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## **The Slingshot Argument and the Correspondence Theory of Truth**

The correspondence theory of truth holds that each true sentence corresponds to a discrete fact. Donald Davidson and others have argued (using an argument that has come to be known as the slingshot) that this theory is mistaken, since all true sentences correspond to the same "Great Fact." The argument is designed to show that by substituting logically equivalent sentences and coreferring terms for each other in the context of sentences of the form 'P corresponds to the fact that P' every true sentence can be shown to correspond to the same facts as every other true sentence. The claim is that all substitution of logically equivalent sentences and coreferring terms takes place *salva veritate*. I argue that the substitution of coreferring terms in this context need not preserve truth. The slingshot fails to refute the correspondence theory.

Keywords: Correspondence Theory, Truth, Slingshot, Donald Davidson, Facts

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This essay is concerned with the version of the slingshot argument employed by Donald Davidson and others. (Davidson, 1984a: 19; Davidson, 1984b: 41-2; Davidson, 1990: 303; Davidson, 1996: 266) This version of the argument is designed to refute the correspondence theory of truth. The correspondence theory analyses the truth of statements in terms of correspondence to facts. According to exponents of the slingshot, correspondence theorists have failed to show that a discrete fact exists for each true sentence. Indeed, the slingshot is designed to show that correspondence theorists could not show this since all true sentences correspond to the same fact. Versions of the slingshot argument have been subjected to a number of criticisms. Still, Davidson continues to repeat it, the argument continues to find advocates (Rodriguez-Pereyra, 1998) and little of the literature has been focused on the question of whether a

slingshot argument undermines the correspondence theory. This essay argues that the Davidsonian slingshot is unable to refute the correspondence theory of truth.

I will begin by sketching the most plausible version of the correspondence theory. (Searle, 1995: ch. 9) Whatever form the theory assumes, it ought to be compatible with the disquotation principle. According to this principle, for any sentence  $S$ ,

(S)  $S$  is true if and only if  $P$

where  $S$  is a name of a sentence (usually a quotation of the sentence) and  $P$  is the sentence itself. For example,

(S<sub>1</sub>) 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

Many contemporary philosophers, including some advocates of the slingshot, believe that the disquotation principle captures all that needs to, or can, be said about truth. Correspondence theorists disagree. They want to say, in addition, that a sentence is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact. This is not to say that correspondence theorists necessarily want to supplement schema (S). Rather, they can analyse it as capturing their theory of truth.

Any complete analysis of truth has three parts. The first part gives an account of truth bearers, the items that can be true or false. Statements are obvious candidates for the role of truth bearers. The second part gives an account of truth makers, the items that determine the truth values of truth bearers. According to the correspondence theory, truth makers are facts. Finally, an analysis of truth needs to specify the relation between truth bearers and truth makers. This relation, according to correspondence theorists, is correspondence. I will, for the sake of convenience, assume that truth bearers are statements (or declarative sentences). That leaves the concepts of facts and the correspondence relation to be analysed.

As I have indicated, the analysis of these concepts can be seen as an exposition of what is inherent in (S). A correspondence theorist can regard the sentences on the right hand side of statements of the form (S) as descriptions of the facts that make true the sentences on the left hand side. As a rule, correspondence theorists hold that these facts are objective. That is, they obtain or not independently of the capacity of language users to know that they obtain. Correspondence theorists are not necessarily committed to the view that facts are a special sort of metaphysical entity. They are simply the truth conditions of statements. Correspondence theorists might do well to abandon talk of facts in favour of talk of truth conditions. This would have the advantage of making clear that they are not necessarily committed to the

existence of facts as a special class of entities. Still, talk of facts is a convenient shorthand. A fact is simply whatever in the world makes a statement true. The best description of the truth conditions of a statement, the fact that makes it true, is generally provided by the statement itself.

Correspondence theorists can also hold that an analysis of the correspondence relation is also inherent in (S). The relation of correspondence is simply the relation of being true if and only if certain conditions obtain. To say that ‘Snow is white’ corresponds to the fact that snow is white is just to say that ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white. That is, the sentence is true if and only if conditions are such that, or the fact of the matter is, snow is white. The correspondence theory states that any two true statements which differ in meaning (normally) correspond to different facts or truth conditions. Before the end of this essay, the existence of necessarily true statements will require us to revisit this feature of the theory. In any case, the theory states that contingently true statements which differ in meaning correspond to different facts. So, for example, ‘Socrates is Athenian’ corresponds to a fact other than the one to which ‘Socrates is moral’ corresponds.

Let us turn now to the slingshot. This argument is designed to show that the correspondence theory is mistaken since sentences with different meanings correspond to the same facts. Indeed, if the slingshot is sound, all true sentences correspond to the same fact. As Davidson puts the conclusion, all sentences correspond to one Great Fact. (Davidson, 1984b: 42) The argument depends upon two principles. The first, following Stephen Neal, may be called the Principle of Substitutivity for Logical Equivalents. (Neal, 1995: 783) It may be stated thus (with ‘ $\leftrightarrow$ ’ indicating logical equivalence):

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{(PSLE)} \qquad \qquad \phi \leftrightarrow \psi \\
 \qquad \qquad \qquad \Sigma[\phi] \\
 \hline
 \qquad \qquad \qquad \Sigma[\psi]
 \end{array}$$

In other words, if  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  are logically equivalent sentences, they may replace each other in the context of other sentences *salva veritate*. The other may be called the Principle of the Substitutivity for Co-referring Terms:

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{(PSCT)} \qquad \qquad \alpha = \beta \\
 \qquad \qquad \qquad \Sigma[\alpha] \\
 \hline
 \qquad \qquad \qquad \Sigma[\beta]
 \end{array}$$

That is, if  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are singular terms with the same extension, in a sentence in which one occurs, the other may be substituted for it *salva veritate*. The two principles obviously apply only in non-opaque (extensional) semantic contexts. (So, for example, PSCT does not sanction substituting ‘the morning star’ for ‘the evening star’ in ‘Julia believes that the morning star is beautiful.’) Even with this restriction, these principles can be used to argue for the conclusion that any two true sentences correspond to the same fact.

A Davidsonian slingshot can be variously formulated. I give a version of the argument closely based on that provided by Barwise and Perry. (Barwise and Perry, 1983: 25) Any version of the slingshot begins by identifying any two true sentences which differ in meaning, say,  $A$  (‘Socrates is Athenian’) and  $M$  (‘Socrates is moral’). The Barwise and Perry version goes on to specify that, for any sentence  $P$ ,  $t_p$  is the definite description:

(D) The number that is 1 if  $P$ , and 0 if not- $P$ .

The slingshot can be stated as follows:

- |     |  |         |
|-----|--|---------|
| (1) | $A$  | premiss |
| (2) | $M$  | premiss |
| (3) | $A$ corresponds to the fact that $A$ .       | premiss |
| (4) | $A$ corresponds to the fact that $t_A = 1$ . | 3, PSLE |
| (5) | $A$ corresponds to the fact that $t_M = 1$ . | 4, PSCT |
| (6) | $A$ corresponds to the fact that $M$ .       | 5, PSLE |

(Davidson sometimes states the slingshot using class abstracts instead of definite descriptions of the sort employed here. This is an inessential difference, however, since a class abstract is just a kind of definite description.) The argument seems to show that ‘Socrates is Athenian’ and ‘Socrates is moral’ (and all other true sentences) correspond to the same fact. Now these sentences manifestly differ in meaning. Consequently the claim that sentences with different meanings correspond to different facts appears to be false. Advocates of this slingshot conclude that the correspondence theory of truth is mistaken.

The slingshot appears to be a sound argument. Given the standard definition of logical equivalence the inferences from (3) to (4) and from (5) to (6) are valid. As the concept is standardly defined, two sentences are logically equivalent if and only if they are true in precisely the same models or possible worlds. Given (D),  $A$  will be logically equivalent to  $(t_A = 1)$ . This is the case since, if  $A$  is true, then  $t_A$  refers to 1 and, if  $A$  is false,  $t_A$  refers to 0. Consequently,  $A$  is true in the same possible worlds as  $(t_A = 1)$ . The same is

true of  $M$  and ( $t_M = 1$ ). The inference of (5) from (4) seems similarly acceptable.  $t_M$  is substituted for  $t_A$ . Both refer to 1. It seems reasonable to conclude that the fact that ( $t_A = 1$ ) is identical to the fact that ( $t_M = 1$ ) and that an application of PSCT has preserved truth.

My attack on the slingshot differs from that provided by some other writers. Some have questioned the slingshot because of its use of definite descriptions. (Brandl, 1991: 429; Read, 1993). The argument proceeds on the assumption that definite descriptions are singular terms. Some writers have argued that, if the Russellian account of definite descriptions is correct, they are not singular terms. If they are not, PSCT does not sanction the inference from (4) to (5). By itself, this observation does not doom the slingshot. Some writers have held that there exists a Russellian semantics for definite descriptions on which the slingshot is valid. (Neal, 1995: 794) Its advocates can also adopt a non-Russellian account of definite descriptions, according to which they are singular terms referring to the objects that satisfy them. The adoption of such an account of definite descriptions has consequences, but advocates of the slingshot may be prepared to live with these. I will grant that the slingshot does not fail because of its use of definite descriptions.

A second line of attack on the slingshot holds that PSLE and PSCT are implausible, at least in the context of sentences of the form

(P)  $P$  corresponds to the fact that  $P$ .

This is the strategy adopted by Barwise and Perry, Searle and others. (Barwise and Perry, 1981: 400-02 and 1983: 25-6; for a related argument see Searle, 1995: 221-6; see also Føllesdal, 1983). A certain amount of confusion has surrounded this strategy. It has been suggested that substitution in the context of sentences of the form (P) is illegitimate since sentences denote facts (or situations), not truth values. Some versions of the slingshot either depend on, or lead to, the Fregean conclusion that all true sentences refer to the truth value True. (Church, 1956: 24-5) (All false sentences are supposed to denote the False.) Given the present version of the argument, its advocates need not adopt this controversial conclusion. The slingshot can be run on the assumption that sentences denote facts or situations. In the end, however, my approach has something in common with the second line of attack. I have doubts about whether co-referring terms can be substituted *salva veritate* in the context of sentences of the form (P). I will not, however, take issue with the substitution of logically equivalent sentences in such contexts.

My attack on the slingshot turns on a close examination of the move

from (4) to (5). The slingshot is designed to show that all true sentences correspond to the Great Fact. At each stage of the argument, a statement is said to correspond to some fact. While they may appear to differ, if the argument is successful, they are really identical. As the slingshot has just been formulated,  $(t_A = 1)$  and  $(t_M = 1)$  are regarded as names for the same fact. So, in order to refute the slingshot, one need only demonstrate that the fact that  $(t_A = 1)$  and the fact that  $(t_M = 1)$  are distinct. One can then say that the substitution of co-referring terms has not preserved truth. In order to demonstrate this I need a criterion of the identity of facts on which these two facts are distinct.

Such a criterion is provided by what K.R. Olson calls the existentialist criterion of fact identity. (Olson, 1987: 91) According to this criterion, two facts are identical if and only if they are found in precisely the same possible worlds. So, on this criterion, the fact that Socrates is moral is distinct from the fact that Socrates is Athenian. In some possible worlds, Socrates is Athenian, but not moral, and vice versa. According to the existentialist criterion, on the other hand, the fact that Socrates is shorter than Alcibiades is identical to the fact that Alcibiades is taller than Socrates. Socrates cannot possibly be shorter than Alcibiades without Alcibiades being taller than Socrates.

Having stated this general criterion of the identity of facts, we are in a position to see why the fact that  $(t_A = 1)$  and the fact that  $(t_M = 1)$  are distinct. Let us begin by asking what fact is denoted by  $(t_A = 1)$ . Since, given that  $A$  is true,  $t_A$  denotes 1, one might think that  $(t_A = 1)$  denotes the fact that  $(1 = 1)$ . Assigning  $(t_A = 1)$  the necessary fact  $(1 = 1)$  is, however, strongly counter-intuitive since  $(t_A = 1)$  is contingently true. The fact we are looking for is contingent. In order to discover the identity of this fact, let us ask ourselves what has to be the case for  $(t_A = 1)$  to be true. Clearly two conditions must obtain: Socrates must be Athenian and 1 must equal 1. Consequently, the fact denoted by  $(t_A = 1)$  can only be the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$ . This is a contingent fact. It is found in all and only those possible worlds in which the fact that  $A$  exists. Similarly,  $(t_M = 1)$  denotes the fact that  $(M \wedge (1 = 1))$ .

Now we need to ask whether the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  and the fact  $(M \wedge (1 = 1))$  are identical. They are not. These facts are not found in all the same possible worlds. In worlds in which both  $A$  and  $M$  are false, neither fact exists. In those worlds in which  $A$  and  $M$  are both true, these facts coexist. However, in all those worlds in which either  $A$  and  $M$  (but not both) is false, the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  and the fact that  $(M \wedge (1 = 1))$  do not coexist. The slingshot

proceeds on the assumption that, as a matter of fact,  $A$  and  $M$  are both true. That is not enough to establish that the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  and the fact that  $(M \wedge (1 = 1))$  are identical. By the existentialist criterion of fact-identity, they are distinct. Consequently,  $(t_A = 1)$  and  $(t_M = 1)$  do not refer to the same facts. I conclude that (5) ought not to be inferred from (4). An application of PSCT in the context of sentences of the form (P) need not preserve truth.

Davidson seems to have been attracted to the slingshot only because he does not have a clear criterion of fact identity. He attempts to motivate the conclusion that all true sentences correspond to the same fact by the following example. (Davidson, 1984b: 41f; for a point similar to the one I make in this paragraph, see Manning, 1998: 25f.) The statement, ‘Naples is north of Red Bluff’ corresponds to the fact that Naples is north of Red Bluff. It also corresponds to the fact that Red Bluff is south of Naples. Davidson then adds that the statement corresponds to the fact that Red Bluff is south of the largest Italian city within thirty miles of Ischia. He is then off on a train of thought that leads to the conclusion that “if a statement corresponds to one fact, it corresponds to all.” (Davidson, 1984b: 42) In fact, no such conclusion is indicated. The fact that Red Bluff is south of Naples and the fact that Naples is north of Red Bluff are identical. They are found in precisely the same possible worlds. The fact that Red Bluff is south of the largest Italian city within thirty miles of Ischia is, however, a distinct fact. Possible worlds exist in which Red Bluff is south of Naples but not south of the largest Italian city within thirty miles of Ischia. Once we are clear on this point, we are not tempted to believe that all true sentences correspond to the same fact.

The adoption of the existentialist criterion of fact-identity undermines the slingshot, but the cost may initially seem to be unacceptably high. The correspondence theory of truth as stated above suggests that ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ corresponds to the fact that  $2+2=4$ . It also suggests that ‘All triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$ ’ corresponds to the fact that all triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$ . The trouble is that the fact that  $2+2=4$  and the fact that all triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$  exist in precisely the same possible worlds, namely all of them. By the existentialist criterion of the identity of facts, it follows that these facts are identical. Worse, it follows that ‘ $2+2=4$ ’ and ‘All triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$ ’ correspond to the same fact. This consequence may seem to be as damaging to the correspondence theory of truth as any consequence of the slingshot. (Rodriguez-Pereyra, 1998: 521) Someone inclined to defend the

correspondence theory can respond to charge in a couple of ways.

The first way would be to revisit criteria of fact identity. The existentialist criterion states that existence in the same possible worlds is a necessary and sufficient condition of the identity of facts. One could propose an alternative criterion, according to which existence in the same possible worlds is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of the identity of facts. Call this the weak existentialist criterion of fact identity. A complete account of this criterion will specify sufficient conditions of fact identity as well as necessary conditions. At present, I do not see how to specify these sufficient conditions but I will assume that such a specification could be provided. If the weak existentialist criterion of fact identity is correct, then the existence in the same possible worlds of the fact that  $2+2=4$  and the fact that all triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$  does not entail that these facts are identical. One could then hold that '2+2=4' and 'All triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$ ' correspond to different facts.

If one is inclined to retain the existentialist criterion of fact identity, matters are a little more complicated. One could begin to address the present challenge by adopting the reasonable view that there are only two mathematical statements, viz., the necessarily true one and the necessarily false one. (Stalnaker, 1983: 73) More generally, one might say that there is really only one necessary truth and one necessary falsehood. If there is really only one necessarily true statement, we would not expect that each statement of it corresponds to a different fact. On the contrary, if every statement of the necessary truth is only a notational variant of the others, it would not be surprising that they all correspond to the same fact. Another way to put this point would be to appropriate David Lewis' view that all necessarily true statements have the same subject matters, namely any subject matters. (Lewis, 1998: 114-5) One would then say that all necessarily true statements denote or correspond to the same facts, namely all facts.

The correspondence theory may still not be out of the woods. Above I stated that, according to the correspondence theory, when true statements differ in meaning, they correspond to different facts. Consequently, if '2+2=4' and 'All triangles have internal angles equal to  $180^\circ$ ' differ in meaning, they correspond to different facts. In my response to the slingshot, however, I have just suggested that they could correspond to the same fact. Correspondence theorists have two options at this point. The first option is to hold that, appearances not withstanding, different statements of the necessary truth have



the same meaning. This is an implausible view. Any two necessarily true statements apparently differ in meaning even if they share the same denotation. Still, if meaning is identified with empirical content, it is an option. The second option is to modify the correspondence theory.

The first way to modify the theory would be to hold that, although contingently true statements which differ in meaning correspond to different facts, all necessarily true statements correspond to the same facts. This modification has a somewhat ad hoc feel about it, but it could be defended. Necessarily true statements and contingently true statements have very different properties and we might expect that a theory of truth would treat them differently. Contingently true statements which differ in meaning do so precisely because they have different truth conditions. If necessarily true statements all have the same truth conditions, they will not exhibit the same link between meaning and truth conditions. We would then not expect that a difference of meaning entails a difference of truth conditions.

A more radical revision of the correspondence theory would also solve the present problem. The theory's advocates could hold that it applies only to contingently true statements. This is quite an attractive option for the correspondence theorist. A plausible line of argument leads to the conclusion that contingent and necessary truths are true for quite different reasons. A somewhat old-fashioned, but still attractive, view holds that all necessarily true statements are tautologies and true in virtue of the meanings of their component terms. If this is the case, necessarily true statements are true because of something about themselves. Their truth does not depend on facts to which they correspond. The truth of a contingently true statement, by way of contrast, does depend on something other than the statement itself. According to the correspondence theory, it depends on objective facts. On this solution of the problem, there really are no necessary facts, only necessarily true statements. Not every correspondence theorist will find this radical revision acceptable. In particular, those who are Platonists and believe in the existence of mathematical facts, upon which the truth of mathematical statements depend, will likely find it unacceptable. These correspondence theorists will need to adopt another of the suggested solutions.

Let us turn now to the question of what correspondence theorists can say about the first and third inferences in the slingshot. It turns out that given the truth of certain reasonable positions, the correspondence theorist can cheerfully accept these inferences. These inferences lead to the conclusion

that ( $t_A = 1$ ) and  $A$  are names for the same fact, as are ( $t_M = 1$ ) and  $M$ . Although, if the inference from (3) to (4) is not sanctioned, the slingshot fails, the fact that  $A$  refers to both the fact that ( $t_A = 1$ ) and the fact that  $A$  might be troubling. The correspondence theory holds that any true contingent sentence  $P$  corresponds to a unique fact. If ( $t_P = 1$ ) and  $P$  name the same fact, this position is undercut. Some commentators on the slingshot, including Searle as well as Barwise and Perry, have argued that the fact that ( $t_P = 1$ ) is distinct from the fact that  $P$ . If they are right, the inferences from (3) to (4) and (5) to (6) are blocked. Another option is, however, available to those who would rescue the correspondence theory.

I want to ask whether a contingent statement ever actually corresponds to two facts. The fact that PSLE sanctions the move from (3) to (4) certainly suggests so. Before accepting this conclusion, let us reflect on the sorts of statements to which a contingent statement  $C$  can be logically equivalent. Defenders of the correspondence theory can hold that these will fall into two classes. In the first class are the statements that can be immediately seen to share a meaning with  $C$ . Examples of statements in this class are provided by  $(C \wedge C)$  and  $(C \vee C)$ . The second class of statements logically equivalent to a contingent statement  $C$  consists of the conjunction of  $C$  and a necessarily true statement.

The existence of the first class of logically equivalent statements poses no problems for the correspondence theorist. They need only say that, since  $C$  and  $(C \wedge C)$  have the same meanings, the fact that  $C$  and the facts that  $(C \wedge C)$ , that  $(C \vee C)$ , and so on are identical. Even if PSLE sanctions the move from “ $A$  corresponds to the fact that  $A$ ” to “ $A$  corresponds to the fact that  $(A \wedge A)$ ” the correspondence theorist need not worry. We do not have here a case of a contingent statement that corresponds to distinct facts. Some cases are less clear than this one, as the following example illustrates.  $A$  is logically equivalent to  $((B \rightarrow B) \rightarrow A)$ . This sentence does not obviously mean that  $A$ . Consequently, one might think that the fact that  $A$  is distinct from the fact that  $((B \rightarrow B) \rightarrow A)$ . Note, however, that  $(B \rightarrow B)$  is a tautology and without empirical content. So long as correspondence theorists hold that meaning is identical to empirical content, they can plausibly hold that  $((B \rightarrow B) \rightarrow A)$  means that  $A$  and that the fact that  $A$  is identical to the fact that  $((B \rightarrow B) \rightarrow A)$ .

The existence of the second class of logically equivalent statements is more troubling for an advocate of the correspondence theory. Here we have

logically equivalent statements that differ in meaning.  $C$  and  $(C \wedge (Q \vee \sim Q))$ , for example, are logically equivalent but apparently differ in meaning. This suggests that the fact that  $C$  and the fact that  $(C \wedge (Q \vee \sim Q))$  are distinct. If we accept that PSLE applies in the contexts of statements of the form  $(P)$ ,  $C$  apparently corresponds both to the fact that  $C$  and to the fact that  $(C \wedge (Q \vee \sim Q))$ . The correspondence theory requires, however, that contingent statements that differ in meaning correspond to different facts. So the theory seems to have a problem.

It is not, however, an insoluble problem. Consider again the logically equivalent statements in the Barwise and Perry version of the slingshot. In this argument,  $A$  is logically equivalent to  $(t_A = 1)$ . Now, as I have argued,  $(t_A = 1)$  denotes the same fact as (that is, has the same truth conditions as)  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$ . Now, correspondence theorists can hold that  $(1 = 1)$  is simply a tautology and without empirical content. They can hold that to say that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  is just to say  $A$ . If so, the fact that  $A$  and the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  are identical. People who believe that necessary facts do not exist will reach the same conclusion. They will say that no fact corresponds to '1 = 1.' Saying that  $A$  is true if and only if the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  obtains adds nothing to the assertion that it is true if and only if  $A$ . The conclusion that the two facts are identical is reinforced by the reflection that these two facts are found in precisely the same possible worlds. By the existentialist criterion of fact identity, then, they are the same fact. Consequently, the correspondence theorist can hold that the fact that  $(A \wedge (1 = 1))$  and the fact that  $(t_A = 1)$  are identical to the fact that  $A$ .

I conclude that the Davidsonian slingshot poses no threat to the correspondence theory of truth. Correspondence theorists may hold that PSLE never leads to the conclusion that contingent statements correspond to different facts. Advocates of the theory will reject the inference of (5) from (4) on the grounds that co-referring terms cannot be substituted *salva veritate* in this sort of context. They then have nothing to fear from the slingshot. That said, correspondence theorists must contend with arguments other than the slingshot.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of writing this essay, I profited from the suggestions and criticisms of Colin Macleod, Jan Zwicky and, especially, David Johnston and Edwin D. Mares.

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