

## HUMAN DIGNITY AS THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION OF SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the role of human dignity as a fundamental ethical foundation of sustainable economic development. Although human dignity is widely recognized in philosophical and legal frameworks, its implications for economic systems remain insufficiently explored. In this context, the study proposes a normative three-dimensional model for evaluating economic activities in relation to human dignity, based on real autonomy, non-instrumentalization, and minimum well-being. The model builds on Kantian ethics and the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen, while also being consistent with the normative framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. To illustrate its applicability, the model is applied to the fast fashion industry. The analysis indicates a low level of compatibility with human dignity, particularly in terms of limited autonomy, the treatment of workers as means rather than ends, and insufficient working conditions. These findings reflect broader structural tensions between profit-oriented economic systems and the ethical requirements of respecting human dignity. The paper concludes that sustainable economic development cannot be achieved without integrating human dignity as a guiding normative principle. It also suggests several directions for reducing the gap between economic practices and dignity-based standards, including stronger labor regulations, greater transparency in supply chains, and improved access to opportunities that enhance individuals' real freedoms.*

**Keywords:** *human dignity; sustainable development; capability approach; autonomy; ethical evaluation.*

**JEL Classification:** *A13; D63; O10; Q01.*

**UDC:** *17.026.4:502.131.1*     **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.53486/ser2026.13>

### 1. Introduction

Human dignity is usually interpreted as the normative foundation of fundamental human rights and freedoms. The role of dignity is rigorously studied and theorized from a philosophical and legal perspective, but its valences are not sufficiently explored through the prism of economic systems and sustainable development.

In the contemporary context, marked by globalization, the persistence of social inequalities and structural economic transformations, a reassessment of human dignity is required as one of the ethical pillars of sustainable economic development.

Within the framework of most contemporary economic systems, objectives such as efficiency, economic growth and profit maximization prevail. However, these objectives often contradict the ethical demands of human dignity. In this context, the Kantian idea, according to which the individual must always be treated as an end in himself and never only as a means, provides a normative ethical framework for sustainable economic development and for the protection of human dignity.

The paper argues that economic development cannot be considered sustainable in the absence of the effective integration of human dignity as a normative principle. Without it, economic development risks becoming not only inequitable but also unsustainable in the long term. An economy that ignores the intrinsic value of the person undermines its own conditions of legitimacy and stability. However, the full integration of human dignity into

the economy is limited by the structural constraints of the market economy, which makes certain compromises inevitable.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of human dignity has been extensively addressed in philosophical and legal scholarship, where it is commonly understood as the intrinsic and inalienable worth of every human being. The literature on human dignity as an ethical basis for sustainable economic development starts from moral philosophy and gradually reaches development economics and current sustainability models. In this process, an interdisciplinary approach is emerging in which ethics and economics are closely linked. An important starting point is Immanuel Kant, who in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) argues that dignity is an intrinsic value of each person. Human being must be treated as an end in himself, not as a means, which becomes a moral basis for the idea of respect and for limiting exploitation.

An important change occurs in development economics through Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom* (1999), where development is understood as the expansion of people's real freedoms. Poverty is not just a lack of income, but a lack of real possibilities for action and choice. This approach is continued by Martha Nussbaum in *Women and Human Development* (2000), who proposes a list of essential capabilities for a dignified life and transforms dignity into a clear criterion for public policies. Jeffrey Sachs in *The Age of Sustainable Development* (2015) argues that poverty reduction, environmental protection and international cooperation are essential for sustainable development based on dignity.

The literature shows an evolution from the philosophical idea of dignity, to the critique of the market economy, then to the development economy centered on freedom and capabilities, and finally to current models of sustainability.

Against this background, the present study contributes by proposing a structured three-dimensional model that operationalizes human dignity through autonomy, non-instrumentalization, and minimum well-being, bridging normative theory and practical evaluation.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and normative research design based on a review of the relevant academic literature and conceptual analysis. The methodological approach includes analysis, synthesis, comparison, and deduction, used to integrate insights from Kantian ethics, Amartya Sen's capability approach, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The research develops a three-dimensional evaluative model grounded in real autonomy, non-instrumentalization, and minimum well-being. This model serves as an analytical framework for assessing the compatibility of economic activities with human dignity.

Its applicability is illustrated through a case study of the fast fashion industry. The analysis relies on secondary data from existing academic sources and does not involve primary data collection. The evaluation is interpretive and focuses on identifying structural patterns rather than statistical measurement.

## 4. Results and Discussion

As stated in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” [Declaration]. And so, within contemporary society, human dignity transcends the realm of abstract concepts, being an inalienable right.

In the Republic of Moldova, dignity is not only an ethical aspiration, but also a supreme value, constitutionally guaranteed. Thus, in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, human dignity is declared a supreme value, along with the rule of law, civic peace, democracy, fundamental human rights and freedoms, the free development of human personality, justice and political pluralism (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

From an ethical perspective, human dignity implies the recognition of the intrinsic value of each individual, a value that cannot be conditioned by external factors, economic or social performance. This implies the obligation not to reduce the person to a simple instrument in the mechanisms of production or consumption. Dignity is manifested through the freedom of individuals to exercise their capabilities and to live a life based on self-respect and social recognition. Dignity is also the essential value of contemporary international society, it is the origin of all fundamental human rights and freedoms... conceived as the cornerstone of the international, regional and national normative framework for the protection of human rights (Dorul & Cazacu, 2021).

The subject of human dignity has been one of the central themes of reflection for many thinkers. The term “dignity” itself comes from the Latin *dignitas*, which originally referred to worthiness, personal merit, social status or prestige.

For the illustrious German philosopher Immanuel Kant, man has dignity because he is autonomous and capable of following the moral law (an end in itself). The foundation of Kantian morality is the obligation to treat humanity as an end in itself and never as a mere means. “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”, wrote Kant in his fundamental work on ethics, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, originally published in 1785 (Kant, 1997, p. 38).

This imperative can be applied in all spheres of human life, including the economic sphere, where the individual should not be reduced to the status of a “resource” or a simple instrument of production in the service of capital growth. If the economy itself is not an instrument at the service of man, but only an end in itself, man, his needs, his freedoms can easily be neglected. Applying the Kantian perspective allows for a critical analysis of economic relations, in which efficiency and profit are often prioritized to the detriment of human dignity.

For example, during the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, rapid economic development and the maximization of production were treated as priority objectives, often to the detriment of human well-being. Working conditions were often precarious, health risks were high, and wages were very low. Workers, including children, were subjected to extreme working conditions, with long hours. Friedrich Engels argued that: the worker is treated as a commodity, like any other article of trade. (Engels, 1887). Even though much time has passed since then, eloquent examples in this regard can still be found in the contemporary period. In the fast fashion industry, the pressure for rapid production and low costs often

leads to work in precarious conditions, which reflects the tendency to subordinate the dignity of workers to the imperative of maximizing profit.

The elevated status of the idea of human dignity is also reflected in Immanuel Kant's famous dictum: "In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent, what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity" (Kant, 1997, p. 42). Thus, a radical distinction is established between two ways of attributing value in the moral universe. If an individual or a human activity is treated through the prism of the "equivalent", it is automatically relegated to the category of a commodity. By specifying that what has dignity "has no equivalent", Kant transforms human dignity into an argument against instrumentalization. If price allows for replacement (substitution), dignity imposes respect (recognition of intrinsic value).

In the 20th century, philosopher and economist Amartya Sen advanced the idea that human freedom can be defined, in part, as the capacity to shape one's own life. He proposed a systemic view of development, in which freedom is not just an objective but an engine composed of five interconnected pillars. "Five distinct types of freedom, seen in an "instrumental" perspective, are particularly investigated in the empirical studies that follow. These include (1) political freedoms, (2) economic facilities, (3) social opportunities, (4) transparency guarantees and (5) protective security" (Sen, 1999, p. 10). Each of these types of rights and opportunities helps to advance the general capability of a person. They may serve to complement each other. Public policy to foster human capabilities and substantive freedoms can work through the promotion of these distinct but interrelated instrumental freedoms.

Amartya Sen develops the theory of capabilities, emphasizing what a person can actually do or be. In this view, the possession of a resource is irrelevant if the individual does not possess the substantial freedom to convert it into real results. Thus, development is no longer seen as a simple expansion of material goods, but as a process of eliminating the "unfreedoms" that prevent people from achieving their human potential, transforming the individual from a passive recipient of assistance into an active agent of his own life (Sen, 1999). At the heart of Sen's theory is the distinction between means and ends: income is only an instrument, while capability represents the freedom of man to choose the life he likes. The intersection of the theory of capabilities and human dignity redefines the purpose of modern economics. A human-centered economy ceases to pursue only the expansion of material goods.

If within the economic system the individual is reduced to a resource that is evaluated only in terms of his productivity and does not have the freedom to choose, then the value of the person is implicitly correlated with his economic performance. In this sense, human dignity, currently understood as an intrinsic value, independent of external criteria, comes into tension with the imperatives of the market, which presuppose comparative evaluation. We can observe this problem on the labor market. Most of the time, the employee is viewed only as a replaceable resource, and the employment relationship is reduced to a simple contract, without any emphasis on respecting the dignity of the person. The concept of decent work assumes that economic activity must be carried out in conditions that respect the physical and mental integrity of the individual, provide security and allow a dignified existence. Having a job does not always protect people from the risk of poverty. Poverty of the employed population is associated with low wages, poor skills, insecure employment and often involves involuntary part-time employment. At the same time, it is related to the type

of household in which the employed persons live and to the economic status of the other members of the household (Burghelea, 2012).

Currently, dominant economic systems are built more around efficiency, productivity and profit maximization. But these objectives often conflict with the ethical demands of respect for the individual as an end in itself. In this sense, Kant's perspective on human dignity provides a reliable normative foundation for reassessing the objectives of the economy. Viewing the individual exclusively as a means of production or as a simple economic factor contradicts the idea of the intrinsic value of dignity and undermines the premises of sustainable development.

The tension between the economic logic oriented towards profit and the ethical demands of human dignity imposes the need to identify a development model that can reconcile them. The concept of sustainable development provides this theoretical and practical framework capable of integrating the economic, social and human dimensions of progress. The recognition of human dignity as an intrinsic value, and not as a market price, imposes on economic systems, which are intended to be sustainable, the priority of the well-being and autonomy of the person. Thus, profit ceases to be an end in itself, becoming a subordinate mechanism to human development.

The terminological consecration of sustainable development took place in 1987, with the launch of the document "Our Common Future", prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the Brundtland Report). This report proposed an innovative vision, focused on harmonizing economic activity with the protection of natural ecosystems, the objective being to identify a global path that would guarantee the evolution of humanity in the long term, not just isolated or temporary advantages. The fundamental definition established in this context describes sustainability as a process capable of ensuring the well-being requirements of the current population, without endangering the resources and opportunities that tomorrow's generations will need for their own development. The Brundtland Report substantiated the need for a balance between the aspirations of current generations and the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987).

Sustainable development is based, among other things, on the idea that current generations have a responsibility to leave to future generations an environment that is at least as habitable as the present one. The sustainable development paradigm culminated in the establishment by the United Nations of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted under the auspices of the United Nations, explicitly include dimensions such as decent work, reducing inequalities, quality education and well-being. These goals indicate an implicit recognition that economic development cannot be separated from respect for human dignity. The global framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations, places human dignity at the heart of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The document stipulates that the main goal is "to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions", which is very important for the realization of human dignity (United Nations, 2015).

From the perspective of this paper, the SDGs can be interpreted as a concrete expression of the integration of human dignity into development policies. They are pillars for the implementation and protection of human dignity.

Thus, SDG 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities within and among countries) reflect the need to ensure a minimum level of material well-being, without which human dignity is compromised. SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) and SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) contribute to the development of human capacities, essential for the exercise of autonomy and social participation.

At the same time, SDG 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all) introduces the concept of "decent work", which derives directly from the idea of respect for the dignity of the person in the economic sphere. SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) guarantees the institutional framework necessary to protect fundamental rights and freedoms.

Respecting dignity involves not only ensuring present well-being, but also protecting resources and opportunities for future generations. Thus, the ecological dimension of the SDGs (such as SDG 13 – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts or SDG 15 – Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss) becomes an integral part of a broader vision of dignity (United Nations, 2015).

Therefore, the Sustainable Development Goals are not just a set of public policy directions, but can be understood as a normative mechanism through which human dignity is translated into concrete economic and social practices. They reflect a paradigm shift, in which development is conceived not only as the accumulation of resources, but as a process oriented towards the expansion of real freedoms and opportunities of individuals.

Sustainable economic development involves not only economic growth, but also ensuring social equity, environmental protection and respect for fundamental human rights, including human dignity. The need to achieve a balance between three basic dimensions is emphasized: economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental protection. But the social component is frequently minimized, being limited to a simple monitoring of quantitative indicators, such as the volume of income or the employment rate. This approach neglects respect for human dignity, as an intrinsic value and normative criterion of development.

Integrating human dignity into the paradigm of sustainable economic development is not just about ensuring a material minimum. It involves guaranteeing decent working conditions, equitable access to resources and the real possibility for individuals to actively engage in socio-economic life. From this perspective, the success of development cannot be measured exclusively in terms of gross domestic product, but also by the impact on the quality of life and on the real freedoms of individuals. Therefore, sustainable economic development cannot be conceived without a strong ethical foundation. Human dignity must function as a criterion for evaluating and guiding economic policies.

But the full integration of human dignity into the market economy is limited by such structural constraints as global competition, cost pressures, and capital dynamics. These conditions generate situations in which economic actors are forced to prioritize efficiency over ethical standards. A structural tension arises between the normative ideal of dignity and the realities of the global economy. However, achieving economic development fully

compatible with ethical demands involves regulating and guiding the market economy through public policies and international standards.

Sustainable economic development is not only an economic objective, but also an ethical one. Without the integration of human dignity as a fundamental principle, any form of development risks becoming inequitable and, ultimately, unsustainable.

In order to understand and assess whether an economic activity respects human dignity, a three-dimensional normative model is proposed, based on the fulfillment of three essential normative conditions: real autonomy, non-instrumentalization and ensuring a minimum level of well-being. The choice of these conditions is not arbitrary, but stems from philosophical traditions and the foundations of sustainable development.

The first normative dimension is the condition of real autonomy. It has its foundation in both Kantian ethics and in the capabilities theory developed by Amartya Sen. From a Kantian perspective, autonomy represents the individual's capacity to act according to his own rational will. A. Sen emphasizes "capabilities", understanding freedom not only as the absence of formal constraints, but as the existence of real and effective options. And therefore, the individual's participation in economic life must be the result of free and informed consent, not of economic constraints. This requires that people have real alternatives, access to education, social protection, employment options.

The second dimension is that of non-instrumentalization. It is based on the imperative formulated by Immanuel Kant, according to which the person must always be treated as an end in itself and never merely as a means to maximize profit or economic efficiency. Economic practices become amoral when they completely ignore the intrinsic value of the person. The use of human capacities in economic processes is inevitable, but it becomes problematic when the person is reduced exclusively to the status of a resource, a factor of production or a cost.

And the third normative dimension is the condition of integrity and minimum well-being. This is based on the theory of capabilities and the normative framework of sustainable development, reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals promoted by the United Nations. This dimension goes beyond strictly utilitarian approaches to well-being and emphasizes the real conditions that allow a dignified life: economic security, safe working conditions, access to health and education. And so, well-being is not reduced to income, but is understood as a set of conditions that support the exercise of autonomy and social participation.

The proposed model distances itself from traditional approaches that evaluate development only in terms of material resources or collective utility. Compared to the theory of capabilities, which provides a general framework for analysis, this model has a clearer normative function: it serves as an ethical evaluation tool for real economic practices. At the same time, unlike the utilitarian view, the model imposes moral limits. This means that no increase in economic efficiency or general welfare can be used as an argument to justify the sacrifice of individual rights.

To increase the empirical applicability of the model, each dimension is operationalized through an evaluation scale structured on three levels:

#### 1. Real autonomy

- Low: the individual has no real alternatives; lack of other work options.

- Medium: there are limited options, but these are restricted by structural factors, such as, for example, education.
- High: the individual has access to real alternatives and can make decisions in conditions of freedom.

## 2. Non-instrumentalization

- Low: the person is treated exclusively as a means, substitutable labor force, lack of institutional respect.
- Medium: there are some protection mechanisms, but economic logic dominates the relationship, partial respect for dignity.
- High: the person is recognized as an end in himself, being actively respected within economic relations, enjoys fair treatment.

## 3. Well-being and integrity

- Low: precarious working conditions, insufficient income for a decent living, risks to health and safety.
- Medium: acceptable conditions, but insufficient for a stable and secure life in the long term.
- High: conditions compatible with a decent life, social protection, safe working conditions are ensured.

Lack of one of these dimensions or a low assessment on one of them indicates a total or partial incompatibility with the demands of human dignity. In this sense, the proposed model does not only aim to describe economic realities, but also provides a normative framework for their evaluation and orientation, contributing to the effective integration of human dignity into the paradigm of sustainable economic development.

In Table 1, *Matrix for assessing economic activity from the perspective of respecting human dignity*, it can be seen how the model can be applied to economic activities, using three main questions. A high level of assessment shows that the economic activity is compatible with human dignity. A medium level indicates that there are some ethical problems and the compatibility of the economic activity with human dignity is compromised. A low level indicates the existence of serious ethical problems and a lack of respect for human dignity.

**Table 1. Matrix for evaluating economic activity from the perspective of respecting human dignity**

Dimension	Key Rating Question	Low	Medium	High
Autonomy	To what extent do the people involved have real freedom of choice in participating in economic activity?	Lack of real options/ alternatives	Limited options	Real freedom of choice
Respect, non-instrumentalization	To what extent are people treated as ends in themselves, and not exclusively as a means to achieve economic objectives?	Is treated as a mere means	Partial respect	Is treated as an end in itself
Well-being	To what extent are living and working conditions compatible with a dignified existence ensured?	Precarious conditions	Acceptable conditions	Decent and safe conditions

*Source: prepared by the author*

The final assessment is made by analyzing the three dimensions. The presence of a low level indicates a significant impairment of respect for human dignity in the economic activity analyzed.

We aimed to apply this model to the economic activity of the fast fashion industry. The specialized literature highlights the fact that the fast fashion industry generates significant social and environmental costs.

The study by Bick et al. (2018) shows that low wages and poor working conditions disproportionately affect workers in low-income countries. The fast fashion industry is associated with low wages, health and environmental impacts. (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018). The authors argue that in the decades since the fast fashion business model became the norm for big-name fashion brands, increased demand for large amounts of inexpensive clothing has resulted in environmental and social degradation along each step of the supply chain. They argue that “from the growth of water-intensive cotton, to the release of untreated dyes into local water sources, to worker’s low wages and poor working conditions; the environmental and social costs involved in textile manufacturing are widespread”. (Bick, Halsey, & Ekenga, 2018).

The precarious situation in the fast fashion industry is also highlighted by researcher A. Joselin. She mentions that fast fashion and sweatshops are intricately linked within the global fashion industry. Fast fashion brands often prioritize profit over ethical production (Joselin, 2024).

In order to evaluate the economic activity in the fast fashion industry, the three conditions set forth are observed. So, the first condition is that of real autonomy. The question that arises here is: To what extent do the people involved have real freedom of choice in participating in the economic activity? The answer in our case is: quite low. Workers in South Asia and Africa, where the production of fast fashion items is often concentrated, have limited options, there are few real alternatives for employment. The evaluation indicates a low-medium level.

Examining the fast fashion industry through the lens of the second condition, that of non-instrumentalization, the question arises: To what extent are people treated as ends in themselves, and not exclusively as means to achieving economic objectives? Studies on this topic reveal that workers in this industry are treated almost exclusively as means. The emphasis is on minimum costs and fast production. Workers are treated, rather, as cheap labor and are constantly pressured to increase labor productivity. The assessment indicates a low level.

The third normative condition is the condition of integrity and minimum well-being. The following question is asked: To what extent are living and working conditions compatible with a dignified existence ensured? The general answer is: low level. Wages for workers in the fast fashion industry are very low, working conditions are often precarious, there are risks to health and safety. For example, "Bangladesh's minimum salary for textile workers is only \$94 per month, far less than the estimated \$569 per month living wage". The assessment reveals a low level. The results of the assessment can be seen in Table 2, *Assessment of economic activity in the fast-fashion industry from the perspective of respect for human dignity*.

The assessment indicates a generally low level of compatibility with human dignity in the fast fashion industry, in particular from the perspective of respect for the person and the well-being of workers.

**Table 2. Evaluation of economic activity in the fast-fashion industry from the perspective of respecting human dignity**

Dimension	Key Rating Question	Evaluation, level
Autonomy	To what extent do the people involved have real freedom of choice in participating in economic activity?	Low-Medium
Respect, non-instrumentalization	To what extent are people treated as ends in themselves, and not exclusively as a means to achieve economic objectives?	Low
Well-being	To what extent are living and working conditions compatible with a dignified existence ensured?	Low

*Source: prepared by the author*

Based on the results of the assessment, the need for interventions aimed at reducing the gap between existing economic practices and the demands of human dignity is outlined. It is necessary to strengthen the framework for labor regulation at national and international levels, in order to ensure safe working conditions and remuneration that allows a decent living. It is necessary to increase transparency in supply chains. Consumers must have access to relevant information on production conditions. Public policies must aim to expand the real capabilities of workers, through investments in education, social protection and the diversification of employment opportunities.

Thus, the analysis demonstrates that the integration of human dignity into the contemporary economy is not just an abstract ethical requirement, but a practical necessity for achieving truly sustainable economic development.

## 5. Conclusions

Sustainable economic development cannot be reduced to economic growth or technical efficiency. It involves the integration of fundamental ethical principles, among which human dignity occupies a central place.

The analysis carried out highlights the fact that human dignity is not just an abstract ideal, but an essential normative criterion for the evaluation and orientation of economic activities. In the context of the contemporary economy, characterized by globalization, competition and pressure on costs, the risk of instrumentalizing the individual is becoming increasingly pronounced. From this perspective, the Kantian principle of treating the person as an end in itself acquires particular relevance. Integrating dignity into the economy does not imply the elimination of market mechanisms, but their orientation and regulation in such a way as to respect the intrinsic value of the individual. At the same time, sustainable development must be understood as a complex process, which includes economic, social and ecological dimensions, but which finds its ethical foundation in respecting human dignity.

In this context, an evaluation model based on three fundamental dimensions has been proposed: real autonomy, respect (non-instrumentalization) and minimal well-being. This model allows a normative analysis of the compatibility of economic activities with respect for human dignity.

Therefore, an economy can only be considered truly sustainable to the extent that it focuses on the individual as the ultimate goal and contributes to the expansion of human freedoms and the assurance of a dignified life for all individuals, both now and for future generations.

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