CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Chinese Philosophy as Experimental Philosophy

HAGOP SARKISSIAN AND RYAN NICHOLS

INTRODUCTION

Among the methods used to interpret and investigate Chinese philosophy surveyed in this volume, experimental philosophy is, almost assuredly, the least well known and least deployed. In fact, there is very little published work that falls under the title of "experimental Chinese philosophy" as we will define it. Part of the reason why has to do with the recent vintage of this methodological movement, which only began in earnest in the last fifteen years. Yet another possible reason has to do with a substantive question concerning whether the methods of experimental philosophy are even appropriate for the investigation of Chinese philosophy for, as we shall see, some assumptions must be met before considering whether they are. Nonetheless, we maintain that fruitful avenues of research lay within relatively easy reach.

Given this backdrop, the purpose of this chapter is to briefly assay the landscape of experimental philosophy and identify which, if any, of its central manifestations may be of use for those working in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

EMPIRICALLY INFORMED PHILOSOPHY VS. EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Before proceeding, it might be helpful to characterize experimental philosophy by contrasting it with a related yet (for present purposes) distinct approach—empirical philosophy.[1] "Empirical philosophy" refers to an approach by numerous philosophers (most noticeably in philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, political philosophy, and moral philosophy) to make use of observational and experimental research from the social, behavioral, and natural sciences to inform, enrich, and adjudicate philosophical claims.

Empirical philosophy of this type has a long and storied history. Outside of a brief interregnum in the twentieth century, when analytic philosophers were centrally preoccupied with the analysis of the semantics of ordinary concepts, philosophers

throughout history have availed themselves of research in relevant disciplines—oftentimes even doing the work themselves. Among those who have approached philosophical questions empirically include such notable figures as Descartes, Hume, Newton, and Locke (e.g., Appiah 2008: chapter 1; Knobe 2007).

Today, many philosophers working in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, moral philosophy, and applied ethics routinely and systematically draw upon the social, behavioral, and biological sciences to inform their theories. Some empirical philosophy is almost akin to highly theoretical science. This is true in disciplines such as philosophy of biology and philosophy of physics, where much research is dedicated to systematizing the empirical research in these fields and placing it in a coherent and broad theoretical framework. Jesse Prinz has characterized this type of work in the philosophy of mind as follows.

> One might put the point by saying that empirical philosophy is a form of theoretical psychology, which tries to systematize empirical results, draw implications, guide research, and relate laboratory findings to broad overarching issues that have been of traditional concern in philosophy. (2008: 218).

However, philosophers also draw upon empirical research more selectively, using it to inform focused research and to make more narrow claims as well. For example, philosophers have used research from experimental psychology to make claims about the nature of moral judgment (e.g., Kelly 2011; Mikhail 2007) and consciousness (e.g., Prinz 2012).

Indeed, those working with the Chinese tradition have increasingly made use of empirical research in their interpretations of the classical texts. Bongrae Seok (2013), for example, has argued that thinking of classical Confucian theories of virtue from a framework informed by cognitive science can help us understand the tradition better and also make it more relevant and applicable to contemporary concerns. Specifically, he argues that classical Confucianism seems committed to the idea that moral cognition is embodied in important ways. He makes extensive use of the scientific literature on embodied cognition to elucidate this theme. Hagop Sarkissian has argued that the Confucian concept of *de* might be understood as arising from virtuous individuals minding the impact of minor features of their bearing, demeanor, countenance, tone of voice, and other related qualities. The impact from changes in these characteristics has been measured in experimental social psychology (Sarkissian 2010a). Ryan Nichols and Don Munro have argued that resources from evolutionary biology and psychology such as kin selection and reciprocal altruism can help us understand salient aspects of classical Confucian thought, such as its emphases on reciprocity and filial devotion (Munro 2002; Nichols 2011). Eric Schwitzgebel (2007) has drawn on developmental psychology in assessing the competing claims of Xunzi and Mengzi on the proper course of self-cultivation; Brian Bruya (2010a; 2010b) draws on the cognitive science of action in understanding Early Confucianism; Ted Slingerland (2013) has drawn on the psychology of dualism and dual-process theories of cognition (Slingerland et al., 2012) in interpretations of early Chinese classics; David Morrow (2009) has used Mencius as a way to argue for a particular model concerning the relationship between

emotion, moral principle, and moral judgment. More recently, David Wong (2015) argues that metaphors of adorning, crafting, and cultivating human nature in early Confucian texts refer to distinct aspects of it, and that resources from psychology and neuroscience can help us better understand them.[2]

Experimental philosophy is distinguished chiefly in that philosophers themselves (often in collaboration with researchers in the relevant sciences) conduct the experiments by generating the hypotheses, developing the experimental design, collecting data, and doing the statistical analyses (see also Rose and Danks 2013). This requires some training and familiarity with experimental research methods, which is why much of this work is done in collaboration with researchers in related fields who are experienced in the methods. Fortunately, given the significant overlap in research interests between philosophers and many social and behavioral scientists, opportunities for fruitful collaboration are not difficult to find.

THREE TYPES OF EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Experimental philosophy is, then, the systematic exploration of philosophically relevant questions using the tools of experimental science. Its aims, goals, and methods are, however, diverse. The following taxonomy might be fruitful for framing the remaining discussion. This taxonomy draws from previous work with some modification (e.g., Alexander 2012; Nadelhoffer and Nahmias 2007). It is by no means exhaustive, and particular projects may fall under more than one category.

Extended Conceptual Analysis: Conceptual analysis is a traditional method of philosophy, with a venerable past. For example, when Socrates asks about the nature of justice, or the nature of what is pious, he is engaged in conceptual analysis—seeking to elucidate the nature of a concept by examining its usage and breaking it down into its more basic components. This is arguably the focus of many early discussions in the Chinese tradition as well. We can understand Confucius's attempt to clarify the application of terms such as "filial" and "upright," and Mencius's argument about the correct application of the concept of a true king, to be analogues of this practice. The result is a characterization that provides a concept's prototypical instantiation, general definition, or condition of apt use.

This seems to be an activity supremely suited to pursuit without any highly specialized training or equipment save the individual mind and clarity of thought. As Timothy Williamson notes,

> If anything can be pursued in an armchair, philosophy can. Its traditional method is thinking, without observation or experiment. If the pursuit is conceived as social, rather than solely individual, then speaking must be added to thinking, and several armchairs are needed, but that still leaves philosophy looking methodologically very far from the natural sciences. Loosely speaking, their method is a posteriori, philosophy's a priori. (Williamson 2005: 1)

However, even here we have a hint at the potential benefits of using experimental methods. The "social" dimension noted by Williamson is most readily understood

as referring to dialogue—analyzing concepts with shared users of the concepts. Why reflect with others? As shared users of concepts, we might help one another elucidate and analyze the semantics of the concepts being considered. If this is so, then experimental methods can extend this activity systematically, canvassing the intuitions of ordinary language users on a host of concepts at the heart of philosophical debate. Some experimental philosophy is of this kind, aiming at arriving at a deeper understanding of the concepts themselves. Other projects use experimental methods to analyze concepts to see whether the analyses undertaken by philosophers either track or depart from ordinary, prephilosophical intuition.

Some work in experimental philosophy clearly fits under this general rubric. For example, there were a number of early papers devoted to exploring folk intuitions concerning the relationship between causal determinism on the one hand, and free will and moral responsibility on the other. The purpose of some of this research was to identify whether ordinary, untutored intuitions aligned with those of philosophical compatibilists (who claim that moral responsibility is compatible with the thesis of causal determinism) or incompatibilists (who claim that determinism undermines moral responsibility). Showing that ordinary intuition conflicts with either camp would then give that camp an extra theoretical burden, as it would have to explain away what seems intuitive to most users of these concepts (see Sommers 2010 for a review). As experimental philosophy has developed over the years, research of this kind has continued but in a minor role.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELING

Extended conceptual analysis is chiefly interested in the nature of the concepts themselves, and how best to analyze them. Another project aims, instead, to uncover the psychological mechanisms that underlie the application of these concepts. What are the psychological processes that give rise to these concepts? Are they driven by cold, calculating cognition, or hot, reflexive cognition? What factors are the judgments sensitive to? And are the processes reliable? Experimental projects falling under this general theme are most closely aligned with traditional cognitive science, and taken together the number of studies done so far under this theme would constitute the clear majority of all experimental studies (Knobe forthcoming).

Put another way, most work done under this broad theme is not done to elucidate a concept or to provide a more nuanced or novel analysis of a concept (such as moral responsibility or justice or beauty). Instead, psychological modeling seeks to show how the application of a concept may be affected by factors or considerations in unexpected ways. As Joshua Knobe, a leading figure, puts it:

> In the paradigmatic case of this sort of work, a researcher is studying people's application of a concept and comes upon some specific pattern in the results that seems highly surprising and counterintuitive. Then other researchers explore this effect further, trying to get at the cognitive processes underlying it. Throughout this whole process, the emphasis is always on one particular effect and its

> psychological underpinnings; no one ever proposes anything that looks like an analysis of the concept as a whole. (Knobe forthcoming)

Knowledge of these psychological processes can, of course, inform our judgments as to the veracity of the judgments themselves. For example, if the judgments are the product of cognitive processes that we have antecedent or independent reason to think are unreliable, then we might then be skeptical that the judgments resulting from such processes are veridical or reliable themselves (e.g., Nichols 2014).

PHILOSOPHICAL RESTRICTIONISM

Finally, some projects in experimental philosophy are aimed at curtailing the ambitions of standard philosophical methodology, such as conceptual analysis and the use of thought experiments to elucidate intuitions in the construction of philosophical theories. Despite constituting a very small minority of experimental projects, restrictionism is a highly visible one, including some of the most discussed, cited, and controversial projects in experimental philosophy. Papers in this "negative project" (e.g. Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg 2014) seek to problematize traditional philosophical methods by showing that the intuitions or judgments that they yield stem from processes that are unreliable or prone to systematic bias. For example, researchers have reported systematic differences in philosophical intuitions stemming from the order of the cases presented (e.g., Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012), the context in which thought experiments are presented (e.g., Liao et al. 2012; Tobia, Chapman, and Stich 2013), the identities of the actors in the experiments (e.g., Sarkissian et al. 2011), or the social or cultural background of the participants themselves (e.g., Machery et al. 2004; Sytsma et al. 2015).

One large motivation for the restrictionist project has been the well-documented, pervasive, and systematic psychological differences between East Asians and Westerners, especially pertaining to how individuals in these different cultures conceive of, categorize, and explain the social and nonsocial world. Richard Nisbett and colleagues (2001), in an influential review of this literature, argue that whereas East Asians think holistically, attending to the relationships between objects and situating them into broader contexts, Westerners think analytically, attending to the separateness of objects and classifying them in distinct categories. These include cultural differences in how people think about individuality, agency, and entativity (i.e., where individuals spontaneously draw boundaries between individuals) (Heine et al. 2008; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Westerners endorse and reflect a commitment to the separateness of persons as individual loci of control, who value independence from others. By contrast, individuals in many cultures of Asia, East Asia, Southern Europe, and Africa see individual behavior as largely organized and determined by, and thus contingent on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others, as well as their nonsocial environmental context.[3] Experimental philosophers have used this research program to generate hypotheses on how individuals from these different cultures will diverge in their philosophical intuitions in a systematic way, thus bringing the universal ambitions of philosophy into question.

Of course, cultural differences in cognition represent just one way in which philosophers' ambitions may be parochial, contingent, or local. Other individual differences, such as age or gender, or motivated cognition, may also play a role.

EXPERIMENTAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

There is little work that qualifies as experimental Chinese philosophy under any of the characterizations above. Thus, in what remains, we will provide a couple of case studies concerning how one might use experimental methods to explore the Chinese intellectual tradition.

There are two broad types of projects one might do:

(1) Test for the impact of internalized Chinese social/philosophical culture: Subjects appropriate for this study would be drawn from East Asian societies inheriting Confucian cultural and moral values, such as China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.
(2) Test specific philosophical claims that appear in the philosophical tradition itself, such as claims concerning the nature of moral judgment or the effects of observing ritual propriety.

In what follows, we will give examples of both types of projects, using two of Confucianism's most distinctive features as test cases—filial piety and ritual propriety.

EXAMPLE 1—FILIAL PIETY

Consider the philosophically rich anecdote in *Analects* 13.18, having to do with Upright Gong, in the context of experimental and empirical philosophy.

> 13.18 The Duke of She said to Confucius, "Among my people there is one we call 'Upright Gong.' When his father stole a sheep, he reported him to the authorities." Confucius replied, "Among my people, those who we consider "upright" are different from this: fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. 'Uprightness' is to be found in this." (Slingerland 2003a: 147)

Philosophers standardly approach this passage from one of three positions, either a comparativist perspective, a close-reading perspective, or an intra-textual perspective. Comparativist readings might discuss the relationship between the case of Upright Gong and the case of Euthyphro, from the eponymous early Platonic dialogue (e.g., Zhu 2002). Euthyphro charged his father with murder after his father had caused the death of one of his slaves. Close readings of *Analects* 13.18, by contrast, tend to contextualize the passage in its social and political setting as they mark nuanced linguistic features; authors sometimes accompany close readings with criticism (see Hall and Ames 1987: 300–309; and Liu 2009). However, most treatments of the Upright Gong case fall into the third camp, by virtue of their attempts to position the passage in relation to other parts of *Analects* or other Early Confucian source texts (e.g., Chan 2012).

Instead of these approaches, one of the current authors (Nichols) along with a research team, explored the passage from an experimental angle. Broadly, this research team wanted to know about the cultural mirroring of the passage's moral ethos in contemporary China, as compared to elsewhere. After all, studies show that Chinese (and East Asians in general) have greater rates of filial piety than others (Hwang 1999), a fact routinely attributed to Confucian cultural heritage. Would Chinese subjects be more willing than Western subjects to show agreement with Confucius's advice and disregard principles of justice by concealing the crimes of kinsfolk? In psychological studies it is not enough to raise good research questions; one must craft principled reasons to hypothesize that a specific, testable answer is true. To illustrate, one of the hypotheses of this research was that Chinese participants would express more filial piety than American participants by being more willing to conceal the crimes of their fathers.

Nichols et al. (2016) designed an experiment that duplicated several key features of the case of Upright Gong, focusing not specifically on stealing but on other immoral behavior. All participants in the experiment read a short passage asking them to imagine being the passenger in a car when the driver of the vehicle causes an accident. Two components of this short passage varied according to experimental condition. One variable concerned the identity of the driver causing the accident: either one's father, one's taxi cab driver, or one's supervisor at work. A second variable concerned the resulting consequences of the imaginary accident: either property damage to someone else's car, bodily injury of a pedestrian, or vehicular manslaughter of a pedestrian. In all cases, the driver speeds away. Participants were drawn from both Chinese and Western populations, and were asked the same set of questions (in Chinese or English), which revolved around moral psychology. For example, they were asked "How ashamed would you feel if you turned in the driver to the civil authorities, and other people found out that you did so?" and "How morally wrong do you believe was the driver's actions?" Answers to these and other questions were collected on a scale, meaning that participants were not forced into answering yes or no questions.

Results confirmed the hypotheses that Chinese participants were significantly more influenced by filial piety and by authority in their moral psychological reasoning. This can be illustrated by using data from the question "How willing would you be to conceal this offense?" Across all conditions, Chinese were much more willing to conceal the driver's crime than were American participants. In particular, even though both Chinese and American participants were more willing to conceal the crimes of their fathers than, say, the crimes of their taxi drivers, Chinese participants were much more willing to do so (Nichols et al. 2016).

In sum, we used an analog of the case of Upright Gong and recruited contemporary Chinese and American subjects to study moral psychology. Our conclusions from this experiment shed light on the influence of Confucianism and filial piety on Chinese subjects. While we can't restate that argument here, we have evidence to believe that cultural transmission makes cross-cultural psychological studies like this one relevant for understanding the influence of the contents of Confucianism. Cultural transmission refers to the processes that facilitate the vertical diffusion

(across generations through time) and horizontal diffusion (across a population at one time) of information. Cultural transmission modelers and theorists (Henrich and Boyd, 1998; Richerson and Boyd, 2005) have made many gains in testing their hypotheses. As a result, historians of philosophy interested in the testable legacy of ideas could improve their work by making themselves familiar with and applying cultural transmission theory to historical philosophical ideas.

More importantly, perhaps, studies such as this one might help adjudicate some of the competing philosophical claims made throughout history concerning the role of filial piety in social and political life, especially with regard to its relationship to other Confucian values such as humaneness or benevolence (*ren*). Time and again the weightiness of filial piety as a core Confucian value has spurred debates as to its potential corrupting effects. Can Confucianism be a viable sociopolitical ethos if its excessive emphasis on partialism undermines or compromises its commitments to general benevolence and social justice? This question, arising throughout the history of Chinese thought (see Chan 2012), and once again the locus of scholarly attention (see Sarkissian 2010b), has proven to be recalcitrant. Experimental research may help to adjudicate philosophical debates in this domain by exploring these philosophical questions using new methods (cf. Sarkissian ms).

EXAMPLE 2—RITUAL

Another distinctive aspect of early Confucian ethics is its emphasis on rituals, or the *li*. The *li* referred to a broad range of activities and practices, among them participation in formal religious rites keyed to important life moments (e.g., mourning rites, wedding rites) as well as more mundane aspects of social conduct that would fall under manners or etiquette. In particular, both Confucius and Xunzi maintained that practicing rituals could have transformative effects on individuals, including forming strong emotional connections with others, and fostering feelings of reverence and benevolence. Indeed, ritual practice was thought to promote social harmony, providing individuals with both scripts for normative behavior as well as connecting them to a transcendent order—the Way of Heaven. Rituals provide meaning and situate one's behavior in a larger framework (Cook 2004; Csikszentmihalyi 2004; Slingerland 2003b).

But how do rituals enable this? On the one hand, one might think that the early Confucians endorsed a view whereby ritual efficacy lay in their relationship to Heaven, working in inscrutable ways to shape human dispositions and conduct. Some passages in the *Analects*, for example, reflect a kind of reverence for the power of the ceremonial that is beyond human ken (e.g., 3.11). On the other hand, many have thought that the early Confucians were making claims based on the actual effects of ritual participation through careful observation, first-hand experience, and engagement with the received tradition. According to this latter way of looking at the issue, the early Confucians were making broad, empirical claims about the functional role of ritual performance in human psychology. But what, precisely, is this role? How should we understand it?

Consider two distinct possibilities. We might think that the practice or ritual—that is, participating in the rites and comporting oneself according to ritual form—would cause or cultivate the caring and prosocial emotional attitudes. The particular gestures, postures, incantations, and sequence of events of ritual ceremonies could evoke the appropriate dispositions in the participant. There is textual evidence to support this view, as numerous passages reflect the belief that something about the particular ritual forms passed down through antiquity and through the Zhou dynasty were thought to be incredibly important and profound (e.g., the Di sacrifice mentioned in *Analects* 3.11). Indeed, the general Confucian attitude toward ritual is one of conservatism, and there is manifest disapproval of deviation away from orthodox ritual form (with rare exceptions such as that found in *Analects* 9.3).

However, other passages note that the *li* could be practiced *pro forma* (or even reluctantly) without any emotional evocation. This is revealed in the infamous exchange between Confucius and Zai Wo, who resists observing the traditional three-year mourning period for his deceased parents, believing such a protracted time in the solitary and meager mourning rites would hinder important parts of self-cultivation (17.21). Confucius claims that if Zai Wo would feel at ease ending the mourning period after one year then he should do so. Here the natural, genuine feelings are lacking, and so the ritual is meaningless without them. We can also infer that the barren and simple mourning lifestyle would not be sufficient to make Zai Wo feel a greater sense of loss for his parents.

If ritual forms cannot foster the emotions, perhaps the emotions must be brought along with the practitioner, as some have suggested. For example, Bryan Van Norden (2007) has argued that rituals are meant to be approached as though they are sacred, and persons ought to participate in rituals with awe and reverence. These feelings imbue the ritual with a kind of authority. On this view, rituals can have transformative effects on persons only if they approach them with a standing commitment to treat them as sacrosanct. Participants must be instructed on how to feel about the ceremony in question (e.g., joyful or dignified), and the ritual form must have resonating elements (e.g., festive or solemn music).

We might then hypothesize that ritual form is important, but the meaning imparted to rituals is of even greater importance. From here, we can generate some testable hypotheses.[4] For example, participants might be invited to partake in an experiment on the effects of body posture on learning. All participants would be asked to assume a posture that either has some preexisting association with religious rites—say, a traditional bow, a kneel, or a position mimicking prayer—or one with no such association—say, flexing one's arms or sitting in one direction while twisting one's torso to face another. For each such posture, one set of participants would be told that it has deep and significant ritual meaning in several cultures, where adopting the posture in question is thought to foster communal values or commitments (the "value condition"), whereas another set of participants would be told that the relevant posture is meant to test their physical capabilities or constrain their movements (the "control condition"). All participants would then be asked to take part in a subsequent experiment aimed at testing some moral or prosocial

tendency, such as contributing to a common good or curtailing self-interest. The main hypothesis would be that the participants in the value condition would be more likely to act in morally positive or prosocial ways as opposed to those in the control condition. A secondary hypothesis would be that preexisting levels of religiosity or spirituality, as well as preexisting association of posture with ritual form, might also significantly influence the efficacy of adopting the postures. Some existing research supports these hypotheses (e.g., Barrett and Lawson, 2001).

Several early Confucian texts speak of the efficacy of ritual when coupled with appropriate attitudes and emotions, and scholars have explored and evaluated these claims throughout history from the armchair. Yet such claims can be explored using experimental designs such as the one just noted.[5]

CONCLUSION

The field of East Asian philosophy has been unusually friendly to interdisciplinary approaches to philosophical questions, but we have considerable room in which to make further contributions. Indeed, in this brief introduction to the topic, we have not had occasion to discuss many other relevant studies, testing hypotheses on East Asian texts for example by using resources from text analytics (e.g., Slingerland and Chudek 2011). And while it might be argued that experiments, whether with human subjects or textual corpora, are best left to experienced scientific researchers, it is not always reasonable to expect that the specific claims made in the Chinese philosophical tradition will be so tested without the contributions of scholars working with the tradition. Specialists working in the tradition are best positioned to generate the hypotheses and represent the claims in the classical corpus in an honest and faithful fashion. Moreover, studies concerning Chinese thought can be made much stronger by collaboration with those who specialize in Asian or East Asian fields with differing disciplinary strengths, whether historians, political scientists, economists, literature scholars, or linguists. Fruitful avenues for exploration lay in the offing for those willing to make the effort to establish ties with other researchers and jointly explore shared research agendas.

NOTES

Our thanks to Joshua Knobe for helpful comments and discussion on a previous draft.

1. For an overview of some work in this area, see Knobe et al. (2012).
2. See also the special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Volume 9) edited by Brian Bruya, containing other work along these lines.
3. Chinese philosophy is implicated in the restrictionist project. This is because of the close connection between Chinese philosophy—especially Confucian philosophy—on the one hand, and East Asian social and political culture on the other. Confucian cultures persist in many East Asian societies today, including (but not limited to) the cultures of Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. Many psychological

and behavioral differences documented by the researchers above were with the participation of East Asian subjects, and the tendencies they exhibit align with the principles and precepts found in the Confucian intellectual tradition itself. These include, for example, an emphasis on family duties as weighty values shaping the practices of everyday life, understanding (and endorsing) human society as consisting of dyadic relationships arranged largely along hierarchical orientations, seeing the self as shaped profoundly by such relationships, and embracing communal values to a much greater extent than individual ones. We won't get here into the complicated story of the direction of causality, and prefer to take a position where geographical/ecological features can play an important role in shaping basic cultural orientations and values, but also where such values can then evolve through cultural evolutionary forces and reinforce and extend such orientations and in ways that would be highly underdetermined by the factors stemming from the original ecological context.

4. My thanks to Ted Slingerland (personal correspondence) for suggesting the general form of such an experiment.
5. While our two examples concerned aspects of Chinese philosophy which might be considered distinctive, it is important to note that existing work in experimental philosophy has also found that Chinese and Western subjects share core intuitions in a wide range of philosophical domains, including free will (Sarkissian et al. 2010), metaethics (Sarkissian et al. 2011), and the self (De Freitas et al. ms).

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