

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY MYSTICS AS GOD'S CHILDREN
(AN INTRODUCTORY COGNITIVE STUDY)

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The theme of youth as opposed to old age belongs to one of the most permanent archetypes of culture. Curtius talks about the conflict between the young (*iuniores*) and the old (*seniores*) in the context of discussing the remnants of the ancient Indo-European religion in European culture as interpreted by Dumézil:

This Indo-European polarity covers a large number of paired opposites, among them that of stormy youth (*iuniores*) and thoughtful old age (*seniores*). There is not room for the details and the evidence here. I shall quote only Dumézil's conclusion: "L'un des deux termes (Varuna, etc.) recouvre ce qui est inspiré, imprévisible, frénétique, rapide, magique, terrible, sombre, exigeant, totalitaire (*iunior*) etc., tandis que l'autre (Mitra, etc.) recouvre ce qui est réglé, exact, majestueux, lent, juridique, bienveillant, clair, libéral, distributif, senior, etc. Mais il est vain de prétendre partir d'un élément de ces 'contenus' pour en déduire les autres." (Curtius 1990: 171-172).

It is interesting that Curtius, in spite of his being a medieval scholar of great distinction, did not, apparently, think of applying this polarity, which he knew so well, and particularly the notion of youth, or childhood to his conception of the Middle Ages. There is no room for the idea that the Middle Ages were a period that could be called European culture's childhood, or youth in Curtius's monumental *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages (ELLMA)*. Probably in his eyes it would spoil the purity of the intellectual venture of *ELLMA*, which was to bring us (or rather West Europeans) back to the Latin Middle Ages rather like a wayward child is brought back to its mother. In his foreword to the English edition of *ELLMA*, he says: "In 1932 I published my polemical pamphlet *Deutscher Geist in Gefahr*. It attacked the barbarization of education and the na-

tionalistic frenzy which were the forerunners of the Nazi regime. In it I pleaded for a new Humanism, which should integrate the Middle Ages, from Augustine to Dante" (Curtius 1990: vii-viii). Talking about the reasons for the American enthusiasm for medieval studies, Curtius remarks: "The American mind might go back to Puritanism or William Penn, but it lacked that which preceded them; it lacked the Middle Ages. It was in the position of a man who has never known his mother" (1990: 587). In view of the above quotations it is clear enough that Curtius, with his vision of the Latin Middle Ages as Europe's Alma Mater (fostering mother) could hardly see that epoch as an irresponsible child, with its tendency to be "imprévisible, frénétique, rapide, magique, terrible, sombre, exigeant, totalitaire". Of course he saw probably very well such tendencies in the Middle Ages, but he never tired of emphasising the Latin element in the medieval culture, and it may fairly be surmised that his concept of Latinity, which seems to include both Latin learning and Latin civilisation, was to serve as an antidote to anything "imprévisible", and a medicine containing the salutary element of a responsible, though liberal, adulthood.

Le Pan, on the other hand, in his book *The cognitive revolution in Western culture*, feels no compunction about suggesting that medieval people were endowed, in comparison with the modern Western man, with a different cognitive apparatus through which they perceived the world, and that this apparatus was strikingly similar to that of a typical child:

As the general atmosphere of violence suggests, medieval society was in some ways more primitive than our own – or more frankly primitive – and may thus seem to us more child-like. People took tremendous pleasure in color, in dress, in ritual, in parades, in spectacles, in elaborate food and drink (when they could get them) in all those aspects of life that children especially love, and most adults do not scorn. Like children, medieval people were subject to emotional extremes – they wept more quickly than we do, were headstrong and hasty, quick to sin zestily and repent heartily, and then to sin and repent again (Le Pan 1989: 47).

This is a verdict that many medieval scholars, such as Huizinga in his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, would probably corroborate, though others might no doubt question it, and consider it to be a false cultural stereotype that ominously resembles the way the colored people were presented as "overgrown children" by the Western colonialist propaganda.¹ Let us for a time, however, put into brackets the question of the truthfulness of the hypothesis that medieval people were like children, and let us proceed as if it were indeed the case.

¹ Le Pan is well aware of the implicit dangers of his approach and defends himself at length against the potential charge of cultural racism, (cf. 1989: 12-20).

One of the aspects of that alleged "medieval childishness" we have apparently grown out of, though perhaps not quite, is certainly the tendency to look for direct interventions of God and/or various other supernatural forces in the life of men. Children, as is well known, can afford a lot of violent, unpredictable, and irresponsible behaviour because they subconsciously position themselves and are positioned by adults as subordinates whose lack of authority is compensated by the possibility to appeal to the adults whenever anything goes wrong and expect them to make things good again, rather than be themselves drawn into the often troublesome, tedious, and hazardous process of coping with life's vicissitudes. The duration of our childhood depends of course on how long and how effectively this kind of relationship can continue, though, naturally, there are many transitional stages between the above described state of nearly complete dependence and the condition of a perfectly responsible, self-reliant adulthood, which, incidentally, most of us never seem to reach.

It is clear enough that religion in general and Christian religion in particular is often presented as a formula for preserving at least some elements of this child-like attitude also in adulthood, side by side with other such formulas as the relationship between the servant and the master, or the teacher and the disciple. We may be reminded at this point of the proverb: "God, our parents, and our master can never be required", (cf. Apperson 1993: 252) which puts all three kinds of relationship on an equal footing. We also often witness their being projected on the relations between men and women, with wives being treated like servants in a traditional marriage, and men styling themselves as servants and apprentices of their ladies in the courtly love culture. In all these cases, to occupy an inferior position means that we are relieved, or at least we would like to think that we are relieved, of the responsibility, or a part of it, to be the "architects of our own fortune", and to forge, on our own, a coherent world view. The development of such child-like attitudes is on the one hand encouraged by the Christian Church, which likes to quote Christ's words: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3), on the other hand, however, the extent of this infantile element is fairly strictly controlled by the Christian doctrine of providence in which the element of a child-like trust in God's assistance is carefully balanced with an emphasis on God's respecting man's free will, i.e. on His treating human beings as if they were responsible adults who know what they are doing, in spite of Christ's famous exclamation "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34) that, admittedly, casts doubt on humanity's adulthood. The above quoted Christ's eulogy of childhood can be properly contrasted with the almost equally famous dictum by St Paul: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face

to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor 13: 11-12). Thus some people at least may feel at a loss to know whether to enter the Kingdom of Heaven we should "become like little children" or rather "put away childish things", or perhaps we should conclude that there is no contradiction between the two on the face of it mutually exclusive statements and we should seek a sublimated childhood, free from its puerile aspects, one that does not "see through a glass, darkly", but "face to face". The question, however, arises at this point what elements of what might be called the "real childhood", and how much of them, can be saved in this process of sublimation.

We may observe that an answer to this problem was avidly sought by many Christian mystics, who were encouraged by the typically Christian ideals of mercy and forgiveness, easy to associate with the parent – child relationship, and by the ecstatic feeling of having flouted the rules of ordinary logic, the feeling provided by the nature of the mystical experience itself, and one that can be easily seen as going back to some ideal, original, and primeval state of being. Happold describes this experience in the following way:

There are two urges in life. One is towards selfhood, individualisation, and separation; the other; the other towards an escape from the loneliness of self into something bigger than self. Man is the most individualised of all created beings, and yet, at the same time, the one most capable, through thought and imagination, of participating in everything. These two urges are constantly at war within him. He clings to his selfhood and self-love; he is reluctant to give them up; and yet at the same time he has an inherent longing for reunion with something to which he feels he belonged and from which he feels himself to be separated (Happold 1975: 40).

The mystic urge is clearly described here as a longing for the lost childhood, which may indeed be defined as the age of being at one with "something bigger than self". There is little doubt that no such onness can be conceived, let alone achieved, if that "something bigger than self" is seen exclusively as a stern and demanding father, whose very nature implies a clear dividing line between one person and another, and who expects from his children an adult form of responsibility. Hence the importance of the feminine element in mystical thinking and the tendency to emphasise the motherly aspects of the Godhead, and mother's unconditional love, given free and not as a reward. One of the best examples of this kind of attitude is of course the 14th c. English mystic, Julian of Norwich, the author of the formula that Jesus Christ is our real Mother (cf. Wolters 1966: 167).

The 14th c. English mystical poem "The Pearl" is also largely devoted to the discussed problem, it contains a debate between a two year old girl and her father, where the latter represents a typical fatherly logic, not being able to com-

prehend that the highest reward can go to those who did nothing in particular to deserve it. The father complains:

That cortaysé is to fre of dede,
Yyf hyt be soth that thou cones saye.
Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede;
Thou cowthes never God nauther plese
ne pray,
Ne never nawther Pater ne Crede –
And quen mad on the fyrst day!
I may not traw, so God me spede,
That God wolde wrythe so wrange away.
Of countes, damysel, par ma fay,
Wer fayr in heven to halde asstate,
Other elles a lady of lasse aray.
Bot a quene! – hit is to dere a date.

(Cawley – Anderson 1976: 20-21)

That cortesy has too free a hand
If truth it is that you now say.
A bare two years you lived in our land,
Could not gratify God or pray;

Paternoster, Creed, you never knew –
Yet called to queenship the first day!
I cannot credit, God bless me true,
That God could go so greatly astray.
To the state of countess in heaven, say,
God might a maiden like you appoint,
Or that of lady of lesser sway;
But queen! that comes to too high a point.

(Stone 1977: 155)

The Dreamer's way of thinking in "Pearl" is not particularly modern, he represents a traditional respect for hierarchy and a typically medieval horror of those who rise too fast in any hierarchy especially if they are newcomers who have not gone through a sufficiently long period of training in any established corporate body. Dante in Book XVI of *Inferno* also complains of such upstarts:

La gente nova e' subiti guadagni
orgoglio e dismisura han generata,
Firenza, in te, si che tu già ten piagni.

(Sapegno 1977: 182)

New families, who have made sudden gains,
Have generated pride and immoderate ways,
Florence, in you, you weep for it already.

(Higgins 1998: 112)

Pearl's mentality, on the other hand, is "childish" in the sense that she has no time for traditional hierarchies and does not consider it strange to be elevated overnight from a very low to a very high position. This may be compared to the situation in fairy tales, which surely existed already in the 14th century, and where it is not considered particularly remarkable, let alone scandalous, for the heroes and heroines to pass quickly from a lowly to a most privileged social position, as it happens to Cinderella and similar figures. There is little doubt that Pearl's irreverent attitude to traditional pieties strikes as definitely more modern than the Dreamer's fearful conservatism. It turns out then, perhaps a little surprisingly, that it is a "childish" character that may be seen as representing a more modern world-view than a character whose logic is apparently more "adult" but at the same time more "medieval". Pearl to justify her position cites Christ's Parable of the Vineyard (Matt 20, 1-16), and is associated with Christ's

saying about “the pearl of great price” (Matt 13, 46) which places her firmly in the New Testament tradition, while the Dreamer’s pedantic sense of hierarchy and decorum seems to point towards his being attached to the Old Testament concept of the law, the law which St Paul calls a “schoolmaster” needed to “bring us unto Christ” but later of no use because superseded by faith (cf. Gal 3, 24-26). Indeed, from a New Testament point of view it is the Dreamer’s apparently “adult” logic that is “childish”, “childish” in the bad sense of the word, meaning tied to a limited and fragmentary vision of reality, while Pearl’s represents a spiritual “adulthood” based on a direct contact with Divinity. This paradox is of course part and parcel of the fundamental paradox of “Pearl”, where a two year old girl behaves towards an adult man as a master and a spiritual guide towards a somewhat slow-witted disciple. The poem is indeed profoundly Christian in that it shows a religiously and poetically inspired childhood as superior to a rather unimaginative adulthood, although, at the same time, the Dreamer certainly strikes the reader as being more human and psychologically more understandable than his daughter. At any rate, “Pearl” manages no doubt to problematise the relationship between parent and child, and between childhood and adulthood.

Incidentally, it may be noted that the New Testament Parable of the Vineyard, just like that of the Prodigal Son, evokes a vision of a world which is governed by an almost fairy tale logic in which it is the youngest and the most reckless, and those who are the least integrated with any established social order, that ultimately triumph over their conventional, dutiful, and rule-abiding elders and rivals. As the great expert in fairy tales, Max Lüthi, has put it: “The youngest of three brothers, the simpleton, the scurfhead, the ashboy, Peau d’Âne, the orphaned girl, the stepchild, or (on the other hand) the prince or the princess – these are the heroes or heroines of the folktale. Of all people it is they, the isolated ones, who are blessed by fortune. Of all people it is they, because they are isolated, who are invisibly linked to the essential powers of the world” (Lüthi 1995: 53-54).

This state of blessedness that the marginalised and isolated characters in fairy tales regularly attain is connected by Lüthi with the idea of “universal interconnection” which he treats as a logical concomitant of isolation:

Visible isolation, along with the invisible interconnection of all things (Allverbundenheit) – these may be considered the principal characteristics of the folktale. Guided by an invisible hand, isolated characters are joined in harmonious cooperation. These two aspects are interrelated. Only that which is not rooted anywhere, neither by external relationships nor by ties to its own inner being, can enter any association at any time and then break it off again. Conversely, isolation derives its meaning only from the capacity for extensive interconnections. Without this capacity, the externally isolated elements would lack support and fall apart (Lüthi 1995: 51).

Here then is the world, as Lüthi puts it, “dichterisch bewältigt” (‘poetically overcome’) (1995: 78-79) and the folktale, at least in its pure form, provides an instrument for reconciling the zone of wonderful dreams with that of the hard reality, an instrument that of course requires in order to be effective a certain type of mentality, one that could be described as flexible and trustful and associated with childhood, though by no means limited to it.

It is my working hypothesis that a similar “poetical overcoming” may be observed in the works by many medieval mystics, and especially those who belonged to the tradition of “via negativa” (the negative way) practised by many 14th c. mystics, including the famous German mystic, Meister Eckhart, which consisted in emphasising the unknowability of God, and the vanity of any attempts to describe Him by ascribing to him any positive attributes. In Eckhart’s own words: “Why dost thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of Him is untrue” (cf. Happold 1975: 64). A mystic should thus, in a way, imitate God by refusing to be tied to any attributes, or attachments. We can easily compare Lüthi’s concept of “isolation vs. universal interconnection” with the following description of the Mystical Way by St John of the Cross, where the paradoxical dialectic of attaining everything through freedom from attachment to anything in particular is expounded at length:

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything,

Desire to have pleasure in nothing,

In order to arrive at possessing everything,

Desire to possess nothing.

In order to arrive at knowing everything,

Desire to know nothing ...

When thy mind dwells upon anything,

Thou art ceasing to cast thyself upon the All,

For, in order to pass from the all to the All,

Thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all.

And, when thou comest to possess it wholly,

Thou must possess it without desiring anything,

For, if thou wilt have anything in having all,

Thou hast not thy treasure purely in God.

(Happold 1975: 361-362)

Para venir a gustarlo todo

no quieras tener gusto en nada;

para venir a poseerlo todo,

no quieras poseer algo en nada;

para venir a saberlo todo,

no quieras saber algo en nada ...

Cuando reparas en algo,

dejas de arrojarte al todo;

porque, para venir del todo al todo,

has de negarte del todo en todo;

y cuando lo vengas del todo a tener,

has de tenerlo sin nada querer;

porque, si quieres tener algo en todo,

no tienes puro en Dios tu tesoro.

(San Juan de la Cruz 1995: 90-91)

I do not of course mean to suggest that we have to do here with the same thing. St John of the Cross is speaking about a consciously adopted asceticism, while the folktale heroes are not ascetics, they are often far from any spiritual perfection suffering from such vices as laziness, or inability to learn from their mistakes. What, however, unites at least some of St John’s ascetics with Lüthi’s

folktale heroes is their deeply fixed passivity, the readiness to let things happen to them. This readiness is described in St John as the mystic's passive way of entering "the night of sense" ("la noche del sentido"): "The passive way is that wherein the soul does nothing, and God works in it, and it remains, as it were, patient" (Happold 1975: 359), and associated by Lüthi with the folktale hero who: "lets himself be moved and guided by unknown objects and characters without even asking about their nature and origin" (Lüthi 1995: 85). The difference naturally consists in the fact that the mystic has to make sure, or at least to feel sure, that the force that guides him comes from God, or is God himself, while the folktale hero, as is clear from the above quotation, is completely indifferent to such considerations, which can be explained by the fact that he inhabits the world of magic, where there is no room for religion², although an even simpler way to account for it is by pointing to his "childlike" nature which is so simple and naive that there is no room in it not only for religion but also for any kind of the so called "inner life" (Lüthi 1995: 11).

The attitude we are discussing now is in fact often described as "detachment" and associated with the fourteenth century German mystic, Meister Eckhart in whose writings it is denoted by two terms: the first is *gelâzenheit* (Gelassenheit in modern German), translated sometimes as 'releasement' or 'letting be', and sometimes as 'infinite resignation' or 'serenity' (cf. Schürmann 1978: 16, 267), and the other is *abgescheidenheit* (Modern German *Abgeschiedenheit*) which could be translated as 'isolation', 'separation', or 'renunciation' (cf. Schürmann 1978: 84-85). The *gelâzenheit*, i.e. being released from attachments of all sorts, seems to be strictly connected with the already described "via negativa" ('the negative way') of which Eckhart is perhaps the most outstanding representative. Eckhart writes about freedom from attachment (*Eigenschaft*) in the following way:

I could have so vast an intelligence that all the images that all human beings have ever received and those that are in God himself were comprehended in my intellect; however, if I were in no way attached to them, to the point that in everything I do or neglect to do, I did not cling to any of them with attachment – with its before and its after – but if in this present now I kept myself unceasingly free and void for the beloved will of God and its fulfillment, then I should indeed be a virgin, without the ties of all the images, as truly as I was when I was not yet (Schürmann 1978: 13).

² The reader may be reminded here of George Frazer's famous presentation of magic and religion as two antagonistic forces in Chapter IV of his "Golden Bough" (cf. 1993: 48-60).

What is striking here is that Eckhart treats his concept of detachment as one's way to be free from any specific, permanent and defining ties to "images",³ while remaining potentially open to associate oneself temporarily ("in the present now") with any such image if such be the will of God. This project is undertaken in the name of a spiritual "virginity" and a return to the state of being "when I was not yet", i.e. some incipient virtual being characteristic of undeveloped, inchoate forms, which clearly shows that Eckhart was fully aware of the child-like element in his intellectual construction. Particularly important seems here the connection between detachment and the readiness to yield to the spur of the moment ("in the present now" – *in disem gegenwertigen nu*), and to refuse to think providently, i.e. in terms of "before" and "after", which, as is well known, is very characteristic of children's psychology:

A detached man lives in the instant. ... The "before" of a work is its project (further on we shall meet the expression "premeditated works"), the "after," its recompense. Project and recompense are marks of ownership and cannot be reconciled with the "beloved will of God." Duration is the mode of temporality corresponding to attachment. The temporality of detachment, the instant, annihilates the project as well as the recompense. It is only itself. Whatever my knowledge may be and whatever my works may be, if in this present instant I dedicate myself to them without making them mine, if I remain as open and as free from entanglements as I was in the beginning, then I am truly detached. Detachment arises and is verified in such a "now" which is always new (Schürmann 1978: 14).

In Eckhart then we find a well developed cognitive project meant to resemble a child's way of perceiving the world, but it has to be emphasised that we have to do here with a conscious "infantilisation" undertaken on the basis of a keen awareness of the difference between the adult and childish ways of thinking.

The aim of Eckhart's "infantilisation" seems to be almost identical with Lüthi's concept of "isolation" and "universal interconnection", the former term seems to correspond roughly to *abgescheidenheit*, while the latter to *gelâzenheit*, which is a broader concept to be associated with Eckhart's concept of being a "wife", while the former bears resemblance to Eckhart's concept of virginity. The spiritual virginity, i.e. freedom from attachments, enables us to receive God, while the spiritual wifeness refers in fact to motherhood, i.e. to the fruit ensuing from this reception. As Eckhart himself has put it in one of his sermons:

³ This fear of attachment to images was certainly also, if not first of all, motivated by a desire to fulfil more strictly the Second Commandment: "Thou shall not bow down to /images/, nor worship them", and thus to avoid any form of idolatry.

I have spoken a word, first in Latin, which is written in the Gospel and which is translated so "Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a little castle and was received by a virgin who was a wife." Now then, pay close attention to this word: it was necessary that it be a virgin by whom Jesus was received. "Virgin" designates a human being who is devoid of all foreign images, and who is as void as he was when he was not yet. ... Now pay attention and look! If a human were to remain a virgin forever, he would never bear fruit. If he is to become fruitful, he must necessarily be a wife. "Wife," here is the noblest name that can be given to the mind, and it indeed more noble than "virgin." That man should receive God in himself is good, and by this reception he is a virgin. But that God should become fruitful in him is better; for the fruitfulness of a gift is the only gratitude for the gift. The spirit is wife when in gratitude it gives birth in return and bears Jesus back into God's fatherly heart (Schürmann 1978: 3-4).

In another place talking about the role of *abgescheidenheit* in the Christian's life, Eckhart says that it: "purifies the soul, cleanses the conscience, enflames the heart, awakes the spirit, intensifies the desire, enables the cognition of God, isolates from the created world, and unites us with God" (Wehr 1989: 77-78).⁴ Thus Eckhart's *abgescheidenheit*, or "virginity", has clearly a preparatory function, like Lüthi's "isolation" it singles a being out for the special function of mediating between the natural and supernatural dimension. The main difference between these two models seems to be that a folktale hero is isolated in order to be "universally connectible" according the decrees of the capricious, though anonymous, fate, while a mystic is to cultivate his freedom from attachments, i.e. his "negative way", in order to achieve a perfect serviceability, i.e. to be always prepared to set his hand to any job that the Divine Will may wish him to do.

The paradox of this intellectual position seems to consist in the apparent impossibility to reconcile the emphasis on the unknowability and inscrutability of God with the principle of fulfilling his "beloved will". At this point, however, we are helped by Happold, who asserts:

But He, of whom the mind can have no knowledge, can be known to the deep centre of the soul; He, who is neither perceptible to the senses nor conceivable by the intellect, is sensible to the heart (Happold 1975: 64).

It is clearly this "knowledge through the heart" that the mystics prefer to any kind of purely intellectual cognition. We may be justified in supposing that the

⁴ The wording of this passage in the original is as follows: "/Abgescheidenheit/ reinigt die Seele und läutert das Gewissen, und entzündet das Herze, und weckt den Geist, und beschleunigt das Verlangen, und läßt Gott erkennen, und scheidet ab die Kreatur, und vereiniget sich mit Gott." The translation from the German is mine.

"negative way", because of its inherently anti-hierarchic nature, can provide an outlet for all kinds of uncontrollable, and "frenetic" (as Dumézil would have put it) emotions associated with childhood and youth. It seems that Eckhart was aware of this danger and hence comes his insistence on the "spiritual poverty" the purpose of which was to prevent his "detached" being to form any attachment except a direct one to the Godhead itself, so direct indeed that it resembles a kind of "regressus ad uterum," a return to a state of full unity between the creature and the engendering principle:

A poor man is he who wills nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing. ... Thus we say that man must be so poor that he is not and has no place wherein God could act. Where man still preserves some place in himself, he preserves distinction. This is why I pray God to rid me of God, for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God as the principle of creatures. ... Therefore also I am unborn, and according to my unborn being I can never die (Schürmann 1978: 214, 218-219).

Thus, just like Curtius in his grand project, Eckhart postulates a return to the motherly principle, only he conceives of it in a less metaphorical and more radical way. It is also manifest that the medieval mystics' "childishness" is not anything that we could, like in Le Pan's project of the "cognitive revolution", mentioned at the beginning of the present study, ascribe to the Middle Ages conceived of as the period of the Western man's cultural childhood now happily overcome after we entered, in connection with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a period of cultural maturity. It is rather an ideological proposition that can still be, and certainly is, considered interesting, or even attractive, raising, perhaps, the question of whether Europe is not now old enough to experience its "second childhood", in which, however, as is to be feared, neither Curtius's Latinity, nor Eckhart's Christian God have much chance to play a central role.

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