Education for Human Flourishing

A Conceptual Framework

OECD
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

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INTRODUCTION

OECD's PISA High Performing Systems for Tomorrow initiative is supporting education systems to develop new thinking on purposes, policy and practice in education. The dramatic emergence of new forms of artificial intelligence requires a bold account of human flourishing and education's role in its achievement. This brochure summarises the core arguments. It draws on policy dialogues involving senior officials in British Columbia (Canada), Estonia, Finland, Singapore, Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Focusing on foundational literacies has served us well for many years. But for the extraordinary challenges ahead, young people also need broader values, skills and knowledge. Above all, the next generation needs to be ready to design and build the participative democracies and regenerative economies of the future. Education for human flourishing represents new directions for primary and secondary education. It aims to help young people to flourish in life and work and contribute to flourishing communities, societies and the planet.

Three principles guide this initiative:

- To enable young people design new societal, economic and organisational models for a century of unprecedented challenge.
- To develop their cognitive, creative and caring capabilities
- To help them find purpose and meaning through learning

Education for human flourishing nurtures five competencies: Adaptive problem-solving, Ethical competency, Interpreting the world, Appreciating the world and Acting in the world. All five are rigorous and stretching, can be taught and assessed, and build on maths, science, reading and digital literacy.

Education for human flourishing represents a major shift in the why, what and how of education that will help educate the next generation for their future, rather than our past. The price of sticking with the status quo will be the wastage of young people's talents, greater damage still to their mental health – and a failure to resolve the pressing challenges of our times.

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Since the 1970s, the Human Capital Theory has shaped the aims of education. Policymakers have used a broadly shared approach: an orientation toward science, mathematics and problem-solving within a broad curriculum, a commitment to helping all students perform well irrespective of background (equity), and the expansion of higher education. Progress has been mixed. Advancing technologies have outstripped the supply of educated people. And most countries have struggled to close the equity gap. The Human Capital theory is now subject to three critiques.

The first is that the drive for economic growth, on which the theory is premised, has been secured at too high a price. In many countries, we see widening wealth gaps, disruptive migrations and increasing social fragmentation. Despite international efforts to check fossil fuel emissions, current trends in global warming suggest that parts of the world will soon become uninhabitable or at least hostile to life. Consumption far exceeds the capacity of the earth's remaining natural resources to sustain it. And the continuing destruction of living species has caused a collapse in biodiversity. The economic model for which education systems provide human capital has caused damage to societies and the planet itself.

The second critique concerns the role of education in differentiating between people. The supply of human capital has been regulated by academic examination and progression. Schools have long served as a gateway to tertiary education for by sifting students through testing. Recently, in many countries, college degrees have in turn become a signalling system, enabling employers to sort and remunerate applicants according to the prestige of the institution from which they graduate. In this way, education determines winners and losers in a divisive meritocracy. Educated elites have proved effective in engineering opportunities for their children. And the main measure of merit itself, ability in cognitive skills, is excessively narrow.

Third, education is failing to address a new and urgent problem. In surveys, many people say their lives lack meaning. Less confident in their prospects for employment and prosperity, less likely to share beliefs and values and less secure in allegiance to place, community, gender and faith, they lack a sense of what their lives are for. Some see the current mental health epidemic among young people as signalling an ethical and existential gap in a generation that is struggling to formulate its moral identity and find purpose in today's schools.

For the first time in many years, the bearings of education are being widely discussed. The HPST group suggests three principles for future education systems:

- To enable the next generation to design new societal, economic and organisational models for a century of unprecedented challenge.
- To develop not only cognitive capabilities but caring and creative ones too
- To help young people find purpose and meaning through learning

Education for human flourishing builds on these principles.

EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, saw flourishing as the intrinsically desirable, ultimate end of human beings. Encompassing happiness, meaning, friendship and accomplishment, flourishing is what human beings do when they achieve their full potential. It involves virtuous activity, suitable and peculiar to human beings, achieved over a whole life.

Kristján Kristjánsson's Neo-Aristotelian account of Education for human flourishing consists of three components: moral, reason-infused, emotionally driven, activities that are meaningful to the individual and have some consequence in the world; contemplation; and awe-struck enchantment. At the centre of this proposition stands a double objective: the development of human cognition, exercised according to moral principles and informed by scientific reasoning; and the development of human meaning, both through one's personal contribution in the world and one's sense of something bigger and more mysterious.

Student well-being has been defined as a dynamic state characterised by psychological, social, physical, cognitive and material factors that enable students to live well. The growing realisation that large numbers of students are unhappy, and that many suffer from significant mental health problems, places student well-being at the heart of research and policymaking in education.

What is central to student well-being is the subjective happiness of individuals currently in education. What is central to neo-Aristotelianism is education that enables objective flourishing over a lifetime. Reconciling education for human flourishing and education for student well-being is vital to developing new and expanded aims of education. There is every reason to place an Education for human flourishing programme in a carefully designed learning environment, where the learning principles, pedagogies and practices support both objective flourishing and subjective well-being.

The emphasis on individual flourishing should not suggest that the flourishing of others does not matter. Looking at three non-European approaches to flourishing, Kristjánsson underlines the central importance of caring for and about others.

- In Ubuntu, selfhood is realised through others. It is only by caring for others' needs that one cares for one's own. Education is the process of "learning to participate in socio-moral projects that have communal value".
- Confucians pursue harmonious relationships through a process of continuous transformation. The goal of education, emphasising empathy and compassion, is to integrate the capabilities of both the individual and the group in service of the community.
- Buddhists reject the concept of individual selfhood. The goal of education is to overcome anger, egoistic craving and intellectual illusions; and become compassionate toward all living beings and the natural environment.

Kristjánsson concludes that all three approaches are inherently relational. Education for human flourishing concerns one's own flourishing and the flourishing of others.

The crisis of the planet extends these obligations. First, it insists on our responsibilities to other living species. Second, it prompts us to consider the interests of future lives. The number of past and present lives will be far exceeded by the number of future lives that could be lived before the natural extinction of the earth. History shows us that we can shape future lives, for good or ill. Education should develop the values and capabilities in today's generation to ensure that the interests of future generations are given full weight.

EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The growing interest in human flourishing coincides with rapid developments in artificial intelligence. Will AI inhibit or facilitate human flourishing? One definition of intelligence is the capacity to achieve one's objectives. Thanks to machine learning, robots can now achieve the objectives set for them by humans, in defined fields of activity. How do the threats and opportunities of AI relate to the three principles for future education?

AI and broadening human capabilities

The OECD's Artificial Intelligence and Skills project predicts that AI will in due course be capable of everything humans do, barring only tasks involving visual input, complex motor movement and the resolution of unstructured problems. Influenced by analyses of this kind, we can be tempted to see AI as undermining human agency. As it mimics our capabilities and confiscates our tasks, what are we left to do?

But it doesn't have to be a long withdrawal, humans ceding ground to robots. At our best, we do more than segment our work into discrete, automatable tasks. Instead, humans look across activity as a whole, deploying an integrated suite of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-cognitive skills in design, evaluation, communication and execution. What AI does imply is that socio-cognitive and meta-cognitive skills should be given more weight in teaching and learning. Above all, AI prompts us to explore the possibilities of our human creativity. How can we harness all that we do and are? How can we integrate the full suite of human capabilities, holistically and intuitively, to imagine and design our futures?

AI and developing new models for the future.

AI is often seen as undermining not only human agency but human security too. Certainly, its use in economic crime, surveillance capitalism, misinformation and political interference all make our existing societal, economic and organisational models less fair and less sustainable. At the same time, AI may facilitate new approaches and models for media freedom, democratic processes and the rule of law. Policy makers, scientists, researchers and designers may find AI invaluable in creating more sustainable and non-discriminatory solutions.

AI and restoring meaning to individual lives

Will AI encroach on what it is to be a person? Will it further damage our sense of purpose and identity, to the point of undermining human meaning? In the political sphere, algorithms are already used to target specific categories of voter with specific messages. Harari suggests that future citizens may delegate their political rights to an artificially intelligent agent which remembers their prior choices and the circumstances in which they were made, interprets them in the light of patterns in everyone's choices and circumstances - and casts a vote accordingly. In the consumer sphere, he envisions an agent that remembers every product preference ever expressed - and makes the next purchase for us.

At the very least, therefore, the growing influence of AI, in these and other areas, suggests that humans should seek to limit its impact on activities that provide us with meaning; and develop new sources of meaning by nurturing broader capabilities and finding deeper purposes.

The next horizon?

Narrow Artificial Intelligence, the capacity of machines to solve the problems humans set them in defined fields of activity, is widely seen as the gateway to General Purpose Artificial Intelligence: the capacity to learn, generalise and apply knowledge across multiple fields of activity. Bostrom argues that GPAI sits alongside whole brain emulation, brain/computer interfaces and cognitive enhancement as a possible - and the most likely - route to superintelligence. He presents superintelligence as both a defence against existential risk, natural and man-made, and a creator of existential risk, in the form of a totalitarian future. The essential task of our age, therefore, is steering the development of AI, by slowing it to advance other technologies first and focusing it on problems that contribute positively across multiple scenarios and are acceptable from a range of viewpoints. The likelihood of GPAI and superintelligence, whether achieved in a few decades or longer, poses challenges to humanity of a different order. Education for human flourishing, in broadening and rebalancing human capabilities, restoring meaning to human lives and creating fair and sustainable models for the future, may be our best shot at controlling it – and so securing "the attainment of a civilisational trajectory that leads to the compassionate and jubilant use of humanity's cosmic endowment".

THE EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING COMPETENCIES

The High Performing Systems for Tomorrow initiative proposes five competencies that equip young people to flourish. They flow from the system principles: that young people should develop cognitive, creative and caring capabilities; contribute to the renewal of societies, economies and organisations; and rediscover meaning. These principles emphasise human agency, security and purpose. Though appearing to undermine all three, AI in fact prompts us to reconceptualise them in ways that enhance flourishing.

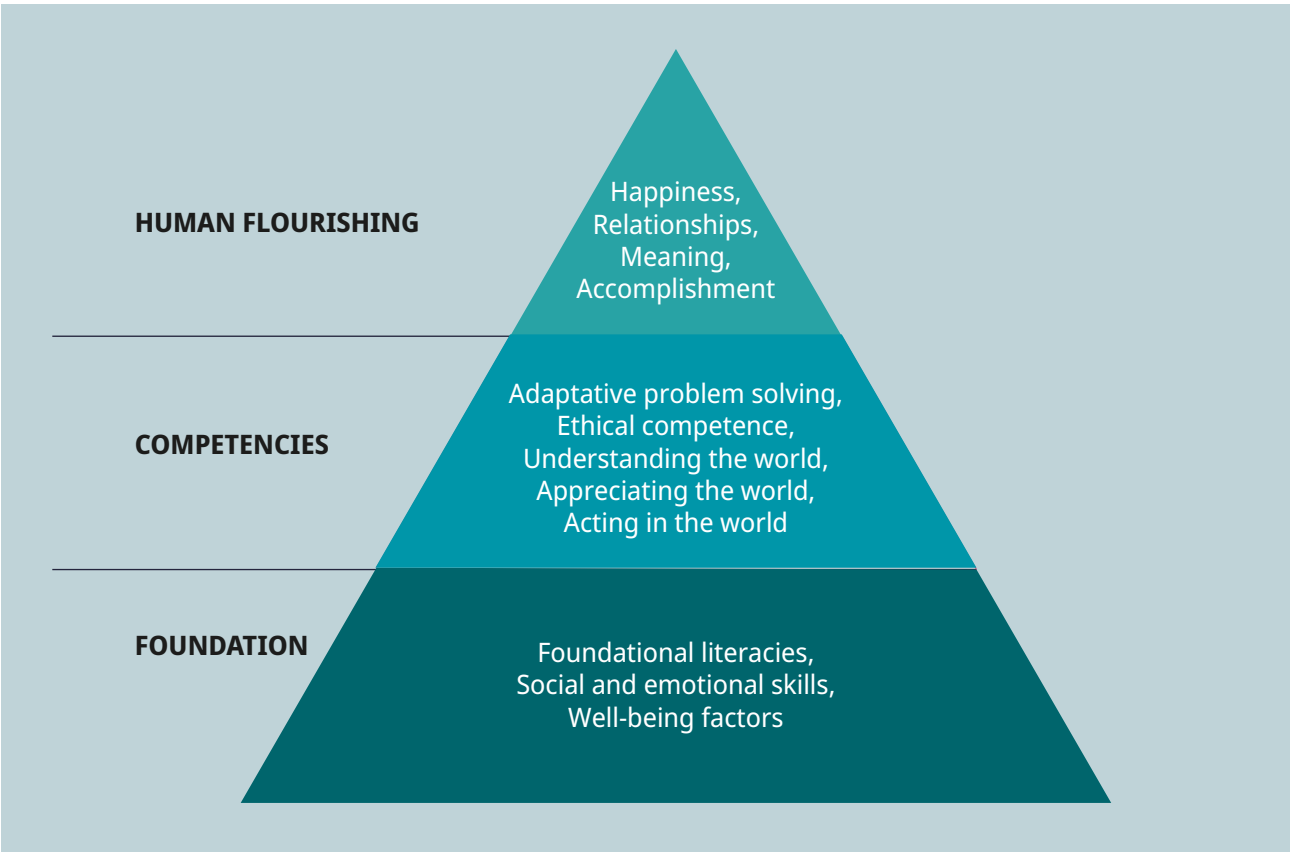
Figure 1 - Education for human flourishing competencies

The central competency is **Acting in the world**: the ability to find one's purpose, identify one's intent and undertake activities. In order to act in the world, one draws on two other competencies: adaptive problem solving and ethical competency. Acting in the world is itself one of three distinct competencies that enable people to find meaning in their lives. The others are **Understanding the world**, in a way that reconciles competing worldviews, and **Appreciating the world** (beauty, nature and the sublime).

The next step is to consider how the competencies fit into a broader learning framework, partly to establish overall coherence, partly to lay the ground for the selection of metrics.

The Education for human flourishing architecture (below) consists of three layers: the four dimensions of human flourishing; the Education for human flourishing competencies; and a foundation. Every young person should have the opportunity to develop foundational literacies and skills, and to do so in family, community and educational settings that are conducive to well-being. These literacies and skills provide a necessary toolkit for life and work, while scaffolding specific Education for human flourishing competencies.

Figure 2 - Education for human flourishing architecture



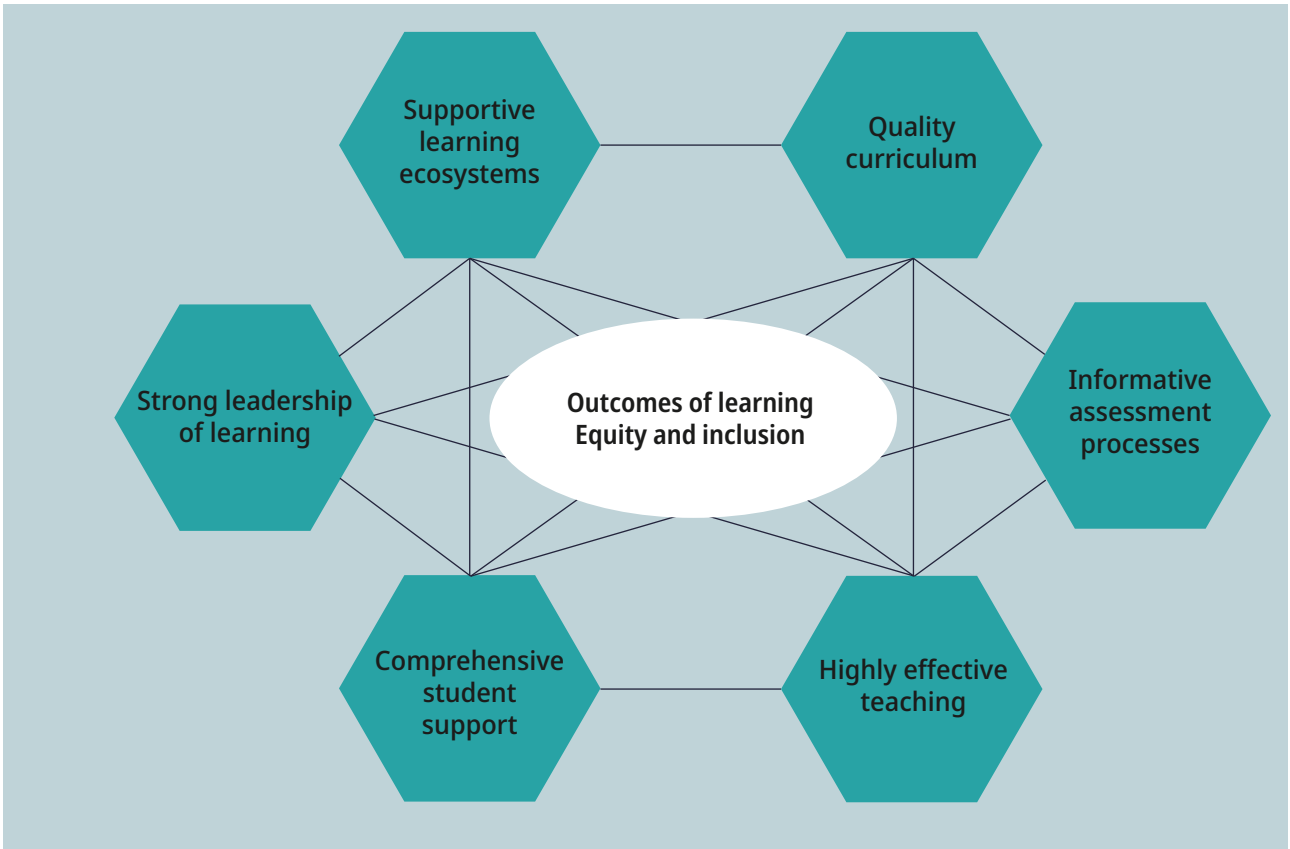
ENABLING EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

What does Education for human flourishing imply for the design of education systems? Starting from an analysis of today's best systems, we have identified a number of trajectories for the future. The result is a direction of travel rather than a blueprint. More than other dimensions of Education for human flourishing, the systems dimension is sensitive to existing architecture, cultural context and political constraints.

Building on an HPST review of schooling arrangements in British Colombia, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong and South Korea, Geoff Masters has created a framework for understanding learning systems.

Education for human flourishing points to six ways in which this framework can be developed.

Figure 3 - Conceptualising a learning system



Outcomes of learning

Education for human flourishing is not agnostic about learning outcomes. It looks to equip young people with the ability to solve adaptive problems, bring an ethical perspective to what they think and do, understand the world, appreciate the world and act in the world. This is the learning system's central aim.

Equity

Equity policies were originally developed to ensure that the variance in student performance attributed to socio-economic disadvantage should be as close as possible to zero. Today they address a broader understanding of disadvantage, encompassing gender, race, sexual orientation, migration status, geography, religion, age and disability. A modern account of equity balances equality with diversity by promoting fairness and social inclusion. Fairness implies that students should be compensated to develop a full range of Education for human flourishing competencies. Social inclusion underlines that human flourishing is above all collective flourishing.

Highly effective teaching

Education for human flourishing competencies rest not only on knowledge and understanding but personal attitudes and beliefs, implying an approach to learning that combines the cognitive and the social. The National Institute for Education in Singapore has brought to HPST a teaching and learning strategy that does exactly that. It integrates teacher-guided learning and experiential learning, which in turn enable active learning, where the student learns through their own experiences and interactions.

Supportive learning ecosystem

Education for human flourishing implies an expansion of the learning programme, to provide a broader range of student opportunities. The three meaning-making competencies, in particular, depend on experiences beyond the boundaries of school education, in the form of immersion in other cultures and perspectives, exposure to the arts and the natural world and engagement in purpose-forming activities such as entrepreneurship and volunteering.

A promising way to think about this is to see Education for human flourishing as an arena for combining school and college provision with that of other organisations, in a way that balances formal and non-formal education. The concept draws on the ecosystemic approach to education and develops it.

In education, the origins of ecosystem thinking lie in the school partnerships movement: co-opting arts organisations and businesses to support specific dimensions of the curriculum. But in recent years, a broader concept has developed. This is the free-standing learning ecosystem. Examples are emerging in Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa and Asia. Their common features include multiple providers, innovative curricula and pedagogies and shared funding and governance. Increasingly, they describe their purposes in the language of human flourishing, as a response to adversity.

The supportive learning ecosystem is one dimension of the formal system. The broader learning ecosystem stands in a bolder relationship to the formal system, sometimes accelerating or reimagining it from within, sometimes complementing and challenging it from outside. Is tomorrow's policymaker someone who nurtures and balances formal and non-formal learning, equitably, to expand the perspectives, experiences and purposes of each student?

System shift

The High Performing Systems initiative has worked closely with Charles Leadbeater on the concept of system shift. He argues that shifting a system requires a co-ordinated approach to changing purpose, power, relationships and resource flows. Is it possible to start with purpose, where that purpose is Education for human flourishing?

"Systems Innovation requires us to be intentional. Here, vision of purpose is vital. It helps steer direction and orchestrate energy around shared missions, demanding of us that we reach for new possibilities and be purposeful in our actions. It calls on us to stand up for what we believe in, to uphold our values.

Yet, systems innovation also requires us to be emergent. Here, purpose is unfolding and evolutionary, seeking beyond the horizons of what we know today and acknowledging the uncertainties and adaption required of us in change. Such emergence calls for us to be adaptive and reflective, to hold many perspectives at once. Emergence asks us to move at the pace of relationships, sometimes slowly and at other times very fast.

Does the idea of education as human flourishing commit one to a particular approach to how a system creates a new sense of purpose? If the purpose is to achieve measurable results in quantifiable outcomes, then a deterministic approach to purpose may work, especially in jurisdictions in which political authority commands trust and legitimacy. The political process can decide on the preferred outcomes; the system can be driven to deliver those outcomes.Yet if a system were to take this approach to human flourishing it would create a very stunted version of flourishing. The adoption of human flourishing as a goal for education systems would then also commit systems to an approach to change appropriate to that goal. To achieve human flourishing a system would need a more open, regenerative, interpretative, approach, to allow purpose to emerge from learning, experimentation and adaptation across the system as it develops a renewed, widespread and deeply felt sense of purpose. It cannot be something specified in detail from on high in advance. It would depend on a generative interplay between intention and emergence." — Charles Leadbeater

System transformation

If the justifying conditions for purpose-led system shift are systemic challenge and opportunity, then those conditions seem to be met in today's world. Education for human flourishing can be the purpose that drives the system shift. But is it shift that's required, or is it transformation?

In partnership with High Performing Systems for Tomorrow, Otto Scharmer has piloted a development programme for education leaders in British Colombia, Estonia, Finland and the International Baccalaureate. The programme is designed to facilitate system transformation in support of Education for human flourishing.

Scharmer argues that the quality of awareness and relationships is critical to achieving system transformation. In all sectors, he suggests, systems are in transition. Some are still oriented to output and efficiency. Many are now oriented to their users and stakeholders. In the next phase, systems should be ecosystemic and regenerative. But this will require ecosystemic and regenerative awareness and relationships.

Across different levels of system activity, he sets out what such awareness and relationships look like. The first kind of activity is listening. It involves not only factual or empathic listening but holding a space for what is ready to emerge. The second kind is conversation, the art of thinking together, of giving birth to new ideas, imaginings, identities and energies. The third kind is organising, through "decision-making circles that develop the capacity to act from local knowledge while being aware of cross-organisational interdependency and aligned by a shared purpose". The fourth kind is co-ordinating and governing. Here, "the natural self-interest of the players extends to a shared awareness of the whole ecosystem. Ecosystem awareness requires us to open the heart and internalise the views and concerns of others. The result is decisions and outcomes that benefit the whole system, not just my part of it".

CONCLUSION

High Performing Systems for Tomorrow offers new purposes for education. Returning to older traditions, found in different parts of the world, the project argues that education should support human flourishing, for individuals, communities and the planet.

Education for human flourishing invites the next generation to rediscover meaning and purpose through agency, equipping young people to build new societies, economies and organisations for a world in crisis.

This is no soft option. Adaptive problem-solving, ethical competence, Understanding the world, Appreciating the world and Acting in the world are rigorous and demanding competencies. They do not replace foundational literacies: they build on them. But they retrieve education from the exam certificate that straitjackets it. They open up a life of purpose and fulfilment.

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