

# Finding the unity in Dewey through Heidegger

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## Abstract

*Dewey openly admitted that he had not achieved systematic unity in his philosophy, even though it had been a goal of his to develop a coherent philosophy of experience. This lack of systematic unity is encountered in the equivocal nature of much of the interrelation amongst his many arguments and terms resulting in frustration for many, a frustration that may have hindered a deeper understanding of his efforts to promulgate a different way of conceiving our experience. Heidegger is another philosopher who brings frustration to many, especially in relation to his esoteric terminology. But beyond this frustration there are many similarities between the philosophies of Heidegger and Dewey. The efforts Heidegger made in his early work to describe the character of his philosophizing offer an insight into a method which maintains the unity from its beginnings. This beginning with unity that enables the preservation of unity is held up in contrast to Dewey's philosophic method which, while professing the unity and integrity of experience, begins with a subtle distinction in experience that conceals the possibility of a unified beginning. Dewey is left to construct his system using the various fragments he has uncovered of a unity that Heidegger is able to maintain throughout his philosophizing.*

## Unity as Systematic and Historical

In a reflective piece written in response to a range of critics, Dewey (1939, p. 523) made reference to 'my philosophical system'. 'I did not hit upon my position as a ready made and finished doctrine', he (p. 521) revealed. 'It developed in and through a series of reactions to a number of philosophic problems and doctrines' (p. 521). 'Inconsistencies and shifts have taken place', he (p. 520) admitted; 'the most I can claim is that I have moved fairly steadily in one direction'. In a further confession Dewey (p. 554) claimed that he had 'failed to develop in a systematic way my underlying psychological principles'. And in an earlier statement Dewey disclosed his doubts about his ever attaining systematic unity. 'Although I have not the aversion to system as such that is sometimes attributed to me', he (1930, p. 21) remarked, 'I am dubious of my own ability to reach inclusive systematic unity, and in consequence, perhaps, of that fact, also dubious about my contemporaries'. Having acknowledged the difficulty, Dewey (1985, p. 21) continued to believe that 'the boundless multiplicity of the concrete experiences of humanity when dealt with gently and humanely, will naturally terminate in some sense of the structure of any and all experience'. And while Dewey believed that he had not achieved systematic in his description of the structure of experience, a 'sound philosophy of experience' remained a goal of Dewey's (1938a, p. 91) work.

As a consequence of these admissions, one could claim that achieving a systematic understanding of Dewey's philosophy of experience would present a gargantuan, if not impossible task. If Dewey had not achieved it, how could anyone else? However systematic unity is not only achieved by searching amongst an assortment of fragments. Unity can also be found in the way the question is asked and investigated in the beginning. It was in this way that Dewey's work could be informed by Heidegger, another philosopher who was centrally concerned with experience. In one of his first published series of lectures, delivered in 1919, Heidegger (2000, p. 53) presented an 'analysis of the structure of experience'. In these lectures Heidegger revealed an understanding of the term experience in its broad association with life, a conception also held by Dewey. 'We use the word life to denote the whole range of experience', Dewey (1916, p. 2) remarked. "'Life" covers customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations. We employ the word "experience" in the same pregnant sense' (p. 2). As such, Dewey (p. 2) often joined the two terms, referring to 'life-experience'. Heidegger similarly associated life with experience, although at the same time he acknowledged problems with the way in which this composite term was construed. Heidegger (2000, p.

55) opined that ‘the term “lived experience” is today so faded and worn thin that, if it were not so fitting, it would be best to leave it aside. Since it cannot be avoided, it is all the more necessary to understand its essence’.

Heidegger (2004, p. 7) felt the need to refine this notion of lived experience and he began to introduce it as ‘factual life experience’ in order to more clearly indicate that his investigation was focused on the historical sense of life, setting aside any epistemological notions. “‘Factual’ does not mean naturally real or causally determined, nor does it mean real in the sense of a thing’, he (p. 7) stipulated. ‘The concept “factual” may not be interpreted from certain epistemological presuppositions, but can be made intelligible only from the concept of the “historical”’ (p. 7). Factual life experience was experience as it was being lived. And for Heidegger this factual experience was the point of unity of any systematic philosophy of experience. Heidegger (1984, p. 8) realized that there could not be ‘a historical definition of philosophy and next to it a so-called systematic definition, nor conversely’. ‘Historical description is dead if it is not systematic, and systematic description is empty if it is not historical’, he (pp. 8-9) insisted. ‘What is needed’, he (p. 8) proposed, ‘is a definition “from historicity”’. Such a definition would emerge from an investigation of factual experience in a way that did not construe experience objectively but remained within the lived and personal.

Philosophy can be characterized only from and in historical recollection. But this recollection is only what it is, is only living, in the moment of self-understanding, and that means in one’s own free, productive grasp of the task harbored in philosophy. (Heidegger 1984, p. 8)

From this perspective Heidegger realized that his terminological focus on factual life experience may not always be explicit enough in relation to the personal nature of his investigation. As a consequence he introduced the term ‘Dasein’. “‘Facticity’ is the designation we will use for the character of the being of “our” “own” *Dasein*’, Heidegger (1999a:5) stipulated. ‘Da-sein is a being which I myself am, its being is in each case mine’, he (1996, p. 108) asserted. ‘Dasein always is what it is only as one’s own Dasein and never as the Dasein in general of some universal humanity’, he (2002, p. 114) further clarified. Dasein was an everyday German noun that meant entity or existence. But it also appeared in the verb form dasein, which meant to be here or there (being-t/here), to exist. Heidegger sometimes hyphenated the term as Da-sein to emphasize this mixed meaning, noun and verb, as well as to accentuate the unity of Da and sein which it encapsulated.

With Dasein, Heidegger was attempting to shift the emphasis away from more objective notions of human being, to set aside the traditional epistemological dualism between subject and object. ‘Being-there *in the manner of be-ing* means: not, and never, to be there primarily as an *object*’, he (1999a, p. 5) highlighted. However ‘the definition of human being’ as ‘*animal rationale*’ reflected ‘being objectively present’, Heidegger (1996, p. 45) stressed. In a similar way the term person had its origins in the word parson, rendering each of us as ‘defined in advance as being-created in the image of God’, Heidegger (1999a, p. 23) noted. And likewise the term man brought with it unwanted conceptual baggage that hindered his interpretation. ‘In all its traditional categorial forms’, Heidegger (p. 21) pronounced, ‘the concept of man fundamentally obstructs what we are supposed to bring into view as facticity’.

## **Two types of experience and thinking**

### *A. Dewey’s reflective and ordinary experience*

Within the larger notion of lived experience both Dewey and Heidegger distinguished two types of experience. While not identical, each philosopher’s distinction supported the claims of the other in a complementary way. For Dewey (1929, p. 145) the ‘two types of experience’ were ‘ordinary experience’ (p. 9) and ‘reflective experience’ (p. 7), a distinction he expressed using various other terms such as ‘gross’ (p. 9) or ‘naïve experience’ (p. 12) on the one hand, and ‘intellectual experience’ (p. 23) on the other. He (p. 7)

also described these two types of experience as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ experience respectively. Dewey (pp. 6-7) conveyed this distinction as ‘one between what is experienced as the result of a minimum of incidental reflection and what is experienced in consequence of continued and regulated reflective inquiry’. This distinction between ordinary and reflective experience emerged from Dewey’s (1939, p. 559) focus on ‘the function of a *problematic* situation in regulating as well as evoking inquiry’. He (p. 559) named this as ‘the controlling factor’ that guided his ‘entire view’. The way to contend with a problematic situation was through inquiry, and to this end Dewey set out his ‘general features of reflective experience’ (1916, p. 176), what he later called the ‘pattern of inquiry’ (1938b, p. 101).

They are (i) perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined; (ii) a conjectural anticipation – a tentative interpretation of the given elements, attributing to them a tendency to effect certain consequences; (iii) a careful survey (examination, inspection, exploration, analysis) of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand; (iv) a consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent, because squaring with a wider range of facts; (v) taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action which is applied to the existing state of affairs: doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis. (Dewey 1916, p. 176)

Dewey (1916, p. 176) stressed that ‘it is the extent and accuracy of steps three and four which mark off a distinctive reflective experience from one on the trial and error plane. They make *thinking* itself into an experience’. At the heart of reflective experience was thinking. Thinking was the difference between the basic trial and error mode of ordinary experience and ‘continued and regulated reflective inquiry’ (1929, p. 7). However a crucial feature of Dewey’s distinction between these two types of experience was that reflective or secondary experience remained grounded in ordinary or primary experience: steps one and five. As such, any excursion from ordinary experience into reflective experience must return to ordinary experience or else be left groundless. It was ordinary experience that was primary. Thus, ‘when intellectual experience is taken to be primary’, Dewey (p. 23) warned, ‘the cord that binds experience and nature is cut’. He (p. 8) saw the ‘resulting failure’ as ‘three-fold’.

First, there is no verification, no effort even to test and check. What is even worse, secondly, is that the things of ordinary experience do not get enlargement and enrichment of meaning as they do when approached through the medium of scientific principles and reasonings. This lack of function reacts, in the third place, back upon the philosophic subject-matter in itself. Not tested by being employed to see what it leads to in ordinary experience and what new meanings it contributes, this subject-matter becomes arbitrary, aloof – what is called “abstract” when that word is used in a bad sense to designate something which exclusively occupies a realm of its own without contact with the things of ordinary experience. (Dewey 1929, pp. 8-9)

Dewey (1929, p. 27) considered these two types of experience to be joined; to separate them was to perform ‘the conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence: a conversion that may be said to be *the* philosophic fallacy’. But in a problematic way, this distinction between ordinary and reflective experience, even though it emphasized their connection, removed thinking from the realm of ordinary experience.

### *B. Heidegger’s thing and environmental experience*

Heidegger discerned two types of experience which he (2000a, p. 75) called ‘thing experience’ and ‘environmental experience’. In making this distinction Heidegger was attempting to deal with the philosophic fallacy that Dewey identified. As a consequence, Heidegger’s environmental experience was not

experience of the environment in the objective sense, but encompassed both of Dewey's types of experience in a broader lived experience. As Heidegger (2000a, p. 74) put it, 'we can see, at least in a provisional way, that we frequently, indeed for the most part, live environmentally and experience in this way'. Environmental experience 'lies in the essence of life in and for itself', he (p. 74) believed, and 'by contrast, we become theoretically oriented only in exceptional cases'. Like Dewey, Heidegger was aware of the possibility of thinking within a specifically theoretical orientation which was disconnected from everyday life. And again like Dewey he was aware of the problems of dualism that this had caused.

But where Dewey had based his distinction on the amount of reflection in the two types of experience, Heidegger positioned his directly in terms of the problematic separation of the products of thinking from their ground in environmental experience. This separation gave rise to thing experience, a type of experience which abstracted from everyday life, thereby offering the possibility for believing that things were existentially separate rather than always encountered within environmental experience of some description. For Heidegger (p. 62), environmental experience was a personally meaningful 'living-towards' in which 'there is something of me'. It was this inclusion of 'my "I"' (p. 62) that primarily distinguished environmental experience from thing experience. 'In the bare experience of a thing there is a peculiar breach between experiencing and experienced', Heidegger (p. 83) recounted; 'the latter has broken out of the rhythm that characterized the minimal experience and stands for itself, intended only in knowledge'. Heidegger's distinction between environmental and thing experience was built around the distinction within experience between experiencing and experienced. "'Experience" designates: (1) the experiencing activity, (2) that which is experienced through this activity', Heidegger (2004, p. 7) asserted. Similarly Dewey (1916, p. 196) realized that 'reflection upon experience gives rise to a distinction of *what* we experience, the *experienced*) and the *experiencing* – the *how*'. 'However', Heidegger (2004, p. 7) remarked, 'we use the word intentionally in its double sense, because it is precisely the fact that the experiencing self and what is experienced are not torn apart like things that expresses what is essential in factual life experience' (p.7).

Thing experience was founded on the theoretical reflection that tore experience in two. The parts of experience were things, objects. In environmental experience both experiencing and experienced were encompassed together within thought and never sundered. Heidegger's (1966, p. 46) two types of experience could thus be equated with 'two kinds of thinking, each justified and needed in its own way: calculative thinking and meditative thinking'. For Heidegger (1996, p. 149) calculative thinking was concerned with things, objects, abstracted from lived experience. Calculative thinking positioned a thing in the 'single exclusive reified context' (2000, p. 58) of thing experience; exclusive because 'my "I"' (p. 62) was removed. In this understanding of experience or way of thinking, 'I remove, bracket and disregard my historical "I" and simply practise theory', Heidegger (p. 72) attested. Calculative thinking, as thing experience, was an 'objective occurrence' that Heidegger (p. 62) described 'as a *process*' because 'it simply passes before my knowing "I", to which it is related only by being-known, i.e. in a flaccid I-relatedness reduced to the minimum of life experience'. Calculative thinking was a process in a mechanical way because it was abstracted from me and my experiencing. As such Heidegger (1999b, p. 92) regarded calculative thinking as a form of '*machination*', which he described as 'the pattern of generally calculable explainability'. 'Calculative thinking computes. It computes ever new, ever more promising and at the same time more economical possibilities', Heidegger (1966, p. 46) declared. 'Calculative thinking races from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself' (p. 46).

However 'calculative thinking is not meditative thinking', Heidegger (1966, p. 46) discerned; 'not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is'. Meditative thinking engaged with meaning as it included me, the meaning of a situation for me at a particular time, and the contemplation of such. It involved thinking the whole of experience, experiencing and experienced together; not just experienced alone as in abstract, calculative thinking. Heidegger (2000, p. 61) maintained that the 'environmental milieu does not consist just of things, objects, which are then conceived as meaning this and this; rather the meaningful is primary and immediately given to me without any mental detours across thing-

oriented apprehension'. In any situation things were always already meaningful to me in some way, even if that meaning was considered to be deficient. Heidegger (2006, p. 11) regarded meditative thinking as of 'mindfulness' rather than machination. 'Why? Because man is a *thinking*, that is a *meditating* being', he (1966, p. 47) affirmed. In other words, thinking predominantly referenced the whole meaning of my experience, including me, rather than separating meaning into isolable contexts that excluded me. As such Heidegger was at pains to portray meditative thinking not as some academically special form of thinking but rather a way of thinking that was practiced by all, although he did imply that meditative thinking could be carried out at different levels of depth. 'Anyone can follow the path of meditative thinking in his own manner and within his own limits', Heidegger (1966, p. 47) declared. 'Thus meditative thinking need by no means be "high flown". It is enough if we dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now' (p. 47). While meditative thinking was accessible to all, 'at times it requires a greater effort', Heidegger acknowledged, a comment pointing towards his efforts in philosophy. Here meditative thinking 'demands more practice. It is in need of even more delicate care than any other genuine craft. But it must also be able to bide its time, to await, as does the farmer, whether the seed will come up and ripen' (p. 47).

### **Dewey's logic and Heidegger's ontology**

The two types of experience discerned by Dewey complemented the two types that Heidegger identified. However the difference between Dewey's types and Heidegger's types was not insignificant. Dewey's distinction between reflective and ordinary experience emerged from his (1939, p. 559) guiding focus: 'the function of a *problematic* situation in regulating as well as evoking inquiry'. This distinction rested on the amount of reflection in each type of experience. And while he always maintained their connection, this focus on inquiry directed Dewey towards an emphasis on reflective experience, thinking, and therefore logic. Dewey (1916, p. 169) differentiated his 'two types of experience according to the proportion of reflection found in them'. Reflective experience, while connected with ordinary experience, was distinct from ordinary experience. As a consequence of its relative deficiency in thinking, Dewey (p. 169) considered ordinary experience to be 'trial and error'. In subtle contrast, Heidegger's distinction between thing and environmental experience was premised on the inclusion or exclusion of one's own self in experience and thinking. Heidegger did not make a distinction within experience in relation to the proportion of thinking but rather the type of thinking. This distinction supported his further interest in the question of facticity as the character of the being of our own Dasein. Heidegger (1999a, p. 1) expressed his focus as ontology, where "'ontology" means doctrine of being', such that 'being should in some thematic way come to be investigated and come to language'.

Heidegger realized that such an investigation of being required a capacity to differentiate being from beings. Unless it was considered possible to discriminate between being and beings, then an understanding of being could never be accessible. 'Being is different than beings', Heidegger (1984, p. 152) declared, 'and only this difference in general, this possibility of distinction, insures an understanding-of-being'. 'This is the *ontological difference*', he (p. 48) remarked. 'How is this to be understood? Difference ... means to keep separate. The ontological difference holds being and the being together at a distance from one another' (p. 48). Heidegger was aware that being and beings could never be separate, but he also aware of the need to differentiate between them. He believed that this passing over being, treating being as something existential, a quality in isolation and thus a being, was the reason why the difference was not able to be discerned before this. 'Why is the ontological difference not able to become a theme for metaphysics?', Heidegger (2003, p. 48) asked. 'Because if this were the case, the ontological difference would be a being and no longer the difference between being and beings' (2003, p. 48). In other words, 'the danger is that, within the horizon of metaphysics, the difference leads to representing being as a being', he (p. 24) warned.

Heidegger realized that being could not be discerned within thing experience, the calculative thinking that characterized metaphysics, because of the obsession with the theoretical and thus with objects. He (1996, p. 34) openly acknowledged that his investigations ‘would not have been possible without the foundations laid by Edmund Husserl’, whose logical investigations enabled him to clarify the ontological difference. ‘Husserl first differentiated “formalization” from “generalization”’, Heidegger (2004, p. 39) observed. Before Husserl this distinction ‘was never seriously considered’ (p. 39). Interestingly, Dewey also worked with this distinction and the logical confusion associated with it. He (1938b, p. 354) declared that ““general” as a logical term is ambivalent’ in the sense that it was ‘employed to designate both the generic and the universal’, thereby resulting in ‘the confusion of the two and its consequences in logical doctrine, namely, failure to observe the logical difference of the existential and non-existential, the factual and ideational’. Where Heidegger referred to these logical distinctions in terms of formalization and generalization, Dewey preferred to focus on universal and generic logical forms, or propositions, respectively.

Dewey portrayed this logical difference using a range of examples, one of which involved the notion of color. ‘When it is said that red, green, blue, etc., are colors, the reference is clearly to kinds included in a more generic kind’, he (1938b, p. 258) claimed. This generalization was then an ordering of different colors ‘according to genus’, as Heidegger (2004, p. 40) put it, replacing kind with genus. ‘For example red is a color’, and ‘color is a sensuous quality’, he (p. 40) explained, showing the expansion in genus that could easily be achieved in thought. In relation to the phenomenological analysis of factual life experience, generalization provided access to the experienced, the ‘what’ or ‘content sense’ (p. 43). But there was a difference between a kind of color, such as white, and the abstract universal sense of what Dewey (1938b, p. 258) called in this example ‘colority’ (while noting that ‘there is no abstract noun “colority” in common use’). Dewey (p. 258) claimed that in the abstract sense of colority, the term ‘whiteness does not designate a color as a quality at all. It designates a certain way or mode of *being* colority, the abstract universal’. ‘Redness, blueness, whiteness, are ways of *being* colority, not kinds of color (in the concrete) like red, blue and white’, Dewey (p. 259) reiterated. There was thus a difference between the meaning of white in its relation to color as a kind or genus (generalization), and the meaning of whiteness in its relation to colority (formalization). Without an awareness of this logical difference between formalization and generalization logical confusion resulted. In this case ‘the difference between white and whiteness’, Dewey (1936, p. 257) observed, ‘is said to be simply that between a quality referred to a thing and the quality taken in isolation [of a thing]’. Here Dewey (p. 253) was using the term quality in the sense that it ‘designates something existential’, and is ‘concrete’ rather than ‘abstract’. As such the difference was understood as simply between two beings; being was passed over. ‘The instance may seem trivial’, Dewey (1936, p. 257) acknowledged. ‘But unless the difference of logical dimensions exemplified in it is borne in mind, the relation between the logical forms of *observed* matter of the world and scientific *conceptual* structures is lost, to the confusion of theory’ (p. 257).

For Dewey (1938b, p. 280), ‘generic and universal propositions’ were logical forms that represented ‘cooperative divisions of function in the inquiry which transforms a problematic situation into a resolved and unified one’. As such he (p. 280) understood these ‘two forms of propositions’ to be ‘cooperative phases of inquiry’. These phases were involved in steps three and four of the pattern of inquiry and as such were features of reflective experience, not ordinary experience. In contrast, Heidegger (1995, p. 296) recognized the possibility of this difference being ontological as well as logical. This was a difference that engendered ‘a prior opening up of the dimension of what is to be comprehended’, the dimension of being. Heidegger brought this difference into play with facticity, an abstract universal in Dewey’s terms. But Heidegger was aware of the further ontological difference between facticity and other abstract universals.

## Indications of beings and of being

Heidegger realized that in order to investigate facticity he had to work within environmental experience in a meditative way, that is, with his own experience, his own Dasein. This was different to both 'formalization and generalization' which he (2004, p. 44) described as 'theoretically motivated'. Both were of thing experience and calculative thinking. In order to guard against falling into a prejudicial theoretical determination Heidegger needed to be aware of the ontological difference, that he was working with being, but also that being was always of beings. In this sense Heidegger's indications described the being of Dasein, but at the same time they were of Dasein's concretion as a being. He described such indications as formal indications. 'How can this prejudice, this pre-judgment, be prevented? This is just what the *formal indication* achieves', he (p. 43) stated. Heidegger (1996, p. 108) recognized that any determination regarding Dasein only '*indicates* an *ontological* constitution, but no more than that'. This was in contrast to the seemingly objective determinations of formalization and generalization. 'What is common to formalization and generalization is that they stand within the meaning of "general", whereas the formal indication has nothing to do with generality', he (pp. 40-41) stipulated. 'In the formal indication one stays away from classification; everything is kept precisely open', he (p. 44) explained. Heidegger (1999a, p. 62) cautioned that 'a *formal indication* is always misunderstood when it is treated as a fixed universal proposition and used to make deductions from and fantasized with in a constructivistic dialectical fashion'. He (2001, p. 27) noted that 'in order to grasp the sense' of a formal indication fully, 'a radical interpretation of the "formal"' was required. Formally indicative concepts were "'emptily" meant: and yet decisively!', he (2001, p. 26) stressed. As such they presented an interpretive challenge.

These concepts are indicative because, insofar as they have been genuinely acquired, they can only ever address the challenge of such a transformation to us, but can never bring about the transformation themselves. They point into Dasein itself. But Da-sein – as I understand it – is always *mine*. These concepts are *formally indicative* because in accordance with the essence of such indication they indeed point into a concretion of the individual Dasein in man in each case, yet never already bring this concretion along with them in their content. (Heidegger 1995, p. 296)

Formal indications were always of the being of our own Dasein. If separated from this personal entwinement, formal indications would become abstract universals in the sense of formalization. 'As soon as one takes these concepts without reference to their indicative character like a scientific concept according to the conception of ordinary understanding', he (1995, p. 297) warned, 'philosophical questioning gets led astray with respect to every single problem'.

## Heidegger's beginning and Dewey's end

The ontological difference and formal indication were crucial to Heidegger's approach to the investigation of facticity. These two features of Heidegger's method enabled him to work within environmental experience by way of meditative thinking. Here was 'an original unity', Heidegger (1984, p. 9) acknowledged, 'that is, the unity of the temporality of the philosophizing factual Dasein itself; the full problematic must be unfolded from this unity'. This was a unity which Dewey also seemed to work with, but his focus on the connections between ordinary and reflective experience left this unity undisclosed.

Instead of understanding the unity that was at the beginning of his investigation, Dewey sought his systematic unity in its conclusion. As a consequence, Dewey's indications of the structure of experience remained primarily within the realm of universal scientific concepts. 'Biology, psychology, social psychology and psychiatry, anthropology, all afford indications as to the nature of this structure', he (1985, p. 21) contended, 'and these indications were never so numerous and so waiting for use as now'. These indications were of 'the context of the make-up of experience itself', what Dewey (p. 21) referred to as 'that

inclusive and pervasive context of experience in which philosophic thinking must, for good or ill, take place, and without reference to which such thinking is in the end but a beating of wings in the void'. But 'it is dangerous to begin at this point', he (p. 21) insisted.

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