# Gender Differences in Self-Reported Moral Reasoning: A Review and New Evidence

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*Sixty-four undergraduates wrote responses to the question, "When faced with a moral dilemma, what issues or concerns influence your decision?" The responses were coded according to one or more of 13 themes by independent raters blind to the subjects' gender. Six of the themes were identified as "feminine" themes and seven as "masculine" themes on the basis of previous work by Gilligan ([1982],* In a Different Voice, *Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), Kohlberg ([1976], "Moral Stages and Moralization: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach," in Lickona, T. [ed.],* Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research, and Social Issues, *Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York), and others. Only one association between gender and the presence of any given theme reached statistical significance: Thus, there is little evidence to support the idea that men and women differ in their reports of how they think about moral dilemmas. For all subjects, the average proportion of possible feminine themes in a response was higher than the proportion of possible masculine themes. This finding supports the idea than an exclusive focus on themes such as rights and responsibilities will fail to capture many of the considerations all subjects regard as most important.*

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## INTRODUCTION

A prominent controversy in recent work on moral reasoning concerns the existence of gender differences in orientation to ethical decision-making. The present study, in contrast to previous work presenting subjects with specific moral dilemmas, examines the existence and pervasiveness of gender differences in self-reported, open-ended descriptions of orientation to ethical dilemmas. The central focus of this investigation, therefore, concerns the question of whether men and women report the use of different issues, considerations, or standards when engaged in moral reasoning.

Gilligan (1977, 1982) is commonly credited with bringing the issue of gender differences in moral reasoning into sharp relief. She first pointed out that Kohlberg's seminal work in the study of moral development included all-male samples. She therefore wondered if his description of the developmental course of moral reasoning could be considered complete. To investigate this question, she studied women facing real-life dilemmas, and concluded that women's central concern in moral reasoning involves issues of caring and conflicting responsibilities. She contrasted this orientation with that described by Kohlberg's subjects, who reasoned about hypothetical dilemmas, and tended to focus on issues of justice and competing rights.

Kohlberg's 1976 statement of his theory of moral development presented a "directly structural conception" (Kohlberg, 1984) of the theory and the heart of the developmental component of the theory. He described three major "levels" of moral reasoning, each of which contained two stages. At the earliest developmental level (Kohlberg terms this the "preconventional level"), the reasoner considers issues of reward and punishment, and sees society's rules and expectations as externally imposed. A developmentally "older" reasoner, reasoning at what Kohlberg calls the "conventional" level, instead has internalized the rules and expectations of authority. Reasoners at the final, "postconventional," level make a distinction between self-chosen principles and the rules of authority. Although in more recent work Kohlberg refined the empirical scoring criteria, and "withdrew" the highest state (Stage 6 in the postconventional level), the basic scheme described here remains in force (see Colby *et al.,* 1983, Kohlberg, 1984, and Kohlberg *et al.,* 1983, for a fuller discussion of more recent developments in the theory).

Gilligan (1977, 1982) argued that women impose a "distinctive construction on moral problems, seeing moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities" (1982, p. 105) rather than in terms of abstract principles and competing rights:

> The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in the women's interviews is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world. For the men in Kohlberg studies, the moral imperative appeared rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the right to life and self-fulfillment. Women's insistence on care is

at first self-critical rather than self-protective, while men initially conceive obliga-
tion to others negatively in terms of noninterference. (1977, p. 511)

Gilligan asserted, moreover, that women's moral thinking differed funda-
mentally in character from that of men's. Women's thinking, she claimed,
tends to be "contextual and narrative" rather than "formal and abstract" (p.
19), although she allows for the possibility that a feminine moral "voice"
can belong to men as well.

   Some of Gilligan's claims echo previous findings of gender differences
in moral thinking, for example, that girls show greater "guilt intensity"
than do boys and appear to have "more humanistic moral standards
than males" (Hoffman, 1975, p. 727), and that female adolescents ex-
hibit greater emotional empathy than do male adolescents, (Hanson
and Mullis, 1985). Yussen (1977), analyzing the moral dilemmas de-
cribed by adolescents, found that a greater percentage of girls than
boys focused on interpersonal relationships. Bussey and Maughan
(1982) found that their male subjects (university students), when asked
to reason from the perspective of a female central character in a moral
dilemma, scored at a lower stage (Kohlberg's Stage 3) than did other
male subjects when asked to reason about a male character facing the
same dilemmas (these subjects scored at Kohlberg's Stage 4). Female
subjects scored at Kohlberg's Stage 3, regardless of the gender of the central
character in the dilemma.

   Indeed, other researchers, many of them influenced by Gilligan's
work, have claimed that gender differences in reasoning extend well beyond
the moral realm. Schiedel and Marcia (1985) propose gender differences in
ego identity, claiming that "for females . . . the emphasis is on interper-
sonal tasks and . . . identity and intimacy struggles merge, whereas for
males . . . intrapersonal issues dominate and intimacy follows identity res-
olution" (p. 149). Clinchy and Zimmerman (1982), studying women's epi-
stemological development, found that their sample of women college stu-
dents displayed less intellectual aggressiveness and more contextual reason-
ing than did an earlier, but presumably otherwise comparable, sample of
college men interviewed by Perry (1970).

   Indeed, a more recent and far-reaching claim asserts that women and
men have fundamentally differing orientations to knowledge, with men
adopting objective, abstract standards for assessing claims and acquiring
knowledge, and women adopting more intuitive, subjective, and contextual
standards (Belenky *et al.*, 1986). Men, these authors argue, seek and focus
on proof, rigor, and objectivity, and are more comfortable with an adver-
sarial style of discourse including argument and debate; women, in con-
trast, seek and focus on understanding and on connection with others, and
in negotiating and building a shared perspective that honors individual and
subjective viewpoints.

Empirical work on the specific hypotheses of Gilligan, and the more general claims of Belenky *et al.,* is just beginning. Interpreting data from a study of 29 women facing an abortion decision (Gilligan and Belenky, 1980), Gilligan constructed a developmental sequence of moral reasoning that differed from the one developed by Kohlberg, wherein the "youngest" reasoner considers only the pragmatic needs of the self's survival, a developmentally "older" reasoner considers issues of responsibility toward others to whom she is connected and whom she wants to avoid hurting, and the most advanced reasoner considers a more inclusive definition of "caring" that includes caring for the needs of the self as well as the needs of others. Gilligan argued that her progression made more sense of her female subjects' responses, and gave them more developmental "credit" than they would have received had their interviews been scored by Kohlberg's method. In large part, Gilligan held, this "downscoring" of women's responses came about because the formulation of Kohlberg's original sample was done on an all-male sample. Kohlberg's focus on the abstract set of principles used by his subjects to resolve a hypothetical dilemma, Gilligan argued, ignores and/or devalues women's more contextual style of resolution.

Although agreeing with the need pointed out by Gilligan to consider moral reasoning in real-life contexts about issues of care and responsibility, Kohlberg maintained the distinction between structure and content of reasoning, and argued for the utility of studying reasoning about hypothetical dilemmas. Kohlberg and his associates (Colby *et al.,* 1983) also denied the charge of sex bias in especially the most recent scoring system, a denial receiving empirical support for the meta-analysis conducted by Walker in 1984, and in more recent work also conducted by Walker and associates (Walker 1986b; Walker *et al.,* 1987; but see Baumrind, 1986, and Walker, 1986a, for a debate of potential shortcomings in Walker's 1984 analysis).

Lyons (1983), in an empirical test of Gilligan's hypotheses, developed a coding scheme to capture a subject's overall conception of self (either *separate-objective,* experiencing interpersonal relationships in terms of reciprocity between separate individuals, or *connected,* experiencing interpersonal relationships in terms of responding to others in the other's own terms) and overall orientation to moral reasoning (in terms of *justice* or in terms of *care*). Using open-ended, individual clinical interviews with a total sample of 36 subjects, ranging in age from 8 to over 60, Lyons found that men's orientation to self tended to be separate-objective, and their orientation to moral reasoning tended to be in terms of issues of justice and rights. By constrast, women tended to orient to the self in a connected style, and to adopt an orientation to moral reasoning in terms of care and responsibility. Lyons also presented data indicating that the orientation toward self and the orientation toward moral reasoning were very highly related, with a separate-ob-

jective self orientation being strongly associated with a justice/rights orientation to moral dilemmas, and a connected self orientation predicting a responsibility/care orientation to moral reasoning.

Walker (1986b), using somewhat different scoring criteria and a larger sample (62 university employees), did not find strong evidence for gender differences in overall moral orientation. In another study (Walker *et al.,* 1987) gender differences in overall orientation were found only among the parents of the elementary through high school students, but not in the student samples. This pattern of results, with gender differences appearing between mothers and fathers of students, but not among students themselves, was also reported by Sigelman *et al.* (1984) in a study of moral values of college students and their parents.

Another recent study of moral reasoning that failed to reveal gender differences was carried out by Ford and Lowery (1986). Their undergraduate subjects were asked to describe a moral confict, and then, given a description of a "justice" or "rights" orientation to moral issues and a description of a "response" or "care" orientation, to rate the extent to which they used these orientations in resolving the conflicts they had described. Men were more consistent in their self-reported use of a justice orientation while women were more consistent in their self-reported use of a care orientation. When self-reported importance and difficulty of the reported dilemmas were held constant, gender differences in the use of the two orientations were not statistically reliable: "Both sexes apparently considered questions of relationship, care, and responsibility, as well as questions of fairness, justice, and rights, and they considered them fairly equally" (p. 782). Interestingly, self-reported importance and difficulty ratings of the dilemmas generated were significantly correlated with the use of a care orientation but not with the use of a justice oriention.

These latter findings are similar to ones reported by Galotti and Kozberg (1987), who studied reasoning about different kinds of commitments typically faced by undergraduates. They found that men and women appeared to think in very similar terms about a range of commitments, both academic/vocational and interpersonal. Moreover, when asked in an open-ended essay to discuss the nature of commitment, subjects of the two genders used very similar language and raised very similar themes, both "masculine" (e.g., commitment as obligation, commitment as contract) and "feminine" (e.g., commitment as a devotion of self, commitment as an expression of self).

Walker *et al.* (1987) found very little evidence for Gilligan's claim that people predominately use a single orientation to moral reasoning. Less than 20% or their sample consistently used one orientation, and there were no gender differences in this regard. Indeed, adults tended to use more of a mix

of orientations than did children. This finding calls into question the utility of using a global scoring of a subject's orientation toward moral reasoning. Instead, the particular orientation adopted would seem to have a great deal to do with the particulars or the moral situation.

The present study examined gender differences in orientations to moral reasoning, but in a much less global way than has been previously attempted. Although the Walker (1984) review argues compellingly against global and/or unidimensional gender differences in orientation to moral issues, the findings of Walker *et al.* (1987) allow for the possible existence of more subtle gender differences. For example, it is possible that men and women both adopt a "care" orientation when reasoning about a certain class of moral issues, but differ in regard to the specific issues on which they focus within that orientation. Therefore, the present study was designed to investigate gender differences in the thematic issues subjects report focusing upon in their own moral reasoning.

Subjects were asked to respond, in writing, to the following question: "When faced with a moral dilemma, what issues or concerns influence your decision?" Following the example of Yussen (1977), written responses rather than oral interviews were collected to examine performance in cases where experimenters had no means of providing subtle cues or reinforcement based upon the content or style of the subject's responses. The question used was open-ended, so that subjects would have maximum freedom to define terms in any way that they chose, to express themselves as fully as they wished, and to use the language they felt was most appropriate and natural. Subjects were not asked to describe a specific moral dilemma, but instead to respond to a more general question that asked them to consider the nature of moral dilemmas themselves. If subjects pressed for a definition of "moral dilemma," experimenters responded only with a statement that the term referred to situations in which "values come into conflict."

Subjects' responses were scored for the presence of several themes, constructed both from the writings of Kohlberg, Gilligan, and others, and from a preliminary reading of the responses. These themes were classified as being primarily "feminine" or primarily "masculine." Because Walker *et al.* (1987) argued that orientation to moral issues is not global in nature, the present scoring scheme allowed for the possibility of any number of themes appearing in a single response.

In order to examine age and developmentally related differences in written responses, experimenters asked subjects to take the Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest, 1979). The also recorded their student status (upperclass: senior or junior; underclass: sophomore or freshman).

## METHOD

### Subjects

Sixty-four undergraduates at Carleton College served as voluntary participants. Half of the subjects were male, and half female; within each of these groups, half were juniors and seniors (designated "upperclass students"), and half were freshman and sophomores (designated "underclass" students). Subjects came from a variety of majors and did not share any particular pattern of previous enrollment in psychology courses. Subjects were not compensated for their participation.

### Raters

Three undergraduates, all female psychology majors, served along with the author as raters of the themes within the written responses. Two of the raters were blind to the goals and hypotheses of the study.

### Materials

Subjects were given a sheet of paper containing a typed question and room for a response, and also were given the short form of the DIT (Rest, 1979). Raters were given typed copies of the responses written by subjects, coded only by a randomly assigned subject number. Raters were also given response sheets on which to record their ratings.

### Procedure

Subjects were recruited and run individually by members of a psychology research methods class. Subjects were first asked to respond to the following typed item at the top of an otherwise blank sheet of paper: "When faced with a moral dilemma, what issues or concerns influence your decision?" Experimenters were discouraged from rephrasing the question, but when pressed, defined "moral dilemma" as "a situation in which values come into conflict." Subjects were given as long as they wished to respond, in writing, to the item. Most took about 10 minutes. Next, subjects received the DIT, and were a.,ked to read the instructions and to respond to all items. Again, subjects worked at their own pace, and most finished within 40 minutes.

Raters also saw only typed versions of the written responses. They were given a list of themes (described below), and asked, for each response, to score it for the presence of any or all of the themes. One of the raters assisted in the construction of some of the themes; the others received only a brief definition of each. All raters worked independently and at their own pace, usually finishing in 90–120 minutes.

## RESULTS

### Scoring of Themes

Three raters and the author scored each of the 64 responses for the presence of 13 themes. These themes were derived from both an examination of the works of Gilligan, Kohlberg, and others, as well as an initial reading of all the responses. The themes were categorized into two groups, in accordance with previous claims about gender differences in moral reasoning: "feminine" themes, including "What others would think and/or feel," "Effect on others," "Situation specifics," "Effect on self," "Gut feeling/intuition," and "Personal guilt"; and "masculine" themes, including "Greater societal good," "Legal issues," "General principles," "Reasoning systematically," "Religious teachings," "Personal code of ethics," and "Rights of others." Table I presents the brief definition of each theme given to thematic raters. Interrater reliabilities, computed using coefficient alpha over all raters, ranged from .40 to .98 (median = .86). The final coding of responses was done on the basis of the majority "vote" of all raters. In the few cases of ties, the author made the final decision.

### Differences in Themes

A 2(Gender) × 2(Age: Upperclass vs. Underclass) analysis of variance (ANOVA) run on $P$ scores (scores derived from the DIT, which indicate the proportion of "principled" reasoning, akin to Stage 5 and Stage 6 or post-conventional level reasoning in Kohlberg's framework) yielded no significant effects or interactions.

Proportion usage of each theme was calculated for all subjects and the results are shown in Table II. Log linear analyses revealed different usage patterns for the following themes only: Reasoning systematically, an effect of gender; Rights of others, an effect of class; and Situation specifics, an interaction between gender and class. Thus, for 11 of the 13 themes, there were no differences in usage between men and women. Pearson pro-

**Table I.** Codes and Instructions Given to Raters of the Moral Dilemma Essay

| Interrater reliability[b]/ mean proportion usage[c] | Title and description of theme[a] |
|---|---|
| **Feminine themes** | |
| .88/.30 | What others would think/feel: Whether S (subject) consults others, or imagines others in a similar situation to make a decision. |
| .86/.80 | Effect on others: Whether S consider the possible benefit or harm to other people in making the decision. |
| .85/.22 | Situation specifics: Whether S makes explicit references to the decision "depending on the situation." |
| .79/.44 | Effect on self: Whether S considers the possible benefit or harm to him/herself in making the decision. |
| .92/.19 | Personal guilt: Whether S refers to his/her own guilt (or expected level of guilt), or explicitly considers "having to live with" a decision. |
| .89/.03 | Gut feeling: Whether S mentions "intuition" or "gut feeling" in making a decision. |
| **Masculine themes** | |
| .98/.31 | Religious teachings: Whether S considers formal religious teachings (e.g., the Bible, Talmud) or reasons from experience in an organized religion (to be distinguished from "conscience" or "personal sense of right and wrong"). |
| .81/.09 | Greater societal good: Whether S refers explicitly to the concerns of society in general or to the "greatest good." |
| .92/.13 | Legal issues: Whether S refers to the local, state, or federal laws. |
| .40/.06 | General principle: Whether S explicitly states one or more principles that are always followed in resolving moral dilemmas e.g., "Never kill," "Save life before property." |
| .85/.17 | Personal code of ethics: Whether S makes explicit references to a personal set of moral values or ethics. |
| .81/.11 | Reasoning systematically: Whether S describes trying to reason logically, systematically, without being affected by mood or emotion. |
| .98/.05 | Rights of others: Whether S explicitly mentions the (legal, personal, or moral) rights of other people (to be distinguished from the benefits or harm to people). |

[a]Descriptions used by raters.
[b]Computed with coefficient alpha.
[c]Over all subjects.

duct moment correlations were computed between $P$ score and the usage of 13 themes. Table II also presents these results, and reveals only one marginally significant correlation, with higher $P$ scores associated with a greater likelihood of the presence of the theme, Greater societal good, a masculine theme ($r = .18$, $p < .10$).

**Table II.** Usage of Individual Themes by Gender and Class, and Correlation with $P$ Score

| | Proportion usage by | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Theme | Male, under-class | Male, upper-class | Female, under-class | Female, upper-class | Correlation with $P$ score |
| Feminine | | | | | |
| What others would think/feel | .19 | .25 | .25 | .38 | .09 |
| Effect on others | .81 | .69 | .69 | .81 | .09 |
| Situation specifics | .06 | .38 | .31 | .13 | .06 |
| Effect on self | .50 | .38 | .38 | .38 | .14 |
| Personal guilt | .06 | .31 | .25 | .25 | .04 |
| Gut feeling | .00 | .06 | .00 | .00 | − .05 |
| Masculine | | | | | |
| Religious teachings | .19 | .25 | .38 | .43 | .01 |
| Greater societal good | .13 | .38 | .13 | .13 | .18[a] |
| Legal issues | .13 | .00 | .19 | .19 | .02 |
| General principle | .19 | .06 | .13 | .31 | − .06 |
| Personal code of ethics | .13 | .25 | .25 | .19 | − .01 |
| Reasoning systematically | .25 | .19 | .00 | .00 | − .06 |
| Rights of others | .00 | .13 | .00 | .06 | .15 |
| Total number of themes in essay | 2.69 | 3.25 | 2.93 | 3.25 | .20[a] |

[a] $p < .10$.

Finally, the total number of themes present in an essay was calculated, and is presented in Table II. A 2(Gender) × 2(Class) ANOVA on this measure showed no significant effects or interactions.

In order to further assess the degree to which individual responses displayed masculine or feminine themes in general, two new measures were computed. The first was a measure of the proportion of masculine themes used in an response, computed by counting the number of masculine themes present in any given response and dividing by the total number of possible masculine themes. The second, the proportion of feminine themes, was computed in a similar fashion. A 2(Gender) × 2(Age) × 2(Theme Type: Masculine, Feminine) ANOVA, with repeated measures on the last factor, was run on the proportion of themes used. Overall, the proportion of possible feminine themes ($M = .33$) was higher than the proportion of possible masculine themes ($M = .13$; $F[1, 60] = 35.61$, $p < .001$). There were no gender differences that even approached statistical significance, and only a marginally significant effect of class, with upperclass students' responses ($M = .25$) showing slightly higher usage of both types of themes than underclass students' ($M = .21$; $F[1, 60] = 3.50$, $p < .10$). No other effects or interactions approached statistical reliability.

Finally, the proportion of masculine themes (number of masculine theme/total number of themes) was calculated. Males and females dis-

played an average proportion of .36 and .37 masculine themes, respectively. (Note that this implies that the average proportion usage of feminine themes was .64 and .63 for males and females, respectively). A 2(Gender) × 2 (Class) ANOVA revealed no significant effects or interactions.

## DISCUSSION

In general, the essays of men and women were not distinguishable: Only one discernable thematic difference in the responses written by men and the responses written by women emerged: Men were more likely to write essays coded by the masculine theme, Reasoning systematically. These null findings argue against the idea than men and women have fundamentally different orientations to moral reasoning. These findings support the conclusions of Walker (1986b; Walker *et al.,* 1987) and others (Galotti and Kozberg, 1987; Ford and Lowery, 1986; Sigelman *et al.,* 1984), who also report few or no gender differences on similar tasks.

On the other hand, the findings do indicate that the kinds of moral concerns and issues originally identified by Gilligan (1977, 1982) are important to both male and female subjects. Indeed, the overall usage of themes identified as feminine on the basis of reading Gilligan, Lyons, and others, was double or triple the usage of themes identified as masculine. This in turn supports Gilligan's and Lyons' claims that by focusing only on issues of justice, traditional investigations of moral reasoning omitted a great deal of the thinking that people spontaneously report engaging in. This finding is also similar to one reported by Galotti and Kozberg (1987), who found that both male and female undergraduates thought more extensively about interpersonal than about academic/vocational commitments. In both cases, subjects allowed to respond to open-ended items indicated a more comprehensive approach to thinking about issues of deep personal relevance, one that concentrated on values that have historically been identified as feminine.

Three methodological issues must be considered in order to interpret the above findings. The first is that the data collected were in the form of a written response rather than an oral interview. As such, there were no opportunities to probe the subject's thinking, to see if terms were being defined in similar ways, or to examine the context of a particular subject's orientations. On the other hand, by asking subjects to respond in their own ways, without having to explain their ideas to an interviewer, the possibility of interviewers unconsciously "leading" the subjects to focus on one set of issues rather than another, or to provide any other cues, was minimized. In any event, the fact that the present results fit together with those of other researchers who have used oral interviews (e.g., Walker *et al.,* 1987) suggests that the procedural differences engender small, if any, effects.

A more important methodological consideration is the sample of subjects used. One difference between the samples of researchers who argue for gender differences vs. those who do not find them is sheer numbers; those studies with relatively large numbers of subjects report few differences. Another, perhaps more important difference, is range of age and educational level. Most of the studies failing to report gender differences used a sample of undergraduate subjects; most of the studies where gender differences are found include older subjects, and/or subjects who range in age from early adolescence to late adulthood, and who also vary widely in socioeconomic backgrounds and in education. It remains for future investigations to determine which of these variables influence the structure and content of moral reasoning and in what ways.

The final issue concerns the classification of themes as masculine or feminine. Two themes, Religious teachings and Personal code of ethics, both classified as masculine, arguably could also be classified as feminine. Both were classified as they were because implicit in each is a noncontextual application of standards, presumably more representative of a masculine orientation than a feminine one. Note, however, that very little in the results hinges on their classification: Neither correlates significantly with gender, although there is a trend for Religious teachings to be used more frequently by females. Had this theme been classified as feminine, the overall difference in proportion of usage of feminine and masculine themes would have been even more pronounced. Thus, the classification used here tends to be conservative.

The results of this study argue against the idea of sizable or obvious gender differences in self-reported reasoning about the nature of moral dilemmas. Only 1 of 13 themes showed a differential pattern of usage by male and female subjects. Interestingly, however, the tendency for males to concern themselves with reasoning systematically, e.g., to overcome "emotional" influences, does provide some limited support for the theses of Gilligan (1977, 1982) and Belenky *et al.* (1986). Taken all together, moreover, the findings do suggest that concerns typically labeled feminine are important ones, and are important to all subjects. Indeed, these concerns are more frequently mentioned than are ones that might be considered masculine. It seems, then, that a broader conceptualization of moral reasoning is needed to account for the typical moral reasoning of both women and men.

A question raised by these findings, left for future investigation, is the relationship in the present task and the moral reasoning that takes place when confronting specific moral dilemmas, either actual or hypothetical. It will be important to document the degree to which the themes one reports using in moral reasoning are actually used, under what governing circumstances, and how one's conception of one's own moral reasoning develops.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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