

Arnold van Ruler's critique of a sense of the tragic: An appraisal

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Abstract

This contribution is aimed at provoking a discussion of the widespread contemporary retrieval of a sense of the tragic. It focuses on the rather vehement critique of any theological affirmation of the tragic in the work of Arnold van Ruler. His theology offers a radical and sustained affirmation of the goodness of God's creation. He argues that our problem is not being finite creatures, human nature or the Creator, but human sin (due to the human will, not human nature), understood primarily as guilt before God. The analysis of Van Ruler's position adopts the strategy of catena and commentary based on Volume 3 and Volume 5C of his *Verzameld Werk* (2009, 2023). It concludes that Van Ruler's sharp critique of the tragic may well be appropriate but that he underestimates the problem of so-called natural evil. With Martin Versfeld, a retrieval of the comic, either alongside or instead of the tragic, is advised.

Keywords

comic; evil; natural evil; sin; social evil; tragic; Arnold van Ruler; Marthinus Versfeld

Introduction

Tragedy is the fruit of sin. Fundamentally, creation is comic.

– Martin Versfeld (1990:74)

There can be no doubt about the widespread theological retrieval of the tragic in contemporary Christian theologies. One finds that across different geographical contexts, confessional traditions and theological schools. One may also find that across divisions of race, gender, sexual orientation,

class, culture and caste. Other contributions to this colloquium will surely attest to that with ample references to recent literature.

Allow me to state two very general and indeed generalising impressions in this regard:

The first impression is that those in positions of relative power and privilege are attracted to a notion of the tragic because of a recognition of natural sources of (human) suffering (see Conradie 2006) – that necessarily threaten such power and privilege. There are many such sources, including accidents that cannot be attributed to human involvement, aging (the limited life cycle of cells), animal aggression, chance events (“accidents”, where the timing has gone wrong), disability, (natural) deselection, earthquakes, illness, injury, mortality, predation, uneven rainfall patterns, random mutation, transience, tsunamis, viruses, volcanoes, you name it. All these point to the vulnerability of the human condition – which is then open to a sense of the tragic. Accordingly, our underlying problem is limited power, if perhaps mixed with a sense of guilt.

The second impression is that those who are not in positions of power and privilege (or their theological spokespersons) are also attracted to the notion of the tragic because they sense that social sources of suffering (assault, multiple forms of injustice, murder, oppression, rape, slander, tyranny) interact with such human vulnerabilities. Sin is understood primarily as power, the power of the powerful, not as guilt. There is a recognition that our lives are not always within our locus of control. The tragic is then related to being the victims of the sins of others, to being sinned against (see Park 2009; for a discussion, see Conradie 2017, 2020a, 2020b). Nevertheless, the sense of the tragic is typically balanced by an even stronger sense of the joy of living. That is especially true of Indigenous forms of culture and spirituality, but may also be found in many a struggle. For example, the blues and the tragic are deeply intertwined, with the music often giving voice to profound suffering, hardship, and loss, while also serving as a powerful, cathartic release and a way to find joy and community *through* shared pain, transforming personal struggles into artistic expression.

Indeed, it is a genre that confronts life's harsh realities but also affirms life, turning despair into something meaningful and even celebratory.¹

Suffice it to say, then, that at the heart of current theological discourse on the tragic lies the distinction between so-called natural evil and social evil. Put bluntly, is social evil the cause of natural evil (as Augustinians argued traditionally) or is the opposite the case (sin is caused by human anxiety over finitude – as some would argue following Paul Tillich and Edward Farley)? In my view, to avoid ascribing intentions inappropriately, this distinction is better understood as between natural and social sources of (not only) human suffering. This distinction cannot be a hard one, since humans are part of nature, while in the “Anthropocene” the geological impact of human presence has become embedded in the Earth's rock layers for millions of years to come. Anthropogenic climate change and anthropogenic extinction are pertinent examples. Nevertheless, the distinction is necessary. I assume that discourse on the tragic revolves around diverging positions on this distinction.

In this short contribution, to provoke further discussion, I will go against the grain by countering such a retrieval of a sense of the tragic. To do so, I will focus on the rather vehement critique of any theological affirmation of the tragic in the work of Arnold van Ruler. His theology offers a radical and sustained affirmation of the goodness of God's creation. Our problem is not being finite creatures, human nature or the Creator, but human sin (due to the human will, not human nature), understood primarily as guilt before God.

Such a critique of the tragic is found scattered throughout his writings. It would be hard to offer a systematic treatment given how voluminous his writings are. For the sake of expediency, I will focus especially on Volume 3 and Volume 5C of his *Verzameld Werk* (2009, 2023), by searching for references to the tragic. I will adopt the strategy of catena and commentary. I will draw on some of the translated essays included in the volumes *This Earthly Life Matters* (2023) and *Consummation* (2025). Where necessary, I will offer my own translation of such quotations.

1 For these two sentences I made use of an AI overview, searching for “the blues and the tragic.”

“The Reformed view of being human” [1960]

In an essay titled “The Reformed View of Being Human” (in Van Ruler 2023a:155-176) that consists mostly of skeletal notes, Van Ruler includes a section on “Sin and grace”, a sub-section on “Evil is a fact” and then one on “Not tragedy, but guilt”. Here is the text in full:

A core of the biblical-Christian doctrine is that human beings cannot exculpate themselves: we cannot derive evil from something else – to the question “Where does evil stem from?” no answer can be given – because people have called it into being themselves – evil is at its core the fault of human beings.

People have pointed to a host of factors: the limitation and confusion of human insight – the finitude of human beings – corporality – materiality – the laws that govern the world – the phase in the development of the world process – the logical counterpart of the good.

Then we can explain evil, derive it. Then that also becomes unavoidable, necessary. A tragic element is then found within human beings, namely evil. That they do what is wrong! That, then, is unavoidable and necessary!

Here, there is a contradiction between the Greek (and generally pagan) and the Christian analysis of being human. The one excludes the other: *tragedy and guilt*.

Nothing less than humanness [humaniteit] depends on this: *if people are tragic, they are further understood as no more than a fragment of a larger Being, which is divine-demonic*.

Obviously, there are thousands of aspects that could tempt us to interpret evil tragically. But these are murky borders. At the core, we must maintain that human beings are guilty. Just as we must maintain at the core: human beings are free (Van Ruler 2023a:168).

Let us take this as a position statement: According to Van Ruler, there are two mutually exclusive visions of the human condition: the tragic (which is mostly Greek and essentially pagan) and the Jewish-Christian vision, which does not shy away from human sin as the root of evil.

“Barmhartigheid en gerechtigheid” [1960]

In another lesser-known but still profound essay on “Compassion/Charity/Mercy and justice”, Van Ruler (in 2023b:516-533) again claims that the Jewish-Christian tradition is distinctive in shying away from a sense of the tragic and by acknowledging our guilt before God:

Carefully considered, only Israel has known about this guilt; the rest of humanity has always, when it came down to it, realised itself as tragic – thus dreaming the dream of paganism (Van Ruler 2023b:219, translation XXX).

Van Ruler’s argument is remarkable. He acknowledges that mercy and justice are closely related in the diaconate. Mercy and justice are both required as an appropriate response to the plight of the poor and oppressed (he uses such terms!). There is a sense in which justice refers to the right order, to what one deserves, as is expressed in Aristotle’s notion of *suum cuique*. But what if one can no longer say, “They deserve such help,” but must add, “They themselves are guilty too.” If help is then offered, nevertheless, Van Ruler describes that as compassion, “the rumbling of the bowels” (2023b:518). God’s mercy is extended to the guilty person simply because she or he is God’s creature. This is why a sense of the tragic does not suffice.

For Van Ruler (2023b:518), compassion is something more feminine and motherly. However, he warns against a then contemporary tendency (probably with reference to Dorothee Sölle) to regard suffering as the be-all and end-all: Christ then becomes only the suffering Christ, God becomes the sufferer (his omnipotence as powerlessness), creation is understood as already a sacrifice, all of being is illuminated exclusively from the cross. He states rather bluntly that this is no small danger and “an Indian, Buddhist perversion of the gospel” (2023b:519). Why? Van Ruler insists that being is not suffering! Sin is guilt. We must find other, higher, and more decisive perspectives in justice and mercy than in pity.

Van Ruler acknowledges that it is not always easy to recognise sin as guilt (2023b:518). It may be confused with the role of chaos in God’s creation (see Van Ruler 2023a:130-144). But then God created such chaos too – to play with it. God called such creative chaos good, too. That is not our deepest

problem or the root cause of suffering. Only Israel recognised that the problem is guilt before God and the world.

“De taak van de kerk in een bedreigde wereld” [1962]

In this essay on the task of the church in a world in peril (in Van Ruler 2023b:449–459), written around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Van Ruler recognises the impact of evil and the all too real threats to life. However, he insists that the world is not ontologically threatened. There is a theological tendency to see existence as threatened by contingency, by the power of *Das Nichtige*, but this can only invoke despair and must be resisted, given that the world is there because of the sovereign will of God. Like communism, the church has the expectation that this world will be transformed towards what Van Ruler describes as “the social ideal”. It sees that as the sanctification of the earth towards the kingdom of God. To do that, the problem of evil needs to be confronted at its roots. The diagnosis is that of sin. The church not only proclaims that salvation from evil is necessary but also that it is possible:

But here too, the church nourishes an old confidence. She asserts not only that redemption is necessary, but also that it is possible. All evil is essentially sin, and all sin is essentially guilt. It is something that humans have added to creation. Therefore, it is something secondary. Therefore, the world is also redeemable. That is the profound sunniness in all the church’s talk about sin. The world, when it comes down to it, is not tragic. It is not threatened by a fatal necessity. If it is threatened, it is only by human guilt – although this guilt can become condensed in the form of demons and Satan (Van Ruler 2023:454, translation XXX).

Note here how Van Ruler denies the ontological reality of sin. It is strictly speaking not something, but the privation of the good. It cannot exist on its own but only as a parasite within God’s good creation. By contrast, the notion of the tragic does seem to carry ontological weight. There is some prevailing shadow side to being created.

“The sunny side of sin” [1965]

In this famous, brief and delightfully provocative essay, Van Ruler (in 2003a:211–213) identifies five sunny aspects of the Christian notion of sin. Here are two of them:

As a first sunny aspect, I refer to the notion that sin is something secondary. It is a second-comer. It is something that was superadded. The first, the original, the fundamental, is not sin, is not evil! Nor does evil belong to it; it forms no part of it. What comes first is creation. That is the work of God. That is nothing but good. No darkness resides in it. The deep darkness of evil was added to that.

This is an unbelievably crass statement. Israel began with that. The Christian church has taken that over. In our times, that is contested from all sides. Nevertheless, it contains a deeply sunny aspect: Being is deeper than sin! That I am is more fundamental than that I am a sinner.

A third sunny aspect moves in an entirely different direction. Where does evil come from? Evil at its root is sin! Where does sin come from? Sin comes from nowhere! It just is. It is called into being by humans. Sin is guilt.

That is quite an honour for human beings. They can do quite a bit. They can sin. That is: they can call evil into being. That almost amounts to creating. Just as God called the world, the good, into being from nothing, just like that, for no reason and from nowhere, so human beings called evil into being.

Human beings stand in freedom. They are *more* than cogs in a machine. More than a wrinkle in the ocean! More than, or at least different from, plants and animals. These are also there, but they cannot sin. That human beings can do.

That is the sunny aspect to sin: human beings are not tragic beings who have to let evil, as fate, pass over them, but they are, however, guilty beings: they themselves have called evil into being (Van Ruler 2023:212).

Note how clearly Van Ruler distinguishes here between natural evil and social evil. This is because of his radical affirmation of the goodness of God's creation and therefore the goodness of the Creator. Although such goodness is usually blithely affirmed, Van Ruler recognises that this is widely contested in his times – as it is in ours. How dare the Creator declare creation to be good given “natural evil”?

“Joy as the quintessential Christian experience of life” [1966]

Van Ruler was prone to depression. It is therefore quite striking to see his emphasis on joy in the titles of some of his popular publications (for a discussion, see Van Keulen 2009). In this regard, he was also a source of inspiration behind Jürgen Moltmann's perhaps better-known *Theology and Joy* (1973).

Here is a paragraph from his essay on “Joy as the quintessential Christian experience of life” (in Van Ruler 2023a:249-252) where he relates that to a sense of the tragic:

The Christian experience of life [levensgevoel] springs from the gospel. The gospel tells us that the Saviour has come. Therefore, we are not going to throw up our hands in despair, not even when we observe our own extravagant wickedness and miserableness. Evil is sin. Sin is guilt. *Existence is not tragic for that reason. Evil is not necessary either. It depends on the will of the creature. It is something that has been added. In other words, evil is secondary.* Therefore, the world is redeemable. And the Saviour has come, the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. He has risen from the dead. He has sent the Spirit. Therefore, we have once more received the spirit in our bodies. Along with the apostles, we move into the world, each person every morning when she or he goes to work (italics added).

Van Ruler can be quite blunt and cryptic. He is clearly overstating the case in saying that “Evil is sin. Sin is guilt.” I would suggest that he is stating it this way to provoke. Of course, there is a need for further qualification. Evil cannot be equated to sin, even where it is understood as the consequence of sin. Sin is not only guilt but also power, even where the roots of sin as power may be in sin as guilt. The question is where making room for

such qualifications may lead one. The key here is to note that he is resisting a view where evil is regarded as something necessary. This is why he is resisting a sense of the tragic.

“The human being as sinner” [1970]

This is one of Van Ruler’s last essays (included in Van Ruler 2023a:214–222). As he often does, given that he was invited to give multiple lectures, Van Ruler repeats much of his earlier argument but does take the analysis a few steps further. It is best to quote his argument on the tragic in full and to italicise the sentences where the tragic is mentioned explicitly:

That they are sinners is not all that can be said about human beings. Nor is it something sombre. It is, however, generally felt to be that. In the church – at least in a good church – all is about sin, hell and condemnation. Cold shivers run down your spine. If, in your youth, you have been trained year after year, you spend your whole life in mortal fear. An element of pressure enters all of existence. The seriousness of life becomes deadly. No giggle comes forth. All that is worldly is to be rejected because it is sinful.

That is how it is frequently perceived by outsiders. That is how it is often perceived by insiders as well. It cannot be denied: ministers and church people have given much inducement to this image. But here I do not add that it is quite understandable. It is completely incomprehensible. It is based on a fundamentally mistaken view of the matter. To understand humans as sinful is in no way a sombre matter, but in some ways a sunny one.

To support this statement, I now give only one argument. There is, without doubt, evil in the world: an unimaginable mass of evil. The life of the person is assailed by it. The world can perish in a nuclear war. The crucial question is: How must we understand evil? Where is it located? What is its being [wezen]? What are its prospects?

The truly sombre answer to this question is as follows: Evil is embedded in the structure of this cursed society. Or also: Evil emanates from the inherited burden that we carry with us on account of our physical descent from animals. Or, more deeply

based: Evil is in some way or another given with created reality as such.

These are truly sombre answers. Moreover, they lead us to a fundamentally pessimistic experience of life. Then, after all, we are victims of evil. It is necessarily given with being or being human, or with human society. There is no escape from it. Whoever experiences [doorleven] that in its full profundity concludes that existence is in itself an evil. We can feel so helpless about it that it drives us to despair. This despair makes it seem that there is but one single escape – suicide. Today, we get the impression from world news that a rage for suicide is on the rise. Precisely the most sensitive young people, who suffer most from the evil in the world, turn their hands against themselves.

We can capture it in a phrase: the tragic sense of life. We perceive evil as so intimately interwoven with human existence that we can understand our being there and our being human only as a tragic fate.

Precisely for that reason, the preaching that human beings are sinners, no matter how old-fashioned it is, is particularly relevant. In our time, nothing is *more* needed than the age-old emphasis of the Christian centuries – that human beings are sinners.

That, too, is an answer to the question of what evil is. But it is no sombre answer. It is without question a sunny answer. It is the only and authentic sunniness in a world immersed in evil. Why? Because it says that evil does not come from anywhere! It is not given with the created being. Therefore, it also does not belong to it. *There is no tragic fate of which we are the victims.* It is an addition, added to the created reality. From the impenetrable depths of the human will! There evil is based. It is not fate; it is guilt. Here we should not, of course, think only of human beings as individuals. There are – also in this respect – human beings in their communality. That is why the Christian church has always spoken of the fall and inherited sinfulness. But even in saying this, they had the will in mind, the original and communal will. That is perverted. That wills the perverted.

We are not victims but perpetrators of evil. That is what is sunny. Through this preaching of human beings as sinners, we are freed from the tragic sense of life and redeemed to the public, personal confession of our communal guilt. Naturally, we also sigh about the consequences of sin. In that respect, we seem to be victims. And we are that too. We live under God's judgment. But the core and essence of sin does not lie in its tragic fate but in guilt.

That too is sunny. No tragedy but guilt! Not something belonging to [creation], but something added, thus secondary and accidental! Human beings as creators of evil: they have called it into being out of nothing. That is, as it were, the honour of humanity! And because evil is something secondary, the world and life can again be redeemed from it! The gospel tells us that this total redemption of the totality of reality from total perdition is not merely a possibility but also reality. It has been given to us in the Mediator! So, we may look evil in all its depth in the face. The Mediator is a match for it.

Those who have not yet discovered these supremely sunny aspects in the orthodox preaching that human beings are sinners have never listened to it properly. Perhaps we should add to this: orthodox preachers and believers themselves have also understood and applied the matter so sombrely that they were a hindrance to the proper discernment of these sunny aspects in it (Van Ruler 2023:215–217, *italics added*).

Van Ruler was quite a performer in the lectures that he gave. He probably knows that he is pushing such a counter-intuitive argument, but is inviting his audience to consider viewing the world in this way. It seems that he is persuading himself accordingly. It is indeed deeply counter-intuitive to suggest that what is truly sunny about the human condition is that we are not victims but perpetrators of evil. Why? Because the alternatives, that the problem lies with human nature, nature or the Creator, are far worse. If that is our problem, we will need artificial intelligence, genetic engineering or something like that to solve our problems. Or perhaps we must usurp God's role by becoming divine ourselves. Homo Deus! (see Conradie 2024). Lurking in the background here is Van Ruler's engagement with Nietzsche's critique of Christianity: He affirms Nietzsche's call to stay true to the Earth

but then, as part of God's good creation (in response to the then-current theology of the death of God). There is some room for a postgraduate project here!

Some further reflections on natural and social evil

There can be little doubt that Van Ruler's critique of the tragic is related to the problem of understanding the relationship between social evil (for Van Ruler the result of human sin, understood as guilt) and what is nowadays described as natural evil (for Van Ruler probably a contradiction in terms, better understood as natural sources of suffering) (see Conradie 2018b).

One may also say that this problem becomes pinpointed in theological reflection on death and dying. Clearly, there is a theological depth dimension to death when understood as judgement by God. Death is, in this case, more than mortality but punishment for human sin. The wage of sin is death, at least according to the apostle Paul (Rom 6:23). But is a distinction between mortality and death not necessary? Should we not accept the biological inevitability of the mortality of all multicellular organisms? Moreover, should we not accept such mortality as forming part and parcel of the finitude of creatures, as part of God's good creation?

In an essay titled "All Things New?" [1968], Van Ruler (in 2025:227–230) grapples with this problem explicitly. He explains how odd and unimaginable the hope for the resurrection of the body is. He regards this article as a kind of summation of the Christian faith in God as Creator, Saviour and Consummator of all things. He then adds this:

In modern times, we have so much trouble with these things because we can no longer innocently assume that death is for human beings a punishment for sin and for creation a curse from God on account of human beings. Is death not natural? Does it not at least have a natural side? Is biological death, at least, not a reality that is given with biological life? In other words, is death purely punishment and a curse? Did the leaves not fall from the trees in paradise?

It would seem that faith and natural science are at odds with each other in this matter. Theology has not found any solution to the problem thus far. It has merely made some concessions. However,

to do so, it had to withdraw itself into the spiritual world quite a bit. If one does not play along, one is left without an answer. One can but say that one does not know exactly how things fit together. Perhaps one can add that *in the idea of natural death, the tragic view of life, which is life-threatening, lies lurking*. What a sunny thought [it is] that death is nothing but punishment and a curse! (Van Ruler 2025:229).

One can hear Van Ruler's admission of the results of modern science on mortality but also his reluctance to consider its theological implications. What lies behind this is his insistence that our primary problem is not being created as finite and mortal but human sin. Christian theology is not called to address scientific discussions on mortality but to focus its reflection on the gospel message of atonement for sin as guilt. Why is death a punishment and curse sunny? Because the only problem is then human sin, and that can and indeed has been resolved in Christ and through the Spirit. If the problem is God's creation and in fact the Creator itself, that would be far worse.

On being finite creatures

What, then, should one make of the tragic? It is possible to limit an understanding of the tragic to engagement with (human) finitude. The issue that must be addressed is then not evil, whether natural or social, but understanding what being a finite creature entails, restraining our desire for the infinite. This would include a sense of finite knowledge, finite capabilities and a finite exercise of power. It must also include the temporal dimensions of finitude in the form of a sense of transience, namely the death of each moment (perpetual perishing), of each day and of each year gone by. There is certainly pathos here, but is this really what a sense of "the tragic" refers to?

At the heart of this is the need to come to terms with our mortality. We need to answer Van Ruler's own question more clearly than he does himself: Yes, the leaves did fall from the trees in the Garden of Eden, albeit that this image is best understood as a social construct. Yes, all multicellular life is necessarily mortal. No, death (mortality) did not enter the world due

to human sin, although by now all deaths (of all organisms) are affected by and cannot be separated from the impact of what Christians call sin. Yes, natural selection based on random mutation plays a role in biological evolution (a theme Van Ruler was reluctant to address).

And, yes, Christian theology still has not found any solution to the underlying problem thus far (see also Conradie 2018a). A lot of recent work has been done on the Christian faith and biological evolution, but much of this embraces the notion of the tragic – which would be to Van Ruler’s dismay (see Van den Brink 2020, though). We still need to find ways of affirming that all of this (notably mortality, predation, animal aggression, natural selection) forms part of God’s good creation. Van Ruler’s own famous essay on “God and Chaos” (in 2023a:130–144) may help us in this regard by affirming the creative role of the forces of chaos in God’s creation. Accordingly, God is not merely a God of order, but also one who created chaos, who chaotifies things where necessary and who employs chaos creatively. God created chaos to play with it.

One may also say that this debate hinges upon the exegesis of the term *φθορά* (*phthora*, i.e., perishing, disintegration, decay, futility) in Romans 8:21. In a recent essay Christina Gschwandtner shows how, for Athanasius and the Orthodox tradition following him, the fundamental underlying problem is death and perishability: “We are redeemed not primarily from sin, but from being subject to *phthora*, although sin is obviously closely connected to it and indeed one of its marks.” (2025:77, note 9). And: “Christ has liberated us from death and destruction so that we can participate in the divine life, thereby being no longer subject to perishability and ultimate corruptibility” (2025:77).

Van Ruler is clearly inclined to follow the Western tradition of Augustine (see Versfeld 1990) and Anselm here. He would detect in the Eastern Athanasius something of a Hellenising tendency. Although he does not shy away completely from any notion of *theosis* (a theme worth exploring), Van Ruler insists that any suggestion that creatures will be taken “up” into the very being of God is foreign to the Christian faith. For him, salvation means the opposite, namely that God pours out God’s very being in and over God’s creation. God will dwell amongst us on earth, amongst humans, instead of us dwelling with God in heaven. Heaven is not where we originally came

from (contra Plato), or where we are going back to. The invisible forms part of God's creation. Heaven is best understood as provisional storage space (see Van Ruler 2025:109-114). Consummation means that all things (the whole of history) will be renewed, not that it will be replaced by something new (see Van Ruler 2025, Conradie 2025). Hence, his critique of the tragic.

What, then, does "the tragic" refer to? This question, I suggest, is open for further discussion. The danger, as I see it, is that the tragic can be understood in terms of that which is temporal, material, earthly or bodily. That is a road leading towards Manicheism and Gnosticism. That is the road that Van Ruler tried his best to avoid, as did Augustine before him.

Perhaps there is a need to retrieve a sense of the comic instead of, or at least alongside, the tragic. Martin Versfeld (1990:72) may be on the right track here to observe that the natural does not come naturally. Sin is something spiritual; it is a distortion of the natural. Satan is the primal Manichee. The corruption of creation does not proceed from the darkness of matter upwards, but from Lucifer, the Light-bearer downwards. This yields Versfeld's suggestion that creation is fundamentally comic: "Humour is the contemplation of the finite from the point of view of the infinite" (1990:74). Van Ruler would concur: God created the world to have fun. Creation is God's joke on us, a good joke (see Van Keulen 2009).

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