

# ON CAPPELEN AND HAWTHORNE'S "RELATIVISM AND MONADIC TRUTH"

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Cappelen, Herman and Hawthorne, John (2009) *Relativism and Monadic Truth*; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cappelen & Hawthorne<sup>1</sup> take as a starting point for discussion the mainstream view of the contents of thought and talk: "Simplicity," the core tenets of which are:

- (T<sub>1</sub>) There are propositions and they instantiate the fundamental monadic properties of truth *simpliciter* and falsity *simpliciter*.
- (T<sub>2</sub>) The semantic values of declarative sentences relative to contexts of utterance are propositions.
- (T<sub>3</sub>) Propositions are, unsurprisingly, the objects of propositional attitudes, such as belief, hope, wish, doubt.
- (T<sub>4</sub>) Propositions are the objects of illocutionary acts; they are, e.g., what we assert and deny.
- (T<sub>5</sub>) Propositions are the objects of agreement and disagreement. (1)

The overarching ambition of the monograph is not to demonstrate the truth of Simplicity. The goal is more modest: to critically evaluate the challenges to Simplicity—particularly to T<sub>1</sub>—that have arisen recently in Analytic philosophy as a result of inspiration from foundational ideas in semantics.

In their opening chapter, the authors begin with a discussion of possible world semantics, as developed by Kaplan (1989) and Lewis (1980), and show how their respective work develops a semantic framework that feeds motivation for analytic relativism; in particular, Kaplan and Lewis set the scene for subsequent philosophers to reject monadic truth and falsity (and in doing so embrace a full-blown relativism) by proliferating the parameters along which truth is relative by allowing the contents of thought and talk to be non-specific along dimensions other than world, time and location. Against this background, Cappelen and Hawthorne provide what they take to be a crisp and elegant account of the analytic relativist's package, as one that consists in the

1 Cappelen, Herman and Hawthorne, John (2009).

endorsement of three interrelated theses: (i) Proliferation; (ii) Disquotation; (iii) Non-Relativity of Semantic Value and Belief Reports. This tri-fold characterisation of relativism is important because it identifies the opponent that will be their target in subsequent chapters. Before getting to disquotation and the non-relativity of semantic value and belief reports, there are a few tricky points to make about *proliferation*.

Cappelen and Hawthorne capture the gist of the *proliferation* aspect of analytic relativism as follows:

Contemporary Analytic relativists reason as follows: ‘Lewis and Kaplan have shown that we need to relativize truth to triples of <world, time, location>. Hence in a way, anyone who follows Lewis and Kaplan is already a relativist. There are only truth and falsity relative to settings along these three parameters, and so there is no such thing as truth *simpliciter*. But, having already started down this road, why not exploit these strategies further? In particular, by adding new and exotic parameters into the circumstances of evaluation, we can allow the contents of thought and talk to be non-specific (in Kaplan’s sense) along dimensions other than world, time and location. (10)

A mark of relativism is then insisting on parameters additional to the possible world parameter. It is worth noting that MacFarlane, a leading contemporary analytic relativist who is a central target of Cappelen & Hawthorne’s critique, would dispute the relationship Cappelen & Hawthorne propose between parameter proliferation and the endorsement of truth relativism. Specifically, MacFarlane denies parameter proliferation as a distinguishing feature of truth relativism. On this point, MacFarlane (2010) reasons (roughly) as follows: parameter proliferation does not imply assessment-sensitivity<sup>2,3</sup> and assessment-

- 2 Consider here MacFarlane’s (2010: 5) claim that “a naive realist about taste properties could take propositions to be true relative to a standard of taste, but hold that an assertion is accurate just in case its content is true at that *one true standard of taste*. Thus, proliferation is consistent with full-blooded objectivism about taste claims.”
- 3 For what it’s worth, Cappelen & Hawthorne (*forthcoming*), in their reply to MacFarlane’s reply to their book, think that MacFarlane has inaccurately forced on them the view that parameter proliferation *implies* assessment sensitivity. They write: “He attributes to us the view that ‘assessment sensitivity is trivially implied by proliferation’ (MacFarlane, this vol.). We are quite explicit in our denial of this. We emphasised the point that standard relativists add disquotational truth and the non-relativity of belief and meaning reports to proliferation.” I think one aspect of the confusion here is that Cappelen & Hawthorne have discussed proliferation *both* as one of three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for assessment sensitivity (and moreover analytic relativism). As such, this would make MacFarlane’s attributing them the view that assessment sensitivity is trivially implied by prolifer-

sensitivity is what individuates truth relativism. An assertion is assessment-sensitive iff it can be characterised as accurate only relative to a context of assessment. As MacFarlane sees it, parameter proliferation is compatible with contextualism (which is Simplicity-Friendly) and so not helpful for articulating what is essential to truth relativism. Two interesting observations are worth noting. First, it should make sense now why Cappelen & Hawthorne view Kaplan as a relativist<sup>4</sup>, while MacFarlane doesn't. Secondly, it is interesting and somewhat surprising that Cappelen and Hawthorne think that the conjunction of proliferation, disquotation and the content-relativity of semantic content and belief reports literally *implies* what MacFarlane calls assessment-sensitivity.<sup>5</sup>

It will be helpful here to look at Cappelen and Hawthorne's other ingredients of analytic relativism, beginning with disquotation. The *disquotation* element of the relativist's package is a nuanced one, but it is very important for the purposes of grasping a key feature of relativism that distinguishes it from varieties of contextualism that are Simplicity-friendly. In another important sense, I think that by helping themselves to *disquotation* the sort of analytic relativists attacked in Cappelen & Hawthorne's monograph stand distinct from the sort of relativists that embrace a more flat-footed, Protagorean sort of relativism that does not permit of statements of the form "X is true" or "X is F is true."<sup>6</sup> The central disquotation principle (the endorsement of which allows for such a move) is DQ1:

eration inaccurate). However Cappelen & Hawthorne *also* at times talk as though parameter proliferation were a sufficient condition for analytic relativism (which would make MacFarlane's characterisation of their position accurate). Here specifically I am referring to Cappelen & Hawthorne's remark in their opening chapter that "...in a way, anyone who follows Lewis and Kaplan is already a relativist. There are only truth and falsity relative to settings along these three parameters [triples of <world, time, location>], and so there is no such thing as truth simpliciter." I suspect MacFarlane was focusing on their discussion here in making his claim.

4 *Ibid.* 10.

5 Cappelen & Hawthorne (2010) write: "...the phenomenon of assessor sensitivity of semantic value is forced on one once one has embraced (i) disquotational truth; (ii) non-relativity of semantic value ascription, and (iii) the relevant variability of operative parameter values between assessors. They suggest however, (2010: 17, fn. 34) that disquotation is playing no fundamental role here and argue further in that footnote that "an utterance *u* has assessor sensitive semantic value iff there are two assessors such that the content *u* has as its semantic value is true for both assessors while the content *P* is true for one assessor and not the other."

6 MacFarlane (2010: 4) concurs here and refers to the sort of relativism that rejects disquotation "Old School Relativism."

DQ1: The content *It is true that p* is true at an  $n$ -tuple iff the content P is true at that  $n$ -tuple.

and

DQ2: *The claim that P is true* is true at an  $n$ -tuple iff P is true at that  $n$ -tuple.

Notice here that, with DQ1 and DQ2 at their disposal, a relativist can maintain that an ordinary truth predicate (true) is predicable of parameter-sensitive contents. They say: “By recognizing these constructions as legitimate, the relativist makes room for ordinary ways of talking about truth even while advocating a fundamental semantic framework in which it is the relations *true at* and *false at* that are explanatorily fundamental” (14) This allows for the relativist to move unproblematically, then, from “It is cold” to “It is true that it is cold”. And this allows for ordinary inferences concerning contradictoriness and incompatibility.

## Non-Relativity of Semantic Value and Belief Reports

The core idea regarding this third proposed distinctive aspect of the relativist’s package (first with respect to semantic values) is that, for the relativist, while a sentence S in a context C can be true relative to the standard of person X but not for person Y, the following sort of metalinguistic claim is independent of any such standards: “S in C has P as its semantic value.” They attribute to the relativist a similar position with respect to belief ascriptions. X and Y (who the relativist will say disagree about what is delicious) can both assert “Sabrina believes that apples are delicious”, and this assertion cannot vary in truth value on the basis of differences in standards that for the relativist will make “Apples are delicious” true for X but not for Y. Given the non-relativity of semantic value and belief reports, the relativist has a natural way to make sense of contradictory beliefs, and this helps fuel arguments for relativism from faultless disagreement (see Kolbel 2002).

Cappelen and Hawthorne conclude their opening chapter with some discussions about two areas of discourse where contemporary analytic relativism has been most rampant: discourse about epistemic modals<sup>7</sup> and predicates of personal taste. I find it a bit odd that Cappelen and Hawthorne spend as little time as they do discussing epistemic modals because this area of discourse

7 For some recent defences of relativism about epistemic modals, see Egan (2007); Egan, Hawthorne & Weatherston (2005), Stephenson (2007), and MacFarlane (2011b.)

(rather than predicates of personal taste) is perhaps the most fertile ground for relativism. I say that though, perhaps somewhat awkwardly, because of the persuasive case made for a relativistic treatment of epistemic modals that Hawthorne himself once defended<sup>8</sup> (in a 2005 co-authored paper with Andy Egan and Brian Weatherson). Weatherson (2011), in a reply to Cappelen and Hawthorne’s book, suggests (on similar lines) that Cappelen and Hawthorne did not necessarily address some of the best arguments for relativism (at least, to do with epistemic modals) that were advanced in that 2005 paper, but I’ll not delve into a discussion of this here. Dialectically, it suffices to point out that of the two key areas of discourse discussed briefly at the end of Chapter 1 (epistemic modals and predicates of personal taste), it is predicates of personal taste that (perhaps unfortunately, at the expense of epistemic modals) is the recipient topic of a (very) sustained discussion, which is the focus of Chapter 4.

Having characterised their target to Simplicity in Chapter 1, Cappelen & Hawthorne have as their focus in Chapter 2 two particular diagnostics relativists appeal to with the aim of establishing commonality of semantic content. These are *Says-That* reports and *Agree*. These diagnostics are important in part because, in many cases where commonality of semantic content is established, such commonality of content appears to count squarely against contextualism (and open the door for relativism). The ‘Says-That’ test for commonality of content claims:

Says-That: Let  $u$  be an utterance of a sentence  $S$  by an agent  $A$  in context  $C$ . Suppose we can use  $S$  in some other context  $C'$  to say what  $A$  said in  $C$ , i.e., suppose ‘ $A$  said that  $S$ ’ is true when uttered on  $C'$ . If so, we have evidence that there is a level of content in  $S$  that is invariant with respect to the differences between  $C$  and  $C'$  (34)

Cappelen & Hawthorne attempt to undercut *Says-That* as a useful diagnostic for sameness of content by drawing attention to the phenomenon of contextual parasitism, which they take to be at play in cases where we use predicates “left” and “nearby”. They argue that, once it is recognised how the parasitic context dependence associated with terms like ‘left’ and ‘nearby’ can be extended more broadly to terms like ‘fun’ (and so to predicates of personal taste) and ‘might’ (and so to epistemic modals), it becomes clear that the purported evidence one acquires by appeal to *Says-That* doesn’t count against contextualism, and thus not in any way for relativism and against Simplicity.

They consider next what they take to be an improved diagnostic: *collective-says-that* (CST):

8 This was before he abjured the position in his paper on eavesdroppers in 2007.

CST-3: Let a CR-triple for  $s$  sentence  $S$  be a triple consisting of two utterances  $u$  and  $u'$  of  $S$  in distinct contexts  $C$  and  $C'$ , and one utterance of ‘A and B said that  $S$ ’ in a third context  $C''$ . If, for all CR-triples involving  $S$ , the last member is true, then  $S$  is semantically invariant (or, at least, this is good evidence for semantic invariance). (45)

CST appears *prima facie* to be a better sort of diagnostic than *Says-That* because it is equipped to block the sort of contextual parasites that undercut *Says-that*; after all, with CST, there is not *one* context for the report to be parasitic on (45). Cappelen & Hawthorne however show that CST is not an conclusive diagnostic for sameness of semantic content for a different reason. Take for example: “C: A and B said that Naomi went to a nearby beach.” Although the felicitousness of an utterance like this by C, reporting A’s and B’s utterances, appears to constitute evidence for semantic uniformity (by appeal to CST), Cappelen and Hawthorne offer an explanation for why this conclusion is specious. Consider a semantic tool, *lambda abstraction*, which is used to explain a standard true reading of “John loves his mother, and Bill does, too”, a reading according to which Bill loves Bill’s mother. To get this reading, we treat ‘loves his mother’ as the property of being an individual  $x$  such that  $x$  loves the mother of  $x$  (of the form  $\lambda x$  ( $x$  loves  $x$ ’s mother). Now consider, using this strategy, C’s report “A and B said that Naomi went to a nearby beach.” This has a true reading, one on which there is not uniformity of semantic content, where the verb phrase has the logical form  $\lambda x$  ( $x$  said that Naomi went to a nearby beach <sub>(to  $x$ )</sub>)—or “both A and B have the property of being an individual  $x$  such that  $x$  said that Naomi was going to a beach nearby to  $x$ .” (47).

Leaving *Says-That* and *Collective-Says-That* behind as tests to which we can appeal to adduce evidence in favour of uniformity of semantic content, Cappelen and Hawthorne consider what they take to be a better diagnostic: one that focuses on the verbs ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ rather than the verb constructions ‘say-that’ and ‘believes-that’. Here is a formulation offered for *Agree*:

Agree-2: Take two sincere utterances  $u$  and  $u'$  by A and B of a sentence  $S$  in contexts  $C$  and  $C'$ . If from a third context  $C''$  they can be reported by an utterance of ‘A and B agree that  $S$ ’, then that is evidence that  $S$  is semantically invariant across  $C$ ,  $C'$  and  $C''$  (54)

The moral of the chapter is that attempts to reject Simplicity by appeal to *Says-That* and *CST* are not going to be successful, and a genuine test will require an appeal to *Agree*. Cappelen and Hawthorne return to this point significantly in Chapter 4 in their discussion of arguments for relativism on the

basis of purported *Agree*-based evidence in the area of predicates of personal taste.

Before doing so, however, Cappelen and Hawthorne first take on—as the focus of Chapter 3—a different style of argument against Simplicity, which they call the *Operator Argument*, an argument that takes as an assumption *Sententiality*, the claim that: a given expression, E, combines with one or more sentences to yield larger sentences. The Operator Argument (which they credit primarily to Kaplan) is presented (quite elegantly) as follows:

- L1. *Parameter Dependence*: S is evaluable for truth only once a value along parameter M is specified.
- L2. *Uniformity*: S is of the same semantic type when it occurs alone or when it combines with E.
- L3. *Vacuity*: E is semantically vacuous (i.e., it does not affect truth value) when it combines with a sentence that semantically supplies a value for M.
- L4: E is not redundant when it combines with S.
- L5: By *Vacuity* and (L4) S does not supply a value for M when it combines with E.
- L6: By *Uniformity* and (L5), S does not supply a value for M when it occurs alone.
- L7: By *Parameter Dependence* and (L6), S cannot be evaluated for truth.  
(71)

The focus of the argument is complex constructions of the form ES, where E has *sententiality* and E combines with a sentence S to generate a larger sentence ES (71). The Operator Argument is supposed to have the upshot that, “when S occurs in isolation, its semantic value is not propositional...sentences (i.e. “It is raining”) can be evaluated for truth only relative to a setting of an *n*-tuple of parameters that includes at least standards of precision, possible worlds, locations and times” (72) Cappelen and Hawthorne argue that the Operator Argument fails in part because different premises fall in different areas of application: They claim that *Sententiality* and *Uniformity* fail in temporal, locational, modal and precisional constructions; *Uniformity* fails especially so in temporal constructions, and *Parameter Dependence* fails for precisional and modal terms.

For brevity’s sake, I will not evaluate their arguments on these scores because the most typical recent arguments threatening Simplicity by way of relativism are ones that appeal straightforwardly to *Agree*. Chapter 4, therefore, is of particular interest. Cappelen & Hawthorne’s strategy in Chapter 4 is essentially

to use the domain of discourse that is predications of personal taste as a sort of case study; they reason that it appears to be the area where the potential to argue for relativism (and against contextualism) is most fertile, and their aim is to demonstrate that even in this area, the case against contextualism is poor as well as is the case in favour of relativism.

Chapter 4 begins by focusing on the semantics of ‘filling’ and ‘disgusting’ and claims that we can give a contextualist semantics for sentences with these terms, and that the strategy used to do so extends *mutatis mutandis* to ‘fun’ and typical predicates of personal taste.

The authors begin by illuminating how the relativist takes it that disagreement data in cases of apparently faultless disagreement is best explained by the relativist. Take for instance the predicate ‘disgusting.’ Suppose a human says, “Rotting flesh is disgusting,” while a talking vulture replies that rotting flesh is not disgusting. The claim “The vulture disagrees with the human about whether rotting flesh is disgusting’ sounds felicitous, indicating a shared semantic content. But as Cappelen and Hawthorne suggest, “There would be something bizarrely chauvinistic about claiming that the vulture is wrong, we are right, and leave it at that. The relativist offers a way out of the chauvinism—there is a single content, *Rotting flesh is disgusting*, but it can be evaluated only relative to a standard. Relative to human standards, the proposition is true, but relative to vulturean standards, it is false” (101). This is indeed precisely the sort of case Kolbel has stressed when claiming that faultless disagreement motivates relativism: relativism (not contextualism) seems to vindicate the intuition that in cases like this are ones where we can both (i) ascribe disagreement and (ii) at the same time deny any fault (and an assertion of a false belief would be a fault) to either of the disagreeing parties.

Cappelen and Hawthorne’s strategy of reply is lengthy, but it involves two core threads of argument. The first involves demonstrating, through a variety of arguments, that a plausible case for contextualism about predicates of personal taste can be made. The second strategy builds upon this to show how more trouble can be made for the relativist.

Some of the key arguments in favour of a contextualism about predicates of personal taste attempt to undercut the ‘disagreement’ element of apparently faultless disagreements about personal taste predicates (again, ‘spicy,’ ‘fun,’ ‘tasty,’ ‘disgusting,’ etc.) One such argument draws from Lasersohn’s (2005) distinction between *autocentric* and *exocentric* uses of taste vocabulary. The use of a taste predicate is autocentric “iff its truth conditions are given by a completion that indexes the predicate to the speaker...a use is exocentric iff its truth conditions are given by a completion that indexes it to a person or



group other than the speaker, which may, however, include the speaker” (104). An example of how this distinction explains away apparent disagreement involves the statement “The leek and potato soup won’t be very filling,” uttered by X, who says to a small child moments later that the leek and potato soup will be filling. As Cappelen and Hawthorne note, “We do not have any sense at all that the person has changed his mind,” (105). Consider similarly a case involving “fun.” A child utters, “This summer will be fun,” to a friend, with whom he will be attending summer camp, and “This summer will not be fun,” to his parents, who are working long hours to pay for the summer camp. The idea is that we are not inclined to think the child has changed his mind here, and that this suggests he has not contradicted himself (rather, he’s just used a term autocentrically in one case and exocentrically in the other). Cappelen and Hawthorne admit that cases are more difficult to explain away when the disagreement takes the form: A: “This summer will be fun.” B: “No, this summer will not be fun.” However, they maintain that the contextualist has at least three different ways (which I’ll pass over here) to interpret such a claim, none of which constitutes concession of a disagreement (110).

An especially interesting way Cappelen and Hawthorne argue that apparent disagreement can be explained away in certain cases of apparent faultless disagreement involves considerations drawing from Pyrrhonian reflections about our primitive practices and the situation dependence of our judgments using predicates of personal taste, and by appeal to semantic blindness to account for the initial misjudgement about semantic uniformity (118). An example discussed here proceeds as follows: “It is 95 degrees, and a person from Arizona overhears someone from Boston say ‘This is hot’. The Arizonan, in a fit of primitive machismo, says ‘He’s totally mistaken. It’s not hot at all. He needs to be in Phoenix in the summer. Then he’ll know what it really is to be hot’” (117). Cappelen and Hawthorne suggests that a bit of Pyrrhonian reflection removes the sense of disagreement; once one reflects on the background factors that lead to these judgments, “one no longer hears the content expressed in conflict with the Bostonian’s speech” and the claim that the Bostonian has made a mistake will be withdrawn. And at this point the contextualist must make an appeal to semantic blindness: “even though the Arizonan does not express the same property by ‘hot’ as the Bostonian, this is not recognized by the Arizonan’s language faculty and, owing to misjudgements about semantic uniformity, some disagreement judgments are accepted when they ought not to be” (117).

The discussion concludes with a variety of troubles Cappelen and Hawthorne present to relativist attempts to handle some of the same data, and these discussions are involved. One key idea you’d expect given their defence

of contextualism about predicates of personal taste is that they claim relativism generates false predictions of contradictoriness. Perhaps (by my lights) the most interesting of the many issues they touch upon toward the end of Chapter 4 is their section on factive verbs, where they argue that relativism on this score generates a meretricious refutation of omniscience.

The text, all and all, is quite an achievement. It is concise, clearly written, well informed with current literature, full of illuminating examples and never loses sight of the dialectical objective. Is it persuasive? This is a tricky question to answer. On some points, it certainly is. For instance, I think they have quite successfully shown the futility of trying to motivate relativism by using *Says-That* as a test that provides evidence for commonality of semantic content. I also think that some of the strategies they propose for explaining away apparent disagreement are quite accurate, and this suggests a contextualist interpretation for various cases where one would initially have thought a contextualist treatment would be untenable. Despite these (and several other) points of persuasion, I am left with the worry that what they've shown in the monograph is not enough to establish their objective. Simplicity after all is false if  $T_I$  is false, and  $T_I$  is false if any version of truth relativism is correct, and the weakest version of truth relativism (as MacFarlane suggests) would maintain that in some language, there is at least one proposition (or semantic content) that is truth-relative. Let  $D$  represent all the linguistic data that contextualism and relativism compete to explain. Suppose that contextualism fares better overall than relativism in explaining  $D$ . This claim is compatible with the claim that some of the data within  $D$  is best explained by the relativist. And if that is the case, in particular, in cases where relativism fares much better than contextualism, then plausibly a very weak version of relativism is true, despite the admission that contextualism explains considerably more linguistic data better than relativism. And if that's the case—and just some cases are ones the relativist, but not the contextualist, is equipped to explain—then  $T_I$  is false (strictly speaking), and so is Simplicity.

I think the sort of case where it seems that relativism has a good chance to fare better will be cases where all the Pyrrhonian reflection one can do does not dissipate the sense of genuine disagreement with some interlocutor with respect to some taste predicate. This will be a case where, unlike the case of the Arizonan and the Bostonian talking about what's 'hot', interlocutors (young twins, with a shared upbringing, say) share all the same background considerations relevant to explaining their use of taste predicates, and these background considerations are epistemically assessable to both parties after full disclosure. The possibility remains that they nonetheless have different sensibilities, and

so they reject each other's respective claims about what is disgusting in a case, and fun in a case. And because we want to avoid the counterintuitiveness of chauvinism here (though not in all cases of disagreement), a recognition of a genuine disagreement here would appear explained by the relativist. How in such a case might Cappelen and Hawthorne explain away the apparent disagreement? It seems that if enough background factors are controlled for, Cappelen and Hawthorne can avoid the result that they *really* disagree only by some presumptive case that there is semantic blindness about the use of the concept about which neither party has epistemic access. But this would be a funny argument, because it is irrefutable: no genuine case of disagreement would be recognised in principle. Cappelen and Hawthorne might suppose that the overall theoretical virtues of Simplicity are so overwhelming that the considerations about one case that apparently runs counter to Simplicity are ones for which the default assumption should be that some Simplicity-friendly explanation is possible. But this reply seems to beg the question against a *super-weak* relativist who wishes to maintain that only *that* proposition (say) is truth-relative.

I'd like to consider one other point about Cappelen and Hawthorne's dialectical strategy. Reading the book is not unlike watching a boxing match, as the scoreboard for the contextualist and relativist is constantly changing; but unlike boxing where you know the judges are tallying up how many punches are landed, it's easy to lose track of the score, and at the end (and throughout) you are told that the contextualist has won (and was always winning). And maybe that was the case. It's hard not to wonder though, as smart as Cappelen and Hawthorne are, if, had they used their considerable skill to make a monograph-length inductive argument for relativism, that it would have seemed the relativist came out on top. In any case, even if they did not convincingly show that relativism should not be endorsed in certain pockets of certain areas of discourse, they certainly did set in many ways clear constraints for how any relativist position would have to be plausibly argued for, and on this score there are many. This much is an achievement in itself.

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