



## **The Role of Philosophy in the Interplay of Politics and Social Justice in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigeria, like most African nations is still battling with the issue of subsistent living which does not leave much room for anyone to engage in the enterprise of philosophizing. This is made more difficult by the crop of political leadership who, as a result of greed and materialistic tendencies, has rubbished the values for hard work, human dignity, honesty and integrity in the national polity. In such a scenario, some have even doubted the relevance of philosophy. But since 'knowledge saves, and ignorance entangles; since knowledge liberates, and ignorance enslaves, philosophy by clarifying our political and social concepts, empowers the electorate as well as political office seekers / holders with the appreciation of their rights and privileges as well as their duties within the polity. Philosophy can and should develop a 'social vision', with norms, goals and values for every actor in the polity so as to guard against skewed behaviours that are inimical to social justice.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of the relevance of philosophy to nation building is a serious issue especially among undergraduates in Africa and African universities. This is all the more serious, perhaps because of two reasons amongst others: first, the discipline of philosophy, and the art of philosophizing have a relatively short history in Africa and much less in Nigeria, except for the claim by some Africanists like Onyewuenyi, of the Egyptian origin to Greek philosophy, which nevertheless was not sustained. Second, the greed of African leaders which has destroyed her economy, leaving over eighty percent (80%) of her population below poverty level has created an atmosphere where people primarily subsist, as they say, 'from hand to

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mouth', with practically no time and resources to engage in the leisure of philosophizing.

Not until recently, the department of philosophy was never found in most African universities. Reports show that the Nigerian Philosophical Association, an umbrella of philosophers in Nigeria, has for long, been subdivided into two zones: East and West, leaving off North for not having enough departments of philosophy in the Universities situated in the north. This obvious lack in this twenty-first century is only but a small reflection of the pattern of society the political leadership of African nations wants. How may philosophy be useful in a society that does not promote philosophical thoughts? Or if that may sound contradictory, since as we shall see from the various meanings of philosophy that every individual person and indeed every society do have some sort of philosophy, we may rephrase the question by asking: what relevance has philosophy to a society that is battling with the provision of bare necessities of life? What hope do graduates of philosophy have in Nigeria except as being hired as teachers of philosophy when there are opportunities for that?

It is obvious that for the moment, not much is seen about the relationship between philosophy and politics, philosophy and economics, and indeed philosophy and good governance in Nigeria; not much is seen about the role philosophy has to play for the over-all growth of the society. It is our aim in this paper to highlight these relationships and roles and to emphasize the need for the promotion of a 'philosophic culture' if Nigeria, as a country, and indeed Africa, as a whole, is to be emancipated from the manacles of political hooliganism.

### **What is philosophy?**

The question, 'what is philosophy?' is a perennial question which has engaged the attention of philosophers and 'laymen' all through the centuries. Different people have given different answers to it based on their different experiences with reality. Following the tradition of Hegel, philosophy could preliminarily be defined as the study of reality. Reality here is not just an individual particular entity, or an aspect of an entity, which is the scope of restrictive natural and social sciences of physics, biology, anthropology, etc. Reality encompasses each and every individual thing that exists; all that is. Whatever then involves 'all that is' would be too inclusive as to need an all too comprehensive and too broad a discipline that would be able to explain its principles and operations. Philosophy thus, is seen as the broadest of all disciplines. Its broad nature makes it all the more impossible to be explained away neatly by a formula. And so the various formulae employed by diverse authors serve as bits of information describing aspects of what constitutes the entire discipline.

The reason for this lack of accord in the definition of philosophy may not be far from its history. In the history of Western education, for instance, every discipline was incorporated into one all-inclusive corpus called

philosophy. Gradually but systematically, the various disciplines beginning with mathematics began their long journey of detachment from philosophy to establish their autonomy as distinct styles of rational thinking. Just a few centuries ago, the term philosophy was commonly used to mean the 'sciences'. But this is not to absolve us from presenting a unified position on the matter. We shall first of all, examine the various interpretations and then attempt to find the way to understand this veritable swarm of views and definitions.

Historically, philosophy is seen as 'a discipline that encompasses all other disciplines'<sup>1</sup>. It is the basic human enquiry which has yielded the multiplicity of disciplines that take care of virtually all aspects of human life. Its emergence in Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup>c B.C. was characterized by the general quest for knowledge: what is the *urstoff*, i.e. fundamental principle of reality? Is there one, or are there many things in the universe? Is change real or imaginary? These and others are questions that touch both on the natural / physical sciences and the arts / aesthetics. They are deep-seated questions which, in the passage of time, have metamorphosed into the various disciplines that constitute the hallmark of the present-day science and technology. In simple terms, philosophy, from the historical point of view, is 'an enquiry which is the mother of all enquiries, and from which all other modes of enquiries originated'<sup>2</sup>.

Even after the historic detachment of the natural / social sciences, philosophy did not totally loosen its grip on them. It still permeated them, providing them with humane texture by systematically using its principles in the analyses of the concepts they employed. Thus, there is and can be philosophy of every discipline and activity: philosophy of education; philosophy of history; philosophy of language, philosophy of science; philosophy of law; philosophy of eating; etc. In this way, philosophy is taken to be the "attempt to examine the nature of the various disciplines or branches of knowledge"<sup>3</sup>; a quest after every competence and perfection in every field of human life. Its task is to analyze and explain concepts and activities.

Again, as I noted in the work: *Philosophy: A Thematic Introduction*, it is an incontrovertible fact that different people living in different parts of the world have different understandings, interpretations and reactions to things and events. No two inaccessible groups of people or individuals can live exactly the same pattern of life. Each individual's / group's pattern of life will always be conditioned by both genetic and environmental factors. Nonetheless, each individual / group has a way of life, and this is called philosophy. In this vein, philosophy is taken to mean a world-view (*weltanschauung*), a way of life, that is, the fundamental beliefs of an individual or group of individuals about life, its origin and end, the universe, and the entire reality. It is an identified way of life which could be specific to an individual or group of individuals, whether expressed or implied in action. Since every individual or cultural group has a way of life, it then means that every society and indeed every individual has a form of philosophy: a

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philosophy which is more or less circumscribed by historically determined social relations. This is the sense in which we loosely speak of Okere's philosophy, Mbiti's philosophy, Aristotle's philosophy, Igbo philosophy, Yoruba philosophy, African philosophy, European philosophy, etc.

However, from the point of view of etymology, the term philosophy is derived from two Greek words, *Philos* - love of, (*Philein* – lover of), and *Sophia* - wisdom. Philosophy then means the love or pursuit of wisdom, and the philosopher is known as the lover of wisdom. This is very instructive for the simple reason that philosophy is not just the same as passive wisdom which a person simply possesses. From the socio-cultural perspective, virtually every group of people has a wisdom that they live by or believe in. In the world today, a great many people have been indoctrinated or cowed into believing one creed or another, and possessing general beliefs, attitudes and concepts of life, are accordingly acknowledged as having a philosophy. But that does not make them philosophers. Wisdom in the sense of philosophy is the active use of intelligence. A philosopher is one who personally loves to know the truth and / or meaning about the general principles of the world; a person who actively and consciously pursues the truth in such matters. For the Greeks then, philosophy meant a refusal to be contented with traditional beliefs or truths marked by a conscious quest for understanding or wisdom.

Finally, philosophy can also be seen as an attitude to life. This may need further clarification since it could be misconstrued as a way of life. Indeed, a way of life as we have seen involves an expression of a comprehended relationship with reality which may or may not involve a theoretical substantiation of this relationship, but is nonetheless manifested in people's decisions and behaviour. In this sense, a way of life (which may have originated from inherited stock of tradition) is equipped with an attitude to life. But when we say that philosophy is an 'attitude to life', we mean that critical attitude which is characterized by curiosity to know, openness of mind on all issues, lack of dogmatic assertions or stand, tolerance, and preparedness to examine everything without prejudice.<sup>4</sup> This is the sense in which the earliest Western philosophers are posited to have emerged from Greece in the 5<sup>th</sup> c B. C. : a time when men decided to break up with unadventurous traditional practices and paralyzing superstitions insisting that any hope of a reliable answer to the questions of life, truth and meaning must come not from magic or authority, but from a critical understudy of nature and events. 'The unexamined life', Socrates would say, 'is not worth living'. Thus, the critical, non-dogmatic attitude marked the beginning of philosophy as a rational enquiry.

In yet another dimension, it has been observed, and rightly so, by cognitive psychotherapists like William S. Sahakian that human beliefs, intellectual posture or perspective on life can and does actually affect personalities. Often, it is people's philosophical attitude toward the world around them that governs how they respond to a given set of stimuli. When one's philosophical outlook, stance or belief is faulty, it would adversely

affect his emotional or mental health.<sup>5</sup> A 'critical attitude' therefore, will give rise to a certain level of awareness of the ways things work out in nature, and the need to appreciate everything from the perspective of the inescapable contingency of human finitude. Such an attitude is utilized effectively in philosophical psychotherapy to bring calm resignation in the face of troubles and inevitable difficulties in life. It is responsible for people being wisely unemotional about what cannot be changed, which is very vital for regaining psychological balance in the face of mal-adjusted behaviours. Thus, a philosophical attitude is popularly known as a serene attitude; a 'stoic' attitude; an attitude that is characterized by a lack of undue excitement.

Now, having said these, it is pertinent to give, even if a concise description of philosophy that would assist us in employing its services in the interplay of politics and social justice in Nigeria. Following the tradition of Aristotle, philosophy is defined as that systematic inquiry concerning the fundamental questions of the conduct of life (ethics), the nature of reality (metaphysics), and the justification of belief (epistemology). It is 'a rational enquiry into the meaning, truth and logical interrelatedness of our fundamental ideas'. And by fundamental ideas we mean those ideas upon which the truth or falsity of other ideas rests. Philosophy is a form of inquiry involving analysis, criticism, interpretation, speculation and praxis.<sup>6</sup> In the modern era, the importance of praxis in the enterprise of philosophy is keenly articulated by logical positivists. Wittgenstein captures the idea when he insists that philosophy is "an activity, and this activity is the clarification of thoughts."<sup>7</sup> For Staniland, 'it is the criticism of the ideas we live by'<sup>8</sup>, that is, a criticism of the thoughts that govern the organization of our social, political, economic, scientific and cultural life. It is practically impossible to divest philosophy from the everyday life. To philosophize is to reflect on human experiences, and human experiences are themselves products of philosophizing.

One could have a philosophy without being a philosopher. The three primal aspects of philosophy seen in the definition above, namely: ethics, metaphysics and epistemology have entirely non-philosophical sides to them. A people may be born into a society with an inherited norm or rules of conduct to which they have contributed nothing. They have a somewhat philosophy of life. But it is only when they begin to critically reflect on the inherited rules of conduct that they are led to the discipline of ETHICS. Similarly, people especially within the traditional societies often resort to the magical and divination for obtuse and paranormal issues which seem to subvert the laws of space-time contingency. But METAPHYSICS deals with these issues in a rational and methodical way, proving that there may be more to the world than that given to us by natural objects in space and time. Again, when people engage in ceaseless disputations with one another in their daily living, they are supposedly trying to justify their grounds, often by means native to physical bravado. But this becomes EPISTEMOLOGY and thus, a part of philosophy the moment the usual principles of correct thinking are employed.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, everyone has some form of philosophy, and

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everyone engages in some form of philosophizing, in the sense that everyone possesses certain basic beliefs about life and the world which help one to determine one's actions and mode of living. But to be a philosopher, one needs to have that characteristic attitude of philosophers, which above all, is 'critical' in the pursuit of knowledge.

### **Politics, meaning of**

To define the term 'politics' is not so easy a task. This is so because even though the term is generally applied to behaviour within governments, it also embraces all human group interactions including corporate, academic and religious institutions, and thus, any pretension that does not take care of each and every of these extensions would be grossly inadequate. Here, we shall attempt a description of the concept based on the thrust of this paper.

Politics has variously been seen as 'social relations involving authority or power'; 'the profession devoted to governing and to political affairs'; 'the opinion you hold with respect to political questions'; 'the process and method of making decisions for groups'<sup>10</sup>, etc. Ambrose Bierce defines it as 'strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles'.<sup>11</sup> Whatever these may be, politics, as an area of study, is concerned with developing knowledge and understanding of government and society. When peoples or institutions interact, there is the opportunity to appreciate where values are allotted and how resources are distributed. It is within the domain of politics in social distribution to analyze who gets what, when, why, how and where as well as to critically appraise the concepts of power, justice, order, authority, government, conflict, legitimacy, accountability, obligation, sovereignty and decision-making, which are indispensable for its survival:

- **Power** is the ability to impose one's will upon another
- **Authority** is the ability to enforce laws, to exact obedience, to command, to determine, or to judge.
- A **government** is the body that has the authority to make and enforce rules or laws.
- **Legitimacy** is an attribute of government gained through the acquisition and application of power in accordance with recognized or accepted standards or principles.
- **Sovereignty** is the ability of a government to exert control over its territory free from outside influence and with a sole monopoly of force within that territory. Etc.

Based on these, politics could be described as a macro tool created by man to organize himself for the collective survival of the group or polity. That is, organizing and promoting survival of the human species is the primal reason, end and practice of politics.<sup>12</sup> Faced with the breakdown (and sometimes non existence) of order, and the brutal marginalization and denial of justice to people in the societies, philosophers have found themselves obliged to not only confront these social-political ills, but to seek for

justifiable theories and solutions that would put humanity back on the track of civilizing process. This was the genesis of political philosophy, a discipline whose task it is to normatively investigate the political values of society and the international order by means of historical and analytical processes. While political philosophy produces theories, and principle on which political actions are to be based, political science uses the theoretical perspectives to inform and assess the explanation of historical events, political behaviour, the workings of political institutions and actors, political processes and the policy outputs of governance and regulatory structures.

### **Social justice**

The term justice is yet another term which has engaged the attention of perennial philosophy. Different people from different places have attempted to explain it from different standpoints. Often, their positions are coloured by the guts of their places and historical moment. In the ancient world, Cephalus, for instance, taught that “justice is telling the truth and paying one’s debt.”<sup>13</sup> For Simonides it is “benefiting one’s friend and harming one’s enemy.”<sup>14</sup> Again, reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one gets the impression that justice for Aristotle, involves not equality, but right proportion. The justice of a master is quite different from that of a slave, for a slave is a property, and there can be no injustice to one’s own property.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the institution of slavery was not considered as injustice by the Greco-Roman spirit. In the modern times however, there isn’t much change in this ideology save in taxonomy. While the American and European idea of justice denounces slavery, they openly and tacitly support racism and colonialism. So, what indeed does anyone mean when he speaks of justice?

Ulpianus defines justice as “the constant and perpetual willingness to give everyone his right” - *Iustitia est constans ac perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi*.<sup>16</sup> Now, every individual person, as a person is a subsistence of rights. These rights confer on him inestimable value that demands respect from others. Mutual respect or reciprocity of respect in social interaction is thus hinged on the realization that each individual person possessing inalienable rights is equal with the other. This equality of persons which the biblical writer – Paul strongly emphasized (cf. Gal. 3: 27-28), is the basic principle of social justice, that is, without it, and the protection of it by law, no polity could be adjudged as a just polity. This is not to be misconstrued as advocating for ‘physical equality’ of conditions which is a practical impossibility. Rather, it is a proscription of the denial of any special privilege contingent upon birth, creed or the like in favour of any person or group engineered by any public machinery saddled with the task of protecting the common good. This is why one can say that justice is a concept involving the fair, moral, and impartial treatment of all persons, especially in law.<sup>17</sup> Rawls captures this idea in his theory of ‘distributive justice’, insisting on the three determinant principles thus:

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- **The Principle of Greatest Equal Liberty:** Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
- **The Difference Principle:** Inequalities should benefit the least well off in society.
- **The Principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity:** Positions to which inequality are attached should be open to all.

'Distributive' justice therefore, as involving the distribution and continual redistribution of the benefits and burdens in the society, is the key to resolving the problems attendant to social inequality / injustice, and ultimately of eliminating it. In some manner, this 'Distributive justice' encapsulates what are technically termed 'legal' and 'commutative' justices in so far as it somewhat regulates what the individuals owe to the social group, as well as the mutual dealings of individuals in the society.

### **Philosophy, politics and social justice**

We have attempted so far to put into perspective the various key concepts involved in our discussion. I know this may have led the 'intellectual welfarers' among us to lapse into mental lassitude. It is pertinent, at this juncture therefore, to plunge ourselves headlong to answering the all important question: what is the role of philosophy in the interplay of politics and social justice in Nigeria?

In the modern times, the development of philosophy seems to have followed three dimensions: the first which developed along what Ogundowole calls 'pure philosophy line' includes the works of Bacon, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Feuerback, Whitehead, etc, which somewhat ignored political issues; the second involving Machiavelli, Campanella, Malebranche, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Burke, etc are those whose works bear remarkable political texture; while the third dimension involves those whose works are both deeply philosophical and political (Hobbes, Locke, J. S. Mill, Kant, Hegel, Diderot, Voltaire, Russell, Popper, Marx, Engels, etc).<sup>18</sup> These, as it were, combined in varying degrees pure politics with philosophy, and have been able to affect in varying ways, the 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe and America. Karl Popper, for instance, was most probably knighted in England for his contribution in political works – *The Open Society and Its Enemies*; and *The Poverty of Historicism* – rather than for *The logic of Scientific Discovery*.<sup>19</sup> This however, is not a peculiar feature of the modern society. In ancient Greece, the Sophists, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Democritus, etc all made explicit pronouncements on political matters. Even the great thinkers of the Middle Ages were not left out from philosophizing about the human social life. Russell captures the situation thus:

Philosophy, throughout its history, has consisted of two parts inharmoniously blended: on the one hand, a theory as to the



nature of the world, on the other an ethical or political doctrine as to the best way of living.<sup>20</sup>

Philosophy and politics thus, have a long history of close association. In delineating the specific roles philosophy should play in the Nigerian politics, we shall recourse to the various meanings of the concepts which we have hitherto explained. There is a sense in which philosophy could be perceived as a political activity, because its reflections are to a great extent directed towards improving political economy and sustaining social justice.

In Nigeria today, we are striving to achieve a stable social order. 'Social order' as we know refers to the 'social systems and schemes of social relations that define the political, economic and social roles, rights and duties of people in a society.'<sup>21</sup> A stable social order thus, points to the harmonious relationship of different individuals or group of individuals living within the same society. But this cannot be achieved in a multicultural and multi-lingual environment diffused by mutual distrust, hatred and outright ignorance of each other's basic ways of life. Philosophy as a world-view and as a quest for knowledge would have to open for Nigerians a forum for dialogue for a better understanding of each other's cultural way of life, and in so doing, engender a stable social order. Okere notes:

Philosophy can play the role of creating a platform of mutual trust and confidence where pluralism wins over hegemony, where mutual respect among peoples and cultures can replace force, where peoples and cultures are accepted for being human rather than feared or detested for being powerful.<sup>22</sup>

Nigeria is occupying a limited, definite space in the geographical structure of the universe. Her peoples and cultures are of necessity consigned to this specific location. Within such a limited space, so many people with variant interests are struggling for self assertion, identity, political offices, and at times for survival. Occasionally, the interaction takes the form of mutual recognition and dialogue, but at other times, and very frequently too, it takes the form of friction and mutual rejection. The latter have repeatedly resulted in stalemates, survival of the fittest, and wanton destruction of lives and properties. But through the mediation of philosophy, Nigerians could engage in a fruitful and meaningful dialogue with one another so as to foster mutual respect, unity of purpose that respects diversity of means and strategies, a peaceful co-existence and co-operation which are indispensable ingredients for a stable polity and the maintenance of social justice. Philosophy does this by exposing the fundamental assumptions upon which the various cultures of people living together are based. For it is when the guiding principles of one's opponents are known that one can be said to be prepared for meaningful interaction.

Among the functions of philosophy, as I elucidated in the book: *Philosophy: A Thematic Introduction*, is the clarification of ideas, concepts,

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and beliefs shrouded in ambiguity. At the moment, some aspects of our culture need some reformation because they can no longer be practiced without serious conflict in our contemporary society. For instance, how can we reconcile a subservient conception of women held among our traditional cultures with the idea of political equality and social justice demanded by democratic structures? This and many other negative traditional attitudes have heated up the polity, creating an atmosphere of social instability. But in clarifying the ideas by which we organize our lives, philosophy can overhaul our thought system, playing up the good ones and suppressing the bad ones.

Again, in a nation of cultural pluralism like Nigeria; a nation where there is a 'Babel' of languages and obscure symbols; a nation where political actors are inveigled to anti-social activities because of their penchant for quick wealth, anything that brings clarity of thought, and enhances a proper understanding of good human values can only but engender an apposite and greater appreciation of human life, and a lasting relationship among peoples and cultures. This is so because, as Bacon said: 'knowledge is power', and the prophet – Hosea (4:6) had already lamented that 'my people perish for want of knowledge'. "Knowledge saves, but ignorance entangles; knowledge liberates, but ignorance enslaves."<sup>23</sup> By clarifying our political and social concepts, philosophy empowers the electorate and the political office seekers / holders with the appreciation of their rights and privileges as well as their duties within the polity. This empowerment would undoubtedly guard against a number of skewed behaviours that are inimical to social justice.

Perhaps, the greatest task which philosophy must tackle in the interplay of politics and social justice in Nigeria is to develop a 'social vision', with norms, goals and values for every actor in the polity. The need for a clearly defined vision for Nigeria is imperative, as Aluko has pointed out,<sup>24</sup> because of the emergence of 'animalistic materialistic' tendencies into the national polity, which have rubbished the values for hard work, human dignity, honesty and integrity that are indispensable in the realization of a just and stable society. These negative tendencies have insidiously dragged the 'nation' into the Hobbessian brutish and chaotic state of nature, and thus, must be challenged by an ideological or cognitive re-orientation of the masses on the underpinning principles for a meaningful and peaceful co-existence. Philosophy can and should do this by, within the academic circle, engendering in students, that critical attitude (by which philosophers are known) characterized by curiosity to know, openness of mind on all things, lack of dogmatism and preparedness to examine everything without prejudice; and within the wider society by organizing seminars, workshops and symposia especially at this period of preparation for electioneering campaigns, in order to forge a clearly defined social vision that would seek to harmonize the divergent interests of individuals in the society.

## CONCLUSION

The question of the role of philosophy in the interplay of politics and social justice is a question of the relevance of philosophy in the administration of justice within the state. It is a question which seeks to blend theory with praxis for the good of the common man. This has never been an easy task in the calendar of philosophizing. Karl Marx's accusation that 'philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it'<sup>25</sup> could be seen as a call to direct philosophy to socio-economic and political transformation of the society.

Man, according to the 'philosopher', is by nature a political animal. He naturally seeks for survival, relevance and dominion. His brute political tendencies can only be given direction by critical philosophical outlook. Philosophy grounds the understanding of the nature of man as an interdependent social being who must continually engage each other in dialogue, reflecting on each other's reflections and self-articulations for a just and lasting relationship. This is what Ogundowole calls the 'political substantiation of philosophy', that is, applying the principles of philosophy into politics.

It might be relevant at this juncture, to summarily state that the grip philosophy has over politics and social justice is at the intellectual realm: the transformation of the mind. When the human mind is transformed and the value systems changed, Nigerian society would be liberated, it is believed, from the shackles and manacles of political hooliganism and social injustice. Perhaps, this is time for 'professional philosophers' to engage in active politics, for if it is true, and it is, that there will be no end to the troubles of the states, or of humanity itself till philosophers become kings or kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers,<sup>26</sup> then any philosopher who fails to comprehend and / or exert himself towards implementing the relevance of philosophy to nation building raises doubt about his own professional calling.

## NOTES

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