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Theory of Positive Disintegration as a Model of Personality Development For Exceptional Individuals

By Elizabeth Mika

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Gifted Minds in Search of a Theory

For some time now, experts in the field of giftedness have been searching for and creating theoretical models of development, which could be applied to the gifted population.

Unfortunately, such models often suffer from artificially imposed exclusivity.

As Ellen Winner writes,

"Psychology should have theories that account for the development of the atypical as well as the typical. We should not have entirely separate theories to explain learning and development in ordinary, retarded, autistic, learning-disabled and gifted children. Too often we have researchers devoted to one of these populations, with the result that we have separate explanatory accounts of each population.

"Ultimately, psychological theory must account for all of the various ways in which the mind and brain develop. We need universal theories of development, but these theories must be able to incorporate special populations, whether these are special because of pathology, giftedness, or both." (Winner, 1996, p. 313)

Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD) shows a great promise as such a universal theory of development proposed above (Dabrowski, 1970).

TPD is the first theory in psychology that postulates levels of personality development and methods of measuring them; it also describes and explains mechanisms of emotional development.

The theory, formulated almost a half a century ago, focuses on positive aspects of mental health and the essential role of positive values in guiding human development, and as such it can be considered a precursor of positive psychology.

What is unique about the TPD approach, however, is that, through combining both biological and humanistic perspectives, it articulates a positive view of many forms of so-called psychopathology and human suffering in general – a perspective that is conspicuously missing from the positive psychology's exclusive focus on the good, virtuous and happy (Chang & Sanna, 2003).

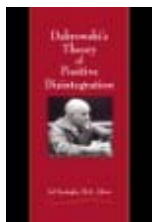
While the 1990's were designated as the "Decade of the Brain," it appears that the first decade of the 21st century has been dominated by the focus on emotions and their influences in shaping our cognition, development and our lives in general (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004).

It is worth noting that Dabrowski's insights on the essential role of emotions in human development have preceded the current discoveries by many decades and are, in fact, still waiting to be fully recognized and embraced by today's researchers and theorists.

Even though gifted and talented are not its exclusive focus, Theory of Positive Disintegration utilizes research findings and clinical insights uniquely applicable to developmental needs of gifted and talented individuals.

Its broad scope allows a theoretical integration of scholarship in the areas of personality development, particularly its emotional, moral and spiritual aspects; and various forms of exceptionality.

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Although his Theory of Positive Disintegration describes adult development, Dabrowski's interests, training and professional activities centered on children for a large part of his life.

Seeing development as a process based on positive disintegration grew out of clinical studies of creative and talented children, youth and adults, as well as children and adults who were developmentally delayed and psychopathic (Dabrowski, 1984).

Major Tenets of TPD

Positive Disintegration and Levels of Development

Dabrowski believed that the most important aspect of human development is the emotional one, since only in the area of emotional growth, transformation of behavior and character is possible.

He saw development as a progression from the level of primary integration characterized by rigid, automatic and instinctual egocentrism to conscious altruism based on empathy, compassion and self-awareness, expressed the fullest at the highest level of development, the level of secondary integration.

This growth takes place through the process of positive disintegration, which is the loosening and partial, or sometimes global, dismantling of the initial character structure during the course of one's life and replacing it by consciously created personality – the goal of life-long development.

Positive disintegration results from and is expressive of multilevel inner conflicts – conflicts between one's ideals and values (what ought to be) and the existing reality of one's internal and external life (what is), which falls short of those ideals and values.

Those who most readily experience multilevel conflicts are individuals possessing high developmental potential – high and broad, multisided intelligence, special talents and abilities, various global forms of overexcitability and the need and desire for inner transformation – for transcending one's psychological type and constraints of psychobiological maturation process.

The need and desire for inner transformation is an expression of what Dabrowski called the third factor – the drive behind autonomous, self-conscious, self-chosen and self-determined efforts at guiding one's development.

Most people experience symptoms of disintegration that are related to stages of biological development -- such as adolescence, old age, or menopause -- or difficult life events. These symptoms are temporary and disappear without causing major changes in a person's functioning.

Conflicts, traumas and frustrations, although often cause psychological imbalance in average individuals, do not lead to efforts at self-transformation and further development. However, in individuals with high developmental potential, difficult experiences awaken and/or intensify the need for psychological growth.

As Dabrowski shows – and supports with data obtained from biographies of eminent individuals and case studies of his patients -- difficult life experiences can disintegrate one's psychological unity by introducing inner conflicts, and a subsequent need and ability for reflection, introspection and hierarchization of one's values, feelings, thoughts and actions.

Hierarchization is an expression of multilevelness – the capacity to perceive and experience different developmental levels within us and in our surroundings.

The role of conflict and frustration in the process of development through positive disintegration cannot be overestimated. Dabrowski writes that "positive inner psychic transformation occurs where children and youth do not have all the things necessary to fulfill all their basic needs and where conditions do not lead to the feeling of complete security.

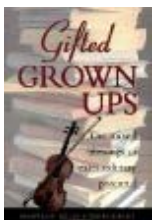


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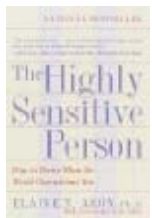


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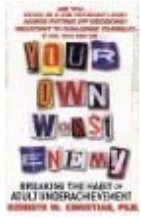


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The transformation is more likely to occur where the individuals have only partial satisfaction of their basic needs and where stimuli exist which provoke at least partial dissatisfaction, hierarchization and postulation of an ideal." (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 35).

In some individuals with high developmental potential, we see a tendency to consciously seek out frustrations in order to facilitate their development. This tendency can be observed early on in development of some children.

Consider Cathy, an exceptionally intellectually gifted 4-year-old, with strong emotional and imaginal overexcitability who, in her parents' description, "likes to scare herself on purpose, imagining that her toys come alive, that bubbles in the paint on the wall will turn into a forest, etc. But she does not like to be comforted then – she wants to work on her fears by herself."

As both the impetus and vehicle for personality growth, inner conflicts with their attendant negative emotions are expressions of positive mental health and not pathological symptoms.

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And because Dabrowski equated development through positive disintegration with mental health, this allowed him to reframe various psychological states commonly considered pathological, such as anxiety, neurosis and depression, as not only largely positive, but, in fact, necessary for personality growth.

The process of positive disintegration, of which psychological difficulties such as emotional suffering of inner conflicts, neuroses and psychoneuroses are most evident signs, is initiated and guided by developmental dynamisms – instinctual-emotional-cognitive forces – present in people endowed with high developmental potential.

Dynamisms, which are intrapsychic factors, are the most potent forces fueling and shaping emotional development. Work of different dynamisms can be observed on each level of development, with the exception of level 1, primary integration, characterized by absence of any developmental dynamisms.

The analysis of dynamisms and their strength allows us to understand whether the process of disintegration has a positive or negative direction.

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Personality development through positive disintegration, in Dabrowski's views, is not related to human biological maturation process and does not follow a time schedule, although it progresses along an invariable sequence through a hierarchy of five levels characterized by the predominance of either integration or disintegration on each level.

Level 1: primary integration. On this level we observe work of intelligence subsumed under primitive instincts (sex, aggression, power); rigid, stereotypical, impulsive actions and, in general, behavior controlled by primitive drives and external forces.

Individuals on this level of development experience no inner conflicts, but plenty of external ones.

The great majority of population lives on and rarely grows beyond the level of primary integration. The most primitively integrated character structures are observed in psychopaths and psychopath-like individuals, who suffer from "emotional retardation," characterized by inability to experience empathy and guilt.

On the level of primary integration, we can observe two forms of adjustment of an individual to society: negative adjustment – non-creative adaptation, characterized by conformity to social conventions, lack of reflection and criticism in approach to reality, adjustment to "what is;" and negative maladjustment, which is disregard for social norms and conventions stemming from extreme egocentrism and ruthless realization of one's lower level goals (psychopaths, criminals).

Level 2: unilevel disintegration. This is the first level where work of disintegrative processes can be observed. Here we see a loosening (disintegration) of the previously well integrated primary character structure as a result of usually external circumstances.

The term "unilevel" denotes lack of hierarchization – i.e. lack of distinction between "what is" and "what ought to be" in one's internal and external life.

Most characteristic manifestations of unilevel disintegration are ambivalencies and ambitemencies, doubts, hesitations, mood swings, various forms of emotional and psychosomatic disharmony. Dabrowski notes that if inner conflicts on this level are present at all, they are unilevel – that is, they involve two (or more) opposing options of the same value.

Such conflicts may be severe and may lead to mental disturbances that are very serious and have mostly unconscious character. Because individuals experiencing unilevel conflicts, lacking the ability for inner transformation, do not see a possibility of their positive resolution and further personal growth, the crises engendered by these conflicts often lead to re-integration on level 1, or to severe mental illness and/or suicide.

Level 3: spontaneous multilevel disintegration. On this level, we see the emergence of multilevelness -- a growing sense of "what ought to be" and growing maladjustment to "what is" (positive maladjustment).

Acquiring a multilevel perspective on our inner and external world can be compared to a Copernican revolution in our perception and awareness. Once we learn to distinguish both lower and higher levels in our feelings, thoughts and behaviors; once we understand that we are capable of both evil and good, and that the choice between them is uniquely and exclusively ours; we reach "a point of no return" and we are "doomed to develop," to use Dabrowski's words.

The awareness of the lower and the higher leads to inner conflicts and the resultant anxiety, shame, guilt, feelings of inferiority and unhappiness – in other words, positive disintegration. With the emergence of multilevelness, we gain intimate awareness of existence of universal human values which become a guiding force in our development, embedded in a powerful developmental dynamism called the personality ideal.

Actions of individuals experiencing spontaneous multilevel disintegration begin to reflect an emerging autonomous hierarchy of values and goals. Typical for this level are multilevel inner conflicts, expressive of growing self-awareness, self-evaluation and reflection, moral dilemmas, search for an ideal and, often acute, existential anxiety.

On level 3, we observe an emergence of multilevel dynamisms such as disquietude and dissatisfaction with oneself, inferiority with oneself, astonishment with oneself, feelings of shame and guilt, positive maladjustment, creative instinct, and empathy. Unfortunately, many of these dynamisms are often considered symptoms of pathology by mainstream psychiatry.

The difficult experiences associated with spontaneous multilevel disintegration are largely responsible for awakening and deepening sensitivity to other people and to one's own development, and lay foundations for efforts at education of oneself and self-transformation, which become fully engaged at level 4.

In some cases, where one's developmental potential contains strong positive and negative elements, the intensity of the developmental processes on this level can bring an individual close to a "psychic catastrophe" (Dabrowski, 1970, p.60)

Among examples of such dramatic inner transformation, bordering on psychic dissolution, are, listed by Dabrowski, Clifford Beers, Wladyslaw Dawid, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jack Ferguson, Franz Kafka, Soren Kierkegaard, Abraham Lincoln, John Stuart Mill, and Isaac Newton.

Other examples include Gautama Buddha, St. Paul, St. Francis, St. Augustine, Leo Tolstoy, Blaise Pascal, St. Ignatius Loyola, Alfred de Musset, Heinrich Heine, and St. John of the Cross (Sorokin, 2002), and Adam Chmielowski (Mika, 2004).

Although the above list consists of eminent individuals, there is much evidence showing that lasting inner transformation consistent with the developmental processes described by TPD is a

much more common phenomenon (Miller and C’deBaca, 2001, Brennan and Piechowski, 1991).

Level 4: organized multilevel disintegration. This level is characterized by conscious efforts at shaping and systematization of one’s behavior, all directed toward conscious and planned self-transformation. Inner conflicts lessen here, replaced by ever-growing autonomy and clarity of values and goals.

External conflicts are largely eliminated through a distinct growth of empathy and compassion, and work of dynamisms such as third factor (active conscience), subject-object in oneself, self-control, education of oneself, inner psychic transformation and self-perfection, all geared toward realizing one’s unique and individual personality ideal.

On this level, we can see growing positive adjustment – adjustment to one’s personality ideal embracing the highest human values -- adjustment to “what ought to be.”

Level 5: secondary integration. Dabrowski theorized that on this level we could observe harmonization of personality and personality ideal. One’s behavior is guided mainly and consistently by dynamisms of responsibility, authenticity and autonomy, empathy, self-perfection and personality ideal.

Psychological development does not end on level 5, but from this point on, it is guided by and consistent with demands of the personality ideal. Empirical data on individuals who obtained level of personality in their development (level 5) are scant.

Nevertheless, Dabrowski and others (Piechowski, 1992; Nixon, 1989; Nixon, 1995; Mika, 2004; Rush & Rush, 1992) have provided biographical analyses of individuals who appear to have reached this level.

The table below illustrates an approximate distribution of different developmental categories along the integration/disintegration continuum.

(Please note that as a rough approximation, the table does not provide exact proportions of the listed categories as they occur on any given level of development; nor it exhausts many different developmental and psychopathological combinations observed in people. Development through positive disintegration, although conceptually divided into discreet levels, in reality occurs largely along the integration/disintegration continuum, with varying degrees of both present in most people who possess any measure of developmental potential. From: Mika, 2002)

Secondary Integration	Level 5	Personality exemplars
	Level 4	Developing personalities
ML disintegration	Level 3	Psychoneurotics
	Level 2	Neurotics, mentally ill
		Borderline of average person and (psycho)neurotic
Disintegration		Average person [statistical norm]
		Borderline of psychopath and average person
	Level 1	Psychopaths
Primary Integration		

Developmental Potential

The level a person can attain in her development is determined by her developmental potential.

Developmental potential (DP) is the “original endowment determining the level to which an individual can develop, if his physical and social conditions are optimal.” (Dabrowski, 1984, p.24).

Developmental potential expresses the relationship between individual development and three main groups of factors influencing this development:

1. First factor – genetic and permanent physical traits (intelligence, overexcitabilities, special talents);
2. Second factor – social influences;
3. Third factor – autonomous forces and processes such as self-awareness, conscious inner conflict, free will and conscious self-transformation, etc. Third factor makes self-determination possible and is necessary for creativity and advanced development.

The third factor is rooted in the first two factors – our genes and our environment – but it is an independent force, which propels those endowed with it toward transcending the limitations of their psychological type, their environmental constraints and the human biological cycle.

Dabrowski called the third factor “an active conscience” since it is a basis of conscious selection in our behavior that leads to rejecting unwanted responses – those that go against our values – and affirming and strengthening others – those that express our personality ideal.

DP as a function of all three factors is encountered in cases of accelerated development. Here an individual consciously tries to transcend the limitations of the first and second factors and, in the process, becomes increasingly autonomous and able to direct her own psychological growth.

DP is particularly strong when it includes all forms of overexcitabilities, especially emotional, imaginal and intellectual; special talents and high intelligence; and the nuclei of the inner psychic milieu that expresses a tendency to transform one’s psychological type and transcend the biological cycle.

High DP is frequently encountered in gifted and talented individuals and manifests in their early childhood. In these children, as Dabrowski writes,

“we observe above average abilities in many areas, emotional richness and depth, and multiple and strong manifestations of psychic overexcitability. In individuals so endowed one may observe from childhood difficulties of adjustment, serious developmental crises, psychoneurotic processes, and tendency toward disintegration of lower levels of functioning and reaching toward higher levels of functioning. This, however, does not occur without disturbances and disharmony with their external environment and within their internal environment. Feelings of otherness and strangeness are not uncommon. We find this in gifted children, creative and prominent personalities, men of genius, i.e. those who contribute new discoveries and new values.” (Dabrowski, 1996, p.22)

DP can be weak when either of the three major components (high intelligence, talents, special interests; overexcitability; desire and will to develop) is weak or absent; or negative when only certain types of overexcitability, namely psychomotor and sensual, are very strong and combined with egocentrism and strong ambition – a developmental constellation encountered in psychopathy.

It is worth noting that giftedness should not be identified with high developmental potential. Indeed, giftedness, if understood only as high intelligence, special interests, talents and abilities, is but one component of DP (first factor).

Making judgments about the strength of one’s DP based on the presence of only one of its components may be misleading. Similarly, although the presence of overexcitability is frequently associated with high intelligence and special abilities, acknowledging only the presence and strength of overexcitabilities in itself may indicate neither giftedness nor high DP – and thus it should not be considered “a measure of developmental potential” (Piechowski & Miller, 1994).

Various types and forms of overexcitability are characteristic of many mental disturbances, for example, that do not have anything to do with giftedness or high DP. (However, there are certain exceptions to consider.

We can predict that a child with relatively high level emotional overexcitability, combined with strong intellectual and imaginal types, will also possess high intelligence and a rich inner psychic milieu, with the nuclei of autonomous dynamisms. Indeed, clinical data seem to support this correlation, showing that intellectual overexcitability is always associated with above average intelligence (Mika, 2002).

A high level emotional overexcitability sensitizes such an individual to his inner processes and external world, and creates a foundation for development of inner conflicts facilitating accelerated development. An imaginal overexcitability helps him or her envision his or her personality ideal and the process of personality development.)

To summarize, high developmental potential, in Dabrowski's understanding, includes high (at least average) and broad, theoretical intelligence; overexcitabilities, particularly emotional, imaginal and intellectual; special talents and interests; and autonomous developmental forces. The absence of either of these components will have a limiting influence on a person's development.

Three Types of Development

Dabrowski distinguished three types of development, based on differences in the strength of developmental potential among people. And so, "normal" development applies to the statistical norm, to a so-called average person, whose developmental potential is weak. Normal development is limited to the fulfillment of biological and social imperatives.

Intellectual functions here are typically at least average, while emotional ones remain underdeveloped. There are no or very little attempts at conscious self-transformation. This type of unilevel development is characteristic for the majority of individuals on the levels of primary integration and unilevel disintegration.

The second type, one-sided development, is driven by one particular skill, talent or set of skills; or by especially strong overexcitability in the context of limited overall DP.

As Dabrowski writes, "Only some emotional and intellectual potentials develop very well while the rest remain undeveloped, in fact, (they) appear lacking." (Dabrowski, 1996, p.21) One-sided development is the instance where the presence of giftedness does not aid personality growth, understood in Dabrowskian sense as self-transformation based on multilevel positive disintegration.

In fact, giftedness itself, occurring here within limited developmental potential, while not necessarily a developmental liability, is not an asset either, since it limits development to unilevelness.

One-sided development is often found in cases of genius whose outstanding but isolated talents "hijack" development, to the detriment of other areas of psychological functioning, most importantly its higher emotional and moral aspects.

Dabrowski frequently observed that when highly, but one-sidedly developed, individuals succeed in attaining positions of power (as they often do, since they are unburdened by scruples and inhibitions), they often "cause grave, sometimes disastrous, effects for social groups and societies." (Dabrowski, 1970, p.149).

The two above types of development – normal and one-sided -- are relatively narrow and inflexible, and represent the socio-biological maturational pattern of human species, characterized by progressive psychobiological integration, adjustment to external conditions and often unreflective conformity to social mores.

Symptoms of disintegration, if they appear here at all, are temporary and related to transitional stages of human psychobiological development.

The third and rarest type of development -- global (universal) and accelerated -- is fueled by strong DP. Here "all essential cognitive and emotional functions develop with relatively equal

intensity and with relatively equal rate," (Dabrowski, 1996, p.21); all types of overexcitability are present; but more importantly, there is the self-aware and conscious direction of one's own development.

Such development is characterized by conscious opposition to influences of the first and second factor, and proceeds through intense crises and conflicts that this opposition creates. This type of development transcends the general maturational pattern of the species and shows maladjustment to it that arises from a relatively high degree of independence from biological and social constraints.

Accelerated multilevel development is characteristic for many gifted individuals endowed with overexcitabilities – most notably psychoneurotics, representing level III (and IV) in the TPD hierarchy of developmental levels.

The term "accelerated" here does not denote the speed of developmental changes, but rather breadth and depth of the inner transformation associated with positive disintegration.

As we see then, gifted individuals can be found on all levels of development – from a psychopath with high degree of primary integration, through all stages of unilevel and multilevel disintegration, up to the exemplars of personality at the level of secondary integration.

However, individuals with high developmental potential – a subset of the gifted population - will exhibit signs of positive disintegration already in early childhood. As Dabrowski writes, "Any individual developmental pattern may cover part of the scale but none can cover the full extent of it." (Dabrowski, 1996, p. 23.)

Thus, theoretically at least, it should follow that individuals attaining the highest levels of development do not start from the level of primary integration. And indeed, biographical data show that in these individuals, the nuclei of high DP are already present in early childhood and so are signs of disintegrative processes to come, such as precursors of multilevel dynamisms that can be observed early on in a relatively small group of children.

Among those precursors are the early capacity to experience strong empathy and compassion, guilt and shame, and early efforts at self-transformation.

Consider Anna (not a real name), an artistically and intellectually gifted 10-year-old girl with mixed types of overexcitability, with the dominance of emotional overexcitability and the remaining types, especially imaginational and intellectual, very strong as well.

At 10, Anna decided to learn yoga in order to overcome her nervousness, and become a more peaceful and relaxed person, someone with whom others feel at peace. Coming from a very modest, working class background, she did not feel her plan would be supported by her family, so she worked on it in secret, using books checked out from her school library.

In her actions, we clearly see dynamisms of self-awareness, subject-object, education of oneself and autopsychotherapy, elements of personality ideal and distinct elements of third factor – all dynamisms of organized multilevel disintegration.

Another example of the presence of ML dynamisms (or their precursors) in children is a statement from a 9-year-old boy, who told his mother that he would like to have an opportunity to look at himself through the eyes of others.

"I'm sure there are things I don't realize about myself, but they must be obvious to others. I think it would be interesting to see how they see me – and it would help me understand myself better."

Clinicians working with gifted population frequently observe signs of advanced moral and emotional development in gifted children. Indeed, examples supporting these observations abound (Silverman, 1993; Lovecky, 1998; Piechowski, 2003.)

However, one should not generalize them on the whole gifted population, since such

generalizations are unwarranted and can be misleading (Margolin, 1994.)

Here again, Dabrowski's insights on the three types of development and their relationship to different constellations of developmental potential provide a useful framework for understanding and assessing the complex relationship between giftedness and advanced moral and emotional growth.

It is worth mentioning that Dabrowski associated early manifestations of positive disintegration in gifted children with their asynchronous development (Dabrowski, 1964), which he described over a half a century ago, before the term was introduced to the field of gifted education (Silverman, 2002).

Closely related to the concepts of developmental potential and three types of development are the forces guiding our development, which are higher level instincts, representing a function of an individual's developmental potential.

While developmental instinct is present in the majority of people in at least rudimentary forms, instinct of creativity arises on the basis of special talents and interests, and certain types of overexcitability, imaginal, sensual and emotional in particular.

Creative instinct can be found already on the level of unilevel disintegration, though it gains strength and importance on level III. Creative instinct in itself, however, when not supported by instinct of self-perfection, plays a limited role in the personality growth and often results in one-sided development, or chronic disintegration since it does not awaken the forces of inner transformation.

Instinct of self-perfection is the highest form of developmental instinct, arising at the level of organized multilevel disintegration on the basis of autonomous dynamisms such as third factor, subject-object, self-education, self-awareness, authenticity and personality ideal.

Combined with the instinct of creativity, it usually applies to the whole character of a person, and propels one to grow toward a personality ideal embodying the highest human values. Although these instincts, characteristic of higher levels of psychological development, are not universal, Dabrowski stressed that they exhibited "a force equal in strength or even stronger than that of primitive instincts" such as the sexual instinct or instinct of self-preservation (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 132)

The concepts of developmental, creative and self-perfection instincts are particularly useful in describing developmental trajectories of eminent, multiply talented individuals who progressed to the highest levels of personality development through positive disintegration (Adam Chmielowski, Ety Hillesum, Dag Hammarskjold, Albert Schweitzer, to name just a few).

Analyzing their biographies and written statements leaves us with an appreciation of the intensity of their inner struggles ensuing from often conflicting influences of instincts of creativity and self-perfection -- and it further confirms validity of Dabrowski's insights on development of exceptional individuals.

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