

Purifying the Soul, Healing the Age: The Relevance of Al-Ghazali's Concept of Happiness in Responding to Contemporary Spiritual Crisis

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Abstract

*This study aims to explore Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness as elaborated in his work *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* and to critically analyze its relevance in addressing the spiritual and ethical crisis of contemporary society. The research arises from concerns that modern understandings of happiness are largely materialistic, short-term, and psychologically fragmented, often leading to existential anxiety and spiritual emptiness. In response, Al-Ghazali presents a holistic framework of happiness rooted in self-knowledge (ma'rifat al-nafs), soul purification (tazkiyat al-nafs), and spiritual ascension toward divine knowledge (ma'rifatullāh), integrating both individual and social dimensions of well-being. This research adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical method using a library research approach. *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* serves as the primary source, supported by relevant academic literature and contemporary data. The study finds that happiness, in Al-Ghazali's perspective, is a transformative and continuous process involving ethical cultivation, inner discipline, and deepening spiritual consciousness. Furthermore, it meaningfully addresses modern conditions of spiritual disconnection and the erosion of moral and social values. The study also reveals that Al-Ghazali's conception of happiness aligns with, yet surpasses, modern psychological models—particularly by emphasizing the integration of vertical (God-human) and horizontal (human-human) dimensions of existence. It not only fosters internal peace but also offers a foundational ethic for achieving social and moral harmony. In light of these findings, the study recommends incorporating Al-Ghazali's values into spiritual education, moral character development, and contemporary counseling practices. It also encourages further interdisciplinary research between classical Islamic philosophical traditions and modern psychological sciences to enhance current understandings of meaningful and holistic happiness in the 21st century.*

Keywords: Happiness, Al-Ghazali, *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, Modern Spiritual Crisis, Ethics and Spirituality

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1. Introduction

Humans are created with the potential of intellect, passion, and heart as the basic elements that distinguish them from other creatures. With that potential, humans have a tendency to pursue something that is ideal and valuable, one of which is happiness. Happiness is not only a natural desire that is rooted in the soul, but it is also the highest goal in every step of life. In the midst of the dynamics of modern life, humans are often trapped in external, material, and momentary perceptions of happiness, which lead to the birth of complex spiritual, psychological, and social crises. Phenomena such as depression, dysthymia, existential anxiety, and loss of meaning in life are common symptoms of contemporary society. In this situation, there needs to be an alternative approach that is able to provide a profound philosophical and spiritual offering of the meaning of happiness.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Kitāb Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* comes as an answer that not only emphasizes the theological and normative aspects of Islam, but also features a psychological and sufistic approach to understanding happiness. This work provides a spiritual framework that emphasizes the importance of purification of the soul, control of desires, and self-recognition as the path to attaining true al-sa'ādah. Al-Ghazālī does not separate the world from the hereafter, but instead associates the achievement of worldly happiness as the path to true happiness in the hereafter. It is in this context that this study seeks to re-examine Al-Ghazālī's thought through *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* and contextualize it with the dynamics of modern society's life.

This research is very important to do because currently happiness tends to be reduced to material achievements and social existence in digital media. A number of empirical studies have shown that this kind of orientation does not provide stable inner satisfaction. Many individuals who outwardly seem to be "successful" actually experience inner emptiness, psychological anxiety, and loss of direction in life. Bastaman, (2007) called this phenomenon a manifestation of the Age of Anxiety marked by multidimensional crises and spiritual alienation. This shows that there is a disorientation of values in modern society that requires a rearrangement of the paradigm of happiness, not only psychologically and socially, but also existentially

and spiritually. Therefore, raising the concept of happiness according to Al-Ghazālī is not only an academic step, but also a substantive contribution to contemporary humanitarian problems.

In general, various academic studies reinforce the relevance of Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness in *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* to contemporary society. Safitri and Idrus, (2021) show that Al-Ghazali-style happiness has spiritual and social dimensions, effective in strengthening family harmony. Tarwiyyah, (2024) emphasizes that Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness, which emphasizes self-control and purification of the soul, is more comprehensive than Al-Farabi's rationalistic approach. Umam and Isa, (2024) call for a reorientation of the understanding of happiness by elevating the sufistic values of Al-Ghazali as an alternative to the dominance of Western narratives. Aziza (2023) even found an alignment between the *mujahadah al-nafs* Al-Ghazali and the concept of *self-mastery* in Stoic philosophy, showing the potential universality of spiritual ethics. These findings reinforce that Al-Ghazali's thought is not only theologically relevant, but also practically able to guide in dealing with the crisis of contemporary meaning of life.

Therefore, the position of this research is to build a conceptual bridge between Al-Ghazālī's classical thought on happiness and the actual needs of contemporary society. This article will not only re-examine the spiritual narratives in *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, but will also relate them to modern social phenomena such as social media pressure, depression due to loss of direction in life, and spiritual crises in the midst of instant and individualistic culture. The author views that Al-Ghazālī's version of happiness is the result of the process of transformation of the soul from the dominance of lust to the calm *qalb*, from worldly restlessness to inner peace in transcendental relationships.

This article will be elaborated in three main parts: first, the description of the concept of happiness in *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*; second, the identification of the elements of happiness such as *ma'rifah*, *riyāḍah al-nafs*, and *zuhud*; Third, elaboration on the relevance of these concepts in responding to the challenges of happiness in contemporary society.

This research is expected to make a new contribution to the treasures of Islamic religious philosophy, especially in contemporary issues related to existential

ethics, spirituality, and the meaning of life. This finding is also expected to be a reflection and conceptual solution to modern problems that have not been able to be fully answered by positive psychology or cognitive therapy alone. Al-Ghazālī's thought, which simultaneously discusses happiness in vertical (human-God) and horizontal (human-other) relationships, becomes an ideal model for a holistic approach to the meaning of life that is stable, meaningful, and sustainable. Thus, this article presents Al-Ghazālī not only as a figure of the past, but also as an interpreter of happiness that remains relevant across the ages.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research, which is a series of research activities aimed at collecting, studying, and analyzing data from various literature relevant to the theme of the study. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to understand and interpret Al-Ghazali's idea of the concept of happiness in the book *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, as well as relate it to the dynamics of contemporary society. This research uses a type of library research that uses various sources from libraries such as books, magazines, and documents as the main data" (Mahmud, 2011,p.31).

The research design used was descriptive-analytical. Descriptive research was conducted to provide a systematic overview of the concept of happiness in Al-Ghazali's work, while an analytical approach was used to elaborate the spiritual and ethical values in the work with contemporary social context. The aim is to find a philosophical and practical connection between Al-Ghazali's thought and the modern spiritual crisis. Explain and analyze social phenomena based on qualitatively collected data"(Sukmadinata, 2008).

The population in this study includes all of Al-Ghazali's works of thought, especially those that deal with the theme of happiness, as well as contemporary academic literature relevant to the topic. The sample of this study was selected purposively, with the main focus on the book *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* as the primary data source. This book is the most complete representation of Al-Ghazali's view of the path to true happiness that is not only worldly, but also *ukhrawi*. The researcher also draws on secondary sources such as scientific journals, academic books, and

previous research that discusses both the spirituality and happiness issues in modern society.

The data collection method is carried out through documentation techniques. Data was collected from written sources in the form of Al-Ghazali's classical works and modern scientific works. Data collection is carried out by studying relevant books, especially the book *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* and other literature containing Al-Ghazali's thoughts and journal articles" (Saifuddin Anwar, 2009). This technique is considered appropriate in uncovering the philosophical meaning of classical texts, as well as allowing researchers to trace how these thoughts are relevant to today's challenges.

The data analysis technique used is content analysis, which is a method that aims to identify, classify, and interpret the content of the document being studied. The researcher interprets the ideas of Al-Ghazali in the book *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* through a thematic analysis of key concepts such as *ma'rifah*, *riyādah al-nafs*, *tazkiyah*, *qalb*, and *al-sa'ādah*. This study also uses contextual analysis to see the relationship between classical thought and contemporary phenomena. The researcher analyzed the data by interpreting the meaning of the text in depth and relating it to contemporary social realities (Sarwono, 2006).

In addition, to maintain the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation techniques are used, both triangulation of sources, theories, and methods. This triangulation is carried out by comparing information from various primary and secondary references, and relating it to empirical data that reflects the current condition of society. The researcher validated the data through data triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and method triangulation as an effort to strengthen the results of the analysis (Sugiyono, 2016).

Through this structured methodology, the research is expected to provide a complete and in-depth understanding of the concept of happiness according to Al-Ghazali and how it can be used as a guide in answering the spiritual problems of modern society. This research aims not only to examine past thoughts, but also to show their practical significance in shaping the character and spiritual well-being of contemporary society.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Happiness as a Human Existential Goal

In *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, Al-Ghazali places happiness as the most essential existential goal of man, which is the highest achievement in life that can only be achieved through the process of self-knowledge and knowledge of God. This concept is rooted in the sufistic principle that man was created not solely to manage the world, but to know his Creator deeply. Al-Ghazali stated that "whoever knows himself, he will know his Lord" *man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu*.

From this, it appears that happiness is not just an emotional condition or external achievement, but a full awareness of the existential position of man in the structure of existence. Happiness does not come from without but grows from within through an intense contemplative and spiritual process, namely through *ma'rifat* (inner knowledge). Al-Ghazali builds the concept of happiness by making spiritual journey the main path, and not just ritual worship or the achievement of logical reasoning (Husen, 2018). Happiness in this framework is the peace of mind (*sukūn al-nafs*) that is born of the ontological awareness that life is temporary, and that the supreme truth is closeness to God. In this context, Al-Ghazali shows that human existence has a direction and purpose, namely to achieve spiritual happiness, which can only be achieved through moral transformation and inner formation. He expressly distinguishes between earthly apparent happiness and spiritual happiness that is *ukhrawi*. Worldly happiness, such as wealth, position, and power, according to him, is a distraction from the main purpose of life. Therefore, the existential direction of man must be returned to the *ghāyah al-haqiqiyah* (true goal), i.e. Allah.

Al-Ghazali's approach opposes the modern paradigm of happiness that tends to emphasise purely subjective and psychological aspects. In positive psychology, (Seligman, 2011) developed the concept of well-being theory which consists of five pillars: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA). While this concept is beneficial in arranging the balance of life, it does not touch spiritual depth as the source of ultimate meaning. This is the uniqueness of Al-Ghazali's approach, which does not stop at strengthening emotions and social relationships but brings people to the vertical relationships that are at the heart of

all forms of search for meaning. Thus, according to Al-Ghazali, happiness is the highest form of realization of man's existential function as a servant and caliph.

Further analysis of field data also shows that many modern societies experience confusion of meaning, even though economically and educationally established. This is an indicator of an existential crisis that cannot be solved with a materialistic approach. Al-Ghazali in this case provides an alternative paradigm, that human beings will not find happiness through external purification, but through internal purification. He explained that human beings consist of spiritual and physical elements, and only when spirituality dominates and is connected to the source of truth, can happiness be achieved in its entirety (Husen, 2018). This is why happiness in Islam cannot be separated from the concept of *taqarrub ilā Allāh* (closeness to God), because in this closeness there is a sense of peace that cannot be replaced by wealth or social influence.

Methodologically, Al-Ghazali developed the concept of happiness through a multi-level approach. The first is *ma'rifat al-nafs*, recognizing one's habits and weaknesses; second, *Riyādah al-Nafs*, training the soul through worship, *dhikr*, and *muhasabah*; Third, *Tazkiyat al-Nafs*, cleansing the heart from spiritual ills such as pride, *riya'*, and love of the world; and fourth, *ma'rifatullāh*, attaining full awareness of God's presence in every aspect of life. These four stages form the integral structure of existential happiness in Al-Ghazali's thought. Thus, happiness becomes a dynamic process that is moral, spiritual, and contemplative. This view is in stark contrast to the lifestyle of contemporary society, which emphasizes acceleration, instant gratification, and external achievement. This existential crisis reinforces the relevance of Al-Ghazali's thought, which emphasizes that inner peace can only be achieved by knowing one's essence, realizing human limitations, and surrendering totally to God (Huda, 2019).

Furthermore, Al-Ghazali's thought also contains praxis values in education and moral development. If the orientation of happiness is returned to spiritual values, then the educational process will not only form intellectually intelligent, but also emotionally strong and spiritually strong individuals. Al-Ghazali's spirituality-based character education has the potential to answer the happiness crisis of adolescents and young adults, which now rely heavily on external validation on

social media. As stated by Chapra (2015), the development of a complete human being is impossible without a foundation of ethics and spirituality. Therefore, Al-Ghazali's thought needs to be re-read as an intellectual and moral response to the challenges of modern times.

From all the exposure and data collected, it can be concluded that the concept of happiness according to Al-Ghazali is not a utopian idea, but an existential project that is very applicable and solution to the current humanitarian problems. Al-Ghazali has succeeded in constructing an ontological, epistemological, and axiological framework of happiness that is not only relevant in the classical context, but also actual to answer the inner turmoil and spiritual emptiness of modern man. Happiness does not lie in outward achievements, but in full awareness of who we are and where we are coming from. In Al-Ghazali's view, happiness is the end point of man's spiritual journey to his God.

The Elements of Happiness in Al-Ghazali's Perspective

In Al-Ghazali's view as explained in *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, happiness cannot be understood partially or solely as an outward achievement, but must be seen as the result of a mutually reinforcing fusion of various inner elements. These elements, according to Al-Ghazali, include: *ma'rifat al-nafs* (self-recognition), *mujāhadah* (control of desires), *riyādah al-nafs* (intense spiritual practice), *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), and culminating in *ma'rifatullāh* (knowledge of God) (Masyhuri, 2012; Murni, 2020; Pratama & Ghozi, 2025). These five elements form a series that serves as a gradual process in man's spiritual journey to true happiness. Al-Ghazali views that the human soul is like a metal that can be turned into gold through a spiritual process that is not instantaneous, but requires determination and inner sacrifice. Therefore, according to Al-Ghazali, happiness is not something that is achieved suddenly, but the fruit of deep awareness and consistent internal processes.

One of the important elements that is the foundation of happiness in Al-Ghazali's perspective is *ma'rifat al-nafs*, which is the process of recognizing the structure of the soul and its potential. The human soul in Al-Ghazali's view has a tendency towards goodness (*fitrah*) but is also easily influenced by lust. Therefore,

recognizing one's weaknesses and strengths is the initial key to starting a spiritual journey. This process is not enough with rational knowledge alone, but it also requires inner experience. As shown in the field data, Al-Ghazali divides the soul into four dominant elements: lust, anger, intellect, and heart. Each has destructive potential if left unchecked, and it is only through *mujāhadah* and *riyādah* that is, spiritual struggle and training that the soul can be directed toward a balanced order (Muthhar et al., 2023) .

Al-Ghazali emphasized that *riyādah al-nafs* is a form of training that aims to subdue worldly desires and strengthen a relationship with God. This practice includes fasting, dhikr, night prayers, and contemplation of death. In this context, the element of happiness that Al-Ghazali offers is very different from modern Western psychological theories that rely on behavioral therapy and cognitive interventions. While (Seligman, 2011) in the PERMA theory emphasizes the importance of involvement and relationships, Al-Ghazali actually starts from liberation from the domination of the outside world, so that the relationship with God can be built purely and consciously.

The next important element is *tazkiyat al-nafs*, which is the process of purifying the soul from diseases of the heart such as *hasad*, *riya'*, *ujub*, and excessive love of the world. Within this framework, happiness cannot be separated from the ethical and moral aspects. A dirty soul will not be able to feel inner peace, even though it has everything materially (Massuhartono, 2019). Therefore, *tazkiyah* is a central process in achieving *sa'ādah*. Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of daily introspection (*muhāsabah*) to evaluate the behavior and spiritual motivation of each individual. This shows that happiness is inseparable from ethical awareness and inner discipline.

The culmination of the entire process of happiness according to Al-Ghazali is *ma'rifatullāh*, which is deep and direct knowledge of God, not just in the form of information, but in the form of spiritual experience (Nafi et al., 2022). This knowledge becomes a source of true peace and frees humans from worldly worries (Arroisi, 2019). In the sufistic approach, this experience is referred to as *dzaūq* feeling God's presence in every pulse of life. Happiness, then, is when the soul is no longer dependent on the world, but is fully dependent on God. This is where the

union between self-awareness and total servitude occurs. This approach makes a great contribution to the discourse of happiness because it explains not only how to be "happy", but also why and for what happiness is sought.

When compared to contemporary approaches in philosophy or psychology, Al-Ghazali's concept of the element of happiness is very complete because it includes metaphysical, psychological, and ethical dimensions at the same time. In the modern Western approach, as stated by Taylor (1989), the search for happiness is often associated with self-actualization and individual freedom, but lacks a spiritual orientation. In fact, as your field data shows, many modern societies have lost their way of life due to a lack of transcendental orientation, even though economically and socially they are in relatively stable conditions. This is where the power of Al-Ghazali's thought teaches that happiness is a balance between spiritual and physical needs, as well as between the life of the world and the orientation of the hereafter.

Furthermore, the elements of happiness according to Al-Ghazali also have practical implications for character formation in education and self-development. Personality development that focuses on *riyāḍah al-nafs* and *tazkiyah* can be a framework for character education based on Islamic spirituality (Murni, 2020). In the context of a modern society experiencing a moral crisis, this approach has become very relevant. As Chapra (2015) affirms, the development of the perfect human being requires not only intellectual intelligence, but also moral integrity and spiritual awareness. Thus, the elements of happiness in Al-Ghazali's thought are not only part of the theoretical discourse, but also a praxis offer for educational reform and the development of contemporary society.

Thus, according to Al-Ghazali, the elements of happiness are a unity that forms a complete and profound spiritual system. From self-recognition to the knowledge of God, from the control of the passions to the purification of the soul, every element supports each other and is a prerequisite for the attainment of true happiness. This concept is very relevant to be used as an alternative to the modern paradigm of happiness that is secular and materialistic. As modern man becomes increasingly alienated from himself and from the meaning of life, Al-Ghazali's thought offers a way home to a soothing and liberating existential truth.

The Relevance of the Concept of Al-Ghazali Happiness to the Spiritual and Social Crisis of Contemporary Society

Happiness in Al-Ghazali's view is not only spiritual and transcendental, but also deeply related to the social and ethical dimensions of everyday life. In *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah*, he emphasizes that man will achieve true happiness when he is able to cultivate a harmonious relationship with Allah as well as with his fellow man. Al-Ghazali integrates the concept of *taqarrub ilā Allāh* (closeness to God) with noble morals such as honesty, patience, trust, and compassion as a path to peace of mind (*nafs al-mutma'innah*) (Masyhuri, 2012) In the context of modern society, this concept has become very relevant, because the various crises that are happening today are not only related to economic or technological aspects, but are actually rooted in spiritual crises and social relations crises. The phenomenon of increasing depression, existential anxiety, and interpersonal conflict is a symptom of human disconnection from deep spiritual and social values. Al-Ghazali offers a holistic approach that places happiness not as an individual goal, but rather as a spiritual and ethical achievement rooted in inner qualities and contribution to the social environment.

In the data studied from the field, it was found that many individuals live in material abundance but still feel empty mentally. Unmet spiritual needs lead to unrest and confusion of the direction of life. This shows the failure of modern concepts of happiness that tend to emphasize external achievements such as status, wealth, and sensory satisfaction. (Seligman, 2011) within the framework of his PERMA model, does acknowledge the importance of meaning in happiness, but does not explicitly attribute it to divine consciousness. Thus, Al-Ghazali fills this void by offering *ma'rifatullāh* (knowledge of God) as the center of happiness orientation (Seligman, 2011). Happiness, according to him, is the fruit of inner peace obtained when man places himself in accordance with the purpose of his creation, namely as a servant and caliph. This approach is especially important in the midst of a modern culture that emphasizes individualism and directionless freedom.

In addition to the spiritual aspect, Al-Ghazali also emphasized that happiness cannot be achieved without social ethics. In the framework of Islam, piety is not only measured by a vertical relationship with God, but also by a horizontal interaction with others. The concept of *akhlāq al-karīmah* such as empathy, helping, and social justice are the main requirements for the creation of a happy society (Bahri, 2022). Modern society is experiencing a weakening in real social bonds that many are digitally connected but emotionally and spiritually isolated (Asmarani et al., 2024). This crisis is referred to by Putnam (2000) as the phenomenon of "bowling alone", which is a condition when society loses a strong social network and human relations become superficial. Al-Ghazali is aware of the destructive potential of this social disconnection, so he emphasizes that happiness must also be realized in the form of fair, honest, and mutually reinforcing relationships in society.

Thus, Al-Ghazali's thought is able to answer two types of happiness crises faced by contemporary society at once: spiritual crises due to the loss of divine orientation, and social crises due to the weakening of human values. The concept of happiness it offers not only aims to calm the soul personally, but also to form an ethical, just, and loving society. Al-Ghazali does not teach happiness as an egoistic achievement, but rather as a spiritual condition manifested in real actions, either vertically to God or horizontally to others. This is what makes Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness very contextual in facing the challenges of modern times. In an era marked by speed, technological sophistication, and extreme individualism, Al-Ghazali's approach teaches the importance of a return to self-awareness, authentic spiritual connections, and sustainable social responsibility. Thus, if the crisis of this age stems from a disconnection of meaning, then *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* is a synthetic offer to reknit the spirit of life that is divided between the world and the hereafter, between the individual and the community, between the physical and the spiritual.

4. CONCLUSION

The concept of happiness according to Al-Ghazali in *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* is a philosophical, theological, and sufistic synthesis that is very relevant to answer the spiritual and social challenges of modern society. Happiness in Al-Ghazali's view is not interpreted as mere outward satisfaction or material achievement, but as

a complete inner process starting from self-recognition (*ma'rifat al-nafs*), controlling lust, spiritual practice (*riyādah*), purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), to the knowledge of God (*ma'rifatullāh*). It is a multi-layered approach that emphasizes that true happiness can only be achieved when humans undergo a thorough spiritual transformation. In the context of contemporary society plagued by value crises, inner anxiety, and disorientation of the meaning of life, Al-Ghazali's concept of happiness proves to be very relevant as a paradigmatic alternative that integrates spiritual and social dimensions.

The results of the study show that the current happiness crisis stems from human disconnection from the transcendental dimension and neglect of social ethics. Modern individuals who are trapped in the logic of materialism and hedonism often feel empty, despite living in physical convenience. Al-Ghazali realized that happiness is not only an individual mental affair, but is also closely related to morals and just and harmonious social relations. Therefore, happiness needs to be reinterpreted as a condition of balance between a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with others. The integration of spiritual piety and social morality is an important contribution of Al-Ghazali's thought in the discourse of Islamic happiness as well as in the space of solutions to the problems of modern society.

In conclusion, this study recommends that Al-Ghazali's thoughts on happiness not only be studied in the academic space, but also integrated into moral and spiritual education systems at various levels. Character education based on *Kīmiyā' al-Sa'ādah* can be the foundation in building a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also spiritually and ethically mature. In addition, in-depth follow-up research is needed on the practical application of Al-Ghazali's happiness values in the field of Islamic psychology, counseling guidance, and spiritual therapy to respond directly to the inner needs of today's urban society. An interdisciplinary study between Al-Ghazali's thought and contemporary approaches in positive psychology, existential philosophy, and moral education can be a promising scientific project in expanding the horizons of the contribution of classical Islamic thought in a global context.

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