

The Divine and the Anthropocentric: Rethinking the Symbolism of Snakes

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Abstract: The anthropocentric framework, rooted in Enlightenment philosophies, promotes a hierarchical view of nature, often neglecting the ecological significance of nonhuman beings. Emerging philosophies like eco-centrism advocate for egalitarian relationships with nature, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life forms. Modern scientific research illuminates the essential ecological roles snakes play in maintaining biodiversity, such as regulating prey populations and controlling disease vectors. Additionally, studies of their evolutionary adaptations, like venomous mechanisms, showcase their complex roles within ecosystems. Ultimately, this inquiry calls for a reevaluation of our relationships with snakes, inviting a broader reflection on humanity's role within the biosphere and advocating for coexistence rather than domination. This essay explores the multifaceted symbolism of snakes across cultural contexts, revealing intricate layers woven through aesthetic expressions, philosophical discourses, and contemporary scientific insights. By re-evaluating their symbolism, we aim to deepen our understanding of snakes as both aesthetic subjects and vital ecological components. Across cultures, snakes evoke a range of emotions and interpretations; their sleek forms and vibrant colors inspire artistic expressions and narratives. For instance, in Hinduism, the Naga is venerated as a protector and symbol of fertility, contrasting Western views that often depict snakes as malevolent beings. This aesthetic appreciation challenges anthropocentric perspectives that marginalize snakes as mere symbols of fear. Recognizing their inherent beauty encourages a more profound engagement with nature, fostering a shift away from fear-based narratives.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Snake, Symbolism, symbol of fertility.

INTRODUCTION

The imagery of snakes has captivated human thought for ages, embodying a complex blend of themes such as fear, reverence, and transformation across diverse cultures (Brunke, 2020.). However, the anthropocentric perspective—one that prioritizes human interests and values—often alters our understanding of these mysterious creatures. This viewpoint significantly shapes how we perceive and engage with snakes, frequently simplifying them to mere symbols of danger or tools for utility, rather than recognizing their ecological importance and rich cultural significance. In many Western narratives, snakes are often portrayed as malevolent entities, reinforcing stereotypes that label them as threats and fostering a deep-rooted apprehension that obscures their ecological roles. In contrast, Eastern traditions celebrate snakes as sacred beings, symbolizing wisdom, protection, and the cycles of life. As we investigate the dual nature of snakes—admired in some cultures while feared in others—it becomes vital to consider the consequences of this anthropocentric approach (Kellert, 2012.). Such bias not only distorts our understanding of these creatures but also contributes to environmental degradation and undermines conservation efforts for their habitats. By appreciating the intricate relationships between snakes and their ecosystems, we can develop a deeper respect for their existence, moving beyond simplistic views of fear and reverence. This article aims to explore how reevaluating the symbolism of

snakes, with an awareness of both sacred and ecological perspectives, can foster a more inclusive understanding of their roles in the natural world. Such rethinking can also lead to more sustainable conservation practices that recognize the value of all forms of life (Higgs, 2003.). Through this inquiry, we can gain insightful perspectives on our interconnectedness with nature and the profound lessons that snakes can teach us about transformation, balance, and coexistence.

II. The Anthropocentric Perspective

The historical context of human superiority over nature is an intricate narrative that spans thousands of years, reflecting shifts in cultural, philosophical, and scientific ideologies that have shaped humanity's relationship with the natural world (Worster, 1993). This relationship can be traced back to the Agricultural Revolution, which began around 10,000 years ago when early humans transitioned from nomadic hunter-gatherer societies to settled agricultural communities. This pivotal change allowed humans to cultivate the land, domesticate animals, and establish a more stable food supply, giving rise to the perception of humans as masters of the Earth, capable of manipulating their environment to suit their needs (Sera-Shriar, 2018). Throughout ancient civilizations, this anthropocentric worldview was often reinforced by mythologies and religious beliefs. Many cultures celebrated humanity's dominion over nature, depicting humans as granted divine mandates to control and manage the natural

world. This is evident in Judeo-Christian traditions, which frame stewardship as a responsibility, yet often imply a hierarchical relationship where humans are above the rest of creation. The Enlightenment period in the 17th to 19th centuries marked a significant shift in human thought, emphasizing reason, rationality, and individualism. Philosophers like René Descartes and Francis Bacon promoted the idea of human superiority based on intellectual capabilities, encouraging an ideology that positioned humanity as unique and separate from nature (Lombardo, 2006.).

This intellectual climate laid the groundwork for a scientific approach to understanding and manipulating the environment, further reinforcing the belief that nature exists primarily for human benefit. The Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries represented a turning point in this narrative. Technological advancements enabled the mass exploitation of natural resources, facilitating unprecedented production and consumption patterns (Marks, 2024.). This era glorified economic growth and industrial progress, often at great environmental cost, and spurred an insatiable human appetite for resource extraction, leading to significant ecological changes. Urbanization and industrialization contributed to deforestation, pollution, and habitat destruction, further entrenching the belief in human dominance over nature (Modak, 2022). Moreover, colonialism intensified this mindset. Imperialist powers justified the extraction of resources from colonized lands under the pretext of civilizing missions and economic progress. This ecological imperialism exploited both land and indigenous cultures, treating the natural environment as an obstacle to be conquered instead of a cohabitant to be respected. The resulting commodification of nature paved the way for significant biodiversity loss and ecological imbalance. As awareness of environmental issues began to rise in the mid-20th century, a counter-movement emerged, challenging long-held beliefs about human superiority over nature. The rise of environmental movements highlighted the detrimental effects of human activity on ecosystems, calling for a reevaluation of our relationship with the natural world (Demeritt, 1994). Prominent works like Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" brought attention to the impacts of pesticides and pollution, galvanizing the public's understanding of ecological interdependence. Today, the ongoing climate crisis serves as a stark reminder of the

consequences of human dominance. It underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in understanding our place within the ecosystem. This new perspective advocates for sustainability, resilience, and coexistence, recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human beings and the complex interconnections that sustain life on Earth. Philosophies such as eco-centrism and deep ecology promote ethical considerations that place nature on equal footing with humanity, calling for a more harmonious relationship based on respect and stewardship rather than domination. In summary, the historical context of human superiority over nature reveals a complex tapestry woven with threads of dominion, exploitation, and ultimately, a realization of interdependence. As we confront pressing environmental challenges, the need to reimagine this relationship is more critical than ever, urging us toward a future where human and ecological well-being are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

The perspective of human superiority over nature, often referred to as anthropocentrism, has profoundly influenced societal beliefs and practices throughout history. Rooted in philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions, this worldview posits that humans hold a privileged position in the natural order, leading to a series of repercussions across various domains such as economics, politics, culture, and environmental stewardship. In economic terms, the anthropocentric view has fostered a relentless pursuit of growth and resource extraction, often prioritizing short-term profit over long-term sustainability. Industries have historically exploited natural resources without adequate consideration of ecological consequences. Practices such as overfishing, deforestation, and fossil fuel extraction exemplify how economic imperatives overshadow ecological health. The assumption that nature exists primarily for human benefit has driven policies that encourage exploitation rather than conservation, resulting in significant environmental degradation. Politically, this perspective has been embedded in legal systems and governance structures that prioritize human interests. Environmental regulations have often been designed with a human-centric focus, allowing for environmental degradation under the guise of economic development. Historically, legislation tended to ignore the needs of ecosystems and other species, with environmental concerns being sidestepped in favor of industrial and commercial growth. However, there is a

growing movement towards incorporating environmental considerations into policy-making, recognizing the need to protect ecosystems for their intrinsic value and the services they provide to humanity. Culturally, narratives celebrating human achievement have frequently overshadowed the acknowledgment of our dependence on the natural world. Literature, art, and religious teachings have often depicted humans as conquerors of nature, fostering a disconnection from the environment. This cultural lens has contributed to a mindset that views nature as a commodity to be exploited rather than as a community of beings with whom we share the planet. Nevertheless, there is a shift occurring, with emerging environmental ethics and movements that challenge these dominant narratives. These new frameworks advocate for a biocentric or ecocentric outlook, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms and the need for symbiotic relationships with the environment.

Simplistic interpretations of snakes through an anthropocentric lens often reduce these fascinating and diverse creatures to mere symbols of fear, danger, or evil. This perspective largely emerges from a limited understanding of their biology and behavior, where the presence of venomous species, coupled with their often stealthy and enigmatic movements, fosters a generalized belief that all snakes are threats to humans. Such views overlook the ecological benefits that snakes provide, such as pest control and maintaining the balance of ecosystems by preying on rodents and other small animals. Cultural myths and narratives further reinforce these negative stereotypes. Across various cultures, snakes are frequently depicted as representations of malevolence or temptation, most notably in religious stories like the biblical serpent in the Garden of Eden. These portrayals contribute to a biased perception that equates snakes with wickedness, resulting in fear and demonization that overshadows their ecological roles. Additionally, snakes are sometimes valued solely for their utility to humans, whether it be for their skin, which is often used for luxury products, or for their status as exotic pets, which leads to their commodification. This commoditized view reduces them to mere objects of fascination or entertainment, neglecting their complex behaviors, social structures, and ecological relationships. While there are interpretations that recognize the transformative aspects of snakes, particularly due to their molting process—which can symbolize renewal and rebirth—these interpretations still

tend to center on human experiences and emotions rather than acknowledging the biological significance and evolutionary adaptations that underlie these processes. In doing so, they may romanticize snakes without genuinely appreciating their intrinsic worth and importance within the natural world. Ultimately, such simplistic interpretations not only diminish the complexity of snakes as a group but also perpetuate a cycle of misunderstanding and fear that can lead to harmful attitudes and behaviors toward these reptiles. This contributes to declining populations, habitat destruction, and unwarranted killings of snakes, which undermine their vital ecological roles. A more nuanced understanding of snakes, appreciating their ecological contributions and intrinsic value, is essential for fostering coexistence and conservation efforts that benefit both humans and these remarkable creatures.

The story of Adam and Eve, primarily found in the book of Genesis, serves as a multifaceted case study that explores themes of morality, human nature, and cultural symbolism, particularly concerning the serpent. In this narrative, God creates Adam and places him in the idyllic Garden of Eden, along with Eve, who is made as his companion. They are granted the freedom to enjoy the garden's abundance, with the sole prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The serpent tempts Eve to disobey this command by suggesting that the fruit will grant her wisdom, leading her to share it with Adam and, ultimately, resulting in their expulsion from paradise. Traditionally viewed as a symbol of temptation and evil, the serpent's role reframes natural associations of snakes from powerful beings to embodiments of deceit, reinforcing negative perceptions that persist in various cultures. This narrative also raises questions about human agency, moral responsibility, and gender dynamics, especially in how Eve's actions have been historically interpreted to justify patriarchal views. The lasting impact of the story shapes societal attitudes toward snakes, instilling fear and mistrust that can lead to their persecution and declining populations, showcasing how cultural narratives influence our understanding of the natural world and our ethical relationships with it. By critically engaging with the story and its implications, we can foster a more informed and compassionate perspective toward snakes and other creatures (Johnson, 1985).

III. Cultural Interpretations of Snakes

Cultural interpretations of snakes are both diverse and complex, reflecting a wide array of meanings that range from symbols of wisdom and healing to representations of fear and evil (Hazel, 2019.). This duality is deeply rooted in various myths, belief systems, and folklore around the world. In numerous cultures, snakes symbolize wisdom and knowledge. For example, in Greek mythology, snakes are closely associated with Asclepius, the god of medicine, depicted with a staff entwined by a snake, signifying healing and the cycle of life. Similarly, in Mesoamerican traditions, the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl represents creation, nourishment, and knowledge, embodying the interconnectedness of life (Wilcox, 2003). The snake's ability to shed its skin has also been interpreted as a powerful symbol of transformation and rebirth. This concept is particularly prominent in Native American traditions, where the shedding of skin signifies renewal and is often harnessed in healing rituals. Conversely, in Judeo-Christian contexts, snakes are frequently associated with evil and temptation (Janssen, 2019). The story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden serves as a poignant example, illustrating how the snake led to humanity's fall from grace, which has fostered a long-standing fear of snakes in many Western narratives. This fear is reflected in various cultural depictions, where snakes are often portrayed as malevolent figures, embodying danger and deceit in folklore and mythology. This complex relationship with snakes extends beyond symbolism into cultural significance in rituals and traditions. In ancient Egyptian religion, for instance, the cobra was revered as a powerful symbol of sovereignty, representing the protection of the pharaohs (Awabdy, 2022). The imagery of the cobra, often adorned on crowns, underscored its role as a guardian. In some African traditions, pythons are held in high esteem, regarded as sacred beings that embody ancestral spirits, further emphasizing the reverence many cultures have for these creatures. Artistic representations of snakes throughout history also illuminate their multifaceted nature. From ancient carvings to modern literature, snakes can embody themes of duality, life and death, temptation and wisdom. This artistic exploration reflects society's evolving perceptions of snakes, inviting viewers to engage with their complex symbolism. Overall, understanding these nuanced cultural narratives fosters a deeper respect and appreciation for snakes. Rather than viewing them solely through the lens of fear, we are encouraged to recognize their ecological importance and intrinsic value

within the natural world. By exploring these interpretations, we can cultivate a healthier and more informed relationship with these fascinating creatures, acknowledging the profound connections they have to our shared human experience.

The symbolism of snakes varies widely across global cultures, particularly when contrasting Eastern and Western religions. In Eastern traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, snakes are revered figures that often embody positive traits. In Hindu mythology, the Nagas are serpentine beings considered protectors of treasures and water bodies. They symbolize fertility, strength, and the cyclical nature of life and death. The cobra, or "*Naga*," is often depicted coiled around deities like Shiva, embodying protection and power. Similarly, in Buddhism, the naga king Mucalinda sheltered the Buddha during meditation, highlighting themes of protection and nurturing associated with snakes. In stark contrast, Western religions primarily frame snakes as symbols of temptation and malevolence. In Christianity, the serpent in the Book of Genesis represents disobedience and the fall from grace, as it tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. This narrative establishes a lasting association between snakes and sin, influencing Western cultural perceptions. The serpent comes to symbolize cunning and deceit, encapsulated in expressions like "*snake oil*," which conveys trickery and falsehood. This divergence in the symbolism of snakes reveals how cultural contexts shape perceptions of these creatures. Eastern traditions often embrace snakes as embodiments of wisdom, renewal, and protection, while Western traditions frequently portray them as harbingers of evil and temptation. This rich tapestry of snake symbolism across different cultures underscores the complexity of human beliefs and how they manifest through the imagery of snakes in religious narratives.

The contrast between reverence and fear in the symbolism of snakes highlights the diverse ways cultures interpret these creatures, reflecting deeper themes within their values and beliefs. In many Eastern cultures, snakes are celebrated and revered as auspicious beings. For instance, in Hinduism, the Naga symbolizes both spiritual power and fertility, often associated with deities like Shiva and Vishnu, while festivals like "Naga Panchami" demonstrate their revered status. Similarly, in Buddhism, serpents like Mucalinda are viewed as protectors who embody wisdom, and in Chinese

culture, the snake is a zodiac sign connected to intelligence and prosperity. These cultures embrace snakes as part of the natural and spiritual worlds, often representing cycles of regeneration and enlightenment. Conversely, many Western cultures demonize snakes, viewing them as symbols of treachery and evil. The Biblical account of the serpent in the Garden of Eden profoundly influences this perception, associating snakes with temptation and moral failure. Furthermore, folklore often portrays snakes as malevolent creatures, such as Medusa or dragon-like beings that heroes must conquer. Expressions like "*snake in the grass*" reflect the fear and suspicion surrounding snakes. This dichotomy reveals a broader dialogue about human relationships with nature: while fear may arise from the physical attributes of snakes, reverence often stems from their mystical qualities. Ultimately, the attitudes toward snakes across different cultures illustrate the complex interplay of fear and admiration, shaping narratives and traditions worldwide.

IV. Ethical Implications of Snake Symbolism

The intrinsic worth of snakes is frequently overshadowed by anthropocentric views that prioritize human interests above all else. Such perspectives often lead to misunderstandings, portraying snakes merely as dangerous creatures while overlooking their vital ecological roles. Snakes are essential for maintaining biological diversity and ecosystem balance, serving as both predators and prey. Acknowledging their significance promotes a broader appreciation for their existence beyond utilitarian value, ultimately fostering a more responsible approach to wildlife conservation and management. The ethical implications of snake symbolism can be explored through the lens of cultural representation. The diverse meanings attached to snakes across various cultures raise concerns about perpetuating stereotypes. In Western traditions, snakes often symbolize danger and deceit, overshadowing their positive representations in other cultures, such as fertility and wisdom. This dichotomy can lead to misunderstandings and biases, exacerbating cultural appropriation when the significance of sacred symbols is trivialized or commercialized. It is crucial to approach snake symbolism with respect and an understanding of its multifaceted meanings to promote cross-cultural awareness and reduce harmful stereotypes.

Another vital aspect is the impact of snake symbolism on conservation efforts. Fear and

misunderstanding can reinforce negative attitudes toward these creatures, resulting in harmful practices such as habitat destruction and extermination. Ethical considerations arise from the need to recognize snakes' essential roles in maintaining ecological balance, prompting a commitment to educate the public about their importance. By fostering a more nuanced understanding of snakes and dispelling myths about their danger, societies can encourage conservation efforts that protect biodiversity rather than exacerbate fear-driven narratives. The psychological and social implications of snake symbolism also warrant attention, particularly regarding the influence of fear on human-animal interactions. Ophiophobia, or the fear of snakes, can impact people's relationships with the natural world, leading to avoidance and misunderstanding. The ethical responsibility lies in promoting education that not only addresses fear but also fosters coexistence and respect for snakes. Additionally, the treatment of snakes in captivity and their representation in media and politics should be approached with sensitivity, considering the potential for fear of exploitation. Moral dilemmas arise from various symbols and narratives associated with snakes, particularly through cultural practices that may involve ritual exploitation. In some societies, snakes are integral to traditions, yet these practices can lead to unsustainable exploitation, threatening snake populations. The illegal trade in snakes for their skins, traditional medicine, and as exotic pets further exacerbates their decline. These activities often overlook their ethical implications, contributing to significant suffering and the loss of biodiversity and sparking an urgent need for re-evaluation of societal attitudes toward these creatures.

The negative symbolism often associated with the snake(s) breeds fear and can result in harmful policies aimed at their eradication. This reinforces misconceptions and inadvertently supports illegal practices such as poaching and habitat destruction. Addressing these moral dilemmas requires increased public education and awareness about the ecological importance and intrinsic value of snakes. By promoting positive representations and fostering a more nuanced understanding, society can work towards reducing fear and ensuring the conservation of these remarkable beings while encouraging a more harmonious coexistence. By recognizing and addressing these ethical implications, we can foster a more respectful and

balanced relationship with snakes and the broader ecological community (Fortune, 1926).

V. Rethinking Human-Snake Relationships

Snakes have been revered in various cultures and belief systems around the world, often seen as symbols of wisdom, renewal, and transformation. This view can foster greater respect and care for snakes, as communities begin to recognize their cultural significance. For instance, in Hinduism, the serpent god Naga embodies fertility and protection. Acknowledging and honoring these cultural beliefs can instill a deeper respect for snakes as integral components of spiritual identities, leading to enhanced environmental stewardship. When people view snakes as sacred beings, they may feel morally compelled to protect their habitats, promoting conservation initiatives that safeguard these creatures and their ecosystems. To move beyond fear and exploitation, educational and awareness campaigns play a crucial role. Community programs can demystify snakes, educating the public about their ecological importance and behavioral traits. By integrating this information into school curricula and outreach efforts, we can alleviate fear surrounding snakes. Additionally, promoting coexistence through workshops can provide practical tips for safely living alongside these creatures, which can mitigate human-snake conflicts. These initiatives help foster a more compassionate approach, encouraging people to appreciate rather than fear snakes. Engaging communities through restorative practices and creative expressions can further cultivate a respectful relationship with snakes. Nature restoration projects can create safe habitats, prompting individuals to feel a sense of connection and responsibility. Furthermore, using art and storytelling to celebrate the beauty and mystery of snakes can reshape public perception, highlighting their positive cultural roles. Advocacy for compassionate wildlife policies, including humane treatment and conservation regulations, is vital. Together, these strategies can shift societal narratives about snakes from fear and exploitation toward appreciation and protection, honoring both snakes and the ecosystems they inhabit.

VI. Aesthetic Concepts and Philosophical Arguments on Snakes

The examination of snakes as symbols across various cultural contexts reveals intricate layers of meaning, weaving through aesthetic expressions, philosophical discourses, and contemporary scientific insights. This essay aims to deepen our

understanding of snakes by reevaluating their symbolism through aesthetic lenses, engaging philosophical inquiries, and incorporating modern scientific perspectives. As aesthetic subjects, snakes elicit a myriad of emotions and interpretations across cultures. Their elegant forms—sleek, sinuous bodies, vibrant colors, and captivating movements—have inspired artistic expressions, literature, and mythological narratives. In numerous traditions, snakes are celebrated for their beauty. In Hinduism, the Naga is revered as a protector and a symbol of fertility and renewal, presenting a stark contrast to Western perceptions that often cast snakes as embodiments of malevolence. The aesthetic appreciation of snakes challenges anthropocentric views that marginalize them as mere representations of fear. Recognizing their intrinsic beauty invites deeper engagement with nature, facilitating a shift away from fear-based narratives. The anthropocentric framework implies a hierarchical view of the natural world, where nonhuman beings often occupy subordinate roles. This perspective, stemming from Enlightenment philosophies that emphasize human superiority, has historically perpetuated a disconnect from nature. Emerging philosophies such as eco-centrism and deep ecology advocate for egalitarian relationships between humans and nature, stressing the inherent value of all life forms. Reassessing our interactions with snakes through this lens creates a responsibility for their conservation and recognizes their ecological importance. Modern scientific research further elucidates the essential ecological roles snakes fulfill in maintaining biodiversity. As natural predators, they regulate populations of small mammals, controlling disease vectors and enhancing ecosystem vitality. Understanding these roles reshapes our perceptions, transforming snakes from phobic entities into necessary components of ecological balance. Moreover, scientific studies reveal fascinating evolutionary adaptations—venomous species develop complex biochemical mechanisms that aid in hunting and also hold potential medical applications. This scientific lens enriches our appreciation, unveiling the layers of meaning that extend beyond cultural myths. In summary, reevaluating the symbolism of snakes through aesthetic concepts, philosophical dialogues, and scientific discourse reveals a nuanced understanding that challenges anthropocentric narratives. By appreciating the beauty and ecological significance of snakes, we can foster more respectful relationships with these creatures. This inquiry not only enhances our

understanding of snakes but also invites a broader reflection on humanity's role within the biosphere—a call for coexistence rather than domination.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting on the various challenges posed by an anthropocentric viewpoint, it becomes increasingly clear that this perspective severely limits our understanding of the intrinsic value of snakes and the broader natural world. By primarily viewing nature through a human-centered lens, we inadvertently diminish the significance of non-human entities, often reducing them to mere resources to be exploited or threats to be eliminated. This mindset not only perpetuates fear and misunderstanding but also undermines the critical roles that creatures like snakes play within their ecosystems. Snakes, often mischaracterized and vilified, are integral to maintaining the balance of nature. They regulate populations of pests and prey, contribute to soil health through their predation, and serve as indicators of environmental health. To foster a healthier relationship with snakes and the environment at large, we must embark on a profound journey of re-evaluation. This journey necessitates a conscious and deliberate effort to shift our perceptions, prioritizing empathy, appreciation, and understanding over fear, misunderstanding, and exploitation. Community education is a pivotal aspect of this re-evaluation. We can dismantle longstanding myths and stereotypes by engaging local communities through educational programs that highlight the ecological significance and unique behaviors of snakes. Conservation initiatives that involve local populations in protecting habitats where snakes and other wildlife flourish are equally essential; such initiatives not only promote biodiversity but also foster a sense of stewardship and connection to the natural world. Additionally, the cultural recognition of snakes' symbolic importance in various traditions and belief systems can play a vital role in reshaping narratives around these often-misunderstood creatures. Many cultures view snakes with reverence, associating them with transformation, healing, and wisdom. By embracing these multifaceted stories and acknowledging snakes' crucial roles in cultural contexts, we can cultivate a deeper respect for their presence in our shared environment.

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