Psychoanalytic Dialogues

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Online publication date: 23 February 2011

To cite this Article Bucci, Wilma(2011) ‘The Interplay of Subsymbolic and Symbolic Processes in Psychoanalytic Treatment: It Takes Two to Tango—but Who Knows the Steps, Who’s The Leader? The Choreography of the Psychoanalytic Interchange’, Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 21: 1, 45 — 54

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2011.545326
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2011.545326

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Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 21:45–54, 2011
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ISSN: 1048-1885 print / 1940-9222 online
DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2011.545326

The Interplay of Subsymbolic and Symbolic Processes in Psychoanalytic Treatment: It Takes Two to Tango—But Who Knows the Steps, Who’s The Leader? The Choreography of the Psychoanalytic Interchange

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Analyst and patient each come to the session with a set of emotion schemas, rooted in subsymbolic bodily and emotional experience, developed in the interpersonal interactions of their lives, and activated in the relational context of the session. Subsymbolic processes are systematic, organized forms of thought that continue to develop throughout life and that may occur within as well as outside of awareness. Argentine tango and the teaching of tango present optimal examples of processes that are systematic and subsymbolic, that occur within awareness and underly the intersection of internal organization and interpersonal communication. The goals of treatment include new integration of emotion schemas that have been dissociated in response to chronic or acute trauma or stress and new resolutions of earlier solutions that have proven maladaptive in the current contexts of life. In the analytic interchange, as in the complex interactions of the tango, subsymbolic communication provides the guide to bodily and emotional exploration and integration. In the treatment, the subsymbolic communications potentially open new connections to the symbolic mode, which then feed back to deepen the subsymbolic explorations, and new, emergent shared schemas are constructed.

This paper presents three contrasting perspectives on the interplay of implicit and explicit processes—or more basically, in my view, the interplay of subsymbolic and symbolic systems: the concepts of Maybe and Extra Possibilities in Argentine tango as taught by my tango teacher, Dardo Galletto;1 Philip Bromberg’s formulation of “ineffable” processes in the therapeutic interaction; and concepts from phenomenology and hermeneutics building on Freud’s concept of the nonrepressible part of the unconscious.

I’ll start briefly with the perspective of Argentine tango, then return in more detail to that later. Dardo knows that I am a psychologist, so he often calls on me in class to be a translator—not from Spanish to English, although that is needed as well, but somehow to help him to get from the subsymbolic experience in his body, via language, to the bodies of his students. Since I have devoted considerable time to investigating that process, I take it as a serious challenge. Of course,

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in all cases he shows what he means through his own movements, but he recognizes that is not
even enough; he wants the right words as well.

Dardo tells his students just to feel, not to think, not to use their minds—but he knows that
is not exactly what he means. I cannot find a way to explain subsymbolic processes to him or to
the class, but I try to tell him that we do have to think, but in a different way. He also frequently
directs us to “feel the ground,” use the “floor energy,” “feel our centers,” and he assumes that
these concepts communicate something to us. He tries to have us distinguish between focus on
the vertical direction—ankle, knee, hip, and center within our bodies—and horizontal moves,
which involve responding to the partner and moving together around the room. He tries to
explain that we must feel the other person, but we have to feel our own bodies first, and then
feel the other in our own bodies; that is the only way to feel the other. The center is the point
where the horizontal and vertical intersect and also where self and other connect. Then he
asks me to explain how all that works. I cannot explain the new work on mirror neurons and
embodied perception and tell him that he seems to have discovered that, but I try to explain that
psychologists, neuropsychologists, and psychoanalysts know quite a bit now about what he is
discovering in trying to communicate how to dance.

He has frequently used the concepts of “maybe” and “extra possibilities” and struggles to
explain what they mean, or what he means by them. Both mean we need to explore inside our-
selves and feel our partners to know what to do next. In the dance we need to have a moment
of waiting, not knowing what is coming next (the moment of *maybe*) for the dancing to be real.
What we do next *is not known*, in a sense does not exist until the two partners construct it, each
with his or her separate roles. In order to let this moment happen we (tango dancers) need to be
*balanced* and *grounded* in our own bodies, and to be *open* to the other at the same time, and we
need to *wait* to know ourselves and the other before we move. We need first to feel the parts of
our bodies, how they work, how to strengthen them; this is what allows us to be balanced and
grounded. He also helps us trust that it is okay to have the moment of not knowing what will hap-
pen next; in fact we must have that moment. Sometimes we will make mistakes, feel awkward;
that is necessary if we are really exploring.

Once you can do all that—feel your own body, be grounded and balanced, feel the other, 
wait to move till all that comes together and connects to a pattern—then you can do a dif-
ferent kind of exploration. That is where the *extra possibilities* come in. When the *maybe*
moment is part of you, accepted by you, happens naturally, then you will want to experiment
with the steps, to create new patterns. Here there are many interesting questions about how the
new patterns are created in both partners’ minds. Like all new ideas, the mystery is where the
new patterns come from, since they will be a surprise to the leader as well as to the one who
follows.

In my struggles to provide a connection from bodily experience in tango to language, I
have realized that tango provides a prime example of the distinction between subsymbolic and
implicit or unconscious processes. We focus intensively and explicitly on the bodily experi-
ences and movements of tango, within oneself and in relation to the other (and to the music,
the role of which I do not discuss here). The experience is conscious, focused, and organized, not
implicit. I’ll trace the significance of this process of focused subsymbolic exploration in relation
to psychoanalysis, and then return to the tango connections.
BROMBERG’S UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE AND THE CONCEPT OF THE INEFFABLE

In his 2006 paper “The Analyst’s Self-Revelation,” Philip Bromberg said that change “takes place not through thinking, ‘If I do this correctly, then that will happen’ but, rather, through an ineffable coming together of two minds in an unpredictable way” (p. 147). I have referred to this as Bromberg’s uncertainty principle (Bucci, 2010). I’ll try to deconstruct this principle and also extend it a bit:

For ineffable read subsymbolic but more than that.
For coming together read emotional communication but more than that.
For mind read emotion schema—including processing in sensory and somatic systems, not the intellectual entity sometimes thought of as mind.
For the concept of the unpredictable, we need to distinguish several levels: the necessary uniqueness of the moment and what the analyst knows and brings to the moment that may help to negotiate it.

The concept of ineffable was the central theme of the panel in which a previous version of this paper initially appeared (and of the 2008 Division 39 conference as a whole). There was a related conference in Rome in July 2007 on Psychoanalytic Theories of Unconscious Mental Functioning and Multiple Code Theory. Two of the speakers, Giuseppe Moccia and Giuseppe Martini, both members of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society, took us on a scholarly guided tour of psychoanalytic and philosophical thought concerning the domain of implicit or unconscious processes, starting with Freud’s (1915) original insight concerning the nonrepressible part of the unconscious: “Everything that is repressed must remain unconscious; but let us state at the very outset that the repressed does not cover everything that is unconscious. The unconscious has the wider compass: the repressed is a part of the unconscious” (p. 166). Since Freud’s time, the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics have more deeply studied and valorized that wider compass, as Martini (2007) and Moccia (2007) pointed out, giving it many labels and emphasizing many different aspects:

- the unrepresentable; the perturbing and ineffable sphere that escapes the clarifying ambition of interpretation (Martini, 2007)
- the reality that escapes the word (Heidegger, 1959/1982)
- the enigmatic question (Gadamer, 1989)
- the untranslatable (Ricoeur, 1970)
- the incomprehensible (both on a psychopathological level as referring to delirium, but also in more general philosophical terms, as referring to bodily experience) (Jaspers, 1963).
- the unthinkable, the unknown, unknowable, infinite without form (Bion, 1962)
- the unthought known (Bollas, 1987)

There are also related concepts in the writings of Ferenczi, Winnicott, Piera Aulagnier, Loch, Matte Blanco, Ferrari, and many others.

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All of these writers, philosophers, and psychoanalysts are attempting to characterize the same epistemological domain, but their characterizations are divergent and to some extent contradictory. The known that is unthought of Bollas is different from the unknown, the unknowable of Bion. And both are different from the incomprehensible of Jaspers, and the unrepresentable of Martini. The untranslatable of Ricoeur, and Heidegger’s concept of the reality that escapes the word are similar to one another but different from the rest.

I suggest that the conceptual struggle that we see here arises because all these writers are still trapped in the implicit contradictions of the classical psychoanalytic metapsychology, while explicitly they may reject this framework. Freud’s formulation of two distinct systems of thought within the psychical apparatus, including a system of thought outside the verbal categorical domain, was certainly one of his most profound insights. But in characterizing this system, Freud was caught in the inconsistencies of the energy theory that he himself formulated, as well as in his implicit valuing of language over nonverbal forms. On one hand, he characterized the primary process as a systematic mode of thought, organized according to a set of principles that he specified as the laws of the dreamwork. On the other hand, he also characterized this system as the mode of thought associated with unbound energy, the forces of the Id, chaotic, driven by wish fulfillment and divorced from reality. You can see this inconsistency throughout psychoanalytic theory, as in the comments of the writers I have mentioned here. We need to work through some of these implicit assumptions so as to develop a more veridical understanding of emotional meaning and emotional communication.

In the context of the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of today, in the theoretical framework of multiple code theory, I have pointed to a world of complex thought that is nonverbal and even nonsymbolic, that occurs in its own systematic and organized format, primarily continuous and analogic, that is rooted in our bodies and sensory systems, and that can be consciously experienced and comprehended but that is not directly representable in words. Such nonsymbolic, or what I call subsymbolic, processes occur in perception and as imagery, in motoric, visceral, and sensory forms, in all sensory modalities. Subsymbolic processing is required for a vast array of functions from skiing to musical performance and creative cooking—and for the interactions of ballroom dancing, especially Argentine tango. Subsymbolic processing in visual and other modalities is central in creative scientific and mathematical work; research mathematicians and physicists understand this very well. Einstein referred to sensory and bodily, particularly muscular, experiences as the basic elements of his thought (quoted in Hadamard, 1949, pp. 142–143).

Of greatest interest to psychoanalysis, subsymbolic processing is dominant in emotional information processing and emotional communication—reading facial and bodily expressions of others, experiencing one’s own feelings and emotions. All of these functions call for processing that is analogic and continuous, not discrete, and that occurs in specific sensory modalities, not in abstract form. We know this processing as intuition, the wisdom of the body, and in other related ways. The crucial information concerning our bodily states comes to us primarily in subsymbolic form, and emotional communication between people occurs primarily in this mode. Reik’s (1948/1964) concept of “listening with the third ear” relies largely on subsymbolic communication, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Bucci, 2001).

In the context of the cognitive science of today, subsymbolic processes are understood as organized, systematic, rational forms of thought that continue to develop in complexity and scope throughout life. They are modeled by connectionist or parallel distributed processing systems (McClelland, Rumelhart, & Hinton, 1989), with the features of dynamical systems.
All processing, including symbolic as well as subsymbolic processing, may operate either within or outside of awareness. Subsymbolic processing often operates within awareness, but we may not be able to capture it. Most of us have not developed the skills of focusing attention on this processing mode, although one can perhaps begin to learn to do this in meditation and using certain feedback mechanisms, as in the devices used for self-regulation of blood pressure, where people learn to listen to their bodies. We are not accustomed to thinking of processes, including sensory, motoric, and visceral processes that cannot be verbalized or symbolized, as systematic and organized thought; the new understanding of subsymbolic processing opens the door to this reformulation. It changes our entire perspective of pathology and treatment when we are able to make this shift.

This formulation cuts the theoretical pie in a new way. Subsymbolic processes are lawful and systematic, not chaotic. They are not driven by wish fulfillment; they can be both thought and known, in the senses of Bion and Bollas. But the specific psychical terrain that we are trying to explore can be mapped only partially onto words; if we try to place the signposts prematurely—apply general mappings that have been used in other terrains—we will find ourselves blocked or lost. The subsymbolic processes constitute the untranslatable, in the sense of Ricoeur; the reality that escapes the word, in the terms of Heidegger. They are not unrepresentable but do exist in what Martini (2007) referred to as the perturbing and ineffable sphere that escapes the clarifying ambition of interpretation.

Returning to Bromberg’s uncertainty principle, I have formulated the concept of “ineffable coming together” as emotional communication, which is largely subsymbolic. For “minds,” I refer to a more complex structure, the emotion schema, that includes components of all three processing systems: subsymbolic processes, symbolic imagery, and later language.

Emotion Schemas

Emotion schemas are types of memory structures that constitute the organization of the self in the interpersonal world. They are formed on the basis of repeated interactions with caretakers and others from the beginning of life.

The subsymbolic sensory, somatic, and motoric representations and processes constitute the affective core of the emotion schema—the source of the varieties of arousal and pleasure and pain that constitute emotional experience. In each event of life, the processes of the affective core will be activated in relation to the people, places, and activities that figure in that event; thus we build memories of people and events that give us pleasure or pain, that activate happiness, or dread, or a wish to attack. Autobiographical memory is built out of such events; this is the basis for the organization of the self in the interpersonal world.

The emotion schemas develop in an interpersonal context; the baby who laughs and smiles and has feelings of joy can see and hear the other person also smiling and laughing and making the corresponding sounds; the expressions of the other becomes incorporated in the schema of joy. If the child who cries hears sympathetic sounds and sees a particular facial expression, along with feeling a soothing touch, the child’s schemas of pain or fear will develop to incorporate responses of turning to others and expectations that others can help. If the caretaker typically responds to the child’s cries with annoyance or withdrawal, schemas of negative expectations and associated responses will develop.
Dissociation Within the Emotion Schemas

Every person has multiple emotion schemas, including schemas of self and schemas of others, integrated to varying degrees. Dissociations may occur within the schemas, and among them. Some degree of dissociation is normative and necessary to allow us to function smoothly in our lives; not every desire or expectation or response will be formulated in symbolic form (Bucci, 2007a, 2007b). In some cases, however, dissociations occur in response to events that are extremely painful, experienced as threats to life or to the organization of the self. With such dissociation, it is not only that we haven’t made a connection to symbolic forms, not only that the schema may never have been formulated, but that we avoid such integration. If the parent is herself or himself the source of the negative affect, acting in such a way as to elicit pain or rage or terror in the child, this type of avoidant dissociation will occur and will be crystallized and reinforced. We must avoid knowing who or what is the source of the extreme pain in order to go on with life, to retain the connection to the caretaker that is emotionally and physically essential for survival, and to maintain a sense of self. The initial dissociation is a life-saving event; if the dissociation is crystallized so that new emotional information cannot be taken in, it becomes the problem that interferes with life and brings patients to treatment.

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF THE ANALYTIC INTERACTION

Analyst and patient each come to the session with a set of emotion schemas, developed in the course of their lives, affected by events of life outside the session as well as by events within. The interaction is inherently unpredictable, as Bromberg has said. The meeting of the emotion schemas that have been activated is new and unique; this particular interaction with activation of these particular emotion schemas in each participant has never existed prior to the moment. The schemas that are activated are dominated by the somatic and sensory experiences of the affective core rather than by images of people and events, and in some cases will be dissociated, certainly for the patient, and also to a certain degree for the analyst. In such cases, the affective core of sensory and somatic experience is not connected to the source of the activation and the connection is avoided; thus both participants may be aroused in particular ways and may not know why. This interactive arousal, which is largely unsymbolized—feelings of rage or humiliation or despair, whose meaning is not known or is wrongly known—is the potential source and content of the therapeutic work; it is also the potential threat.

In a more general sense, the interaction is also unpredictable in that therapists today must negotiate this terrain largely without the explicit traditional guides of theory and technique. The analyst can no longer assume that there is a particular repressed scenario that is guiding the patient’s experience, that he or she is avoiding, and that can be uncovered. The analyst can also not assume a set of rules and parameters that define the correct way to work. These changes bring freedom from theories and techniques that do not fit; they bring the uncertainty of freedom as well.

Subsymbolic experience is the guide to the uncharted terrain of the analytic interchange. Both participants must learn to follow this, to receive and send signals that are outside of the symbolic domain.
The Uncertainty Principle of Tango

In tango, the leader and follower generally do not follow a specified sequence of steps; tango differs from other ballroom dances in that respect. Bodily communication is crucial; the leader needs to feel the follower’s position at every moment to enable him to signal the next moves; the follower needs to be poised to receive and respond to the leader’s signals. This involves a type of normative dissociation for both partners; the interaction occurs primarily in the subsymbolic bodily zone; verbal guidance is too slow, too limited, violates the flow of the dance. At every moment both participants need to be in the activated and open state that tango teacher Dardo Galletto calls “maybe.” The leader tries to signal a move—maybe it will work, maybe it will not; each partner needs to continuously receive bodily information from the other and continuously test and shift the signals to produce a response. The concept of maybe is Dardo’s uncertainty principle in tango, a true dynamical system in a technical sense, dependent on transmission of sufficient information to override uncertainty and exceed the response threshold. The state of “maybe” involves the capacity to rely on analogic information without symbolic guideposts, to remain suspended—sometimes on one foot—focused on the zone of subsymbolic processing, without the usual support of symbolic images or words. The interaction, following the track of the subsymbolic information, is usually more difficult when dancing with a new partner; each has to endure the risk of not knowing or misinterpreting the signals that are sent. Some people cannot bear the uncertainty: they want to repeat fixed routines; the fear of losing one’s balance and the humiliation of miscommunication feel too great. They do not get far in learning tango.

The subsymbolic communication, the state of “maybe,” the capacity to endure a stare of uncertainty are necessary for tango, but it is also true that they are not sufficient. Tango dancers also need to bring at least two additional psychic supports to the milonga, the dance: one is basic knowledge of steps and techniques, and the other is attitude. It is all very well to be open and suspended on one foot, but without some movement vocabulary, some knowledge of the positions, the communication cannot work. Here is one place where the symbol system must enter tango, as for any dance and sport. Teachers try to break down the sequences into their elements, to analyze the steps and techniques, to teach the names of the steps. They also analyze the ways to use the body and the feet—relax the hips, feel the upper and lower body separately, keep the upper body facing the partner—and the movements that are needed to signal the lead.

To a large extent, teachers work by showing their own movements as images. Dardo demonstrates a specific way of holding the body and of moving; the students watch and translate the moves to their own bodily systems. Dardo also emphasizes metaphor to characterize the movements, and then goes beyond that to characterize attitude as well: we must delight in our partner as in a delicious meal of grilled meat; we must feel our partner, not just love and delight but a far more complex range of feelings including aspects of dominance and submission and their consequences. We do not only relax our hips and turn our upper bodies, we walk like an Argentine woman (or an Argentine man, which is quite different). Dardo demonstrates how to do both; it is interesting to see a class full of New York professional women and men shifting (more or less) into those modes.

This symbolic communication is necessary for learning and teaching, and also may be necessary between partners when there is miscommunication. Was the lead unclear; was the follower
misattuned. (I can tell you now, as all of us Argentine women know, in tango when something goes wrong, it is the leader’s fault—whatever the Argentine men say.)

I have only presented the surface of the bodily and emotional complexity of tango here. Once all this and more begins to be in place, once the focus on parts of the body, or on particular steps or movements, is assimilated as part of the self, the extra possibilities between the partners can emerge. The two together can explore and develop ideas of action and interaction that go beyond what they have been taught. The learning process is a wavelike function for tango, as for any subsymbolic interaction; learning new movements will at some points interfere with the flow of the experience and at other times will facilitate it.

The Choreography of the Analytic Interchange

In analysis as in tango, the subsymbolic exploration and the connection to the symbolic domain, within the relationship, as well as within each participant’s autobiographical memory, are necessary for both participants. The patient is struggling to talk, or is not talking, or talking about not wanting to talk, or talking about how the analyst looks, or how the room smells, or whether the room is too cold or too hot. We can see the patient as beginning to enact a dissociated schema that represents a particular expectation about another person.

The analyst will be having his own struggles with this, determined, as the patient’s are, by the emotion schemas that are activated. There is a flow of subsymbolic experience going on within the analyst, linked to symbolic representation to varying degrees.

With the synergy of the moment, an interaction will occur that is both old and new: old in that it is based on the emotion schemas with which each participant habitually interacts with the interpersonal world, and with which each has entered the session, and new in that each is confronting a particular person, at a particular time and place, in a particular role, for the first time.

For both participants, it is necessary not only to be focused on subsymbolic experience and to respond to it but also to be willing to endure some degree of painful activation; the willingness to endure the activation in turn requires some capacity to contain it. As the arousal and the interaction proceed, both participants will be searching and exploring in their associations and responses, in their past lives, and in their present interactions; both will be attempting to talk about experience, to construct formulations that will enable them to explore together. The connections from the subsymbolic to the symbolic mode are necessary to enable understanding and communication of shared experience, to put down signposts in the shared terrain, and to open new exploration.

The view of treatment proposed here, in which both participants enter with schemas that are dissociated to varying degrees, both engage in exploration of subsymbolic domains, both make new connections to symbolic experience, is very different from a model in which a patient is viewed as coming in with unconscious experience that has been previously formulated and then repressed, the analyst has a neutral affective stance, and the analyst interprets the patient’s associations with the goal of insight and uncovering the repressed contents.

To work in the mode of uncertainty, the analyst, like the patient, needs to develop the skills of operating in the subsymbolic interactive mode. By virtue of experience and training and perhaps other factors, the analyst may develop this to a relatively high degree and may have somewhat more sense of safety in negotiating the troubled waters.
What does the analyst bring, what does the analyst need, to support work in this mode? Here are a few possibilities:

- In tango, the teacher or the experienced dancer has an advantage in symbolic vocabulary, not necessarily verbal. He knows a set of sequences and how to direct his moves. Similarly, the analyst has more symbolized emotional categories with which to identify what is occurring—not necessarily more categories with diagnostic names, not even more verbal categories, but more schemas, more meanings: this patient is like others I have seen, or others I have known or read about; this tangle is like others in which I have been caught.

- There are obvious differences in feeling states between therapist and patient on many levels, differences in degree of fear, of risk, and of pain with which they enter the therapeutic relationship. Beyond these, there is also a general difference in attitude that is not so obvious. I have suggested elsewhere (Bucci, 2007a, 2007b) that analysts have developed, implicitly, a capacity for flexible shifting in self states, a capacity to find different parts of themselves that are genuine but context determined. This involves a particular analytic attitude that I characterize as a normative and adaptive dissociated mode, not unlike the mode of the actor who is immersed in a role, but with more uncertainty. The state that is activated in the therapist in the session, the love or hate or fear or shame, is fully genuine at the moment, necessarily open to some degree of risk, but in the context of a background knowledge that it is only one way of being, that there are other ways of being that will be activated in different contexts, and that they are all held within one overall autobiographical frame. It is that background knowledge that is likely to be subsymbolic and may be implicit, that allows the immersion in the moment that is necessary for analytic exploration.

- Beyond this, to support the freedom of emotional exploration, I suggest that analysts also require a systematic general psychological theory that specifically accounts for the unique and unpredictable interactions of the analytic interchange—that makes them, in fact, more predictable in certain respects. If analysts do not have an explicit theoretical framework to guide them in a situation of uncertainty and risk, they will draw on an implicit one. The problem with implicit theories is that they may tend to lead clinicians in ways that are unrecognized, and unexamined, down the slippery slope of assumptions concerning specific repressed scenarios to be uncovered, or techniques involving interpretation of resistance, or from another perspective, projective identification as involving the patient’s intolerable affects placed in the therapist. In place of such ill-defined ideas, we need a systematic theoretical framework that provides an understanding of the arousal of subsymbolic processes within each participant; how each connects these processes to symbolic forms within himself or herself; how each connects to the other on several levels; how each connects the events of the present to memories of the past; and how all these connecting processes can be used to bring about change.

Beginning with uncertainty and risk, psychoanalysis requires the capacity to focus on and be open to subsymbolic experience, to find new ground to explore—the extra possibilities—in both participants while also increasing the zone of the symbolic and the predictable. The analyst’s discovery of unexpected and undirected levels of experience within him or herself provides the setting for the dance of emotional exploration in the therapeutic relationship.
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