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The Significance of Self-Awareness for Christian Leadership

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Abstract

Leading others truly begins by leading oneself and self-awareness is indispensable for leading oneself. This article dwells on the significance of self-awareness for Christian leadership. It briefly reflects on self-awareness from the philosophical and religious viewpoints and concretely, discusses the importance of self-awareness in some circles of Western philosophy and through the concept of self-awareness in Buddhism. It reflects on the importance accorded to self-awareness in contemporary corporate circles where self-awareness is now considered a critical leadership skill. The article concludes by discussing two methods of self-awareness, namely *Vipassana* meditation and consciousness examen.

Keywords

Christian leadership, self-awareness, consciousness, Vipassana, self-reflection, consciousness examen.

Even a cursory survey of literature on Christian leadership during the past few decades shows how the focus has been largely on leadership as manifested in activity. The various seminars, workshops, lectures and sessions held on leadership have also followed this trend. Some of the popular subjects

under the general theme of leadership have been these: having a clear vision and mission, setting goals and objectives, planning and administration, teamwork, motivating others, conflict management, styles of leadership, organizational development, innovation and the like. Servant leadership has also been a focus, and appropriately so, as Christian leadership is rooted in Christ who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” (Phil 2:7a). Nevertheless, the emphasis regarding leadership has been on the outer dimension rather than on the inner dimension. The stress has been more on leading others than on leading oneself and more on ‘doing’ rather than on ‘being’. In this article, however, we shall dwell on the aspect of ‘being’, on the inner dimension rather than on the outer, focussing on the leader as person rather than on his/her activity. In particular, we shall dwell on the significance of self-awareness for being a genuine Christian leader.

Lack of Self-Awareness: A Serious Obstacle for Christian Leadership

At the outset I would like to clarify that I am not intending in the least to downplay the dimension of ‘doing’ in the context of Christian leadership. The dimension of ‘doing’ is undoubtedly crucial, and its importance cannot be overemphasized. The decree *Ad Gentes* of Vatican Council II expresses it clearly: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.”¹ However, the aspect of ‘being’, of leading oneself, is equally, if not more, important for the Christian leader.

It is not the case that the significance of this internal aspect has not been understood or recognized. The above decree itself points out this significance: “The future missionary is to be prepared by a special spiritual and moral training. For he must have the spirit of initiative in

1 “*Ad Gentes*”, 1965, n. 2.

beginning, as well as that of constancy in carrying through what he has begun; he must be persevering in difficulties, patient and strong of heart in bearing with solitude, fatigue, and fruitless labour.” (n. 25). However, more often than not, the significance of leading oneself is implicit or understated and therefore runs the risk of being neglected. When this happens, there is a high likelihood that one will encounter difficulties and problems in leading others. Though many examples could be given which manifest a lack of genuine Christian leadership, we shall look at only a couple of types for illustration.

The first type consists of leaders who are extremely talented and creative, truly committed and hard-working. They may even be understanding and warm in relating with people. However, they are not able to realize their full potential because they struggle with their emotional and psychological selves. They have a low sense of self-esteem and manifest a lack of confidence. Due to this, they feel overwhelmed by external challenges and difficulties, which further dents their self-confidence and self-esteem. Leadership ends up becoming a Sisyphean task for them. The other type is a leader who adopts the style of a manager, just as in corporate circles, instead of being a leader in the true Christian spirit. Thus, s/he is highly efficient and versatile in getting people to get things done but is severely lacking in basic human qualities. S/he is highly capable in visioning, organizing and performing challenging tasks but is out of touch with fundamental realities.

It is not uncommon to hear about Christian leaders, including religious and priests, who end up becoming like these. Due to their highly efficient managerial qualities, relentless commitment and strong determination, they perform highly challenging and creative works of service and are greatly appreciated and recognized in the public domain. However, those who are subordinate to them and are directly associated with them experience them as insensitive, autocratic and ruthless individuals. Since leaders of this type

are probably more common, let's look at some concrete examples for a clearer understanding. Thus, we might have a parish priest who is a highly efficient organizer of various parish activities but loses his head at the slightest mistake committed during liturgy and does not have the slightest hesitation in reprimanding the person in public. Or there might be a Sister Provincial of a religious congregation who is extremely capable in administration and planning. However, she is so insensitive and autocratic that her subjects refer to her as 'lady Hitler'. Or there might be a professor who is highly accomplished and brilliant and is a shining example of the intellectual apostolate in the Church. However, when students ask him any questions or inquire about any doubt in class, he feels threatened. In fact, he understands any question as personally threatening and reacts by insulting the students. He also cannot tolerate difference of opinion. Because of the leader's behaviour in each of the above examples, the value of leadership in the true Christian spirit of service and love suffers terribly. In fact, the second type is not Christian leadership. Moreover, it is questionable whether one should call it leadership in the first place.

Why does such a failure of leadership happen? It would not be possible to explore all the various reasons in this article. However, a major reason for this failure is the lack of self-leadership. Robin Sharma, Writer of the best-selling book *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* says, "The starting

point in leading others is learning to lead yourself." In *Heroic Leadership*, Chris Lowney aptly highlights the importance of leading oneself. He

“

The starting point in leading others is learning to lead yourself,”

says that leadership springs from within; it's about who I am as much as what I do. A leader's greatest power is his/her personal vision, communicated by the example of his/her

daily life (p.19).²

Thus, the dimension of ‘being’ as much as ‘doing’—one’s personal example as much as one’s activity—is what essentially defines a Christian leader. But without sufficient knowledge of oneself, without a certain level of self-awareness, it would be not be possible truly to lead oneself and, consequently, to lead others. And if we are honest with ourselves, we would realize how little we know ourselves. A cursory glance at the human brain—the seat of our emotions and thoughts, of all that we say and do, the basis of our consciousness—succinctly points this out.

It is widely accepted, and now it is even a cliché, to say that the human brain is the most complex structure in the universe. However, just to give a glimpse of the brain’s complexity: the cells of the brain are called neurons. Each neuron has thousands of tiny branches called dendrites to receive information from other neurons and a primary axon to transmit information to other neurons. Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998, p. 8)³ describe the brain’s complexity in the following words:

A piece of your brain the size of a grain of sand would contain one hundred thousand neurons, two million axons and one billion synapses, all “talking to” each other. Given these figures, it’s been calculated that the number of possible brain states—the number of permutations and combinations of activity that are theoretically possible—exceeds the number of elementary particles in the universe.

Giant strides have been taken and continue to be

² Lowney, Chris. 2005. *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World*. 1. paperback print. Chicago, Ill: Loyola Press.

³ Ramachandran, V. S., and Sandra Blakeslee. 1998. *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. 1st ed. New York: William Morrow.

taken in understanding the human brain. Yet, some scientists like Robin Murray opine, “We won’t be able to understand the brain.” (“The brain is the...”, May 29, 2012). It is obvious that this truth about ourselves, complex as it is, cannot be nonchalantly side-lined. Moreover, the above information is only from the neuro-physiological perspective. There is the whole sphere of consciousness and all that it entails—the entire gamut of our thoughts, feelings, drives, etc., including the mysterious area of dreams—that still largely remains undiscovered, the many breakthroughs in recent times notwithstanding.

One cannot afford to give a blind eye to all this and to maintain that it has no importance for Christian leadership. However, unfortunately, this seems to be done more often not, and the most probable consequence is what we have already seen above: either genuine leaders who want to do good but struggle with their own selves and, therefore, are unable to lead others effectively or heartless managers who fail to accord to people even basic respect and dignity.

Therefore, self-awareness becomes recognized as indispensable for leadership. Given the vastness of the subject matter and the limited scope of this article, we shall reflect on self-awareness from a limited perspective, dwelling only on a few aspects from the philosophical and religious viewpoints. Self-awareness is also increasingly emphasized in contemporary corporate circles. We shall explore some of these discussions with a view to deepening our understanding of self-awareness. We shall then discuss some concrete ways in which self-awareness could foster genuine Christian leadership.

Self-awareness

It would be difficult to give a precise definition of self-awareness. Self-awareness could be described as an ongoing process of knowing one’s thoughts, emotions, strengths, weaknesses and the like. It is a journey of growing

in consciousness of one's inner world. Stephen Covey, the Writer of the popular book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, "Self-awareness is our capacity to stand apart from ourselves and examine our thinking, our motives, our history, our scripts, our actions, and our habits and tendencies." There are also other terms such as self-knowledge, self-consciousness or self-insight which have the same meaning and are used interchangeably with self-awareness in common parlance.

Self-Awareness: A Brief Philosophical and Religious Overview

Generally, from its origin, self-awareness has been associated with ancient Eastern thought and philosophy. However, this is not true. There are examples in ancient Western philosophy which indicate that self-awareness was discussed and even held in high esteem. Let us briefly look into this point.

Among the Stoics, one of the important spiritual exercises was attention (*prosoche*), which closely resembles self-awareness. It is a fundamental attitude that involves continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness that never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. This attitude enables the philosopher to be fully aware of what he does at each instant and to will his actions fully (p. 84).⁴ Hadot further describes this attitude in Stoic philosophy in the following words (1995, p. 84-85):

Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future—two areas which do not depend on us. By encouraging concentration on the miniscule present moment, which, in its exiguity, is always bearable and controllable, attention increases our vigilance.

⁴ Ibid.

Finally, attention to the present moment allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant, and causing us to accept each moment of existence from the viewpoint of the universal law of the cosmos.⁵

The Roman Emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius also emphasizes attention, while formulating the triple rule of life. The triple rule of life consists of the three philosophical exercises of discipline: desire, inclinations and assent. And the fundamental attitude underlying these three disciplines is that of attention. For Marcus, nothing must escape the vigilance of consciousness: neither our relationship to destiny and the way of the world (discipline of desire), nor our relationship with our fellow men (discipline of the active will), nor, finally, our relationship to ourselves (discipline of assent) (p.198).⁶

Besides the above, two sayings attributed to two prominent philosophers, Thales and Aristotle, also point out the emphasis on self-awareness in Western philosophy. Thales asserted that “The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself” while Aristotle said, “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” All the above sufficiently indicates that self-awareness was not only discussed but also emphasized in at least some circles of ancient Western philosophy.

Self-awareness is more popularly associated with ancient Eastern philosophy, and for the right reasons. For example, in Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism, self-knowledge and self-awareness are fervently studied and explored in their various aspects. Lao Tzu, the Taoist philosopher, says, “At the centre of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want.”

In Buddhism, the word ‘self’ in self-awareness refers

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

not to one's self or ego, but to consciousness itself (p. 213).⁷ The inter-relatedness between awareness and consciousness can be observed in Buddhism. According to Roy (p. 88-91),⁸ "If consciousness can be recognized in all cognitional acts, awareness, which is fundamental to the knowledge of human beings, consists of consciousness. Self-awareness is the only possibility to know awareness, and in awareness, self-consciousness is included." Chien-Hsing Ho describes the inter-relatedness in the following words (p. 216):⁹ "For the Buddhist, consciousness is intrinsically self-aware in that we in ordinary life are aware of an awareness that has the act as its core and is endowed with the form. Put differently, consciousness is constantly aware of itself involving such an awareness.

There is then in consciousness a self-awareness accounting for this 'being aware of'."

It should also be clarified that the many schools of Buddhism have slightly different and diversely nuanced interpretations of self-awareness, the details of which we cannot explore in this article. There are also various meditation practices in Buddhism used by those who wish to grow in the process of self-awareness. Out of these, the *Vipassana* method is the best known. We shall discuss *Vipassana* a little more in detail later, especially in exploring how it could help one to grow in self-awareness with a view to fostering one's Christian leadership. We shall now briefly look at the significance of self-awareness as understood in the contemporary corporate environment.

Self-awareness in the Contemporary Corporate

⁷ Chien-Hsing, Ho. 2007. "Consciousness and Self-Awareness." *Asian Philosophy* 17 (3 (November 2007)): 213–30.

⁸ Roy, James. 2010. "The Concept of Awareness." Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University.

⁹ Chien-Hsing, Ho. 2007. "Consciousness and Self-Awareness." *Asian Philosophy* 17 (3 (November 2007)): 213–30.

Environment

Henry Mintzberg asserts that self-awareness is a critical leadership skill. He makes the fine distinction between managers and leaders. However, in the corporate environment, he prefers to use the term ‘manager’. For Mintzberg, the topmost of the five mindsets of a successful manager is self-awareness (p. 57).¹⁰ He uses the term ‘reflective mind-set’ instead of self-awareness, but with the same meaning. He emphasizes the need for managers to step back and to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. Leaders will be more effective and will have a longer leadership influence if they are self-aware and use that self-awareness to develop stronger personal characteristics (p.105).¹¹ Goleman (p. 84),¹² too, while describing the five core competencies of emotional intelligence, cites self-awareness as the first:

Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest—with themselves and with others. People with a high degree of self-awareness recognize how their feelings affect them, others and their job performance.... Self-awareness extends to a person’s understanding of his or her values and goals.

What is noteworthy in Goleman’s words is that there is no pretence or false sense of security and authority manifested by the leader in relating to others. On the contrary, there is transparency and authenticity. The leader

¹⁰ Gosling, J, and H Mintzberg. 2003. “*The Five Minds of a Manager*.” Harvard Business Review 81 (11): 54–63.

¹¹ Rothstein, Mitchell G., and Ronald J. Burke, eds. 2010. *Self-Management and Leadership Development*. New Horizons in Management. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

¹² Goleman, Daniel. 2004. “*What Makes a Leader*.” Harvard Business Review, January 82–91.

neither suppresses his/her feelings, especially those that are unpleasant and painful, nor attempts to camouflage his/her lack of certain competencies while leading others. Rather, s/he addresses his/her feelings and works on them. S/he is honest about areas where s/he is not adequately competent and is willing to receive help from others. S/he would most likely not be able to do this without a certain degree of self-awareness and openness to engage in self-reflection.

Joseph Badaracco (“The Discipline Of...”, 2006) interviewed business leaders who faced crisis situations, asking how they faced these and observing the significant role played by self-reflection:

They (managers) are able to take time out from the chain of managerial tasks that consumes their time and undertake a process of probing self-inquiry—a process that is more often carried out on the run rather than in quiet seclusion. They are able to dig below the busy surface of their daily lives and refocus on their core values and principles. Once uncovered, those values and principles renew their sense of purpose at work and act as a springboard for shrewd, pragmatic, politically astute action. By repeating this process again and again throughout their work lives, these executives are able to craft an authentic and strong identity based on their own, rather than on someone else’s, understanding of what is right. And in this way, they begin to make the transition from being a manager to becoming a leader.

Thus, self-awareness helps leaders to be at peace with themselves and enables them to think clearly and to make sound personal decisions without being unduly affected by what is going on inside or outside of them (p. 94).¹³ Therefore, it is not surprising that self-awareness

¹³ Bryant, Andrew, and Ana Lucia Kazan. 2013. *Self-Leadership: How to Become a More Successful, Efficient, and Effective*

is increasingly included in leadership and organizational development programmes.

We have offered a brief overview of self-awareness from the philosophical and religious perspectives. We have also dwelt to some extent on the significance accorded to self-awareness in the corporate sphere. These reflections strongly indicate that self-awareness could play an important role in fostering genuine Christian leadership. We shall look at some concrete ways in which this could happen. One of these ways has been already mentioned before, namely *Vipassana* meditation. The other is consciousness examen.

Vipassana and Consciousness Examen: Efficacious Practices for Self-Awareness

The following words briefly describe the method of *Vipassana*:¹⁴

Vipassana, which means to see things as they really are, is a way of self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the common root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion.... Life becomes characterized by increased awareness, non-delusion, self-control and peace.

Let us understand the psycho-physical background which this meditation addresses. From the moment of our conception, our mind is continuously conditioned by various

Leader from the inside Out. New York: McGraw-Hill.

¹⁴ <https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/vipassana>

experiences, both positive and negative. It is these conscious, subconscious, and unconscious conditionings of the mind, in particular those caused by negative experiences, that later manifest themselves as various negative and regressive tendencies such as inferiority complex, lack of confidence, addictions, compulsive habits, hostile behaviour, and a domineering attitude towards others (p. 664).¹⁵ These are also known as mental impurities. Christ, too, has pointed these out through his poignant words, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mk 7:14b-15, 21-23).

Thus, the psychological-emotional baggage of the past that one carries within oneself has a detrimental effect on one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour in the present. In spiritual parlance, this could be the person’s brokenness or woundedness. The two types of lack of Christian leadership we considered earlier were a result of this brokenness. The same could be said of other persons and situations that manifest lack of Christian leadership. The *Vipassana* meditation helps to address these mental impurities. S.N. Goenka, who popularised the *Vipassana* meditation¹⁶ explains that it consists in bringing the mind to focus solely on the present by awareness of one’s breathing and bodily sensations. Initially, one observes one’s natural breathing and later, as one progresses, one observes bodily sensations. The various mental impurities manifest themselves in unpleasant bodily sensations.

However, the meditator realizes from experience

¹⁵ Josy, A. P. 2007. “*Vipassana Meditation in the Christian Perspective: A Physico-Psycho-Spiritual Approach*.” Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection 71 (9): 663–66.

¹⁶ <https://www.dhamma.org/en/index>

that, however unpleasant the bodily sensations, these are passing. Therefore, without any reaction or judgement, he/she continues only to be aware of these sensations and gradually is healed of the underlying mental impurities. This process of self-awareness gradually weakens the various conditionings (p. 665)¹⁷ and habitual thought-patterns, which also weakens their influence over our negative and regressive behavioural tendencies, leading to better emotional and psychological well-being. Regular practice of this meditation leads to a deeper inner freedom which, in turn, helps one to be a more efficacious Christian leader.

Another instrument that could enable one to reach a deeper self-awareness belongs to the Christian spiritual tradition and is known as 'examination of conscience'. Examination of conscience is a practice the origin of which can be traced right back to sacred scripture. The following verses indicate this:

- Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD. (LAM 3:40)
- Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. (2 Cor 13: 5a)

Nevertheless, the development of examination of conscience into a methodical and well elaborated instrument for spiritual growth can be attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola. In *The Spiritual Exercises* (# 43), St. Ignatius explains the five steps for making this examination (Fleming 1978, 29-30). It is understandably conditioned by the medieval context that still existed five centuries ago. It has been reinterpreted by many Ignatian scholars in contemporary times, but remaining faithful to its spirit. Some, like Aschenbrenner, have even renamed it 'consciousness examen'. Aschenbrenner (1972,

17 Josy, A. P. 2007. "Vipassana Meditation in the Christian Perspective: A Physico-Psycho-Spiritual Approach." Vidyajyothi Journal of Theological Reflection 71 (9): 663–66.

14-21)¹⁸ describes the five steps of the examen as follows: 1. Prayer for Enlightenment, 2. Reflective Thanksgiving, 3. Practical Survey of Actions, 4. Contrition and Sorrow and 5. Hopeful Resolution for the Future. Of these, the third step especially is an effective way to grow in self-awareness. For this article, though we shall dwell only on the third step, it is necessary to clarify that the examen needs to be done in its entirety and not just by doing the third step. In fact, practising only the third step would amount to missing the significance of the examen. The third step of the examen should not be misunderstood merely as a review of our actions, classifying them into good and bad. On the contrary, Aschenbrenner (p. 18)¹⁹ explains it:

The operative questions are: what has been happening in us, how has the Lord been working in us, what has He been asking us. And only secondarily are our own actions to be considered. This part of the examen presumes that we have become sensitive to our interior feelings, moods, and slightest urgings and that we are not frightened by them but have learned to take them very seriously. It is here in the depths of our affectivity, so spontaneous, strong, and shadowy at times, that God moves us and deals with us most intimately. These interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements are the “spirits” that must be sifted out, discerned, so we can recognize the Lord’s call to us at this intimate core of our being.

The above words more than clearly demonstrate how the examen could be a concrete means for growth in self-awareness. When one compares it with the *Vipassana* meditation, one observes a striking resemblance between them in spirit. Both strive to arrive at an ever-deeper self-awareness. However, they are practised differently. In

¹⁸ Aschenbrenner, George. 1972. “*Consciousness Examen*” 31 (1): 14–21.

¹⁹ Aschenbrenner, George. 1972. “*Consciousness Examen*” 31 (1): 14–21.

Vipassana, one aims to be aware of one's breathing and bodily sensations, whereas in the examen, as Achenbrenner says, one looks at one's affective world. There is another crucial difference. *Vipassana* is essentially a self-introspective instrument and inevitably individual-centred. However, it is important to clarify that this does not mean that *Vipassana* meditation is a solipsistic and self-centred exercise, focussing purely on self-transformation and having no concern for others. On the contrary, the ultimate aim of the meditation is to become compassionate towards all creatures, in line with the Buddhist spirit. The point is that *Vipassana* meditation places the onus on the individual and his/her efforts.

The examen, on the other hand, is placed in the larger context of a personal relationship with God. It presupposes the context of faith. However, this faith is not expected to be always unshakable and strong; on the contrary, it is a faith that might struggle through the uncertainties and vicissitudes of life, but one that is transparent and open to the presence of God who labours in all things (Spiritual Exercises, # 235).²⁰ Therefore, as the above words of Aschenbrenner affirm, the concern of the examen is not merely to be aware of our affective world but to discover God's presence in it. Its concern is to recognize God moving us and calling us to a more loving relationship with Him, notwithstanding our limitations and weaknesses. For the Christian leader the examen can become an effective instrument for growing in self-awareness and, consequently, can enable him/her increasingly to discover how God is leading him/her so as better to lead others.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we looked at how, in general, Christian leadership tends to be activity-centred

20 Fleming, David L. 1978. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading. Series IV--Study Aids on Jesuit Topics*, no. 7. St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources.

rather than person-centred, thus focussing on the aspect of ‘doing’ more than on that of ‘being’. We also saw why it is important to accord equal importance to the latter, as failure in doing so results in lack of leadership. We also discussed concretely two types of lack of leadership and some of their negative consequences. We arrived at the conclusion that a lack of self-awareness is an important reason for the failure of Christian leadership and we briefly dwelt on the importance of self-awareness from some philosophical, religious and corporate perspectives. Then we looked at two concrete instruments, namely *Vipassana* meditation and consciousness examen, both of which could aid the Christian leader to grow in self-awareness and thus to be a more genuine leader in the Christian spirit. Evidently, there can be no end to self-awareness. The path of self-awareness is an ongoing process, leading one more and more to the discovery of his/her true self, precious and unique, created ‘in the image and likeness of God’ (Gen 1:26). The journey of self-awareness is the journey of a lifetime.

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