Exploring Moderation and Reason in Search of Happiness

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I dedicate this work to Brother Donald Mansir who always reminded me that happiness and fulfillment are not found in other people’s prescriptions on how to live life, but through my own exploration. Thank you for igniting and encouraging my curiosity and wonder.

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**I: Introduction**

Every person is on a journey. As Tolstoy states in his second epilogue, “there is no possibility of describing the movement of humanity without a conception of a force impelling men to direct their activity to one end” (Second Epilogue, III), and each person is searching for fulfillment. For Tolstoy, this end is power as countries constantly wage war on other countries in the hopes of gaining wealth, land, and recognition. But, to what fulfillment does power bring people? Power brings more riches, yes, but along with these riches comes more danger, along with more land comes higher risks of rebellion, and with more recognition comes higher chances of being invaded. Power is not an end by itself; it is a stepping stone for a higher end, true happiness.

People strive for all goods - wealth, power, and physical health - in the hopes of being happy. These ends can act as roadway signs along the journey or divergent paths that lead one astray. At some points these secondary ends are positive, propelling the searcher one step closer to being truly happy. However, at other times, as the focus falls so heavily on these ends, one gets lost in the pursuit of that specific end, forgetting about the pathway to happiness. Avoiding the latter in favor of the former option requires one to be cognizant of his or her true goal and to avoid losing oneself in the pursuit of the divergent end. To be fully cognizant of one’s end goal, one must know what he or she desires most. As happiness becomes the main motivator, one’s actions align with that end goal. If this is the case, the other goods will be pursued with happiness in mind and the searcher will not lose his or herself in the other good by delving into excess.

Losing oneself in the other goods will only cause one to fruitlessly pursue ends that can never make him or her fully happy. One obtains the most current goal only to feel unfulfilled,
and therefore is in need of continued searching. This constant searching is a sure sign that one is not reaching for his or her true goal. If one is pursuing wealth, for what end does he or she want wealth? If one is trying to gain power, for what reason is power a goal? More than likely, the person assumes these ends, by themselves, can bring happiness. As one feels unfulfilled, he or she tries harder and gets lost further in the attainment of the specific goal. However, this only leads further from happiness by pulling one into the recesses of excess. Here, one is lost to constantly striving for the most wealth or power and losing sight of the pathway to true happiness. As the need for more consumes him or her, the ability to separate this good from the ultimate goal becomes more difficult. Excess inhibits one’s ability to obtain the ultimate end of happiness as one gets consumed in other goods for the sake of themselves.

Excessive tendencies are dead ends that hold one back from happiness. The way to combat this is to live based on moderation. In this sense, moderation is the ability to curb one’s need for more and balance the superfluities. This requires that one recognize what these are and what his or her personal capabilities are for handling those surpluses. Moderation is a balance between these extremes based on individual response and ability. While moderation is, in a general definition, the mean between extremes, it is also recognition of what one can and cannot handle. It accounts for individual tendencies and personalities and future actions are directed toward these. Moderation, just like people’s personal desires and abilities, is individualized. Some limits that one person can handle are intolerable to others. Some people are able to combat certain tendencies while others are powerless in their wake. Moderation is not a universal, all-encompassing prescription of how much of any and everything that people can have. Rather, it is based on every single person’s ability to recognize his or her own limits and live in between
these. By doing so, one is able to focus on those activities and experiences which lead to happiness.

Happiness is much the same. As each person has his or her own preferences, desires, and goals, his or her pathway to happiness will be as unique as his or her personality. Some may find fulfillment in the midst of others’ attention while some shrink from this very thought. Finding happiness becomes a journey of understanding the ends and means one utilizes to seek fulfillment. It is a journey to know why one pursues a certain end, such as wealth or power. Understanding the foundation for the choices one makes will lead to an awareness of the pathway one’s choices lead him or her on. The life of moderation acts as the truest path to this end. The ability to know oneself will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the happiness one seeks and the way to attain it.

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, takes the reader on a journey to understand the connection between excellence and moderation. He explains his idea of moderation, the relation between moderation, excellence, and happiness, and the role of reason in this precarious dynamic. These four characteristics—moderation, excellence, happiness, and reason—are intertwined in each individual as the person begins to explore and search for the end goal. This essay reviews and explains Aristotle’s concepts, exploring where these concepts overlap and introducing new angles from which to view these concepts.

Two characters from differing novels are introduced as examples of the journey towards happiness, using and deviating from the various parts of Aristotle’s concepts. Two very different characters who find happiness in very different ways each explore the meaning of moderation for themselves. Emma from Jane Austen’s *Emma* and Natasha from Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* each embark on a journey to discover this happiness. The reader travels with these characters as
each experiences false fulfillment by pursuing goods that are not in accordance with moderation and happiness. The final result for each character, while very different, leaves each character happy and fulfilled in the life each is living. As each found his or her personal definition of moderation, through trial and error, each was able to eventually reach a balance between the extremities of his or her character. This involved much introspection and information from outside sources, an ability to filter this information, and then reason to understand and apply this knowledge.

Aristotle explores the idea of happiness through the concepts of excellences that he attributes to all aspects of life. As he believes that each craft has its own end, which is the excellence of that craft, Aristotle holds happiness to be the end goal of excellence. This end good is pursued and desired for itself, lacking nothing (1097b15). As the reader will see, Aristotle attributes happiness as attainable from only one type of life, the contemplative life, and here is where this essay deviates from our ancient and brilliant philosopher. Happiness is the complete end, as other excellences are pursued for the end of attaining and leading a happy life. It can be a complete end for individual roles in society rather than just for the contemplative role. Being excellent in one’s craft- shoemaking, parenting, writing, and others- can lead one to happiness as long as it is a moderate and reasonable lifestyle that he or she leads. The latter part is where this essay returns to Aristotle. Happiness can only be attained through moderation and the use of reason when determining the best path towards excellence. Happiness is the exploration of one’s understanding of these concepts, learning the art of moderation and the best way to reach towards excellence. Using Jane Austen’s and Leo Tolstoy’s characters as examples, happiness becomes the fulfillment of an individual role, the throwing off of character vices and imperfections, and the slow journey towards excellence.
II: In Pursuit of Excellence

Excellence is the pursuit of the many goods in life but the goal is the good that is a complete end and pursued for itself. There is nothing greater beyond this excellence so it is the final end. Aristotle explains in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that living a balanced life is in pursuit of excellence and happiness. The role of goods in relation to excellence and happiness is explained, as is the role these, happiness and excellence, play in creating a good character. Aristotle also explores the idea of pleasure in relation to the good and excellence.

Aristotle explicitly states that pleasures are not processes because they are activities and ends (1153a9). This means that pleasures are not pursued for any reason other than the activity is pleasurable in itself. The end that is being pursued can either be the same as the activity or different. The end goal is not always a positive, but Aristotle is quick to point out that this does not mean that all pleasures are bad, “the view that pleasures are bad because some pleasant things are unhealthy is like saying that healthy things are bad because some healthy things are bad for the pocket” (1153a17-18). This is important to highlight the fact that there is no universal positive in relation to pleasures. Rather, all people pursue different pleasures based on their individual wishes. Each person is unique and because of this, the activities he or she enjoys will be personalized to his or her inclinations, “since no one nature or state either is or is thought the best for all, neither do all pursue the same pleasure; yet all pursue pleasure” (1153b29-30).

Pleasure, as a general category, is sought by all people but in various forms based on the individual’s wants. Pleasures are not synonymous with the goods. The pursuit of pleasures is fulfillment of material desires while pursuit of the goods and excellences is fulfillment of a function, such as striving to be a good merchant or banker.
In the pursuit of fulfilling a role in society, one strives to be excellent in his or her art form or craft. Excellence is a good and an end goal for the various respective crafts. Aristotle states that every art or craft have its own function and excellence is the fulfillment of this particular role in society to the best of one’s ability. Excellence varies depending on which activity it corresponds with, but no matter which particular excellence being spoken of; it helps balance an individual’s pursuit of happiness. Excellence goes beyond bodily desires; it is an activity that is concerned with the soul (1102a16). Excellence is categorized by two different types of excellences, intellectual and moral, the difference being that “intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit” (1103a14-16). Excellence, as a whole, is concerned with reason and habit- using reason to constantly act in a correct manner, thus forming positive habits. Actions, when directed at excellence, become pleasant in themselves and for people of a noble [good] disposition (1099a12-14) and when one finds actions enjoyable, one will tend to repeat those actions and form a habit. Aristotle explicitly states this by highlighting the fact that as one enjoys his or her actions, he or she is more inclined to perform these actions, “for no function of man has so much permanence as excellent activities…and of these themselves the most valuable are more durable because those who are blessed spend their life most readily and most continuously in these” (1100b13-16). Excellence becomes a state of being in which one thrives, creating habits that continue on as he or she continues pursuing goods for the sake of excellence.

Aristotle begins to draw a connection between excellence and happiness because it is “those who act rightly [that] win the noble and good things in life” (1099a5). As stated earlier, excellence is the fulfillment of one’s personal role in society. Happiness, as the complete end, is
the end goal of excellence. Happiness is the fulfillment of the function of man- to lead a life founded in reason and working towards the excellence. People that act in accordance with excellence and pursue goods for reasons beyond instant gratification are the ones that are rewarded. “The characteristics that are looked for in happiness seem also, all of excellence” (1098b22), so the various forms of excellence all take part in happiness. Excellence is the highest state one can pursue in relation to pleasure and good and because of this, excellence is concerned with noble things. Not only is pursuing excellence pleasant, it is also “good and noble, and [has] each of these attributes in the highest degree” (1099a22). In the next lines, Aristotle continues to draw the relationship between happiness and excellence stating that Happiness is “the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing” (1099a24). Both excellence and happiness, pursued as ends in regards to the good, account for the noble actions of people.

As stated earlier, excellence is concerned with the state of the soul and not of bodily desires, “and happiness also we call an activity of soul” (1102a17). Excellence and happiness are not concerned with the quality of physical life primarily, but the state and character of the soul. This character of the soul concerns itself with a constant pursuit of excellence. Excellence is an ongoing state that requires one to continuously contemplate excellence and as he or she does, a habit is formed. Happiness, as end of all excellences, is also a constant state. Aristotle explains that the highest good is something that cannot be easily taken away and lies in a perpetual state (1100b1). As long as one is pursuing the excellent he or she will remain happy. It is a state of being where one is “always, or by preference to everything else, [one] will do and contemplate what is excellent” and this will cause one to “be happy throughout [one’s] life” (1100b18-19). Excellence is not a stagnant state of being, rather it is a constant pursuit of what is best in any given good and happiness comes from this pursuit for a greater good than the instant gratification.
given by the obtainment of every pleasure. Aristotle, equating happiness with the highest excellence, shows that one striving for the happy life must consciously choose to only strive for the highest excellence. Excellent activities and the opposite are what determine whether one will be happy or not (1100b10). Since the happy person only pursues excellence, he or she will not suffer from choosing to do wrongful acts (1100b34) but Aristotle does not guarantee a charmed life for all those who pursue excellence. Rather, he calls people in pursuit of the excellent to bear “all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances” (1101a1) and because of this, “the happy man can never become miserable” (1101a6). Happiness and excellence are both concerned with the state of the soul and as one pursues excellence, one finds him or herself on the path to happiness. With excellence as the end goal, one does not commit malicious acts, rather one learns to bear life’s misfortunes and make the best of any circumstance. Happiness is not contingent on continuous blessedness; it is a constant contemplation and striving towards the excellent state.

As happiness and excellence call a person to a persistent pursuit of what is highest and best, he or she must be aware of balance and moderation. Happiness and excellence are concerned with the good and therefore determine the actions one takes in pursuit of the good. While pursuing excellence, one must live a balanced life that does not delve too excessively into the pleasure or tread too lightly, avoiding the pleasure altogether. Excellence lives within the balanced life and “is concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success…excellence is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate” (1106b25-28). Living within the boundaries of a moderate life does not denote a painful existence. Instead, as one strives towards the excellent, he or she experiences happiness in the act of reaching for the highest state. As moderation plays
a part in moving towards the highest excellence, one who is reaching for this good “is not pained at the absence of what is pleasant and at his abstinence from it” (1118b34). Rather, avoiding excess and deficiency allows one to truly enjoy pleasure for the deeper reason of reaching excellence and happiness. Excess and deficiency both counter one’s attempts to reach happiness because happiness lies within the balance. Too much of any pleasure can be a deterrent from reaching excellence because the focus is no longer on the highest good but on the next instance of pleasure one can obtain. Happiness determines the amount of any pleasure that one can have without having too much. Aristotle uses wealth as an example, stating that “even good fortune itself when in excess is an impediment, and perhaps should then be no longer called good fortune; for its limit is fixed by reference to happiness” (1153b22-24). Aristotle highlights the importance that moderation and balance plays in the pursuit of the excellent. Happiness is not a hoarding of pleasures or the ability to exploit a pleasure to its fullest, rather, excellence and happiness is finding the balance between excess and deficiency for pleasures. It is pursuit of pleasures for the highest good, using pleasures and balance to create a pathway of stepping stones towards happiness.

As stated earlier, pleasures are pursued for an end goal, excellence, and Aristotle draws a close relationship between excellence and happiness in his treatise. The conclusion that these connections produce is that happiness is the end goal. The end or chief good is complete in and for itself, meaning that it is pursued for the sake of itself and not for another, more complete good. It is “always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else” (1097a34-35). This chief good is what a person desires most of the pleasures and excellences, the good that these others are pursued in the hopes of obtaining.

Now such a thing happiness, above all else, is held to be; for this we choose always for itself and never for the sake of something else,
but honour, pleasure, reason, and every excellence we choose
indeed for themselves…but we choose them also for the sake of
happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy (1097b1-5)

While other pleasures and goods are pursued because they are enjoyable for themselves, there is
the hope of obtaining happiness in the process. Happiness is sufficient in itself to be a good
pursued for itself only. It is something that “when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in
nothing” (1097b15). Happiness is the highest good and other pleasures are enjoyed on the
pathway to happiness. The key is moderation as happiness cannot be enjoyed if there is excess or
deficiency.

III: A Careful Balance

A balanced lifestyle is the focus of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and from this an idea
of the moderate lifestyle emerges. He highlights what exactly it means to say “moderate
lifestyle”, showing how it acts as a mean that identifies the best path to the good. This path then
determines for one the best way to live within this balance, using reason as its guide. Balance is
not easy to identify and even more difficult to implement. It is an ongoing process that requires
one to understand one’s own capabilities and reasoning and then act in accordance with these. A
life of moderation is not just in the balanced actions taken, but also in the understanding that acts
as a foundation for this lifestyle, a discernment that gives one deep insight into his or her
personal choices and actions.

Aristotle uses the idea of a mean between extremes to highlight the role of moderation.
He begins Book II by exploring excellence and the path to obtaining it. He uses various goods as
illustration, saying that “temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and
preserved by the mean” (1104a25-26). Here, while introducing the importance of a mean, he
alludes to the fact that moderation participates in the mean by balancing the two opposites. This
balancing act is precarious and requires people to become experts in the quest for the good. These experts realize that moderation is individualized and they avoid “excess and defect, but seek the intermediate and choose this—the intermediate not in the object but relatively to us” (1106b4-5). The mean between extremes will be different for each person as each person’s capabilities are different. Here, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of finding the intermediate in relation to his or her quest for the good. As he or she begins to understand what the good or excellence is, he or she is better equipped to seek the mean that fits that good. As excellence is

Concerned with passions and actions, in which excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success; and both these things are characteristics of excellence. Therefore excellence is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate. (1106b25-28)

Aristotle is able to articulate the fact that excellence itself is a form of mean because of its requirement that, in order to obtain it, one must find this balance between excess and defect. Excess and defect, in Aristotle’s treatise, are both considered vices. Moderation, then, is the virtue balanced between these vices. The good or excellent, as stated previously, is “destroyed by defect and excess” (1104a12) and “that which is proportionate both produces and increases and preserves it” (1104a16-17). Moderation becomes the recognition of what is virtuous and what is not. One not only recognizes the definition of moderation as a mean but also the importance of knowing what is virtuous and what participates in vice. Excellence deals with the desires and passions of people so moderation must do so as well. It must be able to mediate between too much of a pleasure and too little of it; moderation is not avoiding a good, it is finding the right balance of it. Moderation is a “mean between two vices, the one involving excess, the other deficiency, and that it is such because its character is to aim at what is intermediate in passions and in action” (1109a20-23). The intermediate is a virtuous mean that
keeps one from obtaining too much or not obtaining enough, as it does this, it progresses toward the excellent.

Living within this balance can be difficult to maintain, let alone to identify. Working towards obtaining the good requires a difficult path because “both art and excellence are always concerned with what is harder: for even the good is better when it is harder” (1105a9-10). The process is not supposed to be easy and requires some setbacks in order to find the correct balance. One must explore and experience both sides of the spectrum before recognizing what one’s abilities are and therefore where his or her moderation lies. While it is the balanced state is the most highly regarded, one must “incline sometimes towards the excess, sometimes towards the deficiency; for so shall [one] most easily hit the mean and what is right” (1109b24-26). It is an exploration, which may include some mistakes, that leads one towards a better understanding of what his or her personal balance is. This exploration and experience is not arbitrary, rather it is a conscious decision to work towards and act in accordance with one’s personal sense of moderation. It requires one to have knowledge of what he or she is doing, why he or she is doing it, and then acting from this knowledge (1105a30-33). It is not a chance occurrence that helps one find the balance between the extremes, rather it is a choice to live within the acknowledged mean. It is the recognition that all goods, including the necessary ones must be pursued for his or her needs and only to the needed amount, anything in excess or for other reasons is a characteristic of the self-indulgent person (1150a16-20). This act of moderation requires people to not only be cognizant and aware of their actions and reasons behind these actions, but also to enjoy the act of balancing the excesses. The mean between the extremes cannot be a burden or the person who is burdened is no longer pursuing moderation for the sake of excellence. The “temperate man is so called because he is not pained at the absence of what is pleasant and at his
abstinence from it” (1118b32-33), rather he is aware of the importance of his actions on the pathway to the good. This lifestyle is the most conducive to obtaining the good, as the good not only requires self-knowledge and understanding, but also challenges people to work hard enough to obtain it. The more difficult the process, the more the person learns, and the more worthwhile the endeavor becomes in the end.

The balanced lifestyle is a chance for discernment. As one must experience both extremes in order to understand what the mean is. Some people’s extremes are other people’s mean and the discernment must come from an understanding of oneself. As the excesses and deficiencies are explored, one is able to know what kind of balance is required to work towards the good and how to act in accordance to this end. The individualistic aspect of moderation comes from the concept that one person can handle more of a good or necessity than another, such as food or drink, but reason maintains a universal necessity of making a balanced lifestyle a choice. Moderation is the ability to truly understand what is good and bad, proceeding to work towards the former. It is a discernment between necessity and excess or deficiency.

IV: Making a Conscious and Reasoned Decision

This discernment or reason is the substance of each person’s ability to move towards excellence. As each person travels the path toward happiness, working to fulfill his or her excellences, and using moderation throughout the process, reason helps to ground this journey. All actions and choices, in order to reach the excellent, must be founded in reason. Reason is the groundwork for why a person chooses to live a life of moderation. As one strives to meet the end good; he or she is cognizant of the means to reach this goal and also must make choices that align with these means. By acting in accordance with this will, one’s actions, based on reason, help determine his or her character.
Living a life of moderation and balance is not a casual pursuit that one embarks on because it seems a good idea, rather it is logical and founded in a true desire for excellence. Striving towards the obtainment of the good is a choice to live a life of balance, “one ought to choose that which is intermediate, not the excess nor the defect, and that the intermediate is determined by the dictates of reason” (1138b18-20). A balanced lifestyle based on reason is more durable and resilient than an arbitrary lifestyle that floats from one mode of action to another as it pleases. The conscious decision to live a life working towards a specific goal thus necessitates actions that are in accordance with this choice. It is a logically planned endeavor that has meaning and therefore importance in one’s mind. By having a goal, plan, and reasons for both, one is more likely to stick to this lifestyle instead of float aimlessly about. Aristotle highlights this by stating that “it is to reason that the others [the incontinent men] refuse to yield, for they do form appetites and many of them are led by their pleasures” (1151b10-12). Here, reason is what keeps one on the balanced track, for without it, one is prone to live his or her life moving from one pleasure to the next, never discerning if it is actually good for him or her. Bodily materials and pleasures become the driving force instead of reason and balance so one is disposed to live a life of extravagance or insufficiency. Aristotle states that “the incontinent man fails to abide by reason because he delights too much in them [bodily things], and this man because he delights in them too little; while the continent man abides by it and does not change on either account” (1151b25-27). Being founded in reason, the moderate life is one that is unchanging because the person understands why he or she foregoes some goods and pursues more of others, a lifestyle that involves conscious reasoning and actions.

As understanding and conscious reasoning are the basis for moderation, the intermediate lifestyle is one of choice. One must be aware of why he or she is choosing to act a certain way
and for what purpose. “Excellence, then, is a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason” (1107a1), the end goal is the focus of the action which is determined by reason. Being aware of the actions that are in accord with excellence is only part of the process. One must not only be aware of the actions but also understand why these actions lead one to excellence and then finally, choose to act. Since living a moderate lifestyle is a choice, one that is not made lightly, reason must be a founding element. Reason helps one to understand the rationale and the actions required and this helps lead one towards excellence. Aristotle explains that one must be in a certain condition when living a moderate lifestyle, one must “have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” (1105a31-33). Living a moderate lifestyle must not only be founded in reason, but one must understand why it is the correct lifestyle. Motivated by the end good, moderation is a choice that is grounded by reason.

Reason is the recognition of one’s goal to reach the end good and the choices and actions that stem from this motivation. Excellence embodies this idea by requiring a sensible approach to acting and making decisions. Excellence, like balance, is a choice, pursued because one has reason to believe it is the highest good. The ends and means to reaching the goal must be understood and the choice to act must be within one’s own power to choose. The end goal is the primary cause for choosing to act a certain way, “the end, then, being what we wish for, the things contributing to the end what we deliberate about and choose, actions concerning the latter must be according to choice” (1113b2-4). Obtaining the end good is motivation to want to act in accordance with excellence, and one must make the choices that lead to the goal. Aristotle defines choice as more than a random decision; rather he uses the word desire. Using reason to
obtain these desires is what helps one obtain excellence, because “moral excellence is a state
concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true
and the desire right, if the choice is to be good” (1139a23-25). Living a life of moderation that
works towards excellence necessitates one to live consciously in his or her actions,
understanding, and knowledge. One must be aware of his or her purpose for choosing to act and
what desires one is fulfilling by moderating pleasures.

The active choice to live a life based on reason is one that helps determine the character
of a person. One’s lifestyle choice is a direct revelation of what kind of character he or she
possesses. Actions and reasoning for those actions are necessary for one to reach excellence.
Reason helps one avoid appetites and work towards actions that are congruent with the end goal,
it is knowledge and understanding of the importance of correct actions, “the continent man,
knowing that his appetites are bad, does not follow them because of his reason” (1145b13-14).
Reason becomes the measure against which actions are chosen. These actions are what determine
one’s character. Aristotle is quick to point out that action, not opinions shape character, for “by
choosing what is good or bad we are men of a certain character, which we are not by holding
certain opinions” (1112a2-3). Instead of pursuing the newest and most exciting pleasure, one
who lives by reason understands what actions to take and why, thus determining the kind of
lifestyle he or she will lead. As one is led by reason, his or her character is defined by the actions
and choices made.

Reason is the foundation for not only moderation but what moderation leads one to,
happiness and excellence. The connection between these has been established, but the
groundwork is laid by choices that are dictated by reason. One makes a decision to think or act a
certain way and reason is also a choice. Living based on the constraints of reason is what allows
one to live a life of moderation and work towards happiness. As happiness and excellence are the end goods that one strives for, reason is necessary in order for one to choose actions that are congruent with this goal. Reason, as the foundation of moderation, is a constant choice. One must continuously choose to base his or her actions and decisions in reason and live the life dictated by such.

V: Emma’s Journey toward Inner Awareness

In Jane Austen’s novel Emma, the reader travels with Emma Woodhouse as she discovers moderation and happiness. Moderation for Emma is learning the correct balance of being present in society and involved in other people’s lives as opposed to exhibiting the correct decorum without meddling. She is loved and respected within her societal circle, quick witted and clever; Emma has to learn how to focus these talents. By removing herself from direct engagement in other people’s love lives, she realizes the importance of listening to her own feelings and allowing other people to do the same. She is learning the delicate balance of tempering her need to feel engaged and her involvement in other people’s lives in order to be more aware and present to her own feelings and needs. Presented in contrast to her reclusive father, Emma is portrayed as an extrovert, employing herself in acting as a matchmaker for her neighbors and friends. The reader watches as Emma struggles to find and maintain moderation, balancing her extroverted ways with a need to have personal awareness. Her father stands on one end of the spectrum, avoiding most societal gatherings except the ones that are required. Emma, after meddling in Harriet’s life, must learn how to balance this extreme with the one her father exemplifies. The reader is able to play witness to this transformation as Emma searches for, finds, and then struggles to work towards living a life based on balance. Emma is seen to

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progress from a naïve, yet well-intentioned girl, to a more aware character that not only works towards moderation, but also discovers her own true happiness.

Austen presents Emma as a young, well-loved girl who possesses all the necessary social presentations. Emma Woodhouse is described in the opening lines as “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition” (Austen, page 7). Emma never wanted for anything; instead she was much loved by others in her societal circle and had learned from a young age how to attend to guests. Besides her social graces, Emma possesses a quick wit and has been “spoiled by being the cleverest of her family” (33). This cleverness has been put to use, unsuccessfully, throughout the novel as a means to create romantic matches for other people. The idea of marriage, as presented in the novel, is the union between two equals-socially and monetarily equal-not a union strictly for love. This means that people marry to solidify, or heighten their status, gain a position in the town politics, or receive an endowment. Emma believes that she can use match-making as a way to solidify her friend, Harriet’s, questionable position in society. She attempts, and fails multiple times, to heighten Harriet’s social standing by matching her with the right husband. In her father’s eyes this indicates that Emma “never thinks of herself, if she can do good to others” (13). Emma’s intentions are good as she believes this is the best and correct course for Harriet.

Emma believes she can be of use to Harriet and this becomes the basis for their friendship (24). Emma’s need to be of use to others is her motivation for many of the actions she does. When left to her own devices, Emma lacks the fortitude to complete tasks at which she should excel (39) and Mr. Knightly points out that “she will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience” (33). In fact, Mr. Knightly is one of the few to find fault with Emma Woodhouse and he is the only one that ever tells her of these faults (11). Emma’s actions are motivated by a
naïve notion that she can play matchmaker. Her arrogance is the cause behind this, the “real evils indeed of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (7). Her natural disposition to attempt to be helpful to others and her lack of ability to temper this, even after multiple failed attempts, indicates Emma’s inability to moderate her actions. She not only thinks too highly of herself, but is also blinded to the harm she is actually causing.

Emma’s greatest fault is her arrogance and her assumption that she knows what is best for everyone else. In her many attempts to match Harriet to a suitor, Emma not only disregards Harriet’s feelings but is blinded by her scheme to see what the suitors themselves want. At the start of the novel, Harriet is being pursued by Mr. Martin who is the brother of Harriet’s close friends. As the proposal is made, and Harriet hesitates to refuse Robert Martin, Emma is surprised, especially when Harriet asks “You think I ought to refuse him then” (45). Emma looks down and does not give Harriet a direct answer. Instead she asks pointed questions that lead Harriet to the conclusion that Robert Martin is not worthy of her acceptance. Mr. Knightly who had advised Mr. Martin to move forward with the proposal is livid with Emma, stating that not only did Emma see Harriet’s answer but she “wrote her answer too, Emma, this is your doing. You persuaded her to refuse him” (53). Even though Emma feels some misgivings, she is not truly sorry since she feels herself still in the right. She is convinced that she is “a better judge of such a point of female right and refinement than he [Mr. Knightly] could be” (56). Even though she briefly second guesses herself, a glimmer of her inner virtue shining through, she still maintains herself to be right. While Harriet maintains that Mr. Martin was not the man she hopes for, there is trepidation as she refuses him. Emma is unable to see this as she begins to plot a way to bring Harriet and Mr. Elton together instead.
Mr. Elton is a man of some refinement, wealth, societal standing, and good looks. He is young and a very eligible bachelor and Emma is convinced that he is planning to propose to Harriet. After many appearances at Hartfield, Emma’s house, Mr. Elton drops off a riddle for Emma and Harriet to figure out. As Emma figures out the answer quickly—courtship—and then explains it to Harriet, she is quick to conclude that it has been written for Harriet. Emma believes that “there is so pointed, and so particular a meaning in this compliment, that I cannot have a moment’s doubt as to Mr. Elton’s intentions. You [Harriett] are his object — and you will soon receive the completest proof of it” (64). She failed to recognize the meaning as Mr. Elton handed over the poem; he was looking and talking directly to Emma (62). In fact, Emma is the only one blinded to Mr. Elton’s true intentions, her brother-in-law states that Mr. Elton “seems to have a great deal of good-will towards you” (94). While Mr. Elton’s intentions are clear to others, Emma is “too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear him impartially, or see him with clear vision” (93). Emma was convinced that she was right and others were unable to see the situation clearly, she amused “herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are forever falling into” (94). Emma has a knack for completely misreading people and then assuming she is correct and all others are sadly mistaken. This arrogance is what leads her to making mistakes and blunders throughout the whole novel. As others’ suspicions prove correct and Mr. Elton confesses his love to Emma (108), she is not only mortified by her mistake but feels remorse for the pain she has caused Harriet, “she [Emma] would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistake-more in error-more disgraced by misjudgment, than she actually was, could the effects of her blunders have been confined to herself” (112). Emma, while arrogant and incapable of truly understanding others’ feelings, is a virtuous
person who lacks moderation in her actions. Her mistakes are not malicious; instead, these mistakes usually catch Emma unaware. When she does become aware of her blunder and realize the consequences of said blunder, she feels bad, acknowledging the pain and embarrassment it is going to cause others, usually Harriett. This ability to feel remorse about the pain she causes others is where her virtue lies. Emma is able to see how her inability to understand others needs contributes to their pain as she goes ahead with her ill-conceived plans. As she slowly begins to understand the mistakes she has made and to remedy them, she slowly begins to temper her emotions and actions.

In the process of learning how to moderate her actions, Emma undergoes a few lessons. Besides the failures in her match-making abilities, Emma is reminded of social propriety from Mr. Knightly. He acts as a voice of reason throughout the novel, admonishing and advising Emma constantly. When she publicly insults Miss Bates, calling her unbearably dull, Mr. Knightly is quick to remind her that Miss Bates is “poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion” (309). Emma, realizing her lack of decorum, feels a combination of “anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern” (311) for Miss Bates. She rushes to Miss Bates’ residence the next day to apologize and make amends. Emma is learning how to be aware of other people’s wants, needs, and emotions. In the process of learning how to temper her own actions, she becomes more conscious of other people and her interaction with them.

This newfound awareness of others is the first step to her allowing others to decide their own fate. She has spent much of the novel attempting to control the social circle she moves in by matching couples with little success. Emma begins to let people make their own choices; she begins to give up control. As she does so, she starts to understand what others truly wanted and
what was best for them. In the end, Harriet accepts Mr. Martin’s second proposal (386) and this time, instead of being appalled by the thought, Emma realizes that it is a good decision for Harriet. She assures Mr. Knightly that he “need not be at any pains to reconcile me to the match. I think Harriet is doing extremely well. Her connexions may be worse than his,” (387). As Emma takes a step back and removes herself from the direct situation, she is better able to understand what is going on. Her opinion is not based solely on what she has deemed her own duty to fulfill and her arrogance no longer impedes her ability to know what is true. Emma realizes her previous ignorance, calling herself a fool (388) as she begins to release her arrogance and need for control. As Emma begins to moderate her actions and temper her arrogance, she allows others to decide their own life choices and this in turn releases her from advising others.

As Emma is released from other people’s lives, she is better able to cater to her own. By allowing others to make their own decisions, she is liberated from her constant thoughts directed at others and can take time to understand her own wants and needs. By doing so, Emma comes to the surprising conclusion that she is, in fact, in love with Mr. Knightly.

Emma’s eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient to make her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, make rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth. (335) This knowledge had been present the whole time; she had refused to take the time to understand her own wants. She admonishes herself, “how to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!-The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!” (338). Emma is astonished at the blindness of herself and she begins to realize the cause of it is her own arrogance. Emma is now able to act on her own wants and desires instead of being entangled and blinded by her supposed attempt to help others. She is aware of how her constant
need to meddle not only hinders others from achieving what they want but also imposes on her ability to be aware of herself. Moderating those actions and thoughts is teaching Emma the importance of paying adequate attention to herself and allowing others to make their own decisions.

Moderation, in this sense, is Emma slowly learning to temper her own arrogance and desire to feel needed by others. She does not have to be involved in other people’s personal lives to the fullest extent. By disengaging herself, Emma learns that others are not only capable of making their own decisions, but capable of making well thought-out choices. She is now able to recognize and understand her own personal feelings, allowing herself to act on those to make choices that generate happiness. Emma concedes that “with insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody’s feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody’s destiny” (339). Now, by removing this blindness, she is able to act in a rational way instead of acting in response to her schemes for others. Emma, after realizing her faults, must begin the slow process to alter her habits. Her usual need to be wanted and needed by those around her must be tossed aside if she hopes to find excellence. As she realizes where her flaws lie and she begins to make necessary changes in order to move towards excellence, Emma releases herself from her arrogance. As her major character flaw, her arrogance, is stripped away, Emma has the ability to see the path towards excellence more clearly. Emma Woodhouse finds that tempering her actions allows her to be better equipped to find true happiness and allow others to do the same.

VI: Natasha Discovers a Focus

Natasha, like Emma, begins to find excellence and happiness when she begins to focus her energy correctly. Throughout Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the reader journeys with
Natasha, witnessing her develop from a young and energetic woman who is sometimes emotional and independent to a fault, into a woman who directs this emotion and energy exclusively towards her family; now possessing the ability to focus it into something productive. After years of blatant disregard for propriety and a knack for getting away with it, Natasha spends her formative years loving, lusting, and, time and time again, losing or leaving her previously declared love. She runs through lover after lover- Boris, Andrew, Anatole, and Pierre- hearing and responding affirmatively to multiple marriage proposals. Finally, she finds her foundation in Pierre, settling down and having a family. It is on her family that she sets her laser-like focus as all her energy and emotion is directed at them. Her family is everything to her, her complete joy and fulfillment is found in them. While never forgetting her independence or lack of concern for societal expectations, Natasha dives into the familial expectations and role and is able to divert her attention onto her loved ones. It is here that her passion lies and through this passion and focus, she discovers the meaning of moderation. As she finds fulfillment in her role as mother and wife, tempering and redirecting her emotions, she experience happiness. Moderation, in this case, is the ability to productively direct one’s attention and energy into her truest passion and desire. Natasha finds what grounds her, and in turning her full attention on her family, she discovers what it means to be truly happy.

As a child, Natasha knows no boundaries as the beloved daughter of an upper class family. She is able to barge into adult conversations, disregarding societal decency, and win the attention of the adults in the room. This tenacity is prevalent throughout Natasha’s life- in her childish impatience, her fickleness in love, and finally in her life as a wife and mother. Tolstoy portrays Natasha as happy at the end of the novel, a point that is debatable. Natasha seems to lose her independence, giving way to every want and wish of her husband Pierre. Her beauty and
radiance seem to disappear as she focuses all her attention on her children. But in his portrayal of Natasha, Tolstoy highlights her ability to adapt to strenuous situations while still retaining her vivacious character. Prince Andrey, someone who likes to meet people who do not meet the expectations of society, notices early on that Natasha was exactly this type of person, “with her wonder, her delight, her shyness, and even her mistakes in talking French” (Tolstoy, page 521). As she grows up- experiencing love and loss, joy and anger, confusion and moments of clarity- Natasha does not lose the vivaciousness prevalent throughout her younger years. Rather, she begins to understand herself and her priorities, choosing to focus this tenacity into those experiences. It is recognition of oneself and one’s priorities instead of playing the pawn of society’s expectations.

Society has rules and expectations of all citizens depending on age, gender, and class rank. Natasha is a child that knows the responsibilities that come with being an upper class female, and yet, chooses to completely disregard them. While Natasha never follows social expectations very closely, she is a gem in society and finds herself well accepted as a young woman. After her marriage, however, she slowly recedes from the social spotlight, choosing to devote herself to her home life. There were certain rules and recommendations for young, married women- “a girl on marrying should not neglect herself, should not give up her accomplishments, should think ever more of her appearance than when a young girl, and should try to fascinate her husband as she had fascinated him before he was her husband” (Epilogue 1. X [page 1316]). Natasha “acted in direct contravention of all those rules” (1316), choosing to focus her energy into maintaining her house. Natasha left behind all the rules of attraction, including her singing, that she used before and felt that these would be ridiculous in her open relationship with her husband. As can be deduced from her utter disregard for society’s
expectations, Natasha does not find much fulfillment in the societal company she has enjoyed growing up—“the young Countess Bezuohov was little seen in society, and those who had seen her there were not greatly pleased with her” (1315). Natasha is little concerned with society’s opinion of her because she is so completely absorbed in her children and Pierre’s life. Because of her familial responsibilities she does not have time to make societal appearances. Natasha did not have time for maintaining an acceptable social standing, nor for following the rules that she views as absurd and irrelevant to her life. Instead, her energy is focused on fulfilling her role as a mother and wife, turning her complete attention on the responsibilities that come with these roles. By abandoning the expectations that society has for her, Natasha is able to completely devote her time and energy to what is important, her loved ones.

Natasha has a very strict idea of how her household should be run. Natasha believes that every minute of Pierre’s life belonged to her and his home and in exchange for that, Pierre has “complete power in his own house to dispose of the whole household, as well as of himself, as he chose” (1318). Natasha runs a household that bows down to the master’s every wish and desire in exchange for the complete attention and devotion of the husband. Work is the only acceptable time for Pierre to be away from home and this is given great importance in Natasha’s mind-allowing him away for an extended but defined time period. Her role as a wife is much the same, completely and intensely focused on the needs of the household. She takes great interest in the personal raising of her children, choosing to nurse them herself instead of using a wet nurse. Natasha follows her own rules impeccably—making “herself a slave to her husband” (1318). Natasha’s image of an ideal home life reflects the devotion she has to her family. As Natasha is able to devote her whole being to her family, she has expectations that her husband do the same. The role that each member of the family is meant to play is well defined and the execution of
these roles is imperative in Natasha’s idea of a family. It is in these expectations that the reader can see Natasha’s passionate devotion to her family.

The devotion to her family is the backbone of Natasha’s lifestyle. This ideal image of a home life comes from Natasha’s expectations of the married couple. The objective of marriage, in Natasha’s eyes, is a family. She sees the satisfaction of marriage in the family and what she receives from the fulfillment of this expectation. The joy that comes from being married and that the couple receives from each other is “only the first beginnings of marriage and not all its significance” (1317). Family is the desired outcome and source of joy for Natasha’s marriage. Because of this view, her life is fervently committed to her family. By having a strong family life, she is fulfilling the purpose of her marriage. Her selfish desires are no longer relevant unless they fulfill the needs of the family and her every thought is for her children, home, or husband. Natasha is working to fulfill her role as a mother and wife to the best of her ability. Her excellence comes in focusing her energy to this endeavor. The household works to satisfy Pierre’s needs- tiptoeing around him as he works, waiting for him as he travels for work, giving consequence to his scientific research and recognizing the importance this work holds for him. Natasha is very good at drawing themes and ideas from her conversations with her husband and “she guessed very correctly what was the essential point of Pierre’s wishes, and having once guessed it she was steadfast in adhering to it” (1319). Her staunch adherence to her role as mother and wife within the family unit not only allows for her complete understanding of her husband, but is the foundation for her marriage. As she fulfills these roles, she finds her purpose. Her idea of marriage is concretely grounded in the family and by dedicating herself to the successful running of a household, she, in turn, is dedicating herself to her marriage and to the realization of her purpose.
Natasha was always a slender young woman, but as happens with mothers, she has become stouter and broader, making it hard to recognize the vibrant young woman that she used to be. While a lot of society is surprised by the change in appearance in Natasha, “the old countess, with her mother’s insight, had seen that what was at the root of all Natasha’s wild outbursts of feeling was simply the need of children and a husband of her own…she had always known that she [Natasha] would make an exemplary wife and mother” (1316). The physical changes highlight the differences that are evident in Natasha in her familial role.

While she is completely devoted to her family, some would argue that Natasha’s devotion is intense, including her mother—“‘only she does carry her devotion to her husband and children to an extreme,’ the countess would say; ‘so much so, that it’s positively foolish.’” (1316). Natasha is an extreme person by nature- exuberant with love of life and vocal as a child, she never failed to surprise society. She suffered severe mood swings and changes in desire—loving, first Andrey then Anatole- in a matter of days, attempting outlandish antics in order to obtain her most current desire. Throughout the novel, Natasha’s wishes are obvious and her opinions are shared freely. This is no different in her relationship with Pierre. She did not care about the laws of attraction that society held wives to because she felt they would be absurd to her husband “to whom she had from the first moment given herself up entirely, that is with her whole soul, not keeping a single corner of it hidden from him” (1316). She did not conceal herself, rather allowing the world an intimate view of her thoughts, ideas, and emotions throughout the novel. Now, however, she shares this view, not only with the audience, but also with Pierre. He is allowed to know and understand the workings of Natasha’s mind- sharing her passions and emotions. All her emotional turmoil as a child subsided as her need for a family and outlet for these emotions was realized.
Natasha finds happiness and fulfillment in living a devoted life to her family and husband. There are moments of exquisiteness and beauty when her intense emotion is visible in her outer countenance. Normally she “wore an expression of calm softness and serenity” (1315) and her main concern is the health of her children and the happiness of Pierre.

Natasha did not care for society in general, but she greatly prized the society of her kinsfolk—of Countess Marya, her brother, her mother, and Sonya. She cared for the society of those persons to whom she could rush in from the nursery in a dressing-gown with her hair down; to whom she could, with a joyful face, show a baby’s napkin stained yellow instead of green, and to receive their comforting assurances that that proved that baby was now really better. (1318)

Natasha’s happiness stems from her ability to effectively channel her intense emotional outbursts into a passion that helps to complete her. Her natural inclination is one of living a life complete and whole—acting through her emotions and beliefs. The reader watches as Natasha transitions from outrageous antics expressing her current emotion to a woman who has found not only her purpose, but also happiness within this purpose. Moderation in this definition is this exact transformation. Natasha finds true happiness within her family life after living her younger years unhappy and desperately searching for some form of fulfillment. As her family life and role meet this desire, she is able to focus her intense emotion wholly and completely. As the reader is able to watch as Natasha successfully navigates this transition, the role that moderation plays in her happiness is manifested in her ability to recognize the importance her family life plays in her personal self-realization. As she begins to reconcile her personal wants with the demands of a family, Natasha puts her selfish ways aside in order to fulfill the needs of her family. Her whole being is focused on meeting the demands and responsibilities of being a mother and wife. In fulfilling these, Natasha finds a way to moderate her otherwise excessive emotions and in turn find happiness.
VII: Conclusion

Aristotle offers a definition of happiness that stems from one’s ability to fulfill the function of man of leading a contemplative life. Each individual role in society has an excellence which is a fulfillment of that role in the best way possible. The idea of excellence is maintained within the boundaries of moderation and reason, calling all people to live a life pursuing the good without getting lost in material pleasures. As this essay proposes, happiness can be found by the pursuit of these excellences and by living a life grounded in balancing extremes. Reason is the foundation of this lifestyle- highlighting the fact that these actions are a conscious decision that is actively pursued. If everyone is to be happy according to Aristotle’s definition, all people would lead a contemplative life, pursuing excellence as the sole focus of their existence. This essay takes Aristotle’s idea of the contemplative life and widens the scope of the definition. Happiness can be achieved by leading a life based on reason and contemplating the relative existence of their specific role in society. People are able to achieve this happiness through their own actions and choices to lead a life devoted to their specific excellence. Happiness is no longer reserved for the philosophers but is available for all people who make the conscious decision to live his or her life in a moderate and reasonable fashion.

Emma from Jane Austen’s Emma and Natasha from Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace are offered as examples to this concept. Moderation and reason are the foundation for the change in their behavior and thought processes. The readers are privy to both characters’ internal thoughts and the consequences of these thoughts. The reader travels with each of them as these women discover and understand their respective flaws and take steps to remedy them.

As the reader walked with Emma through her early years, witnessing the many mistakes she made and the consequences these had on her life, the transformation she underwent is
evident. The novel ends as Emma realizes her past errors and takes steps down a new path with Mr. Knightly by her side. Because of this, the focus of this essay is placed on her previous self in comparison to the very short glimpse the reader has of her new self. As Emma realizes her mistakes, she comprehends the changes that these mistakes necessitate. She slowly begins to extricate herself from the tangled web she has woven in other people’s lives and focuses her energy on herself. As she does so, she is better able to listen to and understand her own needs and feelings. Her thoughts and actions are now devoted to herself more so than to others; she is attempting to strike the precarious balance between being too involved in others’ lives and being too reclusive. The reader watches as Emma explores and attempts to find moderation in her own actions and choices, thus leading her closer to experiencing happiness.

The focus on Natasha, as a constant character throughout the novel, is placed on her at the end of the action. The reader watches her throughout her younger years, experiencing her love and pain with her, but the emphasis is placed on her days as a mother in the Epilogue. Here, the view of the character differs from Emma in the sense that the reader has an intimate view of Natasha after she has struggled and found a way to focus herself and her energy into her particular form of excellence. Natasha finds herself, after years of intense emotion, finally settled down with Pierre and able to translate this restlessness into acting as the best mother and wife possible. Instead of losing the vibrant version of herself, she translates this into fulfilling her role as a mother, and in turn her excellence. Her energy is redirected, but not lost, and in so fulfilling her role, Natasha discovers happiness.

As stated in the opening comments of this essay, all people are on a specific journey through life. Tolstoy captures this essence clearly in that first quote, reminding the reader that all people are directing their actions to one end. After exploring Aristotle’s definition of happiness,
this essay posits that happiness can be understood in a broader sense. The contemplative life is not just the life of a philosopher, rather, happiness is found in the fulfillment of individual roles. Happiness is a recognition of what leads a person to feeling fulfilled and the active pursuit of these actions or thoughts. Happiness is the end goal of actions and the pursuit of excellence. One’s life journey is the constant search for this pathway to happiness. Dead ends- unfulfilling actions, mistakes, and oversights- will stand as obstacles along the way, as evidenced by the journeys of Emma and Natasha, but if the searcher continues looking, the correct path will become evident. Both Emma and Natasha come to their respective excellences, Emma focusing on her own needs instead of others, and Natasha fulfilling the role of an excellent mother and wife. Neither is born into their excellences, rather it is a glimmer of virtue that is already in them that has to be discovered. Both have to make mistakes and blunder about for a new way until they light upon the correct path. This essay proposes that happiness is not a defined path, universal for all people; rather it is a journey, one that will involve dead ends, U-turns, and dimly lit sections. It is once these are conquered and the light falls on the correct path that fulfillment, and in turn happiness is discovered.
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