

Austen's Narrative Perspective and the Problem of Interpretation in *Emma* and *Persuasion*

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Abstract

In the novels *Emma* and *Persuasion*, Jane Austen uses different narrative perspectives as experiential didactic tools for her audience. Using both confined and fluid narrative perspectives, Austen simultaneously presents subjective and objective perspectives to her readers. These seemingly conflicting perspectives present multiple realities that challenge readers' assumptions about how to relate to certain characters, and how characters relate to one another. Austen does not make judgments for her audience or privilege any view of reality, however, and in fact seems to discourage the formation of absolute judgments, an act that her devout Anglican background might suggest she believes ought to belong only to God. Instead, the use of narrative perspective in *Emma* and *Persuasion* presents readers with a different experience. The narrative perspective allows readers to view others more generously, reassess their own process of judgment, and experience a more complex, conflicted world without straightforward answers—a fictional experience with further applications in reality.

Throughout her works, Jane Austen is particularly interested in both the problem of evaluating others and the use of narrative perspective to address that problem. Though Austen's oeuvre is popularly viewed as a refinement of the novel of manners, a genre that depicts a specific historical context, her novels also consider the problem of interpretation, a theme that resonates beyond the world of nineteenth century England that Austen's characters inhabit. Indeed, current interest in theory of mind, or the ability to interpret one's mental states and distinguish them from those of others, underscores the ongoing necessity of understanding one's relation to others. Improving theory of mind is thus a problem of particular interest, to which literary fiction has been cited as a possible solution (Kidd and Castano). Centuries before theory of mind hypotheses were popular, however, Austen herself was interested in how her fictional works and use of narrative perspective could provide readers a tool with which to engage in practiced empathy.

Austen experiments with the third-person close perspective to explore this complex problem of understanding others, a technique that also provides the reader an opportunity to reexamine his or her own habits of thought. In both *Emma* and *Persuasion*, the novels' protagonists must continuously reevaluate

others' actions and motives, as well as their own. These two novels directly engage with the problem of relating to others and are of particular note because their protagonists and narrative strategies inhabit opposite ends of Austen's authorial spectrum, even though *Persuasion* was written directly after *Emma*'s publication. The different narrative perspectives used in *Emma* and *Persuasion* allow for multiple readings of the text, a process by which may elucidate how the novels' protagonists, as well as Austen's audience, can understand and interpret others—a practice that allows the literary work to extend far past the printed page.

Context within Scholarship

In the late nineteenth century social world presented in Austen's novels, the ability to effectively speculate about and communicate with others was particularly vital to having successful relationships. To address this practice, Austen experimented with a narrative perspective of her own invention: free indirect discourse, a kind of third person close narration that forces the reader to see the narrator's and character's perspectives simultaneously. The similar technique of narrated perception is used to render a fictional character's experienced sensory perception without

explicitly reporting the act of perception (Pallarés-García 171). Austen's literary contemporaries were less concerned with the subtle interiority that she was attracted to, in particular popularity of the epistolary form. The epistolary form was widely used in order to portray different narrative perspectives, though the conscious, stylized use of the letter-writing format tended to skirt access to the narrator's interiority. The letter format in and of itself emphasizes its own construction, and thus the narrator's conscious construction of his or her own image. The limitations of popular nineteenth century literary strategies' ability to convey perspective and self-identity pushed Austen to experiment with how readers could relate to her characters through free indirect discourse.

Emma demonstrates how narrated perception can offer both subjective and objective perspectives. When Emma meets Jane for the first time, the audience learns Emma's opinion of Jane. The narrator says, "[Jane] was, besides, which was the worst of all, so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion. Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved" (Austen 175). Though the narrator seems to objectively present Jane as a reserved, formal person, the syntax also indicates Emma's subjective perspective. One indication of her subjective perspective is the past progressive verb form, exemplified in "there was no getting." This verb form reveals that an act of perception and the perceived reality occur simultaneously. Other indicators of subjectivity include modifiers such as "seemed," "disgustingly... suspiciously reserved" and "the worst of all," which imply a subjective perception that filters objective observations (Pallarés-García 171). In addition, the narrator indicates that Emma is the perceiver earlier in the scene, noting, "In short, [Emma] sat, during the first visit, looking at Jane Fairfax with two-fold complacency" (Austen 174). The close narrative distance presents multiple, seemingly conflicting, views of Jane: as an active antagonist who is "determined" to ignore her, and as the victim, someone who is subject to Emma's judgment and insecurity.

Many scholars have discussed the presence of this narrative voice and the use of free indirect discourse in Austen's novels. Most discuss how free indirect discourse simultaneously reveals different subjective and objective viewings of the same event, a reading that mirrors the protagonists' understanding that

initial impressions or assumptions may not align with the objective truth. These scholars, including Elena Pallarés-García, William Galperin, and James Thompson, often focus on free indirect discourse's depiction of the characters rather than its interaction with the reader; and if Austen's novels are seen to provide a didactic process for their readers, that process is not connected to the narrative voice specifically, but rather the lesson that arises from the novels' plot and themes. However, Austen was especially cognizant of her audience—when *Mansfield Park* was published to only a handful of reviews, she took it upon herself to copy down notes of her friends' and family's opinions of the novel, even though many of their reactions were negative (Byrne 286). Austen's concern over her novels' reception, both critically and by her close acquaintances, suggests that to discuss Austen's narrative approach without referencing its effect on her readers would be to ignore her own attention to her audience's experience.

Discussing the relationship between narrative perspective and the audience can also help resolve a debate between Austen scholars about the place of *Persuasion* within Austen's canon, and, in particular, its relationship to *Emma*, the novel that directly precedes it. Some scholars, including Tony Tanner, believe that *Persuasion* is a complete departure from Austen's earlier novels because it doesn't focus on moral education, and its heroine does not learn to be prudent rather than romantic. Other scholars, though fewer in number, think that *Persuasion* clearly continues the themes evident in Austen's previous novels. For example, Susan Morgan emphasizes that Anne, like Austen's other heroines, must navigate the problem of separation between the self and the world, as well as engage in some kind of active involvement over time, to help her reach a position of maturity and happiness (*The Nature of Character* 88).

The difference in both novels' narrative perspectives must also be reconciled in this discussion. *Emma* presents free indirect discourse that, for most of the novel, is confined to Emma's perspective, whereas *Persuasion* presents a narrative perspective that moves frequently between its protagonist Anne Elliot, the omniscient narrator, and its other characters. The differences between the two novels can be reconciled, however, if the narrative perspectives are viewed as subtle didactic tools acting as instructive modes for

the reader.

Emma: Narrative Perspective as Empathy in Action

In *Emma*, Austen seems to take great pains to present the titular character as an imperfect protagonist who, by all reasonable standards, readers should not like or approve of. Emma is self-centered, naïve, reckless, proud, and often condescending. For example, Emma's friend Harriet is in love with the landowner Mr. Martin but Emma does not approve of the match, even though Harriet and Mr. Martin are on similar social and emotional footing. The narrator says that Emma admits she “would have given a great deal, or endured a great deal, to have had the Martins in a higher rank of life. They were so deserving that a little higher should have been enough” (Austen 189). This statement is presented in third person, and though it initially seems to be an objective truth of Emma's thoughts, presented from the narrator's point of view, the statement is actually part of a narrative within Emma's mind. Austen sets up a series of conditionals—that she “would have given” and endured much for another family's benefit—that demonstrate Emma's mental exertion and need to convince herself of her good intentions. Within the context of the passage, however, Emma's self-interest becomes clear. The Martins' “deserving” higher social status is not her primary motivator for wanting them to rise in social status; rather, Emma wants Mr. Martin to be higher in social status so that Harriett will also be elevated if she marries him, and thus will be a more suitable social companion to Emma herself.

Though at first glance it seems Emma has no morally redeemable qualities, she does often show genuine regard for others, the discussion of which Austen seems to largely omit. Peter Graham says, “The sole competent adult living at Hartfield, [she has] a house and estate to run; and the practical intricacies of managing Mr. Woodhouse are suggested... Emma would be a more immediately sympathetic character were we actually to see more of her charitable efforts” (179-180). Though Graham tends to overestimate the selflessness of Emma's charity towards the poor, he does imply that Austen seems to actively work to obscure the moral qualities that might more readily endear Emma to readers. Austen purposefully presents readers with the most problematic aspects of Emma's character, largely omitting a thorough discussion of her moral triumphs

and emphasizing her dubious actions. Emma's suspect moral character is further emphasized by the fact that she is clearly not the novel's moral compass. Instead, the more mature, reserved Mr. Knightley serves as her ethical counterpoint and the source of clear, balanced judgment, ready to censure her selfish motives. By giving Mr. Knightley moral authority as the novel's pervading voice of reason, Austen consciously positions Emma for moral censure with little interest in depicting virtue as her most engaging quality. Instead, Austen relies on a different narrative strategy to endear Emma to readers.

The audience is not compelled to empathize with a complex character due to her actions, behavior, and moral attributes; rather, audiences empathize with Emma as the result of close narrative perspective. The old childhood saying, “You can't really understand another person's experience until you've walked a mile in their shoes” seems to be the crux of this narrative approach: by “walking” the length of an entire novel in Emma's shoes through close-narrated perception, audiences are convinced to empathize with her. For example, audiences may disapprove of Emma's harsh evaluation of Jane or her view of the Martins, seeing them as self-serving, condescending perspectives. The close narration, however, may also help audiences to identify with Emma and more readily accept her judgments. When Emma says, “There was no getting at [Jane's] real opinion,” close narrative perspective helps readers identify with Emma in what could be interpreted as a vulnerable moment. Emma perceives that Jane is rejecting her friendship. The reader's intimacy with Emma's mind, created through close narrative perspective, helps emphasize her perceived emotional affront. The intimacy helps readers sympathize with Emma in this scene instead of censuring Emma for unfairly judging Jane. Accustomed to seeing from Emma's perspective and learning her habits of mind, readers can more readily make allowances for her and empathize with her tendency towards pride and insecurity.

Audiences are not asked to rely solely on Emma's perspective, however, or to accept it as objective reality. The simultaneous presentation of real events and perception of those events through narrated perception not only draws readers close to Emma, but also draws attention to the act of perception, which encourages an objective distance. Therefore, the audience is able to

empathize with Emma's perspective but not necessarily approve of or agree with her. When Emma muses that she would have "endured a great deal" for the Martins to have a higher social rank, it's simplistic to believe that her statement is completely a statement of self-interest. Emma does care for Harriet's rank, to a certain extent, and the statement seems tinted by genuine feeling. In her following statement, the assertion that the Martins were "so deserving" and only "a little higher" elevation on the social ladder should have been enough seems to convey some guilt on Emma's part. It appears that she is a bit ashamed of her self-interest, and she modulates it by attempting to affirm that the Martins' social elevation would be slight, and not drastic enough to negatively implicate her. In understanding Emma's habits of mind, readers can empathize with her insecurity, and even pity her. However, it is difficult to allow this understanding to completely excuse Emma for censuring the Martins, and for her interference in Harriet Smith and Robert Martin's relationship. By considering multiple perspectives, the audience must wrestle with its judgment of Emma. Perception and narrative description overlap frequently, inspiring multiple ambiguous readings (Pallarés-García 175).

The primacy of narrative perspective as a didactic tool, not as a didactic message in and of itself, gives Austen's readers a novel method for moral perception. Austen does not tell the reader what the result of moral improvement should be, although she does provide hints. Susan Morgan believes distinguishing between objective and subjective truths is important, but she postulates, more importantly:

The primary activity is that provided for the reader by the artistic technique—the act of directly seeing into the consciousness of someone else. The process of understanding through the immediacy of experience supersedes judgment as a moral act.... Judgment emerges from the special experience of seeing as Emma sees, because that experience, that being someone else, is the moral of the story. (*In the Meantime* 50)

Though Morgan does not focus on the issue of judgment as a necessary tool of survival in the social sphere, she seems to understand that judgment is not just a means to an end, but also a means to a means. Close narrative perspective allows for multiple

perspectives that can help a reader evaluate Emma. More importantly, however, immediate experience provides a way to understand that Emma's perspective of Jane leads to multiple, often conflicting perspectives that are confirmed in reality – and thus that there are multiple realities. This experience elucidates the process by which we empathize with and relate to others on a real, day-to-day basis.

Austen ingratiate Emma with the novel's readers not through a presentation of Emma's moral qualities, but through narrated perception, which brings the audience within a close narrative distance of Emma. Regardless of whether Emma learns to think of others before herself by the novel's end, Austen's audience learns to evaluate characters apart from their actions and personal qualities. The audience empathizes with a complex, imperfect heroine not because her perspective is morally justified, but because the audience has, to a certain extent, internalized Emma's own thoughts. To be sure, Austen does not seem to make the case that judgments of Emma should not be formed. Characters such as Harriet Smith, who is unable to judge others, also do not know how to act in accordance with others' behavior, and they let other characters govern their future. For example, Harriet Smith cannot judge Mr. Elton's true feelings; and since she is easily, and wrongly, convinced of his romantic intent, she rejects Mr. Martin, a genuinely interested romantic match, and spends much of the novel unnecessarily miserable about her unfulfilled marriage prospects. Thus it seems that judgment is necessary for social survival, but because the grounds for judgment are so easily influenced by other factors (friends' opinions, insecurity, self-interest), Austen warns that judgment must not only involve seeing from another perspective, but also must never be considered absolute or permanent. Judgment must be considered part of an ongoing process of evaluating, understanding, and interacting with others.

Readers learn the possibility and validity of seeing from others' perspectives through the immediate experience of "being" Emma. As Emma must confront her assumptions and objective reality, readers must confront the conflict between their assumptions about Emma and their subjective view of her after spending an entire novel close to her perspective—and accept that both the assumptions and subjective perspective may be true. Though from an immediate perspective

it seems that Emma is selfish and condescending, she can simultaneously demonstrate insecurity, generosity, and wit. Emma's reality is not the demonstration of one character trait at the exclusion of others, but of multiple traits simultaneously. Prolonged, close narrative perspective in *Emma* allows readers to experience and accept multiple realities that help them empathize and relate to a character who is not immediately endearing, as well as examine their own habits of mind and tendencies to judge others.

Persuasion through Multiple Realities and Perspectives

At first, it may appear that the same argument regarding narrative perspective in *Emma* cannot apply to the perspective used in *Persuasion*, as there are so many differences between the two novels. In *Emma*, the reader primarily sees through Emma's isolated perspective. Austen may use this narrative strategy because seeing through other characters' perspectives risks shifting sympathy away from an abrasive character towards a more immediately endearing character, such as the beautiful, generous Jane Fairfax, whose mysterious, tragic background is alluring and immediately engages the reader's interest (Morgan, "Emma" 74). In the case of *Persuasion*, however, such a prolonged, intimate narrative distance is not necessary—Anne Elliot, the novel's protagonist, is not as outwardly abrasive as Emma. In fact, there is not much competition amongst the novels' characters to be the reader's favorite, as Anne is the most humble, rational character in the novel. The rest of her companions—from her self-centered, condescending sisters Mary and Elizabeth Elliot to her proud, flirtatious suitor Capt. Wentworth—appear inferior in comparison.

Instead, in the novel's opening chapters the points of view shift dramatically, and cover everyone from Sir Walter Elliot, Lady Russell, Elizabeth Elliot, Mary Elliot, Anne Elliot, Mr. Elliot, Mr. Shepherd, Mrs. Clay, Mr. Wentworth, and various townspeople. There is no reason to believe that the novel will center its attention on Anne Elliot until the end of chapter three, in which Anne speaks and provides a moment of startling, grounding clarity. Up until that point, rumors swirl around Kellynch Hall, the Elliots' country residence, and its potential new tenants, Admiral Croft and his wife. Amidst the various discussions, Anne speaks up, for the first time, and says, "You mean Mr. Wentworth,

I suppose" (Austen 63). For her first entry into the novel's present action, Anne provides a simple, understated clarity, the only utterance of truth amid the swirling speculation. Her statement immediately draws the reader's attention for its purposeful attempt not to draw attention to itself. It takes a while, however, to settle into Anne's point of view—even in this first introduction, Anne is viewed from a third person omniscient perspective. In the next few paragraphs, moreover, dialogue and perspective quickly move away from Anne. Mr. Shepherd speaks, followed by Mrs. Clay, and then perspective begins to shift. The narrator notes:

As Mr. Shepherd perceived that this connexion of the Crofts did them no service with Sir Walter, he mentioned it no more... It succeeded, however; and though Sir Walter must ever look with an evil eye on any one intending to inhabit that house... he [allowed] Mr. Shepherd to proceed in the treaty. (Austen 64)

The passage appears to be in the third person perspective, but in noting that "Mr. Shepherd perceived," it seems that narrative is simultaneously within Mr. Shepherd's mind as he lists the merits of the potential tenants. The narrative then shifts briefly to the narrator's perspective in the introductory clause "It succeeded, however," before moving to Sir Walter's point of view. The passage continues, "Sir Walter was not very wise... Sir Walter Elliot must ever have the precedence" (64). Here, judgment of Sir Walter comes from the narrator, and so the narrative is not only firmly in the narrator's omniscient perspective but also firmly in consideration of Sir Walter's personal desire for precedence. The reader thus inhabits two minds at once.

The narrative then moves into Elizabeth's perspective, and back to Mr. Shepherd, before quietly returning to Anne Elliot in the chapter's last sentence. In fact, the last sentence includes the phrase "and no sooner had such an end been reached, than Anne... left the room" before ending with Anne's own words, "a few months more, and *he*, perhaps, may be walking here" (Austen 64). The narrative moves in a circle, away from Anne and, just as the end has been reached, reveals that it has quietly returned to Anne once more. Though Anne provides the only source of trustworthy speculation and seems to be the only voice of reason, the narrative

doesn't immediately focus on her. It takes into account all of the characters before gradually settling into Anne's perspective. The narrative attention in this scene does not focus solely on Anne, and in fact very little time is given to her voice. In this sense, Anne is not the destination or answer to the narrative's speculative problems with the new tenant, but is a voice in a circle of voices. The reader is not forced to privilege Anne's perspective. Instead, the layered, interlocking perspectives put Anne in conversation with the other characters, who are given just as much authority in the scene through their dominating presence in it. All the observations are presented through a subjective perspective; and to make matters more complex, multiple perspectives may be simultaneously applied to the same object. By navigating through and around Anne, the reader learns to gradually establish Anne as a heroine and acknowledge that though Anne is the most rational character in the novel, she is certainly not the only one who ought to be considered, to the exclusion of other characters.

This widely shifting narrative perspective does not dominate *Persuasion*. The majority of *Persuasion* focuses on Anne's perspective, but the novel does not seem to be making the same case for a confined narrative perspective that *Emma* does. *Emma* begins and ends with its protagonist: its first sentence puts Emma at the very front of the narrative, declaring "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich... had lived nearly twenty-one years with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 55) and ends with "the perfect happiness of [Emma and Mr. Knightley's] union" (405). In contrast, though the majority of *Persuasion* is experienced from Anne's perspective, the novel begins with Anne's father and muddles through a variety of perspectives before introducing Anne at the end of the third chapter; and it ends on a global scale as Anne heads to sea, to take part in the wider world. The novel ends on a note of infinite possibility, potential danger, and moral virtue—not fixed on Anne herself. Since the narrative perspective begins and ends outside of its protagonist, the novel further confirms that its focus is the experience of multiple perspectives. If anything, the close narrative perspective in the middle of the novel seems to imply that the only way to see others' perspectives is to understand and navigate one's own point of view—one's self is the necessary vehicle for perceiving others. By its end, *Persuasion* returns to a place outside of its protagonist, but it portrays a world

in which Anne is appreciated and acknowledged. She is given due consideration; however, the narrative perspective never privileges the individual, but rather it puts the individual into the context of others.

In contrast to the confined narrative perspective used in *Emma*, the web of associated perspectives in *Persuasion* directly challenges the reader to perceive multiple voices, rather than the subjective and objective perspectives of just the narrator and just one protagonist. The strategy works to obscure the source of narration, and through the multiple, simultaneous perspectives, the reader can see that Anne Elliot's thoughts, though perhaps more rational and generous, do not necessarily negate the calculating thoughts of Mr. Shepherd. There is not a single way to view the Elliots' new tenant, or even to view each character; and thus through multiple narratives, Austen is able to show that perspective is not an eye, but a lens.

The Practice of Secular Judgment in Fiction and Reality

Though different narrative strategies are at work in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, both of Austen's novels explore new ways of relating to others. In *Emma*, the narrative perspective is generally confined to Emma's mind. This close proximity allows the reader to immediately experience what Emma experiences, and through this association, readers can empathize with a character who initially appears to have few morally redeeming qualities. The reader can move from a position of judging Emma for her behavior, actions, and moral qualities, and instead begin to empathize with her as the result of the experience of nearly becoming Emma, through close narrative perspective.

In *Persuasion*, the narrative perspective shifts more often and more quickly than in *Emma*, and the multiple perspectives serve to obscure the origin of judgment. Multiple perspectives are presented, so in one scene the perspectives of all characters involved are simultaneously presented. No perspective is privileged over another perspective, not even that of the protagonist. Self-interested views are provided alongside compassionate views, the proud alongside the shy, the calculating alongside the helpless. The rapidly shifting narrative perspective allows readers to perceive multiple realities simultaneously while obscuring the modes of judgment. The subjective

perspectives are superimposed on one another, and it becomes hard to tell where one person's judgment ends and another begins, making it difficult to single out one person for a source of censure. Characters judge one another based on an evaluation or misconception of the boundaries of these subjective judgments (Sir Walter cannot tell where his decision to rent Kellynch Hall begins and where Mr. Shepherd's suggestion begins, but still considers his opinion to preside on the matter.) Thus, if the reader attempts to judge one character, that judgment extends back to the other characters, and, as the cyclical movement of the narrative seems to point out, judgment moves through the multiple characters back to the reader him or herself. *Persuasion's* readers encounter an extremely fluid use of free indirect discourse that provides multiple perspectives simultaneously. Where in *Emma* this technique provides the means of empathizing with one character, in *Persuasion* it enables the consideration of multiple perspectives, and thus multiple realities. In both novels, the use of free indirect discourse encourages readers to consider disorienting perspectives that reveal a plurality of truths. Being receptive to these multiple realities means one must be open to being persuaded by them, which is itself the experience provided by multiple narrative perspectives (Morgan, "The Nature of Character" 104).

Although Austen's use of narrative perspective demonstrates the importance of considering multiple perspectives, of not immediately privileging one perspective over others on the mere charm of personality, and of forcing oneself to enter into a position where empathy is possible, thus making judgment very difficult; it does not seem that Austen wants her characters to avoid making judgments. Evaluating others' perspectives is important so that her characters can make informed judgments, and thus navigate their complicated social environment. However, since perspective can be fluid and what is "known" about others is not necessarily stable, Austen does not seem to be saying that personal, secular judgment is paramount. In the world of her novels, judgment is important but not absolute, perhaps because humans' judgment of one another rests on unstable evidence and because God's judgment takes precedence. The daughter of a High Church Tory rector, Austen was a conservative Anglican her brother Henry described as "thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God" (Byrne 200). If Austen

was a devout Anglican who feared giving offense to God, it is doubtful that she would prioritize individual judgment or believe that individuals could ever make final judgments of one another. Such judgment certainly would be God's responsibility, not humans'. This view of a divine authority emphasizes that though Austen may have viewed judgment to be necessary on a secular level, she would not have thought that one's assessments of other people could ever be final or set in stone—such assessments were beyond the capability or responsibility of mortals. Instead, her novels postulate that individual judgments are constantly shifting and thus in need of constant reassessment. Though accurate judgments require an attempt at selfless, multi-faceted consideration, human judgment is inevitably undertaken with some degree of self-interest and subjective perspectives. Austen might thus argue that individuals' judgment ought not to be assumed to carry the same authority as God's. No judgment can be considered final or objectively true.

Through her use of free indirect discourse, Austen did not intend merely to portray a fictional world or educate her audience by presenting it with moral answers. Austen was too aware of and concerned with the spectrum of opinions that her novels engendered to view her own work in such a reductive manner. Rather, she used free indirect discourse as a didactic tool to help her readers to view others in a more nuanced manner. Whether she used a confined or fluid narrative perspective, Austen provided subjective and objective perspectives simultaneously to allow her audience to engage in practiced empathy and multiple realities. She did not make judgments for her audience; rather, her use of narrative perspective allowed readers to view others more generously, reassess their own assumptions, and experience a nuanced, complex world without answers—a fictional experience with further applications in reality.

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