

BEYOND USEFUL KNOWLEDGE: DEVELOPING THE SUBJECTIVE SELF

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It is currently a major task of Philosophy of Education to develop an alternative concept of education to the prevailing orthodoxy of a somewhat mechanistic and superficial transfer of useful knowledge and skills, which may be prespecified, transmitted, assessed and subsequently certificated. A distinction will here be drawn between, on the one hand, an ‘additive’ conception of education which simply equips individuals with additional knowledge and skills without effecting any more substantial change in his or her outlook, understanding of the world, values or aspirations and, on the other, a ‘transformative’ conception according to which a more fundamental development is envisaged. This obliges us to consider the nature of the self and what would be involved in its development at a deeper level than the addition to it of specific items of knowledge and skill.

The limits of knowledge transfer

It is not my purpose to denigrate the learning of useful knowledge and skills. Arendt (1958) distinguishes between the repetitive and brutalising ‘labour’ which human beings must undertake to meet the biological needs of survival, and ‘work’, the role of homo faber, deliberately creating of objects of use and, by extension, all the tasks, which contribute to the creation of a world fit for a truly human life. This world is essentially one of human fabrication made possible by the skill of homo faber who creates the tool that lightens the burden and accelerates the labour involved. It also makes possible the surplus of resources and time that enables us to look beyond the needs of immediate survival to other arguably more worthwhile and certainly more agreeable ways of spending our time. This applies also to the skills of those who manage the activities of others to ensure that these things are done more conveniently and, indeed, to the politicians and others whose negotiating skills avoid

the frustrations, anxieties and senseless futility of conflict. There are other useful skills and bodies of knowledge, including social and behavioural skills, which the individual needs to acquire in order not to be socially isolated or even ostracised. These, belonging to our human rather than our biological inheritance, need to be learned and we can scarcely deny that the more effectively, rapidly and agreeably this is done, the better. It is also undeniably helpful if all, including learners themselves, parents, those who will eventually use the services of learners and those who arrange the business of teaching and learning are enabled to know what has been learned, where, under what circumstances and under the tutelage of which teachers this is most effectively achieved.

We cannot take an entirely uncritical view of a world totally preoccupied with the creation of useful objects or making useful arrangements for this to be done more performatively nor, certainly, of an educational system geared entirely to this end. Firstly, there is the sheer banality of such a project. The richness of life is not to be procured through the possession of more things or even a greater stretch of leisure time if people have not developed the capacity to profit from these advantages. Secondly, there is the danger that in the modern world, the process of production may become not the creative art of making objects of use but the drudgery of producing serial objects of exchange to enable the producer to obtain the wherewithal to survive biologically.

Additive and transformative learning

The valid criticism of current educational policy and resultant practice is not that pupils acquire too much knowledge or too many skills, that these are too effectively taught or even too carefully assessed. It is, rather, that pupils may acquire very many items of knowledge and many skills, mechanical, verbal or social without this necessarily doing much for, so to speak, 'the person inside', without significantly modifying the 'self' of the learner.

It is scarcely original to suggest that there are important aspects of education that touch the deeper self rather more profoundly than whatever can be measured in terms of accumulated knowledge and skills. We would not go so far as to call these 'real' or 'true' education, for as we have suggested, useful knowledge and skills are far from unimportant. One cannot claim to have been successfully educated when too many of these are lacking. Nevertheless, it will be equally uncontroversial that there can be engineers, business executives, administrators, surgeons, marriage guidance counsellors or even classical scholars, whose conduct and remarks might, despite their unrivalled stock of professional knowledge and skills, lead us to describe them as profoundly uneducated not to say, in the popular usage of the term, ignorant. Nor would the mere accumulation of information on a wider range of topics in itself lead us to modify our description. That which is lacking is not further information but something in the nature of the very selves of those concerned, which their education or experience has failed to vouchsafe them. Our task, therefore, is to attempt a description of the self which is sufficiently comprehensible to render the process of developing it heuristically plausible and some defensible suggestions as to what this development might look like.

The self

Whilst not proposing to enter too deeply upon the profounder controversies regarding the nature of the self, we at least need to go beyond the Wittgenstein/Ryle (Wittgenstein 1958, Ryle 1976) model of a human being as something which may be observed and appraised from without, performing more or less complex tasks as well as meeting the demands of everyday life. Bonnett (2009) has usefully identified a similarly unsatisfactory 'external' view of the self which he characterises as a 'relational' view in which the self is defined by the individual's relations with others and is, therefore, by implication, not

something individual, nucleated, continuous or enduring. Bonnett's interpretation of Arendt and Levinas, to whom he appears to attribute such an entirely relational view of the self, seems unduly severe. More convincing, however, is his conception of the self as something at least semi permanent, if perfectly capable of being modified by experience, including, of course, the experience of both education and relations with others. We must also reject Cavell's (1976) doubts as to whether the self may be said to exist at all under the 'onion skin layers' of socially acquired beliefs and conduct which overlie it, precisely because it omits the subjective and independent element of the self which will be the subject of what follows.

The self with which I am concerned not only moves and performs more or less appropriately or 'intelligently' but thinks, is conscious that it thinks and like the Cartesian self, is convinced of its existence, precisely because it is conscious. This is the subjective self of which various continental writers have provided such a rich analysis. In addition to actually feeling pain and a range of emotions (as opposed to simply exhibiting relevant observable behaviour) the subjective self is also capable of agency, of consciously conceiving purposes and strategies for achieving them and is thus essentially defined both by its ends and by its awareness of itself as a separate, continuous, conscious and reflective being. Its feelings, actions and memories are essentially its own. Another self cannot literally feel its pain or sorrow nor can it feel theirs. Any talk of sharing in this context is the sharing of similarity, not the sharing of identity. Agency is an essential feature of selfhood and the self's self-awareness will enable it to judge and evaluate what are essentially its own actions and strategies, not only in terms of their effectiveness as means to ends but also in terms of their moral and aesthetic values; not only whether they are the best way to achieve the desired outcome but whether they are moral, kind, worthy, decent, elegant, mean, dishonourable, disgusting or crass. It may also weigh these values against each other in its own individual

and independent way. The fully developed and, we may wish to say, educated self is not only conscious and self-conscious but sophisticated and capable of taking account of considerations above and beyond the present situation or particular undertaking.

In Heideggerian terms, (Heidegger 1927) the self is possessed of 'Dasein', an awareness not only of its own nature as a self-reflective being but of being somewhat arbitrarily 'thrown' into a world, not of its own making but with its own more or less coherent 'horizon' of consciousness within which there are other entities: those which are simply 'present at hand' which may be contemplated, studied and understood but are otherwise of little relevance to the purposes of the self, entities which are 'ready to hand', not only 'tools' and 'equipment, as Heidegger (or his translators express it) but anything which may be used for the achievement of Dasein's, (i.e. the self's) purposes. There are also those entities which are also possessed of Dasein, of whom the self is potentially capable of being aware that they are so, and which the individual self possessed of Dasein shares the experience of 'being with'.

Before exploring this phenomenological view of the subjective self and its development further, however, it is convenient to give some attention to two, perhaps more familiar and accessible views of the self: namely the doctrines of the autonomous or rational self and the social or cultural self. These are not to be regarded as mutually exclusive, as is sometimes suggested, but simply embody different perspectives upon the broader subjective self referred to above, which it is proposed to explore in greater detail in due course.

The autonomous rational self is essentially a creation of the Enlightenment and is central to Enlightenment moral and political thought. It supposedly comes into being naturally and exists in human beings in a state of nature, unencumbered by social or other prejudices. It is capable of forming its own view of the world and has a strong and far-sighted

sense of its own individual interests and of what is necessary to preserve them. Consequently, this natural 'atomistic' self is in principle capable of designing from scratch a whole new social order which is not only expedient but perfectly just, on the basis of natural reason alone. It is apparently able to do this without the need to draw upon historically accumulated doctrines in relation to science and religion, politics or morality. On the face of it, the naturally occurring autonomous rational self would seem to leave little room for education since learning could only cloud and obscure the natural light which all human beings, naturally possess.

Mill (1861) rather compromises this notion of a pristine rational self by suggesting that children and primitive peoples possess neither the rights nor the responsibilities appropriate to the status of a rational being, which must, therefore, presumably be acquired as the result of some process, whether maturational or through education and experience. In fact, two whole bodies of educational theory are premised on this ambiguity concerning the genesis of the rational self. For old-fashioned child-centred educators the structure of rationality will develop naturally provided it is nurtured by the provision of appropriate experience or, more importantly, not stunted or perverted by prejudice or the inculcation of unreason. In contrast to these stand writers who, like Hirst, Peters (Hirst and Peters 1970) and many others, maintain that the qualities we ascribe to the rational self, far from being innate, are the result of a long and painfully fought tradition into which, if he or she is to possess an autonomous rational self at all, the learner must be rigorously initiated.

For both of these important traditions of educational thought, it will be noted, education is something more profound, less arbitrary and less open to manipulation by persons other than the learner than the mere grafting on of useful skills or bodies of information. In the one, education is about allowing the individual self to develop what is

already present, the ability to discover knowledge for itself. In the other, though these powers have to be developed, the foundations of knowledge (empirical, ethical, prudential) are to be established either by logic itself or by conditions objectively present in the world. These need simply to be discovered, even if they require to be critically disinterred from under layers of error, prejudice or indoctrination. On both of these traditions the self undergoes not a process of addition but of transformation. On both, the self's perceptions are supposed to be determined not by what governments, employers or whoever think will be useful but by what is supposed to be already present, either within the learner or in the world.

In contrast to the notion of a detached, autonomous, rational self stand theories of the self which emphasise its social or interpersonal origins. Mead (1934), for example, explores the way in which one's sense of oneself, of who or indeed what one is, is progressively constructed through one's interaction with others. As a result of the responses of others one comes to see oneself as attractive or otherwise, as clever or stupid, courageous or fearful, as a future underling or a future master, perhaps even as a man or as a woman ('On ne nait pas femme, on le devient', Beauvoir 1949). These characteristics of the subjective self, and the terms in which they are envisaged by the individual who ascribes them to him or herself, are clearly neither the products of mere nature nor of independent ratiocination alone.

Taking a broader view than Mead, Taylor (1989) historically surveys conceptions of the self at various times and in various places. Though drawing mainly on written, often literary, documents for his evidence, these may be said both to reflect the cultures they represent and, since they often enter the educational tradition, continuously help to form those of later ages. For Taylor, as for all Communitarians, the culture provides the options, the slots which the individual self may occupy, even if Mead gives us a more detailed account of how given individuals may come to occupy given social slots and the precise

manner in which that occupancy is played out. Of particular value in this account of the notion of the social self is the way in which attitudes and values, both aesthetic and ethical, largely derived from the individual's social context, are seen as an essential part of the self, though they may be modified by critical reflection or further experience. Aesthetic values may be central to an individual's motivation and therefore to his/her character and conduct. An understanding of persons and the relations between them is essential to the development of the social and cultural self. Individuals may also consider socially acquired religious beliefs and commitments so central to their selfhood that they may be prepared to accept the extinction of their earthly life in the shape of martyrdom rather than surrender them.

To whatever degree formation of the self is social, however, neither interpersonal nor cultural theories of the self give us any reason to doubt that the self remains ultimately individual and separate. We may agree on values, judgements and religious commitments, apparently share emotions, experience what we term collective joy or grief, but though these may be similar between us and we may each express empathy towards the Other, we experience these as essentially our own.

Transforming and developing the learner's self

Not only are the deliverances of the individual's consciousness and volitions essentially private and its own, however similar they may be to those of others and however much they may involve sympathy or co-operation with others, the individual consciousness is also bounded by its own horizon of awareness. Expansion of this horizon, which is synonymous with the growth of knowledge, necessarily brings into purview a range of new entities. Many of these will simply be 'present at hand', entities that can, for any one individual, never be more than objects of contemplation, even though this contemplation may sometimes be full of wonder, curiosity or admiration. Others will be 'ready to hand' the

materials of the self's actual projects and activities, and here, perhaps, development of the self and the acquisition of useful knowledge and skills may overlap. As the young person grows up or indeed as anyone increases his or her range of social interaction he or she will necessarily become aware of a greater range of others, persons with whom they are capable of standing in a relationship of 'being with'. The increasing knowledge of all three of these categories of entity may sometimes be best seen as developments of the independent rational self, sometimes as those of the interpersonal or cultural self. They will be the fruits of both personal acquaintance and observation and the testimony of others, including formal educational input.

The process of increasing the range of simply 'ready to hand' entities within the conscious horizon of the individual serves as the vehicle and framework for much of the individual's learning about the world, the development of the individual's cognitive and rational self. To be present at hand an entity need not be physically nearby nor, indeed, a material object at all. For most human beings the Andromeda Nebula and the Inverse Square Law are 'present at hand', like the robin that sings in the hedgerow opposite. Awareness of the existence of all three brings them within our horizon of consciousness or may, alternatively, be said to extend that horizon. For most of us, many such things in the universe and many ideas in the worlds of Science and scholarship remain 'present at hand' though they may become 'ready to hand' for those who pursue certain purposes. Knowledge of them is unlikely to prove practically useful to most people, though many will find them fascinating or stimulating to the imagination, objects of intense, prolonged or profound study, all of which will make them more intensely present to our consciousness, which is thereby enriched as well as extended. Such study of entities which are purely 'present at hand' may involve, understanding their structure, the elements of which they are composed and the nature, logic

and limitations of the discourse that may be used to render them present. Yet they may nevertheless remain within the realm of the merely 'present at hand', however profound our study or however intense our fascination.

One cannot, however, learn much of the central structure of any field of study without gaining a measure of extended general understanding which some might regard as constituting a modification of the self. Developing the cognitive potential of the subjective self involves acquiring an understanding of the various modes of cognition available to us, how they support and are linked to one another, the degree of confidence and certainty with which each may deliver its conclusions, the kinds of evidence relevant to each and the degree of reliance that may be placed in that evidence and how they may be validated or challenged, the limits and boundaries of their application and the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity in much of their content.

Besides becoming conscious of the nature, structure and logical workings of the present at hand, external world as it enters the self's conscious horizon, the subjective self may also become increasingly aware of its own nature. We saw earlier how this awareness may be partly determined by the individuals' interaction with others and the picture of the self reflected back to him or her by others. To the extent that this is so, it follows that whatever skills and pieces of knowledge are acquired in school, what is important for the development of the self is the manner of the formative interactions between teachers and pupils which occur as any kind of knowledge is passed on, as well as those between pupil and school as an institution. Perhaps no lessons have been more thoroughly learned in schools than 'I am no good at Mathematics', 'I am stupid' or 'I am of little worth'. Little need be added to the common-sense banalities uttered and written about the effects on values, outlook and self-image – core elements in the subjective self – of individuals by schools where the

outward display of success is the only value or in which an atmosphere of competitive ranking, fear or humiliation of non-achievers prevails. Irrespective of the quantity of useful knowledge they impart to some, such institutions are miseducative of the selves of many and destructive of their ability to eventually relate to others on a basis of 'being with'.

We also saw how the self may be formed by the broader cultural as well as the immediate interpersonal environment. Some role models, values and aspirations offered by the popular media are unedifying if not positively corrupting. Even where this is not so they will often, if not invariably, be simplistic. The high culture represented in the school curriculum, whether in the form of older or more recent works, provides a potential antidote to this, not only by providing a standard by which learners may come to judge more ephemeral productions but by dealing sensitively, insightfully and honestly with the important issues of the human condition, human life and human relationships. The teaching of arts subjects may quite properly include the imparting of facts, competence in handling the terminology of historical, musical, or artistic criticism or in the study of Literature, skill in the analysis of plot, character or imagery. But as far as the development of the self of the learner is concerned, what is important is the content. How do characters, how does the author handle such matters as love, guilt, ambition, death, remorse, resignation, hatred or injustice as well, of course, as relations with others? It is these issues which need to be engaged with and thought through by pupils as they identify with or come to understand the characters portrayed or the events narrated. Their treatment in the works of the literary canon will not be simplistic and it is precisely the absence of simplistic views, responses and judgements that distinguishes the educated person from the uncultured expert, however great the range of specialised knowledge and skills that expert may possess.

To become an individual and separate self is a gradual process which extends from infancy through childhood and adolescence into adulthood and beyond, and may never be complete. It is the realisation that one's perspectives, perceptions, responses and projects have the potential for being authentically one's own rather than those of others, particularly those of others to whom Heidegger refers as 'das Man', the 'they' or the generalised 'one' of the public at large. This does not exclude our sharing the views, perceptions and projects of others subject, of course, to an awareness of the possibility of independent revision. It is in the possibility of both independent and co-operative undertakings that the self realises its potential for agency.

Just as both everyday experience and education may bring some entities – objects, places, ideas, people – into the broad realm of the 'present at hand', so these same processes will also bring others into the category of the 'ready to hand', objects of possible utility as the individual develops consciousness of his or her separateness, capable of conceiving projects of his or her own. While some of these entities, now ready to hand, may previously have been completely beyond the horizon of consciousness, others may have been simply 'present at hand' until the individual became aware of or had his or her attention drawn to their utility.

This process extends the individual's sense of self and of agency and encourages his or her will to power over the physical environment and action within the human and social world. He or she comes to see many entities – which again need not be physical objects – as the means of achieving his or her purposes. Simultaneous equations, as well as Heidegger's famous hammer may be ready to hand. To develop the ability to use entities, physical or mental, in order to achieve purposes is, of course, to develop skills and capabilities, many of which may, in fact, be 'useful'. This is no surprise for the useful things a person does as an economic unit, citizen or occupant of a familial role are also part of his or her self. The

important thing is that the development of an individual's self should not be confined to a preparation for their roles as a worker, potential voter or wife. Heaven forbid that the horizon of someone's purposes and the readiness to hand of entities with which to achieve them should be entirely contained within the bounds of those skills thought useful by employers, governments or 'das Man'. Someone's purposes will include many everyday practical actions and the enjoyment of simple pleasures. The individual's use of objects ready to hand may include many everyday, homely activities and, of course, also include those relevant to the practice of a particular occupation. But they may also comprise performance in music, dance or the creative arts or the practice of sports or games, the search for adventure and many other pursuits or ways of achieving the individual's conception of the flourishing life, all of which may passionately engage those fortunate enough to have been introduced to them and shown the charm, thrill or sense of satisfaction or achievement they provide.

For many who find such fulfilment in the intrinsically worthwhile, employment itself is simply something 'ready to hand', purely the means of being able to do what one really wants to do. Such individuals certainly do not live to work but work to live. To live in the sense of survival, of course, but also in the sense of having something to live for. There are also those fortunate individuals who find something to live for in the very activity that supports them economically – in their job, be this some grandiose artistic or intellectual activity or political endeavour, the dedicated management of some worthwhile enterprise or some more modest trade or professional activity. These people also have skills in the use of the 'ready to hand' for the achievement of what they have come to see as their purposes. Their good fortune, or perhaps their achievement, lies in the fact that those purposes are truly theirs and not those of some employer or other authority. If they operate within a structure that supports them economically, that structure is again part of the 'ready to hand' and

finding it, or adapting one's aspirations to it, may be the supreme skill of all which approaches wisdom in the conduct of one's life.

And then there are all those other entities with whom we have the possibility of 'being with'. To begin with, the vast majority of these will be simply beyond the horizon of consciousness. We have no idea they exist or could even do so. To begin with, even the most immediate Other, usually no doubt the mother, is no more than an entity which is 'ready to hand', no more than that which satisfies the infant's immediate needs. Progressively, other human beings are drawn in from beyond the horizon of consciousness to become objects of detached attention, 'present at hand' and then 'ready to hand' as they meet the growing individual's needs, wants, whimsies or whatever.

Precisely what is involved in 'being with' others in the world will depend on a number of philosophical perspectives. The Kantian (Kant 1785) one is all too obvious and is explicitly, if somewhat critically, recognised by Heidegger. In Kantian terms, those with whom we share Dasein are persons, rational beings not appropriately treated when they are seen purely as the means to the achievement of Dasein's purposes. For the rights theorist, beings possessed of Dasein are beings with rights so that their interests may not be simply ignored or treated as of no account. For the personalist (Buber 1923) they are beings with whom we are obliged to see ourselves in an I-Thou relationship, that is in a relationship of at least equality and empathy. One is obliged to see where the Other is coming from and required to regard his or her perspective, understandings and goals as objectively equal in importance to one's own. One may not say to him or her 'Think as I do or disappear' (Lyotard 1972) from the universe of my consciousness.' This may also chime with the Levinassian (Levinas 1982) notion that we are responsible for the Other. Here Levinas must mean not that we should do everything for the Other or make his or her decisions for them.

Our responsibility is not for the everyday comfort and well-being of the Other, though we are obliged to do all we can to prevent serious harm coming to him or her. We are, however, responsible for the dignity and independence of the Other and may not allow these to be destroyed, far less be the agent of their destruction.

At what point does the capacity for 'being with' first occur? To what extent can it be developed? Is it ever fully developed in anyone? What is involved in such development? How much do we need to understand of another person or be prepared to sacrifice for him or her for it to be said that we exist in a state of 'being with' them? Is mere empathy, even fleeting empathy, a beginning? Do we have to identify with them in some way for the process to begin? Can sympathy for the plight of the anonymous starving third world child or the victims of a brutal war in a distant part of the world count as a beginning of 'being with'? The fleeting movement of sympathy and identification at least brings the Other out of the realms of the merely 'present at hand' or, worse, of the 'ready to hand' in the calculations of an ambitious businessperson or politician. Is there anyone in the modern world with whom we can feel no modicum of 'being with', a question to which Noddings (1984) with her claim that Americans cannot be expected to care for starving children in Africa and Levinas who claims we are all responsible for everyone else, seem to give such starkly contrasting answers? These are all questions which we cannot begin to answer here, though clearly developing the capacity for 'being with' others has to be central to the development of the self. No doubt this development stands to be assisted by studies of the world of human life, human and social activity and human relations. Actual social interaction and opportunities for the development of sympathy and personal relations with those of differing experience from the learner are important if the capacity is to be developed to any significant extent or in any significant depth.

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that many of the most remunerative and prestigious positions in our society are achieved through what are disgustingly termed ‘people skills’: social skills, management skills, leadership skills, commercial skills, entrepreneurial skills, presentational skills and so on. In a crude utilitarian sense, these skills are the most ‘useful’ for anyone to learn. Yet to practice these skills ‘successfully’ may be to see others not as persons with whom one shares the experience of ‘being with’ but as entities which are ‘ready to hand’ and may be used in the achievement of one’s, or one’s employer’s purposes. This may be given an entirely sinister interpretation, implying that, for the most proficient practitioners of these skills, others, workers, subordinates, colleagues, the social acquaintances with whom one finds it advantageous to network, and so on are relegated to the level of things.

Though events may often demonstrate all too clearly that many of the apparently most successful people in our world have been actuated by personal advantage rather than a spirit of ‘being with’ the rest of the population, this is not to deny the validity of the goal encouraging all learners’ to achieve a fuller understanding of the notion of ‘being with’. An enlightened view of interpersonal skills may not necessarily see them as purely manipulative but as an ability to combine a proper concern for one’s own interests and those who, like family, subordinates, and friends depend on one, with a sense of ‘being with’ others with whom one comes into contact. Social manipulation would then clearly be an impoverished version of these skills. It may in fact also be self-defeating, for naked self-interest is not an attractive quality and may do little to enrich one’s personal relations or, in the long run, even advance one’s material interests.

It is important that in developing the conscious self, the capacity for ‘being with’ should not be seen as some kind of constraining moral obligation. This would have the effect

of placing educators who try to develop this aspect of their pupils' selves in the usual unenviable position of moulding them for the benefit of others, albeit unspecified others in the world at large. The capacity for 'being with' others is one that most of us have as adults and which we know enriches our lives. To be without it would be to lead an impoverished existence indeed. Tragically, there may be some pitiable souls who never achieve 'being with' other human beings at all. In worldly terms they may be highly successful in acquiring a stock of useful social, entrepreneurial or technical skills but no other human being is ever more to them than 'ready to hand', useful as a means for the achievement of their purposes, but no more.

It is a false dichotomy to play off widening the circle of our potential for 'being with' others against the perfectly proper responsibility we have for our own preservation and that of those more immediately close to us. 'Being with' another does not entail sacrificing all for his or her benefit any more than we are normally expected to sacrifice everything for the advantage of our closest friends or family. Indeed, respect for their dignity may entail the very opposite. Far from being seen as a restriction of one's own potential for development, 'being with' the Other may be seen as part of the positive development of the self. If this is seen as a virtue, something to be admired, this is an additional and unsolicited bonus. In this our position may seem to approach that of some ancient philosophers, for whom the morally admirable was part of the full and flourishing life and thus in the individual's highest prudential interest.

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