

To Preserve or To Perfect? Rousseau's Take on Hygiene

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Résumé de l'article

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Résumé

L'hygiène a constamment été sous-évaluée chez Rousseau. Cet article examine les raisons qui ont conduit à une telle omission et réévalue l'hygiène comme une source majeure d'inspiration pour Rousseau. Une telle réévaluation suppose de réhabiliter l'hygiène comme une branche de la médecine en perpétuelle expansion au fil du XVIII^e siècle. Si Rousseau a emprunté beaucoup de concepts et d'approches à l'hygiène, en retour les hygiénistes l'ont accepté comme un des leurs. Cette réévaluation de l'apport de Rousseau à l'hygiène a également pour effet de transformer notre vision de l'histoire de l'hygiène aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles : son approche ne menait pas en effet à l'hygiène publique, mais plutôt à ce que l'on pourrait nommer une « hygiène politique ». En estimant à nouveaux frais la contribution de Rousseau à l'hygiène, nous serons davantage en mesure d'éviter une vision téléologique de ce champ.

Abstract

Hygiene has been constantly undervalued in Rousseau's work. This article considers the reasons that led to such a dismissal and reevaluates hygiene as a major source of inspiration for Rousseau. Such a reevaluation implies rehabilitating hygiene as an ever-expanding subfield in 18th-Century France. If Rousseau borrowed many concepts and approaches to hygiene, hygienists accepted in return Rousseau as one of their own. Reexamining Rousseau's take on hygiene has major implications on the way one conceives the evolution of hygiene over the course of the 18th and the 19th centuries: his approach did not lead toward "public hygiene," but toward what might be better defined as "political hygiene." By reappraising Rousseau's contribution, we will be better equipped to avoid a teleological conception of hygiene.

Mot-clés : Rousseau, hygiène, anthropologie, morale, politique, matérialisme, républicanisme

Keywords: Rousseau, hygiene, anthropology, morals, politics, materialism, republicanism

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To Preserve or To Perfect?

Rudy Le Menthéour

The reason why Jean-Jacques Rousseau proves particularly relevant for our times relates not only to his historical importance as the inventor of the modern autobiography or as a source of inspiration for anyone who attempts to revive the ideals of classical republicanism. His prominent role in the field of hygiene—both physical and moral—explains why he is still so meaningful in our troubled times. This probably sounds like an exaggeration, but my main endeavour in this article will be to show why we should take hygiene seriously in spite of its current rather trivial status.

According to the “Frenchman”, a character that personifies French public opinion in Rousseau’s *Dialogues*, we should read Rousseau’s theoretical works backwards, thus starting with *Émile*, because it contains the ultimate principles of his system¹. As we know, of all Rousseau’s works, *Émile, or On Education* borrows most extensively from hygiene:

He rails a lot against medicine and constantly plays the physician; he is unwilling to take care of a pupil that would be too delicate: his treatise is to be used for healthy and robust children only. Most of the precepts he keeps rehashing are very good, but he borrows them from all the medical dissertations that have been defended at the university these past years².

And yet, most scholars consider hygiene a non-essential aspect of Rousseau’s system. Before trying to redeem this flaw, it would be logical to understand

¹See *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* (1990), eds. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, vol. 1, p. 211.

²*Journal de Bachaumont*, quoted in Rousseau, *Correspondance Complète* (1970), t. XI, Appendice 260, p. 288. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

the origin of this defect. I see four main reasons for dismissing or underestimating hygiene in Rousseau's work.

First, Rousseau's attraction to hygiene has been obfuscated by his numerous attacks on medicine and physicians in general. That being said, many readers in his time noted Rousseau's contradictory stance as he referred frequently to medical theories.

Secondly, for most of the 20th century, many Rousseau scholars were obsessed with proving that Rousseau was a legitimate philosopher, and thus, according to the German idea of philosophy, that he developed a perfectly consistent system. In this context, hygiene appeared as a mere distraction in the quest for Rousseau's philosophical rehabilitation.

Third, the plasticity of the field of hygiene in the long 18th century is forgotten. According to its classical definition, hygiene was but one of the five parts or branches of medicine. Alongside physiology, pathology, semiotics and therapeutics, hygiene was defined as the art of preserving health by controlling the six non-naturals (air, diet, exercise, sleep & watch, evacuations, passions). But by the end of the 18th century, hygiene had become something much broader. A disciple of Félix Vicq d'Azyr (considered a forerunner of public hygiene), Moreau de la Sarthe thus defined hygiene as "the application of [physiological and medical] knowledge to the usual art of living³ and to the manner of establishing a common basis for health, morality and happiness." (Moreau de la Sarthe 1800, v) As early as 1801, Jean-Noël Hallé made a distinction between private and public hygiene, and considered *mores*, national character, monuments, human races and public education as legitimate topics for his lessons. To sum this up, during the Enlightenment, hygiene expanded from the physical to the moral domains and from the individual to the political or public fields.

Lastly, by focusing on Rousseau's spectacular use of Buffon's natural history in his *Second Discourse*, the elements of his "theory of man" (Rousseau 2001, 9:31) have been too exclusively tied to Buffon's anthropology without any reference to hygiene, in spite of the fact that Buffon offered many hygienic rules and that his approach to natural history was applied to hygiene by physicians, like Charles-Augustin Vandermonde (*Essai sur la manière de perfectionner l'espèce humaine* [*An Essay on the Manner of Perfecting the*

³The original French reads as "*art usuel de la vie*", a term borrowed from Cabanis.

Human Species], published 1756, six years before *Émile*). Rousseau’s “theory of man” may well have affinities with hygiene in a broad sense as with the natural history of man.

Having explained, albeit inexhaustibly, why hygiene has constantly been underestimated in Rousseau’s work, I will consider three main questions that deserve our attention: what is the significance of hygiene for Rousseau’s “theory of man”? What is the relation between Rousseau’s focus on hygiene and its metamorphosis as a (sub)discipline in early modern France? Lastly, what are the political implications of Rousseau’s reliance on hygiene, if any?

What Hygiene meant for Rousseau

One of the clearest signs that Rousseau took hygiene seriously can be found in his description of *Sensitive Morality, or The Wise Man’s Materialism*, a project he started working on during his retreat at the *Ermitage* in 1756-1757, which he never completed (if we are to believe the narrative provided by his *Confessions* more than a decade later):

I was meditating a third work whose idea I owed to some observations made on myself [...]. It has been noticed that in the course of their life, the majority of men are often unlike themselves and seem to be transformed into entirely different men. I did not want to write a book in order to establish such a well-known thing: I had a newer and even more important object. It was to look for the causes of these variations and to pay particular attention to the ones that depend on us to show how we could direct them ourselves so as to make ourselves better and more certain of ourselves. For it is indisputably more difficult for a decent man to resist already completely formed desires which he ought to overcome, than to forestall, change, or modify these same desires in their source if he were in a position to go back to it. [...] By probing myself and by seeking in others what these different manners of being depended on, I found that in large part they depended on the prior impression of external objects, and that – since we are continuously modified by our senses and our organs – in our ideas, in our feelings, in our very actions we carried the effect of these modifications without being aware of it.

The striking and numerous observations I had collected were beyond all dispute, and by means of their physical principles, they appeared to me suitable for providing an external regimen which – varied according to circumstances – could put or maintain the soul in the condition most favorable to virtue. From how many errors would reason be saved, how many vices would be kept from being born if one knew how to force the animal economy to favor the moral order it so often troubles! Climates, seasons, sounds, colors, darkness, light, the elements, food, noise, silence, motion, rest, all act on our machine and consequently on our soul; all offer us a thousand almost guaranteed holds for governing in their origin the feelings by which we let ourselves be dominated. (Rousseau 1995, 5:343)

We might ascribe different sources to this sophisticated project; we might, for instance, argue that Rousseau was in fact inspired by a Stoic model of a circumstantial morality (i.e. second-rate prudence) as opposed to perfect wisdom. But in my view, this project was hygienic to its core. Granted, this hygienic approach was updated to fit the most recent French philosophical developments, namely the introduction of John Locke’s sensationalist method by Abbé Condillac. When enumerating the causes of the modifications of the self, Rousseau combined different categories of sensations (sounds, colours, noise) with some of the traditional “non-natural causes” (food, motion, rest). The project was also hygienic in purpose, as “sensitive morality” was aimed at *preventing* instead of curing passions, at predisposing one’s will to virtue instead of engaging in a direct fight against vice.

But Rousseau’s project of an “external regimen” went well beyond the mere hygiene of passions (i.e. a focus on the sixth non-natural), as he considered the interaction of body and soul. By attempting to master a set of physical causes in order to avoid corrupting one’s soul, Rousseau was offering his own “hygiene of the soul”, thus renewing a tradition established by Galen in his treatise known under its Latin transcription, *Quod animi mores corporis temperamenta sequantur*, which translates to “That the Faculties of the Soul/Mind Follow the Temperament of the Body.” In this text, the physician analyzed the influence of physical causes on the health of the soul. This approach was so common one could read its rather formulaic description in Robert James’ *Medicinal Dictionary*, a work made accessible to French readers thanks to Denis Diderot’s translation:

Health is a right Disposition of the Body, and all its Parts, for performing their several Functions [...]. The Word is, also, transfer'd to the Mind, and in that Sense means a just Disposition of the rational Powers, and the Passions, for their proper Actions; and this, in a great measure, depends on bodily Health⁴.

Before Rousseau, Antoine Le Camus had already engaged in a similar project. In his preface to the *Medicine of the Mind* (1753), he expressed his intention in these terms:

Having carefully considered the physical causes that, by modifying bodies in different ways, also alter mental dispositions [“disposition des esprits”], I convinced myself that, by using these different causes, or by artfully imitating their power, one would manage to redeem by purely mechanical means the vices of both our understanding and our will. (Le Camus 1753, VII–VIII)

Robert James' definition is also a good testimony of the way many physicians dispensed with the metaphysical conundrum of *soul/body* relations, by referring to the *mind/body* couple. This evolution betrayed a progressive shift from the old-fashioned *moral* hygiene to a new *mental* hygiene. But we should note that Rousseau does not follow this more or less overtly materialistic trend, whereas Le Camus fully embraces this discursive evolution. Although their conceptions of a hygienic virtue first seem similar, Rousseau and Le Camus were far from sharing the same philosophical assumptions. Rousseau carefully avoided delving into physiology, whereas Le Camus was willing to base moral hygiene entirely on physiology.

Although Rousseau's project was never completed, hygiene, as an overarching approach, did prevail in one of his major works, *Émile, or On Education* (1762). I will not spend too much time listing all the rules of corporal hygiene Rousseau borrowed either from Buffon's natural history of man or medical treatises of his time. As many other promoters of hygiene in the Enlightenment, Rousseau praised breastfeeding and cold baths, and harshly condemned swaddling. Even if not all physicians would agree with his precepts,

⁴James (1743), vol. 2, s.v. « Hygieia, Hygeia ». Later published in France as the *Dictionnaire universel de médecine, de chirurgie, de chymie, de botanique, d'anatomie, de pharmacie et d'histoire naturelle...*, traduit de l'anglois [...] par Mrs. Diderot, Eidous et Toussaint... (James 1746).

Rousseau was clearly carving out an intellectual space for himself within the field of hygiene.

In fact, *Émile* was not only a treatise on education full of hygienic rules. The central concept of negative education bears much resemblance to the ideals of *natura medicatrix*. In this sense, Rousseau’s educative project seems very close to moral hygiene (see Le Menthéour 2012, 270–72): the “governor” has to prevent his pupil from falling into vice as long as possible. According to Rousseau’s moral theory, this means the governor should constantly strive to prevent his pupil’s self-love (“*amour de soi*”) from degenerating too easily or, in clearer terms, too early into comparative vanity (“*amour-propre*”). Indeed, given mankind’s current state of civilization, there is no way to escape the social curse of vanity, i.e. the absurd desire to prevail over others, including in their own minds. The emphasis on physical hygiene is also to be understood as a means to delay any consideration of moral matters. In Rousseau’s treatise, physical hygiene cannot be separated from moral hygiene: they are the two sides of a single approach to private education and, more generally, to the development of mankind.

When evaluating to which degree Rousseau’s moral theory is indebted to hygiene, we should not be misled by the condemnation of medicine and physicians in *Émile*. This kind of criticism had become common in treatises on hygiene that celebrated *natura medicatrix* while harshly condemning physicians that overestimated their own art and were not humbled by nature’s healing powers⁵.

What Rousseau meant for Hygienists

We have seen how Rousseau borrowed some of his concepts on hygiene in a broad sense. Now we consider the reverse: did Rousseau have any significant impact on the physicians of his time and on the overall trajectory of hygiene as a discipline later on? The answer is yes, on both counts. Rousseau did not invent the physico-moral approach, but he clearly reinforced a trend that

⁵From a theological perspective, Rousseau’s extensive use of hygiene was totally consistent with his pelagian tendency, that is, with his belief in the natural goodness of mankind, as opposed to any emphasis on original sin. This explains why his *Profession of Faith* fits well in the general structure of a work that claims to be both a treatise on education and a theory of natural goodness.

was already there when he published *Émile* in 1762. Some critics (such as Anne Vila) have already stressed how close Rousseau and the famous Swiss hygienist Samuel Auguste Tissot were, so we will not spend too much time on their highly significant friendship (see Vila 1998, 182–224).

Although physiological causes were frequently summoned by Tissot, his whole argument aimed at developing a new form of moral hygiene that could gain the same public authority as religion. His ultimate goal was not at all to impose a deterministic view of mankind, but to improve the way of life relating to certain categories of the population more vulnerable to diseases. Those “at risk” included “people in general” (i.e. commoners), men of letters (“*gens de lettres*”), people of fashion (“*gens du monde*”, i.e. high-class city dwellers whose tastes were shaped by the Court) and teenagers (prone to masturbation, considered a self-destructive practice)⁶. Although Rousseau did not address each of these highly vulnerable populations in a separate admonition, he strove to change people’s way of life, starting with high-class parents and their degenerate offspring. In spite of this more general approach, Rousseau and Tissot were exactly on the same page. While Rousseau got inspiration from hygienists, a well-known hygienist like Tissot paid his tribute to Rousseau very early on. In a letter to Rousseau from 1762, right after the publication of *Émile*, Tissot praised his correspondent in these terms:

I will benefit from your observations, and I will learn from you the only useful art in medicine—the art of observing. You will see, Sir, in *l’Avis au Peuple*, p. 520, that we almost share the same opinion on this Science... *L’Onanisme* will finally prove to you that there was a physician that saw to its fullest extent the danger of this odious practice you attack so vehemently who was brave enough to reveal this peril⁷.

But not all hygienists would share Rousseau’s physico-moral approach to medicine. As a matter of fact, there was a another trend within the subfield of hygiene, namely a tendency to deliberately alter the old classification of

⁶See, respectively, Samuel Auguste Tissot, *Avis au peuple sur sa santé* (1761) ; *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1758) ; *Essai sur les maladies des gens du monde* (1770) ; *L’Onanisme* (1760).

⁷Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Letter 1966, Tissot to Rousseau, Lausanne, July 8, 1762, in Rousseau (1970, 239).

the branches of medicine (physiology, pathology, therapeutics, semiotics and hygiene) so as to merge hygiene and physiology.

Antoine Le Camus clearly participated in this second trend insofar as the mental hygiene he promoted would dispense altogether with the duality of body and soul and replace it with body and mind or body and brain. But this is not the only form that a new materialistic hygiene could take in the second half of the 18th century. Hygiene could also be conceived of as the radically new art of perfecting the human species, thus making obsolete the classical definition of hygiene as the art of preserving health. The most vocal representative of this trend was the author of an *Essay on the Manner of Perfecting the Human Species*, Charles-Augustin Vandermonde:

Nature, in all her works, has general laws from which she sometimes seems to stray depending on the circumstances. She keeps the first moulds of each species, which she uses to shape the models. She varies the formation of individuals, but remains constant in the creation of species. It seems that to animals and plants that are able to reproduce, she has given the faculty of altering and perfecting themselves, and that in spreading beauty and goodness everywhere, she has left us the power to modify them in a thousand different manners but without distancing us from the original imprint. It is up to us to awaken nature and elevate its works by perfecting the form of the individuals: we must transport seeds and flowers, change animals' climates, mate them with foreign males or with females from another country, mix and cross the races, and by these means, maintain a kind of general commerce among all the beings of the universe. (Vandermonde 2015, 85)

Vandermonde was not a particularly original thinker. In fact, he borrowed most of his ideas (and sometimes his sentences) from Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon's monumental *Histoire Naturelle*. But the radical novelty of his endeavour lay in the way he transferred Buffon's theory of the prototype from its original field (natural history) to hygiene. This audacious transfer allowed Vandermonde to invent what would later be called "eugenics" (Vandermonde 2015, 11–31).

So, when Rousseau aligned with advocates of the physico-moral approach, like Tissot, he was at the same time fighting a new brand of physiologi-

cal hygiene that was gaining traction during the years when he became a philosophical celebrity. From a broader perspective, Rousseau was taking part in a covert intellectual battle. By defending his own definition of hygiene, Rousseau was confronting materialistic thinkers (such as La Mettrie, Helvétius, Diderot, etc.) who were heavily relying on physiology to promote their views. And by doing so, he was also reclaiming medical authority for himself. To put it in other words, he played hygiene against physiology. Hygiene allowed him to oppose his own interpretation of circumstantial causality (“*causalité occasionnelle*”) to the linear causality that inspired most of the enthusiasm that deterministic philosophers felt towards physiology.

Toward a Political Hygiene

Rousseau’s relevance at some crucial moments of hygiene’s development in the 18th century now seems undeniable. But we should also consider that his hygienic inspiration had an impact on what we could call the “grand narrative” of hygiene’s evolution, from its limited definition as a branch of medicine (classical hygiene), to public hygiene (starting, at least in France, with Félix Vicq d’Azyr’s action at the head of the *Société Royale de Médecine* in the 1770s) and finally to the emergence of public health in the 19th century when the state became the protector of its citizens’ health.

If we are to believe Jacques Lambert’s brilliant study (Lambert 1991), there was a strong opposition between private or classic hygiene and public or modern hygiene. According to Lambert, public hygiene was developed mostly by non-physicians (administrators, veterinarians) or physicians that worked in very specific fields (for instance military hygiene). This distinction explains why 19th-century social hygienists criticized Rousseau: his work belonged to an old-fashioned approach that had been made obsolete by these new developments.

This interpretation is clear cut and attractive but not, given serious examination, entirely convincing: Rousseau remained an interlocutor for a disciple of Félix Vicq d’Azyr, such as Moreau de la Sarthe, precisely someone who belonged to the pioneers of public hygiene⁸. Moreau would sometimes criticize

⁸See Jacques-Louis Moreau de la Sarthe, *Esquisse d’un cours d’hygiène* (1800) and *Quelques réflexions philosophiques et médicales sur l’Émile* (1796).

some of Rousseau's hygienic advice, but he clearly considered him a valuable medical authority. More concerning is the fact that Lambert did not take into account the rise of "political hygiene", assuming we may name in such a way Jean-Noël Hallé's inclusion of political concepts and concerns within a hygienic discourse:

mores from the word *mos* = custom custom is a movement that makes us produce some acts = from the repetition of these acts derives mores an effect of habit = mores are a general habit that provides the ideas and actions of men gathered in society with a direction, a form whose aim shall be to induce them to the good, by relying less on precepts than on the impulsion resulting from habit and example =

= public institutions are an artificial means that supports custom and provides an example. They are special institutions authorized by public authorities in which men gather in order to enjoy common occupations and pleasures.

= to institutions one should add monuments – they are objects located amidst men and whose goal is to awaken among them the same impressions always directed toward the public good⁹

There is clearly a parallel between the art of predisposing an individual to private virtue (the main goal of Rousseau's *Morale sensitive*) and this art of predisposing citizens to public virtue. The *Lettre à d'Alembert* gives us some clues about how this might be achieved, for instance by relying on patriotic events or spectacles. Far from being marginalized or simply forgotten, Rousseau's hygienic approach seemed to inspire the public hygiene developments well into the 19th century. Michel Lévy, a prominent hygienist, thus echoed Rousseau's reflections in the *Lettre à d'Alembert* by celebrating "open air national theaters" ("*théâtres nationaux en plein air*") as one of the public institutions that contributed to the moral health of citizens in ancient times (Lévy 1869, 1:18).

Such a quest to preserve both the national character and people's health proves that public hygiene was first not completely distinguished from political hygiene. If there seems to be an ideological affinity between pelagianism and new hygiene (see above, note 9), republicanism and this new brand of

⁹Hallé (1801, 14).

hygiene are even more easily intertwined. One of the most common republican doctrines stated that no republican constitution was eternal, and that the best we could do was to slow down its aging as much as possible¹⁰. How to contain the decay of the republic: such was the ultimate political enigma that Niccolò Machiavelli attempted to solve in his famous *Discourse on the First Decade*. According to the Italian theoretician, the solution lay in a mixed constitution as exemplified by Sparta. He considered such a political regime the best way to escape for a time the curse of Polybian “anacyclosis” (i.e. the endless cycle of constitutional change, from monarchy to tyranny to aristocracy to oligarchy to democracy to ochlocracy and back to monarchy). Rousseau did not adhere to the ideal of a mixed constitution, but he did assign the legislator the task of delaying the decay of the body politic (*corps politique*) defined as an artificial body (the only natural society is family, according to the *Social Contract*).

A second republican commonplace was put forward by Machiavelli, who drew on Spartan anecdotes and maxims to be found in Plutarch among others: walls and fortifications were for tyrants only. A true republic did not need walls; it only required republican virtue and love of the fatherland. This inner citadel was what really counted in making a country strong. Rousseau totally adhered to this commonplace. His political art aimed at preserving not exactly the constitution, as in the phrase used in the US presidential oath, but the love of the fatherland (*amour de la patrie*). In his advice to the Polish rebels, he applied this Spartan model to Poland: “Thus leave your country wide open like Sparta; but like it build yourself good citadels in the hearts of the Citizens¹¹”. One of the main reasons why Sparta exerted such fascination over Rousseau – the so-called “arch-priest of laconism” (Rawson 1969, 242)– was probably that the Greek city constituted both a hygienic and a republican model long before it was appropriated by far-right ideology. Rousseau’s physico-moral approach thus had an enduring impact not only on hygiene as an evolving field, but also on Sparta as a political model (see Le Menthéour 2018). In other words, Rousseau’s political hygiene found perfect expression in Sparta.

When we consider Rousseau’s contribution, why should we use the phrase “political hygiene”, instead of the more common “public hygiene”? Because

¹⁰See among others Goldschmidt (1983, 755–57) and Viroli (1988, 163–64).

¹¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Government of Poland*, in Rousseau (1970, 221).

there is no confusion in his work between a literal and a figurative approach to the body politic. Rousseau remained faithful to classical republicanism by stressing the fact that body metaphors and comparisons applied to political theory (for instance constitution, regime, body politic, etc.) were only discursive figures and should not be read literally¹². For public hygiene to emerge as a discourse and an institutional practice in the 19th century, this awareness needed to somehow be eroded. For public hygiene, and later, for public health to be conceived as major and natural endeavours for the state, people (including administrators, politicians, state-agents, intellectuals) had to stop conceiving the moral health of the body politic figuratively, the way Rousseau did. This new paradigm surely did bring clarity, unity and efficiency to the hygienic enterprise, but there was a price to pay. This shift meant that it became more and more inevitable to forget the rich implications of moral health as a type of political empowerment, and to deprive hygiene of its republican undertones. Rousseau's specific brand of political hygiene becomes relevant again nowadays precisely because it gradually became irrelevant throughout the 19th century with the triumph of public hygiene. His physico-moral approach appears as a major source of inspiration if we wish to criticize the way public hygiene and public health have been confined to purely administrative and technical discourse, with no real reflection on either its moral nor its political implications. Rousseau's attempt to unite the art of preserving health and the art of preserving the polity, but also his insistence that there should be no difference between preserving and perfecting mankind makes his work more relevant than ever.

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¹²See Bruno Bernardi, "La place des référents scientifiques dans l'invention conceptuelle : une étude de cas", in Bensaude-Vincent and Bernardi (2003, 293–311) and Bernardi (2006).

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