

The Great Indoctrination Re-construction Project: The Discourse on Indoctrination as a Legacy of Liberalism

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It ain't so much the things we don't know that get us into trouble.
It's the things we do know that just ain't so.

—Artemus Ward, twentieth-century American humorist

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary educators who reflect responsibly on the moral implications of their professional activities as teachers continue to struggle with a perennial and fundamental problem: When does my teaching cross the line and become indoctrination? Similarly, students ask, when am I being taught and when am I being indoctrinated? In response, philosophers of education ask, how can we distinguish between educating and indoctrinating? These questions are not new. For the better part of the twentieth century, debates about the problem of indoctrination constituted a perennial preoccupation among philosophers of education. We should not be surprised that discussion of the concept has generated its own substantial body of literature, since attempts to unpack the term invariably home in on two fundamental educational concepts: epistemology and pedagogy.¹

In this essay, I offer a historical view that suggests that the discourse on indoctrination, rather than unfolding as a “neutral” analytical project focused on clarifying a troublesome term, charts a process through which indoctrination is effectively *re-constructed* pejoratively to serve the philosophy of liberalism as it emerged in the twentieth century. The emerging “construction” would thus be vulnerable to critiques of the liberal principles on which it is built. At this point in my work, I intend only to flag some key components of the debate that I hope will serve to demonstrate the merits of continuing work to justify this claim. I will suggest that the criteria raised, defended, and critiqued as supposedly constitutive of an essential concept of indoctrination can also be read as the building blocks of a liberal “re-construction project” to produce a concept of indoctrination that can serve to defend liberal ideals; in particular, that of the rationally autonomous individual. However, I do not mean to suggest an intentional conspiracy. Rather, the contributors to the discourse might be compared to farmers who, in claiming that they are simply clearing stones from a field to facilitate planting, remain oblivious to the stone walls they are raising between their own and their neighbors’ fields.

I will first describe the emergence of a pejorative sense of indoctrination as contingent on the birth and growth of John Dewey’s Progressive education movement. I will then examine representative literature on indoctrination since 1964, focusing on each of the four key proposed criteria for indoctrination that constitute the principal focus for the debate: content, method, intent, and outcome. I will suggest the ways in which these can be seen to represent necessary raw materials in the liberal construction of indoctrination and the ends that each serves. I will further

suggest that the debate about the validity of religious knowledge represents a kind of red herring, since it leaves the liberal project largely unexamined. Finally I will conclude by noting important challenges to the core elements of this liberal construction that have yet to be brought.

UNVEILING CONCEPTUAL ILLUSIONS

Those who approach the voluminous discourse on indoctrination can be forgiven for assuming that it will reveal an answer to the question: what is indoctrination? After all, the literature reads as though the project seeks to ferret out the essential constitutive criteria that justify the use of the term. Although its purported purpose as a philosophical tool is to clarify the usage of concepts, in practice linguistic analysis often presents the illusion that concepts are constituted by essential bits which, when identified and analyzed, enable their clarification and appropriate use. However, the idea that concepts are *constructed* to do a certain kind of work presents a useful lens through which to read the literature on indoctrination. In their intriguing paper, “Indoctrination and the Face of Knowledge,” Wittgensteinian scholars Luise and David McCarty “deny that there are any meanings, [or] objective general standards for the correct use of a word. Transcendental language is not referred, for its correctness, back to an accord with rules, language games, innate ideas, or forms of life. Correctness is itself formed by force.”² On this view, the indoctrination discourse might be legitimately construed as a contest where the winner brings the most powerful support for their conception of the term. However, we are mistaken if we believe that the winner necessarily has the correct formulation. As the lack of a compelling consensus on the term in the literature seems to demonstrate, the “[o]ft-proposed analyses of indoctrination, tied to concepts and their close associates, fail — or at least fail to pick out any material or mental structure to underlie and rationalize a charge of indoctrination. This is because there is nothing *beneath* indoctrination.”³ Nevertheless, as the McCarty’s caution, indoctrination “is a steep boundary on teaching, a danger spot from which we are to be warned. But it is not a boundary on the land. It is an abstract line; if we do not draw it, nothing gets drawn.”⁴

I invite the reader to now join me in tracing the first twentieth century sketches of that line as blazed by pioneers of the Progressive education movement.

COINCIDENCE OR CONTINGENCE?

Relying on Mary Ann Raywid’s exemplary summary of the early twentieth century discourse on indoctrination, “The Discovery and Rejection of Indoctrination,” we see that the description of indoctrination in pejorative terms is a relatively recent phenomenon. Raywid notes that up to a decade or two into the twentieth century, “education” and “indoctrination” are used synonymously, in line with the New England Dictionary definition of 1901: “instruction, formal teaching.”⁵ In other words, the terms are taken as synonymous rather than conflated and the work they are intended to do is set out quite clearly in one Elwood P. Cubberly’s 1909 prescription, in which he says the purpose of education/indoctrination for immigrants is

to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence

for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding authority. (*DRI*, 2)

This conception created a dilemma for Dewey and other Progressive educators because the act of “implanting” ideas in children opposes and undermines the concept of student-centered learning and offends liberal-democratic principles.⁶ As early as 1915 Dewey objected to this traditional approach to education; in Raywid’s account, he accused “authoritarian education,” “of engendering attitudes of ‘obedience,’ ‘docility,’ ‘submission,’ and ‘passivity.’ Even earlier, he had suggested that the coercion necessary to elicit effort in the absence of interest was ‘morally wrong’ in its negative effects on the individual” (*DRI*, 3). Political indoctrination was just one form of objectionable authoritarian education; religious education was similarly problematic, and it was not restricted to sectarian schools. Writing in support of secular public education in 1953, V.T. Thayer offers this sanguine take on the role of religion in early North American public education:

Our early schools were little more than the agents of religious communities, being charged with the task of indoctrinating the young in the religious tenets of one religious faith. Gradually there emerged out of religious diversity the non-sectarian school, an institution which, in communities predominantly Protestant, carefully restrained from inculcating in children the religious tenets on which Protestants disagreed, while continuing to instill the doctrines on which all saw eye to eye.⁷

This characterization of public schools as vehicles for religious indoctrination has withered on the vine for most of the discourse; most likely because sectarian schools provided much easier targets.⁸ Some not only admitted to indoctrinating, they openly advocated it. The often-quoted W.I. McGucken effectively became the “poster-boy” for anti-indoctrinationists when, in 1937, he claimed that,

Children are indoctrinated with the multiplication table; they are indoctrinated with love of country; they are indoctrinated with the principles of chemistry and physics and mathematics and biology, and nobody finds fault with indoctrination in these fields. Yet these are of small concern in the great business of life by contrast with ideas concerning God and man’s relation to God....The Catholic educator makes no apology for indoctrinating his students in these essential matters.⁹

Although most secular liberal anti-indoctrinationists chose to indict religion as inherently indoctrinatory (and do so to this day), Dewey focused on the political — because his dilemma was political. Liberal democratic values are necessarily implicated in Dewey’s advancement of Progressive education, and Dewey was concerned that attempts to inculcate democratic ideals might also be considered indoctrinatory. According to Raywid, Dewey escapes from the horns of the dilemma, arguing that a commitment to democracy requires the application and exercise of intelligence and that

only what is made automatic and non-reflective can be stamped in, or indoctrinated, or imposed. Reflection, judgment, reasoning — which are central requisites of the true democrat and the faithful pursuit of scientific method — simply cannot be acquired via impositional methods of education. Thus, for the same reasons that a totalitarian society must indoctrinate in order to assure its perpetuation, a democratic society cannot do so. (*DRI*, 7)

Yet Dewey’s rejection of indoctrination is controversial. Charlene Tan, for example, claims Dewey interprets the advocacy of democracy as a kind of “self-correcting” form of indoctrination.¹⁰ Clearly, Dewey made no apologies for promoting

democratic principles in education, since the “ultimate purpose of democratic education is growth — or ‘to enable individuals to continue their education,’” and further, that “the interest of a democratic society lies precisely in maximizing the potential of individuals constituting it” (*DRI*, 10).

This supports the contention, I suggest, that the twentieth century’s earliest pejorative construction of indoctrination was contingent on the rise of the Progressive education movement, which linked the term to the authoritarian mode of education as practiced by totalitarian states and religious educators. No longer synonymous with education, indoctrination was re-constructed as a practice that inhibits the development of the discrete individual’s rational autonomy, as illustrated in Raywid’s summary of the Progressives’ objections to indoctrination: it “uses the *individual* as a means to an end,” “denies the recipient *the right to choose his own beliefs*, and simultaneously by foreclosing to the individual *the right to function as an independent judge* in weighing alternative ideas,” “forever *restricts the learner*,” and its moral reprehensibility rests on the claim that “it serves to *limit the individual’s understanding and control of his own existence*” (*DRI*, 8–9, emphases added). In other words, to Dewey and the Progressives, indoctrination represented a threat to the liberal ideal of the rationally autonomous individual.

THE GREAT “CLARIFICATION”: CONTENT, METHOD, INTENTION, OUTCOME

Thus reconstructed, the pejorative usage of indoctrination was sufficiently established by the mid-twentieth century that most conceptual analysts took it as given and effectively worked to clarify and strengthen the construction. As John Wilson put it in 1964, “‘Indoctrination’ represents, to most of us, something pernicious, though we are not quite sure what: an area whose frontiers, if we only knew where they were, we do not want to cross.”¹¹ Rather than asking, is indoctrination wrong? Wilson and succeeding scholars ostensibly asked, what is it about indoctrination that is wrong? Although Thomas Green, writing concurrently with Wilson, *did* ask the larger question and concluded that indoctrination is *not* always wrong — when teaching prerationals children about the dangers of hot stoves, for example — he nevertheless suggested three constitutive criteria for wrongful indoctrination:

1. Method: “Indoctrination... may be sanctioned only in order that beliefs adopted may later be redeemed by reasons, only that they may be vindicated by teaching.”
2. Intention: indoctrinators intend “to produce persons who hold their beliefs non-evidentially.”
3. Outcome: “Indoctrination is successful only if people think they hold their beliefs evidentially and in fact do not, only when they use reason as a weapon under the illusion that they are seriously inquiring.”¹²

Apparently unaware of Green’s notable contributions, Wilson settled on the “rationality” of the *content* inculcated as the deciding test for indoctrination.¹³

CONTENT

In focusing on the content criterion, Wilson launched epistemological discussions about what qualifies as knowledge — the legitimate content of education —

which for many subsequent discussants suggested targeting religious education as a paradigmatic example of indoctrination. Responding to Wilson, Antony Flew claimed that “the most widespread programme of indoctrination is that of the schools which maintain their separate and independent existence precisely in order to inculcate belief in the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁴ The contention that it is not possible to bring probative justificatory evidence to support religious truth claims underscores a secular liberal position on indoctrination argued to this day, while the possibility of demonstrating the legitimacy of religious knowledge — in liberal terms — would become something of a “holy grail” for *religious* liberal defenders of religious education in the discourse.¹⁵

Opposition to the content criterion was quickly forthcoming. R.M. Hare, the seminal British moral philosopher, objected to Wilson’s content criterion, claiming that to take this approach “is to say that there is a right content — a right doctrine — and, furthermore, that the teacher is the man who knows what it is.”¹⁶ (Hare implies less than full confidence in teachers to bring this ability to their jobs.) Green not only disagrees with the idea that religious education does not involve learning; he also contends that it is possible to indoctrinate students with the truth, “[t]he only problem is that they will not *know* that it is the truth.”¹⁷

METHODS

Critiques of content as a criterion for indoctrination included claims in favor of a “methods” criterion, wherein indoctrination was argued to involve nonrational (or, insufficiently rational) teaching methods. Ben Spiecker links content and method, claiming that indoctrinators inculcate content — in his example, religious doctrine — “by appeal to an Absolute Authority, by violating the canons of reasoning, by smuggling away relevant evidence, by ignoring critical questions.”¹⁸ The “methods” criterion focuses on the justificatory criteria of modernist epistemology, a key feature of liberalism, although not exclusive to it; yet critics like Hare maintain that methods alone will not do since using noncritical methods to inculcate some forms of content, such as multiplication tables, would not constitute indoctrination. However, Hare suggests that methods do provide the clue to a teacher’s *intentions*.¹⁹

INTENTION

Ivan Snook presents the best known case for the intention criterion: “I suggest that the following provides a necessary and sufficient condition for indoctrination: A person indoctrinates *p* (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches with the intention that the pupil or pupils believe *p* regardless of the evidence.”²⁰ The intention criterion gains considerable traction and is often implicated in stronger claims about indoctrination, such as those of the well-cited Harvey Siegel:

If a “teacher” intends to foster such a non-evidential style of belief, or utilizes methods which tend to foster, or seeks routinely to impart to students beliefs without regard to their truth or justifiability, and in so doing suppresses students’ rational evaluation of said beliefs, then the “teacher” is rightly regarded as an indoctrinator, and the student is a victim of indoctrination.²¹

Snook’s intention argument attracted critics, as well; however, I wish here to suggest only that it is at least in part because — from the liberal perspective — moral

acts are understood to require rational, intentionally autonomous individual agents that the discourse on indoctrination is drawn to the issue of intention.

OUTCOME

Those who argue that an indoctrinated person holds beliefs uncritically or non-evidentially are effectively describing the fourth major criterion debated, that of the “outcome” of indoctrination. Whether it is described as above, or as a “paralysis of one’s mind, both in form and substance,”²² the question of how this endstate is effected is not clear, but its importance to the liberal project is: for indoctrination to be morally reprehensible it requires an intentionally autonomous rational agent.

INTERIM SITE INSPECTION

What seems apparent is that several key assumptions of the argument are, to this point, taken as given and uncontested: (1) that only content predicated on objectively verifiable evidence should be taught; (2) that learning is actualized autonomously through the rational agency of a discrete individual learner; and (3) that teaching and indoctrinating involve intention, thus introducing the moral condition of intentional rationality. In terms of its liberal re-construction, we see indoctrination as an intra-connected structure representing the *opposite* of liberal conceptions of epistemology, autonomy, and intentional moral agency. Violations of these principles would constitute indoctrination and — to *secular* liberal anti-indoctrinationists — religious education, on the content, methods, and outcome arguments, is denied access to the liberal encampment.

LEGITIMIZING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

“WORLDVIEW” DEFENSE

Co-opted by the liberal anti-indoctrinationist agenda, more recent defenders of religious education no longer openly champion religious indoctrination. Instead, they claim that teaching religious beliefs does not necessarily involve unacceptable content and thus is not necessarily indoctrinatory. On a later-Wittgenstein argument they claim that a person’s religious beliefs can constitute legitimate knowledge once it is shown that the adherent’s “worldview” — or “riverbed” belief system — imparted to them necessarily as children while they were in a pre-rational state, includes the “irreducible concepts” on which their religious “knowledge” is predicated. Ronald Laura and Michael Leahy write that these “epistemic primitives” form the basis “of significance for all the inferences made within that conceptual system. To say that epistemic primitives are constitutive of our belief systems is to say that such beliefs define what it means to engage in the systematic thinking which characterizes the specific conceptual enterprise.”²³

In whatever mode it is argued, this discussion has legs because it serves religious adherents with an argument for the rational validity of “religious knowledge.” In Laura and Leahy’s terms: “Since resistance to falsification is a logical characteristic of the epistemic primitives of all belief systems, such resistance does not undermine the rationality or capability of factual reference of the primitives of any system.”²⁴ As Jeffrey Milligan suggests, the consequences of this argument challenge “the truth claims and epistemic assumptions which have often been

deployed to dismiss religious faith as an irrational, mythological relic of less enlightened times.”²⁵

PRAGMATIC PROPOSITIONS

A second argument supporting the legitimacy of religious knowledge challenges the hegemony of propositional rationalism itself. In works separated by thirty years, Ronald Laura²⁶ and Walter Feinberg²⁷ accept the value of propositional rationalism, but argue as well for a “pragmatic rationalism” that Laura describes as:

the relation that holds between the belief which is expressed by a statement and the belief or range of beliefs to which a sincere utterer subscribes in expressing it, such that one cannot consistently affirm the statement and deny the belief or range of beliefs which is implied by it. The inconsistency is not logical — a contradiction in what is said, but pragmatic — a contradiction in what is done in saying it.²⁸

Taken singly or in concert these two challenges introduce the possibility that the teaching of religious beliefs can be a rational exercise and thus must be allowed entry to the liberal anti-indoctrination structure. They challenge claims that religious education is inherently indoctrinatory because it does not deal in knowledge as justified by probative evidence. By extension, if they use legitimized religious content for rigorous rational debate, religious educators escape the methods and outcome criteria, and therefore need not execute an “end-run” around the rationally autonomous individual.

However, even within its liberal construction, there remain grounds for charges of indoctrination that could indict contemporary religious school practices, in particular. As Elmer Thiessen, who advocates for the legitimate teaching of religious beliefs using methods that respect the development of “normal” individual autonomy, says,

There was, and still is, an unfortunate tendency on the part of many Christians to discredit learning, to oppose theological education for ministers, to look upon piety and intellect as being in open enmity, to rely on emotions in evangelism, and to fail to see growth toward rational autonomy as an essential component in religious development. Such tendencies within the Christian church clearly invite the charge of indoctrination.²⁹

Significantly, as Alven Neiman puts it, Thiessen does not “call the Enlightenment into question, but emphasizes a particular understanding of its import.”³⁰ Thus strictured, religious educators are granted the right to wear the liberal label, and I suggest their challenges to the indoctrination arguments can now be seen as “internal squabbling” and not serious external challenges to the liberal construction itself.

CONCLUSION AND “DANGLING THREADS”

In advancing its liberal ideals the Progressive education movement challenged the authoritarian educational model — exemplified in religious education — as indoctrinatory, and thus laid the first planks of what would become the reconstruction of indoctrination as a reprehensible form of education. Today our understanding of indoctrination as received can be usefully understood as a liberal construction, and the discourse on indoctrination — including challenges from defenders of religious education — can be read more as an architectural blueprint than as a neutral modernist analytical project. As received, the discourse is predicated

on a liberal modernist epistemology and shares the latter's strengths and weaknesses.

Taken in its entirety the indoctrination discourse may not have solved the "indoctrination problem" to everyone's satisfaction, but it has been useful in demonstrating some of the clarificatory limits of modernist analysis and in revealing intriguing challenges to secularists' objections to religious education. However, notably absent from the discourse are arguments that threaten to bring the entire liberal construct down around the rationally autonomous liberal individual's ears. In a series of papers, Dwight Boyd questions the legitimacy of the notion of the rationally autonomous liberal individual in its several aspects, from ontological uniqueness to the moral necessity of autonomous intentional rational agency.³¹ The possibility of rational autonomy is also critiqued by feminist epistemologists such as Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, who challenge the modernist foundations upon which this indoctrination structure stands: that truths are transcendent, universal, and objectively justifiable; and that knowledge is universally accessible and can be transmitted from teacher to student.³² My observation that feminist and other poststructuralist philosophers have not yet brought these arguments to the indoctrination discourse is intriguing and worthy of more work.

1. My current bibliography runs to about 150 published articles and books that directly address indoctrination.

2. Luise Prior and David Charles McCarty, "Indoctrination as the Face of Knowledge: Endnotes for Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education 1991: Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society*, eds. Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 249.

3. *Ibid.*, 254.

4. *Ibid.*, 258.

5. Mary Ann Raywid, "The Discovery and Rejection of Indoctrination," *Educational Theory* 30, no. 1 (1980), 2. This work will be cited as *DRI* in the text for all subsequent references.

6. The liberal/modernist idea of the self-directed learner owes much to Immanuel Kant. See Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), trans. Paul Halsall (1997), <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html>.

7. V.T. Thayer, "Sectarian Attacks on Public Education," *Educational Theory* 3, no. 3 (1953), 116.

8. However, in recent times it has resurfaced in legal challenges to prayer in public schools.

9. W.I. McGucken, *The Catholic Way in Education* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1937); reprinted as "Reading 292," in *Eclectic Philosophy of Education*, ed. J.S. Brubacher (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1951), 60.

10. Charlene Tan, "Religious Upbringing Is Not as Michael Hand Describes," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 2 (2004): 257–67.

11. John Wilson, "Education and Indoctrination," in *Aims in Education: A Philosophic Approach*, ed. T.H.B. Hollins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 26.

12. Thomas F. Green, "A Topology of the Teaching Concept," in *Philosophical Essays on Teaching*, eds. B. Bandman and R.S. Guttchen (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1969), 65, 48, and 52.

13. Wilson, "Education and Indoctrination," 34.

14. Antony G.N. Flew, "What is Indoctrination: Comments on Moore and Wilson," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 5 (1967): 273–83. See also, R.M. Hare, "Adolescents into Adults," in Hollins, ed., *Aims in Education*, 47–70.

15. See, for example, Michael Hand, "A Philosophical Objection to Faith Schools," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 89–99; see also, W.D. Hudson, "Reply to Tasos Kazepides's Educating, Socialising and Indoctrinating," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 16 (1982): 167–72; and especially, Elmer J. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination and Christian Nurture* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).
16. Hare, "Adolescents into Adults," 49.
17. Green, "Topology of the Teaching Concept," 54 and 47.
18. Ben Spiecker, "Indoctrination: The Suppression of Critical Dispositions," in *Freedom and Indoctrination in Education: International Perspectives*, eds. Ben Spiecker and Roger Straughan (London: Cassell, 1991), 17.
19. Hare, "Adolescents into Adults," 50.
20. Ivan A. Snook, "The Concept of Indoctrination," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 7 (1970), 100.
21. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 80.
22. Tan, "Religious Upbringing Is Not as Michael Hand Describes," 264.
23. Ronald Laura and Michael Leahy, "Religious 'Doctrines' and the Closure of Minds," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 31, no. 2 (1997), 335.
24. *Ibid.*, 333.
25. Jeffrey Milligan, "Teaching at the Crossroads of Faith and School: The Teacher as Prophetic Pragmatist," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 48.
26. Ronald S. Laura, "Philosophical Foundations of Religious Education," *Educational Theory* 28, no. 4 (1978).
27. See Walter Feinberg, *For Goodness Sake: Religious Schools and Education for Democratic Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
28. Laura, "Philosophical Foundations of Religious Education," 316.
29. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment*, 263.
30. Alven M. Neiman, "Religious Belief and Education for Spirituality after the Enlightenment: The Vision of Elmer Thiessen," *Religious Education* 94, no. 4 (1999), 430.
31. See, for example, Dwight Boyd, "A Question of Adequate Aims," *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1, (1996): 21–9; and also, "The Legacies of Liberalism and Oppressive Relations: Facing a Dilemma for the Subject of Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 33, no. 1 (2004): 3–22.
31. See Lorraine Code, "The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self: Discourses of Social Advocacy at Century's End*, eds. C. Mackenzie, and N. Stoljar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 185–6. See also, Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 183–201.

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