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1

Signal and Noise

Taking Away the Sting

This is a book about interpersonal understanding. It is about what goes well when we succeed at interpersonally understanding one another. But most of all it is about what happens when this breaks down. It is about how this breakdown can fuel conflict, lead us to stay in relationships with the wrong people, abandon relations that should have been right for us, and contribute to what gives conflicts their bite—to what makes them *personal*. It is about how misunderstanding can hurt. It is also about *when* and *why* we misunderstand one another in these ways.

I remember clearly one of my first close experiences with an uncomfortably personal conflict. It was sometime in the early to mid 1990s. My family were staying with my paternal grandmother in the small central Illinois town where she had lived since passing the family farm down to my father's older brother, my Uncle Ed, following my grandfather's death. Uncle Ed was a wise and gentle iconoclast with a big smile and denim overalls, who had served in the Peace Corps, continued to operate the family farm, and invented and built several useful kinds of tools, including a log splitter. He was a big thinker always pursuing new projects or passions. For example, he devised and introduced a system of vocational education into local prisons that allowed inmates to practice plumbing, electrical work, and carpentry on site by creating truck-mounted

working miniature homes for local fire departments to use in mobile fire safety demonstrations. Best of all, he kept peacocks, geese, and ducks on the farm, as well as all manner of other animals. We adored him and my father still looked up to him.

On this particular day, my cousins were up to some shenanigans that I don't precisely remember but statistically would probably have involved some combination or other of candy cigarettes, pillow forts, dangling things through the floor vent designed to heat the bedroom above the kitchen, and walloping me at Monopoly. Various family members were in the house—probably my Aunt Marilyn and her family, and perhaps others whose presence I don't remember sharply from that occasion. Certainly Uncle Ed was there. Likely several of us were sitting around the kitchen table playing solitaire across from one another. But at some point I gradually became aware that my father and uncle had begun raising their voices to one another. Sparks were flying.

As best as I can reconstruct, my uncle was articulating a conspiracy theory about the CIA and discussing his plans to protect the family farm from government intrusion. This was shocking not only for its content, but that my uncle of all people would be the one to go in for it. Meanwhile Dad was becoming increasingly exasperated while trying to explain why building a wall or some such around the property was irrational. As this became more and more heated, their mother—my grandmother—was projecting total denial, saying things like “Now, boys, would you get this pot down from the attic for me?” and “Should we have the beans with dinner, or should I save them for tomorrow?” The incongruity between seeing my father more upset than I ever recall seeing him before or since, not understanding or having followed exactly what he and my uncle were arguing about, and my grandmother's refusal to acknowledge that anything required addressing or being worked out made it one of my most indelible memories. (You can deduce where I get my conflict aversion from.)

The conflict that day was heated. Harsh words were said and voices were raised. But it didn't start off heated. It started off with

rising levels of frustration on the part of each brother that the other would not listen to reason. At some point the conflict became personal. When my uncle was telling my father that he was a fool not to worry about protecting his land from the CIA, my father took it personally. Debating about the wisest course of action to protect the family farm they had grown up on together was not just an academic matter about what was best for the property, or even an important practical question that needed to be resolved, about what kinds of improvements to make. It cast into doubt my uncle's trust of my father's judgment, and situated his accusations of foolishness in the context of their long and complicated relationship. My uncle felt, at the time, as if he were confiding urgent information that he was in a position to know because of his wider world experience, and his testimony about these risks was being disrespected and disregarded. My father's statements insulted Uncle Ed's long history as a Peace Corps volunteer, inventor, teacher, mentor, iconoclast, innovator in prison education, and collector of everything from peacocks to outhouses.

It turns out, as we learned only in the following years, that my uncle was at that time experiencing the effects of an undiagnosed degenerative neural disorder that would subject him to mood swings, paranoia, dementia, and eventual death before the age of sixty. The reason why my father was so frustratingly puzzled by my uncle's out-of-character obsession is that there *wasn't* a rational explanation. The only way to understand what unfolded that day requires knowing about what was going on in my uncle's brain—how the accumulated effects of a long series of small losses of blood was gradually killing off parts of his cerebral cortex.

In the heat of their argument on that day thirty years ago, things got very personal. But no one in the family takes it personally any more. Knowing as we do now that Uncle Ed was in the advancing stages of an aggressive and debilitating disease of the brain and mind, we have the tools to understand that it was never about us. What he was doing and saying during that argument did not mean what my father thought that they meant, for my uncle was not fully

himself. And if only we had understood that at the time, my father would have realized that his brother did not need to be talked out of his paranoia—and, indeed, that it would be a waste of time to try. What he needed instead was to be given time to cool down. If only we had understood then what we do now, their conflict would not have been so personal. Certainly learning that Uncle Ed was ill would not have sufficed to get my dad on board with the plan of building a wall around the farm, nor my uncle on the side of letting it go. But the conflict would have lost its sting and its power to lead to even greater loss of trust. It would have ceased to be personal.

This book is, at a first pass, about how thoughts and actions get to be personal between people. It is about how diagnosing someone, as we can now do to my uncle on that day thirty years ago, can make things less personal. Most of all, it is about how this can go wrong and make things personal all over again. And it is about why philosophy can help us to understand the how, the when, and the why.

Signal and Noise

My uncle's case vividly illustrates something that we all, at some level, know to be true: Relating to someone else as a person requires making a distinction between signal and noise. Every person says, does, and thinks things that are interesting and worth responding to. Our interpersonal relationships are structured around how we do so. But at bottom, we are also—every one of us—made out of things. As a result, sometimes some aspects of what we say, do, or think do not reveal us as persons, but instead are the noise resulting from our imperfect embodiment, which gets in the way of other people's seeing us and responding to us for who we are.

Suppose that after you finish reading this book you and I sit down over coffee to discuss it. You ask me a question about the content and I respond by snapping back at you, "What?!" in a harsh tone of voice. You would almost certainly be surprised. And so you would reach for some interpretation of what has just happened. One possibility—a highly eligible possibility, at least at first

glance—is that I’m a rude asshole. Being a rude asshole is the kind of thing that would lead someone to snap rudely at a polite question over coffee. By contrast, a different interpretation might be that the tone or content of your question revealed that you deeply misunderstood some important and obvious concept from the book, and that I’m frustrated with or disappointed in you. Using the former interpretation, it makes sense for you to feel insulted, but using the latter one might instead cause you to feel embarrassed. Of course, these two interpretations are not incompatible! Maybe you have made an embarrassing mistake *and* only an asshole would be rude enough to respond to an innocent mistake in the way that I have. In that case it might make sense for you to feel *both* insulted and embarrassed. In general, how it makes sense for you to respond to me depends on what my snap reveals about *me*.

But here is a very different interpretation. Maybe I am just “hangry”: I missed lunch and the café was out of croissants. Yes, I am crabby, but that has nothing to do with my character and nothing to do with you. This interpretation requires a very different kind of response. Rather than being insulted by me or embarrassed by what you take me to be responding to, the appropriate response is to hand me a Snickers bar and continue with your line of questioning. This final interpretation is importantly different from all of the others. It draws the line between signal and noise in a different way. The first two interpretations treat my snap as signal: as telling you something about me and our relationship. Treating it as signal doesn’t, of course, settle what this signal means—it could be bad news about you, or it could be bad news about me. But what they have in common is that they treat it as something that merits *some* kind of response. The “hangry” interpretation, by contrast, treats my snap as beneath response. It is something to be overlooked if you want to see me and to understand our relationship.

“Signal” and “noise” are suggestive words for what I am getting at, but they aren’t quite precise enough to pin it down. They are helpful because the first few interpretations of my snap tell you something important about what I really think about you—and

information is a kind of “signal.” The hangry interpretation does not provide this information. So, because it gets in the way of using my behavior to learn my opinion of you, it counts as a kind of “noise” in the channel of information about what I really think—like static or microphone feedback on a jazz recording.

But these words aren’t sufficiently precise, because what counts as signal and what counts as noise depends on what we are interested in. Take, for example, the case of the feedback. If you want to appreciate John Coltrane’s talents, the electronic squeal is what gets in the way of the music. But if you are listening to old Coltrane recordings in order to try to work out where they were made or what kind of sound equipment was used, the mic feedback might be exactly what you need to pay attention to. Likewise, a detective might peruse video of me snapping at you, looking for evidence of whether I have had breakfast. What is noise when you are trying to listen to Coltrane or engage with me is signal when you have one of these other interests.

Philosophers have spent considerable time thinking about the particular kind of signal/noise distinction that is important in the hangry snap case. Following my former colleague Gary Watson, they have adopted a name for it.¹ They say that according to the “asshole” and “embarrassing” interpretations I am *attributively responsible* for my snap, while on the “hangry” interpretation I *lack* attributive responsibility for the snap. For short, on the former two interpretations, but not the third, my snap is *attributable to me*. When an action is attributable to me, it in some sense *reflects on me*, whereas when an action is not attributable to me, what it reflects instead is something about my circumstances.

When philosophers use the word “attributable” as short for “attributively responsible,” they are not just using it with its ordinary meaning. Nor, despite similarities, are they using it in the same way as it is sometimes used in psychology. Its ordinary meaning is close enough to what they have in mind, but a little bit too loosey-goosey, so they try to pin down what they mean by it a little bit more carefully.²

There are three general ways in which we can latch on to the philosophical concept of attributability in order to make sure that we are all talking about the same thing—three hooks, if you will, that we can use whenever we are thinking about it. The first hook, and a favorite tool in philosophy, is to use examples. That is what I have been doing, using the examples of Uncle Ed and the hangry snap. But one of the most famous examples that has been used to illustrate the distinction between attributive responsibility and its lack involves the philosopher Harry Frankfurt. I know Frankfurt best as the gruff, bearded older man who grunted “Whaddaya want?” at me the first and only time that I walked into his office. You may have seen him discussing bullshit with Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*. But long before either of these, he told the contrasting stories of what he called the “willing addict” and the “unwilling addict.”³

On Frankfurt’s rendition, the willing addict and the unwilling addict both have it really bad. Each is so addicted to their drug that it is essentially inevitable that by the end of the day they will end up taking it. But whereas the willing addict wakes up looking forward to their next hit and seeking it out, the unwilling addict wakes up hoping today will be their first day of sobriety. They start the day by throwing away their needles and deleting their dealer’s contact info from their phone, and then log into an online support group for recovering addicts. Only when they take a coffee break and accidentally run into one of their old drug buddies do they return home to dig through the trash to reclaim the needles, plug the dealer’s number back into the phone, and head out to meet them at the designated handoff point.

The willing and unwilling addict are artificial examples that are supposed to illustrate the philosophical distinction, as we now call it, between having and lacking attributive responsibility for your actions. When we reflect on the cases, Frankfurt thinks that we will agree with him that even though both the willing and unwilling addicts’ actions are inevitable, the willing addict’s action belongs to *them*, while the unwilling addict’s action belongs only to

that person's circumstances. It reflects *them*, not just their situation. And although Frankfurt's examples are artificial and contrived, we can put them together with my hangry snap example and start to put together a list of illustrative examples that show us some of the contours of attributability.

Watson offered a second way of thinking about the concept of attributability that goes beyond examples. He said that attributable actions are those that *express ourselves*. When an action is attributable to you, it reflects *who you really are* or, as philosopher Susan Wolf has put it, your *true self*.⁴ On this way of thinking, if I snap merely because I am hangry, my hanger is preventing me from being my true self. It is getting in the way of my being who I am. That is why you have to overlook it, in order to see me for who I am and our relationship for what it is. Similarly, extending this metaphor, the unwilling addict is *overcome* by their addiction, and it therefore gets in the way of their being who they are. The willing addict, meanwhile, is not overcome by their addiction and so their choices to take the drug therefore do reflect who they really are. So deciding whether the snap is attributable to me is a matter of working out whether it is signal or noise in the channel of information about who I really am.

Talk about who you “really” or “truly” are makes many philosophers nervous. Maybe, as the Buddhists claim, you are nothing at all, because there is no such thing as a self. (It's the solemn duty of philosophy professors to worry about such things.) Or maybe, strictly speaking, the actions of the unwilling addict are just as much truly theirs as are the actions of the willing addict—after all, they are certainly no one else's actions, so, speaking literally, they are as really and truly theirs as they are anybody's.

Fortunately, we can think of talk about actions “expressing your true self” as simply a metaphor. By the end of this chapter, I'll explain why it is particularly apt. My own view, which we'll get to eventually in chapter 12, is that it is a metaphor that contains an important grain of the truth. But the important thing for now, and all that we need, is that attributable actions are the kinds of actions to which

many people find it natural to apply this particular metaphor. And that gives us our second hook onto the concept of attributability. But it is the third hook that will be the most important.

Participant Relations

On the morning of May 9, 1962, twenty-seven-year-old entrepreneur Brian Epstein headed to the recording studio of EMI's Parlophone record label at Abbey Road for a meeting where he would be informed by George Martin that his new clients, a young group of guitarists out of Liverpool, would be receiving their first recording contract. Meanwhile, far on the other side of the Atlantic, the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service was issuing a visa to Marina Prusakova Oswald so that she could accompany her new American husband home. And just two and a half miles down the road from Parlophone, unassuming but by then already highly accomplished forty-two-year-old philosopher Peter Strawson was delivering the annual Philosophical Lecture to the British Academy on the topic of "Freedom and Resentment."⁵

Strawson's lecture, which he had written out by hand in one sitting and read out loud verbatim, was as unheralded at the time as the Beatles' signing and Lee Harvey Oswald's return to the United States from the Soviet Union. There appear to be no contemporaneous accounts of the event, and I've been able to find no one who has heard any anecdotes about its delivery or reception. Indeed, it was not even a subject on which Strawson was particularly expert, being one of his only contributions to moral philosophy in what was otherwise a long and distinguished career devoted to quite different research topics, for which he was eventually knighted for service to philosophy. But in retrospect, we know it to be a landmark philosophical event, sometimes mentioned as one of the most important papers of the century. Certainly it has turned out to be among the most influential.

The argument that Strawson advanced in his lecture was complex and sophisticated. And it was so innovative that different

parts of that argument have each spawned large literatures of their own. But at the heart of the lecture is a simple observation: that we treat people differently than we treat things. This observation seems obvious, but Strawson wanted to use it to do important work, and so he refined it by providing evidence. The evidence that he offered is that there are a range of relations—which for him are always attitudes—that we only have toward people, or at least that we only have toward something insofar as we are treating it as or regarding it as a person. Take, for example, the attitude of resentment mentioned in Strawson’s title. You can resent a person, but you can’t resent a rock, and you can’t resent a hurricane. Or take gratitude. You can be grateful *for* all kinds of things. But while you can be grateful *to* a person, you can’t be grateful *to* a mountain, or to a doorway. Strawson called resentment and gratitude *participant attitudes*, because they are part and parcel of participating in interpersonal relationships with one another.

Not all attitudes are participant attitudes. You can be annoyed by people, but you can also be annoyed by the weather. Being annoyed by something is not a participant attitude, because the feeling can apply to anything, as can grieving loss, being obsessed with, and liking. You can grieve the loss of your brother, but you can also grieve the loss of your free time. You can be obsessed with Taylor Swift, but you can also be obsessed with origami. You can like your new colleagues, but you can also like opera.

Because we mark the distinction between persons and other sorts of thing in grammar, there is a simple rough test for participant attitudes. We can ask “of what do you grieve the loss?” or “what are you obsessed with?” or “what do you like?” But we ask “to *whom* are you grateful?” or “*who* do you resent?” not “to what are you grateful?” or “what do you resent?” There is something distinctive about participant attitudes that makes sense only to have them toward *someone* and not just *something*. Other attitudes that we have are toward things. So you can have them toward people because people are just a special kind of thing. But

participant attitudes only make sense to have toward something you are regarding as a person—as a *who*, rather than a *what*.

Strawson was a little bit more careful than I have just been. He didn't say that you can only have participant attitudes toward people, but rather that you can only have participant attitudes toward things that you are *treating* as people. This is more careful, because it allows that someone could be grateful to a thunderstorm even though thunderstorms are not people—so long as, while doing so, they are anthropomorphizing the thunderstorm sufficiently in order to regard it as a person. Following Strawson, this attitude has come to be known in philosophy as “taking the participant stance.” By contrast, the corresponding phrase for treating something as a mere thing—as a *what* rather than a *who*—is “taking the objective stance.” I like to imagine Strawson swiveling his hips to the left while delivering his lecture to a room of stodgy British academics in 1962 to demonstrate taking the “participant stance,” and then swiveling them back to the right to demonstrate taking the “objective stance,” but unfortunately Strawson didn't actually use the word “stance” in his original lecture.⁶

So participant attitudes are only possible “within the participant stance.” That is just a jargony way of saying that you can't resent a rock unless you are anthropomorphizing it. But while Strawson focused on attitudes, we can generalize his observations. It turns out that there is actually a wide variety of relations that we can't have to something except insofar as we are regarding or treating that thing as a person—that is, except within the participant stance. Take complaining, for example. Complaining is not an attitude—it is something that you do out loud, not just a matter of what is going on in your thoughts. But while you can complain *about* anything from your colleagues to your acne, you can only complain *to* someone. Complaining to is a participant *relation*. It is a relation between two things—the complainer and (if you will) the complaine*e*. But it is a relationship that requires the complainer to view or treat the complaine*e* as a person.

Once we recognize the concept of participant relations, we can find them all over the place. Consider, for example, the familiar experience of having a discussion with a colleague in which you are trying to convince them (it is, of course, usually a him) of some point, and then suddenly he repeats your argument back to you as if he has just thought of it himself. If you have ever had this experience, and to the best of my anecdotal evidence every woman who has ever contributed to a meeting has, then you know that it is demeaning. You've succeeded in changing someone's mind, but you haven't succeeded in *persuading* him. Anything can change your mind or give you an idea: Famously, Isaac Newton got an idea from a falling apple, and Archimedes in his bath. But falling apples can't persuade you, and neither can baths—only people can. So persuading, like complaining to, resenting, and being grateful to, is a participant relation.

When your colleague recites your point back to you as if he has just thought of it, he is revealing that although he changed his mind in response to you, he was not persuaded by you. So he is treating you—at least in this respect—as if you are no different from a falling apple. You are right to feel demeaned by it. But this example also reveals something complex about participant responses to which I think Strawson paid insufficient attention. Your colleague can demean you in this way without treating you wholly as a thing. He might, for example, be grateful to you for saying the thing that led him to think of this point, even at the same time as he refuses to credit you with having made the point yourself. (This may, in fact, be exactly how it goes down in the most insulting cases.) So it is not the fact that your colleague fails to see you as a person *at all* that prevents him from being persuaded by you.

This brings us back to the concept of attributive responsibility, and our third hook on how to think about it. Attributive responsibility, I want to suggest, is the entry point for participant responses.⁷ You can't have participant relations to something that you aren't treating as a person. To have any participant relations toward someone, you have to take a participant stance toward

them: to regard them as a *someone*. But regarding someone as a *someone* doesn't make everything about them eligible for participant responses. Instead, when you regard someone as a *someone*, part of what you are doing is distinguishing signal from noise. You are separating out the aspects of what they do or say or think that reflect them *as a person*, and distinguishing them from those that merely reflect them as a thing. In order to be persuaded by someone, you have to interpret them as being attributively responsible for the point that they made. We don't get angry at, and are not persuaded by, features that merely reflect someone's embodiment as a thing. We get angry at, or are persuaded by, what they do *as a person*.

The problem with your colleague is that he heard you make a point, and he found the point convincing. But he thought that he was the one who *found* the point in what you said, as if it were partly luck that you managed to make it. He sees the point, and knows that it was there in what you said, but he doesn't think that it reflects you. In his mind, it is more like the apple or the bathtub. That is why he isn't persuaded by you. Although he is treating you as a person, he is treating your point like the hangry snap.

Bringing It Together

We've now encountered three "hooks" on the philosophical concept of attributability: through examples, through metaphor, and finally through its connection to participant responses. But these hooks are not unrelated—they hang together in an instructive way. Indeed, our third hook provides a kind of validation of our second. In our second hook, we said that attributable actions *reflect on you* or *express your true self*. These are just metaphors. It's not as if somebody else got into a fight with my dad over how to protect the family farm—it was my uncle. But what we learned from Strawson helps us to see why these metaphors are particularly apt.

Participant responses are responses that we can only have to people, not to other kinds of thing. Put this way, we can say that

attributability works as the “in” for participant responses because attributing something to someone involves seeing it as reflecting them *as a person*, not just *as a thing*. An alternative way that we described participant responses is as ways that we can relate to *whos*, but not *whats*. In these terms, attributability works as the “in” for participant responses precisely because it connects what you do to *who* you are, and not merely to *what* you are.

Our detour through these three hooks does much more for us than allow us to pat ourselves on the back for being more precise. It also puts us in a position to better understand what happened in the shift that took the sting out of my dad’s conflict with my Uncle Ed. Throughout the argument and following, my dad and all of us took the participant stance to Uncle Ed. We treated him and were interested in him as a person. But, as we saw, interpreting someone as a person requires applying the signal/noise distinction, separating what they are attributively responsible for from what they are not.

At the time of the fight, all of us thought that the things my uncle was saying and doing were more like the willing addict’s actions than the unwilling addict’s, more like the angry interpretation of the snap than the hangry interpretation. We thought that it revealed something about him: that he was *truly* worried about what the CIA would do to his farm and more concerned about this than about getting along with my dad or listening to his judgment. And we thought that this gave us the best interpersonal understanding of Uncle Ed. This interpretation therefore opened us up to the space of participant responses to what he was saying—to being offended, or angry, or hurt, or betrayed—as well as to the things that we continued to try to do: to persuade him, or to judge him for paranoia or irrationality.

Knowing what we know now does not take us out of the participant stance to Uncle Ed. We still understand that he was a person, and we still have participant responses to some of the things that he said and did that day. Those of us who were there can still be grateful, for example, for the gifts he brought us, or for the work

he did around the house to help my grandmother. But in retrospect we see his conspiracy thinking and his emotional investment in it as products of his brain condition. As a result, we see them as more like the unwilling addict's actions, more like the hangry snap than the angry snap. We no longer think that they reflect or express anything about who he truly was, but only what was happening to him. Where before we saw him active as a protagonist, we now see what his predicament was doing to him. And this closes off the participant responses. We are no longer offended or feel angry, hurt, or betrayed by him. We see now that it was a mistake to try to persuade him or to judge him for his paranoia.

Uncle Ed's example illustrates the familiar point that diagnosis can help us to take the heat out of conflicts—that it can make them less personal. And the concept of attributive responsibility helps us to understand both why and how it does so. The same explanation applies to other cases that we have discussed. When I snap at you, you may start off angry at me. But if you come to the conclusion that what is going on is merely that I am hangry, you will cease to be angry at me for the snap. You might, of course, also know that I was the one who refused to eat breakfast or lunch, because I let you know that I have begun experimenting with intermittent fasting. And you might know that I should have known better, because we have both seen me get hangry before when skipping a meal. So you might still be angry at me. But in that case you would be angry at me for making myself hangry, not for its predictable results. And you might be frustrated with your friend the willing addict when they keep taking the drug despite your best efforts to support them and help them recover. But if you come to realize that they are not the willing addict after all, but the unwilling one, then their rejection of your efforts ceases to feel personal.⁸

In every one of these cases it is a *good* thing that we are able to draw the kind of signal/noise distinction that philosophers call the distinction between attributive responsibility and its absence. If we weren't able to draw this distinction, then our relationship with

Uncle Ed would fray and sour by a sense of resentment and betrayal when he continued to place a higher priority on his farm's security against the CIA than on our other family values. Our conversation about this book would sour very quickly when I snapped at you, or we would end up at cross-purposes, with you trying to figure out what mistake you made when, in truth, you hadn't.

Successful human relationships are possible precisely because we are able to apply the signal/noise distinction to one another. All of us are embodied and situated in complex ways. Our moods and actions are subject to hormones, diet, sleep, and whether there is a national shortage of ADHD medication. We are affected by mental illness, by what happened to us earlier in the day, and by past trauma. It is inevitable, given the many things that influence us, that not everything we do or say reflects on us personally or on this particular relationship. Distinguishing signal from noise allows us to overlook things in order to see one another more clearly. We get *better* interpersonal understanding by knowing what to overlook.

But this book is not about what is good. It is about all of the deliciously complex ways that this valuable and largely good practice can misfire, when we make *mistakes* in identifying what is signal and what is noise. It is about how philosophy can help us to anticipate when the signal/noise distinction can get us into trouble, giving us a mistaken interpersonal understanding of one another. And it is about how these kinds of misfires can create conflicts where there need be none, trap us in relationships we would do better to have avoided, accelerate existing conflicts, and make conflicts more personal. It is a story about what happens when a good process goes bad—or even gets ugly.

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