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# Reflections on *Confucian* Reflections

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Aiden, Mayank & Jivesh

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CONFUCIAN REFLECTIONS  
PHILIP J. IVANHOE  
ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN TIMES





# Outline

**01**

## Introduction

The author. The book.

**03**

## Family

East or West? East.

**02**

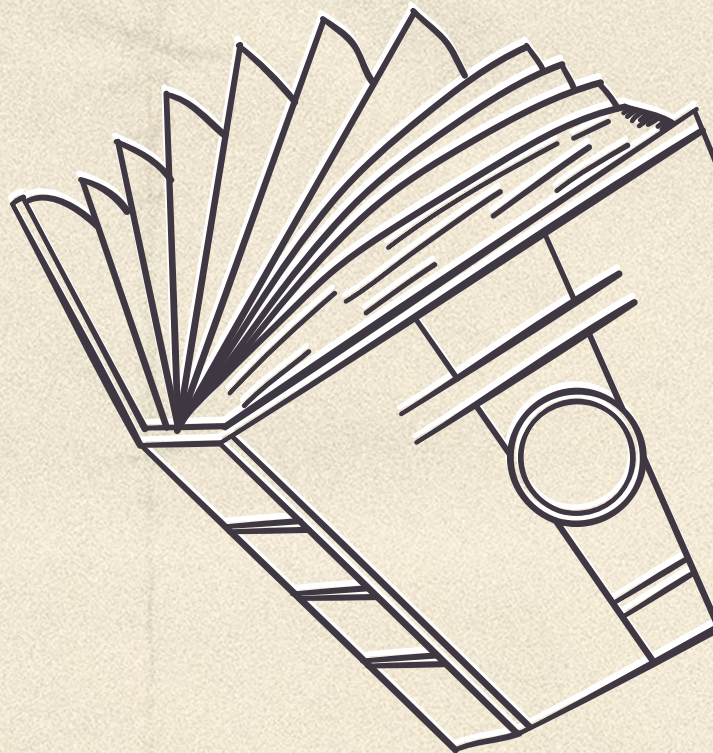
## Tradition

Making tradition cooler.

**04**

## The Everyday

10 Steps that will SHOCK  
YOU.







01

# Introduction

# The Author: Philip J. Ivanhoe

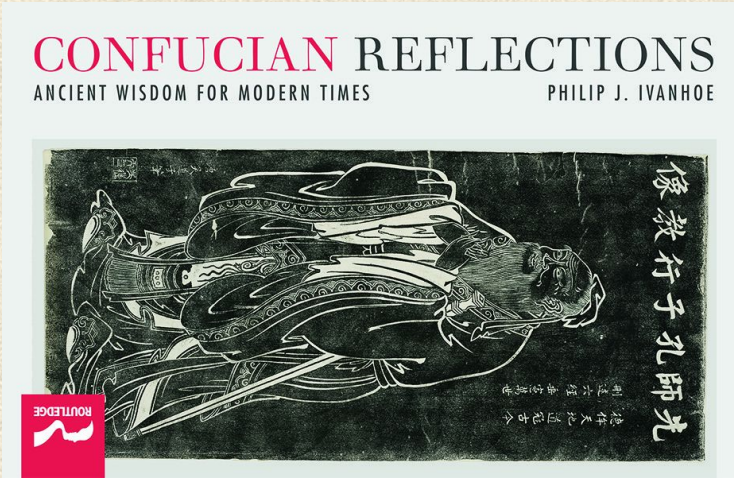


- Quintessentially areté
  - Philosophy & Religion @ Stanford
  - US Marine Corps
  - Professor @ UMich, CUHK, Sungkyunkwan, Georgetown



# The Book: Confucian Reflections (2013)

*“Philip J. Ivanhoe argues that the Analects is as relevant and important today as it has proven to be over the course of its more than 2000 year history, not only for the people who live in East Asian societies but for all human beings.”*

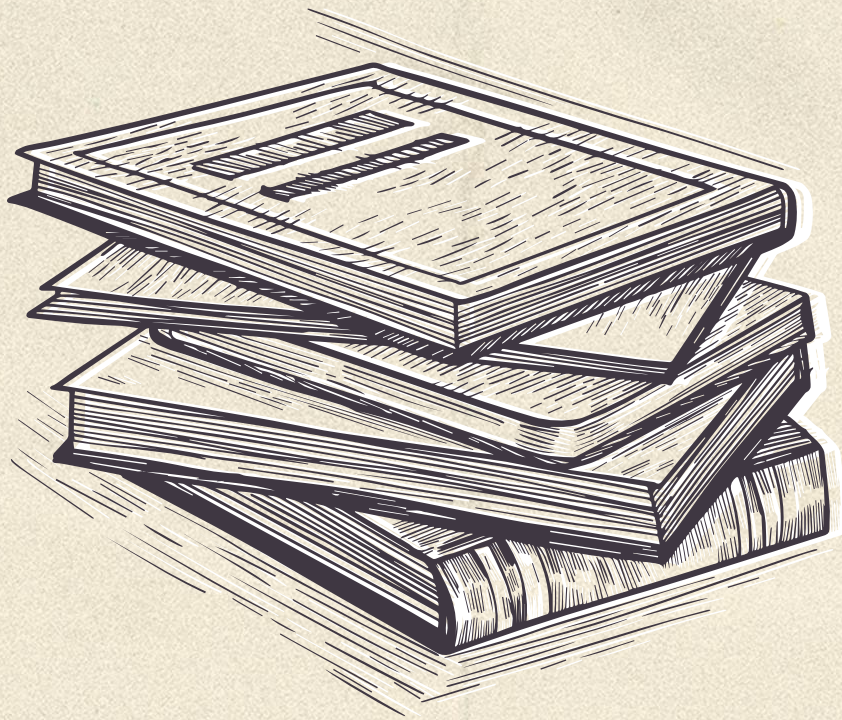


Very few citations from *Analects*!



# 02

## Tradition





Thesis, *Oversimplified*



**REJECT MODERNITY**  
**EMBRACE TRADITION**

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# What is **TRADITION** ?

“anything which is transmitted or handed down **from the past to the present**”

“a collection of beliefs, texts, norms, habits, and practices **handed down from one generation to the next**”

“an organized, **reflective**, and intentional collection of ideas and activities that is **handed down and extends through time**”



# What is **MODERNITY** in this chapter?

(specifically, the modern views on tradition that Ivanhoe is addressing)

These modern opinions hold tradition to be:

“a **constraint** on freedom and creativity”

“an **obstacle** to living a satisfying and happy life”

Ivanhoe argues that these modern opinions are **not well-founded** and even **harmful**



# Why **REJECT MODERNITY** ?

(ie reject the modern views on tradition previously mentioned)

Ivanhoe offers 2 reasons for why our dislike of tradition is baseless:

- Our dislike for tradition is actually a dislike for **traditionalism**, which is a **distinct perversion** of tradition
- A lot of things we value **came from** or **are themselves** traditions



# Tradition vs Traditionalism

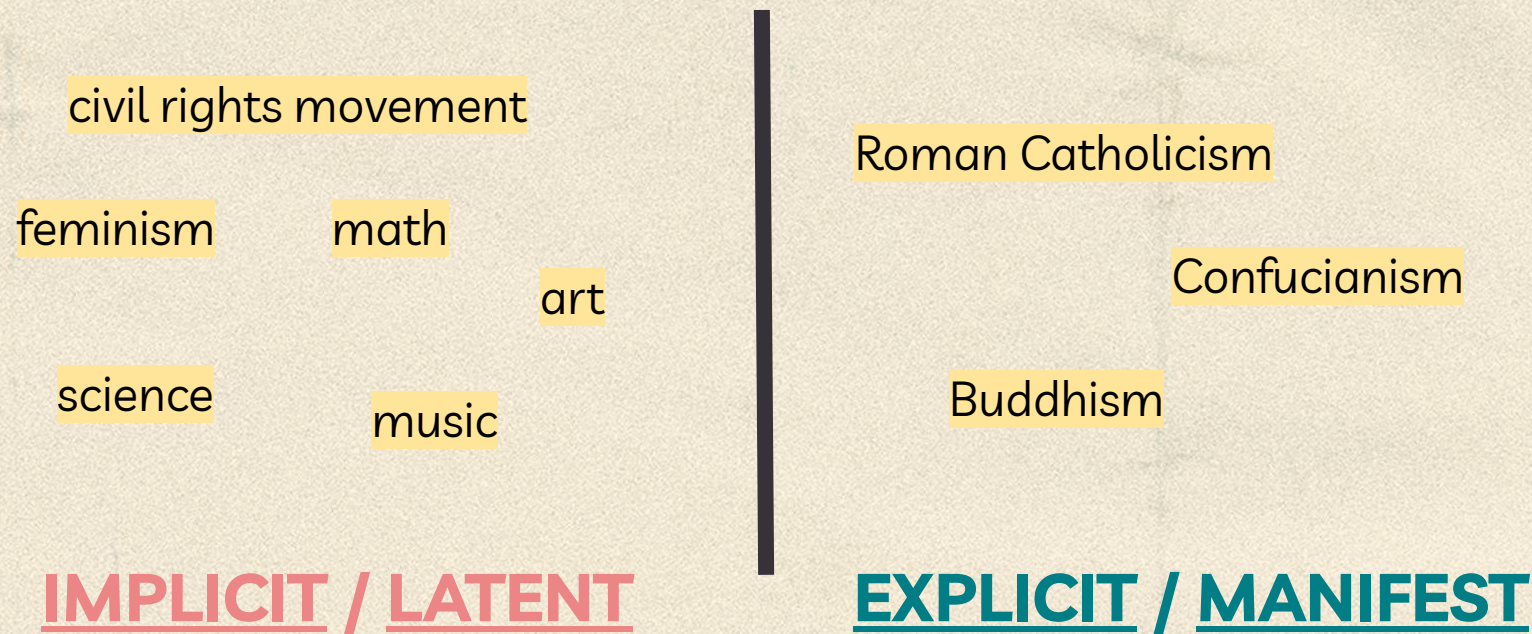
Ivanhoe then distinguishes between living with tradition and traditionalism:

***“Tradition*** is the living faith of the dead”

***“Traditionalism*** is the dead faith of the living”



# Spot the tradition!



All of these are traditions.



# Unrecognized Traditions

Ivanhoe draws a distinction between

1. **implicit**, or latent traditions  
*Social movements, intellectual disciplines, art forms*
1. **explicit**, or manifest traditions  
*Religions, cultural traditions*

It is important to acknowledge that

our latent traditions ARE traditions



# The **DANGER** of Anti-**TRADITION**

Impairs our capacity for self-reflection

-> When we forget the historical trajectory that led to where we are today, and forget the mistakes we made

Limits our ability to lead **creative** and **original** lives

-> Doing so is easier when standing on the shoulders of our ancestors



# How can we **EMBRACE TRADITION** ?

Give more importance to **teachers** since they're responsible for passing down tradition

Respect those who practice a tradition to an **equal extent** as those who transform traditions (doers vs disrupters)

Elevate our latent traditions to explicit traditions, by celebrating them consciously as traditions



# Assessment

Ivanhoe's description of **the spectrum of traditions** is illuminating -> but can we always differentiate tradition vs traditionalism?

Ivanhoe provides a convincing account of **self-reflection in tradition**-> but is living with tradition really necessary for enabling self-reflection?





# 03

## Family



Thesis, *Oversimplified*



**RESTRAINING WEST,  
LIBERATING EAST**

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# The Values of Families: Central Thesis

- Ivanhoe argues that Western traditions are, in many ways, wrong in their conceptions of family. He justifies the Confucian conception of family.
- He first proceeds to show what families are **not**, using Western conceptions of families as negative examples.
- Then offers a normative Confucian description of what families **are**.
  - “source and paradigm of virtue” (68)



# Not: a nuclear family

- Liberals tend to paint the family as a **‘nuclear family’** in an attempt to circumscribe & restrict its importance (?)
  - Aside: Kongzi and Menzi were raised in single-parent families!
- Ivanhoe (and Confucius) offers an expansive definition of family as “*various social groups in which adult members are committed to one another and take **direct care of children***” (61)



# Not: isolated from the outside world

- Western philosophy & culture sees the world as split into the **private** and **public** realms, each with its own separate system of ethics & behaviours.
  - Private realm: 'world of shared love' & family
  - Public realm: 'world of mutual aggression, competition, greed, hostility', a jungle.
- Intrinsically false. Causes a **schizophrenia** of the Self. Weaponized to **coerce women into domestic roles** → also a problem with Confucius.



## Not: isolated from the outside world (contd.)

- Confucians offer an alternative to the public-private divide: ***nei* (inner)** and ***wai*\* (outer)** spheres.
- Confucians argue that the **same set of virtues** are at play in the *nei* and *wai*.
  - differ in the degree of observance.
- In Confucian societies today, people still use familial terms to refer to 'non-family': uncle, auntie, *jiejie* (elder sister), *didi* (younger brother), etc.



# Not: just another social institution

- If families are mere social institutions (and not somehow sacred), then they **belong wholly in the public realm**, and must answer to the demands of public ethical concerns & justice.
- Gives the state a totalitarian license to **intrude into families**, determine what is (and is not) a family, and regulate them.
  - E.g. Singapore and HDB, and *1984*, *The Handmaid's Tale*.



# Tying Up The Nots

- Ivanhoe argues that Confucians claim families to be the **source** and **paradigm** of virtue.
- **Source of virtue:** families form the cradle of moral and ethical development for children (*Analects*, 1:2)
- **Paradigm of virtue:** rulers of states are encouraged to rule their kingdoms as families, and care for their subjects just as adults care for their children.

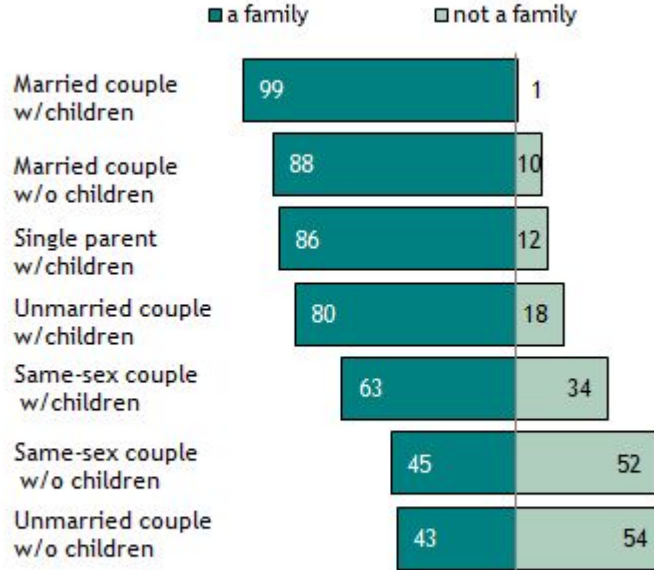


# The Value of

- Ivanhoe's definition is **expansive**. He would consider a close friend but would you consider a close friend to be a family?
- Furthermore, Confucius is and practice for how do we define family? Can a close friend be a family?

## What Is a Family?

% saying this is ...



Note: "Don't know/Refused" responses are not shown.

Question wording: "As I read you a list of different arrangements, please tell me whether you consider each to be a family or not."

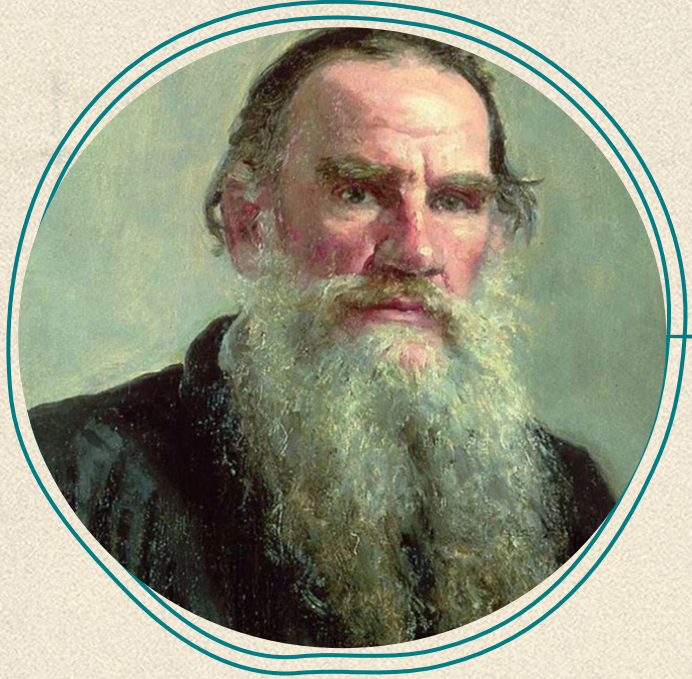
PewResearchCenter

to **limited** and **too** care for children' -

on of what a family person is to us. But good relations? Can a



# The Value of Families: Critique



*All happy families are alike;  
each unhappy family is  
unhappy in its own way.*

*Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy.*

*How does a family avoid being unhappy?*



# 04

## The Everyday





Confucius:

***what would you accomplish should a ruler recognize your talents and potential, offer you employment, and provide the opportunity to pursue your highest aspirations? (11:25)***



Confucius (11:25): **what would you accomplish should a ruler recognize their talents and potential, offer them employment, and provide the opportunity to pursue their highest aspirations?**



### **Zilu**

Give me a large besieged state with famine, teach its people to be courageous and disciplined



### **Qiu**

Give me a moderately sized state, take 3 years and lead its people to enjoy material abundance



### **Chi**

Be an assistant in affairs of state / serve in an ancestral temple



### **Dian**

In spring, wear new clothes ... dry ourselves in the gentle breezes among the altar and... return home chanting



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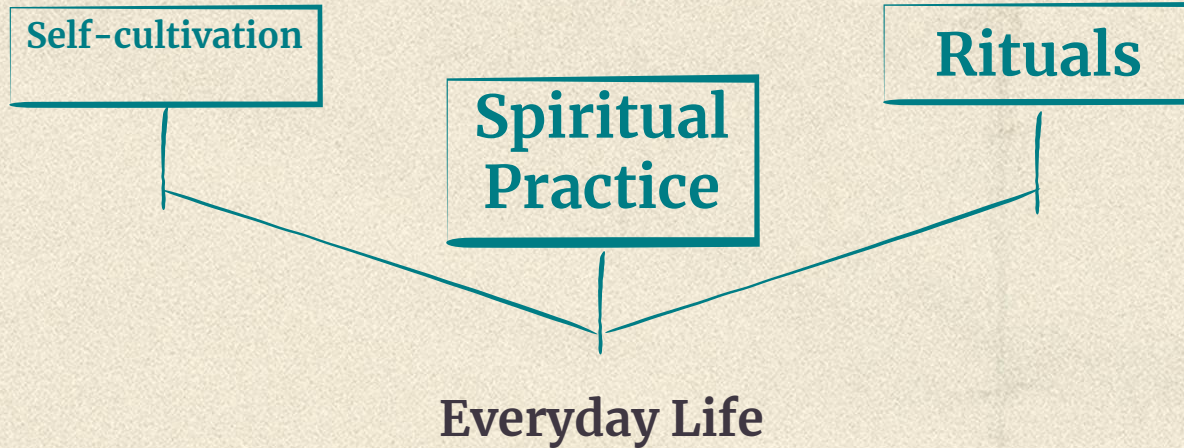
### **Dian**

In spring, wear new clothes ... dry ourselves in the gentle breezes among the altar and... return home chanting

"I am with Dian"



# Awareness, attentiveness, and Care in and of the Everyday





# What is the everyday?

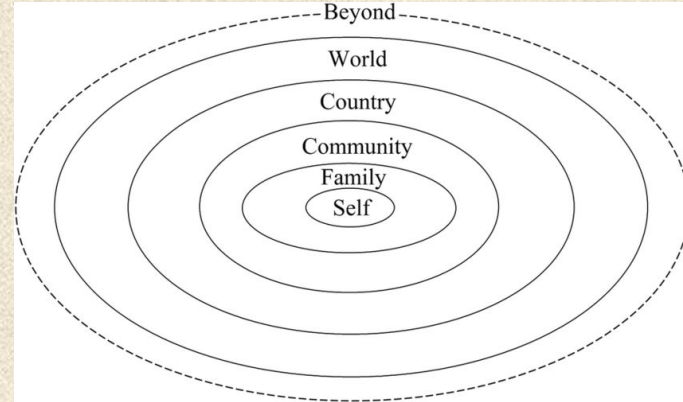
Ivanhoe draws from confucian themes of cultivation of the self + rituals to persuade readers to see **everyday life as a “spiritual practice” (76-77)**

- Speech
  - Comportment
  - Demeanor
  - Clothes we wear
  - Music we play and listen to
  - Interactions with other humans and creatures
  - Interactions with the greater natural world
- 
- **We are responsible and can control and shape our thoughts, feelings, conduct, focus and should cultivate a greater awareness, attentiveness, and care for them (76)**



# Relevance? A grounded way to achieve a utopian personal, social, political life

- Utopian, political, and social goals of the tradition is ultimately beyond human control. (82)
- What is within our control is to make a sincere and determined effort by (81) developing ourselves, improving our families, and enhancing the lives and institutions around us.





# Relevance? Failure is within your control (77)

## Failure to do what we know we should do

- **is not:** owing to a lack of *willpower*
- **but rather:** a lack of proper ideals and models or sustained reflection and concentration (**within your control**).



# Rituals + Cultivation of the self for the 21st century

Ivanhoe does not re-prescribe rituals and behaviors from the analects, but instead argues for an underlying meaning of confucius' anecdotes:

- **cultivate your thoughts, feelings, actions, behaviors. Focus on what is within your control, everyday life**
- **Even failure to do so, is within your control.**



# Awareness, attentiveness, and Care in and of the Everyday – critiques

- **Ivanhoe's has some unsubstantiated view that western ethics** “tends to hold people responsible for what they do but maintains that we cannot control and therefore are not responsible for what we believe or feel”. → **why is this necessary? + not substantiated**
- Ivanhoe emphasizes the value of immersing oneself in everyday actions, family, society. But the text does not seem to empower readers to critically reflect if the everyday leads to their utopian personal, social, and political goals or more issues e.g. entrenching social hierarchy and inequality





# 05

## Conclusion

We come to the end of the Way



# Overall Strengths of chapters 1, 5, 6

1. **Highlights most relevant aspects of confucianism** that can benefit western society today.
2. **Draws at a higher interpretative meaning from confucian-era rituals and anecdotes**, providing readers a greater degree of freedom



## Tradition

Understand tradition's value without anti-tradition prejudice



## Families

Beyond traditional nuclear families, but any committed social group of adults and children (61)



## The Everyday

Less prescriptive “rituals” & more “awareness, attentiveness, and care”



# Points of concern from Chapters 1,5,6

1. Cherry-picked aspects of confucianism that only substantiated his points and would be relevant for society → **Ivanhoe did admit in preface and intro, but what if some of them are fundamental to confucianism?**
2. Lines are sometimes blurred between Ivanhoe's argument + claims and confucius's text. Heavy uses of **"they (confucius) say" followed by claims stated as facts.**  
E.g:
  - a. **[Ivanhoe's interpretation] they (confucious)** held that we are responsible for and can control and shape not only what we do and say, but what we think and feel, how we comport ourselves in the world, and what we choose to focus on each day (76)
  - b. **[Claim]** "One of the clearest results of such a life is a deeper understanding of and joy in the course of daily routine"





# Discussion Questions



# Discussion Questions

1. Ivanhoe argues that we are responsible for our beliefs and emotions. Yet, Confucius' Analects (2:1, 12:19) argued that we should follow the more "virtuous" and "noble". Is it possible (and if so, how) to strike a balance between taking responsibility for beliefs and following the rituals of a tradition?
1. Is there a tradition that you feel you belong to, and cherish? Is it relevant to the cultivation of your Self?
2. Confucian urges us to view the family and the public realm as a continuum. This allows us to be authentic at home and outside (avoiding schizophrenia). However, Confucian societies such as Japan have a strong emphasis on presenting an 'outside face' to society, and to mask the inner face (*Honne* and *tatamae*). Do you think this is a problem? Or is the presenting of a 'face' a part of ritual propriety? If you agree this is a problem, do you think it is inherent to Confucianism, or avoidable?



**Thank  
you**

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