

A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF GABRIEL MARCEL

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on the practical utility of Gabriel Marcel's existential thought, especially in the context of the contemporary effort to advance the condition of human life in Africa. It is no gainsay that humanity seemed to have slowly acquiesced to chaos. Although the world experienced scientific and technological breakthroughs, the products of these achievements have further alienated man from his fellow. Man's dignity and identity is unremittingly threatened as nations and communities wage wars against one another. There is heightened individualism and clashes of interest as much as the 'weaponized man' have failed to reflect on the self-worth of the other. Existentially, humanity have lived in awe descending to what Marcel described as the 'broken-ness' of the world. Thus, as a departure from prevailing existentialists' accounts, Marcel had proposed intersubjectivity as the solution to the problem of human existence. In particular, this paper argues that the task of socio-political and economic revolution in today's society has a lot to benefit from a critical and pragmatic engagement with the existentialist philosophy of Marcel. The paper argues that the practical relevance of Marcel's notion of intersubjectivity appears most clearly in the value it assigns to unity of purpose, and ideas of human worth, camaraderie, doggedness, shared aims and brotherhood to resolve the growing problems of human existence. Expository and analytical methods of research were employed.

Keywords: *Intersubjectivity, Existentialism, Broken World, I-Thou, Absolute Thou.*

Introduction

Today, man faces existential problems. Quite true that this is a decisive period of history, a glorious age marked by scientific and technological achievements; it is indeed a time of globalization and the whole world is experiencing remarkable changes in all areas of existence. Unfortunately, this is only one side of the story; there is another side, mostly unsaid and dark in all sense. Baiju professed that “it is a terrible time, we happen to live, tainted with unheard cruelties of man against man and devastating wars of nation against nation” (4). Although man glories in his achievements, he is threatened by the stuff of his creativity. The invention of military hardware such as weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and guns rather threatened man's existence. No wonder Baiju added that “it is an age of material progress and moral regress where the value of culture, religion, tradition, family, relationships and morality is at shake” (5). So, it is not gainsaying that, human life is filled with anxiety and threatened by meaninglessness.

In Africa, the problem of human existence is multifaceted. News on terrorist attacks, wars and communal conflicts are common headlines. There is hardly any television or radio bulletin without mention of violence. Nigeria in particular has experienced, for the past few decades a dramatic increase in violence, terrorism and the like (Dokubo and Oluwadare 551). Media reports on Boko Haram bombings, insurgent killings, herders' attacks, kidnappings, armed robbery and banditry, militancy and so on are a commonplace. These happenings are pointers that human existence in this part of the world, like the rest of Africa is terrifying and appalling. It is a phenomenon that threatens and undermines the economic, political, religious and social security of the nation.

World over, philosophers have tried to address the problem of human existence. For instance, having witnessed the horror of World War I and II, philosophers like Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre up to Marcel (Dukor 209) raised existential questions. While all existentialists addressed different topics, their focus was to hoist the position of man. Marcel in particular, became popular for his view that man has become a slave to the products of his ingenuity. He recommended intersubjectivity as the answer to calm the chaotic world. Sunnie Kidd corroborated the above when he averred that Marcel's intersubjectivity appeals immediately to the life experiences of all men (2). During his time, Marcel's treatise made a qualitative impact in human relations. The crux of this paper is to reflect on practical benefits of Marcel's thought to the condition of Human existence in a modern state.

Intersubjectivity: Towards a Definition

The term intersubjectivity refers to an interpersonal relationship or bond that exists among humans. Gillespie and Flora Cornish define Intersubjectivity as a short-hand description for a variety of human interactions (49). It has been used to refer to agreement, treaty or armistice between people on a given set of meanings. Thus, intersubjectivity in this sense is simply a word for agreement. On his part, Scheff characterized intersubjectivity as the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals (56).

Brinck defines intersubjectivity as “the sharing of experiences”. She categorized three ways that experiences can be shared namely: jointly, reciprocally, and by complementary interaction. The variety of shared experiences include; emotion, attention, and intention (Cited in Zhlatev and Sinha 14). **Susswein and Racine** defined intersubjectivity as a technical concept used to classify interactive behaviours and abilities (15). The perspectives expressed in these definitions do not convey a univocal notion of intersubjectivity, however, it points to a complex phenomenon, or a set of related phenomena, in which experiential, behavioural, genetic and neural processes and levels are interwoven in both potentiating and actualizing what it means to be human.

Marcel's notion of Intersubjectivity

The term intersubjectivity, Baiju confirmed, was first coined and used by Marcel (Baiju 17). Marcel introduced the notion of intersubjectivity in his famous Gifford Lectures of 1949 entitled “A Broken World” (Lescoe 116). Marcel diagnosed that, today's world is a *Broken World* and it causes lots stress and tensions in man, giving rise to the feeling of alienation,

despair, anxiety and uneasiness” (Marcel, *Mystery of Being* 26-27, 43-44). Sawchenko explained that “Marcel struggled with the existentialist questions of life and death in his own life; he also wrestled with them in his philosophy and his writing” (6). It is no gainsay that Marcel's thought was influenced by experiences of his time, private and public. Sawchenko traced that, “during the First World War, Marcel worked as head of the Information Service organized by the Red Cross, a role in which he was surrounded by death and grief” (8). Of course, his duties included carrying news of injured and deceased soldiers to their families, an experience that influenced him deeply. Like his public life, Marcel's private life was not healthier either. Corroborating the above, Sawchenko avers that:

The early death of Marcel's mother and his Red Cross work with the families of deceased soldiers caused him to question the meaning of life and death. Losing his young wife emphasized for him this existentialist predicament. He was preoccupied with the idea of maintaining relationship with those who have been separated from loved ones through death. This led to his inquiry into these existentialist themes in which he explored ideas of loving faithfulness and fidelity (9).

Murchland added that, Marcel's “views on interpersonal relations were deeply influenced by his own family's relationships as he was growing up having lost his mother before his fourth birthday” (341). Questions of openness and connection, of devotion and love, of fidelity and responsibility toward others grew in him as a result of these early experiences. As well, issues concerning conflict originated for Marcel in these early primary relationships (Sawchenko 9). As an only child, and growing up in a household in which differing temperaments and opinions resulted in strained relationships, pressed him to take a more mature attitude than children at ease in their environment. Marcel came to understand that “life presents radical incompatibilities which cannot be resolved by means of intellectual formulae or conventional attitudes” (Murchland 342).

Thus, in the Gifford Lectures, Marcel pointed out that “we live today in a world at war with itself, and this state of world-war is being pushed so far that it runs the risk of ending in something that could properly be described as world-suicide” (Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, 28). Marcel asserted that the World is broken because the structure of society based on true and authentic relations collapses due to several reasons. He also observed that the world loses its real unity. The idea of community becomes more and more impossible (Baiju 7). What Marcel bewailed here was the loss of human dignity which has been flaunted on account of violence, wars and conflict evidenced in the World War I and II. Having witnessed the horrors against humanity at the war front, Marcel was convinced that the world was really set for a suicide. He believed that our world is slowly succumbing (if not that it had already succumbed) to a passionless age – a completely “mechanistic age” where the power of machines rules. Indeed, as Marcel remarked, we live in a 'heartless' world (Marcel, *The philosophy of Existence* 13).

Furthermore, Marcel identified three factors that accounted to the world's losing of its real unity and peace namely: (i) *Increased socialization of life* where man's true identity is reduced

to mere 'identification cards/documents'; (ii) *Extension of the powers of the State* where the government acts like an omniscient god; and (iii) the *Loss of real unity due to lack of brotherhood, privacy, creativity and reflection* (Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, 181). Marcel stated that these signs are certain global evils which present a reality that needs to be transcended or overcome. These are atrocities which, at their very foundation, are due to man's failure to reflect on the presence and worth of the 'other' by "taking one's own self as the center" (181). Seeing man's cruelty against man, Marcel queried, "How then do we hope in the midst of our world's broken-ness, a broken-ness which holds us captives in our own world?" (181).

Marcel's existentialist ontology therefore provided a realistic stance that affirms the dignity and unity of the person. Marcel offers us a perfect formulation of hope: "***I hope in thee for us***" (Yoshiy 112). The very essence of this declaration lies within the intersubjectivity of hope. His works emphasized the first person, and the intertwining of the life experiences of persons in his writings revealed his theme of *intersubjectivity*. Marcel noted, "it must be realized that our situation as a 'broken world' is a form of captivity – where we, as human beings, are alienated or deprived of a certain kind of liberty; we are captives in a sense that we are trapped inside a system of a mechanized world – "a bureaucracy of life" (Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 32). It is based on this background that Marcel rolled out the notion of intersubjectivity as a roadmap for world peace, freedom from scientific slavery and development of humankind.

Intersubjectivity is aimed at bridging authentic relations in between persons, communities and nations. Marcel identified availability, freedom, fidelity and fraternity, faith, hope and love as the values capable of constructing the desired peaceful world. Availability also called disponability implies openness, welcoming, surrender, readiness to respond, loving attitude, sympathy, admiration and commitment (Marcel, *Philosophy of Existence* 26). Anton understood Marcel's notion of disponability and commitment to mean 'going-hand-in-hand'. It is an unqualified and unreserved availability. It is just like the availability of the mother for her child. One becomes totally available for the other without foreseeing any egoistic profit (Anton 160).

In *Man against Humanity*, Marcel gives equal place to the second pillar, freedom and fraternity. He noted that "The freest man is also the most fraternal.... The fraternal man is linked to his neighbour in such a way that this tie of fraternity not only does not fitter him but frees him from himself. The unfree man is the most self-enclosed within himself" (Marcel 155). Freedom grabs the uniqueness of individuality. Fraternity enhances the individuals to exercise their freedom. Freedom strengthens our relationship. Therefore, fraternity is the expression of the *I-Thou* relationship. He says that a fraternal man is enriched by his brother and the society becomes strong in its nature.

Thirdly, Marcel argued that Fidelity, the third value implies an unconditional vow to another person (Marcel, *Being and Having* 53). In fidelity, we make commitment and promise in order to which we need faithfulness, a "creative fidelity" (Manimala 164). Fidelity, according to Marcel, is a risk and a leap to darkness in the sense that "...in swearing fidelity to a person, I do not know what future awaits us or even, in a sense, what person he will be tomorrow; the very

fact of my not-knowing is what gives worth and weight to my promise (Marcel, 53).

The next pillars of Marcel's bridge are faith, hope and love. Faith is the highest expression of fidelity. Faith can be understood in two ways, i.e., as conviction and as commitment (Marcel, *Homo Viator* 125). In a genuine commitment one engages in a mystical encounter with the other (Baiju 21). Marcel explains faith as conviction, "...when I believe in God and when one asks me questions about this faith or I question myself about it, I would, of necessity, have to declare that I am convinced of the existence of God" (Lescoe 164). Whenever there is faith, it will carry love. Love gives meaning to human existence. All forms of authentic relationship find its climax in love. Marcel stated that "love is substantial, love is rooted in being, and love is not commensurate with anything on which a value can be set or with anything 'marketable'" (Marcel, *Man against Humanity* 142). Finally, Marcel maintained that hope is fundamental presupposition of fulfilled human life. Hope gives meaning to man's existence. Hope is born from humility and not from pride, because a proud man is cut off from certain form of communion from his fellow men. Hope is always liberative and is not a way to escape from realities. A genuine hope is not at all escapism. Hope is not only a personal appeal to the self but an appeal to the selves of all of us. The subject of hope is not "I" or "You", but "We" born out of love (Manimala 168). Thus, these values become pillars the bridge could be made up of. Schilpp and Hahh captured that:

Intersubjectivity in Marcel is the relation between two subjects. It is the subject to subject relation, which is opposed to ego-centricity, but founded on love and harmony with the other. Presence belongs only to the being capable of giving himself to others. Therefore presence is intersubjective. Friendship, marriage, paternity and fraternity are the various modalities of intersubjectivity. It is through creative fidelity, hope and love that one can attain the stage of intersubjectivity. The growth of the society and its every member is based on the intersubjective relation of the members...we should be open to others and must be able to meet them without allowing oneself to be dominated or utilized (16).

Marcel's position shows his view that intersubjectivity is that authentic relationship capable of constructing the world of love is made up of some values. Availability, faith, hope, love, freedom, fidelity and fraternity are those values which are called the pillars of the bridge. These values are not what 'we have' but what 'we are'. They help humanity to realise their own self and strengthen our relationship (18). Very significant to his theory is the concept of I-Thou. Recall that, also fundamental to Marcel's doctrine of intersubjectivity is his view on "*Being and Having*", "...being as the common foundation and unity" of all beings" (Schilpp and Hahh 127). But today's man is more concerned with his havings rather than his being. Today's man is assessed by what he possesses, rather than what he is, therefore he is running to gather more and more havings (Baiju18). Man can transform, meanwhile, his having into being. When one escapes from his ego-centricity and enters into the realm of self-giving, then the person becomes capable of transforming his having into being. Marcel makes allusion to I-Thou who is the facilitator of this intersubjective relationships. I-Thou relation is the transformation of "having" into "being". Marcel noted that an inauthentic person is self-enclosed, while an authentic person is open to all others and considers other persons as *thous*,

more than a *he* or *she* or *it* (Lescoe 98). Marcel declares here that “When man considers others as objects or things to be used, then he goes back to having from being” (15).

This I-Thou relationship crafts opportunity for a presence, participation and intersubjectivity among human beings. Presence, participation and intersubjectivity are in Marcel's estimation are reciprocally all-encompassing. An I-Thou relation is embedded in a communion or collectivism. Baiju interpretes that in I-Thou relationship, man becomes present to the other in a mutual openness and self-giving. He becomes aware of his existence in the most unqualified manner only when he meets the other as thou, as another subject (15). It could be understood that, the relationship is a loving encounter, a genuine meeting in love, a friendship and spiritual availability. In an I-Thou relation, person respects and loves the other as he loves and respects himself. Here one sacrifices himself for the best of others. He is governed not by any egoistic desire, but by a self-giving desire (16).

Next to I-Thou, Marcel proposed that an Absolute Thou brings validity for I-Thou relationship, because the being finds depth and dynamism of this relation in the Absolute Thou (Schilp and Hahn 139). Marcel points out that to love a creature is to love him in God. I-Thou relationship discovers my freedom, because my freedom is actualized when I am available to my neighbor. In this relation one is present to the other, in the same way as he participates in the other's being. I-Thou relationship is a pure relation between two subjects, which is an intersubjective relation (cited in Baiju 15). Thus, Intersubjectivity in Marcel's thought is similar to the Zulu concept of *Ubuntu* (i.e I am, because you are).

The Problem of Human Existence in Nigeria

Africa generally is the most conflict-ridden region of the world and the only region in which the number of armed conflicts is on the increase (Dokubo and Oluwadare 551). It is no gainsay that human existence in Africa and Nigeria in particular is filled with terror. Violence and carnage characterize the society particularly in the north east, northwest and middle belt regions of the country. This is not to say that the South east and west are spared of bloodbath. Armed gangs and militancy prevail in the creeks of Delta regions. Adekanye identified many of the causes of violence in Africa today with the potent ambition of socio-economic dislocation burdens of debt, IMF structural adjustment programmes, the stresses of environmental and human insecurity and the pressures of democratization, including the contradiction of forces of exclusion, marginalization or domination and demands for empowerment (27). The combined effect of these had produced the alarming rise on social and ethnic tension and conflict.

The problem of human existence in Nigeria takes various dimensions. Nigeria experiences increased violence and criminality, which tended to undermine national and human development. These include insurgency, armed robbery, kidnapping, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking and militancy, among other acts (Folarin and Oviasogie 1-2). Radicalized religious and regional youth groups also emerged, most prominent are; the Boko Haram, Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), O'Odua Peoples' Congress (OPC), the Arewa People's Congress (APC), Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, Movement for the

Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Ansaru, 'Kala-Kato', Ombatse, (Onuoha 134-151), and more recently, Herders Militia, among others. The rise of these groups remains worrisome and has made life rather difficult for peace loving citizens.

One of the most ravaging phenomena that have made the condition of human existence Nigerians so frustrating is the Boko Haram. The terrorist acts of Boko-Haram insurgence created a state of palpable fear in Nigeria, while the helpless posture of governments is likewise incommensurate. "Boko-Haram", from Hausa and Arabic words "Boko" meaning 'western education' and "Haram" meaning "sin" respectively (Folarin and Oviasogie 13), is bent on making life a living Hell for Nigerians. From kidnapping of school children and religious leaders, bombing of worship centers, markets and schools, they advanced to suicide attacks and raiding of villages. The group caught the attention of international community following series of violent attacks in Nigeria since July 2009 and specifically with the attack of the United Nations building at Abuja in 2011 (Jimmoh, 2011). The sect has no clear structure or known chain of command. Alao and Atere traced that the group manifested due to frustration on account of national political, religious and economic systems while the institutional mechanism adopted in managing the crisis was defective (1). Since 2009, the group launched violent attacks on regular basis in worship centers, security structures and media outfits with huge human casualty that present the government as helpless and incapable. The increasing spread of the insurgence led some political and religious leaders to conclude that the group has now expanded beyond its original religious composition to include not only Islamic militants, but criminal elements and disgruntled politicians as well (6).

Unfortunately, Boko Haram is not the first Islamic fundamentalist sect in Nigeria to adopt violence as a weapon of operation. In the 1970s and 1980s, one Mohammed Marwa founded the Maitatsine sect that instigated riots in the country which resulted in the deaths of thousands of people (Johnson, 11). This explains why some analysts view Boko-Haram as an extension of the Maitatsine riots. Often, there are clashes between ethnic and religious groups. Examples of such public uprisings include the Nigerian Civil War, Tiv-Jukun/Fulani crisis in Taraba (2003), Gwantu crisis (2001), the census crisis (2006), the post presidential election crisis of 2011, and the Maitatsine uprising in Kano in the 1980s. Other theatres of conflict included, Zango Kataf in Kaduna State in 1992, Zaria Shiites outbreak, Jos Mayhem, Kaduna religious riots, ethno-religious massacre in Kano, Kaduna and Plateau in the wake of sharia judicial system, Nupe –Yoruba conflict in Kwara (Badru 4, cited in Tijani 187-220; Ojie and Ewhrudjakpor 7-14), and more recently, the Southern Kaduna bloodbath.

Indeed, Osaji corroborated that "travelling in Nigeria is fraught with danger and uncertainties. Even at home, life is not safe because armed robbers, assassins, Boko Haram and murderers can strike at any time of the day. Peace is becoming elusive and is a mirage" (43). As if Boko Haram's threat to safety is not sufficient, the Herders Militia has become another nightmare. Villagers no longer access their farms without assault by herders' militia. It is so real to the extent that cattle herders carry light arms and ammunitions publicly. Furthermore, the activities of militants in the Niger Delta have been another daunting challenge. Since the

discovery of crude deposits in 1958 within this region, complex militant alliances such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), NDVF, Icelanders, Coalition for Militant Actions (COMA), Martyrs Brigade (MB), the Tombolo Boys and the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC), to mention but a few. These groups combined lethal attacks and the sabotage of oil installations with the effective use of global media to publicise their campaign of “fighting for the control of oil revenues by indigenes of the Niger Delta” (Oluwatoyin 49). Among their activities include kidnapping of workers mostly foreigners for ransoms, attacks on oil facilities, vandalization of installations, attack on vessels, and crude theft. Although, this may sound simple the loss of life and property is immeasurable. Obi noted that the inability of the Transnational Oil Companies in collaboration with the Nigerian state to mitigate the negative impact oil exploration against the oil-producing communities ignited peaceful protests. These transformed into more violent actions by militant groups formed for the purpose of destabilising the Nigerian state and its access to crude oil revenues (Obi 23). Thus, the Niger Delta violent conflict is a microcosm of the larger Nigerian state within the context of equity, access to oil resources and power by oil-rich communities, self-determination, ethnic autonomy, lack of political participation and democratic accountability, underdevelopment and widespread poverty (Obi 3-4).

In Nigeria today, man's worth is calculated in terms of functions and he is titled by his functions. The inherent majesty and sacredness of human being have now been replaced by his functional values. Technology enjoys the absolute primacy. The value of human beings is determined by human ability and man loses his real personality. His life has become a journey without any purpose and goal. This is why Marcel complains that “man appears more and more, both to himself and to others as an agglomeration of functions” (Lescoe 119); Marcel is not against technology, but he is against technocracy, technolotry and techno mania, which are the attitude of worshipping technical progress (120). It could be summarized here that, life in Nigeria is no longer considered as a divine gift, but as a joke. Man is considered only as an instrument among many others. He is no longer is human but a commodity to be used and exploited by some mass movements whether social, industrial or political.

The Relevance of Marcel's Notion of Intersubjectivity to the Nigerian Existential condition

Although Marcel's account of intersubjectivity is useful, it is also lacking logically and fundamentally when exposed in the furnace of philosophical crossfire. First Marcel grounded his concept on Absolute Thou- God, whose ontological nature remains oblivious. Marcel fails to recognize that not all citizens of the world profess Christianity, he failed to see through this flaw and concluded that God is the source of all unity. Besides, he didn't give room atheists. With his conclusion, many people may read him as a Christian crusader or theologian cascading for converts rather than a philosopher. Again, Marcel casually wave human natural inequalities of race, sex, culture, creed and morality. He simply thought that all humans should accept one another in an interhuman relationship. This wouldn't just happen due to cultural and ideological diversity. After all, even morality is not universal. What Marcel may have considered moral may not be the same world over.

In spite of his flaws, Marcel's concept of intersubjectivity is indispensable for the progress of the human person in Nigeria in that intersubjectivity or the relation to the other, on which the community is based, provides man with a means of discovering ourselves and of finding bearings in the world (Baiju 17). Marcel calls intersubjectivity a corner stone of ontology (Marcel, *Mystery of Being* 225). A good illustration of intersubjectivity according to Schilpp and Hahn, can be found in the relationship between a musician playing an opus of chamber music, where each musician plays a role and makes a contribution in collaboration with others (350-351). Thus, their difference in tune and sound rather produce harmony. Equally the difference in ethnicity, culture, religion, language and population should be complementary rather than segregative. The Nigerian Society for its smooth-running needs compulsorily the presence and participation of all members in the society. No single tribe is single-handedly superior to the other. This is analogous to the saying that "United we stand and divided we fall".

Applying Gabriel Marcel's recommendations on intersubjectivity in Nigeria will mean that we are but a single tribe. It could be observed that sectionalism, nepotism and ethnicism constituted a thorn in the flesh in Nigeria. To the extent that 'juicy' appointments, contracts, sensitive political offices, and employment to certain government parastatals are highly reserved or given on the basis of where one comes from. Implementing intersubjectivity will correct the pointless dominance of the so-called 'major' tribes. Even the Killer herders in the bush will begin to see farmers as brothers. Insurgent and militant groups will see no need for bloodshed but dialogue. People will begin to exchange ideas, take corrections, tolerate others instead of resorting to violence. Intersubjectivity if applied, will take the nation to a point where people will consider one another as brothers and sisters, an extension of oneself. An Igbo man will treat a Hausa or Yoruba man like himself and vice versa. Only by entering into that interhuman relationship both emotionally and physically as Marcel recommended can there be peace.

Conclusion

This paper reflected on the practical relevance of Gabriel Marcel's notion of intersubjectivity. It was argued that although Africa and Nigeria in particular is ravaged by wars, violence and banditry, Marcel's intersubjectivity is sufficient to heal its broken-ness. Marcel observed that the cause of violence in the world is the disconnection between humans, the inability of one to recognize the other. In his proposal, Marcel offers us a remedy to heal this *Broken World*. He stated that an authentic interpersonal relationship can change the chaotic world. Man needs to be open to his fellow men. Intersubjectivity is the best way of interpersonal relationship, the bridge between people. He maintained that a dependable rapport can bring meaning to human existence in this material world. In this paper, Marcel's fundamental notions like I-Thou, Absolute Thou, Being and Having and Intersubjectivity are conversed. All these notions add to highlight the dignity of man as subject and as a person. The paper therefore recommends Marcel's intersubjectivity as a remedy to the ailing chaotic Africa.

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