



DISCUSSION OF JOHN MCDOWELL'S "PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE AND EMPIRICAL RATIONALITY"

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For John McDowell, the acquisition of perceptual knowledge is grounded in a type of experiential justification that ensures the subject an opportunity for knowledge. McDowell's development of this idea centers on a notion of self-consciousness. Specifically, the relevant experiential justification obtains in virtue of the fact that the subject's self-consciousness of experience includes that she is in a perceptual state (i.e., a state in which things are "perceptually manifest").

As McDowell notes in his contribution, this approach to perceptual knowledge can seem threatened by so-called "bad cases": cases (e.g., hallucinations) described in such a way as to rule out that the subject's self-consciousness extends to the fact that she is *not* perceiving. The upshot of such cases can seem to be that the subject's capacity for self-consciousness of her experience cannot include whether a given experience is perceptual.

But for McDowell (pp. 8-9) this impression is dispelled if self-consciousness is appreciated as a feature of the subject's "single capacity" for gaining knowledge from experience. This yields the following solution: if experience in "bad cases" is defective in grounding perceptual knowledge, it is also defective in grounding self-consciousness. And nothing follows from the character of defective states for the character of non-defective states. Self-consciousness of perception can include being in a perceptual state.

My question concerns the motivation for McDowell's view of self-consciousness.

Consider the following contrast. A "bad case" is defective in the sense that from it no perceptual knowledge can be gained. But at least in this absolute sense, a "bad case" is not obviously defective in relation to self-consciousness, insofar as arguably the subject can be self-consciously aware that she has an experience, that the experience has a particular qualitative character, etc. What this might seem to show is that self-consciousness does not exhaustively attend a single capacity for perceptual knowledge, but (also) involves a subject's more general capacity for awareness of her conscious states. In relation to self-consciousness, there seems something privileged about conscious experience in general, which seems not captured by the idea that the "bad case" is simply defective.

This constitutes a *prima facie* challenge to McDowell's conception of perceptual knowledge. The heart of McDowell's view is that perceptual knowledge is a specific type of "rationality at work" (p. 1) that involves a subject's responsiveness to what is self-consciously "perceptually manifest." But the idea that conscious experience *in general* is privileged in relation to self-consciousness energizes the opposing view: that perceptual knowledge involves a subject's rational responsiveness merely to how things consciously are in the general sense, that is, including "bad cases".

My point in raising this *prima facie* worry is to query whether more can be said about the relation between McDowell's view of perceptual knowledge and his view of self-consciousness. Specifically, the ideal object would seem to be grounds, available from within human self-consciousness, to accept McDowell's "knowledge first" approach to perceptual rationality as opposed to a conception centering on responsiveness to conscious appearances.

Response to de Bruijn

De Bruijn notes that the subject's self-consciousness in a "bad case" is not *simply* defective in respect of the availability to her of self-knowledge.

On my account, it is defective in one way. An experience in a "bad case" merely seems to make certain worldly realities manifest to the

subject. So a “bad case” falls short of a “good case,” in which the subject is in a position to know that her experience makes certain worldly realities manifest to her.

But even in a “bad case” a subject’s self-consciousness makes *some* knowledge available to her. She seems to have an experience, and that is not a mere seeming. And there are facts about what it is like to have an experience whose obtaining is neutral with respect to the experience’s epistemic significance; “qualitative character” is a natural label for facts of that sort. The subject in a “bad case” seems to have an experience with a certain qualitative character in that sense, and that too is not a mere seeming. The defectiveness of a “bad case” in respect of knowledge available in self-consciousness relates only to the epistemic significance of the experience.

De Bruijn says this constitutes a *prima facie* challenge to my conception of perceptual knowledge. But what is the challenge?

I see no difficulty in the idea that a “bad case” is defective in relation to self-knowledge in one respect but not others. De Bruijn asks, in effect, why we should not limit self-knowledge in experience to seemings that are not mere seemings. But what is the attraction of such a limit? There should not seem to be a presumption that capacities for self-knowledge are infallible, so that we need a special reason for taking them to extend beyond a region where they cannot lead us astray.

De Bruijn asks for grounds to accept my conception as opposed to one that centers on responsiveness to conscious appearances. But on my understanding that wording does not describe an alternative; my conception centers on responsiveness to conscious appearances. Consciousness of an appearance is self-conscious awareness of an act of the subject’s capacity for perceptual knowledge. If we describe an act of a capacity for perceptual knowledge as consciousness of an appearance, we leave open whether it is a non-defective act of the capacity, a case of worldly realities being apparent, manifest, to the subject. If it is, that is available in the subject’s consciousness, and describing the experience as consciousness of an appearance is weaker than it needs to be. Some responsiveness to appearances is responsiveness to the manifest presence of worldly realities. The weaker concept is intelligible only as a weakening of the stronger concept.

I do not conceive this as a “view,” with positive argument needed to vindicate its superiority to competitors. (I know how annoying this can be.) How I have put things is probably wrong in detail, but the general shape of it is something everyone has in her power to know in her self-consciousness as a thinker, a rational subject. Bad philosophy can persuade us into a false consciousness, in which we cannot see how these thoughts could have that status. The only way to defend them is to expose the distorting effects of such philosophy, as I try to do in my paper.

Charles Goldhaber

McDowell insists on an internalism about perceptual knowledge. The internalism states that someone knows, at least implicitly, that an experience is veridical (i.e., an experience of things as they truly are) whenever she makes a knowledgeable judgment on its basis. This internalism can seem to be challenged by the “familiar fact” that we often cannot know our experience is not veridical, when it is not. That fact can seem to imply that we cannot know that our experience is veridical, when it is (p. 94). And that, combined with the internalism, would imply that we never make knowledgeable judgments on the basis of experience. This unpalatably skeptical result may lead us to reject the internalism.

McDowell resists this rejection by showing that the argument motivating it is invalid without an “extra premise” (p. 94). This premise would state or imply that our inability to know that our experience is not veridical, when it is not, implies we are unable to know that our experience is veridical, when it is. Identifying this extra premise presents an opportunity to reject it, and block the argument.

McDowell attempts to do this by again insisting on his internalism, thus “preempt[ing]” the “line of thought” which would employ the extra premise (p. 95). If the internalism is true, and we sometimes do make knowledgeable judgments on the ground of experience, then the extra premise must be false. That is because our making those judgments would imply that we know, at least implicitly, that the experiences on which we ground them are veridical, despite our inability to know that some non-veridical experiences are not.

This reply succeeds only if we are already more sure of McDowell’s internalism than we are of the extra premise. Are we? That McDowell’s internalism accords with one way we justify our claims to perceptual knowledge may suggest so. (A: How do you know mom is home? B: I see her through the doorway.) But the extra premise finds similar support. It seems to follow from another pre-philosophically intuitive internalism—the idea that indistinguishable potential grounds for knowledge have the same epistemic significance. This internalism seems to accord with one way we withdraw perceptual knowledge claims when challenged. (A: But mom’s twin sister is visiting! B: Oh, then I don’t know if mom’s home.) Is there a reason, then, to take McDowell’s internalism as the default, rather than this other internalism?

Response to Goldhaber

Goldhaber, following a common practice, equates saying an experience is veridical with saying it is of things as they truly are. The equation is wrong. An experience can be veridical, in the etymologically

natural sense, without being an experience *of* things as being the way it truly represents them as being. The internalism I describe concerns experiences that are not just veridical but knowably so, because they make worldly realities manifest to their subjects, with knowledge that the experiences have that epistemic significance available to their subjects in the experiencing itself.

A subject can innocently take herself to have worldly realities manifest to her in an experience when she does not. It can seem to follow that a subject cannot know, just in enjoying an experience, that it *does* make worldly realities manifest to her. That would rule out the internalism I describe.

Goldhaber reduces my response to a bald reaffirmation of my internalism: if it is possible to have perceptual knowledge, conceived as my internalism conceives it, it must be possible to know, just in enjoying an experience, that it is one of perceiving; so the “extra premise,” according to which that is impossible, must be false.

As a response to what makes the internalism seem impossible, this would be dialectically inept. How could it be a defense of the internalism to point out that a premise in the argument that makes it seem impossible conflicts with it?

But that is not my response.

I argue that the objection turns on a line of thought to the following effect. If there could be a capacity to know, just in enjoying an experience, that it makes perceptual knowledge available to one, that capacity would be extra to one’s capacity for knowledge about the environment through experience; it would be second-order in relation to the experiences through which the capacity for perceptual knowledge operates. And unlike the capacity for perceptual knowledge, it would have to be infallible.

This line of thought exploits a confused picture of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness in acts of reason is not second-order in relation to the acts of reason it informs. It is part of what it is for them to be the acts they are. The capacity to know the epistemic significance of one’s experiences of perceiving is an aspect of the capacity for knowledge about one’s environment through experience. And the capacity is fallible. This undermines the idea that a capacity to know, just in enjoying an experience, that it puts one in a position to have perceptual knowledge would have to be infallible.

Goldhaber’s supposedly competing internalism says that indistinguishable potential grounds for knowledge should have the same epistemic significance. But there is no competition. The fact that a subject can innocently suppose herself to be in a “good case” when she is in a “bad case” is not well expressed in terms of the idea that “good cases” and “bad cases” are indistinguishable. (See my response to Declan Smithies.) What is true is that one cannot always tell a “bad case” from a “good case.” That can seem to establish that one cannot tell that one is in a “good case” when one is. But it would establish

that one cannot know one is in a “good case” only on the assumption that a capacity to know one is in a “good case” would have to be infallible. If we discard that assumption, we can recognize that the grounds for knowledge provided by an experience in a “good case” are not indistinguishable from the grounds provided by an experience in a “bad case.” One can tell a “good case” from a “bad case.” In a “good case,” one has, and is in a position to know one has, grounds of a sort one merely seems to have in a “bad case.”

Andrea Kern

McDowell gives two descriptions of how experiences of perceiving are related to perceptually knowledgeable judgments. He evidently thinks they are equivalent, but I do not see how they can be.

In the first description, knowledgeable judgments are grounded on experiences.

In the second, an experience of perceiving, considered in abstraction from any judgment, is a partial act of the capacity for perceptual knowledge, and a perceptually knowledgeable judgment is a complete act of that capacity.

The first description suggests that going from the experience to the judgment is a step, a further act. It makes no difference to this that according to McDowell the judgment is an act of the same capacity of which the experience is an act. This seems to open questions about the subject’s entitlement to take this step.

According to the second description, the judgment is not a further act, but just the full realization of the capacity for perceptual knowledge. And the experience is the same realization of the capacity but, considered in abstraction from the judgment, not, or not yet, the full realization that the judgment is.

The second description seems fine, but not the first. Why does McDowell think the two are equivalent?

Response to Kern

Here is a bridge between the two descriptions. What figures in the second as a partial act of the capacity for perceptual knowledge is, as such, a case of having certain worldly realities perceptually present to the subject. If one has worldly realities perceptually present to one, one is in a position to make certain knowledgeable judgments, with contents suitably related to the character of the worldly realities that are present to one in the experience. The fact that relevant worldly realities are present to the subject in her experience itself suffices to entitle her to make any of those judgments; no further question arises about that entitlement. Making one of those judgments is grounded

in the experience in that the experience gives the subject conclusive warrant for the judgment; it is not possible, consistently with the experience's being what it is, that things are not as they are judged to be in the judgment. Making the judgment is a further step in that it is possible to have relevant worldly realities perceptually present to one—what figures in the second description as a partial act of the capacity for perceptual knowledge—and not make a judgment that would be a corresponding complete act of the capacity: that is, not take the further step.

Declan Smithies

Can it be rational to believe that p whether I'm in the good case of seeing that p or the bad case of hallucinating that p ? McDowell's version of disjunctivism says yes, but the explanation is different in each case. In the good case, it is rational to believe that p because I'm in a position to know that p by seeing that p . In the bad case, it is rational to believe that p because I'm in a situation that is indiscriminable from being in a position to know that p by seeing that p . My question is: how should we understand the relevant notion of *indiscriminability*?

By the *negative* criterion, the bad case is indiscriminable from the good case in the sense that it's unknowably distinct from the good case: I'm not in a position to know that I'm not in a position to know that p by seeing that p . The problem is that this negative criterion applies to rocks, coma victims, and zombies, none of which can form rational beliefs. So, the negative criterion is extensionally inadequate.

By the *positive* criterion, the bad case is indiscriminable from the good case in the following sense: if you are in the bad case, then it is rational to believe you are in the good case. This positive criterion includes hallucination, while excluding rocks, coma victims, and zombies. So it gets the right extension. The problem is that it raises the very same kind of question that it was supposed to answer.

Can it be rational for me to believe I'm in the good case whether I'm in the good case or the bad case? McDowell's disjunctivism says yes, but the explanation is different in each case. In the good case, I'm in a position to know that I'm in the good case, whereas in the bad case, I'm not. But then what explains why it's rational to believe I'm in the good case when I'm in the bad case? We cannot explain this by saying that the bad case is indiscriminable from the good case, since that is just to repeat the datum to be explained.

Why not just take indiscriminability as primitive? One problem is that if we take the epistemic status of the bad case as primitive, then we cannot deliver on the promise of explaining the epistemic status of the bad case in terms of the good case. Another problem is that this fails to do justice to the epistemic role of experience. It is extremely natural to say that the bad case is indiscriminable from the good

case because they are experientially the same. But McDowell cannot say this without recognizing an experiential common factor that explains why the bad case shares some (although not all) of the epistemic properties of the good case.

Response to Smithies

Why is it rational for me to believe that p if I merely seem to see that p ; in my terms, if it merely seems to me that the fact that p , or something whose existence entails that it is a fact that p , is visually manifest to me?

Smithies thinks I would invoke indiscriminability in answering such a question. But there is no need for special explanatory apparatus. Framed as I have framed it, the question essentially answers itself. Suppose it seems to me that I am in a position in which relevant worldly realities are visually manifest to me. In that case, it seems to me that I am in a position in which judging that p would have the rationality that characterizes a perceptually knowledgeable judgment, the rationality of making a judgment when I have perceptually manifest to me something that leaves no possibility that things are not as I judge them to be. That description of the case reveals a rationality the judgment has even if the seeming is a mere seeming and the judgment does not have, but merely seems to have, the rationality of a perceptually knowledgeable judgment. If a judgment seems to have the rationality of a perceptually knowledgeable judgment, that itself constitutes a rationality that the judgment has.

Since I do not invoke indiscriminability, Smithies' candidate criteria for indiscriminability get no purchase on my conception.

The negative criterion is irrelevant. Certainly, a rock is not in a position to know that it is not in a position to have perceptual knowledge that p . But the question, as I framed it, was about how it can be rational for a subject who merely seems to see that p to believe that p . Only subjects capable of getting to know things through perception can have experiences informed by a self-consciousness that includes seeming to have worldly realities visually manifest to them. That does not apply to rocks, coma victims, or zombies.

A positive condition is more to the point; not as a criterion for the applicability of a notion of indiscriminability that supposedly does explanatory work, but just as saying how "bad cases" are epistemically related to "good cases." What is epistemically relevant about a "bad case" is that it presents itself, in the subject's consciousness, as a "good case." As I said, that makes intelligible the sense in which judgments can be rational even in "bad cases." There is no question of just defining being in a "bad case" as having reason to believe one is in a "good case." The rationality in a subject's believing she is in a "good case" is given in the description of the case as one in which she seems to be in a "good case."

Invoking indiscriminability is at best an infelicitous way of registering that the capacity for knowledge through perception is fallible, not just in respect of knowledge about the subject's environment but also in respect of knowledge of the epistemic significance of her experiences; one can seem to be in a position to have perceptual knowledge when one is not. It is infelicitous because it implies that subjects cannot tell "good cases" and "bad cases" apart, presumably because, as Smithies suggests, the cases are alike in an experiential respect, which is conceived as the only basis in consciousness for thoughts about whether one is in a "good case" or a "bad case." No doubt there are experiential respects in which "bad cases" are like "good cases." And such similarities can figure in making it intelligible that "bad cases" present themselves as "good cases," so that someone can be in a "bad case" without being able to know she is not in a "good case." I explain in my paper how this fails to imply that when someone is in a "good case" her consciousness does not include being in a position to know she is.

Alison Springle

According to McDowell, perception is a capacity for knowledge via the impacts of reality on the senses. Non-deviant exercises of this capacity simply make the world manifest to us, thus providing conclusive warrant for our perceptual beliefs.

McDowell thinks the epistemic non-disjunctivist is led astray by a bad inference: from the fact that perception sometimes, for example, in the case of illusions or hallucinations, only tells us how the world seems they infer that this is all it ever does; that perception never wears its veridicality on its sleeve. As McDowell notes, the fact that a capacity sometimes fails to do the thing it is a capacity for does not mean it never does the thing it is a capacity for. However, the non-disjunctivist may treat illusion and hallucination as reason to doubt that perception is the kind of capacity McDowell takes it to be. Perception may contribute to our having propositional knowledge about the world without ever simply making it manifest to us. How can we tell what kind of capacity perception actually is?

Some non-disjunctivists treat this as an empirical question and find that a variety empirical evidence does not support the hypothesis that perception, in the good case, should be understood as being in the business of making the objective world manifest.¹ Elsewhere, McDowell has claimed that empirical sciences merely study the enabling

¹ See, for example, Burge (2005, 2011). The empirical literature employed by, for example, color irrealists or relationalists (e.g., Chirimuuta 2014; Cohen 2009) or phenomenal internalists (e.g., Pautz 2013), as well as the literature on systematic misperception (e.g., Mendelovici 2014, Hill 2014, part III, and his comments on McDowell at the conference, Hatfield 2009, e.g., ch. 6 & 7) potentially provide further fodder for this line of argument.

conditions for perception; they are silent on the epistemological issues that interest him.² This is not obvious. The level of analysis most obviously associated with the physical enabling conditions for perception is what Marr (1982) called the “implementation” level. However, perceptual psychology typically works on the “computational” and “algorithmic” levels of analysis, typically specifying perceptual *function* in broadly epistemic terms (computational), and then explaining how perceptual systems achieve that function (algorithmic). Why should such sciences fail to have traction on the question of the kind of capacity perception is?

Perhaps McDowell will insist that his concern is only with the capacity as it exists in rational creatures who inhabit “the space of reasons.” But why should we think that the science cannot inform us here? What about our status as rational precludes scientific inquiry from illuminating the nature of the perceptual part of the human animal’s soul?³ Somewhat relatedly, perhaps McDowell thinks we can know *a priori*, as part of our consciousness of ourselves as rational creatures, that, in their non-deviant exercises, perceptual capacities simply make the world manifest. But how can this be something we can know *a priori*?

Response to Springle

It is true that many philosophers treat illusion and hallucination as reason to doubt that perception is the kind of capacity I take it to be. In my paper I offer an explanation of why “bad cases” seem to afford reason for the doubt, and I try to expose the apparent reason as mere appearance. Springle does not address that part of what I say.

I do not believe it is an empirical hypothesis that perception makes the world manifest to us. If it were an empirical hypothesis, it might matter that empirical considerations cannot be found to support it. But surely empirical considerations cannot bear on the thought that it is not an empirical hypothesis at all.

It is not to the point that much empirical psychology of perception has a computational, and, as Springle says, broadly epistemic character. (I assume she says it is epistemic because computation is, in the original sense of the term, a way of getting to know things.) The aim of such psychology is to explain how perceptual systems, with only proximal stimuli as input, enable perceiving animals to be differentially responsive to distal stimuli. Descriptions of perceptual systems in computational terms can figure in theories directed at that aim. But a capacity for perceptual knowledge is not to be equated with what a theory of that kind offers to explain, a differential responsiveness to

² See McDowell (2010, 2013).

³ See Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *De Sensu et Sensibilibus*, in Barnes (1984).

environmental realities. So such theories are silent on the question what sort of capacity perception is. And that is not an empirical claim.

This is not to say the actual functioning of our perceptual systems is opaque to scientific inquiry, as Springle suggests. There is a great deal of scientific theorizing, much of it in computational terms, about the functioning of the systems that enable us to be differentially responsive to our environments. My claim is just that that is not relevant to the question whether perception is the kind of capacity I take it to be.

I think the character of our perceptual capacities is available for us to know in the self-consciousness with which we have and exercise them. Springle asks how we could know such a thing a priori, but that may not be the best way to express the thought she wants to question. Knowledge in self-consciousness is not at our disposal in advance of any empirical knowledge; when self-consciousness dawns, we become aware of ourselves as already, among much else, in the business of exploiting opportunities for knowledge through perception, and hence as already having some of what we take to be empirical knowledge. But knowledge of oneself as a perceiver does not itself have or need empirical credentials, any more than does knowledge of oneself as a thinker. In fact it is just the self-knowledge of a thinker, more fully specified in one respect.

Bosuk Yoon

Suppose that my current situation is such that, as McDowell puts it, the world is doing me a favor by placing a ripe tomato on the table in good light with nothing funny going on. McDowell's claim is that in such a situation, I can see that there is a ripe tomato, which provides me with a conclusive reason to believe that there is a ripe tomato, the kind of reason that he takes to be necessary for knowledge. I agree with McDowell that the possibility of subjectively identical deceptive experiences does not entail that I can never perceive that things are in a certain way. I also agree with him that if I see that there is a ripe tomato, I can know, without extra information, that I see that there is a ripe tomato. The same capacity underlies both knowledge of an external fact through perception and knowledge of the perceptual ground for that knowledge.

A question I would like to ask McDowell is this: can my experience *alone* put me in the position to see that things are in a certain way? Suppose that I come to the perceptual situation with the mistaken belief that these days they make only fake tomatoes that look just like real tomatoes. Given this misconception, I would be entitled to believe that there is a fake tomato on the table. Even if there is a real tomato on the table in good light, I would not be entitled, given my

misconception, to believe that there is a real tomato on the table: it would be indeed irrational for me to do so. The rationality of my perceptual judgments depends on two factors: my experience and my conception. Thus, if I do see that there is a ripe tomato and I am conclusively justified to believe that there is a ripe tomato, this is also in part due to the background conception that I bring to bear on my perceptual situation. As far as the rational contribution of experiences themselves is concerned, subjectively identical experiences must have the same given. This principle in itself does not rule out the possibility that my experience, together with an appropriate background, can afford reasons of the sort claimed by McDowell.

Response to Yoon

An experience of perceiving grounds perceptually knowledgeable judgments by making worldly realities manifest to the subject. In self-consciously enjoying the experience, the subject is in a position to know that relevant worldly realities are manifest to her. The experience itself, self-consciously enjoyed, puts the subject in a position to know, for instance by seeing, that things are a certain way. Yoon asks whether an experience *alone* can put someone in that position; the answer is “Yes.”

What if someone is persuaded into a misconception of the kind Yoon considers? She has presented in her experience worldly realities whose actuality entails that certain judgments would be true, so those judgments would be perceptually knowledgeable if she made them. But she is misled into not recognizing the opportunity for knowledge that her experience would afford her if she were not misled. See the discussion of “reflectively unfavorable circumstances” in Andrea Kern, *Sources of Knowledge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).

In a different case, in which fakes are indeed prevalent in the subject’s environment, she is not capable of having present to her in her experience, in the relevant sense, worldly realities that entail the truth of a judgment that the environment contains a genuine instance of the relevant kind of thing. It is irrelevant if on some occasion she has a genuine instance in her field of view; presence, in the relevant sense, is not just being in the subject’s field of view, but an opportunity for knowledge.

Neither of these cases motivates the idea that a warrant for a perceptually knowledgeable judgment requires not only experience but also a conception, in Yoon’s case a belief that fakes are not prevalent in her environment. If fakes are prevalent, the subject does not have an experience of the kind that would by itself put her in a position to have perceptual knowledge. If she falsely believes that fakes are prevalent, her experience by itself would put her in a position to have

perceptual knowledge, if her misconception did not preclude her from recognizing that her experience has that epistemic significance.

As Yoon says, experiences that are subjectively identical, identical in how they present themselves to their subject, should make the same contribution to the rationality of judgments. As I have explained in other responses, this does not tell against supposing that the rational contribution of an experience of perceiving is that it makes relevant worldly realities manifest to the subject. (See my responses to Charles Goldhaber and Declan Smithies.) An experience that makes worldly realities manifest to its subject is not “subjectively identical” with an experience that merely seems to do that; if an experience does that, the fact that it does that is included in how it presents itself to its subject, and that is not true of an experience that merely seems to do that. Yoon brings out what is only a complication in this picture, not an insuperable problem for it: the opportunity for knowing the epistemic significance of an experience of perceiving, and thereby for knowledge about the environment, that is part of the self-consciousness with which the experience is enjoyed can be obscured from the subject by reflectively unfavorable circumstances.

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