

“Individual” in Education according to the Fundamentals of Existence Philosophy: Emphasizing Ideas by Buber and Kierkegaard

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Abstract—This study aims to explain the place of individual as well as the ways to maintain individuality in education according to the ideas of existence thinkers. Putting emphasis on individuality could be taken as one of the most significant basics of existence philosophy. Existence philosophy has been applied widely in various fields including education. The existence thinkers believe that today the individuality of human being has been lost among the masses and it has been invaded. This study, by applying the comparative analysis method and philosophical inquiry, recommends that the teacher should establish a one to one interaction with students through a Socratic method and s/he should provide the background for students to become self. This goal could be achieved through methods such as changing the teacher-students pattern of interaction to teacher-student, decreasing the number of students in a classroom, taking the standpoint of students by the teacher so that the teacher is able to reach an improved understanding of the students.

Key words: existence philosophy, individual, education, Kierkegaard, Buber, mutual interaction

I INTRODUCTION

One of the most imperative duties of education in any country is social training or, in other words, socializing the society members. The educational systems attempt to fulfill this goal in the best way possible in order to prepare individuals for entering the society. We can say today bringing up ‘useful society members’ or ‘growing decent citizens’ is among the basic and main goals of education. But there is a need to focus on individuality of human being as well and to address on the individual differences as a significant index in education. This issue assumes specific and higher importance in the new era in comparison to the past. The reason is that one of the most obvious characteristics of the present era is abundance of

available information and advertisements through increasing number of Medias and each of them try to shape the individualities to their own benefits to gain further supports. In fact, they set out to frame the individuals’ thoughts and behaviors; hence it is apparent that the individuality of human being is in danger in the present era since the massive flow of receiving data would affect the people and lead the individuals to think and act as the various social, political, and economical trends wish. As Kierkegaard (1959) holds, the masses are authoritarian and impose oppression. Mentioning the cultural transfer as one of the main goals of education, Gries (1981) believes that in the past this goal was not taken into account. He also states that promoting justice necessitates attending to both society and the individual and proposes that, in the present condition, education is responsible for guiding youths toward. Therefore, education, as one of the most influential institutions in the society, is in charge of maintaining the individualities. As a result, it should address the individual training while it is providing social training.

II STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the course of socializing individuals in the schools, the individuality and thinking for oneself might be sacrificed to thinking like everyone and be the same as the group. Some of the scholars address this issue and argue that, as it seems, the educational systems increasingly aim to homogenize the individuals. Schools largely apply uniform instruments, material, and education and most of teaching methods and programs are designed in a way to make the learners more similar (Ozman and Craver, 1995). The supporters of existentialist philosophy believe that no two children are the same and they differ according to the awareness, personal traits, interests and desires they have acquired. Despite this fact, we

still observe that the children are treated the same in educational settings and in these environments conformity and obedience are still praised and encouraged (ibid.). Regardless of the accuracy of this claim, attending to “individual” and personal traits and addressing them in the field of education is among the necessary issue to address. Human kind is considered to maintain a polarity, and his life fluctuates between these poles. On the one side, human being is a social creature and the only way to his development passes from society. On the other side, each human being maintains exclusive characteristics which distinguish him from others. Although individuals are attached and think with the same language, those who have nothing except the speeches of others, even though being a thinker, are away from real thinking (Naghizadeh, 2004).

In the history of thought and philosophy, the existence (existentialist) philosophers have underlined “individual” more than others and they have been aware of the dangers of “collectivity”. Although there are variations within the existentialist philosophy, one of the most prominent commonalities among existentialist thinkers is supporting individuality against the attack of collectivity termed as “mass”. Although existential thinkers bring the issue of individuality to the light in different ways, they all agree that pulling in the society would lead to staying away individuality and conformity (or accordance with others) (Flynn, 2006). In the same line, Nietzsche defines being self as the ability to be different and alone, and to live self-sufficiently (ibid.). Underscoring the importance of individual in comparison to mass, the existentialist thinkers, including Kierkegaard and Buber, draw attention to the situation of individual in relation to mass, and they explore the concept of communication and the manner of communication with others. Therefore, the present paper focuses on how we could apply the ideas of these thinkers to address the unique individuality of learners in education as well as the manner of teacher-learner interactions to attain this goal.

III METHOD

In the present study the comparative analysis is applied as the method, in which the predicates and concepts are compared and contrasted (Given, 2008). The major part of comparative analysis is called “constant comparative analysis” and it is generally accepted that: “in the process of constant comparative analysis, a part of data, such as a concept or predicate, is compared and contrasted to other concepts or predicates in order to reveal the potential similarities and differences. Through constantly separating and comparing the concepts and predicates there is a possibility for developing a conceptual pattern that indicate different relationships among the concepts or predicates” (p. 100). In this study, the main focus of study is the ideas of Kierkegaard and Buber. The present study also uses philosophical inquiry (Haggerson, 1991) as part of the process

of investigation. The primary resources, that are the original works written by existentialists, and the secondary resources, that includes explanations of existentialist ideas, are examined. The resources are analyzed, through concept and text analysis, for drawing out the philosophical ideas regarding individuality with the aim of assessing educational implications. This study also used practical syllogism, in which the practical conclusion is drawn through a major and a minor introduction.

IV “INDIVIDUAL” FROM STANDPOINT OF EXISTENCE PHILOSOPHERS

Although there are inconsistencies among the ideas by the existence philosophers, all of them agree on some specific points. They believe that, first, human being possesses no pre-planned nature; second, human being has free will; and third, human being is able to select freely and avoid following others. The existence philosophy originated as a reaction to preceding philosophical systems, including the Hegel philosophy. Existence philosophers argue that the Hegelian collectivism overlooks individual. As Kierkegaard argues, the idealism of romantics as well as the historicism of Hegel reduces the responsibility of individuals for toward their life (Gaarder, 1995). The philosophical system proposed by Hegel has been applied extensively, as a comprehensive explanation, for any issue. But Kierkegaard discusses that the objective realities in Hegelian philosophy is not relevant to the personal life of the individuals (ibid.). In this way, he fiercely opposed the Hegelian philosophical system which had numerous followers and supporters at that time. He believed that, due to lack of individualism, the systematic nature of Hegel philosophy could not tell the individual how to act or live (Bergman, 2004). As a reaction, Kierkegaard turned his attention to individual. He was against the Media advertisements and newspapers at his time since he claimed that they formed the individuals’ personalities. He proposed that the technological information and the newspapers would result in “public personality”. Being exposed to extensive advertisements, people grow interests in various aspects without reflecting on them deeply, and this disables them from understanding the differences between essential and trivial issues (Prosser and Ward, 2000). In fact, Kierkegaard holds that when there is a huge bulk of information and advertisements, the individual cannot decide what to choose and inevitably are trapped in the choices by the public Medias. Jaspers also describes some characteristics for the present era, among the most important ones we could refer to the increasing importance of mass in the field of political and social life and the dominance of technology over the human being’s life which has converted human being to “work” or even “thing”. This condition could be followed by other circumstances that Jaspers takes as the signs of deviation, including the degradation of the meaning of freedom to absolute release and uncommitted and expansion of superficiality and averageness, and the people who talk about

anything which would merely result in the worthlessness of words. In these conditions, individuals turn away from the spiritual values and appreciate things that are not more than instruments (Jaspers, 1957).

The concept of individuality in existence philosophy is tied to the concept of authenticity and they are used along with each other. "The authentic human being is in an endless relationship with himself. He is attached to his fate. He is passionate and his behaviors are rooted in his deep existence and, in sum, the authentic human being is himself as Nietzsche (1885) also asks him to be. Sartre also believes that human being is what is created by the human being himself: "Not only the human being is the concept that he has from himself, but also, it is the concept that he makes from himself. The concept that human being shows after appearance in the universe, is tantamount to the one that he demands from himself after approaching the existence. Hence, human being is nothing but the concept that he makes from himself" (Sartre, 2007, p. 22).

The existence philosophers seek to grow an authentic individual who is aware of the freedom and the idea that any choice implies setting values. The authentic individual realizes that the personal nature is not affected and changed by any external person or object. Sartre defines freedom as the adoption of existence by the human being: "when it is said that mankind is free in choice it means that he chooses his existence freely" (Sartre, 2007, p. 23). Therefore, if mankind is supposed to grow authentically, he should grow in a way that he is able to choose regardless of the influences received from the others since in existence philosophy human being is considered to be free. Kierkegaard talks about the oppression of the masses and claims that the masses repress the individual and are responsible for authoritarianism and downfall but they escape any penalty since they are not distinguishable (Kierkegaard, 1959). Kierkegaard refers to some interdependent features in explaining his contemporary conditions. Among these features we can mention superficiality, adopting abstract approaches that are empty of passion, clamor and alienation with silence, the importance of public and the domination of public beliefs. It seems that the claims Kierkegaard put forward in nineteenth century carry deeper meanings in twentieth century. That is in the contemporary era the dominance of public beliefs, superficiality, following the public, and alienation with oneself are intensified through the increasing development of Media. Heidegger, as one of the most prominent existence philosophers, investigates the influences received from the others in line with Kierkegaard. He also claims that human being is drowning in the daily life in which he could be called "they" which result in the loss of individual traits and disappearance of self. As he states, "others" demonstrates the dominance and authority implicitly so that we enjoy the same entertainments, read the same material, see the same way, and judge the art the same way that

"others" judges (Heidegger, 1927). Heidegger claims that others is related to averageness; a term that is adopted by some of the existence philosophers. He holds that the public or the public culture, while it is not obvious and clear, holds mankind in a moderate level or routine. "Others is not something clear but it is necessarily relevant to averageness. This averageness determines what we dare to do. In this process any deviation is suppressed implicitly. This maintenance of averageness reveals a basic desire of Dasein that is called leveling down from all existence possibilities. This averageness and leveling down would lead to publicness and this publicness brings anything under control" (ibid. p. 109). Averageness or leaning toward median could be considered as a type of superficiality and a tendency toward public that Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jaspers mention. Kierkegaard believes that crowd is an untruth and it leads to irresponsibility by the individuals (Kierkegaard, 1960). Crowd is, in fact, made by individuals hence it should be based on the personal power so that any individual could reach the self he wishes and no one is deprived from individuality except that he deprives himself by integrating with the "crowd" (ibid.). Kierkegaard attaches considerable significance to individual when he states: "if I wanted to write something on my grave, it would be nothing except 'individual'" (ibid. p. 69).

Kierkegaard (1994) defines individuality in three stages of life: the aesthetic stage that is transient and in its highest degree takes the form of repentance for bad deeds; the aesthetic stage is an immediacy phase. The ethical stage is the phase of needs and the religious stage is the evolution stage. The aesthetic stage could extend from simple satisfaction of desires to greatest mental and intellectual refinement. In this stage individual is less attached to the present time and is not concerned about the past or future. In the ethical stage, individual becomes to be aware of responsibility and commitment that result from a leap or transformation rooted in free choice and personal action. Kierkegaard warns that most people stay in the aesthetic stage which there is no choice that leads to "becoming self". The religious stage, which is the highest stage in human existence, includes a religious leap. In this stage the individual transcends the crowd, good, bad, and the universe. To clarify this stage, Kierkegaard mentions Abraham, who transcends the public ethics when sacrifices his son, since public ethics is against killing a human being considered as a sin. Believing that individual is beyond universal (public), he calls the Abraham action as suspension of ethics in which the public ethics are suspended with the aim of approaching a prominent goal. He adds that personal choices, that make the individuals unique, are at the heart of elevation in this stage. In this way, Kierkegaard puts emphasis on the individual and its significance in comparison to crowd so that in higher stages of existence the human individuality is further revealed.

Kierkegaard also claims that when the everyday life loses meaning and goal it changes to an ordinary life that wears individual out and it block the questions from existence and essence (Mareeva, 2005). Since the present century is mechanized more than the Kierkegaard time and the face to face interactions and the repeated and routine life have increased, there is a higher possibility for the emergence of the mentioned condition.

Buber (2004) proposes that human could attain recognition in loneliness, "the deep questions about human existence rise merely when he is alone" (p. 236). Buber also adds that everybody understands the universe in solitude, but living in the universe necessitates interactions with others which should be followed while maintaining the personal self. Buber believes you cannot attain a common deduction about the universe, the universe teach you how to interact with others while preserving your individual self (Buber, 1970). Buber defines two types of relationships; "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships. "I-Thou" involves the relationship between human being and the others in which both are able to maintain their autonomous existence. But in "I-It" relationship, there is no relation at work and "I" is the subject that makes "It" the object. This is not a mutual relationship since one party is active and the other is passive (Ibid). Unlike "I-It" relationship, the "I-Thou" relationship is not unidirectional and it engages both parties. Thou faces I and I is direct relationship with Thou, therefore this relationship is both active and passive and involves both choosing and being chosen (ibid). Buber supposes that the authentic relationship between human beings is "I-Thou" which is an honest relationship according to his ideas.

Exploring the relationship elements in Buber's works, Amitaiezioni (1999) concludes that while Buber defines relationship in social context, he is well-aware of getting lost in society. Although he puts emphasis on establishing relationships among the individuals, he warns that individuals should not get lost in these relationships. The participants in the relationship should not overlook the individuality and personal rights.

Buber (1970) also poses the questions about the modern life that whether the human public life submerging in "It". He then refers to two fields of politics and economics where the rigor of great statesmen and business men stems from their understanding of the humans who are treated not as unique "Thou", but as services and ideals that are applied and employed according to their unique abilities and talents. Indicating to the over-engagement of modern human with materialist enjoyments, Buber argues that the modern over-engaged human being attempts to follow the others rather than identify his unique needs and necessities.

VI "INDIVIDUAL" IN RELATION TO OTHERS

It should be mentioned that putting emphasis on significance of individual by existence philosophers does not imply that they neglect attending to other, others, or crowd, since life is not possible in isolation and loneliness. Regarding the relationship of human with other Jaspers writes: "mutual understanding in dialogue among human beings, only human being is aware of self while thinking ... Human being is alone in the natural system like. He becomes human being merely in companion with those with the same fate. Although he is not a human being by himself, he should not get lost among the relationships. Solitude and relationship are two wings for moving toward self. Relationship should be in a way that both parties maintain their unique selves and do not fade in the each other and there should be no sign of pressure or imposition in question and answer dialogue" (Jaspers, 1969, p. 81). Existential relationship is neither the love and union which dissolves I and Thou nor the intellectual unity that exist in general awareness about impersonal scientific facts. Rather it is a type of respect that is subject to free I as well as the creator of the nature of It (ibid). Heidegger also has the opinion that human being is a creature in crowd and among the public. In his ideas, Dasein accompanies others even in loneliness; "being in public means being with others". In order to clarify the concept of being in public or being with others, Heidegger adds "mit" to Dasein and coins the word "mita-sein". For further elaboration he reminds that being with others by Dasein does not imply that Dasein and others are present in a place at the same time. The basic point to address is that this manner is among its natural features and its being means being with others; hence it is with others even in loneliness" (Heidegger, 1927). Even Sartre, who seems pessimistic toward others in some of his works, in his book *Existentialism and Humanism* takes others as necessary for "self". In his opinions, the existence of other is as definite and obvious as our own existence and, in this way, the human's individual who understands his existence directly through "I think" grasps the existence of other individuals and takes others as the necessary condition for his own existence (Sartre, 2007). Sartre points out that the interaction between I and other does not imply any superiority, rather it means that I know I have existence for other and I am aware of this fact while I see my existence clearly in relation to the other. Sartre suggests that each individual attempts to boast about himself and dominate the others.

Martin Buber does not take the human-human relation as a human dimension, but rather as an existential reality through which human being appears, is completed, and authenticated. He put forward that the real life is the encounter between humans, but it does not entails submerging in other and missing the individuality. The one who is defeated by "It" world, should accept the idea of absolute dogmatism as a reality that builds a solitude beside a jungle. In fact, this idea leads him toward a tragic slavery of "It" world. But the "Thou" world is

not blocked and the one who moves toward it would observe his own freedom with a revived power to relate (Buber, 1970). The difference between “I-Thou” and “I-It” relationships are summarized by Buber.

First, in I-It relationship only a part of existence participate hence another part of existence is not involved while I-Thou relationship incorporates the whole human existence. Second, I-Thou relationship occurs in the present time while there is no time for I-It relationship since the objective recognition of a creature is about its past. Third, I-It relationship, unlike I-Thou one, is not a pure relationship because nothing happens between “I” and “It”, rather it happens inside “I”. Therefore, it could be said that in I-It case, no relationship is established between the two parties rather something takes place in one of the parties, that is “I”. It is suggested that in Media and advertising cases the relationships is of I-It relationship by nature, since one party offers and the other accepts. In fact, this is the same as making individuals as objects which endangers the choice power.

Kierkegaard associates the concept of proper relationship and individuality and believes that technology could degrade the proper relationship among individuals. The approach by Kierkegaard toward relationship is based on the Platonic dialogues, live and direct dialogue that provides a vast meaning background transferred between parties through free and creative ways. He was concerned about the reduction of live relationship caused by the abundance of written language and indirect technological relationships (Mc Pherson, 2001). He states: “individuality is lost and all the relationships are impersonal. As a result, there are two tragedies, mass communication and anonymity” (Kierkegaard, quoted in Prosser and Ward, 2000, p. 172). Kierkegaard underscores the dialogic and mutual conversation in which two parties are active. One example to be mentioned is a friendly conversation according to a real and mutual experience of inclusion (Buber, 2004).

Consequently, it seems that relationship with congener is the prerequisite to the existence of human individual. In such a communication the personal individuality is not suppressed and human beings respect each other and do not impose themselves while communicating experiences and information as well as providing help. The discussion presented regarding the individuality and communication with others includes valuable implications for the teacher and students communication and maintaining the student’s individuality.

VII THE MUTUAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT

Buber and Kierkegaard both highlight the mutual communication. A mutual communication should be established between teacher and student and if this communication takes the form of I-Thou relationship, as Buber

suggests, it could provide a chance for students to attain an enhanced feeling about themselves and represent their existence and conceive themselves as “individual”. In this condition each party regards himself not in the context of a public but as an “individual” in I-Thou relationship. Each individual needs to regard others in I-Thou framework; that is they should be aware that other each and individuals possess a personal, and even biased, semantic world (Ozman and Craver, 1995).

Buber mentions two prerequisites for human life, one responsibility and other entering mutuality (Buber, 2004). Kierkegaard also points to the mutual communication which includes active exchange of teacher and learner standpoints as a way to real knowledge (Walters, 2008). Buber criticizes both teacher-oriented and student-oriented patterns of relationship and he believes that the orientation of one party would disrupt I-Thou relationship. Buber explains that in lower levels of education the mutual communication is relatively asymmetrical and the teacher mainly acts as a guide and help provider but he necessitates mutual communication for higher levels of education where the communication might totally symmetrical (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009). If educational systems are supposed to reveal individual talents and to build their selves and so that they maintain a “self”, they need to establish the discussed type of communication between teacher and student which could be set as one major educational goal.

Green explains that cultural background affects the identity formation of individuals but it does not determine the identity totally. The individual identity is, in fact, constructed by students’ free choices for who they intend to be and educational system indeed originated to improve this self-determination. Harry Broudy refers to the formation and development of self-definition, self-realization, and self-integration as the primary goals of education (Vandenberg, 2010). In order to express and grow their unique “self”, individuals need direct attention, the feeling of worthiness, and taking part in free activities (ibid.). Addressing and attending to this fact could facilitate the identification of individuals’ talents.

The other point to be mentioned about the mutual communication is that it should not be preplanned and preformed (Prosser and Ward, 2000); this means to avoid predictability and predetermined views and beliefs that undoubtedly impair the quality of mutual communication. In a live and dynamic communication, the teacher is able to imagine himself in the condition of student and in this way to improve his understanding from the student and feel emotions experienced by student and finally to see problems the way student see them. In general, by following the path the personality of student would be clarified to the teacher. Regarding the same point Kierkegaard writes: “teaching in its proper form is learning. Real teaching starts when you as a teacher learn from students. You should imagine yourself in his conditions to understand what he understands and the way he

understands” (Kierkegaard, quoted in Walters, 2008, p. 112). In such a condition, students could express their unique individuality and demonstrate their talents. They are able to reveal themselves as autonomous and unique individuals and stay away from getting lost in the public. Carl Rogers, an existentialist psychologist, states that teaching is something beyond transfer of facts and he talks about empathy in education that means teacher enters the student’s world and experience student’s world the same way he does but he should not get lost in this world. He adds that empathy does not merely mean knowing what the other party thinks rather it means experiencing in the same way that he experiences (ibid.). Mutual communication seems a key factor in existential education as well as an influential way to preserve the individuality of students. In this manner, while education is pursued in an effective way the “individual” is highlighted.

The communication between teacher and student is not a business relationship and is not restricted to the classroom and curriculum. Teacher and student are primarily authentic human beings with unique and distinctive personalities and that deserve personal attention; therefore the mutual communication is considered as the best type of communication in this context. Following the same discussion, Kierkegaard distinguishes between knowledge-oriented and capability-oriented communications. In a knowledge-oriented communication, individual is the object of other party. But in capability-oriented communication the receiver reflects on the communicated issue. He highlights the significance of mutual influence in mutual communication (Prosser and Ward, 2000). Buber also believes that any I-Thou relationship that is defined based on the intention of one party to dominate the other is doomed to failure.

Regarding the mutual communication between teacher and students, Buber points out to the bipolar encounter and emphasizes that I-Thou relationship should be tried by students too. the teacher who intends to help the student to flourish student’s talents should accept the student’s talent level as well as his intelligence, he should perceive and confirm the student as a whole. This could be merely achieved through interacting with student as a partner and in a bipolar condition. Teacher should live not only by his own viewpoints but also by his student’s standpoints. He should attain a type of realization that Buber calls inclusion. In this point, the most crucial issue is that the teacher should arouse I-Thou relationship in the student too (Buber, 1970). Both Kierkegaard and Buber recommend that teacher should imagine himself in the position of students and regard the world from this viewpoint. As it seems, in this way teacher manages to understand the specific individuality of student. Otherwise, students are considered as a part of a crowd and not an individual possessing particular traits and characteristics.

VIII CONCLUSION

According to the presented discussion, endangering human individuality in the present era is among the crucial issues to be addressed that is highlighted by existentialist philosophers clearly. And education, as a universal institution, could take advantage of the insights by existentialist philosophers. One of the issues raised in this paper is related to the communication among individuals, including the mutual and two-way relationship between teacher and student. Unfortunately, today due to the over-populated classes in schools and universities in some cases the teacher even do not remember the names of the students! In such a condition, we could not expect the teacher to participate in a mutual relationship with the student and share emotions with them. This issue is of high and specific importance in the context of schools where a close and mutual relationship is required so that the teacher could know the student. In this context, teacher should talk to students intimately and experience their emotions. But in reality, there are many cases that teacher does not know the students’ personalities and beliefs, their understandings from the class and the subjects, and their viewpoints toward life and future. Such a context would not lead to desirable educational outcomes. But if the teacher could provide circumstances for mutual relationship and Socratic dialogue with each student, before, during, and after the teaching, the students would feel worthy and each student would consider himself as a unique individual. In this condition, students reveal their inner selves and teacher could understand the differences among students and take proper actions in relation to each student. But this is not the reality that is going on in most of the classes where teacher communicates with “students” rather than “student”; that is students are regarded as a crowd. Although the teacher-students communication is inevitable and even necessary, the teacher-student communication should not be ignored. When teacher only addresses crowd, the individual is disregarded and each individuals are visualized in the form of a crowd and not single individuals with unique and personal traits. As it was discussed, Kierkegaard teacher should be able to see and experience the world through the eyes of student and in this way he gets to know the student properly. Otherwise, the classroom would only be a lecture room where teacher and student are strangers to each other.

As the result of discussion the following recommendations are outlined for maintaining the individuality in educational contexts:

1. Changing the pattern of communication from teacher-students to teacher-student: If the teacher only communicates with the crowd, clearly the individual is regarded in the form of a crowd and not unique individual. Consequently, the personal issues and problems for each student would be ignored. Therefore, the existence of bipolar relationship between teacher and each single student seems necessary.

2. Reducing the class population: Today due to the increasing costs of education in most of the countries, the classes are overpopulated. By increasing the classroom population while the educational quality is decreased teacher and students could not build a close relationship to understand each other and, consequently, all students are considered as a "crowd".

3. Understanding the student's individuality by entering his world: The teacher needs to see the world from the standpoint of the students to understand the unique individuality of the student. If there is a mutual relationship between teacher and student, student will trusts the teacher and talks to him about personal issue. Therefore, in this type of communication teacher acts as a counselor too.

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