

Revising the Notion of Sexual Perversion: A Response to Priest

Introduction

In his 1997 article *Sexual Perversion*, Graham Priest challenges the ordinary conception of sexual perversion as a morally loaded act. Priest argues that existing accounts of sexual perversions fail to provide any sensible ground for the moral evaluation of perversions on their own, and arrives at the conclusion that the notion of sexual perversion does not make sense outside the scheme of Aristotelian moral philosophy. I object to his claim and aims to propose a theory of sexual perversion, the moral evaluation of which will not be undermined by Priest's rejection of Aristotelian teleology.

This paper contains two major sections. In Section I, I will explain Priest's objections to various accounts of sexual perversion, illustrating why Priest believes that sexual perversion is an inapplicable concept without a theoretical underpinning of Aristotelianism. In Section II, I object to Priest's claim that the morally loaded notion of sexual perversions does not make sense. First, I explain why moral evaluation of an action needs not to be grounded in a presupposed belief of natural-moral confluence, attacking an important premise and consequently the conclusion of Priest's argument. Second, I contextualize my argument by proposing a theory of sexual perversion whereby perversions are deemed vices because the end goal of sex, and thus its violation, are morally charged. I will address potential objections to my theory and demonstrate how my theory can resolve Priest's various objections to existing accounts of sexual perversions.

Section I. Priest on Sexual Perversion

Priest argues that the concept of sexual perversion presupposes not only that "biological processes have well-defined natural ends", but also that "there is a confluence between natural and moral ends" (1997, 371). The theme of Priest's objections to various philosophers, including Levy, Aquinas, and Scruton, is that there is no connection between unnaturalness and moral wrongdoings. He criticizes any attempt to ground the notion of perversion in Aristotle's teleology of nature that

employs the purpose of things, or their natural ends, as a criterion for moral judgment, because if one finds teleology inapplicable the notion of perversion will lose its meaning as well.

According to Aristotle, things in the world are goal-directed. Everything of a natural kind thus has a proper function, and the natural order aligns with the moral order. The ability of something to fulfill its proper function and natural end determines its virtue (1050, a 9–17). In the following section, I will illustrate how Priest's rejection of Aristotelian teleology manifests in his critiques of his selected theories of sexual perversion.

Priest first responds to Nagel's idea of sexual perversion. Nagel argues that sexual acts are deemed perverted when people (more than one person) involved in the acts are not sexually aroused by their partner(s) and their arousal. Nagel offers an account of sexual perversion based on the psychological end of humans' sexual desires and interactions. Priest suggests that the first problem with Nagel's account is the line-drawing issue. For example, if arousal is the sole determinant of perversion, sexual acts that are actually morally wrong, such as rape and masochism, when done in the right way, could be deemed non-perverted. The more serious failing of Nagel's theory, according to Priest, is that it offers no explanation of why the inability to achieve continuous and mutual arousal determines whether a sexual act is moral. In other words, whether we fulfill the end of achieving arousal has nothing to do with morality. Here, it is clear that Priest, unlike what a proponent of teleology might argue, disassociates moral value from the fulfillment of or deviation from the desired ends of an action.

Priest then proceeds to an elaborate argument against why theories of "unnaturalness" are ineffective in explaining why something that is perverted in an unnatural sense is immoral. Priest argues that there is no convergence between what is natural and what is morally good, and what is unnatural and what is morally bad regardless of whether "natural" is defined as what happens in the non-human nature or the all-encompassing nature. Things can be unnatural and good, such as medicine and technology, and, on the other hand, natural and bad, such as humans' tendency towards violence. Therefore, natural ends do not equal moral ends. Here, Priest explicitly rejects the idea that natural features align with moral features

A particular meaning of naturalness that Priest objects to is one based on statistical typicality. By this definition, sexual acts that are practiced commonly enough automatically become non-perverted. Defining perversion in the statistical sense only affects what practices, who, and how many people are sexually perverted, but does not justify why unnatural sexual acts in this sense

are immoral. Priest's major objection to this theory is that, again, statistical typicality, the fabricated line between natural and unnatural, offers no explanation of the moral nature of an act.

Priest further responds to Levy's theory of perversion, which takes sexual perversion as unnatural for it hinders people from achieving basic human goods, such as "life, health, control of mind or body, or the capacity to know or love" (1980, 191-202). Levy's theory has something of an Aristotelian ring to it. Levy takes basic human goods as the natural end of sex. Sexual acts that deviate from this particular end are deemed morally bad. Priest acknowledges that Levy's account for sexual perversion at least explains why perversion is immoral, but proceeds to argue that the notion of human goods is too broad to rule out paradigm cases of sexual perversions, such as sadomasochism, rape, and pedophilia, all of which could be in some degree be considered as fulfilling human goods, such as "life" and "control of body".

Priest continues to criticize the idea that biological processes have well-defined goals, functions, and natural ends, the inconsistency with which results in perversion. Priest specifically objects to the sexual philosophy of the medieval Catholic theologian Aquinas, who not only assumes that what is unnatural in human sexual behavior is perverted, but also that what is unnatural or perverted in human sexuality is simply what does not conform with God's design of natural human sexuality. Aquinas' views have then been absorbed into the central tenets of orthodox Catholicism. Traditional Catholic pronouncements define conception as the proper function and natural end of sex. Priest argues that this orthodox Catholic thinking contradicts what it considers non-perverted sexual acts in many cases, such as intercourse between an infertile straight couple, sex for a woman after menopause or a hysterectomy, and essentially any form of sex that fails to achieve conception. The self-contradiction in defining what accounts as perversion indicates the absurdity in using conception/reproduction as both the natural and moral ends of sex, which seems to be a quite an ad hoc notion designed to condemn what the orthodox Catholic thinking needs to condemn, such as masturbation and homosexuality. Priest also points out that it is plausible to suppose that the problem of this account lies in its identification of reproduction with conception. Many may argue that reproduction entails many other processes, such as birth and nurturing the offspring. Not only can sex play important biological functions in these processes, it can also contribute to an overall social environment that is conducive to the reproduction and survival of human beings because sex serves as a mechanism for people to provide one another with both physical and emotional connections. Therefore, one may argue that if we expand on the notion of reproduction, we can

resolve the aforementioned contradictions in the identification of sexual perversions. However, in line with his overall rejection of teleology, Priest responds that even if sex cannot fulfil the purpose of reproduction, there is no reason for us to define it as morally wrong, which is a more serious failing of this theory. The recurring motif of unjustified confluence between natural functions and moral ends is reiterated here.

Priest emphasizes that the alignment between natural ends and moral ends only makes sense with a theoretical underpinning of Aristotle's teleology. There is no intrinsic reason to suppose or justify the connection between what is immoral and what does not fulfill its Aristotelian natural end. He further argues that teleology has lost its prominence in the modern world, where the scientific revolution and the Darwinian theory of evolution have proven that the occurrences in the world are blindly causal in nature. In the Darwinian context where things are analyzed in light of the morally innocent notion of causation rather than the destination to a natural end, there is no ground for the claim that it is morally bad to use something for other than its natural function. If the notion of natural end ceases to exist, its Aristotelian moral association ceases to make sense too. Priest uses the example of washing off body secretions that have the function of an immune system and shaving off body hair that has the function of protecting skin to illustrate that there is nothing wrong *per se* with using something for other than its biological function.

Finally, Priest responds to Scruton's neo-Aristotelian narrative of sexual perversion. In line with Aristotle's teleology, Scruton subscribes to the alignment between natural ends and moral ends. Scruton argues that while not everything has a natural end, human beings do. That end is human flourishing (Scruton 1986). Unlike Aquinas, Scruton rejects to ground the notion of perversion only in biological facts. He does not argue that the failure to conceive and reproduce warrants that sexual perversions prevent flourishing because, to him, flourishing means achieving interpersonal goals and cultivating human relationships. In light of Aristotle's moral philosophy, Scruton believes that vices are acts that work against flourishing, and virtues promote flourishing. Since sexual perversions are dispositions that prevent this flourishing, perversions are vices. (1986). Sexual acts that destruct interpersonal relationships are perverted and vicious, and those that are conducive to forging positive human relationships are virtuous.

Priest is skeptical of this proposed nexus between natural and moral ends. Priest argues that, outside the belief of teleology, whether an action obstructs human relationships and thus prevents flourishing, again, provides no reason why the action is wrong. He considers committing such acts

imprudent rather than immoral. He uses the example of smoking to show that normally we do not consider all acts that hinder flourishing vicious because, clearly, we do not consider smokers as immoral beings simply because they commit an act that is not conducive to their flourishing. Priest reinforces his point that the only way for us to merge natural and moral features is to ground our understanding of perversion in an Aristotelian theory of ethics. This connection is rather conditional and ad hoc rather than intrinsic.

Priest further argues that even if we subscribe to Scruton's view, we need to distinguish two kinds of vices. On one hand, there are sexual acts that directly inflict harm upon others and thus prevent others' flourishing, such as rape and algolagnia; on the other hand, there are sexual acts that only hinder the flourishing of the person whose vice it is, such as excessive masturbation and pornographic addiction. In light of Aristotelian revivalism, both categories of perversions are considered immoral because they hinder human flourishing. However, Priest argues that the moral opprobrium associated with them differs, whereby the latter form of perversion clearly does not deserve the same degree of moral condemnation as the former. Priest thus maintains that the neo-Aristotelian view still offers no ground for reasonable moral evaluation of perversion.

Priest concludes that the notion of perversion in these particular philosophical narratives makes sense only under the condition of particular beliefs and preconstructed moral philosophy. The moral value of perversion makes sense only within the principles of teleology that associate natural features with moral features. Since this connection is not intrinsic and the teleological belief has exited the main domain of modern worldviews, the notion of sexual perversion, which merely connotes deviation from what's perceived natural, offers no ground for moral evaluation. The conventional notion of sexual perversion as immoral acts thus makes no sense.

To summarize, Priest's argument for why the notion of sexual perversion does not make sense goes as follows:

1. The notion of sexual perversion presupposes that biological processes have well-defined natural ends and that there is a confluence between their natural and moral ends.
2. The alignment between natural and moral ends is a presupposed connection that is only sensible under Aristotle's teleology.
3. Teleology has been phased out and no longer plays a critical role in our understanding of the world.

C. Outside the presumption of teleology, the notion that “*sexual perversion is a sexual act that does not fulfil its natural function, and is, ipso facto, bad*” does not make sense.

In the next section, I will object to Priest’s conclusion by pointing out the problems in his second premise and argues that what makes the violation of an action’s natural ends can be morally bad without presupposing a teleological correlation between natural and moral ends.

Section II. Response to Priest

To start, I’d like to point out the limitation of Priest’s method of argumentation. He engages in argument by elimination. By pointing out that his selected theories of sexual perversion do not survive closer scrutiny outside Aristotle’s moral philosophy, Priest dismisses the applicability of the entire notion of sexual perversion in modern worldviews. Priest gives the impression of refuting opponents' arguments, while actually not taking into accounts of potential arguments that his reasoning could not successfully defeat. If there is a theory of sexual perversion that Priest’s objections cannot undermine, Priest’s conclusion that “the notion of sexual perversion simply does not make sense” will not stand.

Therefore, in this section, I intend to argue against Priest’s position in the following way. I will propose a theory of sexual perversions where the natural features of sexual acts align with their moral features even when examined outside the framework of teleological ethics. By doing so, I attack the second premise of Priest’s argument. The falsity of the premise will render Priest’s conclusion untrue. By presenting a theory that Priest’s rejection of Aristotelian moral philosophy cannot undermine, I demonstrate why the notion of sexual perversion, when properly defined, is perfectly capable of grounding a moral evaluation.

It is clear that throughout his argument Priest emphasizes the recurring failing in proving a correlation between natural and moral ends in the contemporary philosophical literature of sexual perversion. He emphasizes that the only way to associate naturalness with moral value is to adopt Aristotle’s teleological ethics (1997, 369), which suggests that “the virtue (arete) of anything consists exactly in its fitness to perform its proper function” (1997, 365). According to Priest, not only is the notion of proper end completely ambiguous (1997, 366), “this world view (teleology) has also disappeared” (1997, 371). In short, Priest does not believe that we can maintain a nexus between natural and moral features to ground a viable notion of perversion without presupposing

that natural order is in line with moral order. However, I argue that we can justify the confluence between natural and moral ends without assuming their teleological correlation by simply deriving a moral evaluation from the moral badness of violating the proper end of sex when that end is a morally loaded notion itself.

When responding to Levy's theory of perversion, which states that sexual perversions are acts that prevent people from achieving basic human goods, Priest concedes that Levy's theory at least explains why perversion is immoral (1997,363). Priest's response to Levy is particularly illuminating because it shows that he cannot completely deny the confluence between natural ends and moral ends when the content of natural ends is morally loaded. In his previous objections, which are highly anti-Aristotelian, Priest emphasizes that the correlation between natural and moral ends is presupposed. Indeed, like he suggests, deviating from natural ends does not make something immoral. Deviation from naturalness itself has no moral value to it. However, from his response to Levy, it is clear that what the ends of sex are does matter and determines whether their violation becomes morally charged. In stating that the confluence between natural ends and moral ends only makes sense in an Aristotelian scheme, Priest neglects what could make the alignment between natural and moral ends sensible in itself. Because natural ends themselves can have moral valence, they do not need a presupposed Aristotelian belief to become morally loaded.

Let's look at the analogy of apples and their health benefits. We do not need to justify that eating apples is good for your health by presupposing that fruits are healthy. The correlation between fruits and health is not necessary to prove that apples are healthy food. We can prove that eating apples is beneficial by simply proving the positive impacts of apples' rich nutrients, such as minerals and vitamins, on people's health. Similarly, the confluence between natural ends and moral ends can make sense even if teleological presuppositions are not in place or rejected because we can derive moral judgement from the moral characteristics of the end itself. Thus, even outside the background matrix of teleological beliefs, the notion of perversions can still have applications when the violation of the end of sex is morally charged per se.

Now I'd like to propose a theory of sexual perversions whereby the notion of perversion, I believe, does not require Aristotelian presuppositions to be morally charged. I propose that sexual perversions are dispositions that purposefully prevent pleasure or inflict suffering upon the person or people involved in the sexual act. One caveat I'd like to point out is that the notion of suffering here does not include suffering and pain as means to the end of pleasure, but strictly as the end

itself. This theory does not ask people to consent on whether pleasure is the natural end of sex. Whether what we desire defines what is natural is another debate on human nature that demands much more philosophical contemplation than what this paper can offer. This theory simply demands people to acknowledge that there is some sort of end that we all desire to achieve. I will argue that perversions are vices because the violation of that morally loaded end is morally wrong.

I argue that pleasure or avoiding pain is the end that we desire to achieve. The questions we now turn to is why this end of sex is morally loaded. We want to maximize pleasure and avoid pain because pain is bad. We may disagree on what pleasure is or entails, but we can all acknowledge that pain is bad and agree that we all desire pleasure of one sort or another instead of pain as an end. In *the Letter to Menoecus*, Epicurus writes that “we recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good”(Retrieved 2018) . He argues that our fundamental moral obligation is to maximize pleasure or happiness. Now let’s return to the question why sexual acts that purposefully prevent pleasure or inflict suffering is immoral. If we consider pleasure as a moral end *per se*, it then becomes intuitive as to why creating pleasure and avoiding pain are morally loaded. However, opponents to ethical hedonism might disagree on whether pain and pleasure have intrinsic moral value. Nonetheless, that does not prevent us from acknowledging that pleasure is a desirable goal that people strive to achieve. If we consider pleasure simply as a person’s goal, preventing someone from achieving his goal or purposefully undermines his capacity to achieve that goal is a violation of his autonomy, which again becomes a morally wrong act. We do not need to presuppose or force a correlation between the end of sexual perversion and its moral features when its moral value can be derived from this proposed end itself. Therefore, this theory resolves Priest’s objection that even if some kinds of sexual disposition hinder someone from achieving its desired end, such as Scruton’s notion of human flourishing this does not show that they are wrong. By defining sexual perversions as acts that violate morally charged ends---that of people’s innate desire, right, or capacity to attain pleasure that avoid pain---this theory can ground a viable notion of perversion in both its descriptive sense and moral evaluation.

One immediate question one may raise is where we draw the line between perversions and normal sexual activities that fail to create sexual pleasure for the people involved. For example, about 75 percent of all women never reach orgasm from penile-genital penetration (ABC News

2009). Does that mean that heterosexual intercourse in this context also becomes a perversion? The answer is no. There are two ways that we can resolve this objection. First, a consensual and desired sexual intercourse not only concerns with sexual and physical pleasure, but also emotional intimacy and psychological pleasure. The same applies to other forms of desired sexual acts as well. Thus, the absence of one kind of pleasure does not mean that the act is entirely absent of pleasure. Second, the failure to achieve pleasure is not the same as intentionally preventing pleasure. Creating pleasure is morally good, but the opposite of it, the morally bad, is not “failing to create pleasure” but “creating pain”. This is because “failing to create pleasure” still indicates efforts to attain pleasure and avoid pain, which still falls within what Epicurus calls “the attempt to fulfill moral obligations”(the Letter to Menoeceus, retrieved 2018), whereas creating pain is a direct and intentional creation of a moral vice and violation of pleasure, a moral good, thus a violation of our moral responsibility. Again, a consequentialist might object that the morality of an action is to be judged solely by its consequences. Since the two acts share the same consequence, they are not to be judged differently. While I do not agree with consequentialism, the debate between consequentialism and deontology is beyond the scope of this paper. Let’s for now suppose that the morality of an action can be, if not should be, based on whether that action itself is rightfully or wrongfully intended. Therefore, I argue that failing to create pleasure is in principle different from creating pain. This is an important distinction that I make in my theory. Sexual acts that do not involve inflicting pain, as the end of sex, and purposefully preventing someone from attaining pleasure are not considered perversions.

Priest might object to my theory along the same line that he objects to Levy’s theory. Priest might argue that, according to my theory, things that are traditionally counted as perversion will no longer be perversions, such as necrophilia and fetishism. According to my theory, since necrophilia provides pleasure for the person initiating the sexual act, it should not be considered a perversion. One might have strong aversion to this idea because he finds necrophilia extremely disgusting. Likewise, many traditional perversions associated with strong feelings of aversion, such as necrophilia, come down to primal feels of disgust. However, the emotion of disgust itself offers no ground for transmutation into moral wrongdoings. The positivity and negativity of emotions could be highly subject to social and cultural influences, and positive emotions do not automatically mean that they are right. For example, many men used to be enraged by women having equal rights, but their anger cannot justify that gender equality is bad or wrong. Therefore,

disgust and aversions alone offer an emotionally appealing but logically untenable argument against traditional perversions, which many cultures have conditioned us to have negative reactions to.

One may further object that, even if we abide by my theory, necrophilia should be considered a perversion because we abuse and disrespect the dead, which is a form of pain that we can inflict upon others through this sexual act. However, I argue that there is no intrinsic wrong or right in manipulating the dead, which is essentially an inanimate object that is devoid of feelings. Thus, the notion of harm and pain cannot not apply to a dead person, the violation of which consequently loses its moral meaning. Just think about cremation or medical donations of the dead body, which are perceived as perfectly normal or even noble acts. Therefore, there is no reason to morally condemn the manipulation of a dead body, even when it is sex, by virtue of inflicting suffering on others.

A stronger objection might be that certain sexual acts, such as necrophilia and pedophilia, though inflicting no suffering on people directly involved in the act, could inflict collateral suffering. For example, the family of the deceased and the parents of the children can suffer from great pain because they believe that their loved ones are violated. This raises the line drawing issue. Where do we draw the line between people involved in the sexual act and people affected by the sexual act. If we simply restrict it to people who directly and actively engage in the sexual act, what happens if the person involved in the sexual act is being manipulated or misled to feel pleasure? For example, many pedophiles use psychological tactics to trick children into believing that it is a pleasant thing that they are being molested. If we expand it to include people who the sexual act might affect, we also risk labeling everything perversion because it is possible that somehow someone can always turn a personally irrelevant sexual act into a source of their own distress. For example, under the expanded notion of “people who are involved/affected”, if, due to religious beliefs, an orthodox Catholic mother is greatly pained because her son engages in homosexual sex, we have to consider homosexuality a perversion because it inflicts suffering on the people affected by it. In my crude attempt to resolve this issue, I propose that under normal circumstances, where people involved have fully functioning and well-developed cognitive capacity to decide their autonomy and feelings, we should restrict the notion of pleasure and pain only to people who are directly engaged in the sexual act. However, when it is uncertain if someone involved in the act has the cognitive capability to rightfully discern for themselves the experience

of pleasure and pain, the pain and pleasure of the people who have the right to take care of the former, perhaps through established kinship or custody, could be taken into consideration. However, who has the right to do so has to be considered on a case-to-case basis due the complexity in deciding who can claim rights over another person. Nevertheless, along this line of reasoning, typical cases of pedophilia, where the parents of the targeted children experience great pain, can generally be considered perversions because young children may have yet to fully develop their cognitive capacity to recognize right and wrong and their feelings can be easily manipulated. Cases of necrophilia, where people who claim that the sexual act violates their loved ones and therefore brings them great pain, could be considered perversions because the notion of pain and pleasure is not applicable to the dead people directly involved in these acts. However, in certain cases, such as when no one claims right over the deceased person, I will concede that necrophilia is not a perversion.

Here I take a quite radical stance that sexual acts that are conventionally perceived as perversions might not always be true. Under my theory, exhibitionism, frotteurism, sexual sadism and/or masochism, fetishism, transvestism, zoophilia, urophilia, and coprophilia are not necessarily always perversions as long as they align with the goal to attain pleasure and avoid pain for the people involved.

Priest could also object to my theory along a similar line of objection that he gives to Scruton's. Priest may reiterate that there exist two kinds of vices that do not deserve the same moral opprobrium. First, there are the sexual acts that prevent others from attaining pleasure and inflicting suffering on others. Second, there are sexual acts that hurt only the agent who initiates the infliction of pain himself. Priest could argue that these two forms of vices clearly do not deserve the same moral punishment: "the former deserve real moral opprobrium in a way that the latter do not" (1997, 370). Thus, under my theory that seemingly lumps together different agents' pleasure and pain as a moral criterion for vices, the resultant moral opprobrium of perversions could be inappropriate in many cases. However, I argue that my theory actually resolves Priest's worries about the unjust moral evaluation of different kinds of vices because this notion of perversion extends to ruling out paradigm cases that are traditionally considered the second kind of vices. The second kind of vices does not stand under my theory. It is a confusion between pain as an end and desiring pain as means to an end. For people who initiate the infliction of pain on themselves, their initiate such acts because they desire so. Desires exist because they bring about pleasure. Pain and

suffering could very well be valid means to pleasure, but the very notion that people “desire pain” suggests that pain is a means to the end of pleasure. Sexual masochism is a good example. Through the intentional participation in an activity that involves being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise abused, one experiences sexual excitement. Through pain, one fulfills his desire and thus the end of pleasure. Therefore, the second kind of vices does not stand as actual vices because people who engage in sexual acts who desire to hurt themselves still achieve the end of pleasure of fulfilling their desires. Thus, according to my theory, the vices of sexual perversion are derived only from undesirable and unchosen pain that the sexual act enforces upon the people involved. These acts that involve coerced and undesired suffering are immoral because pain, as an end not a means to an end, is bad, and because they violate our autonomy to attain pleasure, a human good innate to us. Whereas the second kind of vices that Priest suggests are not considered vices in the first place, and thus deserves no moral condemnation. There is only one kind, the first kind, of vices that are truly vices, and its accompanying moral opprobrium is justified.

Lastly, my theory also addresses Priest’s objection that certain goals and ends of sex that we moralize are culturally relative and thus offers no objective ground for the moral evaluation of perversion. Priest argues that by positioning culturally variable concepts, such as fostering human relationships, as the natural and moral ends of sex, one has simply “universalized the way of life, goals and values of a particular culture to which he belongs” (1997, 370). However, attaining pleasure and avoiding pain as an end can be universalist. We might not agree on what pleasure entails or amounts to, but we can agree that we all desire pleasure regardless of what forms it takes on, even when it is through means of pain and suffering. The subjectivity of the meaning of pleasure does not undermine the objective existence of pleasure as an end that we all strive towards.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this paper I have explained and objected to Priest’s claim that the notion of sexual perversion does not make sense outside Aristotelian ethics. I proposed a theory that defines sexual perversions as dispositions that purposefully prevent pleasure or inflict suffering upon the person or people involved in the sexual act. By revising the notion of sexual perversion, I further demonstrated the flaw in Priest’s argument by elimination, and that the notion of sexual perversion, when properly defined, can ground sensible moral evaluation without presupposed moral philosophy.

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