

Treating the Sceptic with Genuine Expression of Feeling Wittgenstein's later remarks on the psychology of other minds*

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This paper is concerned with the issue of authenticity in Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology. In the manuscripts published as *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie – Das Innere und das Äußere*, the German term *Echtheit* is mostly translated as 'genuineness'. In these manuscripts, Wittgenstein frequently uses the term as referring to a feature of the expression of feeling and emotion:

[...] I want to say that there is an original genuine expression of pain; that the expression of pain therefore is not equally connected to the pain and to the pretence. (LW II, p. 55)¹

“This weeping gives the impression of being genuine” – so there is such a thing as *genuine* weeping. [...]. (LW II, p. 87)

[...] Genuineness and falseness are not the only essential characteristics of an expression of feeling. [...]. (LW II, p. 90)

Wittgenstein contrasts the genuineness of the expressions with the possibility that the expressions are feigned. It seems to me that Wittgenstein is trying to discredit a specific version of the *sceptical claim* that we do not know other minds. I will refer to it as the *sceptical innuendo*. The sceptical innuendo says that every expression of feeling and emotion may be pretended. Wittgenstein's approach to the issue reflects his later interest in the philosophy of psychology and, in particular, the problem of the ascription of psychological states (P-ascriptions) on the basis of someone else's expression of feeling or emotion.² Thus, the attempt to reject the sceptical innuendo is done mainly by means of conceptual and psychological arguments.

Let's look at this short dialogue between the sceptic and Wittgenstein. The former asks „How do you know that someone else is in a certain psychological state?“ Wittgenstein's first reply is „I know that he is glad because I see him“.³ But

* I am deeply indebted to Aisling Crean for helpful discussion and comments.

¹ The page number refers to the English edition of the *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie – Das Innere und das Äußere* (Wittgenstein 1992) and I will quote it by the English standard abbreviation LW II.

² In what follows I will generally speak of expressions, expressions of feeling, expressions of emotions as meaning all those bodily signs which allow an observer to detect someone else's psychological state. They are the gaze, the facial expression, the tone of voice, the smile, the fold of mouth, the gestures, etc.

³ This reply may be interpreted in two ways. The first is that someone else's being in a certain psychological state, for instance gladness, gives the observer evidence for

the sceptic cannot be very happy with this reply. The sceptic's next question is: „How do you know that he is really glad and he is not pretending?“ Wittgenstein's response is not a direct refutation but is composed of a number of related reasons. These may be summed up in three arguments:

- (i) A psychological argument from the very nature of the expressions. The expressions are meant to be *natural symptoms* of someone else's psychological state (P-state).
- (ii) A conceptual argument about the nature of pretence. It claims that pretence is a *psychological property* which is rightly ascribed when an observer has evidence for it.
- (iii) A psychological argument from genuineness. It claims that we are committed to accept people's expressions of feeling and emotion as genuine.

The argument from expressions

This argument involves an account of the P-ascriptions. It seems that when we ascribe a psychological predicate (P-predicate) that denotes a feeling or an emotion we refer to a person's expressions of feeling such as her facial look, her gaze, her tone of voice. These expressions provide evidence for the ascriptions.

Wittgenstein does not confine himself to describing the practice of the ascription but provides a psychological argument in favour of the claim that we know people's P-states. The argument tries to counter the sceptical innuendo by arguing that expressions of feeling are part of the P-state itself and, as such, are evidence for someone's being in such a state. The argument says that expressions are *natural symptoms* of the subject's state. Wittgenstein expresses his account in a passage from the *Brown Book*:

[...] the personal experiences of an emotion must in part be strictly localized experiences; for if I frown in anger I feel the muscular tension of the frown in my forehead, and if I weep, the sensations around my eyes are obviously part, and an important part, of what I feel. This is, I think, what Williams James meant when he said that a man doesn't cry because he is sad but that he is sad because he cries. The

ascribing gladness to him. The second is a non-evidential account of the ascription. Some readers, for instance Glock (1996, 96), think that Wittgenstein rejects such an evidential conception and is more inclined to say that we simply register someone else's gladness. Linguistic ascriptions express such a registration. Nevertheless it seems to me that in his last writings Wittgenstein is deeply concerned with the notion of evidence and the issue of what entitles an observer to attribute a certain psychological predicate.

reason why this point is often not understood, is that we think of the utterance of an emotion as though it were some artificial device to let others know that we have it. Now there is no sharp line between such 'artificial devices' and what one might call the natural expressions of emotion. (*BrB* p. 103)

Wittgenstein thinks that the expressions are natural signs of someone's being in a certain P-state. That the muscle of my jaw is rhythmically contracting may be a natural sign of my being in a state of tension. Similarly that I have a bright smile when I meet someone may be a sign of my gladness. As Wittgenstein says in the quoted passage these aspects tend to be underestimated, in favour of the idea that expressions are mere devices which enable the subject to communicate his P-state. In particular Wittgenstein thinks that expressions are not chosen by the subject. They are not external signs which supervene on a subject's awareness of being in a certain P-state. Rather they occur together with a subject's being in a certain P-state. Nevertheless Wittgenstein thinks that there is no sharp dividing line between natural and artificial expressions of feeling. This is confirmed by the fact that most of these expressions may successfully be feigned. In that case what we think to be a sign of someone's P-state is not a natural one but a device enabling him to deceive an observer.

Let's imagine a common situation in which such a device is deployed. I know that on the occasion of the annual meeting of the Aristotelian Society I shall meet my friend Robert. We used to be close friends but owing to a quarrel we had some years ago, I could no longer be friendly with him. I know that openly hostile behaviour would be thought of negatively by my colleagues. So I decide to hide my feelings and to feign gladness upon meeting Robert. Thus, when I meet him, I greet him gladly. A person who had observed the scene would have been disposed to say that I was glad to see Robert.

It is worth noting that the story takes into account both the third and the first person perspectives: a report of my true feelings and an observer's report of the scene. This does not happen usually, when an observer may have no way to ascertain whether I was pretending or not. Nevertheless we know from my tale that my behaviour looked friendly. What happened in the meeting seems to confirm that an expression of feeling may be successfully feigned and that we cannot know people's true P-states. Still, it is reasonable to argue that in ascribing a P-state to someone I am, for the most part, justified by referring to his expressions of feeling. In the story my behaviour gives an observer reason for saying that I was glad to see Robert. So in fact, the observer knows my P-state, even though what he knows – my expressions of feeling – is nothing but a successful pretence.

Thus it seems that Wittgenstein's argument from expressions allows that we know something, i.e. the signs of someone else's feelings and emotions. But unfortunately this does not provide any knock-down argument against the sceptical innuendo that what we know may be nothing but the convincing appearance of a *mise en scene*.

The argument from pretence

That it is possible for an expression of feeling to be feigned leads Wittgenstein to discuss the conceptual issue of pretence. In a passage from the *Letzte Schriften* he writes:

The possibility of pretence seems to create a difficulty. For it seems to devalue the outer evidence, i.e. to annul the evidence. (*LW II*, p. 42)

In spite of this difficulty Wittgenstein thinks that the sceptic's claim „He is pretending“ implies a contradiction. His idea is that pretending is a P-state. This means that the P-predicate ‘to pretend’ is mainly ascribed on the basis of someone's behaviour (from now on I will refer to ascriptions of the predicate ‘to pretend’ as *p*-ascriptions). Nevertheless that someone's behaviour provides reason for a *p*-ascription does not cover the whole range of evidence one may have. There are circumstances in which a *p*-ascription does not rely on the observation of someone's behaviour, but on having *background information*.

Let's imagine another short story. I meet Tom, a dear friend of mine I have known since my school days. Recently I learned from some mutual friends that he is going to divorce his wife and that, because of this, he is deeply depressed. Upon meeting him, Tom looks unexpectedly glad and comfortable. Nevertheless I have reason for believing that his expression of gladness and comfort is not genuine, thus I am inclined to say that he was pretending. Here my *p*-ascription depends on two different kinds of reason. The first is that from my previous information – namely that Tom is going to divorce his wife and that, because of this, he is deeply depressed – I inferred that Tom could not be as glad as he looked. Thus I conclude that he was probably pretending. The second kind of reason is that I know Tom for a long time and I may recognise some shades of his behaviour as expressions of tension and discomfort.

According to my story, both the criteria – the observational and the inferential – are involved in my ascription. This seems to be the most common case. But I may imagine settings in which just one of these criteria is involved in my ascription. For instance, when I understand someone to be pretending simply on the basis of some subtleties of his expression. All of this confirms the idea that pretence is a psychological property. That is, pretence is a P-state, which is rightly ascribed when an observer has evidence for it – observational, inferential or both. In a passage from the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* Wittgenstein writes:

[...] I may recognise a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a ‘ponderable’ confirmation of my judgment). [...]. (*PI* II, p. 194)⁴

In this passage Wittgenstein hints at the distinction – never openly stated – between ponderable and imponderable evidence. He considers the latter to be a feature of the expressions of feeling and emotion. The idea is that what gives us reason for ascribing a P-state, is not ever the expression conceived in isolation – i.e. the specific facial expression, gaze, or tone of voice – but its occurring within a context, along with specific events and related actions. But all of this does not say why such a compound of elements provides merely *imponderable* evidence. The idea of imponderability depends on the fact that what is evidence for me, may not be evidence for someone else. On this point Wittgenstein writes in the *Letzte Schriften*:

This is important: I might know from certain signs and from my knowledge of a person that he is glad, etc. But I cannot describe my observations to a third person and – even if he trusts them – thereby convince him of the genuineness of that gladness, etc. (*LW* II, p. 86)

The idea is that my ability to detect someone’s pretence presupposes my personal acquaintance with him, my knowledge of his temperament as well as of his recent life. Nevertheless it seems to me that Wittgenstein’s attempt to reassess the reach of the sceptical innuendo does not really need an account of the subtleties of behaviour. More simply, one is entitled to say that someone is pretending when one has evidence – although imponderable – for it. One’s personal ability to detect people’s pretence is essentially subjective and, as such, cannot be part of a general description of how the detection of pretence works. Thus Wittgenstein’s psychological argument from pretence may be divided into two independent arguments. The first is that the ability to detect someone’s pretence relies on one’s personal acquaintance with that individual. The second is that pretence is a P-state whose ascription needs to be justified by evidence just as much as any other P-ascriptions.

This is the core of Wittgenstein’s argument against the sceptical innuendo. Wittgenstein thinks that pretence is a P-state whose occurrence may be detected on the basis of the subject’s behaviour. This idea provides a conceptual argument for challenging the sceptic. In particular Wittgenstein thinks that one cannot accept the psychological account of pretence and, at the same time, consider the sceptical innuendo plausible. Let’s see why. On the one hand, there is the idea that pretence is a psychological state that sometimes appears in certain signs of people’s

⁴ I refer to the page number of the last English edition of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Wittgenstein 2001) and will quote it by the English standard abbreviation *PI*.

behaviour.⁵ On the other hand, the sceptic claims that people's P-states cannot be known with certainty because their expressions may always be feigned. But Wittgenstein thinks the only way in which the sceptic may develop a notion of another person's pretending her P-states is by the sceptic having experienced that people pretend their P-states. Thereby he proceeds to show us two things which enable us to claim that the sceptic is not entitled to say that we cannot know people's P-states. First he shows that pretence is a P-state. Second he shows that the sceptic must accept that sometimes even he has experienced people's pretending their P-states.

Wittgenstein expresses this idea in a passage from the *Letzte Schriften*:

Do not look at the pretending as an embarrassing appendage, as a disruption of the pattern.

One can say "He is hiding his feelings". But that means that it is not a priori they are always hidden. Or: There are two statements contradicting one another: one is that feelings are essentially hidden; the other, that someone is hiding his feelings from me.

If I can never know what he is feeling, then neither can he pretend. (*LW II*, p. 35)

This passage occurs in the context of the inner-outer model of the mind that Wittgenstein discusses in his later writings. This is the reason for his using the term 'to hide' instead of the more familiar 'to pretend'. Apart from the terminological difference Wittgenstein's conception of the sceptical innuendo is the same. He thinks that the sceptic moves from an *a priori* assumption that is

(i) People's P-states are pretended.

And from this claim the sceptic moves to

(ii) Everybody pretends his P-states.

This enables the sceptic to say that I can never know with certainty whether a person is really in a certain P-state. Thus, in front of a particular person, for instance Tom, the sceptic will be inclined to say

(iii) Tom pretends his P-state.

⁵ This means that one develops the idea that people pretend by seeing people pretending. This view is deliberately partial since to be precise the concept of pretence is actually composed of the third and first person perspective. Nevertheless it seems to me that self-knowledge of pretence does not enter my criteria for third person ascriptions of the predicate 'to pretend', namely for *p*-ascriptions. Thus I am inclined to sever self-knowledge of pretence from third person criteria for *p*-ascriptions.

Thus Wittgenstein thinks that there is a contradiction between (i) and (iii). Let's see why.

The meaning of (i) is that every expression of feeling is pretended. Thus there is no way of knowing with certainty people's P-states. This is consistent with the sceptic's disposition to say that people in general, and Tom in particular, may always pretend their P-states. But something still remains unclear, i.e. the linguistic status of sentence (iii). It is arguable that if the sceptic really wants to hold (i), the thought expressed in (iii) cannot be expressed in a P-ascription. This is because the act of making a P-ascription involves relying on someone's behaviour and we know from (i) that such behaviour may always be pretended. Thus the sceptic who really wants to hold (i) cannot rely on anybody's behaviour. From this we can conclude that the sceptic cannot make any P-ascription at all. Then (iii) is not a P-ascription but rather a mere rephrasing of (i) in which the predicate 'to pretend one's own P-states' refers to an individual, i.e. Tom. So far the sceptic has not contradicted himself.

The problem here is that claim (iii) is not justified by anything in the present state of affairs. This is shown by the fact that, since the sceptic *a priori* does not rely on Tom's expressions of feeling, he has no present reasons for claiming (iii). Thus it seems that the only way that the sceptic has to justify (iii) is by appealing to some background reasons – reasons which are independent of the specific situation. In this case the sceptic has no other way to justify his thought than by referring to more or less circumstantial evidence that people may pretend their P-states – for instance by providing examples of people's pretence.

But Wittgenstein thinks that the fallacy comes out as soon as the sceptic does this. As we have seen, understanding that a person is pretending her psychological state implies understanding that she is in a state of pretending. This latter is a psychological state, since I recognise it on the basis of some features of the person's behaviour. Thus the sceptic knows that it is possible to pretend P-states in virtue of his experience that people pretend their P-states. This would make (iii) a statement expressing a conclusion from people's behaviour. But one has to acknowledge that the way in which the sceptic obtains his reasons for concluding (iii) counters the meaning of (i). This is because in order to come to the conclusion (iii), the sceptic needs to experience people's pretending their P-states and this presupposes that he relies on their behaviour. Such a reliance is *a priori* excluded by (i).

What I have so far observed assumes that the sceptic succeeds, at least in the beginning, in holding (i) and that he only runs into contradiction later, when the demand for justification becomes quite pressing. Still, it seems to me that in the passage from the *Letzte Schriften* Wittgenstein envisages a more direct account. Here the sceptic holds (i) and finds that Tom's behaviour directly confirms it. But the sceptic does not realise that holding (i) means to develop a completely sceptical attitude towards any person's expression of P-states. And this includes even believing that Tom's expression is pretended behaviour. Thus making an ascription

like (iii) on the basis of Tom's behaviour means to counter the meaning of (i). The sceptic runs straight into contradiction.

In the end the argument from pretence shows that there is no way to hold together the psychological account of pretence on the one hand, and the sceptical innuendo that P-states are essentially pretended on the other.

The argument from genuineness

As I have so far observed, Wittgenstein's main reason for reassessing the reach of the sceptical innuendo is that we cannot accept both its plausibility as well as the ordinary functioning of language. This is because some of our linguistic practices, and in particular our P-ascriptions, are conceptually inconsistent with the sceptical innuendo. This idea leads to another aspect of Wittgenstein's rejection of the sceptical innuendo. I will refer to it as *commitment to genuineness*. Wittgenstein expresses himself in these words:

If someone 'pretends friendship and then finally shows his true feelings, or confesses', we normally don't think of doubting this confession in turn, and also saying that we cannot know what's really going on inside him. Rather, *certainty* now seems to be achieved. (LW II, p. 86)

The meaning of the passage is that once a person confesses that her previous expression of feeling was pretended, I am disposed to accept this confession as genuine and not as a further lie. Let's consider Tom's story, but with some changes. A few days after our meeting Tom phones me. He confides in me that when we met he made an effort to look glad and comfortable but really he was not. He also confides that he is going to divorce and that, because of this situation, he is deeply depressed. According to Wittgenstein, I am disposed to accept Tom's confession as genuine. This means that I am not naturally inclined to be sceptical and that, although Tom pretended his feeling at least once, I am not inclined to reject his confession as a further lie. This, of course, does not exclude that on the basis of this episode I will be less inclined to believe him. The episode taught me that Tom has a remarkable ability to feign and that he can successfully hide his feelings. Still, it is arguable that I cannot develop a completely sceptical attitude towards him. This is because I share with him the same language, and in particular, the same psychological vocabulary. It is a conceptual requirement of using this language that I am committed to the genuineness of someone else's expressions of feeling. At the end of the day, the practice of ascribing P-states has to be consistent with such a commitment.

Thus it seems to me that Wittgenstein challenges the sceptic to be consistent: if the sceptic really wants to be so, he should doubt each and every one of Tom's expression of feeling and not only those more open to doubt. For example the

sceptic should be able to doubt that Tom's scream on breaking his leg is genuine. This shows that even though it is psychologically possible to be deeply sceptical toward people's expressions of feeling, it is psychologically impossible to be completely sceptical. This would affect irreparably both the *linguistic practice* of ascribing P-states and the *psychological need* to believe people's expressions of feeling.

This fits with the idea that P-ascriptions rationalise people's behaviour. When I claim that Tom is seriously depressed, I allow myself to know his psychological state and to understand his actions. As we have seen, it is in the essence of the ascription that one observes someone's behaviour and accordingly attributes a P-state to him. It is worth noting that such an ascription often works as a premise of practical reasoning whose upshot is acting sympathetically. For instance my knowledge that Tom is seriously depressed gives me reason for suggesting that he sees a doctor. The same knowledge may serve as evidence in some given circumstances. Let's imagine that Tom suddenly disappears and that nobody knows what has happened to him. The police start investigating, and in order to collect information on Tom's last days, they interrogate me. I will say that recently I got a call from him and that he told me he was deeply depressed. That may give us reasons for supposing that he was mentally confused and that, maybe, he committed suicide. This shows how my ascriptions are involved in explaining Tom's behaviour. It is worth noting that I am never spontaneously sceptical toward Tom's expressions of feeling. If I were and I had said „Probably he was depressed but I am not certain, he was a quite good liar“, the police would have considered my giving evidence differently.

The last chapter of Tom's story is an instance of the attempt to explain and rationalise people's behaviour. It seems that in order to understand Tom's behaviour I need to consider a great deal of his expressions, actions and declarations to be genuine. In particular it seems that appealing to the possibility that Tom lied about everything does not help me in achieving a rational account of his behaviour. Wittgenstein thinks that the appeal to the possibility of pretence has very little room in psychological explanations. In particular he thinks that we appeal to pretence when our understanding of psychological reasons is insufficient or too narrow. In this passage from the *Letzte Schriften* he writes:

This must also be considered: Genuineness and falseness are not the only essential characteristics of an expression of feeling. One cannot tell, for instance, whether a cat that purrs and then right away scratches someone was pretending. It could be that someone uttered signs of gladness and then behaved in a completely unexpected way, and that we still could not say that the first expression was not genuine. (*LW II*, p. 90)

At first blush it seems that Wittgenstein considers genuineness to be an intrinsic feature of expressions of feeling. But I think the passage could mean something further. Wittgenstein is trying to say that our understanding of an expression of feeling is not confined to two alternative values – genuineness or falseness. There

are shades of expressions that are as important as genuineness or falseness. Wittgenstein thinks that a model based on this distinction does not help in understanding and rationalising people's behaviour.

In particular Wittgenstein has in mind cases in which one ascribes a P-state on the basis of someone's expressions but where the person's ensuing actions seem inconsistent with her former expressions. Here Wittgenstein thinks that in order to understand the person's behaviour one does not need to revise one's former P-ascription as being wrong and the person's former expressions as being false. Let's imagine a situation to illustrate this idea. My friend Peter and I have had violent words together. After this episode Peter has stopped being friendly with me, stopped greeting me and has avoided any meetings with me. But over time he changes his mind and he thinks that there is no reason for not greeting me. So one fine day upon meeting him, Peter unexpectedly gives me a friendly smile. I am glad about this and on the basis of his behaviour I feel encouraged to exchange words. We have a chat but after a few minutes Peter looks at his watch and says „I'm sorry but I have an appointment“ and he leaves. Afterwards I feel quite disappointed and I find Peter's behaviour counters his former expressions, namely his friendly smile.

Wittgenstein thinks that we usually understand and rationalise such a situation without saying that the former expressions of feeling, i.e. Peter's smile, were not genuine. Actually we can say that something in my words – maybe a clumsy political remark – disappointed Peter so much that he decided that there was no reason to carry on the conversation. This explanation introduces an *intermediate reason*, i.e. my clumsy political remark, which enables me to understand and rationalise Peter's behaviour. Furthermore it allows me to say that Peter's former expression of gladness was genuine, and that his ensuing behaviour is not in contradiction with such an expression. Peter's case shows, first, that we may explain and rationalise people's behaviour by introducing intermediate reasons. Secondly, it shows that our appeal to the possibility of pretence has very little room in our explanation of people's behaviour. This account resonates with Wittgenstein's example of the cat that suddenly scratches someone after purring. In order to explain and rationalise the cat's behaviour we do not need to say that his purr was pretended but rather need to suppose some intermediate reasons: for instance, that someone absent-mindedly dropped his cigarette on the cat's fur. Such an appeal to intermediate reasons is a basic principle of folk-psychology.

Nevertheless I think that this account does not exhaust Wittgenstein's purpose in this passage. He thinks that what from an observer's point of view looks as a behavioural inconsistency, depends on the observer's incapacity to ascribe appropriate P-states to the observed person. This is consistent with the idea that genuineness and falseness are not the only characteristics of an expression of feeling. In order to understand this issue we need to imagine the case slightly differently. As before Peter thinks that there is no reason for not greeting me. But he also thinks that there is no reason for dealing with me. Thus his smile is polite but detached. Furthermore we need to imagine that I am, for some reason, blind to

shades of smile. Thus I cannot perceive Peter's smile as polite and detached but simply as a friendly smile. Here is the scene considered from Peter's point of view. Peter's expression of feeling was really genuine – he sincerely thought that there is no reason for not greeting me but he also thought that there is no reason for dealing with me. His swift departure is thus perfectly consistent with his former smile – polite and detached. He has some words with me and leaves.

Now let's take into account my point of view. I think that Peter's smile was friendly and I found his decision to leave inconsistent with his former expression of feeling. What really matters is this: simply on the basis of my psychological concepts, I cannot make sense of Peter's behaviour. This is because I lack the conceptual tools that would enable me to understand appropriately Peter's behaviour. Thus I find his behaviour is inconsistent with what I thought to be a friendly smile. Due to my conceptual poverty, the only way I have to understand Peter's behaviour is to ascribe to him one of two alternative P-states: either that of being genuinely friendly or that of pretending such genuineness. It is true that this explanation would not attribute much rationality to Peter, but it is consistent with my conceptual incapacity to understand the situation. That I cannot conceive of shades of smiles means that I cannot conceive varieties of Peter's P-states. In the example, I could not conceive that Peter has a disposition towards me which is anything other than friendly.

At the end of his discussion Wittgenstein makes two points. The first is that we are naturally disposed to accept people's expressions of feeling as genuine. This is a necessary requirement of using P-predicates. The second is that such a commitment needs to be supplemented with appropriate psychological tools. Otherwise we would be confined to a conception of other minds which counts only two values of the expressions of psychological states: genuineness and falseness. This would not allow a satisfactory explanation of people's behaviour and would confine us to quite an impoverished conception of the psychological life of other minds.

In his last writings Wittgenstein does not aim to directly defeat the sceptic. Rather he attempts to understand the conditions in which his queer demands tend to arise. As it happens in the case of the smile-blindness, the sceptic is prone to underestimate the evidential value of many of these shades which express people's psychological states. Accordingly Wittgenstein thinks the only way to silence the sceptic is not by a direct knock-down argument but rather by treating him with some genuine expression of feeling.

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