



### **William James (1842-1910)**

### **William P. Alston**

**W**illiam James was the eldest of five children in a remarkable family, the most famous of his siblings being Henry James, the novelist. The father, Henry James, Sr., was quite lame, and, having an independent income, devoted his time to traveling, raising his family, and thinking and writing about theologico-philosophical matters. The books that issued from the latter are long since forgotten, but the children are not. William's education and early career were rather haphazard. The family was constantly traveling; from the age of two-and-a-half until his death at sixty-eight James only once spent a period of as long as six years continuously in America. He successively set out to study painting, chemistry, and medicine, with interruptions because of back trouble and other probably psychosomatic complaints. In 1869 he was granted an M.D., but, presumably because of his delicate health, it was never supposed that he would actually practice medicine. Not until 1872, when he was made an Instructor in Physiology at Harvard, did he begin to find himself, a trend that his marriage in 1878 helped to reinforce. The marriage seems to have put an end to the various physical complaints that had largely debilitated him up to that point. Meanwhile, he began to move from physiology through psychology into philosophy. (In those days no sharp distinction was made between the latter two.) In 1876 he offered the first course in physiological psychology to be given in America, and at the same time established the first laboratory for experimental psychology in America. In 1880 his title was changed to Assistant Professor of Philosophy, and in 1885 he became Professor of Philosophy, though it was some years before most of his lectures were devoted to what we should today call philosophy. From 1878 until 1890 he was working on his monumental *Principles of Psychology*; after 1890 (and to some extent in the late 1880's) he devoted himself to philosophy. James assembled an outstanding group in the Philosophy Department at Harvard, most notably Josiah Royce and George Santayana. The warmth of his relations with the former (despite the great differences in their thought) is well conveyed by the following excerpt from a letter written by James to Royce while on a European sojourn.

Great was my, was *our* pleasure in receiving your long and delightful letter last night....I need not say, my dear old boy, how touched I am at your expressions of affection, or how it pleases me to hear that you have missed me. I too miss you profoundly. I do not find in the hotel waiters, chambermaids and bath-attendants with whom my lot is chiefly cast, that unique mixture of erudition, originality, profundity and vastness, and human wit and leisureliness, by accustoming me to which during all these years you have spoilt me for inferior kinds of intercourse. You are still the centre of my gaze, the pole of my mental magnet. When I write, 'tis with one eye on the page, and one on you. When I compose my Gifford lectures mentally, 'tis with the design exclusively of overthrowing your system, and ruining your peace. I lead a

parasitic life upon you, for my highest flight of ambitious ideality is to become your conqueror, and go down into history as such, you and I rolled in one another's arms and silent (or rather loquacious still) in one last death-grapple of an embrace.<sup>1</sup>

James has made many noteworthy contributions to philosophy, but he will undoubtedly, and deservedly, be longest remembered for his role in the emergence of pragmatism onto the philosophical scene. He is neither the founder of pragmatism (Peirce) nor the man in whom it has received its most nearly definitive presentation (Dewey), but the force of James's personality and the vigor of his pen played a great part in shaping the image of the movement and in impressing that image on his contemporaries. Moreover, the pragmatism of James does exhibit certain distinctive features that are worthy of attention, and some characteristic strains within the movement come out in James in an instructive way — perhaps more clearly than elsewhere.

The pragmatic movement had diverse antecedents — British empiricism, evolutionary thought of the Darwinian brand, and, at least in Peirce and Dewey, Hegelian idealism — though the derivation from the last is an extremely tortuous one. The relation to traditional empiricism must occupy us a little later; for the moment we would be well advised to concentrate on Darwinism, which contains the seed of what is most distinctive in pragmatism. As is well known, Darwin profoundly influenced the thought of the late nineteenth century in every area. Perhaps the most extensive philosophical residue of this influence was the tendency to view everything, from syllogisms to society, developmentally, as a gradual unfolding from the implicit to the explicit. (Although it must be recognized that this tendency had already received a powerful impetus from the Hegelian philosophy.) Sometimes this kind of evolutionary philosophy flowered into an elaborate cosmology, like that of Bergson, with a heavy emphasis on “process” and “creativity.” James was not immune to this sort of thing. But the response to Darwin most characteristic of pragmatism is to be found in the notion of human intelligence as an adaptive instrument. According to the Darwinian theory, organisms always reproduce in greater numbers than the environment can support, and as a result those least able to get food, or to avoid becoming food, die out and fail to reproduce. Thus any organisms that we see well established in the world about us have survived at the expense of less richly endowed competitors; and one can always ask, of such an organism, “By virtue of what capacities has it been able to survive?” Now, if we look at man with questions of this sort in mind it is obvious that it is his intelligence that is chiefly responsible. It is his capacity to observe, to calculate, to envisage, to predict, to devise novel schemes that gives him his unparalleled flexibility whereby he can live, and live well, in a great diversity of circumstances. Thus, from this standpoint it is quite natural to regard human thought as having the primary function of enabling the human organism to satisfy its needs in its natural environment.

At first sight it might seem that though this way of looking at human intelligence could suggest new paths of exploration in psychology, sociology, and other sciences of man, it could hardly give rise to a philosophy. We must now see why this impression is mistaken.

It is Dewey who has most heavily and most consistently emphasized this aspect of pragmatism, and it can be seen playing a formative role in his philosophy at a great many points (see the section on Dewey). But this concept, though less prominent, is no less fundamental in James and Peirce. In their thought the idea that intelligence has an adaptive function flowers into a philosophy by way of a theory of meaning. (Peirce and James were perhaps the first to exhibit clearly the characteristically twentieth-century tendency to put considerations of meaning at the heart of philosophy.) To see this we shall have to go back for a moment to the true father of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).

This remarkable man, perhaps the greatest thinker yet produced by America, made

distinguished contributions to logic, philosophy of science, metaphysics, epistemology, and other branches of philosophy, besides doing work in science. Paradoxically, despite strenuous efforts by James and others, for personal reasons he was unable to secure a permanent academic post. He worked for thirty years for the U.S. Geodetic Survey. In 1878 he published an article in, of all places, *The Popular Science Monthly*, entitled “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in the course of which he enunciated what he called “the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension.”<sup>22</sup> In 5.392 Peirce says that logicians “are right in making familiarity with a notion the first step toward clearness of apprehension, and the definition of it the second.” But the crucial third step has been omitted, according to Peirce, and the following “rule” supplies it. “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”<sup>23</sup> This principle could be put in terms of assertions as follows. To make any assertion of an object is to say that this object, when in certain circumstances or when subjected to certain influences, will have such-and-such effects having practical bearing. And if we assume that to have a concept of, for example, a lemon is to attach a certain meaning to “lemon,” or to some equivalent expression, we can then restate the principle, in more nearly contemporary terms, as having to do with the meaning of linguistic expressions, somewhat as follows. The meaning of a predicate term, P, is given by all those effects, which have practical bearing, that we would expect any object to have of which we predicated the term P. By “effects, that might conceivably have practical bearing,” Peirce means effects that we might well take account of in acting toward the object with an eye to the satisfaction of our needs. Thus, to call something a lemon is to say that its pulp is nourishing, that if squeezed it will emit a sour liquid, that if put in a bag it will take up so-and-so-much room, that if placed under a heavy weight it will be mashed — these all being effects that, in one set of circumstances or another, we might well take account of in shaping our actions vis-a-vis the object.

In the same essay Peirce makes clear how this principle is derived from the Darwinian conception of the function of thought. He argues as follows. The sole function of thought is the production of belief, which in turn essentially consists of a habit of action. Since a conception is essentially an element of thought it can refer to nothing unrelated to thought’s function. Therefore the conception of any object is the conception of its effects that might conceivably have practical bearings. This whole line of argument stems from the basic assumption that the sole function of thought is the production of a habit of action.

As the title of Peirce’s essay indicates, he meant this principle to be useful in clarifying our ideas, that is, in helping us to become more clearly aware of what our concepts amount to and of what we mean by the expressions we use; and also to be useful in getting rid of vague feelings that there is something to ideas other than this. As such it should have a bearing on any area of human thought. But both Peirce and James were convinced that philosophy was in much greater need of this treatment than either scientific or commonsense thought. Both were convinced that many traditional philosophical issues would either disappear or appear in a quite different light if subjected to this sort of analysis. Prior to 1878, Peirce had already suggested, in his “Review of Fraser’s *Works of George Berkeley*”<sup>24</sup> that there was no real difference between Berkeley’s view that physical objects are simply congeries of sensory “ideas,” and the more usual view that they are material substances existing independent of the mind. On the pragmatic principle, physical objects would still have exactly the same practically relevant effects in either case. Using either theory a lemon will emit a sour liquid if squeezed. But it was left to Tames to pursue this line more thoroughly. James was profoundly influenced by Peirce’s pragmatism, which undoubtedly fell in with existing trends in his own thinking (the mutual influence of the two men goes far back,

see Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, 6.482). In 1898 James first used the term “pragmatism” in the essay “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” reproduced below, and in 1906-1907 he gave a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston and again at Columbia University, which were then published as *Pragmatism* (1907). In this book James traces out the implications of the pragmatic principle for a wide variety of philosophical problems, such as the problem of substance in its specific forms — personal identity, God, matter; the problem of design; of free will; of monism and pluralism; the problem of truth.

The most famous application James made of the principle of pragmatism was his theory of truth. In the chapter of *Pragmatism* entitled “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” James argues as follows. Philosophers dispute at length over the nature of truth. Some say it consists in correspondence between a proposition and a fact; some say it consists in the coherence that obtains between propositions or judgments. But if we consider what it means pragmatically to call a belief true, what the “cash value” of the difference between truth and falsity is, what it comes to is that the belief “works,” that is, it does the job beliefs are called upon to do in the economy of human activity. “The true is the good in the way of belief.” There is no harm in speaking of a true belief corresponding to a fact, provided we understand that what constitutes such correspondence is just this working, rather than some mirroring relation between the belief and something outside of our experience with which we can never make contact. This way of putting the matter focuses attention on the question: “What constitutes ‘working’?” “What job is a belief designed to do?” Put succinctly, James’s answer is: The function of a belief is to enable us to get about in our experience, to lead us from one part of experience to another. This involves enabling us to anticipate the sorts of experience we will have under certain circumstances, as well as providing general conceptual frameworks into which our experience can be organized. “Suppose me to be sitting here in my library at Cambridge, at ten minutes’ walk from Memorial Hall, and to be thinking truly of the latter object. My mind may have before it only the name, or it may have a clear image, or it may have a very dim image of the hall, but such intrinsic phenomena, special experiences of conjunction, are what impart to the image, be it what it may, its knowing office.

“For instance, if you ask me what hall I mean by my image, and I can tell you nothing; or if I fail to point or lead you towards the Harvard Delta; or if, being led by you, I am uncertain whether the hall I see be what I had in mind or not; you would rightly deny that I had ‘meant’ that particular hall at all, even though my mental image might to some degree have resembled it. The resemblance would count in that case as coincidental merely, for all sorts of things of a kind resemble one another in this world without being held for that reason to take cognizance of one another.

“On the other hand, if I can lead you to the hall, and tell you of its history and present uses; if in its presence I feel my idea, however imperfect it may have been, to have led hither and to be now terminated; if the associates of the image and of the felt hall run parallel, so that each term of the one context corresponds serially, as I walk, with an answering term of the others; why then my soul was prophetic, and my idea must be, and by common consent would be, called cognizant of reality. That percept was what I meant, for into it my idea has passed by conjunctive experiences of sameness and fulfilled intention. Nowhere is there jar, but every later moment continues and corroborates an earlier one.”<sup>6</sup>

And in “The Function of Cognition”<sup>7</sup> James writes that percepts or “sensations are the mother-earth, the anchorage, the stable rock, the first and last limits, *the terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the mind.” C. I. Lewis’ analysis of perceptual judgments in terms of the relations among what he calls “terminating judgments” and “non-terminating

judgments” is a more rigorous formulation of this aspect of James’s pragmatism.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that this fits in with the pragmatic principle as set forth above. If every assertion comes down to saying what practically relevant behavior one or more objects will exhibit in certain circumstances, and if such behavior has to involve effects on our experience in order to be practically relevant, it would seem proper to test assertions primarily in terms of the extent to which they enable us to anticipate the effects objects will have on our experience and, secondarily, in terms of their success at the more abstract organization that is involved in the attempt to do this on a large scale.

It is unfortunate that James became so firmly identified with this theory of the nature of truth. James himself did nothing to discourage such an identification. He wrote widely on the topic, and he was not slow to engage in polemic with some of those, especially on the other side of the Atlantic, who responded indignantly to his formulations.<sup>9</sup> The indignation can be partly traced to misunderstandings. James habitually put vivid phraseology ahead of precision, and his incautious use of phrases like “working,” “cash value,” “expedient,” led some of his readers to understand him to be saying that no belief can be true unless it directly guides overt action (thus ruling out all thought of any considerable degree of abstraction) or that any belief is true that makes us contented or happy or that it is to our advantage in any way to believe. Views like this are, of course, rightly stigmatised as both absurd and intellectually irresponsible. Those who read James in this way were not taking seriously the things James says by way of making explicit the sort of working and the sort of expediency that are constitutive of truth (see previous paragraph); although, as we shall see shortly, there are other dimensions to James’s notion of working that tend to fuzz these specifications and make it doubtful just how strictly they are to be taken.

But apart from misunderstandings there are features of James’s theory of truth that might well give pause to even the most sympathetic reader. It seems clear, in retrospect, that James was seriously abusing the term “true” in identifying truth with the sort of criteria of truth he was willing to endorse. Whatever may be the correct analysis of “true,” it seems clear that two persons can call a given proposition true and, at least to some extent, mean the same by what they say, while disagreeing radically over the criteria to be used for determining whether it is true. This has been put by some recent writers by saying that “true” is a term used for endorsing a proposition, signifying one’s acceptance of it, and so on.<sup>10</sup> So far as this sort of position can be made out one can distinguish truth from the criteria for truth without slipping back into the notion of an identity of structure between proposition and fact, a notion that James rightly stigmatized.

But in any event it seems clear that James’s theory won’t do. This conclusion is reinforced by certain implications that James drew from his theory and that scandalised many of his readers, particularly that truth changes and that truth grows. I believe that these contentions of James spring from confusions. No doubt it is sometimes true that I am eating and sometimes not true that I am eating. But that is because the sentence “I am eating” is not sufficient by itself to uniquely indicate a single proposition; hence, these words alone do not indicate anything that is capable of truth or falsity. What is true at one time is that I am eating at that time, and what is not true at another time is that I am eating at that other time; and these are not the same. I am not suggesting that it was confusions of this sort that led James into saying what he did. I bring in this point as a relatively simple example of the sort of confusion that is possible in this area. A consideration that did weigh heavily with James was the fact that a proposition that at one time does a good job of anticipating and organizing experience, for example, that the sun revolves around the earth, may not work so well at a later time, in the light of fuller experience. The history of science is full of such examples. But what this shows is not that truth changes; to say that in the Middle Ages it was true that the sun revolves around the earth but now it is false that



the sun revolves around the earth, and really mean it, is to imply that in the Middle Ages the sun revolved around the earth but that now the sun does not revolve around the earth. What this example does show is that truth is not the same thing as working, of however intellectually respectable a type. Dewey, under the pressure of similar criticism, gave up talking of "truth" and substituted the term "warranted assertability." It now seems clear that James's main concern was, or should have been, with the conditions under which a proposition is justifiably accepted. And he might have spared the world a great deal of fruitless, though lively, controversy by simply making a present of the word "true" to his opponents.

So far James's pragmatism sounds like a fairly hard-boiled form of pragmatism, indeed, like a precursor of that most hard-boiled form, logical positivism. It seems but a short step from the Pragmatic Principle to the Verifiability Theory of Meaning as stated by Schlick or Carnap. For if the meaning of an assertion lies in practically relevant consequences, and if the only consequences that can have practical relevance are consequences for our experience, it will follow that the significance of an assertion consists in its consequences for our experience, which is practically the Verifiability Theory. Both these positions are distinguished from the empiricist tradition of Locke and Hume in that they concentrate on empirical consequences of assertions rather than empirical origins of ideas. Pragmatism, as a form of empiricism, is itself distinguished from logical positivism in the following ways:

1. If we consider the sort of experience that is in question, we will find that the logical positivists have generally followed Locke and Hume in looking for sharply distinguishable sense data like colors, sounds, and smells, and have demanded a formulation of empirical consequences in such terms as the badge of their respectability. Whereas pragmatists have generally been much more liberal as to what is to be allowed to count as empirical consequences. More specifically, James, both in the *Psychology* and in later epistemological writings such as "Does Consciousness Exist?" and "A World of Pure Experience," explicitly disavowed Humean atomism and insisted that experience cannot adequately be envisaged as an aggregate of discrete, self-sufficient, distinguishable sensations. It was James who popularized the phrase "stream of consciousness" and who emphasized the fact that the field of awareness has an indeterminate fringe as well as a center. James argued at length that the relations connecting sensations are as primary a part of experience as the sensations themselves. Dewey also pictures experience as a much less clear-cut affair than it appears in Locke and Hume.

2. As we have seen, Peirce and James rest their empirical theory of meaning squarely on considerations concerning man as an organism trying to get along in his natural environment. Some logical positivists attempt to give this sort of pragmatic justification of the Verifiability Theory (see Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction*, University of Chicago Press, 1938, pp. 64-68), but more usually they have simply suggested that on reflection we can see that is what we mean by "meaning," or they have recommended it as a useful device for getting rid of insoluble problems.

However, as we have already hinted several times, there are other features of James's pragmatism that blur this strictly empiricist picture. In the opening chapter of *Pragmatism* James presents pragmatism as an agent of reconciliation between the tough minded and the tender minded, and before the book has ended it is apparent that the tough-minded position sketched above is well tempered by the tender-minded tendencies in his thought. This comes out most clearly in his treatment of religious issues. On the basis of the above presentation one would expect James to reject the question of the existence of God as meaningless, since no definite experiential expectations follow from it, or at least to make its significance hang on the provision of such consequences, as he does in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In the postscript of that book James says:

Both instinctively and for logical reasons, I find it hard to believe that principles can exist which make no difference in facts. But all facts are particular facts, and the whole interest of the question of God's existence seems to me to lie in the consequences for particulars which that existence may be expected to entail. That no concrete particular of experience should alter its complexion in consequence of a God being there seems to me an incredible proposition....<sup>11</sup>

But something different happens in Pragmatism and in other works as well. James makes a switch, apparently without noticing it, from talking about the practically relevant consequences of the fact that so-and-so, to talking about the effects on our conduct of believing that so-and-so. Consider: "But what does true *insofar forth* mean in this case [the case being belief in the Absolute, the God of absolute idealism]? To answer, we need only apply the pragmatic method. What do believers in the Absolute mean by saying that their belief affords them comfort?"<sup>12</sup> The pragmatic significance of belief in God is held to lie in such things as the greater moral vigor, or hopefulness, or sense of rationality it provides. These in turn being presumed to have various sorts of impact (largely beneficial) on conduct.

It is clear that if all this is allowed to count as pragmatic significance the belief in God will have pragmatic significance. And if we make a corresponding enlargement of the notion of "working," as James was all too willing to do, the belief in God can claim to be true "so far forth" as it works in these ways, that is, insofar as holding the belief does influence conduct in ways such as those just specified.

There are serious objections to this second notion of pragmatic significance. It is difficult to see how the meaning of what is believed can consist in consequences of what is believed. It seems clear that what is believed is logically prior to any consequences of believing it. Moreover, with respect to the corresponding test for truth it does seem highly irresponsible to regard a belief about the ultimate forces controlling the universe as true, on the grounds that holding the belief will increase moral vigor or charge life with a quality of hopefulness. But apart from these objections, it was unfortunate that this notion of the effects of holding a belief should be so entangled with the empiricist elements in James's thought. The confusion that resulted led Peirce to cry in despair that his word "pragmatism" "begins to be met with occasionally in the literary journals, where it gets abused.... To serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he [Peirce] begs to announce the birth of the word 'pragmaticism' which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnapers."<sup>13</sup>

This more tender-minded side of James's pragmatism connects up with another side of James's philosophy, which might or might not be considered an aspect of pragmatism — namely, the very strong voluntaristic, anti-intellectualistic strain in James. This note was first clearly sounded, though with serious qualifications, in two essays James published in the 1880's — "The Will to Believe" and "The Sentiment of Rationality." In the former, James is concerned with issues that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds (that is, for which there is not sufficient evidence one way or the other), but which are such that the position a man takes up on the issue will have an important bearing on the conduct of his life. More specifically, James is concerned with the religious hypothesis that "First... the best things are the more eternal things.... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."<sup>14</sup> ("The Will to Believe," Section X, pars. 3 and 4.) He argues convincingly that a person will lead his life differently in important respects, depending on whether he adopts this hypothesis. Then, on the assumption that there is no evidence sufficient to decide the question one way or another, James contends that one has a right to take up a position on "passional grounds"

(which means, roughly, as one feels inclined). In fact, says James, there is no possibility of doing otherwise; for if one tries to suspend belief, he will be acting as if the hypothesis is not true (that is, he will be conducting his life without any reference to a cosmic ruler), and so for all practical purposes he will be taking a negative position.

This essay contains important foreshadowings of pragmatism. Note especially the way in which a pragmatic theory of belief is involved in claiming that agnosticism is equivalent to atheism. But the position is not identical with pragmatism. In “The Will to Believe” James has still not adopted his “tender-minded” pragmatic test of truth. He is still supposing that, however much lift we may get out of the belief in God, that is to be distinguished from establishing its truth, which would presumably have to be done in roughly the same way as that in which one would establish a scientific hypothesis. Under certain special conditions one can legitimately adopt a belief without such support, but what one is doing then is to be clearly distinguished from establishing its truth. The same distinction is even more clearly underlined in the Conclusion, Lecture XX, of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. But with the notions of “truth” and “working” getting fogged as they do in Pragmatism, James ends up saying that by giving free rein to “passional considerations” of the “will to believe” sort, one could establish the truth of the religious hypothesis, in the sense of truth appropriate to it, a sense that at least belongs to the same genus as the sense in which scientific or common-sense beliefs are true and that cannot be distinguished in any sharp way from that sense. Thus, in both works we have an anti-intellectualism, an appeal to the heart and to life in the large, as against logic and scientific evidence, but with a significant difference.

In “The Sentiment of Rationality” we again get the anti-intellectualism straight, without the claim that it is practically the same thing as intellectualism. There James argues that there is a plurality of world views between which one has to choose on the basis of which one seems to make the most sense out of everything in one’s experience. And again, at the close of his career, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, a series of Hibbert Lectures given at Oxford University in 1909, James returned to the attack on intellectualism. Here his great admiration for Bergson is most evident. In addition to expounding Bergson’s views at some length, he maintains that “the intellect” and its logic are incapable of grasping the flow of experience. Then, building on the ideas of the great nineteenth-century psychologist-philosopher, Fechner, he produces some curious and undoubtedly nonrational speculations concerning the “compounding of consciousness” — resulting in superhuman minds such as a soul of this planet, of which our minds are parts.

We cannot hope to mention all the strands in the very complex fabric of James’s philosophic thought, but at least one more deserves note. In a series of articles later collected under the title, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James sought to solve the traditional philosophical problems of our knowledge of the external world and the relation between mind and body in terms of a view he called “neutral monism.” According to this theory there is a single world-stuff consisting of momentary experiences; these “experiences” then get organized in one way to form minds, in another way to form bodies. Thus, there is no mysterious gap between mind and matter, between knower and known. These dualities simply reflect different modes of organization of the same basic stuff. This view had little connection with pragmatism, and it has been elaborated most fully by Bertrand Russell, who is certainly no pragmatist.

It seems to me that the heart of James’s philosophizing lay in his irrationalism, his glorification of the heart over the head. (Some readers will find here a reflection of James’s admitted incapacity to master logic.) We find this emerging both before and after the publication of *Pragmatism*, in forms more or less related to the form it takes in the pragmatic principle. Nevertheless, it is as an early apostle of pragmatism that James made



his most enduring mark on the philosophical scene.

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