

Displacing the State of Nature: A Disagreement with Graeber and Wengrow

*Desplazamiento del Estado de Naturaleza:
Un desacuerdo con Graeber y Wengrow*

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Abstract

David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* offers a salutary corrective to modern political theory, with its choice between two forms of the "state of nature": Hobbes's negative vision of bloodthirsty humans held in check only by the violent power of the sovereign, and Rousseau's apparently more positive vision of naturally equal humans corrupted by the introduction of agriculture and metallurgy. However, the alternative Graeber and Wengrow offer—a world of imaginative and experimental humans freely choosing different forms of society—excessively downplays the political mediating role of non-human things. This move, in turn, is overly dependent on a modernist ontology that opposes free human thought to mechanically deterministic things. Drawing on the insights of Actor-Network Theory in particular, this article argues for the central role of inanimate objects in the political sphere.

Keywords: *David Graeber; David Wengrow; Shirley Strum; Bruno Latour; Peer Schouten; state of nature*

Resumen

El amanecer de todo, de David Graeber y David Wengrow, ofrece un saludable correctivo a la teoría política moderna, con su elección entre dos formas del "estado de naturaleza": La visión negativa de Hobbes de seres humanos sedientos de sangre mantenidos a raya sólo por el poder violento del soberano, y la visión aparentemente más positiva de Rousseau de seres humanos naturalmente iguales corrompidos por la introducción de la agricultura y la metalurgia. Sin embargo, la alternativa que ofrecen -un mundo de humanos imaginativos y experimentales que eligen libremente diferentes formas de sociedad- resta excesiva importancia al papel político mediador de las cosas no humanas. Este movimiento, a su vez, depende excesivamente de una ontología modernista que opone el pensamiento humano libre a las cosas mecánicamente deterministas. Basándose en las ideas de la teoría del actor-red, este artículo defiende el papel central de los objetos inanimados en la esfera política.

Palabras clave: *David Graeber; David Wengrow; Shirley Strum; Bruno Latour; Peer Schouten; estado de naturaleza.*

David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* was already one of the most anticipated books of recent years, and public interest only increased with Graeber's unexpected death in 2020.¹ The subtitle of the book, *A New History of Humanity*, rings with the sort of ambition that the reading public loves, even in an era that likes to imagine that heroic aspirations are somehow outdated. Although rich in examples and specific claims, the argument of this 526-page work is nonetheless fairly simple. Namely, the authors want us to consider alternatives to the pillar of modern political theory: the notion that humans in the so-called state of nature are either good or evil, with vastly different conceptions of the role of government resulting from the choice one makes between these competing narratives. (2 ff.) The "good" version of the state of the nature is the one promulgated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and through him the work of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and most other figures on the modern Left.² As Graeber and Wengrow summarize this view: "Once upon a time, the story goes, we were hunter-gatherers, living in a prolonged state of childlike innocence, in tiny bands." (2) Through the intervention of agriculture and metallurgy, motivated in part by excessive population growth, this primitive idyll was destroyed. What followed was a process of urbanization and specialization that led in turn to "almost everything bad in human life: patriarchy, standing armies, mass executions and annoying bureaucrats demanding that we spend much of our life filling in forms." (2) As Graeber and Wengrow note, popular writing is saturated with this Rousseauian outlook, as in the frequently encountered proclamations that pre-civilized humans lived in small groups of hunter-gatherers, or that everything was ruined by agriculture.

Unfortunately, those who oppose this outlook too often assert the opposite error, the "evil" vision of the state of nature: "if not Rousseau, then Thomas Hobbes." (2) In the Hobbesian vision, humans are wild and bloody beasts: murderers, thieves, and rapists to the core.³ The only reason we have been able to surpass this awful human nature is "largely due to exactly those repressive mechanisms that Rousseau was complaining about: governments, courts, bureaucrats, police." (3) In one respect Hobbes

¹ Graeber, David and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2021.) In the present article all page numbers in parentheses refer to this book.

² Rousseau, Jean-Jacques *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* trans. D. Cress. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992); Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker. (New York: Norton, 1978.)

³ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.)

can actually be viewed as the founder of liberalism, given that he seeks to depoliticize the interior of society and reserve to the sovereign the right to combat other nations in an international version of the state of nature. But his vision of human nature can be linked with the modern Right just as easily as Rousseau can be associated with the Left. If humans are naturally vicious and licentious predators, this might suggest that we need to be fierce with our enemies, ruthless in our treatment of criminals, cohesive in our patriotic and religious ceremonies, and strict in our sexual mores. Along with Hobbes we might also add such thinkers as Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt.⁴ In Schmitt's words, for instance: "One could test all theories of state and political ideas according to their anthropology and thereby classify these as to whether they consciously or unconsciously presuppose man to be by nature evil or by nature good [... by their] answer to the question whether man is a dangerous being or not, a risky or a harmless creature."⁵ The typical right-wing decision on this issue is obviously the former. Humans are inherently dangerous for other humans, and must be held in line by strict, even violent means.

Graeber and Wengrow reject both alternatives, on the grounds that the theories of Rousseau and Hobbes "1. simply aren't true; 2. have dire political implications; 3. make the past needlessly dull." (3) Initially, the first two of these reasons might seem the most serious and hence the most worthy of our attention: after all, what could be more important than truth and politics? But in many ways the third point is the key to Graeber and Wengrow's book: they are bored with the standard narratives of modern political theory, and offer enough surprises to provide the reader with as much entertainment as enlightenment. What reader could forget their hilarious idea that precious shells spread over vast distances in North America were moved not due to some sort of proto-market economy, but in part due to female gambling habits? (22-24) In part, their book is an effort to capitalize on "evidence that has accumulated in archaeology, anthropology, and kindred disciplines; evidence that points towards a completely new account of how human societies developed over roughly the last 30,000 years." (3-4) Those readers who –like me– are not professional archaeologists, anthropologists, or prehistorians will surely find much that is new in these pages. In the wake of reading this volume, politics feels less like a tense life-or-death exercise and more like a playground for various brainstorming forays.

There should be one sentence beginning "But what sort of new political theory do Graeber and Wengrow intend. What sort of new political theory do Graeber and Wengrow intend with their attempt at a new history of humanity? This is the

⁴ Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince*, Second Edition, trans. R. Adams. (New York: Norton, 1992); Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. G. Schwab. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.)

⁵ Schmitt, op. cit., p. 58.

question that drive the present article. As mentioned, the authors dismiss the usual Left and Right political theories, each of them based on a different conception of humans in the state of nature. Graeber and Wengrow replace such theories with a model of humans as natural experimenters, able to try out and play with different forms of culture and governance. A second key human feature for them, the ability to amass surplus goods that go beyond immediate needs, receives less detailed treatment; they seem to regard it mostly as a springboard for tyrannical elites able to control such surplus. (128) Yet their new variant on the *homo ludens* theme does provide them with significant leeway for speculation in considering different models for how prehistory might have unfolded.⁶

But by the same stroke, I will claim, they render themselves unable to escape the same Hobbes/Rousseau dualism that they otherwise criticize. For even if we replace the notion of good or evil humans with that of imaginative and playful ones, it is still humans who remain at the center of the picture, and this still gives us just another variant of modern political theory. The only way to escape the modern deadlock is to give non-human entities a far greater role in political theory. Motivated by New Materialism, Actor-Network Theory, and Object-Oriented Ontology, some efforts in the directions of a politics of things have already been made: I am thinking for example of contributions by S.S. Strum and Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Noortje Marres, Peer Schouten, as well as in my own book on Latour's political theory.⁷ Graeber and Wengrow, by constraint, are suspicious of granting any political role to things. They treat such discussion warily, as if it were a matter of caving in to mechanisms that channel or condition choice and experimentation, countering their wish to stress the political imagination as the human feature *par excellence*.

The Creative Animal

Graeber and Wengrow are not the first on the contemporary Left to emphasize the mostly unlocked powers of the human political imagination. For some years,

⁶ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949.)

⁷ See Strum, S.S. & Bruno Latour, "Redefining the Social Link: From Baboons to Humans," *Social Science Information*, 26.4 (1987), pp. 783-802; Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Harman, Graham, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*. (London: Pluto, 2014); Marres, Noortje, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Schouten, Peer, "The Materiality of State Failure: Social Contract Theory, Infrastructure and Governmental Power in Congo," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41.3 (June 2013), pp. 553-574.

the usual refrain that capitalism is evil has been accompanied by the complaint that capitalism is a bore. This is easy to understand, given the way in which “capitalism plus liberal democracy” has assumed a near-monopoly state in public political reflection. Given this atmosphere, Slavoj Žižek has become fond of quoting Fredric Jameson’s words: “Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”⁸ Matthew Beaumont has traced the initial inspiration for this remark to some comments by H. Bruce Franklin about Jean Baudrillard; in any case, Žižek repeats the phrase so frequently that he is often wrongly identified as its author.⁹ The late Mark Fisher took it as the premise for his widely read *Capitalist Realism*.¹⁰ This call for imagination feeds, in turn, into the notion that all political transformation takes is the will to do so. As Peter Hallward puts it: “By ‘will of the people’ I mean a deliberate, emancipatory and inclusive process of collective self-determination.”¹¹ Even Catherine Malabou, whose work generally emphasizes the reality of brain structure against untrammelled claims to free will, has taken a sharp turn towards political voluntarism unconstrained by outside forces.¹²

This recent stress on the naked political imagination, unconstrained by non-human forces, is also the keynote sounded by Graeber and Wengrow. As mentioned, they see both sides of the political spectrum as stuck in the same rut: “At the time of the American Revolution, the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ themselves did not yet exist. A product of the decade immediately following, they originally referred to the respective seating positions of aristocratic and popular factions in the French National Assembly of 1789.” (69) Viewed in this context, “Rousseau did in fact write the founding document of the left as an intellectual project.” (69) While they find Rousseau innocent of promulgating the myth of the “noble savage,” they find him guilty in the case of the “stupid savage,” joining Pierre Clastres in arguing that so-called simple peoples are “actually *more* imaginative than we are.”¹³ (73) They

⁸ Jameson, Fredric, *The Seeds of Time*, p. xii. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.)

⁹ Beaumont, Matthew, “Imagining the End Times: Ideology, the Contemporary Disaster Movie, *Contagion*,” in M. Flisfeder & L.P. Willis, L.P., eds., *Žižek and Media Studies*, pp. 79-89. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Franklin, H. Bruce. “What Are we to Make of Jean Baudrillard’s Apocalypse?,” *Adventure Thru Inner Space: Essays and Articles*, 1979.

¹⁰ Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009.)

¹¹ Hallward, Peter, “The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism,” *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May/June 2009), pp. 17-29.

¹² Malabou, Catherine, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain,” in *L'écho du réel*, C. Crignon, W. Laforge, & P. Nadrigny, eds., pp. 485-498. (Sesto San Giovanni, Italy: Mimesis, 2021.) For a critique of Malabou’s position see Harman, Graham, “Malabou’s Political Critique of Speculative Realism,” *Open Philosophy* 4.1 (2021), pp. 94-105.

¹³ Clastres, Pierre, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*. (New York: Zone, 1987.)

soon cite another authority as their ally: “As Christopher Boehm puts it, we seem doomed to play out an endless recycling of the war between ‘Hobbesian hawks and Rousseauian doves’: those who view humans as either innately hierarchical or innately egalitarian.”¹⁴ (85-86) The truth lies elsewhere, they hold. For in fact, “the very essence of our humanity consists of the fact that we are self-conscious political actors, and therefore capable of embracing a wide range of social arrangements [...]” (86) Humans are imaginative and interesting. By contrast, Graeber and Wengrow claim in an eye-opening lament: “Social science has been largely a study of the ways in which human beings are not free: the way that our actions might be said to be determined by forces beyond our control.” (498) As a result, “these days we can hardly envisage our own past or future as anything other than a transition from smaller to larger cages.” (514)

Graeber and Wengrow do not fall into the trap of romanticizing non-Western peoples. They dutifully record instances of slavery, mass executions, and raids devoted to kidnapping and rape among various prehistoric and even historic units. But what they admire in such societies is a flexibility that we today can scarcely imagine. They give several examples of large cities that were either used only intermittently, or which seem to have been voluntarily abandoned after centuries of use. One of their go-to examples is the now well-known phenomenon of “seasonality,” in which a given society is able to flip between authoritarian and democratic structures at different times of year. There is also the topsy-turvy experience of inverted social order known from many festivals: “Seasonal festivals may be a pale echo of older patterns of seasonal variation— but, for the last few thousand years of human history at least, they appear to have played much the same role in fostering political self-consciousness, and as laboratories of social possibility. The first kings may well have been play kings.” (117) But somehow, we got stuck with real kings. (115, 519) Their vision of this transition is grisly enough: “Play kings cease to be play kings precisely when they start killing people: which perhaps also helps to explain the excesses of ritually sanctioned violence that so often ensued during transitions from one state to the other.” (505)

Another token of the human political imagination can be seen in the contrarian political force known as “schismogenesis,” (56-58) a term borrowed by Graeber and Wengrow from Gregory Bateson.¹⁵ This refers to a process of conscious cultural differentiation from one’s neighbors: “after the end of the last Ice Age, the archaeological record is increasingly characterized by ‘culture areas’: that is,

¹⁴ Boehm, Christopher, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behaviour*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.)

¹⁵ Bateson, Gregory, “Cultural Contact and Schismogenesis,” *Man* 35, pp. 178-183.

localized populations with their own characteristic styles of clothing, cooking and architecture; and no doubt also their own stories about the origin of the universe, rules for the marriage of cousins, and so forth.” (166) This fits well with the idea of Marcel Mauss that “[c]ultures [are], effectively, structures of refusal. Chinese are people who use chopsticks, but not knives and forks; Thai are people who use spoons, but not chopsticks...”¹⁶ (174) Along with the classic example of Athens and Sparta (180) –one might also think of the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War– Graeber and Wengrow enter at length into the striking cultural differences between the natives of northern California (characterized by an almost Protestant spirit of self-discipline and the accrual of wealth) and their neighbors in the Pacific Northwest (a militaristic slave-culture devoted to boastful speeches, human sacrifice, and extravagant displays of wealth). (504) There is also the more general example of how urban grain states and pastoral barbarian hordes remained “dark twins” for thousands of years, as exemplified in the history of China. (445) By showing a negative dependence of cultures on each other, the authors verge on a theory of politics as trapped in a human echo chamber, much like the anti-realist meditations of René Girard.¹⁷ They extend this idea into an interesting meditation on the strange ancient Mexican city of Teotihuacan, which they interpret as having reversed direction from an expansionist centralized state into a conscious utopian political experiment around the year 300 A.D., marked by lavish public housing provided to all residents. (332)

The intellectual jackpot that Graeber and Wengrow think they have struck by stressing both individual imagination and cultural schismogenesis is to have freed themselves from what they see as a perilous use of environment to explain all cultural and political history. They happily report the findings of Mauss that only about forty percent of Inuit culture could be explained by environmental factors; other nearby peoples had very different forms of social organization. (108) They reject Clark Wissler’s early attempt to trace Pacific Northwest slavery to their fish-based diet, by contrast with the acorn-gathering norms of northern California.¹⁸ (177) They even go so far as to say that “the idea of classifying human societies by ‘modes of subsistence’ looks decidedly naïve.” (188-189) Instead, “the process by which cultures define themselves against one another is always, at root, political, since it involves self-conscious arguments about the proper way to live.” (203) Yuval Harari’s argument that wheat domesticated humans, rather

¹⁶ See Graeber, David, “Culture as Creative Refusal,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 31.2 (Autumn 2013), pp. 1-19.

¹⁷ Girard, René, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.)

¹⁸ Wissler, Clark, *The American Indian*. (New York: Douglas C. McMurtrie, 1922.)

than the reverse, would fit nicely in an Actor-Network Theory context, given the ANT proclivity for seeing the human-object relation as symmetrical.¹⁹ But Graeber and Wengrow dismiss this effort at symmetry as just another Rousseauian tale, as just another version of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden: a strange claim, given Harari's reversal of the anthropocentrism found in both. (231) They insist that rather than agriculture being encouraged by environmental or demographic concerns, it was a consciously "playful" process. (241) If we do not leave everything in the hands of inventive and politically self-conscious humans, they worry, we will be trapped in such deterministic discourses as optimal pathway theory (204) or even a structuralism or post-structuralism in which "language speaks us." (205)

I am generally opposed to calling those with whom one disagrees "naïve." But since Graeber and Wengrow have already used that term for their opponents, it seems fitting here to say that they have what looks like a "naïve" commitment to modernist ontology. On one side we have creative human beings, limited by nothing but their own imaginative horizons. On the other we have "the world," working according to deterministic clockwork and therefore totally incompatible with the basic conditions of political life. It is not specified where animals fall in this duality, but modern philosophy generally assigns them to the "world" side of the divide, making humans a more or less miraculous singularity in an otherwise cold universe of unbreakable mechanical law. This makes human decisions, especially political decisions made after considered collective debate, a source of utter ontological novelty. That is the background ontology of Graeber and Wengrow's book. It is the sort of unreflective modernism attacked by Latour, and which I have re-christened with the term "onto-taxonomy," referring to the notion that the universe contains only two basic kinds of things: (1) human beings, and (2) everything else.²⁰ This comes through in their rather Kantian worry about people and things becoming interchangeable, which they see as lying at the basis of debt, servitude, and bureaucracy. (426-427) Interestingly, Graeber and Wengrow's hostility toward the role of things in history also makes them suspicious of the idea of sudden revolutions that one normally associates with Left standpoints like theirs. Contra Rousseau, the shift from foraging to agriculture was by no means sudden; for 3,000 years,

¹⁹ Harari, Yuval, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, p. 80. (London: Harville Secker, 2014); on Actor-Network Theory see Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.)

²⁰ Harman, Graham, *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love*, p. 237. (London: Repeater, 2016); Harman, Graham, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," *Open Philosophy* 3 (2020), pp. 132-146; Young, Niki, "Only Two Peas in a Pod: On the Overcoming of Ontological Taxonomies," *Symposia Melitensia* 17 (2021), pp. 27-36.

humans were “play-farming.” (248, 429) Although Rousseau famously links cereal farming with violent war-waging aristocrats, this did not happen for some 5,000 years. (523) To focus the study of history on sudden revolutions, they worry, “is a way of representing our species as decidedly less thoughtful, less creative, less free than we actually turn out to have been.” (501) Against all usual patterns, Graeber and Wengrow’s anthropocentrism also allies them with historical gradualism, or at least with social oscillations having little in common with “progress.”

Thing Politics

The problem, we have seen, is that Graeber and Wengrow’s conception of history empowers the human imagination at the cost of adopting something like a Sartrean subject able to produce political reality *ex nihilo* using nothing but human creative power.²¹ The reason this happens is that they have a strong motivation to avoid what they regard as the “determinism” that they see as entailed by non-human entities. In this respect their argument is reminiscent of Raymond Williams’s critique of Marshall McLuhan as a “technological determinist,” despite McLuhan making plenty of allowance for humans to choose and change the media they inhabit.²² Of course, this is not an all-or-nothing issue. Earlier I cited Schouten’s work on the materiality of state failure in Congo. Are the ongoing problems really due to a “failure of imagination” by the Congolese? Or perhaps we could blame the situation there on such abstractions as “Western colonialism” or even “neoliberalism”; in the present intellectual climate there would be no shortage of applause for such a maneuver, although this really just amounts to a new sort of determinism, one aimed at the supposedly irredeemable corrupting force of Western civilization.²³

It is also worth mentioning Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, with its powerful argument that we cannot just speak of a disembodied capitalism, since a capitalism that traffics in oil entails very different structures than those of cotton or spice.²⁴ Graeber and Wengrow’s reliance on “schismogenesis” as a purely cultural differentiating force is often enlightening, but it cannot explain how the acorn-gathering proclivities of indigenous northern Californians would differ from an equally schismogenetic choice to rely on deer rather than acorns, both of them

²¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. S. Richmond. New York: Washington Square Press, 2021.

²² Williams, Raymond, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. (London: Routledge, 2004); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994.)

²³ Schouten, op. cit.

²⁴ Mitchell, Timothy, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. (London: Verso, 2013.)

equally opposed to the pisco-centric culture of the Kwakiutl further to the north. To choose one food source rather than another is to change one's lifestyle, even if that choice is at some point marked by free human innovation; in turn, that choice will entail different infrastructural frameworks that will make the future of the culture highly path-dependent, no matter how frequently Graeber and Wengrow say that the record speaks of rapid shifts or "play" between one lifestyle and another. Stated differently, to downplay the pressing and different realities that follow from fish-based or acorn-based culture borders on the argument that "guns don't kill people, people do," forgetting that a human with a gun is a different sort of creature from a human with a bronze or (later) iron sword.²⁵

Whereas Graeber and Wengrow would rely on the modern conception of "freedom" as what distinguishes humans from other animals, Strum and Latour reach a different conclusion.²⁶ It is baboons, not humans, who are constantly attentive to shifting social conditions within their group. Human life, by contrast, is heavily mediated by inanimate objects that stabilize identity, rather than identity emerging through the purely social form of schismogenesis. Our lives consist of fixed residences, identification cards, wedding rings, and the various forms of private property that Graeber and Wengrow (and not just they) convincingly link with older forms of "the sacred." (159) In principle, I as a resident of Los Angeles *could* decide to sell my car and use public transportation instead, in an effort to reduce the impending catastrophes of human carbon-dependence; in practice, this would make my life nearly impossible without major changes in employment status and standard of living. Graeber and Wengrow's account renders impossible any account of what the archaeologist Christopher Witmore calls "anthropoiesis," in which humans and their things can and do exchange properties, in a way not dissimilar from that of metaphor.²⁷ To be a gun owner is not just to be a human who can freely decide whether to shoot or not shoot an intruder, or to murder the employees and customers of a supermarket: instead, the range of one's choices is radically changed by the human acquisition of lethal gun-qualities.

²⁵ Latour, Bruno, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, pp. 176-181. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.)

²⁶ Strum & Latour, op. cit.

²⁷ Harman, Graham & Christopher Witmore, *Objects Untimely: Conversations Between Archaeology and Object-Oriented Ontology*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, forthcoming 2023.)

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