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# Leibniz on Substance and God in "That a Most Perfect Being is Possible"

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Nicholas Okrent was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently (March 2006), he is a librarian at the University of Pennsylvania Library.

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Leibniz used Descartes' strict notion of substance in "That a Most Perfect being is Possible" to characterize God but did not intend to undermine his own philosophical views by denying that there are created substances. The metaphysical view of substance in this passage is Cartesian. A discussion of radical substance without any sort of denial in the possibility of other substances does not indicate Spinozism. If this interpretation is correct, then the passage is neither anomalous nor mysterious. There is reason to believe that the passage expresses just the beliefs that we should expect Leibniz to hold in his *De Summa Rerum* period. Furthermore, this interpretation indicates that while Leibniz's metaphysics during this stage of his career is suggestively similar to Spinoza's, there is no evidence that Leibniz accepted Spinoza's pantheistic conclusion.

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# LEIBNIZ ON SUBSTANCE AND GOD IN “THAT A MOST PERFECT BEING IS POSSIBLE”

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## *Abstract*

Leibniz used Descartes' strict notion of substance in “That a Most Perfect being is Possible” to characterize God but did not intend to undermine his own philosophical views by denying that there are created substances. The metaphysical view of substance in this passage is Cartesian. A discussion of radical substance without any sort of denial in the possibility of other substances does not indicate Spinozism. If this interpretation is correct, then the passage is neither anomalous nor mysterious. There is reason to believe that the passage expresses just the beliefs that we should expect Leibniz to hold in his *De Summa Rerum* period. Furthermore, this interpretation indicates that while Leibniz's metaphysics during this stage of his career is suggestively similar to Spinoza's, there is no evidence that Leibniz accepted Spinoza's pantheistic conclusion.

In 1890, Ludwig Stein wrote, “Leibniz serait passé par tine période spinoziste...Leibniz aurait été longtemps indifférent aux conséquences impies d'une doctrine philosophique telle que le panthéisme” (*Leibniz und Spinoza* (1890), in Wells 1957, 503). In response, Georges Friedmann wrote, “Stein a pris tine position dogmatique et impossible a défendre des l'époque ùti il écrivait” (*Leibniz et Spinoza* (Paris, 1946), 10, in Wells 1957, 503). Despite several decades of increasingly refined interpretations of Leibniz's philosophy, the debate regarding whether he passed through a Spinozistic phase is still active.

“That a Most Perfect Being is Possible,” which was written in Paris in 1676 during Leibniz's *De Summa Rerum* period, at first glance seems to indicate that Leibniz flirted with pantheism for at least a short period. In this work, Leibniz argues that all things are one, that all finite things are modifications of one essence, and that God is the only “radical” substance. The passage in general, and these three claims in particular, have pantheistic undertones. Indeed, the claims are strikingly reminiscent of theses prominently held by Spinoza. Consequently, there is a strong temptation to believe that Leibniz is here expressing pantheistic ideas in a form and for reasons similar to Spinoza's. The fact that Leibniz and Spinoza held many rationalistic and broadly Cartesian ideas in common makes the pantheistic interpretation of the passage especially

tempting. However, the temptation to accept the pantheistic interpretation should be resisted. Leibniz had a well formulated theory of finite substances by 1676 (see Mercer/Sleigh, 1995), and therefore his apparent denial of finite substances in this passage needs to be explained.

This paper interprets the aforementioned passage by considering it in the context of Leibniz's views on substance and "requisites" during the *De Summa Rerum* period. The paper then uses this interpretation to argue that while the passage does express some ideas held by Spinoza, it is not pantheistic. The pantheistic interpretation of the passage is based on a confusion resulting from an ambiguity in Leibniz's use of "substance." The passage seems pantheistic because this ambiguity is not recognized. I conclude that this passage fits nicely into the usual interpretation of Leibniz's early metaphysics and that it provides no evidence for the claim that Leibniz went through a pantheistic phase.

This passage is particularly interesting because Leibniz wrote it soon after actually meeting with Spinoza at the Hague in October, 1676. Leibniz read the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670 and had probably been in written contact with Spinoza since October 1671. Also, Leibniz knew at least the basic structure of the *Ethics* from talking with Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus, a friend of Spinoza, in 1675. Leibniz reported to have spoken to Spinoza several times at great length, and he was allowed to see at least parts of the *Ethics*. During at least one of their meetings, Leibniz and Spinoza discussed the ontological argument. As Nadler explains:

before one of their interviews, Leibniz had written up some of his thoughts on the ontological proof of God's existence.. Spinoza had employed the ontological proof in Part One of the *Ethics*, and Leibniz sought to clarify the way in which all perfections can be compatible in one and the same subject. This, according to Leibniz, was at least one area where the two men were able to reach some level of agreement. (Nadler 1999, 341-342)

Leibniz believed that it would not be possible to prove that a perfect being (one containing all perfections) exists until it was first proven that a perfect being is possible (that one subject can contain all perfections). The passage we will consider appears in one of Leibniz's attempts to prove that a perfect being is possible.

The fact that Leibniz and Spinoza had just been discussing the possibility of God and held common beliefs of some sort certainly adds force to the suggestion that this passage is Spinozistic.

But this “agreement” should not be overemphasized. From Leibniz’s first introduction to Spinoza’s ideas about God (Nadler 1999, 301) he was sharply opposed to them and even considered them dangerous. Indeed, even after he had just met with Spinoza he thought that his pantheistic metaphysics was strange, full of paradoxes and based on faulty demonstrations (Nadler 1999, 341). Spinozism does not seem to have appealed to Leibniz in the least.

Here is the passage in full, first as translated by Parkinson in *De Summa Rerum* (1992, 92-95) and then in the original Latin.

[1] It can easily be demonstrated that all things are distinguished, not as substances radically” is written above “substances”) but as modes. This can be demonstrated from the fact that, of those things which are radically distinct, one can be perfectly understood without another; that is, all the requisites of the one can be understood without all the requisites of the other being understood. [2] But in the case of things, this is not so; for since the ultimate reason of things is unique, and contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same. So also is their essence, given that an essence is the aggregate of all primary requisites. [3] Therefore the essence of all things is the same, and things differ only modally, just as a town seen from a high point differs from a town seen from a plain. If only those things are really different which can be separated, or, of which one can be perfectly understood without the other, it follows that no thing really differs from another, but that all things are one, just as Plato argues in the *Parmenides*.

[1] Res extensa omnes non ut substantias [“radicaliter” is written above “substantias”) sed modos distingui, facile demonstrari potest, ex eo quod quae radicaliter distincta sunt, eorum unum sine altero perfecte intelligi potest, id est omnia requisita unius intelligi possunt, quin omnia requisita alterius intelligantur. [2] At vero hoc ipsum non est in rebus, quia enim Ultima ratio rerum unica est, quae sola continet aggregatum omnium requisitorum, omnium rerum, manifestum est, omnium rerum requisita esse eadem; adeoque et essentiam, posito essentiam esse aggregatum omnium requisitorum primorum, [3] omnium ergo rerum essentia eadem, ac res extensa non differunt nisi modo, quemadmodum Urbs spectata ex summo loco differt a spectata ex campo. Si ea tantum realiter differunt, quae possunt separari seu quorum alterum perfecte sine altero intelligi potest, sequitur nihil realiter ab altero differe, sed omnia esse unum, quemadmodum dissent et Plato in Parmenide.

It is important to note that “radically” (“radicaliter”) in the first part of the passage appears in the interlinear space about “substance” (“substantias”). Although this is a difficult passage, a careful analysis can make its sense reasonably clear. In the first part of the passage, Leibniz explains how “substance” is being used in the passage. In the second part, he uses some basic concepts that are well worked out in other texts of the period to argue that finite things do not fit this sense of “substance.” In the third, he uses the metaphor of a town seen from different perspectives to

explain how all finite things differ only modally.

In the first part, Leibniz asserts that a “radical substance” is “radically distinct.” For Leibniz, “radically distinct” has epistemological, causal and ontological implications. One can understand a substance perfectly without understanding anything about another thing. This epistemological characterization of substances, that they are known in themselves, is equivalent to the claim that one can know all the requisites (requisita) of a substance without knowing any requisites of another thing. Though also epistemological, this further claim has causal and ontological significance.

Passages in two essays (“A Chain of Wonderful Demonstrations about the Universe” and “On Existence”) written by Leibniz within a month or two of “That a Most Perfect Being is Possible” help to clarify his notion of “requisite.” A requisite is “that without which a thing cannot exist” [“Requisitum est id sine quo res else non potest”] (Parkinson 1992, 113). In other words, a requisite is a necessary condition. Furthermore, “the aggregate of all requisites is the full cause [of existence] of a thing” [“Aggregatum omnium requisitorum est causa plena rei”] (Parkinson 1992, 113) and “*there is nothing without a cause*, since there is nothing without all the requisites for existing” [“*Nihil est sine causa, quia nihil est sine existendum requisitis*”] (Parkinson 1992, 107). The sum of a thing’s requisites is a sufficient reason, or full cause, of the existence of that thing. And, for Leibniz, nothing exists without a sufficient reason (i.e., without all its requisites).

Leibniz’s explanation of an epistemological characteristic of substance in terms of necessary conditions may seem odd. For Leibniz, however, this move is the obviously correct one. The passage refers to requisites in an epistemological context because Leibniz fuses causal and conceptual dependence. In “On Forms, or, the Attributes of God,” written earlier in 1676, Leibniz writes, “an effect is conceived through its cause” [“*Quia effectus concipitur per suam causam*”] (Parkinson 1992, 71). Furthermore, Leibniz writes:

that whose modifications depend on the attributes of another, in which all its requisites are contained, is conceived through another. That is, it cannot be perfectly understood unless the other is understood. Those things are connected of which the one cannot be understood without the other (Parkinson 1992, 71).

illud cuius modificationes pendent ex attributis alterius, in quo scilicet continentur omnia

requisita eius, id utique per alterum concipitur. Id est non nisi altero intellectu perfecte intelligi potest. Connexa sunt quorum alterum sine altero intelligi non potest

Here, the modifications are both conceived through and caused by the thing that contains the requisites that are the sufficient reason for the modifications. A requisite for something is a causal/conceptual requirement for that thing's existing.

Leibniz is not unique in making these sorts of claims. For example, in the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes "the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause (1A4) (Curley 1985). Spinoza then uses that axiom to move from "two things cannot be understood through one another" to "one of the things could not have caused the other" (1P3). For Spinoza as for Leibniz, causal dependence and conceptual dependence are tightly linked. Admittedly, this discussion leaves the notion of "fusion" ambiguous, as it can mean anything from an interweaving to an identification of concepts. Nonetheless, it explains why Leibniz explains the knowledge of things in terms of their requisites.

This consideration leads to another aspect of requisites: the requirement relationship is asymmetric in that requisites are "naturally prior" and "simpler in nature" than that for which they are necessary conditions (see Adams 1994, 117). A modified thing is causally and conceptually dependent on the requisites that determine it and, therefore, on the thing containing the requisites. But neither the requisites nor the thing containing the requisites is conceptually or causally dependent on the thing that is being modified.

Finally, "radically distinct" has ontological implications: A substance can be "separated." In the passage, Leibniz associates separation with the ability to be understood without anything else being understood. To understand something is to know all of its requisites, which is to know the sufficient reason and total cause of its existence. The reason why we can understand a substance without understanding any other thing is that we can know all of the thing's requisites through the thing itself. In other words, there is nothing causing the substance to exist. Though the substance may have the requisites for something else being in existence, nothing has the requisites for the substance's being in existence. This amounts to the fact that a substance can exist even if nothing else exists. On the other hand, a thing being modified cannot exist unless the substance containing its requisites exists.

Now I am prepared to give an account of the notion of substance—radical substance—used in this passage. A substance is a thing that can be understood without any other thing being understood; it is a thing that is not caused by any other thing; and it is a thing that is separable from the modified things of which the substance contains the requisites. This account of substance would have been familiar to early modern intellectuals. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes explains that, “by substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God” (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch 1985, 210). Descartes goes on to point out that there is an ambiguity in the traditional conception of substance. He writes, “in the case of all other substances [besides God], we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God’s concurrence. Hence the term “substance” does not apply univocally...to God and to other things” (Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch 1985, 210). Only one thing is a substance in the strict sense of the word; only God is totally independent of anything else. However, there are created things—*res extensa* and *res cogitans*—that depend on nothing besides God for their existence, and they are also granted the title substance, in the loose sense of the term.

I believe that Leibniz is using substance in its strict sense in the passage that we are considering. This would explain why Leibniz wrote “radical” in the interlinear space above the word “substance” and defined substance as being “radically” distinct from anything else. “Radical” is used to specify that “substance” is meant in the strict sense, and it signifies complete causal and conceptual independence as well as separability. Interestingly, every other time Leibniz writes about “substance” in *De Summa Rerum* he means the broad or nonradical sense of substance (33, 35, 69, 115), and there are no other references to “radical substances.” In other words, every other time Leibniz writes of substance in *De Summa Rerum* he means something that is separable from and causally and conceptually independent of everything but God. This could possibly explain an interesting comment later in the passage. Leibniz’s argument abruptly breaks off and he writes, “a metaphysics should be written with accurate definitions and demonstrations...” [Scribenda est Metaphysica accuratisde finitionibus ac demonstrationibus...]



(Parkinson 1992, 95). Leibniz's trading on the ambiguous meaning of "substance" might be what led him to write this.

In the second part of the passage (following [2]) Leibniz proceeds to explain why created things are not examples of radical substances. To paraphrase,

in the case of things [all the requisites of one thing cannot be understood without understanding the requisites of something else]; for since [God]...contains by itself the aggregate of all requisites of all things, it is evident that the requisites of all things are the same. So also [therefore] is their essence.

This seems confusing when considered in the context of Leibniz's frequently used example of several formulas originating from the essence of one number. In "On the Origin of Things from Forms," another essay from 1676, Leibniz writes:

it seems to me that the origin of things from God is of the same kind as the origin of properties from an essence; just as  $6 = 1+1+1+1+1+1$ , therefore  $6 = 3+3, = 3 \cdot 2, = 4+2$ , etc. Nor may one doubt that the one expression differs from the other" (Parkinson, 77).

Mihi videtur origo rerum ex Deo talis esse, quails origo proprietatum ex essentia, ut senarius est  $1+1+1+1+1+1$ . Ergo  $6 \equiv 3+3, \equiv 3 \cdot 2 \equiv 4+2$ , etc. Nec dubitandum est unam expressed ab alia differre.

6 can be thought of without thinking of  $1+1+1+1+1+1$ : "just as these properties differ from each other and from essence, so do things differ from each other and from God" [Ut ergo differunt hac proprietates, inter se et ab essentia, ita et differunt res inter se et a Deo] (Parkinson 1992, 77). This conclusion, that things sharing the same requisites differ, seems to directly contradict the above quote. In our passage Leibniz seems to claim that all things and their essences *are* the same because they share the same requisites. Indeed, Leibniz's views about requisites seem to entail this result.

However, in our passage Leibniz does not deny that there are distinct things or that things cannot be thought of independently of one another and God. Rather, he argues that all things are caused by the interaction of God's attributes and are manifestations of His essence, although each manifestation may be unique. In a previous paragraph, Leibniz had concluded that a being that has all primary attributes is necessary. A primary attribute is a purely affirmative attribute, and all purely affirmative attributes are infinite and in God. Furthermore,

“negative affections can arise only from a plurality of affirmative attributes.... From this the origin and necessity of modification is evident” [negativae affectiones oriri non nisi ex affirmativorum pluralitate...Unde patet origo et necessitas modificationis] (Parkinson 1992, 93). This passage is obscure. Fortunately, we do not have to understand all its nuances to see what is at issue.

In Leibniz’s metaphysics there are layers of more or less ontologically basic things. Modes are ontologically dependent on the things of which they are modifications, and everything is ontologically dependent on God. Because God contains the requisites of all finite things, all finite things are causally dependent on God. Furthermore, because something can be understood only if its requisites are understood, everything is conceptually dependent on God. Finite things, being causally, conceptually and ontologically dependent on God, are not radical substances. In the analysis of Leibniz’s conclusion we will see why Leibniz does not believe this conclusion leads to Pantheism.

Leibniz concludes ([3]):

Therefore the essence of all things is the same, and things differ only modally, just as a town seen from a high point differs from a town seen from a plain....all things are one, just as Plato argues in the *Parmenides*.

Adams writes of this conclusion, “why should we grant that ‘the essence [of each thing] is the aggregate of all [its] first requirements’? For it would seem that different essences could be constructed out of the same fundamental attributes--one essence containing P, another containing not-P, different essences containing different degrees of Q, and so forth” (Adams 1994, 129). Adams misunderstands the argument. He is thinking, in a properly Cartesian way, that a substance is identical to its attribute(s). Given this assumption, it is true that finite things would have different essences by virtue of having different attributes.

But Leibniz is not here concerned with the attributes of finite things. Rather, he is concerned with the relationship between God and His modes. Different things may contain different degrees of Q: that is they may all contain modifications of Q. Given Leibniz’s metaphysics, it makes no difference if one thing contains P and another thing Q to whether they

have separate essences, as Leibniz's example of a town shows.

Looking at a town from a hill we have one perspective of it; looking at the town from the plain we have a different perspective. When looking from the hill one will perceive different characteristics of the town than when looking from the plain. For example, from a high point the roads of the town will be visible, whereas from the plain they will not be. This example suggests that Adams misunderstands the crux of the argument. Leibniz's point is not that all finite things are made of exactly the same attributes, but rather that all things are ontologically, causally and conceptually dependent on God. Because finite things are dependent on God in these ways, they are modifications of attributes of God. By definition modifications do not have radically independent essences or radical individuality. Consequently, finite things could only be modifications of one essence, and therefore all things are, in a sense, one. Given the metaphysical views explicated in our passage, this conclusion is logical and unavoidable.

Should we, then, take this passage to be an expression of pantheistic sentiments? Adams argues that it does present a pantheistic, Spinozistic picture of the universe. Adams is so confident of this interpretation that he feels comfortable enough to bluntly write, "here Leibniz flatly affirms the Spinozistic idea that finite things are only modes" (Adams 1994, 129). Adams explains that the "monistic conclusion" in this passage is unique in explicitly rejecting the "ontological externality of the resulting entities" (Adams 1994, 130), whereas in similar passages it is not.

Adams contrasts this passage with another that avoids the monistic conclusion:

All things are in a way contained in all things. But they are contained in a quite different way in God from that in which they are contained in things; and in the genera of things, i.e., in worlds, from that in which they are contained in individuals. Things are not produced by the mere combination of forms in God, but along with a subject also. The subject itself, or God, together with its ubiquity, gives the immeasurable, and this immeasurable combined with other subjects brings it about that all possible modes, or things, follow in it. The various results of forms, combined with a subject, bring it about that particulars result (Parkinson 1992, 85).

Adams writes of this passage, "what is new here is the distinction of 'subjects.' Combined with the single divine subject, the simple forms constitute God; 'combined with other subjects,'

the forms constitute derivative things. This is exactly the way in which most of us would intuitively expect ontological externality to be maintained in a pluralistic metaphysics--though it is strangely combined in this passage with the surviving characterization of derived things as 'Modes, or Things in it,' which presumably means things 'in' the divine subject" (Adams 1994, 130).

I believe that Adams' interpretations of the main passage and the passage he contrasts it with are mistaken. Supposedly, a pluralistic metaphysics is possible only if things have ontological externality. Ontological externality is achieved in the second passage because it includes distinct subjects that are not "in" the divine subject. Upon consideration, however, it is clear that the "distinct subjects" in this passage are in all relevant respects the same as the modes in our passage. Leibniz does not believe that distinct subjects are causally independent of God. Leibniz always held the belief that God conserves the world (i.e., causes it to be), and there is no reason to think that he doesn't believe it in this passage. Consequently, distinct subjects could not be conceptually independent of God because conceptual independence presupposes causal independence. Likewise, things are not ontologically independent of God. If they were, they could exist even if God did not exist. For Leibniz, however, this is patently false. Thus, God is "the subject itself." The picture of ontological, conceptual and causal dependence in the second passage is basically the same as it is in the first.

Supposedly, what makes the second passage different is that it mentions subjects that are ontologically external to God. But if ontological externality implies only that the external thing has a subject that is not God but may nonetheless be dependent on God ontologically, causally and conceptually, then the first passage also has room for external subjects. The first passage does not deny that there is anything that is not God; it only denies that there is anything that is ontologically, causally or conceptually independent of God. Thus, in an earlier paragraph of our passage Leibniz writes,

everything that can be understood in something else can already be understood in the most perfect being itself, whether because we conceive it through itself, or because it has no requisites outside itself (Parkinson 1992, 93).

omnia quae in alio intelligi possunt, jam in ipso intelligi possint, sive cum per se concipiamus sive nulla extra se habeat requisite.

This passage refers to things that are “something other” than God. Consequently, Leibniz does not assert that there is nothing but God, just that everything is ontologically, causally and conceptually dependent on God. This assertion is as true for the second passage as it is for the first.

There are two main differences between the passages. First, Leibniz explicitly refers to subjects other than God in the second passage. Second, in the first passage Leibniz uses a strict notion of “radical” substance such that only God can be one; everything else is a modification of God’s attributes. In the second passage, Leibniz uses a more relaxed notion of substance such that there may be subjects that are not “in” God. However, even in the second passage God is “the subject” and particular things are modes that are in God. Whatever the particular differences between the passages, it seems to be a mistake to claim that the first is pantheistic while the second is not. I believe that Leibniz’s calling finite things modes of God does not signify a theoretical change between the two passages. The first passage is completely compatible with his belief that finite things can be substances in the broad sense.

Although there is no rigorous way to determine what motivated Leibniz to use the concept of “radical substance” in this one text, I have a suggestion. Leibniz is here concerned with describing his metaphysical picture of the universe. Throughout *De Summa Rerum* this picture consists of attributes, modes, etc., that have various levels of ontological, causal and conceptual priority. But everything is ultimately based on God, who is “the subject” that is “the essence” of everything. In our passage, Leibniz focuses on the primacy of God and the ultimate dependency of everything else on Him. This idea runs throughout *De Summa Rerum*, but in this passage Leibniz wanted to emphasize God’s foundational status. In doing so, he stressed that the only thing that is a true (i.e., radical) substance is God, and everything else is a modification of Him. This is compatible with the claim, which Leibniz makes elsewhere, that finite things are substances and subjects for all of their qualities and that finite things are distinct from each other and from God. To bring this passage into accord with Leibniz’s normal use of “substance” and with the fact that pantheism is incompatible with fundamental parts of his philosophy, we merely have to note that he is here using “substance” in the strict or radical sense, and his interests in the passage are

best served by using language that focuses on the dependence of all things on God. There is no reason to think that Leibniz did not simultaneously believe that things other than God could be substances in the broad sense, and that sense is the one that Leibniz held.

I have suggested that in this passage Leibniz used Descartes' strict notion of substance to characterize God but did not intend to undermine his own philosophical views by denying that there are created substances (i.e., loosely speaking). To a large extent, therefore, the metaphysical view of substance in this passage is Cartesian. A discussion of radical substance without any sort of denial in the possibility of other substances does not in and of itself indicate Spinozism. If this interpretation of the passage from "That a Most Perfect Being is Possible" is correct, then the passage is neither anomalous nor mysterious. Given that the use of "radical substance" is unusual, there is nonetheless good reason to believe that the passage expresses just the beliefs that we should expect Leibniz to hold at this stage of his career. Furthermore, this interpretation indicates that while Leibniz's metaphysics during the *De Summa Rerum* period is suggestively similar to Spinoza's, there is no evidence that Leibniz accepted Spinoza's pantheistic conclusion. Of course, Leibniz's views on substance in this passage are like Descartes' in not being consistent, since his nonradical substances are also modes of God, and this is precisely what makes Spinozism possible.

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