**Relativism in German Idealism, Historicism and Neo-Kantianism**

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*Abstract*

This chapter traces the development of relativist ideas in nineteenth-century debates about history and historical knowledge. It distinguishes between two contexts in which these ideas first emerged. First, the early-to-mid nineteenth-century encounter between speculative German idealism and professional historiography. Second, the late nineteenth-century debate between hermeneutic philosophy and orthodox Neo-Kantianism. The paper summarizes key differences between these two contexts: in the former, historical ontology and historical methodology formed a unity, in the latter, they came apart. As a result, the idea of universal history became increasingly problematic. In light of these differences, the paper seeks to (partially) explain why it was only towards the late-nineteenth century that historical relativism became an explicit concern.

*Introduction*

The emergence and development of relativist themes and arguments in nineteenth century German philosophy has a complex trajectory. This trajectory was shaped by the encounter between different scholarly traditions, among them speculative German idealism, hermeneutics, professional historiography, Sense-psychology, Folk-psychology, Neo-Kantianism, and phenomenology. The shared concern of the traditions that I will be focusing on in this chapter was history: how can we understand and conceptualize the essential historicity of human existence and how can we make sense of the variations between different historical epochs and cultures. The type of relativism at stake here is historical relativism, which might be considered a variant of cultural relativism. The historical relativist believes that historical epochs or cultures differ concerning the systems of beliefs and values that they adhere to, and that these different systems of beliefs and values cannot be ranked. For such a view to become plausible, different motives and ideas have to come together: the idea that beliefs and values are not static and eternal, but subject to historical change; the observation that the beliefs and values of past cultures were different from present ones, and sometimes radically so; the idea that beliefs and values are relative to culture or collective ways of life; the claim that there is no linear progress in history; the argument that later epochs are not warranted in judging earlier ones to be inferior, and the view that history is a contingent, undirected progress. Focusing on these and other relativist ideas about history and culture in nineteenth-century German philosophy I want to convey three general observations.

First, although many German philosophers and historians formulated theses and arguments that we today might view as ingredients to historical relativism, throughout most of the century, these thinkers did not worry too much about the problem. The main concern for speculative idealists and their opponents was not whether beliefs and values were relative to historical cultures in a way that forestalls a neutral adjudication between them. Instead, their problem was how the universal and the particular could be reconciled: how could one make sense of historical change and the resulting plurality of historical cultures without losing track of the unity of the historical process and the universal meaning that it embodied. Focusing on this problem meant that even when theses about the relativity of knowledge or moral values were formulated, these theses were usually joined to conceptions of theodicy or historical progress. And these conceptions held relativist implications in check.

Second, it was only towards the late nineteenth century that relativism emerged as an explicit philosophical concern. In particular, it was in the encounter between the hermeneutic tradition and Neo-Kantian philosophy of values that the problem of historical relativism took a more definite shape. “Relativism” entered the debate as a pejorative term and was closely associated with psychologism and historicism. The relativist was someone who failed to observe the boundary between the factual and the normative and who reduced the absolute values underpinning moral and epistemic judgments to contingent facts about human psychology, or to historical facts about what was acceptable in this or that culture. It is interesting to note, however, that those who were criticised as relativists by the Neo-Kantians rejected the label themselves. Those inspired by the hermeneutic tradition were confident that historical understanding based on universal human psychology could bridge the gaps between different cultures and systems of belief and would thus avoid the dangers of relativism.

Third, in the shift that occurred towards the late nineteenth century, the relation between historical ontology and historical methodology was reconceptualized. This reconceptualization may well have been one of the intellectual factors enabling the emergence of historical relativism as an explicit concern. Thinkers of the first phase saw ontology and methodology as closely interrelated. For these authors questions about historical method had to be answered on the basis of a general account of human history, its patterns and driving forces, while conversely, the correct methodological approach to the historical facts would reveal the unity and essence of history. For the philosophers of the second phase, this link was broken, or at least it became more problematic. The methods of the historical disciplines and the epistemic status of historical knowledge had to be clarified without reference to the ontology of the historical world. Historical ontology was considered bad metaphysics. It was in the context of a more purified methodological debate, in which history was no longer guaranteed to be understood as a unified and meaningful process, that historical relativism could take shape.

In what follows, I will substantiate these three observations, beginning with the conception of history that was formulated in speculative idealism, most importantly by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

*German Idealism*

While Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had treated history more or less as a footnote to his philosophical system, the speculative idealists that followed him – Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854), and Hegel – gave development and process a more central place in their conceptions of reason. As a result, the philosophy of history began to take on a systematic significance. Despite the many differences between their idealist projects, the speculative idealists shared three central commitments.

The first commitment they took on from Biblical universal history: the unfolding of the history of mankind is a unified process, and this process does not reduce to the seemingly erratic and haphazard course of particular actions and events. Instead, history it is directed and goal-oriented.

Second, the moving agent and “subject” of historical development is reason itself. The development of reason follows an intrinsic logic or structure, and the unfolding of this structure determines the course of history. The philosopher of history differs from the empirical historian by taking reason as his starting point. This allows him to see connections and totalities rather than particulars, ideas and essences rather than brute facts, and the necessary and rational rather than the merely contingent.

Third, the central locus of the self-expression of reason is the relationship between the individual and the state, because it is here that the problem of human freedom receives a solution that is at the same time *geistig* (mental-spiritual) and concrete. Human freedom realizes itself in the historical institutions of the state, and the development of humankind towards freedom proceeds through necessary stages. By revealing the necessary patterns of the historical process, the philosopher of history not only makes sense of the past. He is also able to situate and interpret the present.

Hegel’s philosophy of history has become the most influential example of an idealist philosophy of history. Although Hegel is an absolutist, in the sense that he thinks of the historical process as the self-realization and simultaneous self-discovery of “absolute spirit”, his philosophical reflections contains many relativist themes.

In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820) Hegel writes of “philosophy” as being “its own time comprehended in thoughts”. Philosophy as the highest form of human reason thus has a historical dimension. This thought does not collapse into relativism though, since Hegel thinks of historical time as structured by the progressive realization of reason itself. For Hegel, ontology and methodology mutually reinforce one another: philosophy of history is empirical history as seen from the standpoint of reason. The philosophical perspective reveals reason to be operative in the historical world in a way that enables progress towards ever higher levels of self-consciousness.

According to Hegel, history has a final goal. On the one hand, Hegel describes this goal as the self-consciousness of absolute spirit. This is why in Hegel’s philosophical system, the philosophy of history is situated at the transition from “objective spirit” to “absolute spirit”: expressed in the historical reality of state and nation, objective spirit passes over into the forms of absolute spirit in religion, art, and ultimately philosophy. Second, Hegel describes the final goal of the world as the realization of freedom. The philosophy of history thus construes the stages of the development of spirit as stages in the development of human freedom, and explicates the systematic links between self-consciousness, rationality and freedom.

Focusing on the second aspect, we can see that Hegel relativizes *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) to particular historical national communities, while simultaneously making an argument for how the particular and relative is essentially related to and ultimately overcome by universal freedom. He argues that the idea of freedom becomes an active force in human history only once ethical life receives a concrete institutional form in the nation state and becomes conscious of itself in a concrete *Volksgeist* (national spirit). Accordingly, Hegel captures the dynamic development of world history through the lens of the relation between particular national spirits and the universal *Weltgeist* (world spirit): the former is a limited expression of the latter. Each historical community or nation is built on a specific principle that it expresses and develops in its ethical and cultural life. By rendering its principle explicit, the national spirit makes it available to the self-consciousness of the historical community. And yet, once the principle is fully expressed, it loses its vividness and immediacy, and the national spirit exhausts itself. The community enters a stage of decay, and ultimately gives way to the emergence of a new principle. Hegel interprets the resulting succession of different national spirits as the process in which the world-spirit overcomes its particular appearances. Historical change has thus both a negative and a positive dimension. In the negative dimension, world-history reveals the finitude and relativity of all forms of ethical life and practical freedom. The positive dimension is that the world spirit is engaged in a process of *Aufhebung* (sublation): by overcoming its particular expressions, the world-spirit preserves their essential principle in a universal concept of freedom.

According to Hegel, the process in which freedom is realized is predetermined by the structure of the *Begriff* (concept) of freedom itself. While Hegel does not deny the role of chance in history, he defines chance as that which is unrelated. Hence, chance is – by definition – excluded from the relational nexus of world history in which the concept of freedom unfolds itself. Hegel captures the structure of this process in terms of progressive stages. Each stage of the historical process expresses, to at least some degree, the final end of the world. There is some disagreement as to whether Hegel’s talk of a “final end” should be understood in a temporal sense, that is, whether the end of history means an end of historical development. But even if we do not subscribe to the temporal interpretation, we can note that for Hegel history is unified and closed with respect to the final end.

Hegel’s philosophy of history involves notable relativist elements. Most importantly, ethical life and consciousness are conceived as dynamic, and as relative to particular historical communities. But, at the same time, the conceptualization of history in terms of progressive stages allows for a hierarchy between different historical cultures. Moreover, the fact that history is a closed totality with a final end negates all relativism: the dynamic relation of expression and sublation that occurs between the particular and the universal ultimately realizes the absolute.

*Professional history*

When Hegel was delivering his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* in 1822, 1828 and 1830, the study of history had already undergone a process of increasing disciplinary professionalization. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1767-1835) reform of the Prussian educational system had turned history from an *Hilfswissenschaft* (auxiliary science) in the service of law and theology to an autonomous academic discipline. The newly-founded discipline implemented its own methodological standards, most importantly the principle of source criticism. Source criticism was supposed to make history empirical and objective. Professional historians rejected the postulate of reason that had shaped the historical understanding of the German idealists. The also called into question the idea of stages and progress. The historians agreed with the philosophers that the course of human history follows general developmental patterns, and that there is a universal meaning to the world-historical process encapsulated in the development of “ideas” and “spirit”. Nevertheless, the historians insisted that the universal meaning of history could not be known by means of philosophical reflection. Instead it had to emerge as the result of a piecemeal investigation that started from historical particulars and was based on the critical study of the available sources. At the University of Berlin, an institutional-intellectual conflict erupted between Hegel and his followers on the one hand, and what would later be called the “historical school” of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Friedrich Carl von Savigny (1779-1861), and Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), on the other.

The main fault-lines of this conflict are exemplified in the Hegelian historian Heinrich Leo’s (1799-1878) critical review of Ranke’s debut work *History of the Latin and Teutonic nations 1494-1514* (1824). Leo attacks Ranke for sacrificing insight into what is essential at the altar of historical particularities. In his response, Ranke argues that history is very much after the general and essential. And yet, the general is to be found and represented in the particular. In a different context, Ranke scolds Hegel for reducing human life to mere shadows or schemes. He warns that the linear conception of progress reduces the life and value of each historical epoch to that of being a mere predecessor of later stages.

Ranke himself believes that all historical periods are “equal to God.” They have an intrinsic value that, although not always obvious from the finite human point of view, is acknowledged from God’s eternal perspective. There is a divine plan in the world, even if it might not be fully accessible to the human observer. And only by emulating divine benevolence—by attending to diverse historical realities with an unbiased mind—can the historian approach an understanding of human history.

Ranke’s appreciation of particulars and his idea that all epochs are equal to God go some way towards formulating a doctrine of historical relativism. But at the same time, these claims depend on the assumption of an absolute perspective: God’s benevolent view of human history. Ranke radicalizes the relativist elements already present in Hegel by jettisoning the idea of progress. Still, he never abandons a theologically-grounded absolutism that envisions history as a meaningful unity.

Not all historians were in agreement when it came to the question of progress in history. For example, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884) and Heinrich von Sybel (1817-1895) believed in history as a progressive process. They conceived of this progress in somewhat restricted, nationalist terms, and tended to equate the progress towards human freedom with the process of German national unification. It is an open question to what extent their views on progress left the door open for a “nationalist” formulation of relativism (roughly, this would be the view that beliefs and values are relative to national histories). But however things may stand with respect to nationalist relativism, with Droysen’s reformulation of the hermeneutic principle of “understanding”, a new form of historical relativism entered the stage: relativism about historical knowledge.

Unlike Ranke, Droysen did not think that the study of history should aspire to objectivity. In his *Historik* lectures, which he held seventeen times from 1857 onwards, Droysen develops a subjectivist hermeneutics of historical knowledge. With an eye to Hegel, he conceptualizes history as the realm of the self-expression of *sittliche Mächte* (ethical powers) and ethical ideas. For Droysen, understanding the past means recapturing general ethical ideas in their concrete historical realisations. But the formative work of ethical ideas in their expressions can only be grasped if the historian taps into his own subjectivity. In order to organize the otherwise disparate empirical particulars in a consistent interpretation, the historian needs to maintain a firm standpoint. And this standpoint, in turn, is shaped by the historian’s own subjectivity, as well as by his age, religion and nation. Droysen concludes that historical truth is only a “relative truth”, a truth relative to the historian’s situated standpoint in the present. The radical implication is that history needs to be constantly rewritten in response to new developments.

Although nineteenth century German historians continued to think of history as a unified process with a universal meaning, they were more sceptical than the German idealists about the prospect of this meaning being revealed from the finite human perspective. Nevertheless, we find that they did not worry too much about relativism either. When Ranke claims all epochs to be equal to God, or when Droysen argues that historical truth is standpoint-dependent, these are statements of confidence, not admissions of defeat. For Ranke, the meaning of history can only be grasped if the equal validity of all historical cultures is acknowledged. But this gives the historian a theological vocation: it is the task of the historian to emulate God’s absolute and benevolent perspective. For Droysen, historical knowledge is perspectival and bound to the present. But this insight provides license for the historian to take on a political role in the service of the German nation state. By writing history from the standpoint of the present, the historical can intervene in the historical course of events. In short, the professional historians of the period were fully convinced of the ethical calling of the study of history. This seems to have made them somewhat blasé about the relativist questions that had emerged in their own conceptions of history and historical method.

*Hermeneutics and Neo-Kantianism*

The full extent of the challenge of historical relativism was only acknowledged towards the end of the nineteenth century, and in a different context. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and the Baden Neo-Kantians, Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936), engaged in a life-long controversy about the demarcation between the natural and the human-historical sciences. Many issues were at stake in this conflict: the question of historical method, the relation between psychology and history, the fact-value distinction, the historical nature of philosophical reasoning, and the possibility of understanding past cultures. In the context of this debate the problem of historical relativism took shape as well.

In his *Introduction to the human sciences* (1883) Dilthey argues that the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) require an epistemological foundation suitable to secure their autonomy from the natural sciences. His “critique of historical reason” sets out to provide such an epistemological foundation. But Dilthey departs from Kantian criticism in fundamental respects. Most importantly, he opposes what he conceives as the stifling dualisms of Kantian philosophy. He rejects the distinctions between sensibility and intellect, between the transcendental and the empirical, as well between theoretical and practical philosophy. In Dilthey’s view, reason cannot be separated from the forces of life. Thinking, emotion and volition form an interconnected and developing nexus. And it is only by reconsidering reason as dynamic, historical and integrated with life that philosophy can do justice to the enormous successes of the various disciplines studying the human-historical world.

In *Einleitung* Dilthey bases the distinction between the human and the natural sciences on a distinction between “inner” and “outer experience”. The facts of the natural sciences take the form of hypotheses that are checked against “outer experience”. In contrast, the facts of the human sciences are “given originaliter from within”. They are experienced not as isolated elements, but as a living continuum and nexus. Dilthey emphasizes that the various disciplines of the human sciences – psychology, law, economics, theology, literature, history, etc. – form a continuum that is based on the interconnected facts of lived experience. The different disciplines work together to explain the external organization of society in state and law, the historical development of cultural systems such as art and religion, and the individuation of human types along lines of gender, nationality, profession, and so on.

However, when it comes to the task of providing the human sciences with a firm epistemological basis, one discipline plays a special role for Dilthey: psychology. Dilthey proposes a novel “descriptive and analytic” psychology that does not explain psychological processes by reference to hypothetical “elements” and natural laws, but instead seeks to recapture the integrated contents of “lived experience”. Dilthey reasons that since lived experience is inherently social, the faithful description and analysis of this form of experience can also provide the basis for objective knowledge in the human sciences. But despite maintaining the possibility of objective knowledge in the human sciences, Dilthey imposes no firm distinction between facts and values. In line with his anti-dualist thinking, he emphasizes that values and ideals emerge from the very reality that is studied by the human sciences, and concludes that facts about this process can also form the basis of normative evaluation.

Finally, Dilthey rejects philosophy of history, as well as sociology as based on false generalizations. He grants that there are stable social structures and patterns on the level of individual nations, and in different cultural systems, and that these can be studied objectively. But he denies that these patterns form a unified, global process that could be captured in terms of universal laws, teleological progress or other grand narratives. In this respect Dilthey is more radical than many other nineteenth-century historicists: he rejects universal history. Nevertheless, Dilthey remains committed to some form of universalism. He embraces universalism on the level of human psychology, arguing that the “psychic nexus” which connects intellect, emotions and volitions builds out the same structures in all human beings, and hence also serves as the basis of mutual understanding across ages and cultures.

In his mature work *The formation of the historical world in the human sciences* (1910), Dilthey identifies “understanding” as the basis of both socio-historical reality and of the human sciences studying this reality. Dilthey now argues that the possibility of understanding is not based on “inner experience”, but rather on the fact that all human beings participate in the objective “manifestations of spirit”, that is, in a world of shared social institutions and cultural meanings.

Dilthey does not see himself as a relativist, and it is only in his “philosophy of worldviews” that he explicitly engages with the problem. But many of Dilthey’s contemporaries, most notably the Baden Neo-Kantians, thought that the “critique of historical reason” harboured a relativist spirit. Windelband and Rickert opposed Dilthey on nearly all fronts. Where Dilthey saw a continuum between empirical and transcendental, sensibility and intellect, factual and normative, the Neo-Kantians demanded firm boundaries between these domains. When Dilthey distinguished the natural and the human sciences by thinking about types of experience and the objects they involved, the Neo-Kantians sought to demarcate different sciences in purely formal terms. And while Dilthey thought of psychology as central to the epistemology of the human sciences, the Neo-Kantians classified psychology with the natural sciences and denied its relevance for the historical disciplines.

Perhaps the most important issue in the disagreement is the distinction between the factual and the normative. In “Kritische oder genetische Methode?” (1883), Windelband argues that failing to observe this distinction leads to relativism. When disciplines like history or psychology seek to answer questions about values and normativity by purely empirical means, the results are devastating: the attempt to derive what is valid thought from actual reasoning ends up treating all thoughts as equally valid – after all, both correct and incorrect reasoning follows psychological laws. Likewise, the attempt to derive moral evaluations from history ends up treating all behaviour as equally morally acceptable, since both good and bad moral behaviours have at some point been accepted historically. Psychologism and historicism are destructive of normativity. They are forms of relativism.

Windelband allows, of course, room for empirical history as a legitimate enterprise carried out within the constraints set by its empirical method. He distinguishes the historical from the natural sciences not by reference to different types of experience, but by isolating different goals of the knowledge acquisition. According to Windelband, the natural sciences are “nomothetic”, in that they seek knowledge of regularities and general laws. The historical disciplines, in contrast are “idiographic”; they are concerned with particular and unrepeatable individual realities. Although Windelband suggests that only the unique individual, but not the repeatable, has a human value, he leaves open what precisely is the relationship between the idiographic method and the philosophy of values.

Rickert takes up Windelband’s distinctions and develops them into a more systematic account of historical method. According to Rickert, the starting point for demarcating the natural from the historical sciences is the question of “concept-formation”: how do different sciences develop a conceptual grasp of reality? According to Rickert, the natural sciences form their concepts by “generalization”, while the historical sciences proceed by “individualization”, meaning that their concepts express an individual, unique and unrepeatable – and in this sense historical – content. Rickert characterizes the procedure of individualization as “value-related”: Historical individuality can only be grasped as a meaningful unity if it is related to a value.

Like Windelband, Rickert thinks of his analysis as purely formal. He accuses Dilthey of committing a twofold mistake. First, Dilthey bases the epistemological account of the historical sciences on the nature of the historical object, and second, he misconstrues that object as psychological. On Rickert’s account, the formal method shows the ultimate object of history to consist in the “unreal meaning configurations” which attach to the empirical realities studied by the historian. And he insists that such unreal meaning cannot be thought of as immanent to psychological life. For Rickert, the correct way to understand the object of the historical sciences is in terms of culture. Culture has both a material and an immaterial component, but it is the latter that bestows meaning upon the former. By classifying psychology as a “generalizing” and thus as a natural science, he removes psychology from the domain of meaning which features centrally in the historical sciences.

Although both history and philosophy deal with meanings and values, Rickert is keen to keep them separate too. He introduces a distinction between theoretical and practical “value-relation” and claims that only the former is relevant to historical method. The task of practical evaluation is then left to philosophy. A universal history that reveals the ethical meaning of history is only possible if it is grounded in a system of absolute values, which in turn, only philosophy can provide. Hence, Rickert makes philosophy’s transcendental values relevant to the interpretation of the meaning of history. Empirical history, by itself, cannot reveal this meaning.

In this way, Rickert preserves the distinction between the factual and the normative that had also been at the heart of Windelband’s philosophy of values. He insists that the theoretical value-relating method of history can only reconstruct particular individualities. It does not, by itself, provide us with a unified grasp of the totality of history. A universal history of progress is only possible on the basis of a philosophical system of transcendental values. And these values cannot be historical entities, or else the result would be a destructive historical relativism. Values and normativity are in the domain of philosophy, not history.

Dilthey reacts to the charge of relativism raised by his Neo-Kantian contemporaries in his philosophy of worldviews. The philosophy of worldviews, which Dilthey also describes as a “philosophy of philosophy,” is his attempt to make sense of the historicity of philosophical systems while also avoiding historical relativism. According to Dilthey, worldviews emerge as attempts to solve the puzzles of life. Dilthey identifies three domains in which worldviews are formulated and developed – religion, poetry and philosophy, with philosophy differing from the other domains in being concerned with rigorous justification and generalization. Dilthey identifies three basic configurations of philosophical thinking that reoccur throughout philosophy’s history, three “types” of philosophical worldviews: naturalism, idealism of freedom and objective idealism. By expressing one of these three basic types, each philosophical system participates in the universal structure of philosophical reasoning. Dilthey thinks that in uncovering the common basis of all philosophical worldviews, he has reaffirmed the sovereignty of reason above the conflicts between different worldviews. He claims to have avoided relativism: while the worldviews themselves are only partial and relative, the perspective that encompasses them all is not. Of course, many of Dilthey’s critics remained unconvinced. For Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) the philosophy of worldviews continued to present a paradigmatic example of historical relativism.

*Conclusions*

As we have seen, the trajectory of relativist ideas in nineteenth-century German philosophy is complex and multi-layered. It is shaped by the encounter between different intellectual traditions, among them German idealism, hermeneutics, professional history, and neo-Kantianism. In general, we can observe two shifts from earlier debates about history and historical knowledge surrounding German idealism and professional history to the later debates that arose between Dilthey and the Baden Neo-Kantians.

First, while in the earlier contexts questions of methodology are always entangled with questions of historical ontology, these two layers come apart in the late nineteenth century. Second, and possibly as a result of the first shift, Dilthey, Windelband and Rickert share a sceptical attitude towards universal history. They agree that the reconstruction of objective knowledge about particular histories is well within the reach of empirical history. But they cast doubt on whether history can be comprehended as a unified whole with a universal meaning.

These developments paved the way for a clearer acknowledgement of relativism as a philosophical problem. Note however that relativism did not become clearly defined as a position or doctrine. Relativism was closely associated with, if not identical to, psychologism and historicism. It was not clearly distinguished from scepticism, nihilism, and anarchism either. To some, relativism seemed to emerge as a violation of the fact-value distinction and could only be avoided on the basis of a philosophy that maintained absolute values. Others thought that relativism could be countered by a universalist perspective on history, or by hermeneutic understanding. In the early twentieth century, worries about relativism were frequently expressed together with political worries about the “anarchy of values”. Under the label of “historicism”, historical relativism came to stand in for an unmanageable plurality of conflicting worldviews that threatened political stability in the present.

*Literature*

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