

## Hermeneutics and Pragmatism

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Pragmatism can be divided between classical American pragmatism and contemporary neo-pragmatism. Classical pragmatism spans approximately ninety years from Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839–1914) earliest philosophical publications in the 1860s to John Dewey's (1859–1952) death. The main figures, in addition to Peirce and Dewey, are William James (1842–1910), Josiah Royce (1855–1916), Jane Addams (1860–1935), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), George Santayana (1863–1962), and W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963). None of these philosophers had anything to say about the main figures of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, though James once met Dilthey. Nor does Dewey, the last of the classical pragmatists, have anything to say about Martin Heidegger. There was no significant influence between classical pragmatist philosophers in America and hermeneutic philosophers on the Continent, though their views sometimes overlap because of their shared roots in Hegel and their shared commitment to anti-Cartesian thinking. That notwithstanding, Josiah Royce, influenced by Peirce, independently developed his own philosophy of interpretation starting from pragmatist principles.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary neo-pragmatism is best represented in the writings of Joseph Margolis (1924–), Hilary Putnam (1926–), Richard Rorty (1931–2007), Richard Bernstein (1932–), and Robert Brandom (1950–). They all self-identify as pragmatists and acknowledge the influence of the classical pragmatists on their attempts to address philosophical questions prominent at the

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Corrington's "The Origins of American Hermeneutics: C. S. Peirce and Josiah Royce" in *The Community of Interpreters* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Rorty, Bernstein, and Brandom all explicitly discuss the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer—Rorty most famously, Bernstein most thoroughly, and Brandom most recently—and all appropriate elements from Gadamer’s hermeneutics into their pragmatist projects.

Two other figures, one classical, one contemporary are relevant for the relation between pragmatism and hermeneutics. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., although not a philosopher, was a member of “The Metaphysical Club,” a group of Harvard thinkers that included Peirce and James. He developed a pragmatic legal hermeneutics wherein to interpret a law is to determine its effects on society.<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, although not a hermeneut, explicitly integrated themes of hermeneutics and pragmatism into his *Theory of Communicative Action*. He adopts many themes from philosophical hermeneutics—such as the rehabilitation of prejudice, the priority of language over self-consciousness, and the essentially applicative structure of understanding—and adds George Herbert Mead’s theory of symbolic interaction to explain the dual processes of individualization and socialization through language use.<sup>3</sup>

The classical pragmatists were a diverse group of thinkers. Their similarities can only be put in the most general terms: an emphasis on practice over theory; a thoroughgoing naturalism; an understanding of mental states solely in the context of actions; a resistance to any metaphysical speculation that leaves concrete, lived experiences behind; and a respect for inquiry modeled on scientific, experimentalist rationality. Many of their defining features they do not

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<sup>2</sup> See Oliver Wendell Holmes *The Common Law* (New York: Dover, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> See *A Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); also see “Individuation through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead’s Theory of Subjectivity” and “Peirce and Communication” both in *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (Boston: MIT Press, 1993). Karl Otto Apel appeals to pragmatism against hermeneutics arguing that Peirce’s notion of truth as the idealized teleological convergence by a community of interpreters is needed to avoid the relativism that would otherwise plague philosophical hermeneutics. See his *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998).

share with each other, such as Peirce's teleological understanding of rationality, James's spiritualism, Royce's idealism, and Dewey's faith in democracy. Less diverse are the neo-pragmatists, as they share an idea about what views of the classical pragmatists are worth preserving. They are all naturalists; ; they are all non-foundationalists about justification; they all hold that theoretical reflection emerges only as a response to practical engagement with the world, and that the satisfaction of theoretical concerns is marked by its ability to resolve the practical issues which generated it. They are all externalists about mental content; they are all anti-realists about natural kinds; and they all hold that the acquisition of knowledge is an essentially social activity.

### **Hermeneutics and Classical Pragmatism**

While Peirce provides us with no hermeneutics in the sense of a theory of the interpretation of texts, Peirce's semiotics suggests that all our relations to the world, and to ourselves, are interpretive. Peirce's definition of a sign is justly famous: A sign is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1932, 228). Smoke is a sign since it communicates the presence of fire to a person. There are always three parts to the sign relationship—the sign, what it communicates, and someone to whom the meaning is communicated. One can think of Peircean signs as that which connects objects to minds. To qualify as a sign it must be determined enough that the mind of the interpreter grasps the object. The way the object is presented to a mind through the sign Peirce calls an "interpretant," and the threefold relation is often referred to as an Object-Sign-Interpretant.

Signs are essential mediators between minds and objects. All awareness is through signs; all thinking occurs in signs. Things can be signs, as can be the particular interpretation of a sign,

which is how we are aware of our interpretations; so too can the Object-Sign-Interpretant itself be a sign, as is the case when we reflect on the nature of signs. Language is a particularly powerful sign system capable of abstract representation. Even human beings themselves, properly understood, are signs:

there is no element whatever of man's consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the word or sign which man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. (Peirce 2009, 54)

His theory of signs, then, lays the intellectual groundwork for a future convergence between hermeneutics and pragmatism around the idea that our relationship to the world is essentially and unendingly interpretive. On Peirce's view we can best understand the possibility of knowledge, the nature of the mind, and the nature of the world through clarifying the distinct elements of the process of interpretation.

Josiah Royce is the classical pragmatist who develops Peirce's theory of signs into a full-scale theory of interpretation. Royce and William James were Harvard colleagues, friends, and intellectual sparring partners. Royce was particularly critical of James's reduction of truth to expediency. He argued against James that any time we claim something to be true we must at the same time recognize the possibility that we could be in error. But the possibility of error only makes sense if we acknowledge a larger perspective upon our relation to the world such that, from that perspective, the error is recognizable. Since there are no perspectives without perceivers, the very practice of saying something is true requires the acknowledgment of an Absolute Knower. Royce is a pragmatic idealist—he calls himself an "absolute pragmatist." Justifying one's beliefs, for Royce, is a matter of coordinating perspectives with that of the

Absolute Knower, but the only way to do that is through the coordination of beliefs across people. For Royce, like all pragmatists, knowledge acquisition is a social process.

Peirce held that knowledge only arose through a community of interpreters. He famously defined what is true as "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" and what is real as "the object represented in this opinion" (Peirce 2009, 139). Royce developed Peirce's notion of the community of interpreters and identified it with the Absolute, the perspective from which we can say what beliefs are true and therefore what things are real. Along with the emphasis on the community of interpreters, for Royce, comes the need to understand *how* we can grasp the views of others. Royce calls the process of grasping what others think, interpretation. He writes, "the proper object of an interpretation, as we usually employ the name, is either something of the nature of a mind, or else is a process which goes on in a mind, or, finally, is a sign or expression whereby some mind manifests its existence and its processes" (Royce 1913, 129). Royce recognizes that our understanding of others' beliefs differs both from our perception of particular objects and our conception of concepts. It is not an awareness of a fact or of a universal, but a way of relating to the world. Importantly, our awareness of our own mind is also a process of interpretation, so for Royce, who sees knowledge as the convergence of the community of interpreters and the process of knowledge acquisition as the process of coordinating beliefs among self-interpreting members of the community, interpretation is the main process of knowledge acquisition. He adopts from Peirce the idea that an interpretation is always a three-part relation between an interpreter, the thing interpreted, and someone for whom we are interpreting and then claims that "to inquire what the process of interpretation is, takes us at once to the very heart of philosophy [and] throws light both on the oldest and latest issues of metaphysical thought" (Royce 1913, 110). The endlessness of

interpretation necessarily drives us toward the understanding of the Absolute.

What we might call Royce's hermeneutics includes the idea that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, is interpretive. It includes the idea that all interpretation is a social relation; indeed, interpretation is the ground for and the perfection of community. Individuals are only members of a community if they interpret themselves as such. Finally, Royce's hermeneutics includes the idea that interpretation is endless, inescapable, and irreducible to perception or conception. Questions of interpretation are no longer marginal philosophical questions. They get to the heart of the most fundamental philosophical concerns.

### **Neo-pragmatism and Hermeneutics**

The best-known neo-pragmatist to embrace hermeneutics is Richard Rorty. In the final part of his landmark book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he calls for a philosophical shift from epistemology to hermeneutics. The book is an extended critique of representationalist accounts of the mind. Rorty thinks that once we abandon the idea that the mind mirrors nature, we must also abandon the basic philosophical framework underlying analytic epistemology. Instead of a new search for truth, one freed from the correspondence theory of truth, he offers us the never-ending conversation of humankind; in the penultimate chapter to *Philosophy in the Mirror Nature* he offers hermeneutics as a kind of replacement for epistemology. He writes,

in the interpretation I shall be offering, 'hermeneutics' is not the name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt. The notion that there is a permanent neutral framework whose structure philosophy can display is the notion that the object to be confronted by the mind, or the rules which constrain inquiry, are common to all discourse, or at least to every discourse on a given topic. Thus epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given

discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption. (Rorty 1979, 315)

Rorty uses "commensurable" in the sense of methodologically adjudicable; his target is the idea that there is, or should be, a philosophical method that would allow us once and for all to adjudicate across rival positions. He credits Gadamer's *Truth and Method* for inspiring his critique, and certainly that is a theme of Gadamer's *magnum opus* that there is a sense of truth that is appropriate for characterizing a successful interpretation of a text or work of art that cannot be guaranteed as the outcome of applying a method.

In his later writings, however, Rorty distances himself from philosophical hermeneutics. He admits that his "invocation of Gadamerian hermeneutics was feeble and unproductive" (Auxier and Hahn 2010, p. 13). Rorty comes to consider Gadamer a "weak textualist" and instead sides with the "strong textualists"—Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and Jacques Derrida.

The weak textualist—the decoder—is just one more victim of realism, of the "metaphysics of presence." He thinks that if he stays within the boundaries of a text, takes it apart, and shows how it works, then we will have "escaped the sovereignty of the signifier," broken with the myth of language as a mirror of reality, and so on. But in fact he is just doing his best to imitate science—he wants a method of criticism, and he wants everybody to agree he has cracked the code. ... The strong textualist ... recognizes what Nietzsche and James recognized, that the idea of method presupposes that a privileged vocabulary, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself opposed to those which we read into it. Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth—that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want. (Rorty 1982, 152)

Despite his extreme nominalism, Rorty's neo-pragmatism converges in important ways with hermeneutics. Rorty rejects Cartesian, representational theories of mind and the epistemological project of properly mirroring nature. Instead of a first-person drive for certainty, Rorty argues

that we should think of "knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice" (Rorty 1979, 171).

Rorty explicitly takes up issues of textual interpretation in his essay on Umberto Eco, "Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-dualist Account of Interpretation." There he argues against the distinction between interpreting a text and using a text, a distinction drawn by Umberto Eco to divide the meanings internal to the text, which are grasped through interpretation, and the contingent interests of the reader of the text, who puts the text to use in some way. Rorty is skeptical about the division between the meaning internal to the text and the interests external to the text. What we have are interpretations, and the interpretations shed light on the text. This activity of shedding light on is not divisible into those parts the *text* provides, those meanings internal to the text, and those parts *we* provide, those uses external to the text.

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. What happens may be too weird and idiosyncratic to bother with...[o]r it may be exciting and convincing... It may be *so* exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced. So it seems to me simpler to scrap the distinction between using and interpreting, and just distinguish between uses by different people for different purposes. (Rorty 1990, 144)

That Rorty comes down on the side of keeping "use" while scrapping "interpretation" belies his pragmatism. He says that if we are anti-essentialist through and through then all activity becomes interpretation and the term, the value of which lies in its contrast with something non-interpreted, loses its usefulness. Eco's split between what is interpretation and what is use, between what is internal and what is external, mirrors his split between the world of social objects and the world of natural objects, or, to put it in Wilhelm Dilthey's terms, things to be understood and things to be explained. Rorty argues all are merely texts, used in various ways.

The neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein has called Rorty to task for not being hermeneutical enough. In his book *Between Objectivism and Relativism* Bernstein argues that Rorty is appropriately dissatisfied with some key themes of Gadamer's hermeneutics, but nonetheless Rorty's version of "strong textualism" amounts to a kind of relativism that is inconsistent with the letter and the spirit of classical pragmatism, especially that of his heroes James and Dewey. Bernstein locates three places where Gadamer's hermeneutics overlaps with classical American pragmatism, especially Dewey's version of it: the emphasis on dialogue, the emphasis on *phronesis*, and the emphasis on experience. Each also is a way that Gadamer's hermeneutics is preferable to Rorty's postmodern pragmatism. Bernstein is most interested in the way that Gadamer's emphasis on *phronesis* and the essentially applicative moment in all interpretation converges with pragmatic emphasis on practice. "One of the most important and central claims in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics" writes Bernstein, "is that all understanding involves not only interpretation, but also application" (Bernstein 1986a, 87). Gadamer argues on the model of Aristotelian *phronesis* that all understanding always involves a self-understanding in such a way that it reflects the situation of the interpreter.

Philosophical hermeneutics has, in Bernstein's words, always tried to navigate between objectivism and relativism, and it has held that the only way to do this is to preserve a meaningful sense of truth—truth not as correspondence, but truth as disclosure, as insights, as recognition, shaped by our speculative ability to understand and articulate the matter at hand in conversation with others. Bernstein heralds Gadamer's understanding of dialogue as capturing our essentially social and essentially linguistic nature.

Gadamer's entire project of philosophical hermeneutics can be read as an attempt to recover what he takes to be the deepest and most pervasive theme in Western philosophy and culture—that the quintessence of our being is to be dialogical. This is not just the "mode of being" of the "few," but is a real potential of every

person—a potential that ought to be actualized. It is this dialogical character of what we truly are that is deformed and threatened by modern technological society. (Bernstein 1986b, 349)

Conversation is not just something we must engage in, *a la* Rorty, but is something fundamental to who we are. Bernstein, however, is critical of Gadamer's reduction of truth to what emerges in dialogue with others in light of tradition. He glosses it as "what can be argumentatively validated by the community of interpreters who open themselves up to what tradition 'says to us'" (Bernstein 1983, 154). Bernstein replies that understanding what tradition says to us requires relying upon what we understand now, and we need to be able to provide a kind of critical distance upon our own understanding, one that doesn't have to ultimately trace back to what tradition says to us. All practical wisdom can do is refer back to the norms given in tradition. The problem of modernity, according to Bernstein, "is that there is so much confusion and uncertainty (some might even say chaos) about what are the norms of the 'universals' that ought to govern our practical lives" (Bernstein 1983, 157). In the absence of shared norms, *phronesis* breaks down. Bernstein argues that what pragmatism offers that hermeneutics lacks is the recognition that we cannot do without overriding political and social norms, norms that direct us toward a more democratic society, one with shared values of openness and equality and therefore one that can best facilitate the ongoing conversation of humankind. Political and social values need to take precedence over epistemic values in order to create a society where dialogue can lead to truth. Here Bernstein is echoing Rorty's famous claim that "if you take care of freedom truth will take care of itself" (Rorty 1999, 118).

Bernstein is critical of Rorty's dismissal of the term "experience" in the wake of the linguistic turn. Rorty thinks that to continue to speak of experience is to continue to pine for a kind of unmediated access to an independently existing world, access that can then function as an

impartial adjudicator of our beliefs. The turn to language, Rorty thinks, is a rejection of the Myth of the Given and the embrace of a merely causal, rather than conceptual, place for experience. Like Rorty's pragmatism, experience as an independent adjudicator of belief is absent from philosophical hermeneutics, which typically holds that all perception is interpretive. Humans have a world rather than an environment because humans are linguistic beings and their linguisticity goes "all the way down." Bernstein wants to argue that the proper pragmatist position, one distilled from James and Dewey, is that the opposition between language and experience is a false dichotomy. If we have a properly naturalistic understanding of human beings as linguistically structured organisms engaged in the world then we can see how experience can play an epistemically formative role without it being independent of language.<sup>4</sup>

The more I read Gadamer, the more I had a sense of familiarity in the way he characterizes experience (*Erfahrung*). It is similar to Dewey's notion of experience unified by a pervasive qualitative immediacy and funded with meaning. ...Furthermore there are parallels between Gadamer's insistence on the role of prejudice and prejudgment in understanding and Peirce's claim, "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy." (Bernstein 2010, 28–29)

Gadamer's account of experience, then, is more similar to Dewey's than Rorty's. According to Bernstein's way of bringing together hermeneutics and pragmatism it helps us avoid Rorty's relativism without falling back into objectivism.

The most recent neo-pragmatist intersection with hermeneutics is in the writings of Robert Brandom. Brandom is best known for developing an account of meaning, inspired by Wilfrid Sellars, in which the meaning of concepts is given by their inferential role in the discursive practice of the exchange of reasons. In what sense is Brandom a pragmatist? He lists a

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<sup>4</sup> See Bernstein's "Experience after the Linguistic Turn" in *The Pragmatic Turn* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 125–152.

number of ways he agrees with the pragmatist tradition. First, pragmatists take seriously science as the model for knowledge, but base their conception of science on Darwinian, evolutionary naturalism rather than Newtonian mechanics. Second, pragmatists reconfigure theoretical and practical knowledge to privilege the latter; theoretical knowledge only exists as an element of practical know-how. Third, pragmatists understand experience, if it plays any philosophical role at all, as a process rather than a state. For pragmatists experience is a process of active, instructional, practical engagement with the world. Fourth, pragmatists construe classic epistemological questions—What do we know? What is it to believe something?—as questions about what forms of habits are successfully adaptive. Fifth, with the emphasis on adaptation Brandom agrees with the pragmatists that concepts are essentially normative. And sixth, pragmatists are functionalists about content, not representationalists. They focus on the role the concepts play in the adaptive life of the organism as a whole. Many of these outlooks Brandom finds in Hegel and the Romantics. Notwithstanding his agreement with these general pragmatic orientations, Brandom thinks classical pragmatism faded before being able to incorporate the insights of the linguistic turn. He writes, “The philosophical way forward from the ideas of the American pragmatists must be a linguistic pragmatism, allied with the later Wittgenstein and the Heidegger of Division I of *Being and Time*” (Brandom 2004, 15).

Brandom consistently articulates his philosophical views through the readings of other philosophers, especially the pragmatists, Hegel, Heidegger, and the analytic tradition that moves from Rudolf Carnap through W. v. O. Quine, Sellars, and Donald Davidson. He is sometimes accused of reading his own inferentialist views into the mouths of past philosophers; his response comes in the third chapter of *Tales of the Might Dead*, where he makes explicit the proper hermeneutical practice of interpreting texts. The first point he makes follows Rorty’s critique of

Eco: the distinction between imposing a meaning *onto* the text rather than finding the meaning *in* the text is a non-starter. It belongs to a long abandoned theory of meaning as fixed by the intentions of the author. What one does when interpreting is provide a "discursive understanding of episodes of concept application, acknowledgings of inferentially articulated commitments" (Brandom 2002, 92). Brandom credits Gadamer with the view that the meanings of a text only emerge in the context of the text being read and that the activity of reading is best considered as a dialogue. He embraces the conclusion that there will be a legitimate plurality of interpretations and that the process of interpretation is open-ended. Brandom calls these views, taken together "Gadamerian Platitudes." They are platitudes not in the sense of being trivial, but of being essential starting points for any adequate hermeneutic theory. They are axioms. When it comes to interpreting philosophical texts, what matters is the conceptual content of the views being put forward. On Brandom's account, that means what matters is the inferential role played by the concepts, their place in the justification of and rational implication of claims.

Brandom argues that we can distinguish two different ways of interpreting texts—*de dicto* interpretations and *de re* interpretations. *De dicto* interpretations try to map out the philosophical views expressed by the text generally in the context of the text as a whole, perhaps in the context of the author's corpus as a whole, or in the historical context in which the author was writing. The project is one in which the meaning of the text is understood to be the one the author could have recognized as the meaning of the text. The interpreter puts him or herself reliably in a position to speak on behalf of the author about the author's views. Much of the historically focused history of philosophy takes up *de dicto* interpretations of philosophical texts. *De re* interpretations of texts follow the inferential commitment of the claims made in the text independently from whether these commitments are themselves explicit or would even have been

intelligible to the author at the time of the production of the text. Both are legitimate interpretations; there are no philosophical grounds for privileging one over the other. When Brandom interprets Hegel, Heidegger, Dewey, and Sellars as sharing some of his own views about inferentialist semantics, he is not interpreting them *de dicto*—as if somewhere in their texts they made Brandomian statements about scorekeepers—but *de re*, as expressing beliefs that commit one to inferentialist semantics. Furthermore, he is interpreting them *de traditione*. One form of *de re* interpretation is to put the text in the inferential context of a particular tradition of argumentation, where the text is understood as part of a larger project—a project belonging to a tradition—and as articulating a distinctive position within that tradition. Interpreting *de traditione* presents the text as making a contribution to the philosophical goals of its tradition. Brandom thinks interpreting *de traditione* best highlights Gadamer's platitude that interpretation is dialogical, for in the process of interpreting the text in light of a tradition one is reinterpreting the tradition in light of the contributions of the text. At the same time, one locates oneself as a participant in the tradition, able to recognize the contributions of the text only because of ones shared commitments to the intellectual project of the tradition. Brandom believes, then, that his pragmatist semantics provides the best background for appreciating the truth of the "Gadamerian platitudes," the axioms of hermeneutic, though there is reason to doubt that the division between *de dicto* and *de re* interpretations is intelligible given Gadamer's own views about interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

In summation, the interaction between the classical pragmatism and hermeneutics has been minimal. Classical pragmatism developed its own theory of signs that became a general

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<sup>5</sup> On this point see Christina Lafont's "Meaning and Interpretation: Can Brandomian Scorekeepers be Gadamerian Hermeneuts" in *Philosophy Compass* 3/1 (2008): 17-29.

theory of interpretation and theory of the centrality of interpretation in knowledge acquisition.

Contemporary neo-pragmatism has been influenced by philosophical hermeneutics. Some of the main figures have presented their own theories of textual interpretation that echo themes in philosophical hermeneutics, though developed from a distinctively pragmatic perspective.

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