

True Relativism, Interpretation and Our Reasons for Action

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Can there be a subject matter of genuine dispute between two participants where neither side has overlooked any relevant fact, where neither side has made a mistake and where both claim to be getting matters right? Would such a case, in effect, amount to saying that there is no fact of the matter and that the parties must agree to differ, or could it ever be correct to say that they were both right? The issue for this paper is whether such a possibility makes sense and whether there are any real such cases. Recently, Crispin Wright has attempted to make room for such possibilities, calling the ensuing doctrine, True Relativism (Wright 2001, 2004). According to Wright, if there are disputes where neither side is in error, cognitively speaking, then it may be correct to say that the truth of the matter is relative to, and the facts partly constituted by, each participant's starting point or perspective. Are there any plausible cases of such disputes? In what follows I offer what appears to be the best candidate, to be found, somewhat surprisingly, in the work of Donald Davidson (— someone usually taken to be the chief opponent of relativism). It involves a plausible case where there are two equally adequate rival interpretations of an agent's mental states, no grounds for choosing between them, and no reason for saying either is mistaken. But before we look at that case let us consider the issue more generally.

1. Grounds for Disagreement

Candidates for the sort of disputes we are interested in may occur where there are questions of taste, ethical discourses, aesthetic judgements, philosophical disagreements, and even scientific theorising. Some, but not all of these candidates can be quickly discounted and it is perhaps unlikely that any single treatment would apply to all such cases equally well. In matters of taste, however, things may seem more straightforward. So let us start with such a case.

When turning our attention to fine wines, I may favour Burgundy while you favour the wines from the Rhone. I claim the greatest wines of Burgundy to be superior to the greatest Rhone wines and you beg to differ¹. In this case it may be tempting, at first, to say that each of us fails to recognise some particular characteristic or quality of the wines noted and attended to by the other. But let us build into the case the assumption that we are both experienced wine critics, fully apprised of what is at stake and as fully informed as you like about the nature, merits, characteristics, faults and virtues of the best samples of each region's wines. As acknowledged experts in the field, we are able to recognize the excellence and typicity of various samples of Burgundy and Rhone, and we may both be able to adjudicate between greater and lesser vintages. And yet, at the end of all our scrutiny, your preference is for a Beaucastel Chateauneuf du Pape over a Leroy Chambertin, and I cannot understand how you can think that. At this point it is right for you to judge that the Chateuaneuf is better than the Chambertin; while from my point of view it is right for me to judge the Chambertin vastly superior. Should we say that you and I are in genuine disagreement about the same subject matter: the comparative qualities of the two wines? Or should we instead say that you are reflecting how you evaluate matters given your palate and preferences, and I am reporting how I evaluate things given mine. If we say the latter, no sense of a potentially intractable dispute about the same matter appears to be in the offing. Surely, we are not judging objective matters of fact here but comparing subjective responses, and as such we should agree to differ; even though those differences will, at times, lead to real conflicts of interest or choice. Still, I will have learned something about your subjective preferences, and you will have learned something about

¹ With one or two further elaborations, the case parallels Wright's rhubarb case. I find the wine example more congenial and the stakes are higher.

mine. I will also have learned not to let you choose from the wine list at dinner.

However, things are not quite so simple as they seem. As wine critics we are not merely reporting on our own subjective experiences — entertaining to each of us as that may be — we are trying to assess the respective merits and qualities of the wines. We may base our judgements on the subjective experiences of tasting but in doing so we aim to go beyond those experiences to the properties of the wines themselves. Similarly, when we express our preferences for one wine over another we are prepared to offer reasons for our preferences. We are not just responding subjectively, we are offering reasoned appraisals. You will speak about the complexity of many component tastes harmonised and balanced in the Chateauneuf. I will speak of the restraint and elegance with which Leroy combines power and finesse in the Chambertin.

So although we may want to deny that we are dealing with a *wholly* objective matter, there is room here for a genuine conflict in judgement between the two tasters. Each taster makes a judgement about the comparative standing of the two wines based first of all on a subjective experience of the pleasure each wine affords him. The difference in subjective experiences would not be enough to generate anything that appeared to be a genuine disagreement. But a potential conflict in judgement is generated when each taster moves from his or her own subjective experience to the supposition that the pleasures caused in him by the wines are features of the wines themselves: features thereby available to others. I take myself to be speaking not about how things are not (just) with me but with the Chambertin and the Chateauneuf du Pape. Have I made a mistake in what I am really talking about? Again, the diagnosis is not so simple. To claim that the wines themselves have the qualities I take myself to detect, I am really making a claim about what others can expect to experience in tasting those wines. I am implicitly moving from how things are with me to how they are for anyone suitably discriminating enough to judge wines. Certainly, I may express the latter claim as if it were a more neutral, experience-independent claim about the wine, not recognising how that claim should or must be understood. The objectivity there is here can be construed along the lines Kant drew in the *Critique of Judgement*. The experience of pleasure I enjoy in tasting the wines lays claim to a similar response in all discriminating wine tasters. The idea that what is

immeasurably better about the taste of the Chambertin in my experience, will be common to all is what that puts me in direct conflict with a similar thought in you, *mutatis mutandis*, about the superior pleasures of the Chateaufort du Pape. There is scope here for genuine disagreement between the parties, and not just clash of responses, once each goes beyond their preferences to would-be objective claims about the wines themselves, or at any rate their inter-subjectively available effects on tasters. It is equally clear, in this case, that while both parties cannot be right, both parties can be wrong. Genuine disagreement is preserved but we can no longer cling to the idea that neither side to the dispute has made any error, or that the dispute is intractable — the point at which appeals to relativism are made.² Both parties to the dispute go wrong, albeit in understandable ways, in moving from their own experience to an all-embracing conclusions about everyone else's experience — conclusions they will be committed to in making in claims to be in touch with facts available to all discriminating tasters about the comparative merits of the wines.

Of course there is another move to make here, more congenial, it may seem, to Wright. We could say that both critics are right and that each is apprised of the facts of the comparative merits of the wines from his standpoint. How are we to make sense of such a suggestion? Well, it is quite likely that there are distinct populations of discerning tasters, each of whom will go along with one or another of our judges on this matter, depending on their own affective or qualitative response to certain flavours. The truth of which wine is better would be relative to given populations of tasters but the sense of an intractable dispute between our original two parties would surely vanish once this possibility was pointed out. Some favour one style of wine, some favour the other. In what sense, then, could either taster continue to regard his opponent as mistaken?

In cases like these, a satisfactory diagnosis of what is going on shows each party to be making a Kantian move from their own experience of pleasure to something that lays claim to facts about similar responses and appreciation by others. In tasting wine I take myself, at the same time, to be entitled to claims about you and anybody else suitably

² In another but similar context, Bernard Williams makes the apt remark: 'Relativism, of any kind, does its work when it looks as though there is conflict, and it may be said that there is no work for it to do here, because there does not even seem to be a conflict.' (Williams 2002, p259)

equipped to judge. The judgments I take myself to be making about a wine in each case are hostage to whether or not I am entitled to the Kantian move. I can get matters wrong. In particular, not to be aware of different populations of tasters with different thresholds for experiencing sweet or sour, salty or bitter, or relational properties defined over these, leaves me open to error in my expectation of agreement. To that extent I have made a cognitive mistake. Again, the case does not support Wright's true relativist requirements of a genuine dispute in which each party is cognitively blameless.

It is worth taking time here to appreciate where disagreement does and does not lie and how the participants' views of their disagreements can fail to locate the source of conflict and can give rise to the impression of an intractable dispute.

What is being envisaged here is that each participant through his or her experience of pleasure lays claim to, and calls upon, the responses and experiences of others. The truth of the universal claim is answerable to whether or not the Kantian manoeuvre is sustainable. But from the participants' point of view things may appear otherwise. I make a judgement about the standing of the wines based on a subjective experience of pleasure — albeit informed by recollection and past experience as a taster — but from that point I am implicitly calling upon and relying on the consent of others in having the pleasure and preferences I do. I base my judgement on a subjective experience of pleasure and take it to afford me knowledge of the wine itself. What I perhaps fail to recognise is that I am implicitly supposing the Leroy Chambertin will be the most hedonistic and pleasurable wine for both of us. It may not be obvious to me, that I am implicitly inviting the agreement of you and others, and making the judgement is such a way as to take into account or invite your agreement. That is, I do not distinguish the claim that the Chambertin is the most hedonistic and pleasurable of wines from the more restrained claim that it is the most hedonistic and pleasurable for me. The slide from how things are with me to how they are in the object of my experience is a common move and at times an innocent one. But the only way to make sense of this transition in the case of tasting is to see me as extending my judgement by implicitly supposing these qualities will be judged similarly by all subjects (suitably placed to judge). I take myself as a litmus test for the qualities I claim to be detecting in the wine and thereby invite others to confirm these qualities by detecting the same qualities in their glass. I expect the effect of pleasure the wine causes in me to be equally

available to you and with a strength that confirms for you that Le Chambertin outweighs the pleasure of (or caused by) the Chateauneuf du Pape. In tasting and enjoying a singular experience of mine aimed at the wine I am, unknowingly, attempting to take into account others' experiences. But the judgement by me that this wine is superior stands or falls with the judgement that the wine is superior to the Chateauneuf for all, and that is why it can be mistaken.

If you are making judgments of a similar form based on your experience of pleasure, our judgements will collide, but not where we think they do. Although we take ourselves to be making simpler judgements about the wines themselves sense can be made of this option, and thus of there being genuine grounds for dispute, only in so far as we are thereby making judgements about how anyone will experience wine. It is only in doing so that we come into conflict of a traceable and resolvable kind. Could there be a right or wrong judgement about the wines themselves? Certainly, and in some cases the Kantian move is valid for all discerning tasters. Can we ever say both tasters are right? Yes, but only about different populations of tasters who divide along the greatest Burgundy – greatest Rhone axis, and therefore they will not be in dispute about the very same claim, and it will take work to disentangle the real but divergent subject matters of their judgements. In such cases we will have a fairly innocuous, indexical relativism. Without such disentangling there will be scope for genuine dispute but there will also be room for one or another or both making a mistake. Our judgements will clash whether or not there is something to get right or wrong about the qualities of the wines themselves. In such cases, my saying that the Chambertin is the most delicious wine, should be construed as the claim that:

(Me) (Everyone suitably placed to judge will find) The Chambertin is most delicious wine.

You, in making the claim that the Chateauneuf is the preferable wine, should be understood as claiming that:

(You) (Everyone suitably placed to judge will find) The Chateauneuf is the most delicious wine.

Clearly, the judgements made by (Me) and (You) are in tension, even though the simpler embedded statements, unqualified may or may not lend themselves to genuine disagreement. The judgements of both parties are wrong, but not about the simpler statements, whatever truth values they do, nor do not, have. We can be genuinely mistaken when making claims about wines, when for each of us, these judgements,

grounded in our subjective experiences, implicitly make claims about others' experiences. In aiming to make claims about the wines we are bound to incur the claims (Me) and (You) about what people in the right conditions internally and externally will find in the wines they taste. These claims are being advanced even though we only take ourselves to be making the simpler judgements about the wines themselves. It is hard at first to see that that is what is happening when we make the initial pronouncements. Subjects themselves will not detect a gap between their judgements about a wine's taste and the qualities of the wine itself (although they know they are fallible under certain conditions that constitute interference factors.) Plus, the ambition in judging is to get things right, to get at the truth of the matter. However, they will seldom if ever recognise that the claims they are making about the wines are implicitly claims about others' experiences in tasting them. Can someone judging a wine be in possession of a truth, then? Yes, but not necessarily the one he or she thinks he is in possession of. On some occasions we can say that the two tasters are judging a proposition with the same content, in other cases we cannot. It all depends on whether there is a single population of tasters whose opinions converge or not; on whether we are entitled to the Kantian move or not.

Other disputes, however, are not so easy to diagnose or resolve. And it is the persistent and troubling cases I want to explore more in this paper. If the treatment of the wine case shows how we can preserve genuine disagreement without countenancing the true relativism Wright espouses, we can nonetheless point to other, more troubling and intractable disputes which do seem to take on the pattern Wright describes. Ethical cases come to mind. But before commenting on them I shall now lay out what I think provides the most plausible candidate in Wright's favour: namely, indeterminacy in the case of the rational interpretation of minds and motives of human agents on the basis of their linguistic and other behaviour.

2. Interpreting Behaviour

For Donald Davidson, what we know about the mind of a human agent is brought to light by our interpreting the agent's behaviour in rational terms. This is not simply a useful method for getting at the facts of another's mental life: meeting the conditions of interpretability is

constitutive of what it is to be minded in the first place.³ A creature's movements and mouthings can be construed as rational acts once we see them as based on the creature's reasons for acting, reasons given in terms of the antecedent beliefs and desires that make sense of that person doing and saying what they do and say. Interpretations given in terms of these intentional notions have to meet the constraints of rationality and charity. The rationality constraint insists there will be ways of making sense of someone that gives better service in interpreting his mental states and actions than others: the correct interpretation will be the one that make him more not less rational in what he does, believes and desires. Meanwhile, charitable interpretations will be those which credit him with credible beliefs about his surroundings: beliefs about his current circumstances that are largely true by the interpreter's lights.

We are each interpreters of one another, and in making sense of other people we rely on what makes sense to us. We see others as rational in so far as the means we have for making sense are themselves rational, and recognisably so by others. We try to ascribe people sensible and not outlandish beliefs as far as we can, supposing them to believe what we do about the prevailing circumstances. Thus in making sense of others we will be operating in accordance with the constraints of rationality and charity even though we may not be conscious of doing so. We are not theorists of interpretation but just ordinary interpreters. Theorists of interpretation are those who makes explicit our ordinary methods for interpreting one another, and make precise what we are justified in ascribing to others on the basis of available evidence. In this way, the theorist of interpretation provides an account of what the ordinary interpreter can know on the basis of the observable evidence. That interpretations can be given consistent with the principles of rationality and charity that make sense of a creature's behaviour is, according to Davidson, what makes it possible to regard the creature as a thinker in the first place. Only someone who meets the standards for rational interpretation, someone whose behaviour is found explicable by an interpreter using these methods, counts as minded. Thus what is is to have a particular belief or desire is to be apt to be ascribed that belief or that desire in the course of providing an interpretation that makes best sense possible of the agent's total life and conduct. As Davidson puts it:

³ The classic source of Davidson's views is his *Essays on Actions and Events* (OUP 1980).

We know what states of mind are like, and how they are correctly identified; they are just those states whose contents can be discovered in well-known ways. If other people or creatures are in states not discoverable by these methods, it cannot be because our methods fail us, but because those states are not correctly called states of mind — they are not beliefs, desires, wishes or intentions. ('The Myth of the Subjective' 2001 p.40)

And for Davidson mental states are not really entities: 'we should simply talk of people having attitudes, which means that certain predicates are true of them'. ('Indeterminism and Antirealism' 2001 p.82). Another way he likes to put the point is to say that events are mental only as described.⁴ Therefore the methods of interpretation are crucial to the mental realm. The mental is vindicated by the intentional categories and concepts we devised to explain our own and others behaviour in rational terms; and the domain of the mental is constituted and exhausted by the principles of rationality and charity as they govern the interpreter's attribution of attitudes and meanings to explain agents' actions and utterances. As Davidson says:

What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes. ('A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p.148)

3. Indeterminacy in Interpretations of the Mental

So what then should we say if faced with the possibility of two or more equally plausible ways to make sense of an agent's actions and utterances, each of which comports with the behavioural facts, the methods of interpretation, the principles of rationality and charity? We face such situations where we have episodes in a person's physical history that are readily understood as deliberate actions but where the identification of them as the acts they are — the descriptions under which they are intentional — depend on the motives attributed to the agent for so acting. At this point there may be more than one fully cogent, plausible story that makes sense of the agent that is fully consistent with everything else he says and does. The two interpretations may diverge at some crucial juncture on the agent's reasons for performing a particular act. At just such a juncture there may be non-empirical reasons for one interpreter, or group of

⁴ See 'Mental Events' p.211 in Davidson 1980.

interpreters to favour one account and for another interpreter, or group of interpreters to favour the other. The question is how we should respond to the idea that the mental life of an agent is constituted and exhausted by what can be said about him in terms of rationality and charity, and given the facts about his behaviour, when there are at least two rival interpretations with equal claim to correctness. Let's consider a particular case.

In 1941, the German physicist, Werner Heisenberg, who was by then working for the Nazis, went to occupied Denmark to visit his old friend and teacher, the atomic physicist Niels Bohr. This much is known. Heisenberg's motives for going to Copenhagen to see Bohr are much less clear. Was he trying to find out what the Allies knew about nuclear fission, or was he trying to persuade Bohr to join him in seeking to prevent the development of the atomic bomb? Was he keen to impress his old teacher and rival, or was he seeking some form of absolution from Bohr for his involvement in such research? It is unclear. Bohr and Heisenberg disagreed about what was really going on. Heisenberg himself may have been far from clear about what he was up to.

In any event the question of why he went to Copenhagen — a risky thing to do at the time — is a question about his motives for acting. A dramatised version of these events is presented by Michael Frayn in his play *Copenhagen*. In the play, Frayn has the characters of Heisenberg, Bohr and Bohr's wife Margrethe, explore different interpretations of what Heisenberg was up to. It is clear that Heisenberg was always impulsive and decisive. Unlike Bohr, he acted without much reflection on his reasons for doing so. This makes it plausible for Heisenberg, despite what self-knowledge he has, to be concerned to make sense of his motives for visiting Bohr, and is prepared along with the others to consider alternative interpretations of his actions.

During the visit, Heisenberg and Bohr talked in the woods to avoid surveillance. It was there that Heisenberg broached with Bohr the difficult issue of nuclear fission. When they returned to the house from the walk in the woods their friendship was over. The play focuses on this incident and the events surrounding it and asks why Heisenberg came to Copenhagen. Forget what we now know, or may subsequently find out, about the actual meeting of these two men. The play is skilfully crafted in such a way as to remain equally poised between plausible versions of Heisenberg's character and history.

Without describing the play in detail let us take it for granted that it offers us a plausible case of rival interpretations of an agent's actions,

where each interpretation is equally compatible with the totality of evidence about the agent's behaviour but where each offers different reasons for what the agent says and does.⁵ Without anything in the available facts to decide between the two interpretations — one according to which Heisenberg was culpable of seeking to elicit secret information from the Allies about their atomic programme, and another according to which he was somewhat naïve — we seem to be faced with an indeterminacy of interpretation. The question is what should the Davidsonian say about this case?⁶

In 'Indeterminacy and Antirealism', Davidson countenances the possibility of indeterminacies of interpretation that go beyond the inscrutability of reference:

Not all cases of indeterminacy depend on the possibility of systematically altering the satisfaction relation in ways that do not affect the truth values of sentences; there can be indeterminacies that affect truth values. ('Indeterminacy and Antirealism', p.80)

In particular, there can be different interpretations of, say, Heisenberg's reasons for acting — i.e. different descriptions of the actions he is performing — which ascribe to him different motives for visiting Bohr. There will be further differences between the interpretations due to the holistic character of the network of intentional attitudes and actions that make up a single overall interpretation:

...by making compensating adjustments elsewhere in one's interpretation of [his] sentences and beliefs one can accommodate either story. (ibid. p.80)

On one account of Heisenberg's character, some of his pronouncements will be false, on the other account the same pronouncements will be true. Now what should Davidson say about the possibility of two equally empirically adequate way of construing Heisenberg's motives? What he should say is one thing, what he does say is another. Rejecting Quine's view of indeterminacy as a matter of empirically equivalent but incompatible theories, Davidson says:

⁵ Those who wish further details can consult the text, *Copenhagen*, published by Methuen Drama Publishing Ltd.

⁶ Davidson saw the play in London and much admired it, remarking that he felt it contained something deep.

Indeterminacy is not like this: the empirically equivalent theories it accepts as equally good for understanding an agent are not incompatible, any more than the measurement of weight in pounds or kilos involves incompatible theories of weight. (ibid. p.76)

This can't be quite right since the rival interpretations are at least incompatible in the truth values they assign to particular sentences — albeit under different interpretations. And it is quite possible for one and the same interpreter, using the same background language, to consider and reject one interpretation in favour of another that disagrees with it with respect to the particular attributions of belief and desire it makes to the agent. However, in calling the empirically equivalent theories 'equally good for understanding an agent' Davidson may be suggesting that each provides a perfectly adequate way of making sense of the agent. But he could, and probably is, suggesting more than this: namely, that either interpretation will do and we need not chose between them. Hence the analogy he gives with measuring weight in pounds or kilos. But this is not quite right for the case of Heisenberg. It is not all the same whether we see him as morally culpable or not. Very different consequences flow from adopting one stand or another towards him, and we cannot minimise these differences as Davidson's analogy suggests. Interpreters who took up radically different moral stances towards Heisenberg after the war could not simply be talked into accepting that they should happily accept one or the other interpretation since there was nothing to chose between them on evidential grounds. Their persistence in thinking that either one or other of them must be right about Heisenberg's real motive in acting as did may give rise to an intractable dispute and a certain realism about mental may be the best way to understand that dispute. For the right things to say may be that there is a fact of the matter about what really propelled Heisenberg to come to Copenhagen — a fact that interpretation alone cannot elicit. This would make the case one of underdetermination of theory by evidence, not indeterminacy. To accept this diagnosis would be to reject Davidson's interpretationist view of the mental. So a particular reaction to the Heisenberg case could be used as an *ad hominem* argument against Davidson's views. But supposing that it is not see easy to make sense of the alternative, realist view of mental states in which beliefs or desires are there in the agent but forever unknowable, what should the Davidsonian say about this case?

It would seem to be at odds with Davidson's own picture to suppose that it made no difference to suppose Heisenberg was acting on ulterior motives or more favourable ones. After all, for Davidson, reasons are causes, and these reasons are quite different. Something caused him to come to Copenhagen, it was a deliberate act, and even if he is not very self-knowing, it seems right to suppose that we can get at the only plausible stories, compatible with everything else in his history. The two proposals about his reasons for acting are not interchangeable, and only one of them was the cause of his action. But we have no way to favour one over another: there are just two overall interpretations, each with its supporters who cling tenaciously to their account. Is this then a candidate for Wright's true relativism? Bernard Williams would perhaps have resisted the idea:

Relativity in what makes sense to some people and not to others isn't necessarily relativity of truth. (*Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 258)

What is relative is the interest that selectively forms a narrative and puts some part of the past into shape. (*ibid.* p.259)

But when we are dealing with total interpretations that makes sense of an agent's behaviour to some people on one interpretation and reveal facets of the agent's character, motives, beliefs, desires and intentions; and with what makes sense to other people in terms of a quite different set of motives and intentions based on another interpretation, shouldn't we say that the truth is relative to the interpretation, or to the moral and psychological outlook of the interpreters?

In Wright's True Relativist framework the diagnosis would be as follows. The two interpreters are in genuine disagreement about Heisenberg's motives for visiting Bohr. Their respective views of the matter are incompatible. Each is warranted in promoting the interpretation he or she favours on the evidential grounds and by appeal to the principles of interpretation. Their disagreement is faultless. Neither side has making a cognitive mistake. But their adoption of one interpretation rather than the other may be based on non-cognitivist (emotivist?) attitudes towards Heisenberg. Neither of their accounts can be defeated but neither is prepared to give way. The dispute is sustainable, faultless and genuine, and ironically, relativism about truth may be the only option for the Davidsonian who propounds an interpretationist view of the mental. On such a view, it may be non-

cognitivist attitudes or outlooks that lead an interpreter to select, as Williams puts it, one well-supported narrative over another.

4. A Last Word About Morals

It may be useful to consider what lessons could be learned in the moral cases from the sort of treatment envisaged here for the psychological, assuming such a framework can be made out. An important case for consideration is that of abortion. In that fraught debate it is hard to believe that the passionate advocates on each side are missing some crucial consideration of the other side's, which were they to see it, would convince them to change their minds. Both sides in this seemingly intractable dispute are only too aware of the battery of arguments their opponents wield to make out their case. Each side has been rehearsing these considerations in public debates for many years. What appears to be at issue is not cognitive blame on one side or another, or both, but a very different way in which each side weighs the considerations that are adduced. Perhaps each side places different weight on the values that are commonly recognised to be in play. However, another option advocated by Ronald Dworkin and others is that each side goes in for different interpretations of the values under consideration. This may lead us to suppose that they are not really contradicting one another, that they have subtly different propositional claims in play. However, if the foregoing remarks about interpretation can be carried over to this case too, there may be no easy way to dispense with an ensuing relativism in moral disputes.⁷

⁷ My thanks to Guy Longworth and Greg Sherkoske for discussion of these issues.

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