

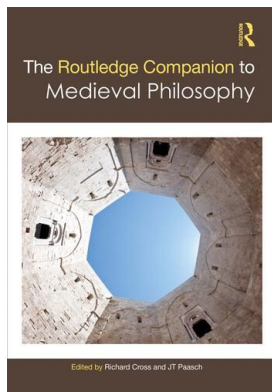
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REASONS AND ACTIONS

Anthony Celano

The medieval theory of moral actions has its origins in Aristotle's concept of right reason and Augustine's notion of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). For Aristotle practical choices mimic the deductive process of theoretical reason in which a particular option may be deduced from a universal proposition. The logically deduced conclusion combines an awareness of a universal moral principle with the recognition of a relevant particular instance. Aristotle himself refrains from providing specific examples of universal ethical imperatives, most likely because he bases his moral philosophy on human practice. His examples, however, do illustrate the nature of practical moral reasoning, as in the rules that stagnant water is to be avoided as unhealthy, and that light meat is beneficial. In the discovery of both the universal and particular premises, experience is a fundamental requirement, since there is no *a priori* knowledge of either proposition. Only after repeated experience, reflection and teaching, can one accept the truth of the statements that stagnant water is unhealthy and that this body of water is indeed stagnant. The awareness of both premises provides the basis for the judgment that one should not drink this water. The most basic formulation of universal moral principles would be that human actions should seek to produce happiness, and these actions are conducive to that end. Again experience is required to recognize those actions that produce happiness, and if the required background is operative, then the agent would always choose correctly.

Aristotle recognizes that human beings do not always follow the dictates of right reason, and he explains moral weakness as an error in the process of practical reasoning. In book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he indicates that a weak person primarily errs with respect to the minor premise. Although Aristotle does recognize the possibility of absolute moral reprobation in intemperate persons, who believe that their evil choices are justified, he considers the problem of moral weakness (*akrasia* or *incontinentia*) to be far more common. Morally weak persons do not think that what they do is right (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1146b22–24), but overcome by unrestrained desires or passions, they choose to ignore the dictates of a rational moral principle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147b6–12). Unlike Socrates, who determines such a choice to be the result of faulty intellectual reasoning, Aristotle understands that a particular choice (*prohairesis*) may be made in spite of the intellectual awareness of moral principles. One may accept intellectually that drinking to excess is to be avoided, but a desire to enjoy a night out with friends may obscure the acceptance of the final term of the practical syllogism, which would command a cessation of drinking at a reasonable point.

Christian moral theory accepts the basic idea of Greek philosophy that all humans seek a single end. In Christian moral thought the single goal is perfect beatitude, which consists ultimately in

the soul's union with God. Christian moralists, however, attempt to explain the decision-making process with the concept of the will, since they were convinced that the exalted faculty of reason could not be led astray by the far inferior powers of emotion and desire. Augustine, whose writings are more influential in the Middle Ages than any source other than the Scriptures, was particularly important for the development of a new Christian theory of moral action. M. Clark describes his contribution as follows:

The moral theory of Augustine was both like and unlike that of the Greek philosophers. It was like Greek moral theory in placing happiness as the end of all human striving, and it was like the Neoplatonic philosophers in relating human goodness to a choice of greater over lesser goods, with God as the true source of happiness. Unlike the Greeks, who emphasized knowledge and self-sufficiency, Augustine taught that the human person reaches union with God with God's help by loving him in response to his love . . . He emphasized right will in addition to true knowledge as the way to happiness of being united to God.

(Clark 1994: 42)

Augustine, certainly aware of the conflicting desires that marked his early life, was particularly interested in an explanation for the human dilemma of willing what is not good presented by Paul in Romans 7: 19–25: “For the good which I will, I do not, but the evil which I will not, that I do . . . But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind.”

Augustine determines the final element in action to be the will which provides human beings with autonomy, self-determination, and the ability to choose between right or wrong. Although he accepts the Stoic idea of a natural cognition of universal principles of eternal law, Augustine also recognizes the will's ability to accept or reject its dictates. Rather than attribute moral error to an intellectual failure, he explains it in terms of the will's free decision to choose between alternatives. J. Müller notes that Augustine recognizes the ancient concept of the rational striving toward a recognized good, but after the fall of Adam, reason is not strong enough to determine right action without the assistance of divine grace. Augustine introduces a new idea of decisive wanting, which ultimately directs the conflicted will toward a particular action. The human will is the crucial factor in Augustine's moral theory, providing the basis for freedom and individual responsibility (Müller 2009: 362). The good will is the cause of “turning and adhering to” the perfect being rather than to a less than perfect one, and the evil will is a desertion or rejection of God (*De civitate Dei* XII.9). The concept of will allows Augustine to explain how any person may freely disobey the moral law, even though one may recognize intellectually its obligatory nature.

In the eleventh century Anselm of Canterbury refines Augustine's theory of free choice through his distinction between the desire for what is beneficial (*affectio commodi*) and the desire for what is just or right (*affectio iustitiae* or *rectitudinis*: *De libero arbitrio*, c. 3). The desire for what is beneficial may conflict with the pursuit of justice, and Anselm's acceptance of two ends that dictate two different courses of action provides the explanation for the will's ability to choose freely (Brower 2004: 244). Freedom of choice is given to rational beings to act in accordance with rectitude for its own sake, and in such freedom consists justice, which is always the goal of a good will (*De libero arbitrio*, c. 3). In language that is similar to that of Kant, Anselm argues that a truly free choice is one that maintains the will's rectitude for the sake of rectitude itself and is not one that benefits the agent. (*De libero arbitrio*, c. 3 and 10). The will of an evil person appears to be a servant to the desire for what is pleasant and the pursuit of pleasure makes a person a slave to sin (Goebel 2006: 109–110; *De libero arbitrio*, c. 10: *Quomodo peccans sit servus peccati*). A free rational being with moral rectitude is neither subject to, nor a servant of, what is not fitting. The rational will can only be turned away from right when it consents willingly to what it should not. Without volitional consent no external temptation can overcome the will's freely chosen path of rectitude

(*De libero arbitrio*, c. 5). Anselm deems no one free who is compelled by the passions to do wrong, since human volitional liberty consists perfectly in the choice of what is right. The recognition of what is just leads to the will's acceptance of its compelling force in human judgments.

The will for happiness or beatitude does not innately include the limits that justice provides. Justice and rectitude require that the human will subordinate itself to God (*De casu diaboli*, c. 14). Anselm claims that no will is just, except that one which wills that which God wills that it will (*De libero arbitrio*, c. 8). The conflict between an inordinate desire for individual happiness and the will to act in accordance with rectitude reflects again human volitional freedom. While in God's unified nature the coincidence of beatitude and justice assure absolute harmony in the divine will, in the human dichotomy between soul and body conflict is inevitable. The desire for beatitude cannot, in Anselm's view, be entirely wrong because it is a universal human desire, which is impossible to ignore (*De casu diaboli*, c. 4 and 13). An inordinate wish for individual beatitude may at times conflict with the demands of justice, especially in regard to others, but ultimately justice and beatitude must coincide, since the will's choices to commit just acts must lead the agent to a state of moral goodness (*De casu diaboli*, c. 12). Anselm recognizes a possible conflict between the individual human desire for beatitude and the demands of just dealings with others.

In the twelfth century Peter Abelard identifies the most relevant factor in moral action to be an interior act of consent and rejects the intellectual foundation in ancient Greek theories of ethical behavior (*Ethica*, c. 1). In themselves, persons, passions, or even desires cannot be evil since they are parts of human nature (*Ethica*, c. 3). The course of moral choosing is not an intellectual process aiming at a beneficial state, but rather a volitional procedure directing the soul to exercising free choice. One may have urges arising from corporeal weakness, but the will may refrain from the consequences, and consent to direct action in accordance with divine law. Only when consent is given to actions that contravene the law of God, can such acts be called truly sinful. For Abelard baser impulses may be accepted or rejected, and even an evil will without consent does not constitute sin.

Abelard divides human desires into those which please (*placere*) and those which are rationally appropriate (*approbare*). Conflict may arise in either type of human desires. In the same action of seeking pleasure one may covet physical pleasure but be repelled by feelings of guilt or fear of punishment. In the higher form of wanting, which pursues what reasons display as good, one may act against one's own conscience. When such a seemingly irrational action occurs the appetitive desire overwhelms the dictates of reason. Herein lies the ability of a human being to make a free choice and to give consent to an act which appears irrational (Müller 2006: 129–133).

Sin, Abelard argues, can be committed without an evil will, and, as such, should not be considered identical to willing itself. Abelard provides an example of a man desirous of a beautiful woman, who restrains himself through the power of temperance. He does not completely destroy the will to sin, but triumphs in his struggle by subjugating his will to the divine one. The intention of the moral agent is here the determining factor, and the deed itself adds nothing to the merit or fault of the agent (*Ethica*, c. 3). Abelard accepts the force of human desires, and says, to be without desire is impossible due to the weak nature of human beings. The sin consists not in desiring a woman, but in the consent to that desire, regardless of the success or failure of an attempted seduction. Consent to do what should not be done, or sin, is hatred of God and the violation of divine law (*Ethica*, c. 3: "Sin is to disdain the Creator, that is, in no way to do what we believe we ought to do on account of Him, or not to give up what we should give up on account of Him"). In acting against the conscience of what should be done for the sake of God sin results (*Ethica*, c. 1). Abelard rejects the epistemic status of practical judgment that is part of Greek thinking, as J. Müller notes. Abelard views the conscience as the ability to recognize manifest truths, but this ability does not preclude error, since one can sin against awareness. Abelard understands such mistakes to contravene belief more than knowledge (Müller 2006: 125–126). Free choice consists in

the soul's ability to reflect and to judge what one should do, and finally whether one should accept or reject the conclusions of reflection and judgment.

The Latin translations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the Greek commentaries that appeared in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries provided an impetus for a renewed interest in, and more extensive treatment of, moral questions. Early in the thirteenth century, authors such as William of Auvergne and Philip the Chancellor located the universal principles of moral reason that are identical with the eternal law in the human innate power, or habit, of *synderesis*. Every single person has an innate ability after certain experiences to recognize the infallibility and immutability of certain moral principles. The dictates of *synderesis* form the major premises of the practical syllogism in the theories on moral choice of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas (Celano 2007).

Like William of Auvergne, Albert understands a text from Paul to allow for the introduction of the idea of *synderesis* into the discussion on correct moral laws. In them there can be no error or doubt, since the natural ability to judge is formed by reason and *synderesis*. So formed, the critical faculty of judgment knows what to do (*De bono* V q. 1 a. 1). Such universal principles are clearly expressed in the decalog, and individual tenets are the belief in one God, to honor one's parents, not to kill, and the like. These commands are universally taken from natural and written laws (*scripta*) and are comprehended by that power which responds to reason. Albert compares the process of acting in accordance with natural law to the process whereby the speculative intellect is perfected. The intellect contains a twofold power before it receives an act of knowledge: a potency to know the instruments of knowledge and the power of knowledge itself. The instruments of knowledge are the first principles of science. The same process holds for the development of a habit of the practical intellect which directs actions. In the knowledge of law the first potency is directed toward its universal principles. Albert argues that before the moral habit can develop there must be knowledge of the terms of the universal imperatives. He says that the knowledge of principles, such as do not steal or commit adultery, is acquired *per accidens*, that is, through the recognition of terms. Because there is no prior understanding, knowledge of such terms is instilled naturally and acquired by subsequent recognition. The meaning of Paul on the topic is that justice is known by the form of justice impressed upon all those whose life and actions conform to the dictates of the universal commands. In this way one develops a habit of natural law (*De bono* V q. 1 a. 1).

Natural law may be a habit, but not one that in itself is sufficient to produce action. Augustine's definition of a habit as that by which someone acts as desired refers to a complete habit that has no trace of potency. This type of habit is not one of principles, by whose possession one is led to action. The innate cognition of the imperatives of natural law leads only potentially to corresponding actions which need to be aligned with the dictates of right reason. The potency of the natural habit is actualized when specified by the particulars of human positive law (*De bono* V q. 1 a. 1).

In the consideration of ethical behavior Albert argues that the practical and speculative intellects are substantially united, but differ in nature because of the distinction between truth and goodness. The nature of the practical intellect encompasses goodness, action and the appetite. Goodness is the prime mover of the appetite, since the good moves that which first perceives it. The practical intellect is the power by which the good is apprehended and pursued. The perceived good is actual and operable and consists in a particular act, since every action must be an individual choice. The good presents itself only insofar as it is desirable, and for this reason the intellect moves the appetite to pursue the good. This process is the reason for Aristotle's statement that only the appetitive element in the soul can move one to action (*De homine*, 485).

Choice determines moral character and is the fulfillment of one potency, which is free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). Albert calls choice a power different from both reason and will (*voluntas*), but it participates in each. Free choice flows from both reason and the will in that the judgment needed comes from reason and free desire from the will. Desire exists formally in the judgment and in the

last act in the process itself. The free choice needs judgment since it seeks something desired for the sake of a further good, whereas the will's appetite simply pursues something for its own sake (*Super Ethica*, 154). Operations or actions generate the virtues only insofar as they have the mode of reason. This rational mode is ascribed to virtues by way of choice, which is the first factor in conveying the virtuous quality. A moral judgment derives its nature to the highest degree from choice (*Super Ethica*, 155). Choice, as it designates the act, belongs to prudence as it is performed, just as the operation of prudence and reason is incorporated within every virtue because all virtues take their form from rational prudential activity (*Super Ethica*, 155).

To choose (*eligere*) is an act of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) which is a potency between reason and will and has something from each power, but the formal nature of choosing comes from the will (*Super Ethica*, 160). To prefer one thing over another in judging and to determine what ultimately should be done belongs to reason, which works in a manner consistent with the decisions in theory or art. To prefer something by accepting it through the appetite is to choose, which does not belong to reason. Sometimes reason's judgment may be ignored even though it always presents a correct principle. Choice that may be correct or wrong is reduced to a principle that is able to be changed or corrected, and this ability to change a decision makes choice free. The object of deliberation is the same in subject as the object of choice, but differs in that the former has the form of reason, while the object of choice always involves the will as well (*Super Ethica*, 160).

The will whose object is goodness does not determine the good, but rather is made good by the pursuit of what is simply good. Albert here follows the doctrine of Cicero who calls simply good actions honorable or proper (*honesta*) because they attract and compel one by their intrinsic force and not merely by their appeal to the human will (*Super Ethica*, 165–166). All human beings because of the nature of reason have the capacity for moral integrity, but only those who have developed the proper moral habits are said to have perfectly achieved moral rectitude.

One may do wrong by making a choice that is somehow based in ignorance, but ignorance does not constitute the reason for choice, because an evil person may know the proper reason, but choose to act improperly. An appetite for something contrary to good may overwhelm a person to the extent that one cannot rightly apply the universal reason to a particular act. One is not unaware of the universal proposition but is deceived in the application of the minor premise or conclusion (*Super Ethica*, 146). The wrongdoer has knowledge of the action that he chooses to commit but remains ignorant of the rectitude of reason as it is applicable to a particular act through choice. Such ignorance of evil removes the practical knowledge that regulates action but does not destroy theoretical knowledge that characterizes consideration and the syllogistic process. All people are bound, and able, to know universal principles, because all have a path to them provided by reason itself (*Super Ethica*, 146).

Thomas Aquinas develops the ideas of his former teacher, Albert, when he argues that moral choice follows a judgment that functions as a conclusion in the practical syllogism. The end in all practical decisions functions as a first principle and not as a conclusion. The end insofar as it is an end does not fall within the elective process (*electio*). Just as nothing prevents a speculative principle of one science from being a conclusion in another, no end in one decision is prohibited from being ordered to a further goal. In medicine, for example, health is the end about which no doctor deliberates. The physician intuitively the goal of restoring or maintaining health and selects the proper means. Bodily health, however, may be ordered to the good of the soul, and one entrusted with the care of the soul may at times have to sacrifice corporeal health for a superior end (*Summa theologiae* I-II.13.3). No one can choose what lies beyond one's abilities or power to accomplish. The will is the bridge between the intellect and the external operation, since the intellect proposes its object to the will, which in turn is the motivating force to action. The intellect which comprehends something as good in the universal sense drives the will to action. The perfection of the voluntary action develops according to the order leading to the operation by which one strives

to attain the object of desire. The voluntary act's perfection results from the performance of some good which lies within the agent's power (*Summa theologiae* I-II.13.5 ad 1).

The will can choose freely since it may decide to act or not to act. Only beatitude, which reason recognizes as perfect, involves a certain necessity, since no one could prefer misery over blessedness. Because the will's choices concern the means to beatitude, it may reject any particular good as not conducive to this end (*Summa theologiae* I-II.13.6). Everything which has intellectual cognition has an appetite proportionate to this awareness. This type of cognitive appetite is the will. The will as appetite is not proper to the intellectual nature, but rather is related to it only as it depends upon the intellect. The intellect itself is that which determines an intellectual being. The intellect moves the will *per se* and primarily because it presents the perceived good to the voluntary potency. The will moves the intellect as if accidentally (*quasi per accidens*) in that what is understood as good is desired by the will. The intellect must act by presenting the object as good in order for the will to desire it (*Summa contra gentiles* III.26.22).

Choice presupposes deliberation about matters that have some measure of uncertainty. If there are fixed ways to determined ends as in certain arts, there can be no deliberation at all. A scribe does not deliberate concerning the structure of letters because the scriptorial art determines the manner in which he writes. Choices that affect minimally the acquisition of the end require no deliberation, since reason pursues the best course to the desired goal (*Summa theologiae* I-II.14.4). For such reasons no one deliberates about beatitude which moral science proposes, and reason accepts immediately as the proper end for all endeavors (*Summa theologiae* I-II.14.6). The will's goodness depends upon the object that reason proposes. The will has the ability to aim at the universal good that reason comprehends, and so the will depends upon reason as it depends on its object (*Summa theologiae* I-II.19.3). Human reason becomes the measure of the will by which its goodness is calculated because of the eternal law of divine reason. The light of reason in human beings, as it displays goodness and rules the will, depends upon the reflection of the divine countenance. The goodness of the human will clearly depends more upon eternal law than upon human reason. Where human reason fails there must be a turn to eternal reason (*Summa theologiae* I-II.19.4). As it exists in the mind of God the eternal law is unknown to human beings, but it can be known somehow either by natural reason or through revelation (*Summa theologiae* I-II.19.4 ad 3).

The intention to attain a proper end ultimately leads the will to the supreme good, which is God. A requirement for voluntary goodness is the order that leads to this good. Since the first element in any genus is the measure and rationale for all subsequent elements, what is right and good is judged in relation to the principle of all goodness. As a result the human will can be good insofar as it conforms to, and imitates, the divine will (*Summa theologiae* I-II.19.9 and I-II.19.9 ad 1). Human beings can know the divine will in a general way (*secundum rationem communem*) because whatever God wills, He does so under the nature of goodness. No one, however, can know what God wills particularly (*Summa theologiae* I-II.19.10 ad 1). In voluntary actions the proximate regulative principle is human reason, but the supreme principle is the eternal law. Whatever human act proceeds to the end according to the order of reason and according to the eternal law is right. Actions that do not proceed in this way are always wrong (*Summa theologiae* I-II.21.1). Aquinas does not envision any conflict between the regulatory forces of reason and the eternal law, since their principles are identical.

Both Albert and Aquinas attempt to explain how reason may fail to function in a rational manner and thus produce incorrect moral action. For Albert the failure is one of reason because the agent may perceive the minor premise, but does not really know its relevance due to the influence of passion. The morally weak person does not intend to do wrong and his act is not the result of will, but rather unwanted ignorance (Tracey 2006: 212–213; Muller 2009: 507). Aquinas generally agrees with Albert's understanding of moral weakness wherein the general moral principle is obscured in a specific instance because of the effect of passion (*Summa theologiae* I-II.77.2). Aquinas,

however, grants a larger role to the will in such decisions, since choice consists in the will's selection according to pleasure. Reason itself can never be the efficient cause of human choice, which depends upon the will, but is rather the final cause of action in its function as proposing and judging any goal as good (Müller 2009: 514).

Other writers of the thirteenth and early fourteenth century rejected the idea of primacy of the intellect in the process of moral decisions. Henry of Ghent, a secular master, and Peter Olivi, a Franciscan, insisted upon the self-determination and freedom of the human will. For them the will is the foundation of human freedom because only it has the power of self-determination (Kobusch 2006: 253–257). Henry of Ghent identifies the habit of the will to be charity and that of the intellect to be wisdom, and their respective acts to be love and knowledge. The will commands the intellect to consider, or deliberate about, what it wills, and so the intellect in no sense can command the will. The desire to know must always precede the principles of knowledge (Stone 2003: 206). John Duns Scotus sees a fundamental distinction between the natural power of the intellect and the autonomous capacity of the will. T. Noone observes that the intellect

is necessarily determined to follow the conclusion presented by the evidence considered and cannot determine itself to one course of practical action over another; reason, accordingly, can be only improperly termed a rational power since its act is required for and ordered to the activity of the truly rational power, the will. That is why, for Scotus, will is the only faculty subject to moral evaluation in terms of good and evil.

(Noone 2006: 294)

While the intellect must follow necessarily the path of its reasoning, the will may accept or reject any end including the desire for union with God. Human volitional freedom consists in this ability to reject any end (*Reportatio Parisiensis IIA* d. 39 qq. 1–4, n. 5: *Intellectus practicus est, qui necessario assentit agibilibus, voluntas autem libere*).

Scotus denies that human beings always act for the sake of happiness, since only the will can determine the character of the desired end. J. Müller observes that as a natural power the will is directed toward beatitude, but as free it cannot want the end necessarily, since it can wish for something different. The intellect can display an end and is thereby only an instrumental cause, or a *causa sine qua non*, since only the will can truly move a human being to action (Müller 2009: 653 and 716). The natural will is not will at all and to will naturally is not willing because the designation, “natural,” negates both the will and willing. Natural will designates an inclination toward the advantageous, but the will in order to be free must have the power to perform or not to perform the act conforming to this inclination. Natural will is then merely a tendency and not a willing at all (*Ordinatio* III d. 17, in Wolter 1986: 182–183). Like Anselm Scotus identifies two desires within the human will: one directed to justice and the other toward the advantage. In the desire for justice or rectitude the will expresses most fully its innate liberty. When the will turns from a good not ordered to itself and seeks what is merely advantageous, it produces only an intellectual appetite that is bound to follow intellectual perception. To love something for itself is a freer act than the desire for self-benefit. (*Ordinatio* III suppl. dist. 26, in Wolter 1986: 178–179).

Contemporary scholars have examined at length Scotus's and William of Ockham's assertion that morality consists in obedience to divine commands. Scotus argues that God could contradict all but the first two commandments, and Ockham insists that God could negate every commandment, if He so desires. Moral action would then consist in obedience to laws that prescribe theft, murder and the like. But if God were to command that humans should hate Him, then as D. Clark argues, “the creature's response to this command entails certain formal requirements; namely conformity to the dictate of Right Reason which requires obedience to the divine wish” (Clark 1973: 34). Although Ockham argues that the principles of morality are no longer eternally fixed in

nature, he still adheres to the notion that right reason leads to proper moral choices. The dictates of right reason, however, have their source, as T. Osborne indicates, in God's free decision about the moral value of certain actions (Osborne 2005: 10). For Ockham error occurs not because of a lack of justice or rectitude required in the act itself, but rather due to an absence of rectitude in the will itself. Moral wrong is nothing other than the will's failure to elicit an act according to a divine precept. Rectitude of action becomes then the act elicited according to right reason in conformity with divine law (*Quodlibet* 3.15). Failure to follow the process of rational syllogistic reasoning produces moral wrong when the minor precept that commands a specific course of action is ignored, because the will chooses on the basis of desire and passion. Rectitude or justice is ignored in favor of what the will determines to be advantageous or beneficial in the explanations of moral error in the doctrine of Scotus and Ockham.

The Christian authors of the medieval period accepted Aristotle's basic description of moral action that functions according to syllogistic reasoning. They attempted to overcome the problem of explaining how one who has knowledge of universal principles would ever be in a position to choose an evil or sinful action. Whether they focused upon the intellectual process of deductive reasoning or the will's ability to choose freely, they were able to give a fuller account of human error and volitional responsibility. Their discussions are not without philosophical interest today, since they considered important ethical questions, such as those concerning volitional freedom, the conflict between self-interest and duty and the ultimate goal of the moral life.

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