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WHAT IS NATURAL ABOUT FOOT'S ETHICAL NATURALISM?

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Abstract
Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* is in the midst of a cool reception. It appears that this is due to the fact that Foot's naturalism draws on a picture of the biological world at odds with the view embraced by most scientists and philosophers. Foot's readers commonly assume that the account of the biological world that she must want to adhere to, and that she nevertheless mistakenly departs from, is the account offered by contemporary neo-Darwinian biological sciences. But as is evident in her notion of function, Foot does not employ an evolutionary view of the biological world. I will attempt to show, first, that it is for good reason that Foot is not operating with an evolutionary view of function; her views do not aim to unseat evolutionary views of function, but instead simply have quite different theoretical goals. Second, I aim to underline the importance to Foot's naturalism of the fact that we are practically reasoning creatures. The profundity of Foot's ethical naturalism rests in how she approaches our nature as practically reasoning creatures. In this aspect of Foot's thought, there is a significant Kantian strain that is surprising to find in someone who calls herself an ethical naturalist.[1]

1. Introduction

In *Natural Goodness*, Philippa Foot tries to breathe new life into ethical naturalism as an approach to an ethics of virtue.[2] On her account, there is a logical kinship between evaluative judgments made of non-human organisms and moral judgments applied to human beings. An organism of a given type, on her account, will count as defective if it lacks something that is vital for carrying through with its characteristic mode of survival and reproduction.

[1] I would like to thank Erin Flynn and an anonymous referee for their constructive comments.
[2] Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

Similar norms apply to human beings as organisms. Yet since we are practically reasoning organisms, there are norms of conduct that we must understand and act on in order to count as good humans. Foot argues that by the natural norms applying to human beings, we count as defective if we lack the virtues. The claim is that to lack the virtues is to lack features that we need to get on with a life that is characteristically human. Moral judgments assess human conduct from the standpoint of natural human goodness.

From this brief sketch, we can see that Foot's naturalism offers a fresh approach to objectivism in ethics. Yet, in spite of such attractions, *Natural Goodness* is in the midst of a cool reception. Here, I will argue that this reception is due to the fact that Foot's naturalism draws on a picture of the biological world that is at odds with the view embraced by most contemporary scientists and philosophers. Foot's readers commonly assume that the account of the biological world that she must want to adhere to, and that she nevertheless mistakenly departs from, is the account offered by contemporary neo-Darwinian biological sciences. Given such a reading, Foot looks horribly misinformed and old-fashioned. For Foot identifies survival and reproduction as basic goals of an organism's traits; this view suggests to some that she harbours out-of-date views about biology because she does not accept the now orthodox view that organismic traits function essentially to promote gene replication.[3] Further, the reader will look in vain through her little treatise for empirical studies that would seem to be necessary to found an ethical theory on natural facts. Yet Foot, I will try to show, is neither misinformed nor old-fashioned. I will attempt to show, first, that it is for good reason that Foot is not operating with an evolutionary view of function; her views do not aim to unseat evolutionary views of function, but instead simply have quite different theoretical goals. Second, I aim to underline the importance to Foot's naturalism of the fact that we are practically reasoning creatures. The profundity of Foot's ethical naturalism rests, I shall argue, in how she approaches our nature as practically reasoning creatures. In this aspect of Foot's thought, there is a significant Kantian strain that is surprising to find in someone who calls herself an ethical naturalist. But it is because of

[3] William FitzPatrick, *Teleology and the Norms of Nature* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 225.

this strain that one does not find reference to empirical studies in her discussion of human nature. As I shall try to make clear, the kind of appeal to natural fact that Foot makes is therefore significantly at odds with what many of her readers insist on imputing to her.

2. A sketch of Foot's ethical naturalism

For Foot, moral judgment is a variety of what she calls *natural normativity*.[4] Natural norms are norms that apply to organisms, in virtue of which they are good or defective organisms of a given species. Foot argues that such norms are *internal* to the identification of anything as an organism. That is to say, to identify something as an organism is *ipso facto* to look at it from a normative standpoint; and this is (logically) *before* developing any empirical theories of the organism.

Let us examine Foot's claim more carefully: why must we adopt a normative standpoint in looking at something as an organism? There are two premises to her argument for this point. First, grasping something as an organism requires us to situate the organism against its species or life form. Second, to situate an organism against the background of the characteristic function of its species is to look at it from a normative perspective. Let us look at the first premise. According to Michael Thompson, whose work provides the basis for Foot's account, identifying something as an organism situates it within a 'wider context' which is its species, albeit not 'species' in the sense employed by biology. As he puts it, 'If a thing is alive, if it is an *organism*, then some particular vital operations and processes must go on in it from time to time – eating, budding out, breathing, walking, growing, thinking, photosynthesizing.'[5] But nothing can fall under these descriptions by being examined as a concrete particular in isolation. To see this, note that when we talk about something as drinking, it is always a matter of saying that '*for it* or *in it*, the events before us add up to drinking,' and that is a matter of situating these events against the

[4] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 33.

[5] Michael Thompson, 'The Representation of Life' in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Hursthouse, Lawrence, and Quinn (eds) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) p. 275.

background of what happens in that species.[6] Only against the background of a life form, can what is happening in a bit of space that is occupied by a domestic cat can be seen as amounting to eating. To take another example, one and the same process, cell division, counts as reproduction for bacteria, but constitutes growth or maintenance in a multicellular organism.[7] Hence, the vital operations that characterize something as an organism are graspable only against the background of a life form. A particular organism, then, is understandable only in its relation to its species and how an individual of that species characteristically gets along; hence, it involves a rudimentary identification of the thing as functionally organized. Note that this is a logical claim about what is involved in identifying something as an organism; the existence of life forms, in the sense employed by Thompson, is not a contingent fact about the development of the present set of living organisms, as is the existence of genera and of phyla. The existence of a life-form is presupposed whenever we identify anything as an organism.

The second premise in the naturalist's argument is again: to situate an organism against the background of the characteristic function of its species is to look at it from a normative perspective. To situate an organism against its species is precisely to make an assessment of that organism against what is normal for organisms of that type. That is, it is to make a normative assessment. Not every variation in an individual from what is characteristic of its species will count as a defect, of course. As Foot points out, a blue tit can lack the patch of blue on its head without being impeded in living its life; this lack is not, then, a defect.[8] So, natural normativity involves some recognition of which components are crucial to carrying out an organism's vital operations. Note that to possess some such understanding we need go no deeper than grasping that the organism as in some way functionally organized, which is precisely what we are doing when we situate an organism against the background of its species. This further implies that to look at an organism as an organism involves some recognition (though possibly mistaken) of its needs.

[6] Thompson, 'The Representation of Life', p. 276.

[7] Michael Thompson, 'Three Degrees of Natural Goodness' originally in Italian in *Iride*, 2003, English text at http://www.pitt.edu/%7emthompso/three.pdf (last accessed March 25, 2008).

[8] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* p. 30.

It is here that Foot's distance from evolutionary biology is most palpable. On Foot's view, traits that play a role in organismic self-maintenance and reproduction, rather than gene replication, are especially crucial. As she puts it, 'The way an organism *should be* is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction: in most species involving defence, and in some the rearing of the young.'[9] Here, the evolutionary biologist, or someone advocating a view of biological function derived from evolutionary biology may well ask: why should we look for just these features, rather than those that aid gene replication? The suspicion is that Foot is importing a flawed notion of biological function, according to which the features of an organism are as if placed by an intelligent designer in order to promote the organism's welfare. But this claim misconstrues Foot's aims. She is very emphatically *not* pursuing a view of the ultimate function of an organism's traits; for all we know, the ultimate function could be serving in some divine plan or gene replication, or something else altogether. Foot's view of function is independent of any empirical theory about these matters; it is an account of function as it is involved in the identification of organisms as such.[10] The ultimate explanation for the creature's existence is left open, as something to be discovered or, perhaps, a perennial mystery.

Still, one might wonder whether this supposedly prior notion of function isn't contravened by our best empirical theory. That is, if the notion of function Foot puts forward is welfarist, and evolutionary biology shows that evolution produces organismic welfare only accidentally, must we not revise our entire conception of an organism, along lines that Richard Dawkins has suggested? First,

[9] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* p. 33.

[10] Hence, one can see that Foot's notion of function differs considerably from the disparate notions of 'proper function' found in Alvin Plantinga and Ruth Millikan. Plantinga's notion of function is emphatically a notion of something's ultimate function: the use for which it was *designed*. See Plantinga and Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 20. It is also distinct from Millikan's notion of 'proper function' which states, essentially, that the proper function of a feature of a reproduced thing is to be determined by the feature's historical contribution to the successful reproduction of the thing with that trait. See "In Defense of Proper Functions," *Philosophy of Science 56* (1989): 288–302. Foot disavows such an historical conception of function. Her notion of function, as I described above, pertains to the present teleology of the life-form; there is an historical dimension (she follows Thompson in speaking of 'natural historical judgments') but only with regard to the life-cycle that is normal to life-form in question.

let us answer the question of whether Foot *is* offering a welfare-based notion of function. The answer is: not entirely. She says:

> In most cases we speak of what each member of the species needs to be and to do in order that *it* should flourish. But of course what is needed may be needed in a group like cooperation in a pack, or obedience to a leader, and what a member of the species is or does may advantage others rather than himself.[11]

This will not, of course, satisfy an evolutionary biologist. Yet Foot's purpose is not to satisfy the evolutionary biologist; her question is, 'how do we identify organisms as such?' and not 'how did organisms with such and such features emerge?' Many of the vital descriptions that apply to organisms apply in the first instance in virtue of their processes of self-maintenance such as eating which for the most part work to promote the welfare of an organism. But other vital operations are not so clearly related to the organism's own welfare. If they are not oriented to the organism's welfare, they are probably oriented toward the maintenance of the community of which the organism is a member. The result is that Foot's conception of function is neutral as to whether functions ultimately benefit the organism, and it is certainly not a necessary condition of something's being a function on her account. Rather, the view picks out features that are part of an organism as they function in its species-characteristic life. Our conception of species-characteristic life defines a conception of the needs of members of that species against which we assess individual organisms. There is no presumption that the end to which the teleological processes operate is for the welfare of the individual organism.

Foot's view is, then, that to recognize an organism is to recognize something with needs and to assess the organism against those needs. Among the organisms so identified, of course, are human beings. Foot wants to compare the evaluation of human beings to that of plants and animals; in each case, natural normativity is applied to the life form in question. On her view, we are a practically reasoning form of life, and so some of the natural norms pertaining to us evaluate us in our functioning as practical reasoners. The basic idea here is that practical reason is a trait of human beings centrally involved in living out a characteristic

[11] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* p. 33n.

human life. Some deficits of practical reason are, of course, not up to us, but others are up to us; in such cases, we have chosen not to develop those dispositions that are needed reliably to pursue the human good. We become good humans through our development and consistent exercise of the virtues; in that case, we have brought our will to be fully responsive to a well-functioning faculty of practical reason. Conversely, a human is (morally) defective insofar as his will is not responsive to goodness. Rationality and goodness are necessarily not at odds for Foot, as they may be on instrumentalist accounts. For Foot, practical reason answers to human goodness; as Foot puts it, 'there is no criterion of rationality that is not *derived from* that of goodness of the will.'[12] This means that we will not count as irrational if we do not act on a desire that could be fulfilled only by doing something bad. We will, on the other hand, count as irrational for not doing something good that we could quite easily have done.

The importance of practical reason to humans follows from the way that this feature of humans is tied into almost everything that we do, that is, it is tied into every *action*. Action, it is fairly clear, involves intention, and intention at least implicitly involves reasons. A good human acts well. Acting well involves the development and application of practical reason. Deficiencies of practical reason impact the whole range of human action. Therefore, to be a good human requires non-defective functioning of practical reason. Yet Foot also wants to claim that there is no criterion of practical rationality not derived from goodness of the will. So there appears to be a very tight circularity in which human goodness requires practical rationality, and practical rationality in turn appeals to human goodness. On Thompson's reading of Foot, this circularity poses no problem, because Foot intends the central moral claims to be self-validating. He writes:

> [Foot] often seems to be justifying certain claims about human practical rationality where she might have emphasized the extent to which these thoughts are, on an account with this structure, self-validating. The human form of life is one in which considerations of justice, for example, characterize a sound practical reason. But this is not something we properly discover from a close study of human life. It must be given to us

[12] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* p. 11.

> from inside, so to speak. For our *taking* such thoughts as reason-giving, *considered as a general, characteristic phenomenon of human intelligence*, is part of what makes our species to be the sort that it is. It is part of the constitution of this peculiar structuring of a kind of animal life. That we operate with these thoughts is thus a *part* of what makes these thoughts true.[13]

Thompson here rejects McDowell's suggestion in 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' that Foot operates with an external biological account of nature; she is, Thompson rightly argues, counting on our recognition of certain moral norms to validate her views about the characteristic human life. On his reading, Foot ends up in a place that will no doubt sound to many readers decidedly non-naturalistic. But on Foot's view, we are self-evaluating, practical animals. One can see this point in an offhand way by considering the case of humiliation; our susceptibility to humiliation is what makes respect something needful. So, if humans need the virtue of respect, as Foot claims, then some degree of susceptibility to humiliation must be a normal feature of humans. Yet, seeing some instances of feeling humiliated as normal in the way that matters to Foot's ethical naturalism requires seeing it not just as a way that humans normally respond in a statistical sense, but rather seeing it as something that we have no reason to attempt to suppress. For it is evident that we could adopt a regime of attempting to suppress our tendency to be humiliated by disrespectful acts. But we do not do so because we embrace our tendency to be humiliated by some acts; we view it as partly constitutive of our human identity. This is the sort of vision of human nature Foot expects us to think of in conjunction with her ethical naturalism. That is, the view of human nature that Foot wants to put at the foundation of her ethical naturalism is a normatively-laden interpretation of human nature that is not identical with a biological account of the species *Homo sapiens*. Hence, for the purposes of working out our views on ethics, we do not need to engage in empirical studies of human nature.

3. Some criticisms of Foot

Critics of Foot have missed the distinctiveness of her approach to the biological world, or so I shall attempt to show by examining

[13] Thompson, 'Three Degrees of Natural Goodness', p. 7.

some representative criticisms of her work. These critics miss, I believe, both the distinctive logical approach to the biological world that she employs to define natural normativity and also misconstrue how natural normativity applies to practically reasoning human beings.

One line of criticism that has emerged against Foot continues to insist on the superiority of evolutionary explanations. On one such view, Foot's conception of function fails because she needs to draw on the notion of function found in evolutionary biology. She must do this because the evolutionary view of function proves to be superior in its scope.[14] Here is thought that the evolutionary view is a scientific account, as opposed to the Footian account which tracks our everyday, armchair approach to the natural world. If something like the Footian notion of function is present in our everyday discourse, then, according to this view we should revise everyday use to bring it into accord with evolutionary biology, because its epistemological credentials are superior.[15]

The mistake in this view is that it sees Foot's theory as a contender in the wrong field. Foot does not hope to displace the evolutionary view of function. Instead, we should read her as aiming at a view of function that is quite different, and plays a separate theoretical role. Foot's naturalism is not the exclusive way of evaluating organisms, though it is always in play when we make a judgment of an organism; in any such judgment we either assume or challenge the boundaries of a given species. On Foot and Thompsons's view, establishing what is normal for that species is an irreducibly interpretive task, and we are always employing some interpretation when we approach organisms, whether as armchair naturalists or evolutionary biologists. There are plenty of other ways of evaluating organisms, say, from the perspective of adaptive fitness, but the other evaluations depend upon natural normativity because they are evaluations of members of life forms.

It is also important to recognize that Foot's view of function does not claim to be explanatory. It is not a biological theory at all; rather, it is a logical theory, a theory of statements about living things. Hence, the complaint that Foot and Thompson fail to give us a 'serious epistemological story about how we might come to

[14] Joseph Millum, 'Natural Goodness and Natural Evil', *Ratio*, XIX(2006): pp. 199–213.
[15] Millum, 'Natural Goodness and Natural Evil', p. 205.

know the truth of natural-historical judgments' is misplaced.[16] In so far as Foot's goal is to show that a normative stance is essential to making claims about organisms, her concern is not with laying out an epistemology for such claims and she can be satisfied with leaving the task to others to work out.

Another criticism of Foot argues that Foot's ethics either yields repugnant results or it must appeal to a normative standard not grounded in natural norms.[17] Foot's ethical naturalism, on this view, would commit us to deeming disabled human beings to be defective. Given Foot's naturalistic framework, it is *ad hoc* to restrict ethical evaluation to evaluation's of an agent's rational will, or so it is claimed.[18] If Foot's view is indeed naturalistic, humans must be evaluated in just the same ways as other creatures, which includes inspecting our physical integrity for defects.

This view mistakes the source of Foot's views on human nature. She is adhering to a spare, interpretive conception of human nature that operates at a logical level. At that logical level, how we interpret ourselves is relevant; we enact ourselves according to that interpretation, and to the degree we fall short of our self-interpretation, we are defective. Further, as Foot points out in the case of the blue tit, not every variation results in a defect. The same applies to human beings. While she cites certain physical conditions as defects, they are only so provided that they impede humans from living a characteristically human life, and what counts as a characteristic human life is a matter of interpretation, not a matter of statistics. Hence, there would be nothing irrational about not rectifying a 'disability' that caused no genuine impediment to living a species characteristic life. Foot could comfortably embrace, I think, the claims of the Deaf community, for example, to realize distinctive human cultural goods.[19]

Finally, Alasdair MacIntyre, in a review of Foot's work, raised what he supposed to be a criticism of Foot's views in *Natural Goodness*.[20] Here is what he wrote:

[16] Millum, 'Natural Goodness and Natural Evil', p. 205.

[17] Scott Woodcock, 'Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics Has an Achilles' Heel' *Dialogue*, XLV(2006): pp. 445–468.

[18] Woodcock, 'Philippa Foot's Virtue Ethics', p. 452.

[19] Robert Crouch, 'Letting the Deaf Be Deaf: Reconsidering the Use of Cochlear Implants in Prelingually Deaf Children', *The Hastings Center Report,* 27 (Jul.–Aug. 1997): pp. 14–21.

[20] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Virtues in Foot and Geach', *The Philosophical Quarterly* **52**(2002): pp. 621–631.

> Imagine a society of some sufficiently complex species, whose members are systematically differentiated into a large class of those who do whatever is required for the survival and flourishing of society and more generally of the species, and a much smaller class of free-riders. Such a society would suffer from a natural defect if there were too many free riders, but the existence of some free riders would not be a defect, and the free-riders are themselves not necessarily defective members of the species. For their existence might have the important function of making other members of their society and species more vigilant in sustaining the practices necessary for the society's and species' survival and functioning. So it might perhaps be for human beings with promise breakers.

MacIntyre believes that this scenario raises questions about Foot's ability to claim that promise-keeping would be required under her conception of natural normativity. The idea is that human beings, perhaps, differentiate themselves naturally into free-rider and non-free-rider groups (promise-keeping and non-promise-keeping groups). Obviously, such role differentiation is observed in other social creatures, particularly insects. It would be wrong, of course, to insist that characteristics are uniformly necessary for living a species-characteristic life in such cases. Indeed, the vital processes of such organisms are carried out invariably through such differentiation, so that they are clearly identified as the natural norms of such a species. Hence, in some circumstance one would speak of good or defective drone bees, etc.

The problem with using this scenario to attack Foot is that it seems to deny a more fundamental claim that Foot makes, a claim I doubt that MacIntyre wants to deny: that practical rationality is natural to humans. In considering MacIntyre's scenario as applied to human beings, it is either the case that the non-promise keeping humans are exercising practical rationality or they are not. If they are, it is clear that they are exercising it defectively. After all, they have a choice of what to do, and if, as Foot claims, trusting and respectful relations are an essential component of a characteristic human life, then they would be defective as practical reasoners if they were not disposed to act in such a way. On the other hand, if they are not exercising practical reason, then they are not subject to moral evaluation at all, for they are not exercising their will, but somehow naturally tracked to behaviour that would count as immoral in an agent. So, if MacIntyre's scenario

does hold true of humans and promise-keeping, this scenario would not undermine Foot's claims about morality, but perhaps mean that fewer humans are subject to moral evaluation than we had thought.

4. Practical reason and human nature

Foot's critics all understand her to be making a sort of appeal to natural facts to justify ethical conclusions that she simply does not make. The purported appeal goes something like this: we observe human beings; we draw generalizations about their behaviour; these generalizations about human behaviour determine how we ought to behave (e.g., the generalizations determine what count as virtues for humans). MacIntyre argues that it is at least plausible that human societies 'need' some free-riders, because we function better with them. That claim, if true, would be arrived at via a sociological or anthropological study leading to an inductive generalization, but it is not relevant to moral evaluation as Foot sees it. Others argue that it is unlikely that humans are adapted to maximally virtuous conduct or that it is probable that we are adapted to some immoral behaviour. Again, the thought is that we could induce norms of conduct via some sort of psychological or sociological study; in this case, we induce that humans 'ought' to engage in some vicious behaviour, but that is not what follows from Foot's naturalism.

Foot's appeal to natural facts is not the appeal that figures in these readings of her work. Foot is not, that is, recommending behaviour on the basis of its being the way people normally behave. Indeed, it is not obvious that this sort of naturalism can be squared with our nature as practically reasoning creatures. What kind of appeal to natural fact *can* figure in our ethical views then? Foot's own examples are disarmingly simple. She says, 'By the criteria of natural normativity charity is a prime candidate as a virtue, because love and other forms of kindness are needed by every one of us when misfortune strikes.'[21] And also, she says, 'It matters in a human community that people can trust each other, and matters even more that at some basic level people can trust

[21] Foot, *Natural Goodness*, p. 108.

each other.'[22] These are what we might call 'internal observations' or interpretations; they are assessment made by a human of the human situation rather than observations that are merely of the human made from a position of scientific detachment. Foot argues that philosophy has no special authority to offer such observations; yet it seems that she does not think that there is need for scientific investigation to establish the truth of claims that are crucial to the general architecture of human morality. Indeed, I would go further than Foot, to say that to the extent that we think such investigation is important to settling the general architecture of our morality, we have made a philosophical error, for we do not need empirical information to settle whether, say, charity is a virtue. But we do need to interpret ourselves as creatures that live in a way that requires charity, and, arguably, Foot still owes us a story about what commits us to such a self-interpretation. But her point is that we are inevitably put in the position of interpreting ourselves, and that it is against a background of some such interpretation that we make choices.

It is here that I find a Kantian strain in Foot's thought. For while Foot is not committed to universalizability as a necessary component of rational practical reasoning, she does hold that we engage in a kind of reasoned self-constitution that is reminiscent of Kant. For Foot, this reasoned self-constitution is not a matter of giving ourselves a universal law; rather, it is a matter of making a coherent, general picture of our situation. I would argue that there are certain central, almost inevitable human experiences that provide the framework for our ethical self-interpretation. Take the experiences in which we first encounter our most basic needs: for example, when we encounter our need to eat in the context of being cared for as a child. From this basic human experience one learns that one is a member of a kind of being among whom it is normal that one care about some others' needs and that some others care about one's own needs. That does not happen by induction, but rather by situating ourselves against the background of a form of life; it happens through often implicit reinforcement from others that 'this is how things are with us,' and this reinforcement and our acceptance makes it true that 'this is how things are with us.' Hence we have a kind of species self-constitution involving reason. I suppose that dissent is possible; it

[22] Foot, *Natural Goodness,* p. 48.

would take the form of mutual moral unintelligibility (imagine a group of human beings who *as a matter of course* did not care in the least for their children). It seems that we do have a shared, broad vision of the virtues that is grounded on a shared picture of general human needs.

5. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that Foot's recent readers have made some rather serious missteps in approaching her work. Properly receiving her thought requires, I think, significant interpretive effort among those who think of evolutionary biology as the sole source of concepts pertinent to the biological world. In short, it requires of its audience to hear the distinctive sense in which Foot uses the term 'naturalism' in application to her view. As should have been made clear in this paper, her use is significantly at odds with its common use.

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