

## A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION OF THOMAS AQUINAS' CONCEPTION ON CONSCIENCE

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### **Abstract**

*In the study of morality, the idea of conscience has served as the cornerstone for the goodness of an action. Aquinas was essential in elucidating the idea of conscience and the associated theoretical issues in this work, titled The Notion of Conscience. Aquinas is given the responsibility of synderesis, primarily a cognitive role. He maintained that people have an unshakeable sense of what is morally right and evil at their core. Synderesis and natural law were related by Aquinas, who associated the fundamental principles of natural law with the earliest practical principles, of which synderesis is the habit. Aquinas held that whether an act is generally good, wicked, or indifferent has no influence on whether an errant conscience binds or disbinds. Acting against one's conscience is always wrong, according to Aquinas, because of the binding nature of conscience. The expository method of conscience created by Thomas Aquinas is the foundation of this study project. Findings showed that conscience is crucial to determining if an act is good. In order to create a well-balanced society that promotes decent living, this research study aims to explain the fundamental significance of conscience as a motivating force. Acting against one's conscience, in Aquinas' view, is always wrong because of the binding nature of conscience, whether one is right or wrong.*

**Keywords:** Aquinas, Conscience, synderesis, Moral Decisions.

### **Introduction**

The inner voice, which manifests itself in man's personal existence, particularly in his moral deeds, is undoubtedly something that exists in him, according to man's own experience. The conscience is this voice inside of you. In the sense that it plays a crucial role in moral judgment, it is an ever-living phrase and notion in the

history of ethics. Nevertheless, the subject of conscience has persisted throughout time, and thinkers like philosophers, psychologists, religious believers, theologians, etc, who study the causes of human behavior and activity continues to find it relevant. It is true that different people in these professions have varied ideas about what conscience is, leading to various conceptions of conscience. It is therefore not strange to see conscience described as the innermost psychic center, the quiet, little voice of God, the higher self, etc. Regardless, "conscience is seen as the moral faculty that tells humans what is good or evil subjectively and which, in turn, indicates to them what their moral obligations are in any concrete action to be performed" (Eboh, 2005). But as a moral person, man has a duty to follow his conscience and "to do what his conscience tells him, even when it is objectively wrong" (Omoregbe, 1993:57). As a result, the Vatican Council II has declared that:

Man finds a law that he must obey deep within his conscience even though it is not one he has imposed on himself. Its voice, which is constantly urging him to love, act morally, and stay away from evil, prompts him to make the appropriate decisions when the time is right. (Flannery, 1988)

This further establishes the fact that conscience is both a moral faculty and a binding force. In order to prove this claim, Thomas Aquinas, whose line of reasoning is followed, asserts that "conscience in this sense is said to incite or to bind" (Aquina, 1981:408). This statement refers to the way in which we decide whether or not something should be done. As a result, conscience conveys its moral obligation to a person while also subjectively defining good and evil. In order to explain the nature of this research effort, it is necessary to establish the backdrop, the problem statement, the purpose, scope, method, and how the work is divided in this introduction.

### **Thomas Aquinas's Conception on Conscience**

Aquinas establishes a distinction between power and conscience when he introduces his examination of conscience. He considered that while power could be given up, conscience could not (Aquina, 1981). As knowledge is related to something, conscience must be connected to action. Conscience cannot be

activated in the absence of an action. This is seen in the characteristics frequently given to conscience, including the notions that it can witness, constrain, or instigate behavior as well as accuse, torture, or correct. And all of them come from the application of knowledge or science to what we do (Aquinas, 1981:92).

With regard to Aquinas, conscience is the process through which we apply our general knowledge of good and evil to what we do. We may determine if something should be done or not done, as well as whether it was done successfully or poorly, by using our conscience. Therefore, in order to grasp what constitutes a good action or a poor action, one must have a comprehensive or global understanding of how things are naturally arranged by God, namely what human nature is and what it needs and deserves. All rational beings can and do acquire knowledge of the Natural Law, which defines what constitutes good or wicked behavior (Aquinas, 1981:92).

However, some individuals have the capacity to so obfuscate their understanding of the natural law through immoral behavior that it appears as though they have forgotten what is good and wrong. Through His revelation in Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments and Christ's Two Great Commandments, God may and does supernaturally reveal what is and is not in accordance with his will on the same general or global level. One must be free to choose whether to act in accordance with what they believe to be the Divine order of things or not in order to apply their knowledge of good and wrong to what they do and the acts they actually conduct.

Our conscience interprets our actions in terms of what is generally morally right or wrong. Our awareness of whether or not what we do or have done is good or bad is different from habit or act because it does not involve the actual doing or deciding. We perform an act after determining in our conscience whether it is or is not the morally proper thing to do by engaging in a subsequent act of will be known as choice. Technically speaking, according to Aquinas, conscience is the act of knowing what actions are right and bad, yet the name could also refer to a habit or ability to carry out this understanding act.

## **Kinds, Functions, and Judgement of Conscience**

### **a) Kinds of Conscience:**

We must consider what conscience actually is as we deal with the many types of conscience. Is conscience a quality, a behavior, or a habit? Here, Aquinas asserts that the power of the conscience is real. He does so by making a number of reasons, ranging from the tainting that sin has on the conscience to the freedom that man has to choose between right and wrong. If sin only defiles a subject, and because the conscience is a power of the soul, it also defiles the powers of the soul, which are its subject.

Only a power of the soul is the target of a vice, according to Aquinas. However, conscience is a power since it is the object of the pollution of sin (Aquinas, 1953:17). He asserts once more that a conscience is a command of reason since it determines what is right and wrong in human behavior. This suggests that man has a responsibility to follow his conscience and decide what is right or wrong for him to do. This commitment is voluntary because no man is compelled to choose between doing good and doing harm. Thus, just as conscience is a force, so too is free will.

Aquinas has to consider the question of whether conscience is a habit given that it is a power. Can our conscience be referred to as a habit if it is established by repeating a behavior and our behavior is dictated by our conscience? Aquinas responds, "Neither a habit nor an act are said to know, but conscience is said to know; consequently, conscience is not a habit or an act" (Aquinas, 1953:17). Speculative habits and operative habits are two different types of habits as a result. Each behavior is therefore either ingrained or learned. Even though all men share this behavior, not all men have the same level of conscience. As a result, a habit is not a conscience.

They are not the same thing, yet Aquinas concedes that these three are occasionally susceptible to error. He proceeds to dispel this ambiguity. According to some, conscience has three distinct meanings. It can sometimes be mistaken for the actual object that one is aware of, just to how faith can sometimes be mistaken for the actual thing that is believed. It is misunderstood to be either the habit or the power that gives us consciousness. Some even claim that it is mistaken for an act.

This distinction appears to be made because, given that there is a conscience act and that an object, a power, a habit, and the act itself are all taken into account in relation to the act, we may find a label that is used equivocally for all four of these. As names are supposed to imply concepts (*intellectus*), the name understanding thus occasionally designates the item understood (*intellectam*), occasionally the intellectual force itself, occasionally a habit, and occasionally an act (Aquinas, 1953:19). The act, the habit, and the conscience are not the same thing since the conscience is not active in a person who is sleeping and does not reveal the deeds that person has previously committed out of habit.

## **b) Functions of Conscience**

The primary role of the conscience is to judge whether or not our acts are justified, or right or wrong. The conscience obsesses over past and present behaviors and whether they were right or bad. Knowledge is applied to an act in two different ways, he claims. In one method, we assess whether the act is currently occurring or has previously occurred; in the other, we consider whether it is correct or not (Aquina, 1953:21).

The existence or absence of an act bothers the conscience in the first sense. Here, the conscience is understood to be aware of deeds. The conscience is aware of which actions have already been carried out and which still need to be. In the first mode of application, we are said to have conscience [that is, consciousness] of an act insofar as we are aware that the act has been placed or has not been placed, as occurs in the common way of speaking when one says, "As far as my conscience

[consciousness] is concerned, this has not taken place; that is, I do not know or I did not know whether this took place."

The verse in Genesis (4:3) that states "we cannot tell non est in conscientiis nostris who put it (the money) in our bags," as well as Ecclesiastes (7:23), "For your conscience knows that you also have often spoken evil of others," are to be understood in this way. This is the basis for the phrase "conscience bearing witness," which appears in Romans 9:1: "my conscience bearing me witness" (Aquinas, 1953:21).

The conscience is used as a judge to determine which of our activities are good and which are bad in the second mode of application. The conscience interferes with our behavior in order to decide which path of action is appropriate at any given moment. This doesn't imply that our conscience determines what we do; rather, it acts as a judge of the morality of every path of action. As a result, according to Aquinas, knowledge is applied to an action to determine whether it is proper or wrong. There is a dual course. One of them dictates what we should do or not do based on our habits of scientific understanding. There is a second school of thought that holds that once an act has been completed, it should be judged in light of one's knowledge-based habits to determine if the act was appropriate or not. According to the double course that exists in speculative concerns, namely the processes of discovery and judgment, this double course in action-related matters can be distinguished. The method, by which we use scientific knowledge to determine what needs to be done, as if we were consulting ourselves, is comparable to the discovery method by which we move from premises to conclusions. The other process is comparable to judging, which is the process by which we reduce conclusions to principles (Aquinas, 1953:22). Through this process, we analyze what has already been done and consider if it is right.

### **c) Judgment of Conscience**

Aquinas considers that judgment and conscience share a trait in order to explain the judgment of conscience. According to him, there are some differences and

some similarities between the judgements made by free will and conscience. Because both allude to this specific act, they are comparable (Aquinas, 1953:24). These specific actions, which distinguish one individual action from another, are the actions of individuation. That is to say, both free will and conscience have to do with human behavior, but not in the same way, as the conscience primarily judges' behavior while free will simply applies behavior to the inclination of the will. In line with Thomas Aquinas, "they differ from each other since the judgment of conscience consists simply in knowledge, whereas the judgment of free choice consists in the application of knowledge to the inclination of the will" (Aquinas, 1953:24). Conscience cannot commit error because it only considers one's acts. This is due to the conscience's role in observing, analyzing, and judging activities that are taken voluntarily.

For Aquinas, it occasionally occurs that the judgment of free will is incorrect while the judgment of conscience is correct. For instance, one can argue about something that needs to be done right away and declare, while still speculating as though it were a matter of principles, that it is wrong, say, to fornicate with this woman. However, when it comes to applying this to the act, numerous circumstances that are pertinent to the deed appear from all angles, such as the pleasure of fornication, by the desire of which reason is restricted, so that its mandates may not issue into choice. As a result, one makes a mistake of choice rather than of conscience. (Aquinas 1953:27)

Aquinas comes to the conclusion that sin, however, never occurs in the conscience and always exists in the reason and the will. Conscience has the ability to judge, but it cannot foresee an action until it is carried out. Insofar as the entire inquiry or counseling of conscience rests on the natural power of judgment, he claims that conscience is referred to as the natural power of judgment. Sin exists in the subject's reason and will, but it exists in the subject's conscience in a different way. Conscience is said to know something, but not in the traditional sense; rather, it is said to know something in the sense that knowledge is based on that which we know (Aquinas, 1953:28).

### **Distinction between Conscience, Moral Law, and Human Reason**

Conscientia, which means to apply knowledge to something or to impart information to someone, is the root of the Latin word conscience (Fagothey, 1959:75). According to Fagothey (1959:76), knowledge is the familiarity with, awareness of, or comprehension of someone or something, such as facts, skills, or objects. As stated by Thomas Aquinas (Aquina, 1981:421), law is the ordinance of reason. These thus suggest that there are disparities between conscience, law, and reason. Aquinas (1953:34) defined conscience as the force that pushes and ties us to the moral duties that the law places on us. As such, the conscience motivates and ties us to these duties. Contrarily, reason is the ability to distinguish between rights and wrong (Fagothey, 1959:88). Law also serves as the foundation for human behavior since without it, there would be no sin and no one would be constrained by conscience. This law is inherently morally justifiable. By placing restrictions on free will, moral law compels free beings to act in a way that advances their goals. Moral necessity is the term used to describe this obligation, responsibility, or oughtness.

Men create laws to pacify their particular societies given that laws belong to the source of human acts and reason is the source of human acts. This law is ordained for the common benefit, according to Aquinas. As a result, ordaining things belongs to the entire people as a community or to the individuals acting on their behalf (Aquinas, 1981:423). This suggests that man creates moral norms to govern his civilization using human reason.

### **Passions, Culture, Ignorance, and Other Challenges to a Sound Conscience**

The most difficult of these challenges is upholding a sound conscience, which a conscience frequently faces. A conscience without blemish is one that leans more toward the good than the wrong; it is said to be sound. One must overcome the many obstacles that stand in the way of achieving a sound conscience. These obstacles that stand in the way of achieving a clear conscience can be divided into internal and external barriers. Passions, ignorance, and skepticism are possible examples of internal forces. The effects of culture and religion could be considered external forces. Fagothey states, "Freedom of conscience is a natural and inalienable right," to individuals motivated by internal considerations. A man can



only embrace religious doctrine if he is intellectually persuaded of its veracity. If he is persuaded that it is true, he has a moral obligation to accept it; if he is persuaded that it is false, he has a moral obligation to reject it; and if he is unsure, he has the right to hold off on making a decision until more evidence persuades him that it is true or false. (Fagothey, 1959: 238).

This implies that in order for the unsure and uneducated to advance, the proper information and convincing arguments must also be given to them. Through hardship, conflict, or force, some cultures also murder the consciences of their citizens. Religions that do not impart the proper lessons have an impact on others. Fagothey responds, "The state has no methods at its command except the use or threat of physical compulsion, which might induce hypocritical obedience but cannot beget belief. Therefore, the government must respect its citizens' consciences. (Fagothey, 1959:238).

Every law should be derived from the natural law, which is the eternal law rendered practical, thus those who are impacted by religions that do not teach the correct doctrines should comprehend this. If the eternal law is the law of God, as Aquinas claims, then leaning toward it will only result in a sound conscience.

### **Evaluation of Thomas Aquinas's Conception on Conscience**

As we have shown in this essay, Aquinas' doctrines are truly exceptional. First of all, according to Aquinas, synderesis is the first practical principle that nature has bestowed upon us and by which we are able to understand the fundamental ideas of practical reasoning. In other words, through synderesis, human reason understands the fundamental ideas underlying the natural law. It should be noted from this that "the good must be done, and evil must be avoided" is the most general of these practical justifications and of natural law. In light of these, one would question how accurate it is for Aquinas to say that reason is the source of moral knowledge. Why do we have moral judgments that are at odds with one other if man understands moral principles with reason? For instance, why should individuals disagree on subjects like euthanasia, contraception, and abortion that

go against the moral code that upholds life? Or does it imply that those who hold the aforementioned opinions lack morality or reason? Similar to this, Aquinas characterizes conscience as the rule of reason that involves the application of knowledge to a human act.

Man can therefore use all of his knowledge to do an act. But when we take into account the many types of information a person possesses, it becomes clear that while it is possible to make mistakes in certain areas, it is not feasible in others. As a result, given that our knowledge is influenced by many factors, it is inevitable that mistakes will be made when applying knowledge to an action. On a different note, Aquinas maintained that acting against one's conscience is wicked; in other words, that conscience is always binding.

All consciences have something in common. As a result, one must follow their conscience. Given that its judgment is in conflict with the accepted standard of morality, may this also be true of erroneous conscience? What happens to the mistaken conscience's associated error? In order to achieve this, Aquinas proposed that the only obligation is to correct the mistake (Aquinas, 1981:427). He never mentions the corrective measures to take in order to prevent the error in conscience judgment.

Therefore, his attempt to correct the problem is inadequate. What happens when a person has a serious belief that his evaluation is correct and has no idea that it goes against the moral law? How can a mistake that the person is unaware of to be "put off"? Here, one must presume that in order to avoid making this mistake, one's conscience must be correctly constituted. When we refer to the creation of conscience, we imply that the individual concerned must first get rid of his skeptical mindset by seeking out the truth and upholding it after it has been discovered. Only through the thorough analysis of the facts can the truth in ethics be understood.

The creation of one's conscience is aided by the Word of God, society moral standards, openness to criticism, willingness to engage in discussion, and other knowledge sources. Aquinas also attempts to explain the vengeful and unstoppable false consciences. The concept of vincible and invincible erroneous conscience, and how they bind, were not thoroughly explained, despite his discussion of the issue of whether the will is good or wicked depending on whether it agrees with or disagrees with erroneous conscience. We think that in these notions, both the certain conscience and the irrepressible misguided conscience, which is ethically right in one's own estimation, must be heeded. The first option, a good but flawed conscience, cannot then be adopted.

By looking for the truth, one can get rid of his doubt. That is to say, through healthy conscience formation. On the other hand, because it is crystal clear that they must act incorrectly, what should persons with an unstoppable false conscience do? What could be said, for example, about the makeup of the suicide bombers' consciences? What if their religious convictions concur with what they do, forming a sound conscience in the process? They are so forced to obey their unstoppable, false conscience. Do they deserve blame?

If they are cleared, does that still make their actions morally acceptable? What should, to put it mildly, be the cure for invincible and vengeful false consciences? These issues require immediate response. In order to address these issues, we must continue to remember that while the judgment of conscience is binding, it also allows for uncertainty and error. There is no inherent assurance of its veracity. It is comparable to the judgment of someone who, despite having adequate moral information, lacks the virtue necessary to determine whether his deeds or judgements are in line with the standards of objective morality.

As a result, although there is no assurance, the decision will be accurate in the majority of circumstances. We firmly believe that all of the scenarios or issues mentioned above can be resolved through the virtue of wisdom. It is a virtue that has the capacity to always arrive at an objectively true practical truth -one that is actually useful. Prudence is the ability to discern what should be done or left

undone with one's intelligence. It also guides a person toward the optimal course of action. The "application of right reason in matters of counsel" is how Aquinas himself described prudence (Aquinas, 1981:1384).

Therefore, it suggests the optimum line of action to be followed. As a result, it facilitates the appropriate application of one's moral understanding in daily life. It should be noted that prudence always serves as the will's compass while making decisions, and that without it, human acts could have devastating consequences such as arguments, hostility, extremism, etc. However, exercising caution can help prevent these issues. Therefore, it may be claimed that a cautious person's moral judgment has a lower chance of error than a person who lacks the quality of prudence. From this, we conclude that our behavior is guided by the virtues of caution and conscience. In other words, the issue of a dubious and mistaken conscience is resolved when the judgment of conscience is absorbed into the judgment of wisdom. Additionally, this judgment of prudence eliminates the shortcomings of the judgment of conscience, ensures righteous deeds, and provides assurance of practical truth.

While this is going on, it's important to note that while prudence and conscience are not the same, they do share a lot of similarities. According to Noble, "conscience informs a person of what is morally right in a given situation, but it is the judgment of prudence that causes the person to will it" (Noble, 1923:55). Furthermore, conscience applies those principles to specific cases, while the virtue of prudence provides the skill, direction, and command to spur conscience to action. Synderesis has the responsibility of providing the intuitively known and necessary foundational principles out of which moral principles are made.

Hence, the virtue of prudence can control the error associated with a false conscience. There is a striking similarity between Aquinas' descriptions of prudence and conscience when the two concepts are compared. First and foremost, both ideas focus on the application of knowledge to a specific task that needs to be completed. (Aquina, 1981:437). They are both intimately related to synderesis, to put it another way. Despite these obvious similarities between the

two ideas, Aquinas himself never makes a connection between the two judgments. Instead, he approached each of the ideas independently.

Were we to draw any other inferences from this beyond the possibility that he felt the idea of conscience was insufficient to capture the actuality involved in the evaluation of prudence? He did not attempt to demonstrate the obvious reality that the virtue of prudence might resolve the issue of error in conscience; instead, he was pleased to just draw attention to the issue. He offered to have the mistake corrected, which we appreciate. Aquinas, a Christian philosopher, undoubtedly drew inspiration from religion, which is another important aspect to remember. That he came to the conclusion that there is "an agent" that moves the will and that the authority of this agency is "divine" (Aquinas, 1981:438) makes this abundantly clear in his explanation of the binding force of conscience.

On the other hand, God, this suggests that God is the only one in charge of conscience and morals. Here, Aquinas' conclusion suggests determinism. One resolves to behave in accordance with the divine precept as a result. Where is the place of human freedom if this is the standard? This was not addressed by Aquinas. However, it is important to highlight that, although having the ability to make decisions, man is constantly constrained by the objective morality with which he has been endowed -the maxim that "good must be done and evil avoided."

Aquinas came to the conclusion that conscience is always binding. What happens then if, for example, a certain activity is prohibited by state law yet my conscience urges me to take it? Should we obey the law and follow our conscience, or the other way around? Therefore, Aquinas was unaware of the potential for conflict between a person's conscience and actions made by governmental authorities. Additionally, it is important to note that, while one is genuinely obligated to follow their conscience, they are also required to respect divine law and legal authority.

Then it ought not to carry out in a pointless manner. Only laws passed with sincere conviction are those to which one is morally required. Conscience's judgment shouldn't conflict with that of authority because authority's power is consistent with reality as it exists. The authority, in any case, aids in the development and reformation of conscience. Even if a person decides to follow a moral authority, their moral judgements will still be present to identify the circumstances that the authority had in mind while giving the order. This suggests that one's conscience plays a larger role in moral decisions than previously thought. As a result, moral judgments are ultimately up to conscience.

However, when conscience deviates from the objective moral standard, one is forced to question its veracity. Therefore, such a conscience needs to be changed. As a result, even while one must act on their conscience, they also have a moral responsibility to do so. We believe that Thomas Aquinas' caution that a person who follows an incorrect conscience is not immune from sin, despite the fact that conscience is always binding, is best understood in the context of this. Finally, conscience must be acknowledged as the ultimate, subjective yardstick of morality, regardless of how we choose to look at it.

Aquinas appears to be the height of knowledge and understanding. Despite the few flaws mentioned above, he deserves a standing ovation for the mannerism that underlies his writings, presentations, and arguments. Thus, only in his lectures and in his well-known books are the ideas of synderesis, conscience, and the binding power of conscience adequately treated. He has educated us on the roles, characteristics, and connections between conscience and synderesis. To top it all off, he discussed the topic of conscience's ability to bind, going so far as to describe the age-old issue of how an incorrect conscience binds.

In reality, he provided practically all of the components necessary for comprehending the term "conscience," making it difficult to fully condemn him. The problems at the time were actually resolved by Aquinas' arguments on the aforementioned topics. So, in addition to having to obey one's conscience, one needs also ensure that it is created properly. Furthermore, the fact that one's

conscience is bound does not imply that doing so is a virtue; rather, it means that acting against it is wicked. It makes sense given that Aquinas contends that a person who follows an incorrect conscience is not absolved of sin.

## **Conclusion**

Conscience is actually a moral standard that is held in one's mind. . As a result, it frequently errs on the side of ambivalence, making it difficult to make accurate moral judgments in specific circumstances. We do, however, question whether morality would have existed absent consciousness. It is, in essence, a precondition for morality, especially in Christianity, albeit it is not its only foundation. In order for the ideas of synderesis, conscience, and the binding power of conscience to be understood, Aquinas had to lay the necessary foundations. His contributions on conscience set him apart from other philosophers and medieval philosophers.

He succeeded in defining conscience as the act of applying moral principles to real-world circumstances. He went one step farther by stating unequivocally that conscience is an ever-binding moral faculty. As a result, one has a moral duty to act in accordance with their conscience. One must make sure that the conscience is correctly constituted; it is not enough to humbly obey one's conscience.

Most of the governing ideals and laws of the world are greatly influenced by Aquinas' thesis on conscience. His idea of conscience is also highly valued in the Christian religion. Therefore, St. Thomas Aquinas is honored in the majority of Christian doctrines on conscience. He frequently applies some of his ideas to addressing the moral issues of the day. The discussions of contraception, abortion, euthanasia, birth control, family planning, terrorism, etc. are obvious solutions to these challenges. The degree to which the idea of conscience has permeated people's psyches is also demonstrated through specific human expressions. "You are bound in conscience to do this or to shun that" and "Do people still have conscience" are two examples. Etc. We now have a clear understanding of what conscience is since Aquinas paved the road for us. The critical assessments have

also assisted us in creating a unified stream of thought on what the concept of conscience and its immovable power actually entail.

One nevertheless holds that the virtue of prudence would go a long way toward resolving the issue of the possibility of mistake in conscience, notwithstanding Aquinas' inability to show us how to put away the error in conscience. Therefore, we must exercise caution in evaluating our activities, and one hopes that by doing so, a more virtuous act will be accomplished. Prudence is what immediately directs the decision of conscience.

The ultimate subjective standard of morality continues to be conscience. Not only must one act in accordance with their conscience, but one must also ensure that it is created appropriately. People will have the ability to act virtuously rather than viciously through this.

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