia could not help us and neither can Thrasymachus.

Socrates helps us out of this problem in a way that d'Anconia could not. He steps Thrasymachus through this problem: "Tell me, Thrasymachus, I said, did you mean by justice what the stronger thought to be his interest, whether really so or not? Certainly not, he said. Do you suppose that I call him who is mistaken the stronger at the time when he is mistaken?"¹⁴ With that question, Socrates puts a wedge between desire and the good. A person can be mistaken in thinking that what they desire is in their interest but in reality, it is not. So how can money benefit us if it is indeed a kind of symbol of human ingenuity

¹³ *Ibid.*, 347a.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 340c.

that doesn't tell us how to use it? And if it is a means for humans to interact in their pursuit of satisfying their desires this doesn't tell us which desires we should satisfy or how. So, money and payment are not to be confused with ends in themselves. Indeed, he says:

And the art of payment has the special function of giving pay: but we do not confuse this with other arts, any more than the art of the pilot is to be confused with the art of medicine, because the health of the pilot may be improved by a sea voyage. You would not be inclined to say, would you, that navigation is the art of medicine, at least if we are to adopt your exact use of language?¹⁵

So we do not perform the many arts of human civilization for the sake of money nor can money replace them or represent them. D'Anconia has made a fatal mistake about money. He has confused something that is a means with the end of an art. Socrates takes us through this analysis of each art in itself in discussion with Thrasymachus:

And we have admitted, I said, that the good of each art is specially confined to the art?

Yes.

Then, if there be any good which all artists have in common, that is to be attributed to something of which they all have the common use?

True, he replied.

And when the artist is benefited by receiving pay the advantage is gained by an additional use of the art of pay, which is not the art professed by him?

He gave a reluctant assent to this.

Then the pay is not derived by the several artists from their respective arts. But the truth is, that while the art of medicine gives health, and the art of the builder builds a house, another art attends them which is the art of pay. The various arts may be doing their own business and benefiting that over which they preside,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 346b.

but would the artist receive any benefit from his art unless he were paid as well?¹⁶

Money is not the aim of any of the arts nor is the benefit of doing the arts. It is a strange kind of reductionism that has motivated d'Anconia. Perhaps it is a symptom of the reductionism inherent in the material monism of Rand. But Socrates isn't done. He continues to take us into consideration of the good for a being. The good for a being is based on the nature of that being. He considers good, or end, of the eye. The excellence of the eye. And so from there, he moves to the soul itself. What is a good, or just, or excellent soul? Socrates continued:

Well; and has not the soul an end which nothing else can fulfill? for example, to superintend and command and deliberate and the like. Are not these functions proper to the soul, and can they rightly be assigned to any other?

To no other.

And is not life to be reckoned among the ends of the soul?

Assuredly, he said.

And has not the soul an excellence also?

Yes.

And can she or can she not fulfil her own ends when deprived of that excellence?¹⁷

No. If what is excellent about the soul is gone then it cannot attain its ends. And the end of a soul is called the good, so that a just soul is one that seeks and attains the good. Money cannot be the good and even may be a vice in some cases. The talent to amass money should not be confused with wisdom. Perhaps it is best called worldly wisdom. But the merely worldly wise are not to be confused with the wise who in their love of wisdom have become just. Socrates helps us define what counts as a just soul:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 346c–d.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 353d.

And we have admitted that justice is the excellence of the soul, and injustice the defect of the soul?

That has been admitted.

Then the just soul and the just man will live well, and the unjust man will live ill?

That is what your argument proves.

And he who lives well is blessed and happy, and he who lives ill the reverse of happy?¹⁸

So we see here that happiness is not an end any more than money is an end. Happiness is the effect of living well. *Well* being the adverbial form of *good*. Money doesn't tell us that we are or have been good, nor can the measurement of someone's money tell us this about them. Indeed, this was the problem we found in d'Anconia is that he did not tell us what is the good. And yet he was ready to criticize the Apostle Paul. But before we turn to Paul, Socrates leaves us with his final analysis that the unjust are unable to work together:

We have already shown that the just are clearly wiser and better and abler than the unjust, and that the unjust are incapable of common action; that to speak as we did of men who are evil acting at any time vigorously together, is not strictly true, for if they had been perfectly evil, they would have laid hands upon one another; but it is evident that there must have been some remnant of justice in them, which enabled them to combine; if there had not been they would have injured one another as well as their victims.¹⁹

This means that when people use money in a just manner they are showing some remnant of justice. And those who use it for unjust ends are unable to work together. So it is not the money that is either just or unjust but the end. And there is no end itself to be found in the money and so money itself is not good. It is only through having a just soul that a person can be happy:

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 353e.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 352c.

But whether the just have a better and happier life than the unjust is a further question which we also proposed to consider. I think that they have, and for the reasons which to have given; but still I should like to examine further, for no light matter is at stake, nothing less than the rule of human life.²⁰

Now we turn to the Apostle Paul. D’Anconia had taken time to refute and correct Paul. But d’Anconia didn’t know what is good. Let me name why he failed to know what is good: he didn’t know what is real. Part of Rand’s economics is that we can engage in economics without settling other religious differences about the nature of reality. So her materialism is overlooked by some Christians who say that we can still adopt her individualism as a code for society. It is a failure to see that a good for a being is based on the nature of a being. Socrates showed us the model of this form of thought: to know the end or good of a being we must know the nature of that being. The eye differs from the ear, the rabbit from the horse, the pilot from the doctor. But Rand’s is a modernist attempt to ground social interaction in the satisfaction of desire. The “good” becomes meaningless in its circularity: good is the satisfaction of good desires.

To know what is actually good we need to know the nature of things. What is human nature? And here is where we need to surpass Socrates. He gave us some invaluable help. But he didn’t take it far enough either in that section of the *Republic* or in his other dialogues. Paul does that for us by grounding the good in the knowledge of God. Consider the verse that d’Anconia took issue with: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”²¹ This requires us to know what is evil. And what is a root? This is a metaphor for how a plant operates. The root is what nourishes

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 352d.

²¹ 1 Tim 6:10.

the rest of the plant and allows the production of fruit. It is not money that is the root of evil but the love of money. The love of a means in the place of the love of the final and highest end. A person might work to get money and that can make it a proximate end, but as Socrates showed us it can never be the final end for a being.

This quote from Paul occurs in the context of this chapter. Contrast it with verse 6: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain.” This is the contrast to the love of money. The love of money is straying from the faith. And we know from Hebrews 11:6 that “without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” And we know from Genesis 15:1 that God tells Abraham “I am your very great reward.”

In Romans 1:18–21 we find Paul doing that kind of metaphysics that d’Anconia failed to do and that Socrates only partially did. The creation reveals its Creator. And it is this knowledge that is our highest end. To live well (wisdom in Hebrew is like *skillful*) is to know God. Jesus corrects his disciples when he says “you of little faith, do you still not understand.” Faith is understanding. If we do not understand what it is to be a human or the origin and purpose of a human then we cannot live well. We will not use money well. And whatever it represents (remember d’Anconia says it represents the great achievements of civilization), we will misuse it in the pursuit of unjust desires (any desire not aimed at the good).

D’Anconia is not merely disagreeing with Paul but with Jesus himself. Jesus states it this way:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor

rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.²²

We have a tendency to read “heaven” as otherworldly. But the context is heaven as the kingdom of God, and Jesus began his ministry by teaching that the kingdom of God is at hand (not elsewhere after death).

Jesus, quoted by John, says that eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3). Remember Socrates said that life is when the soul is excellent in the attainment of its unique end. That is living well. That is the good life. The word here used by Jesus is that this is eternal life. The just soul is the one who knows God and Christ Jesus whom He has sent. The love of money for the satisfaction of whatever desire one happens to have is contrasted with the love of God. This is godliness that brings contentment. The person who either does not know God or says there is no God (Rand) cannot hope to have contentment.

But neither can a Socrates who stops too soon. He stopped in his knowing that he does not know rather than going on to get knowledge. This shortcoming gave us Academic Skepticism which really is behind the modernist attempt to separate economics from religion. The many religions fight and come to no unity and therefore, so the thinking process goes, we need to be able to get on with our lives and have a means of doing so that is neutral with respect to religious topics. While it might appear neutral to some of the religious topics that gave us the Wars of Religion, it cannot be neutral about the nature of being and the good. If we want to satisfy just desires we must know what is real.

Academic skepticism has been the solution of modernity. In the face of interminable Wars of Religion that left all sides exhausted, modernity looked for a solution in skepticism. The idea is that we cannot resolve through knowledge of these religious differences and so we allow factions to co-exist within a state that attends to the public interests

²² Matt 6:19–21.

of all. Religion is merely a private opinion and private matter. This is what allowed the apparent separation of economics and religion. But this is a narrow definition of religion.

It may indeed be true that the issues fought over in the Wars of Religion were not getting resolved and must be put on hold while rational arguments are considered. This should have been the approach all along rather than warfare. What unites economics and religion is the common focus on the good. But academic skepticism applies even to the knowledge of our highest good. And if we cannot know what is good then we cannot know how to use economic resources. The only solution to resolve to come to know our highest good is to bring unity between economics and religion and within religion.

We can conclude that economics cannot be separated from religion. Or, that it cannot be separated from the study of metaphysics. The use of money for just ends requires that we know the nature of things. And to live well requires that we know human nature. And this inevitably leads us to consider the Creator of human nature. The knowledge of God unites the many different arts of human civilization. And this includes the art of payment. While the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, the knowledge of God is the root of a well-lived life. Early I reminded you that Jesus began his ministry by saying the kingdom of God is at hand. But that is only part of what he said. He also said, “repent.” And repentance must occur at the root. D’Anconia and Rand need to repent not only of the love money but of the failure to know the nature of things (unbelief).



**What Can a Conversation between
Ayn Rand, Socrates, and the Apostle Paul
Teach Us about Our Highest Good?**

SUMMARY

Ayn Rand, through her character Francisco d'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged*, taught that the Apostle Paul is wrong when he says money is a root of all kinds of evil. Instead, she argues that money is perhaps the greatest invention of humanity and is the foundation of civilization. In this article, Dr. Anderson challenges Rand's understanding of good and evil first by comparing d'Anconia to Thrasymachus and then by considering good and evil in the Biblical Worldview. These connections make it possible to see how economics and religion are closely connected through basic assumptions about reality and our highest good. Without knowing our highest good we cannot make sense of either religion or economics.

KEYWORDS

Ayn Rand, Socrates, Apostle Paul, good, evil, money, civilization, religion, economics, capitalism, communism, Francisco d'Anconia.

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