

## **Tony Atkinson's new book, *Measuring Poverty around the World*.**

### **Some further reflections**

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September 2019

#### **Abstract**

We describe a new book on measuring poverty by the late Tony Atkinson, published by Princeton University Press. At Atkinson's request we edited the incomplete manuscript that he left at his death. We describe this process, the additions we made (which include afterwords by François Bourguignon and Nick Stern), the content and structure of the book along with Atkinson's approach to his subject, and parallel developments in the World Bank's measurement of global poverty that were stimulated by the report of the Commission on Global Poverty, written by Atkinson, from which this book was developed. The new book is more than four hundred published pages but remains unfinished.

Keywords: global poverty, income, consumption, multidimensional poverty, cosmopolitanism. JEL codes: C80, I32

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#### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is based on and further develops our foreword to Atkinson (2019). We benefitted from discussion at presentations of Tony's book. In particular, we are grateful to Elena Granaglia, Tonia Mastrobuoni and Giovanni Vecchi (Festival dell'economia 2019, Trento, 31 May 2019), Francesca Bastagli, Torsten Bell, Rachel Glennerster, Nick Stern (Resolution Foundation, London, 11 June 2019) and Chico Ferreira, Stephen Jenkins and Ingrid Robeyns (Human Development and Capability Association conference, London, 11 September 2019). We have also benefitted from reading early reviews of the book including Iacono (2019), Ravallion (2019), and Sivaraman (2019). The views expressed here are solely ours and they do not necessarily reflect those of the Bank of Italy or the Eurosystem.

## **1. Introduction**

Tony Atkinson's death on 1 January 2017 deprived social science of one of its finest scholars. His magnum opus *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Atkinson, 2015), translated into more than a dozen other languages, is often talked of as his last book. But the good news is that a new Atkinson book is now published. *Measuring Poverty Around the World*, from Princeton University Press (Atkinson, 2019), appears fifty years after Tony's first book, also on the subject of poverty, *Poverty in Britain and the Reform of Social Security* (Atkinson, 1969). That first book was restricted in coverage to just his home country. In a volume published twenty years later, his view was broadened to embrace the whole of Europe (Atkinson, 1998). With this book, Tony's perspective turns truly global in its compass.

In this paper we return to Tony's book, which we edited for publication, describing in more detail what we believe Tony was trying to achieve and where the gaps in the book remain. In doing so we mention parallel developments since Tony's death in the World Bank's measurement of global poverty, stimulated by his Commission on Global Poverty report, and how some of these differ from the direction Tony was taking in his book. In Section 2 we explain the thrust of the book and our editorial work. We illustrate the book's discussion of conceptual foundations of poverty measurement in Section 3 and of the importance of statistical assumptions and data in Section 4. In Section 5 we turn to the second part of the book dealing with the interpretation of empirical evidence and the analysis of several substantive issues. In Section 6 we conclude.

## **2. The thrust of the book and our editorial work**

Tony's book is not an exercise in statistics, although statistics are a central theme of the book. Tony takes seriously the first of the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the ending of poverty, 'everywhere'. His purpose is then to convince readers that measurement is fundamental in tackling this key challenge to humanity. Better measurement is essential for raising awareness of poverty, for motivating action to address it, for designing good policy, for gauging progress towards goals, and for holding political leaders accountable for meeting targets. By examining how poverty is – and should be – measured, Tony provides an inspiring guide to understand poverty, and policies to fight it.

The book is about measurement of poverty ‘around the world’ in two senses. First, it leads readers through the nuances of measurement used in individual countries. ‘Around’ in this sense means ‘anywhere’. How can one go about measuring poverty in any particular country, rich or poor? The book’s chapters illustrate Tony’s arguments with numerous examples, in part drawing on an appendix that was planned to include national reports on poverty measurement for sixty different countries at all levels of development. Second, the book shows how one can arrive at a global total for poverty. Here, ‘around’ is a gathering together of all countries. How many poor people are there in the world? What are the steps needed to arrive at such a total and, critically, what are the assumptions that lie behind the calculations? In addition to providing a guide to measurement in these two senses, Tony had also planned to discuss in his book a range of substantive issues concerning poverty – for example poverty and climate change, poverty and growth, poverty and the colonial inheritance from European empires. The project was ambitious and the book’s plain, unassuming title is restrictive as Tony’s plan was to cover much more than ‘just’ measurement.

The book grew out of Tony’s work chairing the Commission on Global Poverty for the World Bank, the report of which he wrote single-handed and delivered in the summer of 2016 (World Bank, 2017). The report finished, he decided to write a book for a broader audience about the nature and extent of poverty across the world and in particular, but not only as we have noted, how to measure it. The book re-uses some of the text in the Commission’s report, but it goes well beyond the report. The report was written to advise the World Bank on two specific issues about its future measurement of poverty: how to update its methods based on households’ consumption given that prices change over time and new rounds of international price comparisons become available, and whether and how to incorporate other dimensions of poverty and deprivation into its measurement. The report contains little analysis of data. In contrast, Tony’s book starts from first principles about the meaning of poverty, translates these principles into concrete measures, and then analyses the data to which the measures can be applied. It is much broader than the Commission report both in approach and in content, addressing a range of substantive issues alongside the data analysis, with a central emphasis on the integration of countries’ own national measurements and the measures adopted by international organisations.

As the brief outline above already hints, sadly Tony was unable to carry through all his plans. But before his death he asked us to take his manuscript forward to publication. He left an incomplete first draft and no guidance on how he wished us to proceed. Neither of us

had discussed the project with him. However, he also left a detailed list of all chapter sections and sub-sections together with a ten page summary of the book, written we are sure as a proposal for publishers (although never sent – he had secured no contract for the book). Tony’s family gave us access to his working files, both on his computer and in paper form. In addition, one of us had been a member of the Commission on Global Poverty and hence was familiar with Tony’s starting point.

Of course, we could rely on many years of friendship, open discussion on multiple and diverse issues, and joint work on papers and books. But we quickly decided that completion of the book was impossible. There was too much left to do, especially in the book’s second half. We might have imposed our own ideas and become co-authors (an option the Atkinson family suggested we consider) but we were clear from the outset that the book should remain Tony’s alone. We therefore decided to bring the book to a state where it could be published while remaining incomplete.

We added a significant amount of material in the first half of the book with the aim of more or less finishing Tony’s discussion of conceptual and practical issues in measuring poverty. Some additions are based on Tony’s previous writings or on arguments we had long discussed with him. Others are straightforward updates for developments that Tony would have definitely included, such as those relating to the EU social indicators or the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index. We added smaller amounts of text elsewhere and much of what Tony planned to cover in several chapters in the second half of the book is still missing. We also edited the sixty ‘national reports’ at the end of the book, adding and updating text and data, and writing reports for several countries and drawing graphs for others, although nineteen of the reports remain largely skeletons without the flesh that Tony would have supplied. Our edits and additions to the main text and to the national reports are not visible to the reader but on occasion we added footnotes in which we comment explicitly as editors.

There are only two major exceptions in our resistance to filling the gaps beyond the interventions just described. In one of the chapters in the second half of the book, Tony had planned to discuss the relation between growth, inequality and poverty reduction and the relation between poverty reduction and action on climate change. Tony made clear that he saw both these issues as fundamental in the fight against poverty but he had no time to deal with them. We felt they should indeed be covered in his book. To fill the gap, we asked François Bourguignon and Nick Stern, long standing co-authors and friends of Tony, leading scholars in these two areas, and both former Chief Economists of the World Bank, to deal with these subjects, which they did in two extensive afterwords.

The result is a book of over four hundred pages, with about two hundred and fifty pages of main text, including the afterwords, a hundred and twenty pages of national reports, and an extensive bibliography and index. There are thirty graphs, tables and boxes in the main text and a graph (two in the case of China) in each of the sixty national reports. The book is therefore a substantial one despite being unfinished. Most likely, at the first round of revisions Tony would have not only polished the text but also cut it significantly.

### 3. Conceptual foundations

The book is an example of the ‘principled’ approach followed by Tony throughout his research: there is no measurement without theory and conversely the theoretical developments are valuable only to the extent that they are liable to being used in practice. And behind the whole exercise researchers have the duty to make explicit the ethical judgments that are embedded in the measurement – the enduring intuition of his landmark paper on the measurement of inequality in the *Journal of Economic Theory* (JET) in 1970.

The first chapter illustrates this approach straightaway. Estimates of world poverty, such as those made by the World Bank using the International Poverty Line of PPP\$1.90 per person per day, invariably weight each poor person around the world equally. Tony describes this as a ‘cosmopolitan’ approach to estimating global poverty and one that is entirely suitable for an international organisation such as the World Bank. However, he offers alternatives, which include the extreme position of an ‘isolationist’ approach in which poverty outside one’s own country is ignored, and, more importantly, a ‘limited sympathy’ approach in which full weight is given to the poor within national borders and a weight less than 1 but greater than 0 to the poor in other countries. This is a possibility which has received virtually no attention in the literature on global poverty,<sup>1</sup> but one that links to the current debate on the impact of globalisation on inequalities between and within countries: ‘Whether one thinks the last quarter century has been good or bad for equity depends critically on whether one takes a national or global perspective’ (Rodrik, 2016, p. 1). It raises important ethical questions, but also conceptual problems in measurement, such as the implication that the global poverty count varies with the country where the calculation is made – that is, there is a nationally specific count of world poverty: ‘the magnitude of world poverty as seen from India will be different from that seen from the US; the two world poverty counts may even be moving in opposite directions.’ Although Tony describes these possibilities in the context of a discussion of instrumental versus intrinsic reasons for concern over poverty (he firmly favours the latter),

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<sup>1</sup> Tony refers to Brandolini and Carta (2016), which focuses on measuring global inequality; but see also Milanovic and Roemer (2016) and Ravallion (2019a).

his ideas here should be seen in the light of the intuition in the 1970 JET paper. Counting across countries requires an ethical judgement on how to weight each contribution to the count.

Chapter 1 sets the scene for the rest of the book. Tony takes a first look at estimates of global poverty, measured by low consumption or income, published by the World Bank. The data he drew on excluded high income countries, as they were assumed by the World Bank to have no-one beneath the PPP\$1.90 a day line, defined by the Bank as ‘extreme’ poverty. Following Tony’s advice in the Commission on Global Poverty’s report (World Bank, 2017, p. 47), the World Bank now includes these countries in its global poverty count and provides estimates for them in its public use databases. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty in high income countries is tiny, 0.7 per cent against 9.9 per cent worldwide in 2015, and is such not to affect the global count given population sizes. Although it confirms the geographical distribution of extreme poverty, this number helps draw attention to those 8 million and more individuals in the rich world who have resources insufficient even by the minimum standard applied by the World Bank in the poorest countries – not to mention that this number does not include people who escape poverty counts in rich countries such as the homeless and illegal immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Conceptually, this is a revolutionary change in the traditional World Bank approach that at last closes the gulf between rich countries and the rest of the world, making the measurement of global poverty truly global.

Tony also describes in this opening chapter the selection of the sixty countries used as case studies of measurement, measurement described in the sixty two-page national reports at the end of the book. One of his recommendations in the report of the Commission on Global Poverty was that the World Bank should produce brief ‘National Poverty Statistics Reports’ for each country (World Bank, 2017, pp. 28-9). The Bank accepted this advice and has started to publish on its website short country ‘poverty briefs’. The national reports in Tony’s book reflect his proposal although his implementation differs from the Bank’s. They represent a key feature of the book: the call for integration of international organisations’ measurement of poverty with national analyses produced within each country. The existing literature tends to

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<sup>2</sup> Using the International Poverty Line in high income economies raises the question of whether its level makes sense in rich countries. Critiques of the World Bank’s approach have long stressed that the International Poverty Line is too low to cover the purchasing of basic necessities in many countries, including the United States, the base country (e.g. Reddy and Pogge, 2010, Reddy and Lahoti, 2016). This criticism is partly accounted for by the World Bank’s recent use of two lines set at higher levels (PPP\$3.20 and PPP\$5.50) as well as of the societal poverty line discussed below.

take one or other of these approaches without reconciling the two, sometimes with highly confusing results. As Tony writes in the explanatory note to Figure 7.2 (p. 179), ‘Zimbabwe has a poverty rate of 72.3 per cent when poverty is measured using the national line and a rate of 21.4 per cent when poverty is measured using the \$1.90 per person per day line. (These estimates refer to 2011.)’.

In the national reports, Tony documents the measurement done at the national level by national statistical offices and ministries and the trends shown by these national data, comparing them with what is shown by data published by international organisations, notably the World Bank. Of course, for many countries there exist exercises comparing poverty estimates elaborated at the international and at the national levels, but the novelty of Tony’s approach is to demand their systematic integration. In his view, this serves to cross-check the conclusions on the structure and changes in poverty shown by different methods or sources, where inconsistencies that cannot be explained must sound a warning bell for users of the data. National measures are grounded in some kind of political process within each country, whereas the measures worked out by international organisations have a different origin. The integration of these two measurement exercises provides legitimacy to both, and eventually to the policy decisions that are taken based on them.

The importance of integrating these two measurement approaches could be seen also from the perspective of the tension between ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘nationalism’. As we discuss in an Editors’ footnote on page 209, Greenstein, Gentilini and Sumner proposed to estimate global poverty as simply the sum of national head counts based on national poverty lines, because of ‘the importance of national ownership and the incorporation of context-specific measures of poverty, and that any new poverty goals should be designed with political mobilization as a consideration’ (2014, p. 132; see also Gentilini and Sumner, 2012). This proposal reflects a ‘nationalist’ approach to the global poverty count, which refrains from establishing a common framework for measurement as implicit in the International Poverty Line. Rather than going this way, Tony suggests recognising the legitimacy of both approaches.

Chapter 2 presents a range of different concepts of poverty: ‘political’ definitions (standards adopted by governments to classify a person as poor or not), subjective assessments, basic needs, Sen’s capability approach, and assessment based on principles of human rights. We note there that we think Tony would have added more in time on the last of these, perhaps commenting on the approach taken by the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in his country visits and annual reports. (The most recent annual

report focuses on poverty and climate change (Alston, 2019).) The implications for measurement of each concept are then taken up at the end of the chapter in the context of the debate between absolute and relative measures of poverty. This part of the chapter also introduces the idea of what has come to be known as a ‘societal’ poverty line, following the work that Tony did almost twenty years ago with François Bourguignon (Atkinson and Bourguignon, 2000 and 2001) – a poverty line that is an absolute one at lower levels of development but that then moves up as national income rises, something rationalised using the capability approach. The 2018 edition of *Poverty and Shared Prosperity*, the World Bank’s new biennial flagship report, published after Tony’s book went to press, includes estimates of global poverty based on just such a ‘societal’ line following another of the recommendations of the Commission on Global Poverty.

#### **4. Delving into statistical assumptions**

Chapters 3 and 4 build a ‘Checklist’ of the questions Tony believed one should ask when faced with any statistics on poverty. Frequent references to illustrate the arguments are made to the sixty case studies of measurement provided by the national reports at the end of the book. Chapter 3 focuses on clarifying the concepts. If a monetary measure is being used, what is being measured, consumption or income and how are these being defined?<sup>3</sup> And for what period? How are differences in the cost of living across countries dealt with by the use of purchasing power parity exchange rates? How are differences in needs between households catered for and what about inequalities within the household (another new feature of data in *Poverty and Shared Prosperity* 2018 following the Commission on Global Poverty’s report)? What about the depth of poverty, its severity?

Tony then moves on to non-monetary indicators, for example the absence of a particular item in the home or lack of access to clean water. He clearly wanted to give prominence to these measures of poverty alongside the monetary measures that he had

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<sup>3</sup> A partial lacuna in Tony’s discussion concerns the treatment of durable goods. He certainly mentions the issue and the important distinction between the consumption of the good’s services and the expenditure required to purchase the good. But he provides no further analysis of methods to deal with the problem or of what is done in practice around the world. In editing his manuscript we overlooked the very useful survey paper on durable goods and poverty measurement by Amendola and Vecchi (2014). Inter alia, they note that official poverty measurement in the US, Canada, Australia and the UK ignores durables and that the same is true in 41 out of 95 poverty assessments carried out by the World Bank between 1996 and 2014 (covering 61 countries) in which the definition of the welfare aggregate was clear.

worked with for much of his career, noting that the targets under the SDG poverty goal refer to reducing poverty ‘in all its dimensions’ (UN Sustainable Development Goals website). What indicators are chosen in practice to measure an underlying dimension of e.g. health or education? How are indicators updated over time (an issue addressed recently in the EU’s measurement of material deprivation)? Many of the available estimates of non-monetary poverty come from the work of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), building on the research there of Sabina Alkire, James Foster and their colleagues (e.g. Alkire and Foster, 2011, Alkire et al, 2015). For several years the OPHI estimates have been published in the UNDP’s annual *Human Development Report*. Tony also covers Eurostat’s measurement of material deprivation for the European Union.<sup>4</sup> Were Tony to have completed his book, we think he would have continued to look for a ‘middle ground’ – as suggested by Ferreira and Lugo (2013) – in the debate that has surrounded these measures, pointing to the arguments on both sides while recognising that the measures have been adopted by many national statistical offices. Again, the 2018 edition of the World Bank’s *Poverty and Shared Prosperity* report has started to include estimates of multidimensional poverty as argued for by Tony in his report of the Commission on Global Poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 4 considers the data underlying the statistics on poverty. What are they – do real data as opposed to imputations actually exist? Here, for example, Tony emphasises the importance of development aid from rich countries in improving the available sources in poorer countries. (‘If you ask “where does our aid money go?”, then one answer is the improvement of the information basis for monitoring and designing development policy’.) How comparable are the data between countries and over time? How well measured are price changes within countries, vital to the updating of national thresholds for monetary poverty? Who is missing from the sources used to measure poverty? What sorts of levels of response to sample surveys are achieved in practice? Can estimates be triangulated with information from other sources?

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<sup>4</sup> Other recent initiatives in rich countries that aim to broaden the measurement of poverty include Social Metrics Commission (2018) in the UK (an approach that the UK government has recently decided to implement in 2020 on an experimental basis) and Glassman (2019) in the US, both published since Tony’s book went to press.

<sup>5</sup> The Bank’s approach differs from that in Tony’s book since a monetary measure of poverty is included as one of the indicators to be counted, with a weight of 1/3 in the main calculations with the result that ‘anyone who is income poor is also poor under the broader poverty concept’ (World Bank, 2018, p. 98). In the OPHI calculations that Tony draws on, estimates are based on non-monetary indicators alone.

## **5. From empirical trends to substantive questions**

Chapter 5 marks a transition in the book from considering concepts, possible measures and available data sources, the subjects of Chapters 1 to 4, to analysis of the existing data. Tony planned this chapter to look at the figures for poverty around the world produced by international organisations, picking up where Chapter 1 left off with the monetary measures produced by the World Bank (first reviewing the history of the Bank's measurement of global poverty). He then intended to consider how rapidly poverty is falling on this basis and to show who it is that is living in poverty. This part of the chapter is largely missing. Next he planned to turn to the non-monetary measures of poverty published by the UNDP based on the work of OPHI. Do they tell the same story? Again, the analysis here is incomplete. Drawing on Tony's notes and files, we included some limited analysis of the data to address this question along the lines he had already started and point to directions that we think he would have taken the analysis.

Tony intended in Chapters 6-9 to do two things. First, he wanted to use the data he had assembled in the sixty national reports at the end of the book to answer a standard set of 'key questions' about poverty levels and trends for each of four regions or groups of countries – Asia and the Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and high income countries. In each case, he planned to compare the evidence from the national studies with the global estimates of poverty from the international agencies. Again, much of the analysis that he had wanted to include is missing and the existing literature that he would also have drawn on is only referred to sparsely.

The same is true for most of the second thing planned for these four chapters. Tony was to consider a series of 'general issues' – two per chapter – about the causes and correlates of poverty or about its measurement. These include: the extent of the 'trickle down' to the poor from economic growth and the impact on poverty of changes in inequality; the relationship between poverty reduction and climate change (the poor suffer most from changes in climate); the legacy from the colonial period to poverty today in former colonies (this reflecting his interest in income inequality in Africa back to the colonial period, e.g. Atkinson 2014); the poverty suffered by indigenous peoples; and the persistence of poverty in rich countries. This would have been a bold attempt to use the historical trends and structural patterns of poverty drawn from his national reports to illuminate fundamental questions about poverty. The discussion was not to be restricted to just the countries that made up the region

or group with which the chapter was principally concerned, for example Asia in Chapter 6. He intended extensive cross-referencing to countries in other parts of the world, seeing these chapters as ‘building horizontal bridges between the measurement of poverty at a national level in different countries’.

As noted in the introduction, we decided that the first two of these ‘general issues’ really should be covered in the published book, leading to our invitation to François Bourguignon and Nick Stern to write their afterwords. One of the issues to be dealt with in Chapter 9 was the estimation of global totals of monetary poverty based on the ‘societal’ poverty line introduced in Chapter 2. Here Tony made substantial progress, providing estimates for 2013 based on two different lines – yielding figures of 1.2 billion people and 2.0 billion people living in poverty. However, he had not yet taken the analysis further, by for example comparing his estimates with those of other authors who had used an analogous approach, albeit with important differences in the implementation of the basic idea (Ravallion and Chen, 2013, Joliffe and Prydz, 2017; see also the more recent contributions in Ravallion 2019b and Ravallion and Chen, 2019), or by looking at changes over time (societal poverty declines more slowly with growth than poverty assessed using a yardstick of PPP\$1.90 a day because the poverty line increases).

Chapter 10 concludes. The section titles show that Tony planned to draw together the main messages from each chapter of the book. He finishes in a characteristic upbeat way, his innate optimism on display. As far as the measurement of poverty is concerned, he argues that this cannot be static:

‘The world is changing, notably on account of the rise of countries that were classified as ‘Low Income’ a generation ago, but also because all societies evolve and their ambitions with regard to tackling poverty change over time. To meet the changing world, the analysis of poverty has to become richer and more subtle. Economists, statisticians, sociologists, and political scientists, among others, have to open their minds to new ways of thinking.’

Moreover, he emphasises:

‘The measurement of poverty is not a purely technical subject. This book is not like a guide to plumbing, because the right answers depend on views that are politically influenced and, at heart, matters of moral judgement. They are influenced by culture

and by history. My hope is that the book will widen the ways in which poverty is viewed, allowing for a greater diversity of approaches.’<sup>6</sup>

But at the same time, Tony concludes that despite the holes in the data and their variable quality, in broad terms the evidence is already sufficient, in the sense that policy makers cannot say that they do not have the necessary information to tackle poverty. One section is titled ‘We know enough to act’. He argues that what is lacking is political will. Politicians have accepted the ambitious goals for tackling poverty that are embodied in the SDGs and we now need to hold them to account.

## **6. Conclusions**

Tony Atkinson’s new book grew from his work chairing the Commission on Global Poverty but it goes well beyond the Commission’s report. It is much broader both in approach and in content. It is a classic Atkinson volume and in our foreword to the book we place it within Tony’s career and huge research output since his first work on poverty in the late 1960s.

In the event, considerable parts of the work remain incomplete. Our purpose has been to carry out the necessary editorial work to allow readers to appreciate the many insights contained in the draft left by Tony without nurturing an illusion that the book was almost finished. This is a book worth reading; but readers must be aware that it is an unfinished book. The unfinished chapters offer a foundation on which other researchers can build and a challenge to them to do so.

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<sup>6</sup> Is the reference to ‘plumbing’ an allusion to Esther Duflo’s work? (We were alerted to this possibility by Iacono, 2019.) Duflo’s Ely lecture to the American Economic Association in January 2017, ‘The Economist as Plumber’ (Duflo, 2017), came just after Tony’s death but Duflo also gave the annual IMF Richard Goode lecture with the same title in early November 2016, of which Tony may well have been aware.

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