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The *Zhuangzi* as a Commentary on Kongzi

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Abstract: The role of Kongzi 孔子, in the *Zhuangzi*, has been a compelling story. Can we read the stories about Kongzi as constituting a type of commentary on his teachings and the early development of Confucian philosophy in general? First, let us consider the way Zhuangzi has put his own teachings into the mouth of Kongzi because he was accepted to be a sage who understood how to live well. Then, I turn to the more problematic references to Kongzi as being punished in Chapter 5 and his being a "condemned person" in chapter 6 to illustrate how these stories are taken to be forms of commentary or criticism of Kongzi's project because he did not understand complete virtue. The role of Kongzi in the *Zhuangzi* can be read as a criticism-like commentary using Kongzi to criticize Kongzi.

Keywords: Kongzi/Confucius; Zhuangzi; commentary; complete virtue

1. Introduction

Is there a philosophical commentary element in the *Zhuangzi*'s use of Kongzi (孔子 551–479 BCE)? Are Zhuang Zhou (莊周 ca. 369–286 BCE) and his disciples conveying negative and positive philosophical points about how to live properly in their depiction of Kongzi? Let us avoid the anachronistic labels of Confucianism and Daoism. Let us consider the possibility that the teachings of Kongzi (孔子, Kong Qiu 孔丘, or Zhong-ni 仲尼) and Zhuangzi (莊子 or Zhuang Zhou 莊周) grew out of a common cultural milieu with core shared values, especially a shared world view of the correlative nature of a vital world (*tiandi* 天地 or *yinyang* 陰陽), endowment or calling (*ming* 命), and self-cultivation to become a sage (*shengren* 聖人) or a consummate person such as a prince of virtue (*junzi* 君子) or a sublimely transforming person (*zhenren* 真人). These core values continued in a form of composite practices and common beliefs throughout Chinese history despite the special interest groups that developed later. These special interest groups attempted to win favor at court by accentuating differences in the teachings to fit their imposed models of the various contending schools (*jia* 家) of thought. Roger T. Ames (1985), Kirill O. Thompson (1990), and Michael Nylan (2017) have proposed that there is a common ground, or that there are shared values, found in both thinkers and the subsequent teachings associated with their "family-linages" *jia* 家. There is a long "tradition" of depicting Zhuangzi as a Confucian at heart; it began with Xuanxue, particularly Guo Xiang, and was especially popular during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (Yang 2016, 2018) and was revitalized by Guo Moruo (Lin 1988). Because Guo Xiang edited and reduced the *Zhuangzi* from 52 to 33 chapters, and he praised Confucius, and because Guo proposes that the criticism of the sages is actually a criticism of how later folks interpreted or misunderstood the *traces* left behind by the sages, we must consider the possibility that the stories that criticize Kongzi are presented in the *Zhuangzi* to make Guo's point that it is the incorrect application of their traces by others that is actually being criticized (Ziporyn 2003, p. 21). There is also the possibility that because Kongzi offered his teachings to each unique individual, meeting them on their level so to speak, the *Zhuangzi* stories could be used to depict that unique-to-the-student approach.

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2. Discussion

The role of Kongzi 孔子, in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, has been a compelling story. Can we read the *Zhuangzi*'s stories about Kongzi as a type of commentary on his teachings? First, I look at the way Zhuangzi has put his own teachings into the mouth of Kongzi in Chapter Four, "In the World of Men." Then, I turn to the more problematic references to Kongzi as being "punished" in Chapter Five, "The Signs of the Fullness of Power," and his being a "condemned person" in Chapter Six, "The Teacher who is the Ultimate Ancestor," to illustrate how these stories are forms of commentary and criticism of Kongzi's project. The role of Kongzi in the *Zhuangzi* can be read as a critical commentary that creates a new text rather than merely elucidating or interpreting a given text. I only focus on these four passages to make the twofold point that, at least in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, Zhuang Zhou is criticizing Kongzi by using the mask or voice of Kongzi while putting his own teachings into Kongzi's mouth. By doing so, he attacks Kongzi indirectly by using Kongzi's voice and he advances his own perspective. Zhuang Zhou's rhetorical devices allow him to put his own teaching into practice.

As a caveat, the *Zhuangzi* is a composite text (Graham 1990; Klein 2011; Liu 1994; McCraw 2010). The text is loaded with jokes and humor (Sellmann 1998). As such, a person could propose that given its eclectic and humorous character, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern what Zhuang Zhou was proposing, if anything at all (Van Norden 1996). Ames and Nakajima (2015) note the bombastic rhetoric deployed in the *Zhuangzi*. However, readers of the text have found their own gestalt or wholistic interpretations through the pastiche of passages. One way to uncover the meaning of the *Zhuangzi* is to decipher the way language is deployed in the text, especially the role of imputed words (*yüyan* 寓言), that is, words attributed to real or imaginary figures; the weighty or repeated words of those whom people respect (*chongyan* 重言); and impromptu, goblet words (*zhiyan* 卮言), expressions that empty themselves such as in the punch-line of a joke. I argue that the *Zhuangzi*'s literary style deploys Kongzi both as a fictitious, rhetorical device and as a form of critical commentary by using these three linguistic techniques, that is, by putting imputed and weighty words into Kongzi's mouth to get the reader's attention, and then these words flip over and empty themselves as impromptu goblet words to show or to lead the reader to an experience of free and easy, effortless self-cultivation and harmony with the flow of nature energy (*qi* 氣/炁).

Michael Puett claims that the "…complex interplay of text and commentary defines much of the early literary tradition" (Puett 2017, p. 113). Puett proposes that people told and retold stories of putatively historical figures not for historical accuracy but for "... the variations in the meanings that could be played up … as the fragments of stories would be retold and altered in different situations" (p. 114). Francois Jullien (2000) makes similar claims about the contextualized value of the literary tradition in China (pp. 200–1). Puett claims that "Instead of a process of texts being written as texts, to which commentaries would later be affixed, we are instead seeing a process by which early self-defined commentaries defined the text they were commenting upon" (Puett 2017, p. 115). The *Zhuangzi*'s use of Kongzi appears to fit hand in glove with this image of the commentary writer defining, even creating, a new "text" rather than simply elucidating an already-given document. Before the time of Zhuang Zhou, Mengzi (372–289 BCE) called Kongzi a sage (see Lau 1970, Mengzi 2/A/2). Shortly thereafter, by the time of Han Fei (c. 280–233), there were, at least, eight different sub-schools following the teaching of Kongzi (Watson 1966, p. 118). Zhuang Zhou and his followers accepted this trend of diverse teachings attributed to Kongzi, and they wrote their own versions of Kongzi stories that depict Kongzi in either positive or negative ways. Puett's claim that the commentarial tradition in later antiquity "… came to turn on differing versions of sagehood" (Puett 2009, p. 71) could also apply to the early, pre-Qin, commentarial tradition. His claim especially applies to Zhuangzi's and his followers' use of Kongzi. What is at stake are their radically different views of the sage. Zhuangzi's sage does not promulgate or impose social order or ritual norms, unlike Kongzi's sage ruler, who not only advocates for but also imposes social–political order and ritual norms.

When Kongzi is depicted in a positive manner in the *Zhuangzi*, he is giving or accepting advice on how to live in harmony with the natural world and other people without imposing social order and ritual norms. When Kongzi is depicted in a negative manner, he is advocating ritual norms and social order, like in passages in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), and then Zhuangzi or his followers, in the later chapters, ridicule Kongzi for doing that.

Puett (2017) contends that the Xuanxue philosophers proposed a revised version of the sage. Instead of focusing on the sage Kongzi as the creator of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, they focused on the sage Kongzi as the spontaneous teacher who affectively generated a context for learning for his disciples. To the extent that the *Zhuangzi* text sets the stage for Xuanxue, we can see how the positive images of Kongzi as a sage in the *Zhuangzi* predisposed Xuanxue thinkers to this view of Kongzi as a spontaneous sage–teacher.

The early developments of what would become Chinese imperial-court and popular folk religions were taking root in the later part of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE) in the Spring and Autumn (722–481 BCE) and the Warring States (481 or 403–221 BCE) periods. Despite later attempts to delineate different ways of life or different religio-philosophies, the amalgamating, syncretic, comprehensive, and cumulative character of what I am calling Imperial Chinese Religion and also Chinese Folk Religion embraced both ancestor veneration with apotheosis or the deification of great ancestors, such as Kong Qiu, Lao Dan, the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母), and others, as well as nature veneration, dietary–health–hygiene–gymnastic–meditation practices, and so on. There is a "comprehensive harmony" (Thomè Fang 1981), a unity of opposites and an acceptance of a multiplicity of perspectives, that is found throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, literature, cultural practices, and beliefs. Kirill Thompson (1990), using the harmony of aesthetic order, comes to a similar conclusion: that there is a unity of multiple ideas at play in the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* and its use of Kongzi, especially where it depicts him in a positive manner as a master of the proper way to live, accomplish an important role in the deification of Kongzi and the amalgamating syncretic character of the later development of imperial and folk religion in China where Kongzi is the sage of sages, the teacher of teachers, the master of masters, the saint of saints, and a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The *Zhuangzi*'s use of Kongzi influenced the later Xuanxue philosophers, who presented Kongzi as the highest sage, as one who even depicts and embodies the values of Laozi and Zhuangzi in a superior, more lived manner than they themselves were able to do. Despite the *Zhuangzi* passages and other sources that ridicule Kongzi, his image as a deified sage–god was inspired by the positive images of him depicted in the *Zhuangzi* and other sources.

Ronnie Littlejohn identifies thirty-five passages in the *Zhuangzi* that depict Kongzi in one of four main roles. These four roles comprise two positive and two negative ones, namely Kongzi as a right-thinking teacher (thirteen passages) or as a right-thinking student (nine passages) versus Kongzi as a wrong-thinking teacher (eight passages) or as a wrong-thinking student (five passages; with one passage overlapping in both categories) (Littlejohn 2010, p. 187).

Shuen-fu Lin (1988) offers a detailed analysis of the role of Kongzi in the *Zhuangzi*. Lin counts 52 references to Kongzi, Zhong-ni, or Kong Qiu in the text. After a careful analysis of how the *Zhuangzi* uses language, especially of the role of imputed words (*yüyan* 寓言), the words of those whom people respect (*chongyan* 重言), and goblet words (*zhiyan* 卮言) and of the role of deploying literary masks, Lin proposes that there are only two stories in the *Zhuangzi*, both from Chapter Four, in which Kongzi is depicted as a sage who understands life (Lin 1988, pp. 386–87). Lin argues that because it was well accepted that Kongzi was a sage who had proficiency over how to live properly, Zhuangzi used the literary device or the mask of Kongzi to address matters of life in those two passages in Chapter Four. Lin proposes that the other area of overlap between Zhuangzi's and Kongzi's teachings is the role of perfect virtue. Because they differed on this topic, Zhuangzi could not wear the Kongzi mask to present his own teachings on perfect virtue. For Kongzi, perfect virtue is achieved through strenuous efforts of self-cultivation, education, and ritual prac-

tice to become a morally perfected person or *junzi*. Only after a lifetime of learning and self-cultivation can Kongzi spontaneously follow his heart (*Analects* 2.4). For Zhuangzi, "perfect virtue is a sign of an enlightened person whose sprit is in perfect communion with heaven and earth" (Lin 1988, p. 387). Given those differences, Zhuangzi would not employ the Kongzi mask to discuss his interpretation of perfect virtue.

3. The Passages Analyzed

The first two passages of Chapter Four, "In the World of Men," offer a parody of the way Kongzi teaches in the *Analects*. The passages present a student, Yan Hui 颜回, in the first one, and a high-ranking official, Zi Gao, the Duke of She 葉公子高, in the second, coming to Kongzi or, rather, the more familiar Zhong-ni for advice, making a satire of passages in the *Analects*. At first, the passages sound like typical Kongzi teachings, depicting him as a person who has expertise in how to live properly, but, in "goblet words" fashion, the teachings turn over and empty themselves, in Zhuangzi's style, with the idea that the proper way to live is by merging with the energy flow *qi* 氣 of the natural world. In the passage with Yan Hui going to Wei, we reflect on Kongzi's own troubles in Wei (Makeham 1998, pp. 76–78). This passage begins with Kongzi instructing Yan Hui, but the passage quickly begins to turn when he advises Yan, "you will probably go and get yourself executed" (Watson 1968, p. 54), because typically, Kongzi praises people like Guan Longfeng, Bi Gan, Po Yi, and Shu Qi, who died for the cause of moral virtue or rightness. Zhuang Zhou's voice in the Inner Chapters advocates for living out your natural life span, not dying for a cause. The mask of Kongzi continues to voice the teachings of Zhuangzi, finally culminating in the famous fasting of the heart–mind passage. The teaching to enter an apophatic meditation is absent in the *Analects* or any of the classics that Kongzi cites. The meditation practice was well known (Roth 1999). Having the mask of Kongzi advocate for this practice was a skillful move on Zhuang Zhou's part because it opened a door for followers of Kongzi to accept and even practice meditation, which impacted later Xuanxue in the Wei Jin period (220–316 CE) and Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) Lixue philosophies that blended the teachings of Kongzi with Lao-Zhuang cosmological ideas, and, later, inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹) meditation practices. In this way, Zhuangzi deployed Kongzi's reputation as a person noted for being an expert in how to live properly while voicing his own approach. This created a new "text" for the followers of Kongzi to contemplate and consider for their own self-cultivation practices, that is, to use breathing and meditation exercises.

The next passage in Chapter Four continues the parody of Zhuangzi speaking through the mask of Kongzi, continuing to give sagely advice on self-cultivation and how to live properly. He tells Zi Gao that there are two great precepts (*jie* 戒), namely calling (*ming* 命) and duty (*yi* 義). Superficially, it looks like Kongzi is going to tell Zi Gao not to complain about his civic duties, but the goblet words turn the passage over. Lin cites the Qing dynasty scholar Xuan Ying 宣颖 (fl. early 18th century) for noting an apparent analogy "… between the serving of one's parents and ruler and the serving of one's mind" (Lin 1988, p. 390 n43). For the historical Kongzi, filial piety is a virtue; it is not one's calling as the Kongzi mask proposes in this passage. The analogy being drawn here is that filial piety and duty are unavoidable, not virtues developed by self-cultivation. To serve the heart–mind, people must prevent common human emotions like joy and sorrow from getting inside and tormenting them. Once these socially contrived emotional feelings get inside, people lose their freedom to flow with their natural energy 氣. Zhuangzi's teachings propose that people need to protect themselves from both external dangers and internal torments (Lin 1988, p. 390).

The passage concludes with the Kongzi mask saying the following:

Therefore, the book of rules says: 'Do not deviate from the orders, do not push for success. To exceed due measure is to go beyond your commission.' To deviate from the orders and push for success will endanger the enterprise. A fine success takes time, an ugly outcome is irreparable; can you afford not to be careful?

> Besides, to let the heart roam with other things like its chariot, and by trusting to the inevitable nurture the center of you, is the farthest one can go. Why should there be anything you have initiated in the reply you bring back? The important thing is to fulfill what is ordained for you; and that is the trickiest thing of all (Graham 1981, p. 71).

What Zhuangzi is proposing here, while speaking through his Kongzi mask, is diametrically opposed to what the historical Kongzi taught because the above anecdote proposes that a person in office must let things be and do little. Meanwhile, the historical Kongzi taught that people must exert effort to learn how to exert more effort to accomplish remarkable things for the state such as moral, social, and political order. For Zhuangzi, the more a person initiates activity and exerts energy attempting to get the job done, the more likely it is that it ends in failure. The passage creates an irony, then, between the historical Kongzi and the Kongzi mask presented in the Inner Chapters, and this produces a satire on Confucianism (Lin 1988, p. 390). In this way, Zhuangzi uses his Kongzi mask to criticize the historical Kongzi without doing it himself directly. Thereby, he expresses his philosophy without appearing to be directly involved and obtrusive or obstructive and argumentative (Lin 1988, p. 385).

The above two passages are the strongest examples of the Kongzi mask being deployed to voice Zhuangzi's philosophy. There are other passages in the Inner and other Chapters that have been interpreted as depicting Kongzi as a right-thinking teacher (Littlejohn 2010, p. 187). For the sake of brevity, allow me to turn to two passages that most strongly criticize the historical Kongzi found in Chapter Five, "The Signs of the Fullness of Power", and Chapter Six, "The Teacher who is the Ultimate Ancestor."

In the third anecdote in Chapter Five, Shu-shan No-toes hobbles in for an interview with Zhong-ni or Kongzi. Right away, Zhong-ni insults No-toes for being a penal amputee and coming in too late. No-toes retorts that he paid dearly for his past transgressions but now wants to keep what he has left inside of himself intact and complete. He flatters Kongzi, comparing him to the beneficence of the heavens and the earth, and so, Kongzi invites him inside. After No-toes departs, Kongzi implores his disciples to be diligent like No-toes in their studies to maintain their complete Utmost Power *quan de* 全德. No-toes reports to Old Dan (aka Laozi),

> 'As a person aspiring to be an Ultimate-Self-Realizing Person (*zhiren* 至人), Kong Qiu (aka Kongzi) has some way to go, wouldn't you say? Why did he bother to keep coming to learn from you? He still has an urge to have his name bandied about as someone unique and extraordinary. Doesn't he know that the Ultimate-Self-Realizing Person would think of it as fettering and handcuffing himself?'
>
> Old Dan replied, 'Why don't you show him that death and life are a single strand, that allowable and not allowable (*yike buke* 一可不可) are strung on a single thread? Surely, it is possible to cut/lose (*jie* 解) his fetters and handcuffs?' No-toes replied, 'When heaven binds him for punishment, how can I cut him loose?' (modifying Graham 1981, pp. 78–79; Watson 1968, pp. 71–72; Hamill and Seaton 1998, p. 37).

The poetic imagery is telling. No-toes has had to have his foot cut off before he was freed, cut/lost (*jie* 解), amputated, from his delusions about life, leading him to preserve his Utmost Power. He sees that Kongzi is the real cripple and bound by his own delusions created by his judgment of others and his immodest quest for fame and success; hence, he is easily flattered. Therefore, under these conditions, there is no way to free, amputate, or cut loose, such that one has "punished Kongzi" from his calling. He cannot preserve his Utmost Power or become an Ultimate Self-Realizing Person, a *zhiren* 至人 or a *junzi* 君子. The passage strongly criticizes Kongzi for not understanding the flow of Utmost Power within himself, others, or the world. As A.C. Graham notes, it is not Kongzi's fault that he is in this sense "crippled," because he was born defective, mutilated, punished, and imprisoned by heaven, as Kongzi himself admits in the next passage from Chapter Six (Graham 1981, p. 79).

In Chapter Six, there are three passages involving Kongzi. The first passage offers the most telling criticism. The anecdote opens with a brief discussion among three friends

who all smile in agreement about who among them can ascend into the heavens, roam-freely in the mists, and go whirling into the limitless (*wuji* 無極). After a brief time, one of them, Zi Sang-hu, dies. Kongzi hears that the funeral has not yet occurred and so he sends his disciple Zi Gong to go to pay respects. Zi Gong is a merchant and a statesman; in the *Analects*, he is noted for asking the right questions (see Ames and Rosemont 1998, Analects 7.15 and 17.19). When Zi Gong arrives, one of the friends is weaving a silkworm frame and the other strums a zither while they both sing a little ditty about Sang-hu's return to his sublime transformation (*fanqizhen* 反其真) while they remain in human form (Zhuangzi 1956, 18/6/64). Of course, Zi Gong is baffled, tries to chastise them, and returns to ask Kongzi what kind of men they are, disrespecting the corpse by singing in front of it. Kongzi says that they are the kind of men who roam freely outside the (social–moral) frame while he, Qiu, roams within the frame (*fang* 方, translated as "realm" by Watson and "boundaries" by Hamill; *fang* also means a "method or procedure," so Graham uses "guidelines." I use "frame" to allude to the idea of "framing and reframing" that is popular today). He says that he was "stupid" for sending Zi Gong and goes on speaking as Zhuang Zhou's mask to depict those men, in Zhou's style, as humans who have merged with the transformational process of things (*zaowu zhe* 造物者) and "wander-freely with the single energy-breath of the heavens and earth (*you hu tiandi zhi yiqi* 遊乎天地之一氣)." The Kongzi mask goes on to describe how those men view things from the perspective of correlative thinking, non-dual logic, seeing the alleged opposites of life and death, beginning and end, and this body part versus that part as interrelated, forgetting the self and being carefree in non-purposive, effortless action (*wuwei* 無為). Such men, he says, will not heed common practices or ritual norms.

Hearing the wonders of this carefree lifestyle prompts Zi Gong to ask another of his piercing questions: "In that case, Master (*fuzi* 夫子), why remain within your frame?" Kongzi replies, "I, Qiu (丘), am a condemned person by heaven (*tian zhi lumin ye* 天之戮民也--*lumin* are oppressed, or punished people). That being the case, I will share with you what I have", opening the possibility that they could reframe their thinking by learning the arts of the *dao* together, prompting Zi Gong to ask about their (living outside the) frame (*fang* 方). Kongzi describes an analogy of how fish thrive in water and humans thrive in the way (*dao* 道). He quotes a saying: "Fish forget each other in the rivers and lakes, and humans forget each other in the arts of the way (*daoshu* 道術)" (18/6/73). Zi Gong asks another pointed question about the odd, singular, or extraordinary person (*jiren* 畸人). Kongzi replies that such misfits or extraordinary people are only different in the eyes of humans, but they are all the same for heaven. To continue the parody of the historical Kongzi using his typical argument by authority by citing a reference source, he quotes another saying: "Heaven's petty man (*xiaojen* 小人) is a human's prince-of-virtue (*junzi* 君子), and a human's petty man is heaven's prince-of-virtue" (18/6/74). The rhetorical devices employed here are compelling.

At that time, Kongzi was known for his humility, but to call himself stupid and a person condemned by heaven took that humility to a deeper level, discrediting him while, at the same time, allowing the reader to redirect her attention toward the values and practices advanced by Zhuang Zhou. The closing allegedly respected quote uses basic concepts of the historical Kongzi while overturning their common meaning and conveying Zhuang Zhou's new meaning in which the self-cultivation of the historical Kongzi's *junzi* has been transformed into Zhou's *zhenren* 真人, emptying Kongzi's goblet and refilling it with Zhuang Zhou's meaning. If that passage does not empty the reader's mind, then the next passage in which the Kongzi mask questions whether there is an actual "I" behind the way people talk about themselves should empty them completely. The final passage using the Kongzi mask wherein Yan Hui teaches him to drop the body and mind while sitting and forgetting (*zuowang* 坐忘) drives the point home, or rather, it removes all points, leaving the reader's heart–mind empty again.

4. Conclusions

There are other passages that make similar arguments critiquing the historical Kongzi's teachings. For the sake of brevity, I have only focused on the above four passages from the Inner Chapters because the first two stories are connected as the key examples of deploying the Kongzi mask in a positive manner as an expert on living properly. The other two passages are interrelated in that they use the mask and voice of Kongzi to berate and criticize himself, which again allows Zhuang Zhou to defray direct contact with the disputers of the *dao* while still presenting his perspective as a new "text" for Kongzi's disciples to contemplate. In this way, he offers his ideas on the effortless means to self-cultivation, living well, and preserving Utmost Power. At the same time, he distances himself from contending with others. This rhetorical device helps him display authentic humility, avoid self-promotion, and evade seeking fame in the conventional manner, and yet he becomes famous! His rhetorical devices allow Zhuang Zhou to truly practice what he preaches, effortless action in going with the energy flow, neither bowing to convention nor seeking fame. The use of these rhetorical devices of the parody mask, imputed–attributed words, respected–quoted words, self-emptying goblet words, humor, poetry, metaphor, and other literary devices presents a form of commentary that turns into satire. In the "tradition of the commentary" that not only elucidates a text but also creates a new text and a new way of living, thinking, reading, and writing, Zhuang Zhou gives the world one of its most beautifully written prose–poetry, compelling, insightful, and instructive literary works. Zhou's words are clearly well beyond the mere chirping of birds while being just as attractive, melodious, and harmonious.

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