

The plural role of emotions in Ethics: the case of ethical dilemmas

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This paper identifies a plurality of roles for emotions in practical reasoning by examining how different ethical approaches enable the recognition of the role of emotions in decision-making. By using ethical dilemmas we show how emotions appear in Intuitionism, Utilitarianism, and Deontological Ethics. The analysis reveals that emotions can appear in different places: sometimes as motivational forces, other times as ends-in-view, sometimes as overarching contextual modes and finally that they are sometimes reasons for action and at other times they are causes for actions. In addition, we argue that the most recent developments of philosophy of emotions demand a more complex perspective about emotions and that the impact of emotions in ethics should take into consideration layers of emotions (Mendonça 2013). We conclude that the issues raised reinforce Bernard Williams' claim that our notion of rationality is incomplete without emotions and sentiments for 'it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would' (Williams 1981: 29), and suggest a series of future issues to be explored which would further explain the connection between values and emotion as to do justice to a more complete and rich notion of rationality.

1. General motivation

Almost any reflection about emotion reveals their complex structure and the complex connections with other aspects of the mind and action. Philosophers, psychologists and neuroscience try again and again to

provide a picture of the impact of emotional experience to untangle the rich reality of feelings and emotions and to provide a good taxonomy of the emotional phenomenon. The issue is far from settled and some theorists of the emotion field have established that it is not possible to find a definition that includes all emotions for they ‘vary so much in a number of dimensions – transparency, intensity, behavioral expression, object-directedness, and susceptibility to rational assessment – as to cast doubt on the assumption that they have anything in common’ (De Sousa 2014: 6). Nevertheless it is possible to identify some common traits. One of these is that emotions have an ambivalent position with regard to their role for certainty and action. As Peter Goldie pointed out, though we ‘are inclined to say that emotional experience can sometimes tell us things about the world that reason alone will miss’ (Goldie 2004: 249), it is also the case that ‘we are inclined to say that our emotions can and do profoundly distort our view of things: in anger or jealousy, for example’ (Goldie 2004: 249). That is, sometimes emotions seem to be the source of certainty as when, for instance, a strong gut feeling sensation tells us what course of action to take even though the evidence does not add up in a secure way to give us that certainty; however, at other times, emotions are the source of deception and self deception as when, for instance, fear can turn every detail into an indication of danger or when loving someone blinds the one in love to aspects that everyone clearly recognizes as undesirable.

We think that finding the ways to understand the normative force of emotions within the rich and complex world of emotions may provide some clues to a better understanding of this ambivalent stance of emotional reality. Thus, this paper aims to provide a general picture of the various ways in which emotion can appear in action and decision-making so as to provide a first step to grasp their normative force so as to better disentangle their ambivalent nature. We begin by outlining three templates for Ethical Theory (Intuitionism, Utilitarianism and Deontological Ethics) and show how contemporary research has made it clear that a good understanding of rationality is incomplete without including the experience of sentiments and emotions. Then we suggest that by looking at an ethical dilemma we can better see how the different ethical templates understand the role of emotions in decision-making. We go on to explore the trolley problem and imagine how

different ethical positions reveal different roles for emotions in order to grasp the overwhelming richness of the impact of emotion on decision-making. Finally, we indicate that understanding the role of emotion in decision-making requires the need to integrate emotional complexity. The notion of emotional reflexivity revealed in emotional layers highlights that the ambivalence of emotions may be better understood once emotional complexity is introduced. We conclude by pointing out several future work directions for the benefit of both Ethics and Philosophy of Emotions.

2. Three templates for Ethical Theory

Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, is populated with theories, some more ‘in’ than others; in a sense every philosopher of Ethics worthy of her/his name has her/his own theory. Among other things, these theories are supposed to address ‘big’ moral questions – e.g. What is the right thing to do? What is an adequate theory of good? – and to frame and, if possible, to solve moral dilemmas (e.g. the Trolley Problem, about which more below). It is uncontroversial and well known that this myriad of theories can be grouped, if we ascend to a more abstract level, in families of theories. For the present purposes we are going to consider three such families and give a, say, conceptual snapshot of them. This will allow us further in this paper to suggest what the different roles are that emotions can play within each family, and this, in turn, will illuminate a bit more the philosophical DNA of what each family is. The three families we are going to consider can be named as follows: Intuitionism, Utilitarianism and Deontological Ethics. It is clear to us that these three families by no means exhaust the actual families of ethical theories on the philosophical scene. For reasons we are not going to enter into, in order to make the snapshot of each family we will concentrate on the ‘Right’ instead of on the ‘Good’.

Faced with a situation or with a prospect of an action with moral import, Intuitionism states that your most powerful tool to cope with it is your *moral intuition*. This moral intuition is as natural to mankind

as, say, reasoning or perception, and like these two it can also be educated. So, for instance, if you are preparing yourself to perform action A with moral import, then (unless you are hampered) you know from that moment on if this is a right or wrong action to perform. This is a very powerful starting point for the theory since there is large empirical evidence and cogent philosophical arguments (into which we are not going to enter) that support the relevance of moral intuition in practical decisions with moral import. Two of the most salient problems faced by this family are: (1) possible conflicting moral intuitions associated with moral situations (for instance: you may have the intuition that you should do A, but also the intuition that you should do B, A and B being incompatible; or you may have the intuition that doing A is both right and wrong); (2) context or even individual sensitiveness of the ‘moral intuition faculty’ (not every culture, much less each individual, has the same moral intuitions, not even the same individual at different times of his life).

Faced with a situation or with a prospect of an action with moral import, Utilitarianism states that you should always maximize pleasure and minimize pain for all concerned, perhaps allowing for: (a) a ‘bonus’ relative to the ones who are closer to you (e.g. if you can only save one drowning person, save your daughter, not the young girl near her that you are not acquainted with); (b) an adjustment within different pleasures (arguably, some pleasures/pains are more worthy to have/ more pressing to avoid than others); and (c) some prudential judgments on your practical reasoning (while fostering actual pleasure, consider if it does not jeopardize future ones). One of the most salient problems faced by this family is: possible justification of impingement of great pain on a smaller number of people to enhance the pleasure of a larger number of people (e.g. slavery, and see below the Trolley Problem).

Finally, faced with a situation or with a prospect of an action with moral import, Deontological Ethics states that you should always freely act according to your duty, and for the sake of it and nothing else (e.g. not to be praised by others, or not to be caught doing some illegal action). Kant, who is the father of this family, stated this maxim in different ways, with the two most interesting statements of it being (roughly): to act in such a fashion that your acting might be considered a universal rule; and, in your acting never consider the others as means but always

as ends in themselves. (Note that the latter statement ‘kills’ immediately the Utilitarian view.) Two of the most salient problems faced by this family are: (1) possible conflicting moral duties applied to the same action or situation (you can easily adapt the examples just given to illustrate the akin problem for Intuitionism); and, (2) possible sensitiveness of moral duties (the same examples given for Intuitionism apply here *mutatis mutandis*).

All the three families, it is clear, try to make sense in three different even incompatible ways of our moral experience and moral actions. Let us now turn to the emotions side and see what is going on there, and then try to connect both as we suggested at the beginning of this section.

3. Rationality is incomplete without emotions and sentiments

It has become more and more visible that our conception of rationality falls short if we do not include how feelings, emotions and sentiments make part of it. Though traditionally the capacities for deliberation and judgment have been taken as more rational than the capacity for emotion, and consequently ‘any other mental state (such as the emotions) that conflicts with the outcomes of deliberation and judgment must *ipso facto* be irrational’ (Helm 2000: 4), it is by now completely clear that Reason is no longer in opposition to Emotion. That is, the present state of affairs is now such that everyone would totally agree with Williams when he writes that our notion of rationality is incomplete if we do not include such sentiments in rationality for ‘it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments [...] towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would’ (Williams 1981: 29). Thus, the last ten years of development of emotion theory have enabled the settlement that emotions are crucial for rationality even though they may at times come apart and ‘present one with inconsistent perspectives on the world’ (Helm 2000: 9). Nevertheless, it is still not clear what such a complete picture looks like because we cannot obtain this more complete picture simply by adding

emotions to our notion of rationality. It requires a reconceptualization of rationality and how cognition incorporates and interacts with emotion and a good understanding of emotions themselves. Ultimately, it will also need an explanation of the long historical legacy of thinking of emotions as opposed to reason because the final integrated picture will have to provide an insightful explanation as to why emotions appear to be sometimes in conflict with some thought processes.

One way to contribute to the reconceptualization of rationality in light of the developments in emotion theory is to consider the role of emotions in decision-making. We think dilemmas are promising because we can place the response of a specific theoretical position and then verify what added insight is given by looking into the role of emotion so as to provide a way to see the role emotions play in decision for action. We have chosen the dilemma of the Trolley problem, first introduced by the philosopher Philippa Foot (1978), because of the way it reveals crucial aspects of the way consequences and principles interact in face of moral dilemmas in which both possible alternatives imply a tragic outcome. We do not aim to offer a detailed defense of a specific answer to the dilemma, nor to fully point out what the different answers to the different trolley problem situations reveal about the guiding principles that guide us in moral situations. Instead, we simplistically show that the three identified ethical templates give insufficient answers to the dilemma such that Ethical Intuitionism fails and the other two approaches provide answers with irreconcilable aspects for their theoretical structure, and then list the different ways in which emotions appear to play a role in the dilemma within each Ethical template. The point is to argue as ‘Taylor suggests that one’s emotions are somehow central, but exactly how is left unclear.’ (Helm 2000: 3), and that even though we may not exactly be certain as to the impact of emotions in decision-making we are sure they have an impact which is part of rationality and not in opposition to it. Examining the way emotions appear in face of an ethical dilemma increases our theoretical awareness of the plural positions emotions can take in decision-making.

4. Emotions in Dilemmas: Trolley Problem and the phenomenology of hesitation

In his 1985 article entitled ‘The Trolley Problem’, Thompson describes the dilemma in the following way:

‘Suppose you are the driver of a trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don’t work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. [...] Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?’ (Thompson 1985:1395) The description of the dilemma comes with a second hypothetical case in which you have to imagine yourself to be a surgeon, a truly great surgeon. Among other things you do, you transplant organs, and you are such a great surgeon that the organs you transplant always take. At the moment you have five patients who need organs. Two need one lung each, two need a kidney each, and the fifth needs a heart. If they do not get those organs today, they will all die; if you find organs for them today, you can transplant the organs and they will all live. But where to find the lungs, the kidneys, and the heart? The time is almost up when a report is brought to you that a young man who has just come into your clinic for his yearly check-up has exactly the right blood-type, and is in excellent health. So, you have a possible donor. All you need do is cut him up and distribute his parts among the five who need them. You ask, but he says, ‘Sorry. I deeply sympathize, but no.’ (Thompson 1985: 1396)

What the problem and the second hypothetical case raise is a refinement of the issues surrounding the Trolley Problem when it was first suggested by Foot and brings forth the question ‘Why is it that the trolley driver may turn his trolley, though the surgeon may not remove the young man’s lungs, kidneys, and heart?’ (Thompson 1985: 1396).

Of course there is an expanding body of experimental evidence showing that people make choices for (at least in part) unknown reasons, and then make up reasonable justifications while remaining unaware of the gap between their real motivation and their ex-post rationalization (T. Wilson: 2002) and, with regard to the role of emotion in moral dilemmas, experts have mostly identified the role of moral emotions as crucial elements that take part in the final decision outcome.

For example, in ‘An Experimental Investigation of Emotions and Reasoning in the Trolley Problem’ Lanteri, Chelini & Rizzello found that ‘the immediate responses may be traced to moral emotions as opposed to moral reasoning’ (Lanteri, Chelini, & Rizzello 2008: 793). They conclude their paper stating that, ‘humans probably have a set of hard-wired moral emotions immediately triggered by some features in a choice situation – for instance, among others, personal-moral features’ (Lanteri, Chelini, & Rizzello 2008: 801).

We would like to build upon their effort and examine what other emotional input can be identified in face of a dilemma using the three ethical templates described above. Of course we know that all three theoretical positions can take up more complex identities than the ones we described. For instance, Utilitarian can also take the form of rule-utilitarianism. However, for the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to take up the proposed three templates and explore how Intuitionism, Utilitarianism and Deontological Ethics bring forth different ways in which emotions can play a role in decision-making, and establish what are the differences that can make a difference in the normative role of emotional processes.

When faced with the Trolley Problem, intuitionists recognize that intuitions about the dilemma change depending on how the case is presented such that notions of intention, proximity or the general framing modify the given intuitions about the right thing to do (Stratton-Lake 2011: 15–18). When we add to ethical intuitionism the insight of emotions, we capture one way to ground the self-evident nature of basic moral propositions and understand how moral emotions ground what is intuitively grasped and stand as a non-inferential judgment (Roeser 2006: 38). As Sabine Roeser writes, ‘[w]e can understand emotions as fulfilling the role of non-inferential judgments or intuitions’ (Roeser 2006: 42) and even though not only emotions are required to focus on what is morally relevant, emotions are normative judgments such that ‘[p]aradigmatically, moral intuitions are emotions’ (Roeser 2006: 42). In addition, emotions provide the space for empathy and sympathy when emotions give rise to different moral emotions in different people because they provide the arena to establish a dialogue in which each party gives examples and draws analogies as to promote in the other a

similar emotion to share the emotion and intuition regarding the case in hand (Roeser 2005: 83).

Utilitarianism deals with the Trolley dilemma by using their maxim that we should always act so as to produce the most amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. The outcome is impossible to maintain for its one principle, which is supposed to guide all human action, asks that the surgeon remove the organs of one patient to save all the others and consequently offers an answer that goes against the best judgment. Utilitarianism is well known for how its single maxim can imply a justification of a great pain to some in the name of the happiness of many, and how this asks the Utilitarian to find a way to acknowledge the feelings of respect for persons giving rise to something similar to a moral intuition suggested in the first ethical template. So though we would assume that the role of emotions for Utilitarianism is the end result and consequence of the feeling of happiness, the confrontation with the dilemma reveals that the feeling of respect for persons also needs to be taken into account. Thus the greatest number of people incorporates other feelings and that the feeling of happiness is not an isolated emotional experience placing the utilitarian position unable to conciliate these two aspects. The insight for philosophy of emotion is that when an emotional order is the end in view, it necessarily incorporates other emotional aspects that must be coordinated in order to avoid the self-effacing change (Stoker 1976).

In contrast with Utilitarianism, when a Deontological ethics takes up the Trolley Problem the action is taken to be more important than its consequences. Within this frame of work, to act morally one must follow the rules and the action must be such as to be according to the maxim that you can also will that it would become a universal law (to use Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative) and it looks like feelings and emotions have no possible role to play. It is common to take this reading of deontological ethics: it is in clear contrast with the utilitarian position where the emotional mark of Happiness (overall Happiness) dominates the decision with regard to the emotional input for decision-making such that we could say that in decision-making it is the foreseen possible emotional outcome that dictates the role of emotion in rationality. However, if you follow Greenspan you can take a deontological position and argue that emotions play more than one role

in ethical deliberation and that, just as intuitionists who integrate emotions argue, there is a normative role of emotion reinforcing and favoring reasons motivating action (Greenspan 2011: 43). The overall picture of this interpretation of deontological ethics implies that principles do not stand on their own since they are motivated by emotional input, leaving the theory also open to the self-effacing charge and arguing for an unsustainable position.

Nevertheless, one interesting aspect of Greenspan's work is her departure from the widespread assumptions that a stress on the role of emotion is essentially Humean (Greenspan 2011: 44) and how she argues that emotions play two roles in ethics: first, emotions supply moral judgments with motivational force and secondly, that emotions stand as sources of reasons. As Greenspan explains, when someone is treated unjustly, feeling upset if the injustice goes unchallenged is not only a reason for the state of emotional discomfort carries normative implications (Greenspan 2011: 45). Greenspan writes, '[t]he fact that one is uncomfortable about something counts in itself as a reason for action – action to prevent the feeling from continuing – apart from any properties attributed to its object. So an appropriate emotion, besides having an evaluative component that reflects a practical reason, can add as a further reason a criticism, from the agent's standpoint, of her own state of feeling. The fact that she is in a state of discomfort is normative insofar as it actually counts against her failure to act to relieve it, whether or not the discomfort or her recognition of it also serves as a motive.' (Greenspan 2011: 45) That is, emotions can appear elements that reinforce reasons and have a causal force while at other times they stand as independent reasons (Greenspan 2011).

The presentation of the three possible ethical postures in face of the Trolley Problem reveals that emotions can play a plurality of roles and the complete description of their impact in ethics is too wide for the scope of this paper. We want to propose that the recent developments of philosophy of emotions indicate that the fact that emotions also come in layers (Pugmire 2005, Jäger & Bartsch 2006; Mitmansgruber et al. 2009; Mendonça 2013; Jäger & Bänninger-Huber 2014; Norman & Furnes 2014; Howard 2015), which is not directly contemplated by any of the ethical positions explored, is decisive for a good understanding of the role of emotions in ethics.

5. Reflexivity of emotions

Previous work has shown that meta-emotions cannot be handled as a special case of emotion because reflexivity modifies the nature of our emotional world. (Mendonça 2013) The reflexivity of emotions is such that one emotion about another changes the meaning and value of the first-order emotion such that being angry about being sad and being proud of being sad ends up being a completely different emotional experience of sadness. Since ‘meta-emotions necessarily have an impact on the value of the first-order emotion [...] This means that when we feel a meta-emotion, its object (the first-order emotion) changes and with it also changes the emotional experience.’(Mendonça 2013: 394) In addition the added significance brought by the meta-emotion is not a simple addition to the meaning of the first-order emotion but has a transformative effect because the ‘information obtained with the description of meta-emotions is not simply a matter of having more information about the experience; the extra knowledge we get from meta-emotions may change the meaning of the experience altogether.’ (Mendonça 2013: 394) This means that the inclusion and recognition of the role of meta-emotions in decision-making and deliberation may enable us to make sense of the earlier suggestion that sometimes emotions work as causes of actions and other times as reasons for actions, such that emotional input in decision-making may be the result of refinement of meta-emotional processes.

Though psychologists and philosophers usually illustrate meta-emotions as strategies for healthy emotional regulation, there is no trait in reflexivity that guarantees this and consequently, the relationship between emotions and meta-emotions can be far more complex and negative than the usual positive regulative connections (Howard 2015: 11–15). That is, though reflexivity does not come necessarily with a positive self-corrective direction, just like thinking about thinking does not, it is a privileged ground for instances of regulatory mechanisms and just as thinking about thinking can guide and correct thinking, emotions about emotions can refine and correct feeling. Thus, the meta-emotional mark may be the crucial item to explain why there is a sense in which people are and feel responsible

for their emotions even though it is also the case that people are not always in control of their emotional experiences.

Concluding Remarks and Future Work Directions

The general picture provided by the exploration of the place of emotions in the different ethical templates shows that emotions appear in different places in decision-making. Thus, the way emotions play a role in moral judgment indicates that some kind of version of sentimentalism is needed in ethics to do justice to the way emotions contribute to our ethical decisions (Avramova & Inbar 2013: 170). However, a comprehensive view needs to include insight from different ethical theories so as to grasp the full variety of roles for emotions. We have shown that emotions appear as follows: 1) emotions can be non-inferential judgments such as intuitions and be the normative judgments indicating what is the right action in a moral situation; 2) emotions can be the necessary base for sympathy and dialogue with people who have different judgments about a moral situation; 3) emotions can appear as the goal and consequence to obtain (happiness) and this is different from other emotional outcomes of a specific moral action; 4) emotions can provide the needed motivational force such as feelings about values, a sentiment of respect for the moral law, and when this is taken into account it is crucial to differentiate emotions that appear as causes connected to the descriptive realm of moral action or appear as reasons connected to the normative realm of moral action (for example, anger may be a reason to demand justice (reason) while it can also be a cause for an unjust behavior (cause)); and finally 5) the emotional layer can modify by reinforcing or erasing the force of a first-order emotion.

We think that this plurality of possibilities and added complexity of layers of emotions is at the heart of the ambivalent role of emotion in decision-making and that further research into the plurality of roles will ultimately provide a clearer understanding of the normative force of emotion. Thus, we would like to suggest some follow-up research directions raised by the analysis undertaken that constitute added steps

towards a clearer picture of the normative role of emotions which would show how emotions are one of the ways rationality is guided by values.

First, it would be important to further explore how emotions stand as reasons, building on Davidson's distinction between reasons and causes and following Michael Brady's arguments that emotions stand as a source of reasons and rationality in general (Brady 2013). When an agent runs away out of fear within a moral situation, the agent is at the mercy of an emotion in a causal mode and fear here can only be described within the descriptive realm. However, imagine that the same agent feeling fear does not run away but acts in caution both postponing taking up an action as much as possible while at the same time gathering the most amount of information about the situation. In this case the action of suspension of action seems to be grounded on fear as a reason for caution and one can easily state the general norm that in case of fear one ought to act in a cautious manner, while it is impossible to state a norm that says that in case of fear one ought to run away as fast as possible for in some instances the dangerous situation asks for not running away. The double possibility of the place of emotions is important to seriously take up the neo-sentimentalist proposal for it provides a way to understand that arguing for the importance of emotions for the right action does not mean that all emotions can be subsumed under this description. It is perhaps much harder to establish which ones can be included but, however, the above analysis suggests that only emotions that can be described under the normative realm can be morally integrated and that it is important to identify that the same emotion can be taken within the descriptive realm without annihilating its normative force.

Second, the acceptance of the complexity given by the reflexivity of emotion proves once again that the impact of emotion on ethics goes beyond that of its valence and appeals to a sense of emotional coherence that can be best analyzed in the notion of character. Thus it would be crucial to explore how virtue ethics deals with ethical dilemmas such as the Trolley Problem and if it stands up to the charge of falling into a similar self-effacing position (Pettigrove 2011). Finally, this will ask us to verify in what way this understanding of the role of emotions in ethics has an impact on the education of emotion and the use of education of emotion for moral education.

Third, the provided analysis clearly asks for an evaluation of the pertinent connection between emotions and values. One possible way to uncover the links of the hierarchy of values implicit in people's moral choices is to explore a phenomenology of hesitation in face of moral dilemmas similarly to the way Cooke explored a phenomenology of error and surprise by comparing the work of Peirce, Davidson and MacDowell (Cooke 2011) in order to better understand the role of surprise within the cognitive experience of error. Likewise, it is possible to draw a phenomenology of hesitation built upon the reflection about a dilemma in order to better understand the various roles of emotion in decision-making and in which way emotions give emphasis to this or that value when people face moral decisions in which they hesitate. A phenomenology of dilemmas and hesitation may further explain how the connection of emotion and character is tied to our understanding of emotional depth and do justice to the way in which emotional depth is connected to excellence of character (Pugmire 2005) and healthy feelings (Dewey 1887). Since dilemmas offer a privileged field to analyze the role of certain specific moral emotions such as regret, compassion and anger, it would be interesting to explore the suggestion that moral emotions represent a desired pattern of emotional structure about other ethical situations. In addition, it may also provide a good interpretation to the way people face dilemmas in daily life that, though they may not have the dramatic edge of the trolley problem, may feel similar to those who experience them.

In conclusion, when we examine the role of emotions in ethical dilemmas by ethical templates, it becomes clear that though emotions occupy a plurality of roles they have a normative function when they appear as reasons for action. A better understanding of their reflexive nature and how it influences and changes the way in which they can work, sometimes as causes and other times as reasons, will provide a clearer account of their normative force. Ultimately, we think that this normative trait of emotion is partly responsible for the structured format of the plurality of values in which rationality is embedded. Thus, the level of coherence or incoherence and the internal conflicts that can occur in decision-making within a plural conception of values can never be fully understood without an integration of the place and role of emotions. More importantly, we can never attain a complete image

of emotion without investigating the decisive factors that make them sometimes function as reasons for action. In sum, Ethics is incomplete without a good understanding of emotion just as Philosophy of Emotions is deficient if it does not incorporate the way emotions function as reasons in decision for action. That is, at the core of a better understanding of rationality there is an on-going demand for a better understanding of the role of emotions in decision-making.

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