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## **THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY VS. GOOD WILL. DASENBROCK, GADAMER AND DAVIDSON ON LANGUAGE AS THE COMMON GROUND FOR UNDERSTANDING IN THE CONTEXT OF A LITERARY CANON**

### **Streszczenie**

#### **Zasada wielkoduszności vs. dobra wola. Dasenbrock, Gadamer i Davidson o języku, jako wspólnej płaszczyźnie rozumienia w kontekście dyskusji nad kanonem literackim**

W pewnym fragmencie książki *Truth and Consequences. Intentions, Conventions and the New Thematics* wpisującej się we współczesny spór na temat kryteriów ustanawiania kanonu literackiego, Reed Way Dasenbrock przytacza jako przykład teoretyczną debatę pomiędzy H.-G. Gadamerem a J. Derridą dotyczącą, między innymi, podejścia, jakie powinien przyjąć interpretujący wobec tekstu. W dyskusji tej, Derrida kwestionuje pojęcie „dobrej woli”, na które powołuje się Gadamer, co dla Dasenbrocka stanowi ilustrację jednego z centralnych aspektów sporu w badaniach literackich pomiędzy intencjonalizmem z jednej strony, a konwencjonalizmem z drugiej. Dasenbrock twierdzi,

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iz z perspektywy teorii kwestionujących ideę spójnej podmiotowości i bazujących na zewnętrznych, stabilnych kryteriach prawdy, a do takich zalicza relatywizm konwencjonalistów, niemożliwym jest ustanowienie równie stabilnych i trwałych kryteriów doboru kanonu literackiego, co jego zdaniem jest kwestią dla pojęcia kanonu kluczową. Krytykując pozycję Derridy, przyrównuje również Gadamerowską dobrą wolę do zasady wielkoduszności Donalda Davidsona, filozofa, którego głos wydaje się uważać za najrozsądniejszy w kontekście swych rozważań nad kanonem literackim. Niniejszy artykuł stara się dowieść, iż porównanie takie jest błędne – za Gadamerowską dobrą wolą i zasadą wielkoduszności Davidsona stoją zupełnie odmienne tradycje filozoficzne. Wywodząca się z tradycji hermeneutycznej dobra wola jest tylko pozornie zbliżona do zasady wielkoduszności, mocno ugruntowanej w filozofii analitycznej. W przeciwieństwie do podejścia Davidsona, ma ona stale na względzie Schleiermacherowskie *dictum*, iż niezrozumienie jest stanem domyślnym początku każdej interpretacji. Co więcej, spór o podmiotowość, jako wypadkowa konfliktu między konwencjonalizmem a intencjonalizmem, wcale nie musi stanowić przeszkody w ustanawianiu kanonu literackiego, chociaż być może będzie musiał on powstawać według bardziej „hereetyckiego” niż „ortodoksyjnego” ujęcia interpretacyjnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kanon literacki, dobra wola, zasada wielkoduszności, H.-G. Gadamer, Donald Davidson, R. W. Dasenbrock

The words canon and orthodoxy are historically bound by the sphere of the sacred. Canonical texts are those religious texts which are officially acknowledged by the church and therefore legitimised as both containing and signifying the truth of the world. Such ethos does not allow for relativity, an issue which instantly becomes problematised with the question of a literary canon. Orthodoxy, or literally the “right teaching,” is certainly an unpopular concept in today’s theoretical perspective. The word canon is followed by an array of implied question, the issue of standards of choice, moving to the foreground of the discussion. The concept of an intrinsic value, which obviously accompanies the issue of standards, is laden with an argumentative potentiality, where various political perspectives are bound to engage in heated debates. In the contemporary Western academia, as soon as the subject of “standards” is raised, not a second passes before the question “whose standards?” is asked. This situation troubles Reed Way Dasenbrock, whose book “Truth and Consequences. Intentions, Conventions and the New Thematics”<sup>1</sup> seems to be written primarily for the purpose of defending the traditional concept of a literary canon.

<sup>1</sup> R.W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences. Intentions, Conventions and the New Thematics*, Pennsylvania 2001.

Dasenbrock's text may certainly provoke ambiguous responses. One can stipulate that at least some of his readers (whether a majority or minority remains a debatable, *Zeitgeist*-dependent issue) will share his perspective, assuming a stance grounded partially in personal didactic experience and partially in broadly-understood Western educational tradition. From such a point of view (which I personally endorse), having and teaching a literary canon remains a necessity. Reasons which shape alike perspectives are bound to remain inescapably personal (though almost certainly moulded by whatever theoretical version of the concept of shared interpretative community one believes in) and most probably involve views on such issues as educational and intellectual standards, aesthetic values, cultural appreciation, etc. Yet, the present paper has no intention of participating in the debate over necessity or shape of institutionally acknowledged literary canon and does not presume to take a stance on any side of the field. Instead, it is going to address certain theoretical postulates concerning the relationship between intentionality and truth, which Dasenbrock uses to build the foundations for his conclusions. While I share what I believe is Dasenbrock's motivation for his argument and, at least in part, agree with his conclusions, I find his theoretical position unconvincing. In order to demonstrate what I consider to be an unnecessary conflict in the aforementioned relationship of intentionality and truth, I am going to summarise briefly the crux of Dasenbrock's text, having firstly respectfully acknowledged that the argument which led him to the forthcoming conclusions is impressively complex and erudite.

Dasenbrock's "Truth and Consequences..." is based on a dichotomy which he considers central in contemporary theory. Its two poles are constituted by concepts of conventionalism on the one side, and intentionalism on the other. The first is an immensely wide category which encompasses theories bound together by the common denominator of meaning being a product of social conventions. In this theoretical basket, we find such eggs as Stanley Fish's reader-response criticism, Richard Rorty's neopragmatism, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's ideological criticism, Thomas Kuhn's relativism, Derridian deconstruction, Michel Foucault's discourses of power. To anyone at least passingly familiar with these theories, the differences between them are all too apparent. Yet, the first to admit this is Dasenbrock himself, who nevertheless postulates that what they all share is the idea of socially and discursively constructed meaning.<sup>2</sup> This rather unrestrictive grouping of diverse theories makes more sense when contrasted with a standpoint represented by Dasenbrock – the intentionalist perspective. Dasenbrock finds very little theoretical support for his views compared to the expansive territory of conventionalist thought. With a full awareness of being in the minority

<sup>2</sup> R. W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, pp. 16–17.

nowadays, he draws upon works of scholars who seem to be sympathetic to his cause, such as Eric Donald Hirsch's intentionalist argument presented in "Validity in Interpretation"<sup>3</sup> and "The Aims of Interpretation."<sup>4</sup> The chief philosophical backup, however, is derived from Hilary Putnam's critique of relativist theories<sup>5</sup> and Donald Davidson's writings on communication.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental thought behind Dasenbrock's theory is that interpretation is an affair concerned with the recovery of intended authorial meaning.

The reasons for the aggressive critique of conventionalist paradigm and the support for the intentionalist one are revealed towards the very end of the book. Reasons, which, I might add, were not all that inconspicuous throughout the course of the argument. Dasenbrock's main point is, in approximation, as follows: conventionalism presupposes a constructed, non-inherent subjectivity. Intentionalism does not. Without a self-originating self, it is impossible to make universally valid, objective judgements. Such judgements may, for example, be of moral or aesthetic nature. These, in turn, are necessary as criteria for establishing a lasting and significant canon of readings. To quote Dasenbrock: "[...]one must accept the notion of a substantial self who can mean and speak as opposed to being meant and spoken by some larger structure. The burden of my argument has been that in practice we all live according to this presupposition even if our theories disallow it; it seems to me that it is simply impossible to live and act in the world without presupposing something like the »intentional stance« and therefore a notion of a self doing the requisite intending. If in this way we grant the notion of an intending self, we open up all the space we need for evaluative language."<sup>7</sup>

I suspect that what truly motivates Dasenbrock in his argumentation is simply an instinct of self-preservation, the very same instinct that was probably responsible for Stanley Fish's (unacknowledged by Dasenbrock) conversion.<sup>8</sup> Dasenbrock's text is a heroic stand to defend the right of humanities to exist, in the most brutal, economic sense of the word. Canon and reading lists are necessary, because others in the university structure, especially people responsible for finances have not treated Rorty and Kuhn as seriously as some academics have and might just be tempted to cut back the financing on a discipline that, in all evidence, appears to be questioning its very foundations. We need a canon to survive. And to have

<sup>3</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven 1967.

<sup>4</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago 1976. I have presented an extensive analysis and criticism of Hirsch's perspective on interpretative validity in: T. Kalaga, *Literary Hermeneutics: From Methodology to Ontology*, New Castle upon Tyne 2016, pp. 33–67.

<sup>5</sup> In particular: H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, New York 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Especially: D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 1984.

<sup>7</sup> R. W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, p. 259.

<sup>8</sup> S. Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, Cambridge, MA 1999.

a canon we need a theory of truth, something which conventionalism cannot provide us with. As Dasenbrock writes: "I suggest that to abandon the language of truth as theorists have over the past generation is to abandon the sharpest weapon of critique we possess."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his criticism of conventionalist paradigms, Dasenbrock calls upon the example of what has become known in the academic community as the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter – a theoretical debate which took place in Goethe Institute in Paris in 1981 and whose proceedings have subsequently been published in a volume entitled "Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter." The main body of the confrontation consisted of three texts: Gadamer's "Text and Interpretation," Jacques Derrida's "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer" and Gadamer's "Reply to Jacques Derrida."<sup>10</sup> Derrida's attempt to call into question Gadamer's hermeneutic paradigm hinges upon an attempt to destabilize the latter's marginal mention of the concept of "good will" in interpretation – a point which Dasebrock takes as crucial in the development of his arguments. In "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer remarks: "Thus, for a written conversation basically the same fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another."<sup>11</sup> Strongly disagreeing with Derrida and at least partially supporting Gadamer, Dasenbrock sees Gadamerian "good will" as closely parallel with what Donald Davidson calls "the principle of charity":

Gadamer's concept of prejudice, in effect, united Davidson's concept of the "prior" theory," the set of expectations we have about the meanings of the words we encounter, with the concept of "interpretative charity," the assumption with which we begin the process of interpretation, whereby we assume that the person speaks the same language, has the same beliefs, means the same things by the same words that we do [...] Gadamer asks that the interpreter remain open towards the other (good will).<sup>12</sup>

It is this particular example which I would like to examine more closely and establish whether Dasebrock is right and we can indeed draw a valid parallel between Davidsonian charity principle and Gadamer's interpretative "good will."

Davidsonian model of truth belongs to the optimistic paradigm of the analytic tradition. If we take Frege, Russell and Quine to be the intellectual antecedents of Davidson, then certain invariably present and persistent elements of that tradition

<sup>9</sup> R. W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, p. 254.

<sup>10</sup> The three mentioned texts may be found in: D. P. Michelfelder and R. E. Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction. The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, Albany, N. Y. 1989, pp. 21–57.

<sup>11</sup> H- G. Gadamer quoted in R. W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> R. W. Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences*, p. 209.

cannot be ignored. From its very beginnings, analytic philosophy sought ways of weeding out the sense from nonsense in a project whose aim was a total clarity and a scientific character of language. Though the analytic school has realised that to be improbable and, on numerous occasions self-defeating, the project itself opened up, in the Foucauldian sense, a possibility of a critique that resulted in a redescription of its very essence. One facet of this redescription was Austin's and Searle's work on speech act theory.<sup>13</sup> This theory, through a systematic and thorough critique lead Davidson to arrive where he did, with the theory of truth based on belief and the concept of the so-called radical interpretation.<sup>14</sup> But in my opinion, the primary presupposition of the tradition survived, even if its fundamentals drastically metamorphosed. This presupposition is best illustrated through a comparison with Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical tradition, albeit not in the way of seeking similarities, as Dasenbrock would have it, but rather highlighting what constitutes in my opinion the most significant difference.

Gadamer's philosophical tradition is that of the German Romantic hermeneutics, and if, on the one hand, we trace back the analytic philosophy to Frege, then, on the other, chronologically, but more importantly conceptually corresponding landmark for hermeneutics would be the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher. One of the opening statements of the now-canonical (!) text in the history of hermeneutic thought quite explicitly declares misunderstanding to be the default state of affairs in human communication. Schleiermacher writes that "The more strict practice [of the art of hermeneutics] assumes that misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course and that understanding must be desired and sought at every point."<sup>15</sup> The statement may be read as a direct antithesis to the premises of the analytic tradition. The primary presupposition of the analytic school of thought is that understanding is the natural mode of communication; language, in all stages of the development of the analytic philosophy presents a hindrance inasmuch as it is imperfect, imprecise or simply faulty as a tool for seamless communication and perfect understanding. It is due to the flawed character of language that communication (and thus understanding) sometimes fails. So, while naturally Davidson's theory is radically different from Frege's, what has survived over time is the faith in the possibility of successful communication *by default*.

Similarly, the (conceptual) distance that separates Gadamer from Schleiermacher is immense, and just as the analytic philosophy made a turn away from empiricism so did hermeneutics abandon a methodological approach in favour

<sup>13</sup> J. I. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford 1962; J. Searle, *Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. New York 1979.

<sup>14</sup> D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 1984, pp. 125–139.

<sup>15</sup> F. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, translated and edited by Andrew Bowie, Cambridge 1998, p. 22.



of an ontologically-minded theory of understanding and interpretation. But what has inevitably survived is the belief in the misunderstanding being the basic mode of communication, which casts a very different light upon the aforementioned idea of “good will” around which Gadamer-Derrida encounter revolved – when Gadamer requires of his interlocutor “good will,” he is driven by the necessity to overcome misunderstanding that is there by default. This is an attitude significantly different to Davidson’s model of intrinsically flawless communication.

Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation rests upon what he terms a principle of charity. This basically intentionalist concept postulates that during an act of communication both the addresser and the addressee are motivated by the common purpose of being understood. As Evnine comments on Davidson’s theory: “The assumption that Davidson is requiring us to make, therefore, is that we take others (the interpretees) to find obvious what we (the interpreters) find obvious [...] we must assume that the people whom we are interpreting will believe what we think it is right to believe [...] objects of interpretation, by and large, believe what we think is true.”<sup>16</sup>

On the surface, the assumption behind the principle of charity appears very similar to Gadamerian “good will,” but such an impression is highly misleading. I believe it is this apparent similarity that probably led Dasenbrock to draw Gadamer’s and Davidson’s paradigms together. Davidson, as Dasenbrock reminds us on every step of his analysis, reject conventionalist beliefs in paradigmatic differences. Therefore, the unwritten principle behind his vision of communication is that it must occur upon a plateau of shared mental content. This belief is best illustrated by a citation from his “Inquiries...” found in the chapter on radical interpretation: “If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.”<sup>17</sup> The principle of charity is thus a feature of the communication process that seeks to overcome the difficulties that language, the imperfect medium, poses on the way to communicative clarity. To redefine this once again, negatively: communication would be flawless if it were not for the unfortunate fact that we have to use language.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics has a similar purpose, but for completely different reasons, and it is that similarity of purpose that seems to have deluded Dasenbrock. Exemplified in his discussion with Derrida but primarily laid out in “Truth and Method” is Gadmer’s belief in the ontological preconditioning of humans by *Vorstellung*, or prejudices, that are irrevocably written into human understanding.

<sup>16</sup> S. Evnine, *Donald Davidson*, Stanford 1991, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford 1984, p 137.

The notion, largely inherited from Heidegger's structure pre-understanding laid out in "Being and Time,"<sup>18</sup> postulates that we are always speaking from a historically, culturally and geographically defined perspective. But the most significant formative aspect is always language itself:

Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.<sup>19</sup>

Gadamerian good will cannot be thus understood as a version of the principle of charity: it does not seek to overcome language to reach the pre-existing common ground of communication. It cannot do that because language cannot be overcome. There is no ground that common in Davidsonian sense, other than, of course *language itself*.

It might therefore seem that is a common ground between the two perspectives in question, and that ground is language – and so Dasenbrock was right in the implicit comparison of Gadamer and Davidson, since both speak of a universally shared mental content. While for Davidson this content is extra-linguistic, for Gadamer it is linguistic. Yet, that kind of reasoning is, quite obviously, false, and the analogy is incorrect for a number of reasons. The most obvious one is the case of different language spoken by interlocutors, i.e. an instance of translation: According to Gadamer, a perfect translation, thus a perfect rendering of understanding always eludes us, it is but an illusion – "no translation is as understandable as the original. Precisely the most elusive meaning of what is said – and meaning is always a direction of meaning – comes to language only in the original saying and slips away in all subsequent saying and speaking. The task of the translator, therefore, must never be to copy what is said but to place himself in the direction

<sup>18</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford 2001, pp. 188–195.

<sup>19</sup> H- G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1977, p. 62.



of what is said (i.e. in its meaning) in order to carry over what is to be said into the direction of his own saying.”<sup>20</sup>

To sum up, language cannot constitute a common ground in the same way as universally shared mental content does, because it is precisely its opposite; a concept that by nature problematizes the existence of the common ground. The good will which Gadamer postulates, and which, incidentally, Derrida criticizes as will to power, seeks to neutralise what in principle can never be totally overcome. It is an attempt which never reaches totality of success: in other words, it is something by which we overcome an inherent *gap* rather than, as Davidson would have it, cross an inherent *plateau*.

It is not my intention to make a judgment as to the validity of either of the theories – their juxtaposition served the purpose of illustrating that intention based on definition of meaning, and/or of truth, is not a necessary prerequisite for the possibility affirming canon. Dasenbrock’s error was positing the choice in terms of two alternatives. The first is that we believe in universal values, such as aesthetics, and then we are in position to forcibly argue for the presence or absence of texts, which either do or do not fulfil the criteria of the standards we imagine to be appropriate. A canon is then a possibility. Second alternative is that we do not believe in universal values, believing them to be based upon conventions instead. Not only is there a conflict of interest when it comes to establishing what texts ought to be in the canon, which is merely a practical hindrance, but also the very idea of the canon is called into question, on the grounds, for instance, of proliferation of structural hierarchy typical only of some paradigms but alien and inimical to others.

I find the Gadamer/Davidson example coincidentally extremely convenient for a demonstration of the fact that such a binary juxtaposition is not necessarily the only option. The significance of what I believe to be and have discussed as an error on Dasenbrock’s side is, one could argue, rather marginal to the point of his discussion. Marginal but not inconsequential. Firstly, it should be carefully examined whether Dasenbrock’s error has not been any chance been, paradoxically a confirmation of his own theory. One could claim that I deem Dasenbrock’s argument to be faulty, because I have interpreted Gadamer’s intended meaning better than Dasenbrock did. As such, I have actually confirmed my opponent’s theory, although at his expense. Following this line of argumentation, it could be said that I have proven myself to be a believer in the intentionality of truth. In fact, however, this example merely brings out to the open the unclear and confused status of the relation between meaning, intention and truth. In my interpretation of Gadamer, I am not at all certain that I have captured his intention. My criterion

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

of interpretation of his tenets has been the paradigm of hermeneutics, which I know to be Gadamer's. I do, therefore, make a truth claim, in the context of that particular paradigm, and this truth claim I believe to be valid transparadigmatically. The only criterion at my disposal is precisely the knowledge of a tradition of a particular paradigm and so I can argue for the validity of my interpretation.

Of course I have determined "the truth" of the meaning of Gadamer's notion of good will, inasmuch as one understands, following Davidson and partially following Rorty, truth to be a paradigmatic consensus and argued belief. From such a perspective, the question whether this actually corresponds to Gadamer's intention is irrelevant. I am therefore appealing to the paradigmatically established notion of validity of meaning, without the necessity of resorting to intentionalism, with its, in my opinion, tremendous baggage of insurmountable practical and theoretical difficulties.

It seems to me that such a standpoint is perfectly sufficient for further discussion of values and aesthetics. Moreover, it more or less corresponds to Gadamer's notion of horizon-determined subject, Davidson's belief based truth and Rorty's paradigmatically defined standards. There is no need for further security of the subjectivity of writers and interpreters; we need some theory of truth, be it argumentative, rhetorical or belief based truth, but we can do without intentionality.

Now, to come back to the question of the canon or what I believe to be the original motivation behind Dasenbrock's text. All possible visions of canon, both appealing and unacceptable for Dasenbrock, are ultimately based on some notion of orthodoxy. This naturally entails the truth and intention based canon advocated in his book, but also, paradoxically conventionalist ideas of canon, which he criticises. His critique shows numerous, and, to a large extent, valid difficulties which accompany such a notion in its conventionalist version. To encapsulate Dasenbrock's extensive remarks: conventionalists advocate an orthodox canon but their fundamental principles cannot logically accept the notion of orthodoxy. I am inclined to agree with Dasenbrock, but, as I have hopefully demonstrated, we can talk about validity of interpretation without resorting to intentionalism. On the basis of such interpretations, we can make value judgements, concerning, for instance, aesthetic value, keeping in mind that standards by which we make such judgements are a result of discourse practices of a given paradigm. But we do indeed run into dire straits if we want to validate our answer transparadigmatically. As a possible way out, one could accentuate the importance of the contextual origins of a given text. A hermeneutic paradigm is more justified to make judgments and validity claims than an analytical paradigm, because it shares the text's historically determined conceptual schemes.

Yet, such an approach entails numerous hazards, such as, for instance, the problem of validating judgements across paradigms or the frightening possibility

of silencing discussions on the basis of authoritarian truth-claims, etc. There is at least one other way out, however, which I hope the Gadamer-Davidson example has illustrated. A value judgement could be made precisely on the basis of possible interpretative controversies. A canonical text would be one which for instance, produces transparadigmatic or trans-communal discussion, not on the basis of shared understanding or a common conceptual bridge, but rather on the grounds of uncovering and illuminating the interpretative differences between such communities. A text which is fraught with interpretative dangers from all sides, but one which, through its potentiality for productive misinterpretations, captures and approximates another's paradigm or community. This would have indeed very little to do with orthodoxy, and keeping in mind our initial remarks from the sphere of the sacred, it would constitute an oxymoronic, "heretical" canon of differences.

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