

Psychology of Experiences and Understanding the Finiteness of Human Life

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Abstract

The article examines the problem of the finiteness of human existence in the context of contemporary humanitarian thought and the challenges of technological civilization. The author observes that the classical philosophical understanding of finiteness as individual death is today being supplemented by alarming predictions about the finiteness of the existence of all humanity - as a result of man-made disasters, ecological crises, or humanity's own ill-considered activity. In this regard, the work analyzes the evolution of ideas about life and death from «archaic culture», which outlined a picture of two worlds (the created and the divine, the finite and the infinite), to modern European culture, which developed an understanding of a unified world governed by natural laws. Special attention is paid to the cognitive dissonance that arises when attempting to reduce death to biological reality, as well as to the inability of modern science to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of posthumous existence. As a historical alternative, the author points to a shift in semantic focus from the question «what exists after death?» to the question «how to live correctly?» The author analyzes the historical and philosophical strategies and concepts of Plato and Aristotle, as well as contemporary concepts of P. Hadot and M. Foucault, in which the meaning of life is constituted through a conscious relationship to oneself, spiritual practices, and creative self-determination. The work demonstrates that, despite the diversity of approaches, all of them presuppose the constitution of one's own life and its correlation with ideals. In the final part of the article, the author moves to an analysis of the current situation, where the risks of global collapse are becoming a reality, and rational decisions are being blocked by socio-psychological processes. He concludes that comprehending the finiteness of human life today requires not only philosophical reflection but also the practical responsibility of each individual for the preservation of life on Earth.

Keywords: *Life; Death; History; Culture; Finiteness; Infinity; Crises; Earth; Man; Humanity*

Introduction

In classical German philosophy, the finiteness of human life was understood as death as the boundary of existence, in contrast to the infinity of the Creator. Today, this theme also encompasses predictions regarding the finiteness of the life of Humanity, which could occur either as a result of a cosmic cataclysm (a giant asteroid impact, the temporary disappearance of Earth's magnetic field, the sun burning out, a supernova explosion or gamma-ray burst, etc.) or due to humanity's own unreasonable activity (uncontrolled technological development disrupting the biosphere, nuclear war; there are even predictions of destruction by AI). Here are just two examples of how such activity might end. «Humanity», writes Vladimir Kutyrev, «is threatened by catastrophe not only in the form of a war unleashed by itself, armed with all the achievements of technology - which would still be a private event - but also as a process of the loss of the human within it,

its diminishment, even to the point of disappearance... Not into emptiness (there is none), but into the Other-Being. As emptiness for us. Forward, faster, farther, and towards - death. And the first to perish will be the one who runs the fastest. With bitter pity, one can only say: Blinded by technological light, progressively growing stupid, unhappy humanity» [9, pp. 9, 500]. «No one knows for sure», reflects Eliezer Yudkowsky in a recently published book, «how advanced an AI must be to acquire the motive and ability to secretly copy itself onto the internet. No one knows in which year or month some company will create an AI researcher of superhuman level, capable of generating a new, even more powerful generation of artificial intelligences... After that, someone will take another step up, and we will all perish - if the leaders of AI companies are right that humanity is just a few years away from the point of no return» [25].

Today, the individual finiteness of human life is discussed both traditionally (since, despite continuous attempts to understand and resolve this theme, many remain unsatisfied) and in connection with the newly revived hope of achieving immortality, now based on future technologies. For example, the English philosopher and futurist Max O'Connor (pseudonym Max More) writes that «when technology allows us to transcend ourselves in psychological, genetic, and neurological aspects, we, having become transhumans, will be able to transform ourselves into posthumans - beings of unprecedented physical, intellectual, and psychological abilities, self-programming, potentially immortal, unlimited individuals» (quoted in E. Davis [7]).

Most of these forecasts are made relying on scientific considerations, essentially ignoring the traditional division of reality into two worlds - the finite and the infinite, the world of the life of an individual or Humanity (which also has a beginning and, as currently predicted, an end) and the world of immortal existence or, according to Nikolai Berdyaev, eternity. «Life is noble», he writes, «only because there is death in it, there is an end, testifying that man is destined for another, higher life. It would be base if there were no death and no end, and it would be meaningless. In infinite time, meaning is never revealed; meaning lies in eternity. But between life in time and life in eternity lies an abyss, a transition across which is possible only through death, through the horror of rupture» [4, p. 218].

In Berdyaev's text, this division appears as a rational construct, but for many centuries before, it was understood sacredly, namely, that there is a created world and a spiritual, divine world (God), and it is God who can transfer man into eternity. Such an understanding was formed as early as the early Middle Ages. «Therefore», we read in the «Address to the Greeks» by Tatian the Assyrian (112-185 CE - V.R.), «we believe that at the end of all things there will be a Resurrection of the bodies - not as the Stoics teach, who think that after certain periods of time the same beings always appear and perish without any benefit - but once, at the fulfillment of our ages, and solely for the restoration of certain men for judgment... Let fire destroy my body, but the world will receive this substance, dispersed like vapor; let me perish in rivers or seas, let me be torn apart by beasts, but I shall be hidden in the treasury of the rich Lord. The weak and godless man does not know what is hidden; but the King God, when He wills, will restore to its former state the essence that is visible to Him alone» [20].

Another division was proposed by Aristotle - «natural and made by art» (today we would say, not art, but human activity) - and it is also used in comprehending the problem of the finiteness of life. «Of that which comes to be», we read from the Stagirite in A.F. Losev's translation, «one comes to be naturally, another through art... of the various kinds of coming to be, [coming to be] natural we have in those things whose coming to be depends on nature» [11]. Death, Aristotle would say, is a natural (motion), a natural completion of life, in contrast, for example, to the activity of a physician, which presupposes a goal and ability, representing an art.

In the Modern era, Francis Bacon revised the Aristotelian division. First, he connected nature with human art, asserting that scientific interest lies only in «nature constrained by art»; second, he effectively transformed man into a demiurge, stating that the main task is «the mastery of nature», which will make man «powerful»; third, he formulated a new formula for activity regarding nature («nature is not commanded unless it is obeyed») [16, pp. 149, 154]. These ideas, reinforced by the research of Galileo and Huygens, led not only to the

development and creation of natural science and engineering but also to the conviction among several Modern European scientists that, relying on the laws of nature, one could remake nature itself, not excluding the solution to the problem of the finiteness of life (otherwise, how would faith in space exploration or transhumanism have emerged?).

But, as is known, science has many critics; besides the propositions and divisions mentioned here, opposing ones have currently been formulated. The first proposition: there are not two worlds; the world is unified and rational, therefore immortality and eternity are myths and concepts. And the second proposition: man is not a demiurge; the possibilities of his activity and transformation of nature are limited; he himself, in his activity, is subject to the laws of nature, both the «first» and «second», the social (if Kant writes that «personality is freedom over natural necessity», then Hegel corrects him - «freedom is recognized necessity»).

To clarify the situation outlined here, the author will attempt to comprehend the problem of the finiteness of human existence within the framework of methodology, psychology, and the humanities. In doing so, he will carry out problematization, utilize the results of his research on the genesis of culture, and formulate hypotheses.

From the picture of two worlds explaining the finiteness and infinity of life to the picture of a unified rational world

What was easier for the first (“archaic”) man to understand - death or life? Research by E. Tylor on archaic culture shows that life, as immediate being, was given to man in sensations. Archaic man understood death as eternal life; he believed that life is the soul, understood as a kind of invisible little bird (butterfly, shadow). It lives in the human body, can leave it, but also return, and never dies. Finiteness, i.e., death in this scheme, was understood as the departure of the soul from the human body without return, and infinity - as the life of the departed soul, either in the «land of the dead» (where it continued the same life), or settling among other souls on the «tree of life», or moving to live in a «house» (burial) made by the tribe. [21] Since death in this picture was reduced to life, archaic man was not particularly afraid of it. But in the subsequent culture of the Ancient Kingdoms, where the original reality was already considered to be the gods (to whom souls were subordinate), and the gods, as stated in several myths, not only created man but also “appointed him death”, keeping life for themselves - in this culture, a fear of death develops. This is clearly seen, for example, in the Sumerian «Epic of Gilgamesh», which describes the underworld, resembling a prison, where the souls of people go after death:

«To the house of darkness, the dwelling of Irkalla,

To the house from which the one who enters never comes out,

To the path from which there is no return,

To the house where the living are deprived of light,

Where their food is dust and their food is clay,

And they are dressed, like birds, with garments of wings,

And they see no light, but dwell in darkness,

And the bolts and doors are covered with dust!» [8, p. 186].

As a result, man begins to acutely experience his own death and dream of immortality, as, for example, the priests of the Nahua people (Indians of America who inhabited the Great Mexican Valley in antiquity).

I weep, I feel myself in despair:

I remember that we must leave the beautiful flowers and songs.

Let us enjoy then and sing, since we are leaving forever and perishing.

Let not the living come in anger, the earth is very wide.

Ah, if only to live forever, if only never to die! [10, pp. 223-224].

Interestingly, even in ancient culture, where, as already noted, Aristotle introduces the idea of the natural and science takes shape, the indicated picture of two worlds does not disappear from the stage of human consciousness, continuing to fulfill its purpose. In his work «On the Heavens», the Stagirite reasons both within the framework of rational discourse and the sacred, i.e., the reality of the picture of two worlds. «We hold», he writes, «that all natural bodies and magnitudes are capable of moving in space by themselves, since nature, as we assert, is the source of their motion... From what has been said, it clearly follows that there exists a certain corporeal substance, distinct from the substances here, more divine than all of them, and primary in relation to them all... To all appearances, [our] theory confirms immediate [human] experience, and experience confirms the theory. Namely, all people have an idea of the gods, and all who believe in the existence of gods - both barbarians and Hellenes - assign the highest place to the deity, obviously because they believe that the immortal is inseparably connected with the immortal; otherwise, [in their opinion], it could not be» [2].

The picture of two worlds is preserved in the Middle Ages and even, as can be seen from Berdyaev's reflection, in the Modern era (in modern culture). The other side of the coin is that for many people of modernity, it is understood as mythological knowledge. After F. Bacon, a search begins for a new, rational explanation of the finiteness of human existence. A natural-scientific picture is created in which there are no longer two worlds; the world is unified, subject to the laws of nature, which also apply to the cosmos. Death here is understood within the framework of biological science as the complete cessation of life, and outside the framework of biology, for example, among some religiously oriented philosophers, as... a mystery. A.F. Losev believed that this mystery concerns not only the problem of the finiteness of life but also its ethical content. «In the end», he reflects, «everything comes down to the question of good and evil. God rules over everything, and what is happening here? Could He not with one movement of His little finger eliminate all this ugliness? He could. Why doesn't He want to? A mystery... Angels in multitude fell away from God. The Devil, who was an angel, knows everything and acknowledges everything except the absolute being of God. Couldn't God bring him to such a state that the Devil would not do evil? Ha-ha! And why doesn't God do this? A mystery... And a believer is one who has seen through this mystery. Others quickly reason - say, eh, there is no God. This is rationalism and foolishness. And faith begins when you understand that the Almighty God exists, but He is crucified. God - is crucified! When you begin to try to understand this, you see that there is a mystery here» [5, pp. 32-33].

One can even speak of a kind of cognitive dissonance. The explanation that life has ceased because the heart has stopped looks like a trick. Is man only a biological organism? It is unlikely that thought or experience, or our self-consciousness, can be reduced to electrical impulses or chemical processes in the brain. Without the brain and body, they are certainly also impossible, but they are not reducible to them. It is no coincidence that the concept of «qualia» («the hard problem of consciousness», which attempts to explain consciousness through brain activity) is so popular today. In other words, modern science is unable to explain death as the cessation of life (here it is, and now it is gone; the question arises, where did it disappear?). There is also another problem of rational understanding of the finiteness of life. Even if man is not only a biological organism but also Homo sapiens and a representative of Society, which in the ideal is conceived as eternal; nevertheless, when dying, he still disappears as an individual, self-aware being aware of the world. Berdyaev wrote directly about this, reflecting on the death of his beloved cat Muri. «Muri's suffering before death I experienced as the suffering of all creation. Through him, I felt myself united with all creation, awaiting deliverance... I very rarely and with difficulty cry, but when Muri died, I wept bitterly. And his death, such a charming creature of God, was for me an experience of death in general, the death of those whom one loves. I demanded

eternal life for Muri, demanded eternal life for myself with Muri... In connection with Muri's death, I experienced an unusually concrete problem of immortality. In our garden, under a tree, is Muri's grave. Passing by the grave, I thought about immortality concretely and imaginatively, not abstractly. The idea of impersonal immortality, in which everything uniquely and irreplaceably individual disappears, is repulsive to me» [12] (These problems are symbolically depicted in figure 1).



Figure 1: *It turns out it ends.*

An analysis of the history of the search for solutions to this dissonance, and indeed the problem of the rational understanding of death, shows that the solution gradually shifted towards replacing the question of what posthumous existence (life) is with the question of how to live correctly in this single world intended for life [17, p. 25]. In fact, Plato already understands «salvation» in this vein. Why is this so? Probably because man has no access to the afterlife (and all its detailed descriptions and stories cannot be verified), while one would like to live this only life correctly, interestingly, and fully, in harmony with oneself. The other side is that the understanding of the correctness of life differs in different countries, has changed significantly throughout history, and varies for different individuals. For comparison, let us consider the ancient understanding (Plato and Aristotle) with the modern one (P. Hadot and M. Foucault).

Plato understood the correct life, on the one hand, as correspondence to the picture of the world created by the Demiurge (two worlds - heaven and earth, the cycle of the soul's lives, the laws of this cycle; for example, if the soul does not make efforts to recall its heavenly life, it will have to "wander aimlessly on the earth and under the earth for nine thousand years" [13, p. 165]). On the other hand, the correct life, according to Plato, presupposed a conscious choice of one's fate based on reflection on the lived life and dialectics («The Republic» [14, pp. 417, 418-419] and «Letters» [15, pp. 475-504]).

Aristotle understands the correct life partly in Plato's sense, but more as an aspiration to live by the highest. The question, he asks, should children be taught what they will need in practical life, or what leads to higher knowledge? «No, it is not necessary», answers the Stagirite in the «Nicomachean Ethics», «to follow the exhortations 'Man should know human things' and 'Mortals, mortal things'; on the contrary, as far as possible, one must rise to immortality and do everything for the sake of a life corresponding to the highest in oneself; truly, if in volume this is a small part, then in power and value it far surpasses everything» [3, p. 283].

In the article "How Pierre Hadot, a Postmodern Man of an Era of Change and Uncertainty, Constituted the Meaning of His Life", the author shows that the strategy of life path for Hadot is set not by a final goal - where to go - but by a way of life. True, this way is quite complex: it includes philosophical life (attitude towards other philosophers, transformation of oneself and one's vision of people, unfolding philosophical discourse, spiritual exercises, etc.), work on implementing humanistic values (helping other people, striving for the good, overcoming one's own egoism, cultivating cosmic, «oceanic» consciousness that allows one to transcend one's everyday «self»), and the cultivation of wisdom. «Overall», explains Hadot, «I personally would present the fundamental philosophical choice, that is, the

effort towards wisdom, as the transcendence of the biased, partial, egocentric, egoistic 'I' in order to reach the level of a higher 'I' that sees all things in the perspective of universality and totality, is aware of itself as part of the cosmos, embraces the totality of things... It is a matter of putting oneself in the place of others and trying to redefine our action simultaneously in relation to humanity, not an abstract humanity, but concrete people, as well as in relation to the universe, but not by asserting oneself to the Cosmos, but by dissolving oneself again in it and in events... This effort of imagination, but also of understanding, is aimed mainly at replacing the human being within the immensity of the universe, to make him aware of what he is. This is above all an awareness of his weakness, since it will make him feel how human things, which seem to us of fundamental importance, turn out, if viewed in this heavenly perspective, to be ridiculous and laughable in their pettiness» [1, pp. 139, 212, 254; 18].

According to Foucault, the dignity of life consists in thinking correctly, overcoming social and historical conditioning, making a feasible contribution to the common life of people, and making oneself a kind of work of art. «The question», he wrote, «was to know how to direct one's own life in order to give it as beautiful a form as possible (in the eyes of others, of oneself, and also of future generations, for whom one could serve as an example). That is what I tried to reconstruct: the formation and development of a certain practice of the self, the goal of which is to constitute oneself as the creator of one's own life» [22, p. 315].

In existential psychology, death is understood as an inescapable fact of human existence. On the one hand, it is a source of basic anxiety, on the other, it is a condition for an authentic, conscious, and meaningful life. Irvin Yalom writes the following: "It is not easy to live each moment fully aware of death. It is like trying to look the sun in the face: you can only withstand it so much. Since we cannot live frozen in fear, we invent ways to soften the terror of death. We project ourselves into the future through our children; we become rich, famous, increasingly influential; we develop obsessive protective rituals; or we adopt an unshakable faith in an absolute savior... Confronting death does not necessarily lead to despair, depriving life of all meaning. On the contrary, it can be an awakening experience, opening the way to a more fulfilling life". The central thesis is this: while the physical reality of death destroys us, the idea of death itself saves us...ideas alone may not be enough to cope with the terror that surrounds death. But the synergy of ideas and human connections is a powerful aid in our confrontation with death...I firmly believe—as someone who will die myself in the near future, and as a psychiatrist who has spent decades working with death anxiety—that confronting death allows us not to open some unpleasant Pandora's box, but to return to life in a richer and more compassionate way" [24].

The author's conception of life partially encompasses all the key characteristics of understanding life and death listed here. We will briefly describe them within the framework of an autoethnographic approach. The author is conscious of her life, strives to structure it wisely and correctly, and is guided by the values of culture, love, and assistance. On the one hand, he recognizes the limitations of his capabilities and, consequently, weakness in some life issues (man is weak); on the other hand, if he disagrees with some of his actions or deeds, he tries to change his behavior so they do not repeat. The author not only acknowledges the finiteness of his life but also structures his life in such a way as to minimize the fear of death and the experiences associated with the finiteness of life. To this end, he tries to realize his plans and maintain health throughout his life, following two formulas. Health and plans should, if possible, be completely exhausted by the end of life. One should avoid experiences and the work of imagination that push a person towards the impossible (e.g. living significantly longer; envying others, not getting sick, etc.) or wrong actions. An important value setting for the author is work (naturally, within his competence as a philosopher and educator) aimed at saving the faltering social life.

Despite significant differences, in all the cases considered here, two similar points can be identified: a conscious attitude towards one's own life, its constitution, and the striving to liken one's life to an ideal or higher model (understood, of course, differently). At the same time, it is probably assumed that the problem of the finiteness of individual existence is thereby resolved.

The question of the finiteness of the existence of the life of humanity is discussed less frequently. As a rule, such finiteness is acknowledged, and a way out of such development and completion of events is not apparent. Here is one example, a reflection on the end

of the life of Earth's inhabitants in Alexander Bogdanov's 1912 research novel "Engineer Menni." The novel ends with a prediction of the end of human life on Earth.

"A huge, high hall, flooded with light, thousands of people. But are these people? How free are their poses, how calm and clear are their faces, what strength breathes through their bodies. And these are the doomed?"

What brought them here? What thought, what feeling united them in this common silence? A new person enters and ascends to the dais at the far end of the hall. Obviously, he is the one they were waiting for: everyone's gaze is directed at him. Is it Netti (son of Engineer Menni. - V.R.)? Yes, Netti, but different, like a deity, in a halo of superhuman beauty. Amidst solemnly profound silence, he speaks: "Brothers, on behalf of those who have taken upon themselves the resolution of the final task, I announce that we have fulfilled our duty.

You know that the fate of our world became fully clear many thousands of years ago. The weakened sun has long been unable to nourish the development of our life, our great common labor, with its rays. We maintained the solar flame as long as it was possible. We exploded and hurled onto the sun, one by one, all our planets, except for the one on which we now find ourselves. The energy of these collisions gave us an extra hundred thousand years. We spent most of them researching methods of migration to other solar worlds. We were completely unsuccessful in this...

We have undeniable evidence that intelligent beings also live in other star systems. We based our new plan on this...

The cold and emptiness of ethereal spaces, deadly for life, are powerless against dead matter. To it, one can entrust images and symbols that express the meaning and content of our history, our labor, the entire struggle and victories of our world. Thrown with sufficient force, it will passively and obediently carry our dear idea, our last will, across immeasurable distances...

From the most durable substance that nature could give us, we have prepared millions of giant projectiles: each is an exact copy of our testament. They are made of thin rolled plates covered with artistic images and simple signs that will easily be deciphered by any intelligent being. These projectiles are laid in precisely determined places on our planet, and for each, the direction and speed it will receive from the initial impulse have been calculated. The calculations are rigorous and verified hundreds of times: the goal will inevitably be achieved.

And the initial impulse, brothers, will occur in a few minutes. Inside our planet, we have gathered a huge mass of that unstable matter whose atoms, exploding, are destroyed in an instant and generate the most powerful of all elemental forces. In a few minutes, our planet will cease to exist, and its fragments will scatter into infinite space, carrying away our dead bodies and our living cause.

Let us therefore meet joyfully, brothers, this moment in which the greatness of death merges with the greatest act of creation, this moment that will complete our life in order to pass on its soul to our unknown brothers!"... And when, subsequently, the vision was engulfed by a hurricane of light and fire that flew in, the last thing that drowned in it was for Menni the same thought: "to unknown brothers!" [6].

Judging by this fragment of the novel, Bogdanov believes in the immortality of intelligent life. At the same time, he is calm about the death of an individual, and even of humanity, believing that they, as subjects (engineers), have the right to end their lives by suicide. Thereby, Bogdanov effectively agrees with the finiteness of existence of life on Earth.

In conclusion, a few words about the current situation. Regarding individual life and death, the main historical understandings and practices are currently being reproduced: archaic, religious, esoteric, rational. For example, Rudolf Steiner, whose followers exist in various countries, asserts that on the condition of a correct life in the ordinary world, the one striving for salvation can pass into the

spiritual world (esoteric - V.R.), where he prepares for a new earthly incarnation and assists from this spiritual world in the development of the ordinary world. "Proper spiritual training", writes Steiner, "points to certain qualities that everyone who wants to find the path to the higher world must acquire through exercises. This is above all the dominion of the soul over the course of its thoughts, over its will and feelings. <...> The creation of a new bodily composition, however, is not the only activity that the spiritual man must perform between death and new birth... When a person appears on Earth for a new existence, it usually never has the form it had during his last life. During his absence from Earth, very much has changed. In this change of the face of the Earth, hidden forces also act. They act from the same spiritual world in which man is after death. And he himself is compelled to participate in this transformation of the Earth" [23; 19, pp. 136-137].

Of course, the modern individual understanding of life and death is adapted to the times. Even the religious one, for example, from the point of view of the Christian Church, expects not just a continuation of earthly life in another world, but the transformation of all human nature (soul and body) into a new quality of being - into a "spiritual body", which will be in a state of eternal and real communion with God or in painful alienation from Him. This is not a metaphor, but a mystery that is revealed in the theological experience of the Church.

The situation with the life of humanity is different; here the situation is relatively new. Of course, there have already been periods in history of expecting the end of the world; however, only in our time are the risks and probability of the end of life on Earth so great. And here is why. First, people have created such military technology that, if a new world war with the use of atomic weapons breaks out, it could mutilate and even destroy life on Earth within minutes. Second, the rapid and ill-considered technological and social activity of man has become a source of global crises (ecological, socio-economic, military-political, etc.). Third, the elites responsible for making fateful decisions close their eyes to the need for a radical revision of the established way of life.

Behind all this stand impersonal natural social and psychological processes that block reasonable measures and decisions. It turns out that the human mind is weak and acts under the influence of more powerful factors (competition, egoistic values, "big abstract ideas"). Bogdanov attributed the end of life on Earth to the distant future, but at present, the understanding of the finiteness of existence of life has become urgent. There is a need for awareness of this and, most importantly, for practical action from everyone on whom it depends. And the salvation of life on Earth depends, to one degree or another, on each of us.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted by the author shows that the problem of the finiteness of human existence, while retaining its existential urgency, is acquiring a new significance in the 21st century. Historical models of understanding life and death - from archaic reduction to eternal life to Modern European rationalism - are currently proving problematic; they do not block the cognitive dissonance in culture. A shift from the metaphysics of death to the ethics of "correct life", characteristic of ancient and modern philosophers, is emphasized.

The author notes a paradox: while science and technology have reached unprecedented heights, the human mind proves powerless before its own creations - newest technologies, wars, ecological crisis, uncontrolled AI. In this context, the article not only offers philosophical reflection but also formulates the imperative of practical action. The final conclusion of the work sounds alarming, but not devoid of hope: the salvation of life on Earth depends not on abstract concepts, but on the conscious efforts of each person.

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