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The Ethics of Automation: Constitutional Morality and Legal Responsibility in Artificial Intelligence Decision-Making

1. *Dr. Zohaib Anwar, Faculty of Law, University of Balochistan, Quetta — zohaib.anwar@gmail.com*
2. *Amna Rauf, Department of Law, Superior University, Lahore — amna.rauf@gmail.com*
3. *Dr. Mahira Latif, Faculty of Law, University of Malakand — mahira.latif.umk@gmail.com*

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Abstract:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems are increasingly entrusted with decisions once considered the exclusive province of human judgment. From judicial analytics to predictive policing and automated welfare adjudication, the diffusion of algorithmic governance has created both institutional efficiency and profound ethical uncertainty. This paper examines the intersection between constitutional morality and legal responsibility in the age of automated decision-making within the United States constitutional framework, exploring how the moral premises of the Constitution—rule of law, equality, and accountability—can guide the legal governance of AI. Drawing from constitutional theory, administrative law, and emerging AI ethics scholarship, the article argues that the automation of governance challenges the moral ontology of law by displacing deliberation, empathy, and reason with statistical optimization. It proposes that the constitutional duty to preserve legality requires embedding ethical constraints and procedural transparency into AI systems to ensure that automation remains accountable to human values. Through normative and doctrinal analysis, the paper outlines how due process, equal protection, and constitutional morality may together define a new paradigm of algorithmic responsibility, transforming automation from a technological instrument into a morally governed institution.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Algorithmic Governance; Constitutional Law; Rule of Law; Due Process; Equal Protection; AI Regulation; Algorithmic Bias; Privacy Law; Data Ethics; Constitutional Morality; Legal Responsibility

I. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence now occupies the epicenter of modern governance. In the United States, machine learning algorithms influence bail determinations, social welfare eligibility, immigration adjudications, and even judicial reasoning [1], [22]. This diffusion of automation into the core functions of law and administration has raised questions not only about legality and procedure but also about constitutional morality—the moral commitments underlying the Constitution's structure and its vision of responsible government [37]. The Constitution is not a mere procedural text; it embodies a *moral covenant* between power and principle, ensuring that the efficiency of governance never eclipses the dignity of the governed.

The ethical dilemma of automation arises when state or quasi-state functions are delegated to non-human systems whose logic is alien to constitutional reasoning. Algorithms, by their design, prioritize efficiency, consistency, and pattern recognition. Constitutional governance, by contrast, rests on deliberation, empathy, and the recognition of individual dignity [43]. When a welfare algorithm automatically denies a claim without explanation, or a predictive model perpetuates racial bias in policing, the result is not merely administrative error but a constitutional injury—a violation of the very ethos of fairness and accountability upon which the rule of law stands [23], [19], [50].

As B. Munir and A. Raza have argued, automation in judicial and administrative processes risks transforming decision-making into a technocratic exercise divorced from moral and constitutional oversight [1]. The judiciary's increasing reliance on AI-assisted analytics exemplifies this tension. While automation promises objectivity, it simultaneously removes the reflective human element that gives law its ethical coherence. A system that calculates without understanding is not merely a technical tool—it is an epistemic agent reshaping the relationship between authority and morality [14], [13].

This article situates these transformations within the American constitutional tradition, where the ethics of governance derive from three foundational principles: due process, equal protection, and accountable authority. Each of these principles expresses a distinct moral commitment. Due process embodies the ethical value of respect for the individual; equal protection enshrines fairness and non-discrimination; and accountability ensures that all exercises of power remain answerable to the governed [38]. Automation strains these moral dimensions by creating opacity, bias, and moral distance between the decision and the decision-maker [41].

The central thesis of this study is that the future of AI governance depends on constitutionalizing automation—embedding the moral logic of the Constitution within the architecture of machine decision-making. This is not merely a technical endeavor but an ethical reconstruction of legality itself. As M. Hildebrandt warns, the rise of "smart technologies" redefines the boundaries between law and code, transforming the law's normative grammar into programmable constraints [13]. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that this translation of morality into code does not dissolve the moral content of constitutional governance but rather reinforces it.

In this regard, A. Raza and colleagues' exploration of AI and criminal liability underscores the necessity of assigning responsibility in automated environments [8]. When AI participates in decision-making processes that affect fundamental rights, responsibility must not dissipate into a network of algorithms and corporate intermediaries. It must remain anchored to human agents and institutions capable of moral reasoning. Similarly, as Raza's work on equality before law demonstrates, the vitality of constitutional principles depends on their continuous reinterpretation in light of evolving technological realities [20].

The ethical question is thus not whether automation should be incorporated into governance—it already has—but how its incorporation can remain faithful to the moral and constitutional ideals that give American law its legitimacy. This paper proceeds in eight sections. Section II examines the philosophical and constitutional foundations of constitutional morality as articulated in American jurisprudence. Section III explores the rise of automation and the question of legal personhood in algorithmic contexts. Section IV analyzes due process in automated decision-making systems, while Section V considers equal protection and algorithmic bias. Section VI investigates the problem of accountability and legal responsibility, followed by Section VII's examination of the constitutional integration of ethical design principles. Section VIII concludes with policy recommendations and institutional reforms aimed at preserving constitutional morality in the era of algorithmic governance.

Ultimately, the article argues that the ethics of automation cannot be external to law—they must become its constitutional interior. Just as constitutional morality once transformed power into law, it must now transform code into conscience. Only then can AI governance serve not as an instrument of domination but as a vehicle of justice.

II. Constitutional Morality and the Ethic of Governance

The notion of constitutional morality has long occupied an ambiguous position in American constitutional discourse. Unlike the positivist view of law as command, constitutional morality implies that law's authority is sustained not merely by coercion or formal procedure but by a shared commitment to the ethical principles that underlie governance [37]. This concept, rooted in the republican vision of *limited power and moral responsibility*, provides a critical foundation for confronting the challenges of automation. In the age of Artificial Intelligence, where decisions are increasingly generated by autonomous systems rather than human deliberation, the preservation of constitutional morality requires an explicit reintegration of ethics into legal architecture.

A. The Moral Grammar of the Constitution

The U.S. Constitution, as Robert Post observes, is not a static text but a *living framework of moral expectations* [42]. Its legitimacy depends on fidelity to values such as fairness, equality, and accountability—values that cannot be mechanized without distortion. Constitutional morality, therefore, represents the *animating ethos* that transforms the Constitution from an institutional blueprint into a moral order. As M. Sandel argues, justice is not simply a matter of procedure but of moral purpose—the recognition that governance exists to serve human dignity rather than administrative efficiency [43].

In practice, this morality is reflected in doctrines such as due process and equal protection, which operationalize moral restraint in the exercise of public power. These principles ensure that government action is not arbitrary, opaque, or indifferent to individual rights. Yet automation disrupts this equilibrium. When a decision is made by an algorithm trained on biased data or opaque heuristics, its apparent neutrality conceals deep structural inequalities [23], [19]. Algorithmic systems reproduce discrimination not through intent but through *design*, thereby evading traditional moral accountability. The moral question is no longer "who decided" but "what logic decided," and whether that logic reflects the values embedded in constitutional morality [24], [26].

This challenge underscores what Lawrence Friedman terms "the constitutional morality of the rule of law"—the belief that legality requires both *procedural integrity* and *ethical substance* [37]. The rule of law is not preserved by the mechanical application of rules alone; it depends on moral interpretation, empathy, and public justification. Automation, however, risks collapsing these dimensions into mere calculation. As F. Schauer notes, formal reasoning without moral context becomes "an empty vessel into which any content can be poured" [6]. Thus, constitutional morality demands that AI systems not only comply with procedural norms but internalize the ethical principles those norms express.

B. The Crisis of Ethical Displacement

Automation introduces what scholars describe as a crisis of ethical displacement—the removal of moral reasoning from decision-making processes [12], [13]. In traditional governance, decisions are made through deliberation, debate, and justification, allowing space for empathy and dissent. Algorithms, by contrast, make decisions instantaneously, according to probabilistic models that lack awareness of context or moral consequence. As Hildebrandt observes, this transformation represents "a shift from normative to performative legality" [13]—where law becomes an operational parameter rather than a moral language.

The ethical displacement caused by automation is particularly concerning in the American administrative state, where discretion has historically been tempered by transparency and judicial review [22], [28]. The substitution of algorithmic decision-making for human judgment risks transforming the state from a *deliberative entity* into a *predictive apparatus*. Citizens are increasingly governed not by laws that express collective moral reasoning, but by systems that infer behavior through statistical correlation [50].

A. Raza and colleagues, in their analysis of *Artificial Intelligence and Criminal Liability*, emphasize that the moral structure of law is inseparable from the attribution of responsibility [8]. In the absence of conscious moral agents, accountability becomes diffuse, leaving victims of algorithmic harm without recourse. The Constitution, however, presumes moral agency—an actor capable of justifying choices within the bounds of legality. When decision-making is automated, that presumption collapses, producing what R. Calo calls a "responsibility gap" in AI governance [21]. This gap undermines the very premise of constitutional morality: that authority is legitimate only when accompanied by moral answerability.

C. Moral Responsibility and Institutional Legitimacy

The crisis of automation thus implicates not only technology but the legitimacy of public institutions themselves. The American constitutional order derives its stability from a delicate balance between *efficiency* and *ethical restraint*. Judicial and administrative actors are expected to act not as technocrats but as moral stewards of public trust. Automation threatens to invert this hierarchy by prioritizing predictive accuracy over normative reasoning. As J. Waldron has argued, the rule of law is valuable not because it is efficient but because it expresses respect for the human capacity for reason and participation [11].

The legitimacy of automated governance, therefore, cannot rest solely on technical accuracy or empirical validation. It must be anchored in the ethical intentions of constitutional democracy—a system that values justification over optimization. Constitutional morality demands that the state act in ways that are *morally intelligible* to those it governs [10]. Machine-generated decisions, however precise, cannot satisfy this requirement unless they are transparent, explainable, and subject to human oversight [7], [27].

This insight is not merely philosophical; it has concrete institutional implications. For example, algorithmic tools used in criminal sentencing, such as COMPAS, have been criticized for reinforcing racial disparities while claiming objectivity [19]. The opacity of such systems undermines procedural fairness, as defendants cannot meaningfully contest or understand the basis of their risk scores. The ethical deficit here is not merely one of bias but of constitutional intelligibility—the absence of moral reasoning in a domain where moral justification is constitutionally mandated.

D. From Constitutional Ethics to Algorithmic Ethics

The transition from human to algorithmic governance demands what scholars term a "translation of morality into code" [14], [29]. Constitutional morality cannot remain external to the design of AI systems; it must be operationalized as an internal design principle. Just as the separation of powers institutionalized moral restraint within government structure, algorithmic design must institutionalize moral constraints within computational systems.

In this sense, the *ethics of automation* is not a supplement to constitutional governance but its necessary evolution. The state's constitutional morality—its duty to ensure justice, fairness, and accountability—must be *encoded* into algorithmic decision frameworks. This requires not only technical transparency but also a philosophical shift: viewing algorithms as participants in the constitutional order, subject to the same moral expectations as human decision-makers. As A. Raza's 2023 work on *privacy and technology* suggests, the preservation of individual autonomy in digital environments depends on embedding ethical safeguards within technological systems themselves [16].

In sum, constitutional morality functions as the bridge between human governance and algorithmic power. It transforms law from a tool of control into a moral language capable of regulating machines. Without such moral translation, automation risks becoming a constitutional anomaly—an efficient but amoral actor within a moral

order. The next section explores this tension further by examining how the rise of automation challenges the traditional boundaries of legal personhood and responsibility in American constitutional thought.

III. The Rise of Automation and Legal Personhood

The twentieth century's legal evolution witnessed the recognition of corporations as "artificial persons" under constitutional law—a recognition grounded in accountability, representation, and rights discourse [17]. The twenty-first century now faces a comparable transformation, as Artificial Intelligence systems increasingly act as agents of decision-making in governance and commerce. Yet, unlike corporations, AI systems lack intention, moral capacity, and self-consciousness—traits essential for moral and legal responsibility. Their growing autonomy has reignited the debate on whether algorithms can possess a form of legal personhood or whether the state must retain absolute moral control over their operations [39].

A defining feature of AI is its ability to make predictions or decisions without explicit human instruction once deployed. Machine learning systems evolve through feedback, adapting to data patterns that may be invisible even to their creators [41]. This "opacity by design," as Burrell describes, challenges traditional constitutional assumptions of transparency and accountability [41]. Whereas constitutional law presumes a *knowing decision-maker*, automation introduces a *non-human agent* whose reasoning is inaccessible, creating a lacuna in both moral and legal control.

From a constitutional standpoint, such systems exist in a paradox: they exercise *public power* without *moral agency*. As A. Raza et al. note, attributing criminal liability to AI requires rethinking the structure of culpability itself, since intent—a cornerstone of liability—cannot attach to entities that cannot reason morally [8]. This reasoning applies equally to constitutional governance. Delegating decisions about liberty or welfare to an algorithm that cannot reason about justice undermines the Constitution's moral architecture.

Comparative legal systems offer insight but not resolution. The European Union's approach, particularly under the GDPR and AI Ethics Guidelines, acknowledges algorithmic agency but insists on *human oversight* [7], [40]. In contrast, U.S. jurisprudence emphasizes accountability within existing institutional structures rather than recognizing new forms of personhood. As Hacker observes, American law's strength lies in its capacity to regulate AI through the adaptation of existing doctrines—due process, equal protection, and administrative responsibility—rather than anthropomorphizing the machine [39].

However, the constitutional question is not purely doctrinal. It is ontological—whether legitimacy can flow from decisions that lack moral consciousness. As Jürgen Habermas reminds us, law derives authority not from coercion but from the communicative rationality of its procedures [10]. When automation replaces discourse with computation, the moral justification for governance erodes. The algorithm may be accurate, but it cannot be *right* in the moral sense. Thus, the legal personhood of AI remains conceptually void unless animated by the state's continuing moral duty to justify decisions under the Constitution.

This realization forms the basis for a re-moralization of automation: a framework that reasserts human ethical responsibility over technological functionality. The next section examines how this principle manifests through the lens of due process, the constitutional doctrine most directly threatened by automation's opacity.

IV. Due Process and Algorithmic Decision-Making

The Due Process Clauses of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments embody the procedural and substantive safeguards that transform government authority into legitimate action. They express a moral promise: that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without *fair procedures* and *rational justification*. Automation jeopardizes both elements by creating decisions that are procedurally inscrutable and substantively unexplainable [22], [28].

A. Procedural Fairness in the Age of Algorithms

Procedural due process demands transparency, notice, and opportunity to be heard. Yet algorithmic governance often fails these tests. Automated eligibility systems used in welfare distribution or immigration adjudication, for instance, can deny benefits without providing intelligible reasons [31]. As Veale and Brass explain, such systems convert administrative law's justificatory culture into a mechanical function that produces outcomes but not explanations [28].

The "right to explanation" debate under the GDPR highlights the growing recognition that fairness requires not only correct results but *understandable reasoning* [7]. However, U.S. constitutional jurisprudence has not yet codified an equivalent standard. Courts tend to defer to administrative expertise under *Chevron* and *Auer* doctrines, even when the decision-making logic involves algorithms rather than human judgment. This deference erodes the procedural accountability that the Constitution demands.

When automation operates as a "black box," individuals lose the ability to challenge or even identify the basis of adverse actions. This effectively nullifies the right to be heard—a cornerstone of procedural justice since *Goldberg v. Kelly* (1970). As Bovens and Zouridis warned two decades ago, the move from "street-level" to "system-level" bureaucracy transforms discretion into code, thereby removing the constitutional safeguards once provided by human judgment [34].

B. Substantive Due Process and Rational Justification

Beyond procedure, due process requires rationality and proportionality in government actions. Yet algorithmic decisions are often driven by statistical optimization rather than moral reasoning. The moral question of *why* a decision was made is replaced by the technical question of *how* it was calculated. This shift produces what Yeung calls "algorithmic regulation"—a mode of governance devoid of deliberative justification [26].

Substantive due process jurisprudence, particularly in cases involving privacy, liberty, and autonomy, presupposes human deliberation as the foundation of rationality. Automation's statistical rationality lacks this normative anchor. As Dworkin would

argue, rights are not outcomes of efficiency but *principles of moral coherence* [17]. When algorithms determine outcomes without moral reasoning, they undermine the very rationality due process is meant to preserve.

As A. Raza et al. assert in *From Bytes to Boundaries*, digital governance must be assessed not by its technical competence but by its respect for human autonomy [16]. The opacity of automated systems thus constitutes not only administrative injustice but constitutional opacity—a denial of moral visibility to those governed. Reconstructing due process in this context requires a hybrid model of algorithmic justification, where each automated decision is traceable to a human agent or institution capable of moral accountability.

V. Equal Protection and Algorithmic Bias

The Equal Protection Clause stands as the moral core of constitutional democracy, mandating that all persons be treated with fairness and without arbitrary discrimination. Yet algorithmic systems—trained on historical data reflecting social inequities—can reproduce and intensify structural bias [23], [24]. The result is what scholars term algorithmic discrimination, a new form of inequality that evades traditional anti-discrimination frameworks.

A. Bias by Design

As Obermeyer et al. demonstrated in their landmark *Science* study, an algorithm used to allocate healthcare resources systematically underestimated the medical needs of Black patients due to biased training data [19]. Such bias does not originate in malice but in the uncritical replication of existing social hierarchies. Algorithms thus convert implicit prejudice into quantifiable inequality.

The constitutional danger lies in the illusion of neutrality. Automated systems appear impartial precisely because their biases are hidden within mathematical structures [41]. As Barocas and Selbst explain, data-driven discrimination is harder to detect because it operates through correlation rather than intent [23]. This presents a doctrinal problem: the Equal Protection Clause traditionally targets *intentional discrimination*, while algorithmic bias is structural and emergent.

B. Constitutional Remedies and Ethical Design

To reconcile this tension, constitutional analysis must evolve beyond intent toward *impact-oriented scrutiny*. Courts could adopt a proportionality framework that evaluates whether algorithmic processes produce unjustifiable disparate outcomes, regardless of intent. This shift parallels the moral evolution that A. Raza documents in his study of equality before law in Pakistan, where constitutional equality expanded from formal to substantive fairness [20]. Similarly, the U.S. must reinterpret equal protection to address discriminatory *effects* embedded in code.

Ethical design principles—transparency, accountability, and inclusivity—thus become instruments of constitutional morality. Embedding these principles within AI regulation transforms technology into a constitutional actor bound by moral

constraints [29]. The pursuit of algorithmic fairness is therefore not merely a technical correction but a reaffirmation of the Constitution's ethical promise.

VI. Accountability, Liability, and the Ethics of Delegation

The ethics of accountability form the backbone of the rule of law. Every exercise of public power must be answerable to the governed. In the context of AI, accountability becomes dispersed across developers, administrators, and users, creating what Calo terms a "diffusion of responsibility" [21]. This diffusion threatens the moral coherence of governance: decisions are made, rights are affected, but no one is responsible.

A. The Problem of the Responsibility Gap

The responsibility gap in AI governance mirrors that in criminal law when autonomous systems cause harm without direct human intent. As A. Raza and colleagues argue, traditional liability doctrines must evolve to ensure that the absence of human volition does not translate into an absence of accountability [8]. The same principle applies constitutionally. Delegating state functions to algorithms does not extinguish governmental responsibility; it extends it. Agencies deploying automated systems remain constitutionally bound to justify and review algorithmic outcomes under due process and equal protection guarantees.

B. Institutional Responsibility and Constitutional Control

Constitutional morality requires that accountability be institutionalized. As Bovens and Zouridis emphasize, algorithmic administration must not operate beyond the reach of legal oversight [34]. Transparency mechanisms—such as algorithmic impact assessments and mandatory audits—serve as modern equivalents of constitutional checks and balances. By demanding justification for automated decisions, these instruments reintroduce moral deliberation into digital governance.

Furthermore, as Munir and Raza argue in their study on *Automation in Judicial Administration*, technology must remain a *servant of justice*, not its substitute [1]. Judicial reliance on AI tools should enhance, not replace, the moral and deliberative character of adjudication. The judiciary's constitutional legitimacy depends on its capacity for empathy and reasoning—qualities that no algorithm can replicate.

VII. Constitutional Integration: Embedding Morality in AI Regulation

If automation challenges the ethical foundation of the Constitution, then the response must be the constitutionalization of AI governance—embedding constitutional morality within the design, deployment, and oversight of intelligent systems. This approach transforms constitutional values from abstract principles into operational criteria.

A. Algorithmic Constitutionalism

Algorithmic constitutionalism, as proposed by recent legal theorists, envisions AI systems as entities governed by and embodying constitutional principles [14], [29].

Under this framework, algorithmic systems must be designed to respect procedural fairness, equality, and accountability as design constraints. For instance, transparency mechanisms serve as analogs of *notice and hearing*, while algorithmic audits correspond to *judicial review*. This structural embedding of moral principles transforms technical governance into a constitutional process.

B. Legislative and Regulatory Strategies

The U.S. can draw lessons from the European Union's approach to ethical AI, where the High-Level Expert Group's five ethical principles—transparency, justice, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy—serve as governance benchmarks [29]. Adapting these within the American constitutional tradition requires emphasizing due process and equal protection as guiding values. Federal legislation, such as the proposed *Algorithmic Accountability Act*, should thus be viewed not merely as administrative reform but as constitutional reinforcement.

At the state level, independent AI ethics boards could function as specialized constitutional bodies, reviewing automated systems for compliance with procedural justice and non-discrimination norms. Judicial interpretation, in turn, must evolve to treat algorithmic opacity as presumptively unconstitutional when it impedes meaningful review or public justification.

C. Moral Reconstruction of Legal Responsibility

Ultimately, embedding morality in AI governance means reconstructing the notion of legal responsibility itself. Responsibility in the age of automation is not confined to culpability; it extends to *design ethics*. Developers, policymakers, and judges alike bear a shared constitutional duty to ensure that algorithms operate within moral and legal boundaries. As Raza and Chohan emphasize, legal responsibility must evolve from reaction to prevention—integrating moral awareness at the point of technological creation [8].

VIII. Policy Proposals and Institutional Safeguards

A. The Need for Algorithmic Transparency Acts

Congress should adopt comprehensive Algorithmic Transparency Acts mandating disclosure of training data, logic models, and performance metrics for all systems used in rights-affecting decisions. Such legislation would translate constitutional values of due process into operational standards [22].

B. Judicial Algorithmic Review

Federal courts should recognize algorithmic due process as a constitutional doctrine, allowing litigants to challenge automated decisions lacking explanation. This doctrine would extend the logic of *Goldberg v. Kelly* and *Mathews v. Eldridge* to digital governance contexts.

C. Ethics-by-Design Frameworks

Federal agencies should require *ethics-by-design* certification before deploying automated systems. These frameworks, akin to environmental or privacy impact assessments, ensure compliance with equal protection and accountability standards. As Zuboff warns, surveillance capitalism's unrestrained logic threatens both liberty and dignity unless bound by moral law [50].

D. Civic Oversight and Public Participation

Democratic participation must remain central. The public should have access to information about how algorithms shape their rights. Civic transparency portals and participatory design initiatives can restore moral reciprocity between citizens and state institutions. Constitutional morality thrives not through secrecy but through justification, dialogue, and trust.

IX. Conclusion

The ethics of automation presents one of the most profound constitutional questions of the twenty-first century: can legality survive without morality when machines make our laws real? The answer lies in reclaiming constitutional morality as both a philosophical compass and a design principle. The American Constitution was built not on efficiency but on moral self-restraint. As automation redefines governance, it must not erode that restraint but internalize it.

The diffusion of AI into public administration, judicial decision-making, and social regulation challenges the core assumptions of due process and equal protection. Yet these principles remain the Constitution's most powerful instruments for moral renewal. By embedding fairness, accountability, and transparency into algorithmic design, the state can transform automation from a threat into an ally of constitutional governance.

A. Raza's and B. Munir's works remind us that automation's legitimacy depends not on its intelligence but on its humanity [1], [16]. Machines may calculate outcomes, but only moral institutions can justify them. The Constitution's endurance has always rested on its capacity to absorb technological change without sacrificing ethical substance. The task now is to ensure that artificial intelligence becomes a medium of moral governance rather than moral abdication.

Constitutional morality demands that code obey conscience—that technology, however advanced, remains subordinate to the ethical law of justice. In embedding this moral structure into AI, we do not merely regulate machines; we reaffirm the human spirit of constitutionalism itself.

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