Individual Atonement and Collective Guilt

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Abstract:
Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement* raises the question of individual guilt within the greater context of collective responsibility with the onset of the atrocities committed during World War II. Set before, during and after the war, the novel's main characters are forever affected by an error of judgment, not verified for evidence, on the part of Briony Tallis. Parallel to this, the responsibility of the German people, as well as of Europe in general, is brought into question based on German philosopher Eric Vogelin's analysis of collective action in *Hitler and the Germans*. The analysis develops the notion of evil when it does not appear as such and reflects on the consequences of one's actions, whether collectively or individually.
Key words: Guilt. English Literature. WWII. fiction.

Expiação Individual e Culpa Coletiva

Resumo:
O romance de 2001, *Atonement* (*Reparação*, em tradução do Brasil, *Expiação* em tradução de Portugal), de Ian McEwan, traz à tona a questão da culpa individual dentro do contexto de responsabilidade coletiva diante das atrocidades cometidas durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Tendo como cenário os anos anteriores, durante e após a guerra, os personagens principais do romance são afetados por um erro de julgamento não comprovado de Briony Tallis de forma permanente. Ao mesmo tempo, questiona-se neste artigo a responsabilidade do povo alemão, e da Europa como um todo, com base na análise feita pelo filósofo alemão Eric Voegelin da ação coletiva em *Hitler and the Germans* (Hitler e os alemães, 1964; 1999). Referida análise discute a noção do mal quando este não aparenta sê-lo, e reflete sobre as consequências das ações, sejam essas coletivas ou individuais. Este artigo discute a relação que existe entre os eventos do romance e a tragédia da guerra.
Palavras chave: Culpa. Literatura inglesa. Segunda Guerra Mundial. Ficção.

At the beginning of McEwan's novel *Atonement*, we find that Briony Tallis, a young girl of 13, is "one of those children possessed by a desire to

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have the world just so." (McEWAN, 2001, p.5) The young Briony, who is spending summer in the family home in the country, struggles through a sultry summer day in order to get her vision of the perfect play across and present it to her visiting brother, Leon, and his guest, Paul Marshall. The first part of the novel is filled with Briony's musings on the difficulties of staging a play, which eventually leads to the realization that, for a writer, there seems to be much more freedom in story-telling. If, on the one hand, Briony is amazed at the revelation that "the social world was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique …" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 45), she marvels at the moment when she realizes that the different voices and points of view can liberate her writing from the constraints of having to deal with real life people.

While Briony is living in her own personal transitional world, between childhood and adulthood, creative freedom and discovery, the need to determine her own life and the need to have others recognize her importance; in the 1930s, England itself lies in a space caught in-between – on the one hand, its glorious past as an empire dominating the world, on the other, its yet unknown place and role in Europe before the II World War. The analogy of this transition places Briony as a young girl prone to make irreparable mistakes in her naivety, and England, former empire, in the decadent indolence of the pre-war years, side by side in their egotism and neglect. The girl's self-centered mind sees wrongdoing only as a vague or abstract possibility; the nation, initially, refuses to see the threat of war and destruction posed by Hitler's Germany, unaware of the extreme lengths that evil could go to.

In this same line of thought, we must take into consideration another character in the novel that is central to the narrative: Robbie Turner and his position in the Tallis family. Robbie is a servant's son, but a protégé of Briony and Cecilia's father; a young man brought up to believe that "he was happy and therefore bound to succeed." (McEWAN, 2001, p. 115) It is this belief – and the promise of future support for his projects - that leads him to the brink of good fortune in his young life, allowing him to foresee his prospects bound for success, as a doctor, a scholar, a man of means:

> He had never before felt so self-consciously young, nor experienced such appetite, such impatience for the story to begin … Twenty years would sweep him forward to the futuristic date of 1955. What of importance would he know then that was

> obscure now? …He thought of himself in 1962, at fifty, when he would be old, but not quite old enough to be useless, and of the weathered, knowing doctor he would be by then… (McEWAN, 2001, p.118)

Not only does he visualize a future filled with knowledge and serenity, he sees himself in the company of Jack Tallis' daughter, Cecilia, a reality that would defy the class differences between them – a fact that still had a great deal of significance in Britain in the 1930s. What he neglects to see, as if he were a hero in a Greek tragedy, is that his overt confidence and the underestimation of the workings of a young girl's mind will be the undoing of the world he has imagined he could live in, and the future will be nothing like the smooth path to full happiness he has envisioned. Thus, in the same way as Briony's personal world is undergoing change, based on misconstrued understandings of the real world, and the clear future Robbie envisions is threatened by over-confidence, England is on the brink of what some considered an unexpected war.

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The years before World War II were a show of forces between Fascist countries, such as Germany and Italy (Spain maintaining its exclusion from the conflict), and those such as England and France who were unable to build the necessary resistance to confront the thunderstorm coming upon them. In 1938, only three years after the novel's outset, Great Britain finds itself in the position of attempting to avoid Germany's growing aggressiveness and signs the Pact of Munich – allowing Germany to take over the Sudetes of Czechoslovakia. Neville Chamberlain, then Prime Minister, on his return to England declared that he had brought back "peace with honor". Winston Churchill responded dryly that, in fact, what England and France had chosen was dishonor, and what would eventually result was war. Churchill was right. When Germany invaded the rest of the country a few months later, it was clear that England's attempt to appease Hitler had not been successful. In fact, the policy of trying to negotiate and calm Hitler's ambitions had actually fostered German expansion in Europe. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, England declared war against Germany. Chamberlain resigned in 1940 and was replaced by Churchill, a steady bastion of resistance and obstinacy which led the English in their endurance of all the hardship of war.

In the midst of the oncoming storm, the Tallis family seems to represent a lifestyle tenaciously attached to traditions and customs – some of a more general nature, some pertaining to the characteristics of this particular family. There is a certain blindness concerned with maintaining small-world privileges of class and wealth that leads to a denial of the swift changes taking hold of everything around them, and that would alter their world forever. Nevertheless, the mother, Emily Tallis admits, though she claims to need order and control over the household, that whatever plans there could be, the future is uncertain and self-preservation essential:

> She could send her tendrils into every room of the house, but she could not send them into the future. She also knew that, ultimately, it was her own peace of mind she strove for; self-interest and kindness were best not separated. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 91)

The changes gradually taking place in English society – and that will roll in thunderously with the onset of war – are felt with unease even by Cecilia and Leon, younger, more attuned to modern concepts, but still blinded by their own prejudices. These involve both Paul Marshall's entrepreneurship (proud of the success of his Army chocolate bar to be distributed to troops) and Robbie Turner's ambition. In relation to the former, the siblings share a snobbish inside joke which brushes off Marshall's drive and its implications for the future (his wealth relies solely on the "success" of conscription for a war that, to him, is happily imminent). As for Robbie, when finding that Leon has invited him over to have dinner that night, it is Cecilia who displays evident discomfort. Though Marshall expresses the unease in a pompous comment about Robbie as one of those "grammar school types at Oxford" who were clever but who "could be resentful" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 66), Cecilia's feelings are more complex. Though having studied with Robbie at Cambridge, she had felt a distance was in order, hardly knowing exactly why, for the two had been brought up as sister and brother. The fog clouding her vision will soon enough be lifted as she realizes the feelings she has for the cleaning lady's son.

The blindness of the family is analogous to the collective blindness, or lack of understanding, or refusal even, to understand the tragedy that is underway in Germany and that will also change Europe forever. Thus, if on

the one hand what we see is the Tallis family forcefully letting go of a lifestyle they hold on to dearly, but which is slipping from their fingers, on the other hand we observe that England must confront its role within Europe once more. For after having faced the Great War (1914-1918), the experience of the nation with the horrors of combat is ingrained in the memory of many. The role Britain will play in the conflict that is about to begin, however, will ultimately rearrange the country's significance within the European framework.

Along with the political/economic implications of the Second World War, it is essential that any observer of the past keep in mind the new forms of atrociousness committed during the war beginning on European ground. And here once more there is a connection with McEwan's novel. Evil often seems to be a central theme for the author as noted in an interview given in 1978 in which he states that "one tries to imagine the worst thing possible in order to get hold of the good." (FINNEY, 1978, p. 69) Thus, the evil at the core of Briony's actions is the matter of discussion here, for we often find ourselves dumbfounded when we ask whether Briony has committed a crime, a terrible mistake, or has basically acted upon her own false beliefs and those of others around her. Evil certainly permeated the events that took place during the war, no matter how these are explained. As German philosopher Eric Voegelin states in *Hitler and the Germans*, "a world that allows itself to be shaken by an irrational man is contemptible" (VOEGELIN, 1999, p. 81); the statement does not allow for escape from the responsibility on the part of individuals and the community that fostered such irrationality, that sat back and allowed atrocity to happen. Such is the case of the Tallis family who, by allowing its judgment of an innocent man to be influenced solely by the words of a 13-year-old, is equally contemptible. In light of this, Briony's search for atonement for her actions – and the irreparable consequences that unfold - is at the core of the narration. Nevertheless, a question is posed: is it possible for a nation – Germany - and, in fact, the world, to atone for the evil committed against a group of people joined together by cultural and religious ties such as the Jews? Analogously, is Briony's deed against Robbie – and, by extension, against Cecilia - atoned for by the end of the narrative, one which is weaved masterfully throughout, and which leaves us readers more perplexed at its outcome than pacified?

Atonement begins by presenting Briony's quest for an answer to a fictional dilemma. As a young future writer, the girl breathes and moves in a world of possibilities, a world in which facts might be managed or altered in the world of the creator-writer. As she witnesses the most perplexing scene

taking place between Cecilia and Robbie, and which will be revisited fictionally many times in her future, she is torn between asking for explanations and absorbing the events:

> … she wanted to chase in solitude the faint thrill of possibility she had felt before, the elusive excitement at a prospect she was coming close to defining, at least emotionally. The definition would refine itself over the years. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 50)

Though her youth and protected upbringing have not allowed her to perceive the many subtleties involved in the creation of fiction, nor the complexities lying between reality and fiction, Briony is faintly aware of how, more often than not, situations can be misinterpreted, and, furthermore, that that which is created may lead the creator to unknown paths, for

> it wasn't only wickedness and scheming that make people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you. (McEWAN, 2001, p. 50)

Besides all this, it is made clear that Briony's family life has never forced her to attend to any of the daily chores, drudgeries and realities that could release her, even if for a moment, from her own (over)active imagination. As Cecilia, her older sister, goes about the house filling in the role their mother seldom assumes due to her frequent migraines, Briony is left to her own devices, holding on to her role as creative genius of the household for as long as she pleases. In Briony's adolescent mind, whatever she sees or feels or even experiences, though it may be misleading, is first and foremost the material for fiction. In this sense, she has still not fully discerned the clear distinction between fact and fiction, between real life and imagination. Despite realizing "the strangeness of the here and now … (the) power one could have over the other", to her, "how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 49) is still an abstraction. All in all, the world is a source of fictional experimentation, an inspiration that, as a young girl, she has barely started to understand.

It becomes clear beyond a doubt, as the reader makes his or her way through the narrative of *Atonement*, that the epigraph of McEwan's novel, an excerpt from *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen, is key:

> "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting? … (McEWAN, 2001)

In the Austen novel the main character, Catherine Morland, is reprimanded for not distinguishing between reality and fiction, for not being able to see the truth with clarity, since she has been absorbed in too much of the fanciful and fictional world of the fantastic novels she loves to read. It is clear by a careful reading of the epigraph that atrocities and evil can be committed from a foolish interpretation of the facts, from a refusal to think rationally and morally. Furthermore, spreading false information and convincing others of the soundness of the facts is easily and perversely done, despite good judgement. The connection with the main character of *Atonement* is made clear: the moral responsibility of judging right from wrong is crucial in understanding how Briony, differently from the adults around her, has not quite fully developed her sense of justice and moral rectitude. Austen's novel allows Catherine Morland to "atone" for her slight errors in judgment, as is often the case in the novels by this author. Realization to Austen's heroines arises from a sense of shame, often brought on by some older or wiser character's reprimands. In *Atonement*, the myopia of the Tallis family members is pronounced and takes on different forms depending on whose character's perspective comes up in the narrative. The reader is given the opportunity to have insight into almost every character's inner ponderings: I say *almost* because, though the reader can see Mrs. Tallis' perspective as that of a member of an old aristocracy that resists the changes around her; though we have a clear picture of Cecilia's restlessness and desire, besides, evidently, Briony's ambition and curiosity; we are not given much insight into the feelings and thoughts of the two characters who actually cause the damaging misunderstanding, Paul Marshall – Leon's ambitious, money-minded friend - and Lola Quincey, Briony's older cousin, disturbed by her parent's notorious divorce. Thus, the epigraph serves as McEwan's warning to us readers as well:

we will be taken on a fictional rollercoaster ride and made to wonder about the injustice of the world and the moral bearings of those who apparently stand as strongholds before society. It thus becomes gradually harder and harder to maintain our distance as experienced and insightful readers.

The characters of Lola and Paul Marshall are especially significant in this discussion for they raise the question of there ever being a possible atonement for an evil caused, on their part, for practical reasons. The pair ends up, apparently, unscathed, untouched by the events that gradually destroy the Tallis family as it was – but, then again, we, as readers, are not allowed much insight into their thoughts. The fact is, however, that the couple actually profit not only from Briony's false testimony, but from the carnage of war as well. Thus, if for many the war disrupts the future that could have been, for the Marshalls, their future lies in the what can be obtained from war (as the Amo Bars become a basic staple for troops) and, concomitantly, the removal of any possibility of making that which is wrong right again. The Marshalls future and survival are guaranteed by the cowardice and inaction of Briony, who is unable to speak up against their marriage, a union that will allow the crime that Robbie Turner is accused of to remain. Their life is also made possible, financially speaking, by the years of battle in which soldiers (such as Robbie) take to the front the chocolate bars Paul Marshall has created in the 1930s, hopeful and confident that the war would certainly take place, in spite of all contrary opinions.

Analogously, the inability or unwillingness to speak up and reveal the atrocities committed during WWII was the reason for so much of the barbarity to be allowed to go on. It is essential here to go back to Voegelin and his ideas on the involvement of the German people in the atrocities of war. One of the philosopher's most important arguments is that of mastering the present which, in fact, is a problem of moral consciousness demanding a great deal of spiritual self-examination. In this aspect, one must recall Briony's attempt at spiritual cleansing in elaborating the story of Cecilia and Robbie's love and its outcome. If for the Germans, for a long time, there was a denial of any sense of guilt and, therefore, a lack of moral awareness of the evil committed, for Briony the sense of guilt is the element that leads her to tackling the past, though there is not one event in the past that can actually be rewritten.

For ages the issue of guilt and complicity with evil has been in the minds of scholars belonging to a number of areas, from religion to anthropology to literature itself. Moreover, the issue of the "guilt of the

guiltless", developed by Herman Broch in his 1950 novel *The Guiltless*, i.e., the evil in those who do not appear to be evil, is even more amazing. To Hannah Arendt, this is connected to what she refers to as "the banality of evil" in *The Life of the Mind,* and which Voegelin sees as the collapse of the spirit. This gives rise to questions that Voegelin brought up in his studies on the issue of evil in the Nazi regime: How does it occur that humans abandon rationality and common sense? To him, this failure lies in seeing oneself as the center of the universe, a path that leads easily to dehumanization. And, if one is dehumanized, it is easy to reduce the rest of humanity to a mere instrument for one's aggrandizement. Therefore, in this sense, Briony's lack of maturity to judge correctly reflects the abandonment of common sense not only on her part, but, more seriously, on the part of those around her from whom common sense would be expected. In this sense, it is clear why Voegelin declares that "the society should always be an expression of the morally mature persons within it". (VOEGELIN, 1999, p. 38) Regardless of the straightforwardness of this reasoning, both Hannah Arendt and Voegelin emphasize, in different ways, the significance of not falling into easy statements about the "evil nature of the human race, about original sin, about innate human 'aggressiveness' (ARENDT, apud VOEGELIN, 1999, p. 39*),* since this could easily sweep away individual responsibility, thus making everyone and no one guilty.

What scholars such as Voegelin call our attention to is the context in which a man such as Hilter can develop – within German society, within the surrounding democratic nations of Europe, within a context of spiritual and rational decay. In this decay, a second "reality" is created to such an extent that, according to Voegelin, "the man lives in what he imagines, and what he imagines takes the place of reality …" (VOEGELIN, 1999, p. 129). Though for Briony a second reality is enabled by her imaginative powers, regardless of the existence of a reality set down by the (real) actors of her "fiction", that this second reality could have taken over the minds of her whole family can only be explained by their inability and unwillingness to see Robbie Turner as a man, and one who could arouse the interest of a member of the family, Cecilia.

According to Voegelin, "reason and spirit are the two modes of constitution of man, which were generalized as the idea of man," (VOEGELIN, 1999, p. 86). In different ways and to different degrees, humanity strives in its search of the divine, and thus, using a Greek term, it is theomorphic. As Voegelin posits, "the specific dignity of man is based on this, on his nature as theomorphic, as in the form and in the image of God." (VOEGELIN, 1999, p.87). Though it is not the aim of this paper to go into

theological discussions on the existence of God, one must call attention to the danger that is at hand when man loses the *ideal* of God, the image of humanity as made up of individuals that are able to transcend the physical world. The loss of dignity comes as a result of accepting that a man can be easily destroyed in the hands of others, and, from there, irrationality ensues. Thus, as Robbie Turner sees the family he once imagined supported him and his ideals turn against him, his place in humanity is put to question as well. By exchanging his prison sentence for service in war (thus being sent to France in 1940), Robbie is not driven by an ideal of fighting for his country, but for fighting for his own freedom and dignity as a man. The irony lies in the conditions in which Robbie finds himself in France – the dehumanization of life is made more than apparent as he and his companions trudge to Dunkirk in a retreat that did nothing to rally the morale of the British troops. His dignity is on a tightrope throughout the ordeal, a lifebuoy he clings to in face of every degrading situation he witnesses in France. Nevertheless, Robbie is led to ponder on the destruction of civilization, analogous, in his view, to the destruction of his own life: "First his own life ruined, then everybody else's." (McEWAN, 2001, p.278).

Yet, what keeps Robbie alive is the one element that can symbolize the transcendence that remains amidst all the horror of war and his personal destruction. Cecilia's letters are close to his heart, literally, carried with him under his uniform, side by side with the wound he has suffered in a German attack. To touch them and recall their content allows him to move ahead and still dream of the future, albeit the emotional and physical pain he feels. The letters' intense words of love have been masked, by force of the prison censors, who considered Robbie an overly sexualized being (proven, in the trial against him, by his actions towards Cecilia and Lola when at the Tallis household), in references taken from works of literature they both love so well. The letters' content, in which "Robbie and Cecilia had been making love for years" (McEWAN, 2001, p. 262) is not in consonance with their actual contact face to face, for when they do meet, before Robbie is sent overseas, "they understood how far they had run ahead of themselves in their letters." (McEWAN, 2001, p. 262) Nevertheless, the literary characters, scenes or works mentioned by the lovers in the letters reveal the desire and feeling one has for the other in a clever ploy to deceive those who would keep them apart. It is literature that both allows them to connect to each other and their desire and to transcend the ordeal of their everyday lives. Hence, the connection Robbie has with his previous life is tenuous, barely keeping him sane, as he witnesses destruction and carnage all around him. What space can literature

and hope have amid all the horror of war? There is no easy answer, but in McEwan's novel Robbie is shown to feel that "he could become again the man who had once crossed a Surrey park at dusk … swaggering on the promise of life…" (McEWAN, 2001, p.290). The words in the letters are the remaining link, the sole light that carry him on.

It is truly paradoxical that the very element that has in a way been at the root of the destruction of a man such as Robbie, of his life and love, is that which allows him to keep a spark of light in the darkness of his existence. For it is a certain fact that Briony´s over imaginative mind was the cause of a series of actions that could not be undone. Her fictionalization of life undid life itself, unraveling the threads that kept her family and world together. It dehumanized, through misinterpretation, through stupidity, one may say, the existence of one individual. One may call Briony's fault intelligent stupidity, in Voegelin's words, one that disturbs the balance of things. Where Briony could have unraveled threads of truth, attempting to actually understand what had happened to her cousin Lola, to perceive how well she was being manipulated by the young girl who had been attacked (to glimpse, though tenuously, at the complexities of human desire), she falls instead into a set of pre-conceptions that destroy life. That, on the other hand, it is fiction itself that allows Robbie and Cecilia to maintain the insubstantial link that keeps them alive is all the more touching.

Perhaps the reference to the word "evil" mentioned above will take people by surprise, whether in regards to the actions of a 13-year-old girl in a novel or to the actions of individuals at war. However, it is necessary to see this from a philosophical point of view. Paul Ricouer, who spent much of his studies dwelling over the subject, refers to evil not as a thing, "an element of the world, a substance in any natural sense." (RICOUER, 2007, p. 26). To Ricouer, "evil necessarily comes under the problem of freedom. That is why "one can be responsible for it, take it upon oneself, confess it and fight it." (RICOUER, 2007, p.26 – 27) It is in the face of evil that an individual's freedom and responsibility is called into order. To the author, evil is a challenge and a possibility for an individual to reflect more deeply and refine one's logic. It is absolutely clear that intellectual and spiritual disorder damages the moral basis of a community. Therefore, the lack of fair judgement on the part of Briony, her family (with the exception of Cecilia) and the judicial system, creates a space for evil to exist. Not once supposing that any member of the elite to which it belongs could have perpetrated such a crime as rape, the Tallises and their guests are responsible for the evil that is to come:

death, suffering, the dissolution of ties, the end of love. German society at Hitler's time adopted a similar pattern of behavior – whatever was happening to others could be easily accepted, as long as the fabric of society could be salvaged and those supposedly responsible for economic and political woes punished. However, at the core of it all, beyond the economy and the political struggles for power, was the long reigning chaos in this society's spirit and mind.

At the close of the novel it is 1999 and Briony is heading towards the former Tallis residence, now transformed into a hotel and events center. Her reflections revolve around how she has attempted to tame the past, soothe her role in the tragedy that has taken place in her family. There is the bitter realization of how well the Marshalls have done, the undeniable truth that Paul Marshall is considered a benefactor of culture, science and the arts. Briony has attempted several reconstructions of the past and of the love story between Cecilia and Robbie. Her own career, as a novelist and writer, has carried on and permitted her, ultimately, to ponder on the role one is granted in this activity. For Briony, "the problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?" (McEWAN, 2001, p.479). With this power, Briony, the mature author, has arranged the fate of the lovers Cecilia and Robbie, though the harm done can never be undone. Has she achieved atonement? One cannot say for sure. However, it is possible that whatever wisdom she lacked as a young girl, may now have been obtained. Ian McEwan in an interview in which he referred to the attacks on September 11, 2001, states that "imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity". Moreover, he believes that novels can show "the possibility of what it is like to be someone else …" (SUTHERLAND, 2002). In this sense, Briony has given the lovers the freedom to live out their love, in spite of her false accusation and the war. If insight into the feelings of others is enough to fictionally redeem the wrong committed by an individual, it is not certain that such a solution is the key to expiate the atrocities of war. It is correct to state that any evil committed by someone will be endured by another, and therefore, our role as moral individuals cannot be simply to stand by and watch. The connection between reason and reality must be upheld and, more importantly, though the past cannot be altered, accepting and acknowledging the events that took place may allow atonement to arise in the future.

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