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Horrors in theological context

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1. Angles of approach

Although my book *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell University Press, 1999) takes its polemical starting point from discussions of the problem of evil by analytic philosophers from the 1950s onwards, it has an underlying theological perspective which begins with Job (and shades of 4 Ezra), continues with Christology, and stretches forward to the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. My medieval friends – Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham – reinforce and give philosophical interpretation to Job's 'size-gap' between God and creatures. My youthful wrestlings with existentialist philosophers and neo-orthodox theologians lead me to locate the *imago dei* in human nature in its alleged capacity for meaning-making rather than its putative potential for moral virtuosity. The goal of reciprocal divine–human identification, so prominent in Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, combines with Matthew's Emmanuel-theme and Chalcedon to render the Christology; while the conditions of the possibility of defeating horrors constitute my rubric for interpreting credal commitments and adjusting traditional eschatologies. Throughout the book and my sequel Gifford lectures, I try to rivet attention on the category of horrendous evils because they disrupt conventional approaches to evil in philosophy and theology alike.

2. The category of horrors

2.1. Defining the category

In an effort to isolate the category of the very worst evils, I define horrors as evils the participation in (the doing or suffering) of which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole. My standard examples include the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, cannibalizing one's own offspring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, parental incest, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, being the accidental and/or unwitting agent in the disfigurement or death of those one loves

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best. In his gracious and insightful comments, William Placher continues this list in a convincing way.

Participation in horrors furnishes *reason* to doubt whether the participant's life can be worth living, because it engulfs the positive value of his/her life and penetrates into his/her meaning-making structures seemingly to defeat and degrade his/her value as a person. I understand the criterion to be objective but relative to individuals. People have different strengths: some bear easily what crushes others. Subjective first-person horror-assessments are not infallible. After all, there are people who know how to make the worst of a good situation, as well as curmudgeons who habitually cast shadows on life's happier moments. Nevertheless, the individuals' own estimates of how bad things are constitute weighty evidence about what is horrendous for them.

2.2. Horrendous observations

It doesn't take much subtlety to recognize that human history is riddled with horrendous evil. In fact, it is comparatively easy for human beings to cause (be salient members in causal chains leading to) horrendous evils. Moreover, an individual's capacity to produce suffering (horrendous and otherwise) unavoidably exceeds (both quantitatively and qualitatively) his/her ability to experience it. Hitler's psychic capacity was not large enough to suffer each and all of the tortures he inflicted on millions. Seventeen-year-old male soldiers lack the empathetic capacity to experience anything like enough of the mother's anguish as her baby is bounced on sharp bayonettes. Yet because – where suffering is concerned – capacity to conceive follows capacity to experience, our ability to cause horrors unavoidably exceeds our powers of conception. Grimmer still, virtually every human being is complicit in actual horrors merely by living in his/her nation or society. Few individuals would deliberately starve a child into mental retardation. But this happens even in America, because of the economic and social systems we collectively allow to persist. Human being in this world is thus radically vulnerable to, and collectively an inevitable participant in, horrors. My dark contention was and is that this makes human being a *prima facie* cursed kind of thing to be.

2.3. The problem of entrenched horrors

Imitating standard discussions in analytical philosophy of religion, we are poised to pose the problem of entrenched horrors as follows:

(1) If God exists, and is omnipotent, God is able to avoid producing a world with entrenched horrors.

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(2) If God exists, and is omniscient, God knows how to avoid producing a world with entrenched horrors.
(3) If God exists, and is perfectly good, God wants to avoid producing a world with entrenched horrors.
(4) Therefore, if God exists, and is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, no such entrenched horrors exist. (1, 2, 3)

The conclusion of this puzzle-generating argument is that the existence of God is *logically incompatible* with the existence of horrors. The existence of the one *contradicts* that of the other. Since horrors exist, God must not!

Standard philosophical responses probe the analyses and implications of the divine attributes in premisses (1), (2), and (3). Approaches that stress created self-determination – both free will defenders (such as Plantinga) and process philosophers (such as Charles Hartshorne and David Griffin) – rechart the scope of divine omnipotence. Some 'incompatibilists' – not only process thinkers, but also Robert M. Adams and Keith De Rose – deny that omniscience knows the future. Whether or not (1) and (2) are left in place, it is objected to (3) that there are *reasons* consistent with perfect goodness *why* even an omniscient and omnipotent being might not prevent the existence of horrors.

3. The lameness of the moral

Typically, because God is personal, divine goodness is understood in terms of *moral* goodness; philosophical free will defenders and best-of-all-possible-worlds theodicists take themselves to be offering *morally sufficient* reasons why God might cause/permit horrendous evils to mar our world. Undoubtedly, systems of morality shed light in arenas where human agents interact with one another to traffic in small, medium, or even large-scale evils or goods. My contrary contention was and is that – in the region of the horrendous – moral categories are bankrupt, because they fail to grasp what is so bad about horrors, what it might mean for God to permit them, or what their remedy might be.

3.1. Morally sufficient reasons why

Horrors resist domestication in terms of 'morally sufficient' reasons (reasons compatible with perfect goodness, knowledge, and power) why God permits them. Like Placher, I want to insist that horrors are so bad that to treat any of the reasons why we can think of as reasons *God* found (or would have found) *sufficient* turns God into a monster, an evil genius of worse than Cartesian proportions. (After all, ignorance and false belief are not always horrendous; likewise, ignorance and false belief are only two

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among the many avenues along which horrors can invade.) I join Placher and many others in thinking that horrors are the rock on which the etymologically defined project of theodicy (literally, justifying the ways of God) founders – that it would be obscene to suppose that horrors are *justified*, or that God intends them *as instrumental or constitutive means to some greater good*.

My thought was and is that *soteriology* offers a better strategy – like the bible, usually short on reasons why but more forthcoming with explanations of *how* God can make good on evils, how God can be good to those who have perpetrated or suffered them, before, during, and after the evils have been allowed. Because horrors constitute a crisis for positive personal meaning, I argued that the value God sets on created persons would lead God not only to 'balance off' (say, in apocalyptic theology's clouds of bliss that put the past behind us and inaugurate a largely discontinuous age to come) but also to give horror participation a dimension of positive meaning by 'defeating' it through organic integration into some great enough good. Because I understand the bible's God to be interested not only in the cosmic and the communal, but also in individual created persons, I insisted that such defeat be accomplished not merely within the framework of the world as a whole but within the context of the individual horror participant's own life!

Thus, in my book, I tried to maintain respect for the depth of horrors, and endeavored to accommodate my own and Placher's queasiness with solutions in two ways: first, by rejecting the demand for sufficient reasons why; second, by denying that any package of merely created goods could defeat horrors (cf. *Sophie's Choice*), and by maintaining that the only way for horrors to be defeated is for them to be integrated into the horror participant's relationship with God – a relationship which I postulated (following traditional theology) to be on the whole beatific and which I estimated to be incommensurately *good* for the created person on the whole, forever and ever, world without end!

3.2. Created moral agents and just deserts?

Coming from the side of created agency, I observed above (in section 2.2) how humans in this world cannot bear full moral responsibility for horrors, not least because ignorance diminishes the voluntary and – where horrors are concerned – we cannot fully conceive of what we do. In any event, between created agents and the horrendous consequences of their actions lies an intervening agent – God – who establishes the framework! Even Adam and Eve in Eden shared this predicament of radical vulnerability to and seriously diminished responsibility for horrors. Moreover, justice is

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stalemated insofar as horror for horror deepens the tragedy by multiplying the ruin and cannot set things right. These considerations combine to settle the issue: both free will approaches to the origin of evil (à la traditional 'free fall' accounts) and free will defenses to the problem of evil are themselves stalemated by horrors!

3.3 Diagnosing the difficulty, reversing the charges

Placher rightly discerns that from my point of view *all human beings are victims* – God's *victims*. Not that God had any *obligation* to do otherwise or to be good to us; the 'size-gap' means that God has no obligations to creatures. But horror participation is not good for us. My Jobian formulation of the soteriological problem is thus that *the non-optimality of the human condition and of the non-optimality of divine–human relations arises fundamentally from the fact that God has set us up for horrors by creating us as personal animals in a world such as this!* Tying personality to the developmental structure of animal life – one that begins in groping immaturity and dependence, stumble-bumbles by trial and error towards higher functioning, only to peak and slide towards diminishment – makes our meaning-making capacities easy to twist, even ready to break, when inept caretakers and hostile surroundings force us to cope with problems off the syllabus and out of pedagogical order. By building into animal nature both an instinct for life and the seeds of death, biology makes human persons naturally degradable. Real and apparent scarcity amplifies the desperation of human struggles to survive.

4. Sin and finitude

In chapter 5, I draw on Mary Douglas's analysis of the categories of purity and defilement, and identify sin as *uncleanness*. I argue that human being is doubly defiled: first, because all creatures are (to borrow language from the book of Job) maggots, not naturally suitable to occupy the same social space as God; and second, because human beings as personal animals or enmattered spirits are metaphysical straddlers, hybrids, wholly and completely neither one thing nor the other. I might have explicitly identified a third factor as 'ontological' defilement – the misfit between human being and an environment of real and apparent scarcity such as this.

Placher is uncomfortable with my *ontologizing* of sin – by making it fundamentally a function of what we and God *are*, and only derivatively a matter of what we *do*. Placher begs to differ. Sin is a category of negative evaluation. Doesn't the bible say that creation is good? Don't various neo-orthodox theologians stress that finitude isn't bad in itself, provided that it is accepted?

So far as the ontologizing of sin is concerned, I am unrepentant. I reject

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– as I imagine Placher also does, but as many of my friends in the Society of Christian Philosophers do not – any idea of a historical fall according to which misuse of freedom explains our present non-optimal condition (the latter being a partly natural and partly punitive consequence of the former). Contrary to Augustine but like Julian of Norwich, I think that sin arises not from misused capacity but from incompetent incapacity – an incapacity to get on top of the task of harmonizing body and spirit, personality and animality into a functional unity. I don't mean to deny that we *do* as well as *suffer* horrible things, or that Hitler perpetrated more horrors than Mother Teresa did – for that matter, far more than we ourselves do. *What I did and do want to deny is that misdeeds are the root of our non-optimality problems; on the contrary, it is the other way around!*

As for the divine self-congratulation in Gen 1, I read that chapter as asserting that creation is good insofar as it is ordered the way God wants it, insofar as the creatures function (do and are) what God made them to do and be. I think it is defensible to see Gen 1 as more about continuous creation (God's continual work against resistance to establish order out of chaos) and eschatological fulfillment rather than putative historical and/or mythic beginnings (cf. Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistance of Evil*). After all, its story ends with a sabbath of never-ending day, when God rests from God's labors. The goodness of creation will be secured when God has finished God's labors. My claim is that *so long as horrors and vulnerability to horrors persist, God's work is not yet done.*

On my cashing of the purity/defilement metaphors, it is not any and every sort of heterogeneity, but *dysfunctional* heterogeneity, that is unclean. Dysfunctional heterogeneity lies at the root of all three levels of human defilement. First, traditional theology acknowledges the natural unsuitability of creatures to inhabit the same social space as God, when it advances a doctrine of divine impassibility, admits that creatures are not by nature the sort of thing that can produce effects in God, and concedes that created active powers are for interacting, not with God but with other creatures. Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence testifies to the same point. Likewise, Scotus insists that because creatures are finite with respect to natural goodness, their natural goodness is not compelling for divine love, while divine agency is invariably voluntary and not necessary in relation to creatures. What makes divine–human cohabitation possible is that God invents a *social* system that assigns roles and gives them definition. Covenants contract us into the reign of God. But creatures' status as citizens is an initiative of divine grace rather than a matter of natural entitlement or propriety.

At the second level, personal animality, enmattered spirit, mind–body

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are a hybrid, neither one kind of thing nor the other, where the two kinds, by their very natures, run interference with one another. At the third, placing us in a world such as this makes it inevitable that human deeds will bear horrendous fruit – have consequences *prima facie* ruinous for agents and their intended or unintended victims alike. Neither horizontally nor vertically does human being include the power to achieve functional harmony within or suitable flourishing in relation to its environments.

Nevertheless, if created nature doesn't give rise to any *entitlements* to be or to flourish, it does build in created natural *neediness and dependence* on God for both. Scholastic theology acknowledges this with the doctrines that the action of God as first cause is required both to initiate and to sustain the being of creatures at every moment of their existence; that created causal power is insufficient by itself to produce any effect without divine concurrence. In my book, I set non-human creation aside to press the claims that that human nature dualistically conceived of as personal animality, enmattered spirit, mind–body is dysfunctional (inadequate to its *telos*) and so incomplete; and that human being can be organized into harmonious functioning only insofar as the Spirit triangulates itself into our functional dynamics. Such triangulation with the Spirit also fits humans for divine–human society, insofar as functionally, if not ontologically, the divine Inner Teacher is part of the identity that the person assumes: I-not-I-but-Christ.

To what extent does this position really disagree with the neo-orthodox theologians with whom I spent my high school and college youth? Placher suggests that they think finitude being and doing what God created it to be and do is good. I do not disagree with this. My claim is rather the quasi-Augustinian one that human being cannot order itself up into being and doing what God made it to be and do apart from collaboration with the Inner Teacher. After years of watching unbelieving philosophers grow saintly in various dimensions, I am all the more convinced that the Spirit groans in all of us from our very beginnings, whether or not it is ever recognized or named as personal. But if this unconscious collaboration is what keeps us functioning at all through horror participation, it doesn't automatically organize us up into functional harmonies. Rather, the relationship grows in effectiveness as the collaboration becomes ever more conscious and consensual from the human side. In my book, I maintain that decisive defeat of horrors will involve conscious recognition of God-with-us all along and evermore, and conscious working together with the Inner Teacher to appropriate latent positive meanings in our past careers and to make new sense of our lives. With scholastic theology, I also reckon that happy endings would mean a transformed relationship to our material environment, one that allows us to live in it without being radically

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vulnerable to horrors. Because many horror participants die unbelievers in a state of *prima facie* ruin, because our *ante mortem* environment remains pregnant with the horrorendous, I put definitive plot resolution beyond the grave and so make the goodness of finite creation generally and human being especially an eschatological hope realized only after death. Here we come to what probably is a substantive disagreement with neo-orthodox theologians, many of whom were fuzzy to negative about our *post mortem* survival. Their sometime emphasis on authentic freedom of choice to accept our finitude may also reflect a more optimistic estimate of human potential to contribute to plot resolution.

Noting my fascination with Julian of Norwich's picture of the fall, Placher pleads that we are worse than that. The image of Hitler as an eager toddler stumbling into Czechoslovakia seems radically to underestimate the malice and cruelty of Nazi imperialism. My response is that toddlers are not always cheerful; when hurt they strike out and do damage, in some sense on purpose and yet in many important dimensions not knowing what they do. Julian of Norwich herself speaks of our fallen condition as wounded, dazed, and confused – a condition that spirals downward in 'the worst of sinners'; a dysfunction that remains life's worst scourge in the most persevering of saints. My intention was not to romanticize childhood or trivialize the significance of our actions. My whole book presses the point that our individual and collective actions have not just small, medium, or large, but *horrendous* consequences. My point was rather to resize our agency in the face of a wildly unrealistic portrait of incompatibilist-free moral agents, the better to stress the limits of our responsibility for horrors and to re-evaluate what is at stake between humans and God.

5. Universalism

Placher and I both share the hope for universal salvation. Because free will defenders among my colleagues in the Society of Christian Philosophers find this a stumbling block, let me clarify what I do and do not take to follow from the notion that everyone will be saved. Focus on horrors clinches my universalism, because horrors are levellers, inflicting their *prima facie* life-ruining power on both perpetrator and victim alike. My confidence that *all* horror participants are redeemed from ruin rests on the conviction that the worst evils are too bad even for the guilty; or better, that horrors are no respecter of moral worth, indeed evacuate it of its usual significance. Moral innocence in the Auschwitz inmate was usually not adequate protection from the stain of the horrendous. Most people – even if morally innocent relatively speaking – did not have strength of character sufficient to ward off the meaning-destroying corrosion. Moral innocence becomes

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hollow for those whose lives have been shattered, because it does not have enough positive value to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Nor did Nazi officials, camp guards, and collaborators – even if never caught and convicted of 'crimes against humanity' – escape the *prima facie* soul-destroying power of their deeds. Whatever their postwar material circumstances, the problem common to horror perpetrators and their victims was humanly irreparable meaninglessness and fragmentation. And so, at a high level of abstraction, the solution to *that* problem is the same for all participants and involves divine initiatives of the following three sorts. First, God must identify with their participation in horrors and thereby catch up their horror participation into the fabric of their relationship with God. Second, God will have to heal and teach them how to appropriate some of the positive meanings such divine identification affords. Third, for them to be finally free, God will have permanently to re-place them in an environment where they are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to infer that – on my view – it *makes no difference* whether you are a perpetrator or a victim, or that horror perpetrators get off 'scot-free'. For those who have actually participated in horrors, it is impossible to get off scot-free, because the positive meaning of one's life has already been *prima facie* ruined. Judas's ruin was so deep he could not see his way out of it. Even if Matthew's Gospel is wrong about the final verdict – that it would have been better for the betrayer never to have been born (Matt 26:24) – Judas did not get off scot-free. Since the cure for horrors is the making of positive meaning, and the restoration to the horror participant of the capacity to make positive meanings; and since the process of letting go of the old and groping towards the new is and can be a painful process, all horror participants can expect to undergo painful rehabilitation. But whether one is a horror perpetrator or victim will make a big difference to the concrete steps and stages of rehabilitation, as well as to the particular shape of the positive meaning that can be made. Can we even begin to imagine the excruciating process involved in Hitler's developing an empathetic capacity to suffer with those whom he tortured? My position is not that horror perpetrators such as Hitler will not have to undergo terrible suffering as a consequence of their deeds. My contention is rather that its aim will not be retributive but curative, and that the plot will resolve into a 'happily ever after' even for them.

6. Incarnation anyway?

While I am putting my theological cards on the table, it may be worthwhile for me to make explicit another feature of the way Christology relates to my version of the soteriological plot. Starting in the twelfth century, medieval

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theologians began to debate whether God would have become incarnate anyway even if Adam had not sinned. Insofar as they traced the origin of evil to created sin, they held sin to have been optional and certainly not at all inevitable. Anselm had argued that, due to the vast 'size-gap' between God and creatures, incarnation is *prima facie* metaphysically indecent – something God would do only if it were required to achieve the aim in creating rational creatures, that of bringing them to an unending and happy enjoyment of Godself. Twin facts – that the Adams family sinned, and that it would be unfitting for sinners to be made thus happy without satisfaction – constitute for Anselm the necessary reason that defeats the presumption against incarnation. By contrast, Grosseteste and Bonaventure summarized arguments (perhaps from Rupert of Deutz and Honorius of Autun) that God would have become incarnate anyway, even apart from human sin, in order to perfect the created universe by realizing its most exalted capacity – viz., for hypostatic union – and to give headship to the church. Later still, Scotus focused on glory and contended that God's primary reason for incarnation had nothing to do with sin, but rather was divine love for the soul of Christ and desire to include it in the intimacy of trinitarian society.

My own view is that divine creation of human beings in a material world such as this, in an environment of real or apparent scarcity, makes human horror participation inevitable. So if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and good to each and every created person, divine providence would not create us in a world like this without including incarnation too. *Pace* Anselm, it's not what we *do*, but what we *are* – our natures and the naturally necessary effects of an environment of scarcity on beings of this nature – that makes the incarnation figure in a loving God's plan.

7. 'The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'

Committed as scholastic theologians were to the explanation of evil in terms of misuse of created free choice, they defended the resurrection of the body on the ground that humans should be rewarded or punished in the bodies in which they earned merit or sinned to the end. Neither way, however, would the bodies be resurrected to their *ante mortem* conditions. The bodies and souls of the blessed were to be raised impassible and incorruptible, into a condition where pain and sorrow and death are no longer real possibilities. Scholastics who understood *post mortem* rewards in terms of beatific vision had trouble explaining what the bodies would be used for. Twelfth-century incarnation-anyway theologians imagined that the bodily eye would enjoy its own participation in beatific vision by viewing God's body, while Aquinas undermined his own hylomorphism with his insistence that

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the sensory soul and bodily self would merely share in the 'overflow' of intellectual blessedness.

My own belief in the resurrection of the body also rests on soteriological considerations. Because I think divine goodness to horror participants involves not merely balancing off but defeat, and because personal materiality in a material environment such as this has been so costly to us, I want the plot to resolve into a condition in which the whole human being can enjoy a non-toxic relation to material creation. I see the risen Christ as representative and pioneer of human being, in which animality and personality are functionally harmonized with one another and with the wider material world. I do not say that our resurrection bodies will be metaphysically impassible – some causal interactions are beneficial and enjoyable (such as eating chocolate, drinking fine coffee, or feeling the breeze against your face). Rather, I replace the notion that the elect rise impassible with the contention that we will eventually – sooner rather than later – be ushered, body and soul, into a situation in which we are no longer vulnerable to horrors.

Having affirmed the propriety of humans rising to reward or punishment in their *ante mortem* bodies, scholastic theologians worried – what with cannibalism and expanding populations – whether and to what extent our resurrection bodies and their material components could be *numerically* the same. If a given parcel of matter is first incorporated into my body and then into that of the person who eats me, who will get that matter on the last day, and will there be enough to go around? Working as they did with Aristotelian physics, scholastics tended to explain the impassibility of resurrection bodies in terms of divinely infused mega-habits that add power to resist natural corruptive causal powers, and/or miraculous divine intervention to obstruct them. Thus, they do not appear to have found it problematic how resurrection bodies could be *specifically* the same as the ones we have here and now.

In my book, I hand-wave these problems, contenting myself with the vague assertion that divine defeat of horrors will involve preserving us in an environment where we are no longer vulnerable to horrors. I do not commit myself on whether the *post mortem* material environment generally or our *post mortem* bodies in particular will be specifically – much less numerically – the same as our *ante mortem* bodies. Recently, in his American Catholic Philosophical Association presidential address on immortality and resurrection, James Ross expressed the view that in the age to come we will find the same material stuff, but it will operate according to radically different causal laws. If we are even now Aristotelian enough to believe natural kinds to be essentially constituted by their causal powers, however,

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we will have either to suppose that resurrection matter is different as to natural kind, or to embrace the scholastic notion of systematic divine intervention to obstruct corruptive forces.

Either way, we face the disturbing why-question: if God can make us in a material universe in which we will not be radically vulnerable to horrors, why didn't God do so in the first place? In my book, I float a partial answer: that God loves material creation – apparently, a material creation with causal powers like those in our *ante mortem* surroundings – and wants to give it a chance to 'do its thing'. This is, of course, unstomachable as a putative *sufficient* reason why. Here – as in my book – I eschew the search for sufficient reasons why. My admission of ignorance leaves my eschatology underdeveloped. But in this, I keep the company of most twentieth-century theologians I have read!

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