

ARCHIPELAGOS OF EDUCATIONAL CHAOS

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THE DEFENSE OF GOVERNMENT schooling, like government itself, is based on fallacies. In this article, I directly refute many of the main arguments for government schooling. Using argumentation ethics, all conceivable arguments are refuted, thereby eliminating any valid reason for its continuance.

First, I define what government schooling is. Second is an outline of the praxeological consequences of government schooling. Third, several arguments for government schooling are refuted. Fourth, the solution is put forward.

The approach taken here is different from the approach taken by other critical articles and books on government schooling.¹ Unlike other texts, this article is focally a praxeological description of government schooling and its effects. This serves as an introduction to the refutation of arguments for government schooling. Nonlibertarian criticisms fail to strike the root of the problem (Freire 1995 and Illich 2002). As Max Stirner (1907, p. 56) writes of such criticisms, they think “inside the [socialist] superstition, without ever throwing a doubt upon this belief; [they write about] the State without calling in question the fixed idea of the State itself.”

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¹For nonpraxeological criticisms of government schooling, see Rothbard (1999), Rickenbacker (1974), and Richman (1994). Other authors who have provided such criticisms include Marshall Fritz and John Taylor Gatto (2003). For articles by Marshall Fritz and others in the Alliance for the Separation of School and State, see www.honested.com.

PRAXEOLOGY AND GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Government schools are nonmarket entities. The government enforces attendance, curriculum, and financing. Praxeologically,² compulsory attendance is abduction, compulsory curriculum is indoctrination, and compulsory financing is theft. Government also enforces teacher training and selection criteria, which serves to further cement the subservient nature of the school.

Once this compulsory nature is recognized, it can be seen that there is no major praxeological difference between government prisons and government schools, except that students do not need to stay all night, and have not been convicted of anything other than being young.³

Some governments allow a kind of parole called home schooling. Under home schooling, the parent implements the syllabus from home or on some nongovernment-school land, and makes the student take a government test once in a while.

As with government interference in anything, government interference in education is criminal, immoral, and counterproductive.

CONSEQUENCES OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLING

There are two main problems with government enforcing its monopoly of criminal schooling.

1. Monopolistic services are necessarily lower in quality and higher in cost. This might be a good thing depending on specifics, since more efficient production of *bads*, as distinct from *goods*, is bad.

2. If government has the monopoly, then truth, liberty, and logic will not be considered a positive obligation, because government is the negation of such things. As Rothbard (2004, p. 1271, n. 13) says, "The very fact that a government school exists and is therefore presumed to be good teaches its little charges the virtues of government ownership, regardless of what is formally taught in textbooks."⁴

²For an elaboration of praxeology, see Mises (1996), Rothbard (2004), and Hoppe (1993).

³For a beautifully written comparison between prison and government schooling, see North (2004).

⁴See also Rothbard (2004, p. 955).

Government schools are funded not through voluntary exchange but through forced expropriation. The forcible expropriation of money earned through voluntary exchange serves to decrease the incentives to satisfy consumers in the future. Since the government school has an unfair advantage over any competitors, it will further prevent entrepreneurial progress in educational industries. Government disadvantages *everyone* (except the perpetrators) because their money is not going to where it would have gone voluntarily. As Rothbard (1997, p. 243) put it, “*no act of government whatever can increase social utility.*”⁵

Further, Rothbard (2004, p. 1364) writes: “[E]very intermixture of government ownership or interference in the market distorts the allocation of resources and introduces islands of calculational chaos into the economy.” After enough government interference, these “islands of noncalculable chaos swell to the proportions of masses and continents” (Rothbard 2004, p. 614). Whether government schools satisfy students or parents cannot be determined. The “*provision of the service is completely separated from its collection of payment*” (Rothbard 1997, p. 249).⁶ Only on the market, where agreement can be expressed by *choosing to custom* an enterprise, can the knowledge of whether an enterprise is supported, relative to resources used, be known. With a government institution, no *real* knowledge of customer satisfaction can be found out. In fact, “customers” of the government are more accurately called detainees or serfs. No knowledge of the preferences of an individual can be determined, because there has been no opportunity for demonstrated preference.

Each individual intervention by government into the educational system, including the enforcement of its operation, regulation, and subsidization, creates an island of educational chaos. At the end of the students’ stay in the government school, they are graded as to how well they have learned what they have been taught, and how close their answers are to those of the syllabus’s model answers. The grading process, teaching methods, and curricula are all enforced by government. Universities and businesses, then, have no more convenient choice than to use government valuations of student intellect as their selection criteria, even though “government can no more determine prices than a goose can lay hen’s eggs” (Mises 1996, p. 397).

⁵Emphasis in original.

⁶Emphasis in original.

Gresham's Law tells us that when the government imposes overvaluation—in relation to the market value of a money—it will drive out the undervalued money (valued below the market rate). Applying Gresham's Law to government education qualifications, certification, standards, and everything else, the same applies. When government interferes, the bad education drives out the good.

The effects of government intervention in education last for a long time after the student has left the government school. As David Hume (1987, p. 32) noted, since “force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion.” Étienne de la Boétie (1984, p. 46) made a similar argument: “It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude.” As long as government continues to control the minds of the young and their teachers, liberty is impossible.

This is the result of each individual government intervention: a massive collection of islands of educational chaos, including the continued existence of government. The consequences of government schooling are both instant and residual. It is impossible for them to increase social utility in any way, either short-term or long-term.

Perhaps the ultimate example of the poor quality of education available in government schools is the fact that they still exist even though, as we will see, *all* arguments for government schooling are fallacious on multiple levels. Also, most people don't have a clue as to what government actually *is*. Government is hardly going to teach its subjects revolutionary knowledge!

ARGUMENTS BY ADVOCATES OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Advocates of government schools put forth several arguments in favor of their position. I now turn to an analysis and refutation of such arguments.

Social Utility Maximization

A popular argument put forward in favor of government schools is that society is better off because of them. This is flatly incorrect. When an exchange is coerced, only the coercer benefits *ex ante*; otherwise, there would be no need for coercion. Because government schools are funded through taxation, they are funded through coerced transactions.

In a voluntary exchange, both parties must favor the transaction, otherwise no trade would take place. Therefore, on the free market, everyone's welfare is improved, while in coerced markets, some people's welfare is reduced.

What About The Poor?

It is often argued that poor people can't afford the education that rich people can, so a free-market system will cause the poor to have a lower-quality education. Therefore, this argument claims, government should provide it for them, otherwise the margin between the rich and poor will increase.

While such claims have a certain intuitive validity, such validity turns out to be facile when considered more thoroughly. Consider the following:

(1) Why not get rid of all differences between the rich and poor, or even better, all differences between everyone? Should we dumb down the smart people, put healthy people into wheelchairs, and give hearing disrupters to people with good hearing?⁷ Even then, there will still be differences in the degree to which people are changed. Further, how can we surmount geographic differences?

(2) Without the rich, evil capitalists, who will feed the poor? Which method is more efficient than mass production for mass consumption? Competition encourages efficiency, which in turn drives prices down to levels more affordable to the poor. The more wealth possessed by an entrepreneur, the more capital he can invest toward the increased efficiency of his production process.

(3) Poor people can be better educated on the free market. For example, using the monitorial methods of Joseph Lancaster, poor people can be taught cheaply, quickly, and effectively, especially compared to our current government system. Joseph Lancaster (1803) was an educator who came across Andrew Bell's writings and developed further the monitorial system of education. The monitorial system is a method of teaching where the smarter students teach those not yet at their level. In exchange, they may get a small payment or be taught by the senior teacher for no fee.

(4) In our current system, because of relative time-preference rates, the poor people end up subsidizing the education of the rich. "Time preference" refers to the fact that everyone prefers the gratification of their desires sooner, rather than later. Some people are

⁷Kurt Vonnegut (1968, pp. 7–14) described such a world in his short story "Harrison Bergeron."

better able to delay their urge for rewards in the hope that their current activities will eventually lead to an even greater reward in the future. (That is, they have a “lower” time preference.) Poor people, unlike rich people, cannot afford to invest so much time in attaining some far-off reward, because it would mean forgoing current rewards to a greater degree than in rich people (Hoppe 2002).

(5) Government giving the poor the equivalent purchasing power to the rich in education—not that it can—may give them equal opportunity, but what of the people who fail to take the opportunity? If government enforces the taking of an opportunity—or rather, the elimination of alternatives—then surely government should enforce all secondary opportunities as well, thus eliminating freedom altogether. Anything else would be inconsistent.

(6) If government schooling is not aiming at creating entrepreneurs—which it would be impossible for it to do—then why does government think that workers can be trained better by a bunch of bureaucrats than by employers themselves?

Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc

Progress in education is often considered proof that government schooling is beneficial. This fallacy is called *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore caused by this). It does not in any way follow that *because* there is government schooling, people are smarter than they would be *otherwise*. It is not because of government interference, but despite it that any progress has occurred.

The maxim that governments ought to train the people in the way in which they should go sounds well. But is there any reason for believing that a government is more likely to lead the people in the right way than the people to fall into the right way of themselves? (Macaulay 1830, para. 60)

In fact, if it were not for government interference, there would not be the necessarily misallocated resources in the form of high-cost and low-quality service and repression of all nongovernmental activity. There would not be (to the same extent) the learning of boring, useless, and/or incorrect information.⁸ Without government enforcing attendance, if students or parents did not like the material the child was being taught, they would not be forced to learn it or attend. The young who are currently largely wasting their time in school would be much smarter and more highly valued by society if only government let them be.

⁸See, for example, Gatto (2003).

Another example of circular reasoning is the claim that government schooling is necessary for the creation of good citizens: Citizens need to be taught how to best live in a democracy, etc. All this argument claims is that government needs to teach its subjects the proper way to act and think so that government itself can continue. If this is true, and I am very much inclined to believe it, then this argument cuts in exactly the opposite direction. If, for example, a protection racket had to brainwash its citizens to accept it, then this is surely no argument—regarding quality of education—for the protection racket to continue to brainwash its subjects under the threat of force. Libertarians are not concerned with how best government should secure its existence. When libertarians discuss alternatives to government schooling, we are asking: Is government or private education the better way an individual should be educated? Not: *given* the existence of government and its continuation, what form of schooling best secures its existence?

Non Sequitur

A *non sequitur* claim is an inference that does not follow from its antecedents. The main *non sequitur* argument is as follows: Society benefits from education, *therefore* government must provide it. The use of the word *therefore* is in no way implied in this context.

Suppose, though, that we grant the legitimate use of *therefore*. Now, surely, there are more things that society needs or that everyone will benefit from using, such as food and housing. Using the same logic—society benefits from food and housing, *therefore* government must provide them—it must follow that everything that benefits society must be provided by the government.

Clearly, this conclusion is absurd. Besides the contradiction that society will benefit by eliminating the government, or the government not attempting to implement or enforce anything, there are other contradictions.

Conceptual Realism

Conceptual realism occurs when a collective or a nonliving entity is addressed as if it is an individual. For example, “the nation went to war” and “government helps people” are cases in point.

Government schooling, like government itself, is full of contradictions. First, however, it is necessary to clear up a misidentified contradiction that *is* valid as criticism of government education, but not a contradiction *per se*. “Government education is” *not* “a contradiction in terms,” as Leonard Read (2004, p. 34) claims. Perhaps *in toto* it is; it may be true that society as a whole does not progress or improve (educate itself) due to government enforcement of education. But is an individual being taught to read by the government not education?

Education might be said to be the allowing of an individual to develop freely. Therefore, since government is not a voluntary institution, it cannot be an educative influence, but the very opposite. However, this is not the same definition as that which is generally used.

Leonard Read's use of conceptual realism is what led him to this incorrect conclusion. Only individuals act; a society is merely a collection of individuals interacting. In this light I quote Mises. Note that when he talks of "education," he is using the *status quo* definition. In my terminology, "education"—in the sense that Mises uses it—is "government schooling."

Education, whatever benefits it may confer, is transmission of traditional doctrines and valuations; it is by necessity conservative. It produces imitation and routine, not improvement and progress. Innovators and creative geniuses cannot be reared in schools. They are precisely the men who defy what the school has taught them.

In order to succeed in business a man does not need a degree from a school of business administration. These schools train the subalterns for routine jobs. They certainly do not train entrepreneurs. An entrepreneur cannot be trained. A man becomes an entrepreneur by seizing an opportunity and filling the gap. No special education is required for such a display of keen judgment, foresight, and energy. The most successful businessmen were often uneducated when measured by the scholastic standards of the teaching profession. But they were equal to their social function of adjusting production to the most urgent demand. Because of these merits the consumers chose them for business leadership. (Mises 1996, pp. 314–15)

And,

[E]ducation cannot convey to pupils more than the knowledge of their teachers. Education rears disciples, imitators, and routinists, not pioneers of new ideas and creative geniuses. The schools are not nurseries of progress and improvement but conservatories of tradition and unvarying modes of thought. The mark of the creative mind is that it defies a part of what it has learned or, at least, adds something new to it. One utterly misconstrues the feats of the pioneer in reducing them to the instruction he got from his teachers. No matter how efficient school training may be, it would only produce stagnation, orthodoxy, and rigid pedantry if there were no uncommon men pushing forward beyond the wisdom of their tutors. (Mises 2001, p. 263)

Further:

Nobody can be at the same time a correct bureaucrat and an innovator. Progress is precisely that which the rules and regulations did not foresee; it is necessarily outside the field of bureaucratic activities. (Mises 1983, p. 71)

Another example of conceptual realism is the misunderstanding of what government actually is. If parents need to be told what is best for their children by the government, it must be that government is in some way different from parents. But in reality, as Mencken (1960, p. 331) claims, “government is a gang of men exactly like you and me.”

Murray Rothbard explains this in a section written about private property and ownership, but which is perfectly valid on the question of private education as well. Rothbard (2002, p. 56) writes:

[T]he crucial question is *not*, as so many believe, whether [education] should be private or governmental, but rather whether the *necessarily* “private” [educators] are legitimate [educators] or criminals. For ultimately there *is* no entity called “government”; there are only people forming themselves into groups called “governments” and acting in a “governmental” manner. *All* [education] is therefore always “private”; the only and critical question is whether it should reside in the hands of criminals or of the proper and legitimate [educators].⁹

Contradictions—Reductio ad Absurdum

Everybody owns themselves. In arguing, the participants represent themselves. In arguing for any limitation in the ability of oneself to represent oneself, it is contradictory. You cannot argue that you cannot argue.¹⁰ It is contradictory to voluntarily argue that voluntary exchanges should be limited. In law this is known as estoppel (Kinsella 1992, pp. 61–74; 1996). Any argument supporting government schooling is invalid. Many other contradictions stem from this one. It is a mistake that leads to further inconsistencies, and compounds the initial contradiction. Below are some examples of the results of this initial and consequential contradiction.

There are legislative contradictions of the government. The laws that it imposes upon others are *not necessarily* applicable to government itself. For this reason, Albert Jay Nock (1927) identified the government as that which “claims and exercises the monopoly of crime.” For example, both abduction and theft are illegal according to government legislature if anyone *other* than government performs them. What can be more criminal than government schooling, which, praxeologically, is theft-funded abduction and indoctrination?

⁹Emphasis in original.

¹⁰On this form of argument—“the argumentation ethic”—see Hoppe (2003, chap. 10).

The principles of school financing are contradictory, as Stephen Byington and Benjamin Tucker published on a sticker: “If common folks should not be made to pay for uncommon schools, why should uncommon folks be made to pay for common schools?” (Cited in Zube 2004, p. 47).

The principles of compulsory attendance and curriculum are contradictory. How can it be that parents are not smart enough to know what is best for their children, but are smart enough to choose, by voting, those who are? In Australia, these people the government considers too stupid to decide things for themselves—except to choose who will govern them—are forced to vote! In voting, there are other issues to be considered in addition to education (not that voting resembles any legitimate contract, anyway) (Spooner 1992). Where is the logic in thinking parents are smart enough to make a decision on multiple issues embedded in voting, but not smart enough to make a decision of which they can see the direct consequences? In addition, such decisions may be for a shorter time than any inter-electoral period. How can it be that slaves are allowed to elect their masters? Mises (1996, p. 617) writes:

[I]t is not easy to silence the voices of those who ask whether it is not paradoxical to entrust the nation’s welfare to the decisions of voters whom the law itself considers incapable of managing their own affairs; whether it is not absurd to make those people supreme in the conduct of government who are manifestly in need of a guardian to prevent them from spending their own income foolishly. Is it reasonable to assign to wards the right to elect their guardians?

Murray Rothbard (2004, p. 1302) makes a similar argument:

It is curious that people tend to regard government as a quasi-divine, selfless, Santa Claus organization. Government was constructed neither for ability nor for the exercise of loving care; government was built for the use of force and for necessarily demagogic appeals for votes. If individuals do not know their own interests in many cases, they are free to turn to private experts for guidance. It is absurd to say that they will be served better by a coercive, demagogic apparatus.

[P]roponents of government intervention are trapped in a fatal contradiction: they assume that individuals are not competent to run their own affairs or to hire experts to advise them. And yet they also assume that these same individuals are equipped to vote for these same experts at the ballot box. We have seen that, on the contrary, while most people have a direct idea and a direct test of their own personal interests on the market, they cannot understand the complex chains of praxeological and philosophical reasoning necessary

for a choice of rulers or political policies. Yet this political sphere of open demagoguery is precisely the only one where the mass of individuals are deemed to be competent!

And, if government thinks its subjects should elect them, then surely this is best carried out in the free market. As Rothbard (2004, pp. 888–90) continues:

It may be objected that, while the average voter may not be competent to decide on issues that require chains of praxeological reasoning, he is competent to pick the experts—the politicians—who will decide on the issues, just as the individual may select his own private expert adviser in any one of numerous fields. But the critical problem is precisely that in government the individual has no direct, personal test of success or failure of his hired expert such as he has in the market. On the market, individuals tend to patronize those experts whose advice is most successful. Good doctors or lawyers reap rewards on the free market, while poor ones fail; the privately hired expert flourishes in proportion to his ability. In government, on the other hand, there is no market test of the expert's success. Since there is no direct test in government, and, indeed, little or no personal contact or relationship between politician or expert and voter, there is no way by which the voter can gauge the true expertise of the man he is voting for. As a matter of fact, the voter is in even greater difficulties in the modern type of issueless election between candidates who agree on all fundamental questions than he is in voting on issues. For issues, after all, are susceptible to reasoning; the voter can, if he wants to and has the ability, learn about and decide on the issues. But what can any voter, even the most intelligent, know about the true expertise or competence of individual candidates, especially when elections are shorn of all important issues? The only thing that the voter can fall back on for a decision are the purely external, advertised “personalities” of the candidates, their glamorous smiles, etc. The result is that voting purely on candidates is bound to be even less rational than voting on the issues themselves.

Not only does government lack a successful test for picking the proper experts, not only is the voter necessarily more ignorant than the consumer, but government itself has other inherent mechanisms which lead to poorer choices of experts and officials. For one thing, the politician and the government expert receive their revenues, not from service voluntarily purchased on the market, but from a compulsory levy on the inhabitants. These officials, then, wholly lack the direct pecuniary incentive to care about servicing the public properly and competently. Furthermore, the relative rise of the “fittest” applies in government as in the market, but the criterion of “fitness” is here very different. In the market, the fittest are those most able to serve the consumers. In government, the fittest

are either (1) those most able at wielding coercion or (2) if bureaucratic officials, those best fitted to curry favor with the leading politicians or (3) if politicians, those most adroit at appeals to the voting public.

The arbitrary limits of government interference in schooling are contradictory. “[I]f government ownership is preferable in schooling, why not in other educational media, such as newspapers, or in other important areas of society?” (Rothbard 2004, p. 1271, no. 13).¹¹ Why doesn’t government supply food, friends, and socks for everyone, and make sure they are used in a manner the government considers appropriate? I reckon it is important that all members of society have these things.

[O]nce the principle is admitted that it is the duty of government to protect the individual against his own foolishness, no serious objections can be advanced against further encroachments. A good case could be made out in favor of the prohibition of alcohol and nicotine. And why limit the government’s benevolent providence to the protection of the individual’s body only? Is not the harm a man can inflict on his mind and soul even more disastrous than any bodily evils? Why not prevent him from reading bad books and seeing bad plays, from looking at bad paintings and statues and from hearing bad music? . . . It is a fact that no paternal government, whether ancient or modern, ever shrank from regimenting its subjects’ minds, beliefs, and opinions. If one abolishes man’s freedom to determine his own consumption, one takes all freedoms away. The naïve advocates of government interference with consumption delude themselves when they neglect what they disdainfully call the philosophical aspect of the problem. They unwittingly support the case of censorship, inquisition, religious intolerance, and the persecution of dissenters. (Mises 1996, pp. 733–34)

Also, is sex not necessary and for the good of society? Why doesn’t government interfere in sexual relations as it does in educational relations? The application of the equivalent interference in sexual relations as government currently performs in educational relations is called rape—as John Zube (2004, p. 45) writes: “It is something like rape, in education, when one is forced to learn something one does not want to learn, from someone one does not like, at a place and time not of one’s choosing”³⁵—molestation, or, more accurately, since the students are young and immature, pedophilia. If government legitimizes its interference in education because it is necessary for everyone, there is no logical stopping point toward a totalitarian

¹¹See also Rothbard (2004, p. 955).

state. If government schooling is legitimate, is pedophilia? If not, why not?

SOLUTION

I am not advocating increased servitude, totalitarianism, or pedophilia. They are in violation of my subjective values and objective natural law. The solution to the criminality, immorality, and outright stupidity of government interference is to get rid of it! Secede! Compete! Mises (1985, p. 115) writes:

There is, in fact, only *one* solution: the state, the government, the laws must not in any way concern themselves with schooling or education. Public funds must not be used for such purposes. The rearing and instruction of youth must be left entirely to parents and to private associations and institutions.

How should they be desocialized? One possibility is through syndicalist principles (Hoppe 2002, pp. 121–36). What will replace them? Whatever the participating individuals decide.

Coping With Change

Some readers may be convinced of the silliness of government schooling, but are hesitant to condemn it because they are not certain of what the free market will decide upon. If you don't know how people will be educated without government, so what!? Do you know how to make a pencil? Leonard Read (1975) wrote a fascinating pamphlet on how the free market makes a pencil, using international division of labor, resources from many locations, and so on. He points out that it takes hundreds, or even thousands, of people to make a simple pencil, and no individual directs the process. In fact, no individual even understands the entire process. And if no individual understands the entire process of making a pencil, how can any understand, much less direct, the complex society in which we live?

On the free market, if you see something you can do better, then you are free to do it yourself. If you don't know how to do it better, then you are free to seek the services of someone who does. Uncertainty, poor understanding, and little or no experience are not valid reasons for the continued acceptance of criminality—the use or threat of force—in education. Consider the following statements:

- The uncertainty of the future is already implied in the very notion of action. That man acts and that the future is uncertain are by no means two independent matters.

They are only two different modes of establishing one thing. —Ludwig von Mises (1996, p. 105)

- Movement is life. Certainty is death. Movement and uncertainty is reality. —John Ralston Saul (2001, p. 164)
- [Governments] create certainties, and when they are taken seriously, they deaden the heart and enchain the imagination. —Ivan Illich (1977, p. 11)
- Doubt might not be a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd. —Voltaire (1996, p. 53)
- [W]e must alter our civilization from one of answers to one which feels satisfaction, not anxiety, when doubt is established. —John Ralston Saul (1993, p. 584)
- People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them. —Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841)

Non-Solution / Compromise / Delayed Solution

What can students who are forced to go to school do? It is an awkward situation, because even market entities respect government qualifications and measures of student intellect, such is the magnitude of the islands of educational chaos caused by government interference. To those stuck in school, perhaps the following advice may help: “When I cannot change the city, I never want the city to change me” (Soetendorp 2003). Of course, there is always the classic statement frequently attributed to Mark Twain: “I never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

POSTSCRIPT:

OBEDIENCE IS IGNORANCE

Government, the enforcer of obedience, would not exist without the ignorance of its subjects. When ignorant of human action, obedience nearly always will follow. It is perhaps the most important endeavor, for those who understand economics, to teach the ignorant. For if they fail, government will continue. And government can do nothing but destroy humanity, to some degree.

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