Reason Over Genius: Kant's Rejection of Genius in Philosophy and Science

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Abstract

Kant's views on genius changed significantly over time. Early on, he saw genius as important in both science and mathematics, but later he limited it strictly to the arts. This shift reflected his belief that philosophy and science rely on reason and universal rules, which anyone can learn and apply, while genius in the arts involves unique creativity that cannot be taught. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and his popular writings, Kant argued that reason, not genius, should guide knowledge and action. He criticized relying on genius in philosophy or science, as it would exclude most people from understanding and participating in these fields. Kant's Enlightenment ideals emphasized equality in knowledge and the freedom to think for oneself. By rejecting genius in philosophy and science, he promoted the idea that reason and autonomy should be accessible to everyone.

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1. Introduction

Kant's conception of genius has long been a complex and contested subject in scholarly circles, owing to the apparent inconsistencies in his treatment of the topic. The publication of Kant's *Nachschriften* from his logic and anthropology lectures has, however, provided crucial insights into the historical development of his views on genius, tracing its change from the pre-critical to the critical period. Various scholars have sought to reconstruct Kant's perspective on this matter, drawing attention to the lecture manuscripts of his students (Tonelli, 1966a, 1966b; Giordanetti, 1995). In general, prior to the early 1780s, Kant attributed a significant role to genius in both mathematics and scientific cognition, arguing that mathematical knowledge and groundbreaking discoveries in the natural sciences could result from the contributions of genius. However, during the 1780s and 1790s, Kant's position underwent a remarkable change. By this period, he explicitly and implicitly restricted the concept of genius to the domain of the fine arts. This reorientation can be understood in light of his evolving philosophical methodology, particularly his demarcation between sensibility and understanding, his account of the role of imagination, and his distinction between subjective and objective purposiveness, as elaborated in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (AA 5:309; cf. Wenzel, 2001). Kant's adoption of a new transcendental method in doing philosophy, which demands universal validity as the criterion of cognitive judgment, necessitated his rejection of the idea that genius holds any significant role in the domains of *mathematics* or *science*. This methodological insight, rooted in his broader philosophical framework, thus confined the applicability of genius solely to the realm of fine art.

Recent scholarship has revisited Kant's views on genius, engaging in debates about whether the concept of genius can be meaningfully applied to both scientific insights and the fine arts. This discussion draws on the notion of schematism introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's theory of schematism, which he describes as a kind of *art* (*Kunst*), may be understood as involving a special form of creativity closely associated with genius. Consequently, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is not merely an analysis of aesthetic experience but also provides valuable resources for understanding Kant's theoretical philosophy and its potential implications for scientific cognition more broadly (Matherne, 2015). Furthermore, the influence of rationalist philosophers such as Alexander Baumgarten and G. E. Meier plays a vital role in shaping Kant's conception of genius. Scholars emphasized the importance of distinguishing between the "*science of beauty*" and the "*beauty of science*," an idea that profoundly informed Kant's aesthetics. Kant's aesthetic judgments should be interpreted as offering a positive alternative to Platonic tradition (Bereitenbach, 2018). Conversely, other scholars contend that Kant would likely reject such an extension of genius to scientific cognition on both *epistemic* and *moral reasons*. This position is evident in his critique of his former student Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas towards a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Kant takes issue with Herder's thesis, which posits creative natural forces as responsible for the emergence and development of organic life, including the transformation of species over time. Not only did Kant dismiss Herder's *Ideas*, but also was deeply critical of its style and speculative tendencies.

Ultimately, Kant concluded that Herder's genius talent should be subject to rational constraints to avoid epistemic and moral overreach (Williams, 2021).

In this paper, I will explore a perspective that has been under-thematized in the secondary literature. I contend that Kant's opposition to the concept of genius in scientific knowledge is grounded in his commitment to an *egalitarian*, *universally accessible form of philosophical wisdom*, which fundamentally contrasts with the exclusivity inherent in the notion of genius. I argue that this interpretation is substantiated by Kant's distinction between "philosophy" (*Philosophie*) and "philosophizing" (*Philosophieren*).

A closer examination of Kant's understanding of the essence of philosophy sheds light on his ultimate rejection of the role of genius in scientific cognition within the framework of his mature philosophy of the 1790s. This rejection, I will demonstrate, is deeply connected with Kant's commitment to the core ideals of the *Enlightenment*, which emphasize reason, universality, and the democratization of knowledge. Thus, Kant's Enlightenment commitments provide a compelling basis for his dismissal of genius not only in scientific inquiry but also in philosophical ideals.

2. Kant on Philosophy as an Active Endeavor

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asserts that all *rational cognition* originates either from *concepts* or from the *construction of concepts*. Cognition derived purely from concepts is *philosophical*, while cognition that involves the construction of concepts is *mathematical*. Furthermore, Kant differentiates between two types of cognition: "cognition from data" (*cognitio ex datis*) and "cognition from principles" (*cognitio ex principiis*). The former, which he describes as *historical*, consists of empirical data, whereas the latter is *rational* and grounded in principles (A836/B864; compare with: AA 9:22; AA 24:188f; AA 24:321; AA 24:797; AA 24:614-615; AA 24:704; AA 29;534). Kant's position to the history of philosophy stems from his critique of the Wolffian school, which he characterized as dogmatically repeating Wolff's ideas without critical assessment. In the *Blomberg Logic*, Kant stated,

> With philosophical cognition, now, one seeks, from the characters of things, to have insight into the connection of their grounds and consequences. Some are of the opinion that they have philosophy, although they really lack it, and others actually have it without thinking so. Those who memorize definitions from Wolff and other philosophers think they have philosophy. They only have a merely historical cognition and actually cannot philosophize at all, and think for themselves, or judge, concerning objects. They lack the skill of at least judging a thing philosophically. (AA 24:50)

The essence of philosophy lies in the act of "thinking" and "judging" the validity of assertions or doctrines, rather than merely "repeating" or "memorizing" them. Philosophical cognition is rooted in rational inquiry, not historical reproduction. Although Kant did not assign significant value to the history of philosophy, which he considered to be a collection of data, this does not imply that he dismissed the historical study of philosophy altogether. Instead, he emphasized the importance of uncovering the underlying *principles* that inform the historical development of philosophical

thought. Despite Kant's skepticism regarding the history of philosophy, his distinction between "cognition from data" and "cognition from principles" (or "philosophy" and "philosophizing") is deeply rooted in the Wolffian rationalist tradition, particularly in the works of figures such as Christian Wolff and G. F. Meier.[2]

Although philosophical and mathematical cognitions are both rational sciences for Kant, only mathematics—and philosophy in its historical sense—can be *taught* and *learned*. Philosophy, when understood as an independent activity of self-thinking (Selbstdenken), differs fundamentally from mathematics. The aim of philosophy is to explain the grounding of reality and action, rather than the construction of concepts. More importantly, according to Kant, one cannot, as the above quote indicated, *learn philosophy itself* but can only *learn how to philosophize*. This entails the exercise of reason's talent in applying its general principles to various phenomena, while maintaining the critical capacity to investigate the sources of these principles and to confirm or reject them (A838/B866). Kant thus defines philosophy as a discipline of activity rather than a static body of knowledge. Philosophical cognition, as an activity, in his view, consists in the systematic unification of diverse rational concepts and is inherently *performative*. It is not reducible to the mere compilation of historical facts but requires active engagement with reason to use the principles that structure our understanding.

However, this does not fully capture Kant's conception of philosophy. Kant rejected the identification of mathematics with philosophy, despite both being forms of a priori cognition grounded in pure reason; their functions, he argued, are fundamentally distinct. To this point, Kant further differentiates between the concept of philosophy in a "scholastic" sense and in a "cosmopolitan" sense (*in sensu cosmico*). Philosophy in the *scholastic* sense refers to a "system of cognition that is sought only as science, without having as its end anything more than the systematic unity of this knowledge,

[2] The question of whether Kant is charitable to the "dogmatists" in his critical philosophy is a matter of significant debate. Here, I wish to offer a brief remark. It is undeniable that Kant owed a substantial intellectual debt to the dogmatist tradition, as becomes evident upon closer examination of their texts. Kant himself drew extensively on the works of dogmatist philosophers throughout his lectures during his long career at the University of Königsberg. Furthermore, his own education was firmly rooted in the rationalist, or dogmatist, tradition. It is therefore unsurprising that Kant's distinction between "philosophy" and "philosophizing" can be traced back to figures such as Christian Wolff, G. F. Meier, and the so-called dogmatist philosophers. Christian Wolff, in his *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*—particularly in the chapter "De triplici cognitione humana, historica, philosophica et mathematica" distinguished between three forms of cognition: historical, philosophical, and mathematical. Wolff characterized historical cognition as "bare factual knowledge" (*nackte Tatsachenkenntnis*), in contrast to philosophical cognition (*cognitio philosophica*), which involves understanding the principles underlying the facts. Philosophical cognition, according to Wolff, cannot be derived merely from "hearsay" (*Hörensagen*) but requires "self-thinking" (*Selbstdenken*). G. F. Meier shared similar views. In his *Excerpts from the Doctrine of Reason* (*Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*), Meier introduced the term "rational cognition" (*cognitio rationalis*) and identified three distinct kinds of cognition: (1) cognition of things, (2) cognition of reason, and (3) cognition of the correlation between things and reason. While Kant was highly critical of rationalist philosophy, he inherited significant elements of its intellectual legacy. Despite his reliance on rationalist texts for his lectures, some of the profound insights these texts contain were not sufficiently reconsidered in his critical philosophy. (cf. Hinske, 1998, 52-59; Albrecht, 1982, 1-24).

thus the logical perfection of cognition" (A839/B867; AA 9:24).[3] By contrast, philosophy in the *cosmopolitan* sense, which Kant identifies as the foundational meaning of the term, is "the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)" (ibid). For Kant, philosophy in the *cosmopolitan* sense is far more significant and practical, as it aligns cognition with the ultimate purposes of human reason. A philosopher, in this sense, is someone who employs the power of reason for the purpose of legislation—establishing principles that *guide and regulate cognition and action*. This stands in contrast to the "artist of reason," who treats reason as a mere exercise in the manipulation or play of concepts (ibid).

This distinction reveals Kant's departure from the rationalist, who conflated mathematics and general logic with philosophy. While philosophy, general logic, and mathematics are all forms of *a priori* knowledge, their ends and functions differ fundamentally. Philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense (*conceptus cosmicus*) concerns and engages every individual, addressing the essential purposes of reason with existential concern. Conversely, philosophy in the scholastic sense serves as a specialized skill directed toward arbitrary goals and interests only a limited people, namely dogmatic philosophers in his eyes (A839/B867; AA 9:24).

Philosophy, in its ultimate aim, is *universal* in scope, concerning all individuals and addressing the "entire vocation of human beings" (A840/B868). This universal vocation is closely connected to the task of practical philosophy. Kant aligns this conception with the traditions of ancient philosophy, where the term "philosopher" signified nothing more than a "moralist," someone who excels in self-discipline through the exercise of reason (ibid). Thus, a philosopher in the cosmopolitan sense is not only a moralist but also one who is deeply committed to the laws of reason.

Kant concludes that philosophy has two principal tasks: *understanding nature and exercising freedom*. These tasks correspond to the domains of natural law and moral law, respectively. While initially distinct, these two systems ultimately converge into a unified philosophical framework. The philosophy of nature is concerned with what *is*—the empirical and theoretical study of phenomena—whereas the philosophy of morals addresses what *ought to be*, focusing on normative principles and the moral obligations of rational agents (A840/B868).

The true philosopher, according to Kant, is a *practical* philosopher who exemplifies wisdom and aligns with the ultimate end of human reason. In contrast to the "artist of reason," or *philodox*, who pursues speculative knowledge without contributing to the ultimate purpose of reason, the practical philosopher engages in activities that are inherently meaningful and purposeful (AA 9:24). With this clarification established, the next critical question arises: does Kant regard *philosophizing*—understood as the active exercise of reason—as the vocation of philosophers alone, or does he conceive it as a task upon all human beings?

To address this question, one must turn to Kant's renowned essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" published in the *Berliner Monatschrift* in 1784. In this essay, Kant defines enlightenment as humanity's emergence from "self-incurred

[3] For an analysis of Kant's departure from the rationalist definition of philosophy and his rejection of a perfectionist account of cognition, see Pollok, 2014, 18–35.

immaturity" (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*) through the use of one's own understanding without reliance on external guidance, such as that of the church or other authorities (AA 8:35). According to Kant, enlightenment has yet to be fully realized—not due to a lack of intellectual capability, but rather as a consequence of cowardice and laziness, which prevent individuals from summoning the courage to exercise their own reason. Nevertheless, Kant asserts that enlightenment is not only possible but also inevitable, provided that human beings are granted sufficient freedom to "think for themselves" and to have courage to use their own understanding (AA 8:36).

For Kant, the key to achieving enlightenment lies in *freedom*, specifically the freedom to engage in the *public use of reason* (*AA 8:37*). This brief but influential text underscores Kant's advocacy for the public use of reason in addressing matters of public concern. In my opinion, it suggests not only that reason has a fundamentally practical orientation but also that the exercise of reason in public life is an expression of individual *autonomy*. This perspective provides a deeper explication of Kant's notion of "philosophizing" as a *public activity* concerning every agent. Crucially, philosophizing is not an endeavor limited to professional philosophers but extends to the general public. Given Kant's emphasis on the true philosopher as a practical philosopher or moralist in the tradition of the ancient Greeks, it is reasonable to conclude that Kant's conception of philosophy—namely, philosophizing—is inherently linked to *existential* concerns. The broader task of transcendental idealism, in this context, is to elucidate the foundations of both experience and action, thereby grounding the principles of human cognition and moral freedom.

Philosophy, understood as philosophizing, aims at self-legislation and self-control through the exercise of reason. This engagement with reason inherently involves the realization of human autonomy, which Kant regards as the vocation of all human beings, not merely that of philosophers. By situating philosophy within this framework of autonomy, one can further elucidate Kant's conception of philosophizing and clarify his rejection of the idea of genius in philosophy during the 1790s.

3. Challenging the Notion of Genius: Kant's Perspective on Science, Art, and Philosophy

Kant did not maintain a consistent position regarding the role of genius in philosophy, mathematics, and science. However, the definition of genius has remained consistent since the 1770s. Kant characterized genius as an "original mind", in stark contrast to a "mind of imitation." Genius, according to Kant, is a mere construction of the mind that requires no instruction or rules and adheres to none; it is a faculty that cannot be taught (AA 15:361; cf. Giordanetti, 1995, 407). This raises the question: in which field can genius be found?

During the 1760s and 1770s, Kant acknowledged the existence of pleasure in mathematics and the significance of genius in the discovery of new scientific methods. Kant argued that genius plays a crucial role in scientific advancement, stating that the sciences presuppose genius and that "geniuses will embrace the sciences for their difficulties" (AA 25:1236; Wenzel, 2001, 417). Still in the 1770s, Kant did not draw a sharp distinction between the sciences and the arts, asserting that *genius* could be found

in both domains: “In all the arts and sciences one can distinguish between mechanism and genius” (AA 15:370, Refl. 829; Wenzel, 2001, 417). During the critical period of the 1780s, Kant revised his concept of genius, limiting its existence to the domain of fine arts, excluding science and philosophy. According to Kant, the product of genius is fine art, as it is only through the imagination that a judgment of taste can be formed. From the 1780s onward, the idea of genius was restricted to fine arts, with no place for genius in mathematics or philosophy (Giordanetti, 1995, p. 408).[4]

In the 1790s, Kant underwent no significant shift in his position and rejected the concept of genius in the contexts of science and philosophy, but only to make his position more explicitly. This is particularly evident in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where he systematically rejected the notion of genius in both philosophy and the sciences. Kant asserted that “there is neither a science of the beautiful, only a critique, nor beautiful science, only beautiful art” (AA 5:305). Kant further argued that “genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature, this could also be expressed thus: Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art” (AA 5:305). Kant then provided a detailed definition of *genius*, outlining four key characteristics:

1. **Genius is a talent for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given**—and because no such rule exists, the product must be original.
2. **The genius produces original work, which must also be exemplary**—it serves as a model and is not derived from imitation.
3. **As the product cannot be codified scientifically, it reflects the nature of its creator**—it is an expression of the author’s unique mental disposition, making it impossible for others to replicate the work of genius.
4. **Genius, by its nature, does not legislate for science but solely for the fine arts**—the domain of genius is confined to artistic creativity and not to scientific or philosophical endeavors (AA 5:308).

This redefinition underscores Kant’s mature view that the realm of genius is exclusive to the fine arts, where *originality* and *creativity* flourish beyond the confines of systematic rules or scientific methodology.

This implies that genius neither requires learning nor can it be acquired through imitation. Kant asserted that “learning is nothing but imitation; even the greatest aptitude for learning, facility for learning (capacity) as such, still does not count as genius” (AA 5:309). He went so far as to argue that even *great minds* such as Isaac Newton cannot be considered geniuses, despite their groundbreaking discoveries in the fundamental principles of physics.[5] According to Kant, this is because such principles can be learned, both theoretically and practically.

[4] However, in other contexts, Kant maintained that genius plays a role in the development of new scientific methods. He argued that the talent for pioneering innovative approaches in scientific cognition is a hallmark of genius, facilitating groundbreaking contributions in both science and art that had not previously existed. This suggests that Kant continued to grapple with the concept, contemplating whether he should entirely abandon the idea of genius in philosophy. (AA 15:827; Wenzel, 2001, 417).

[5] It is also debatable whether Kant’s view is fair to Newton. In his lectures on anthropology, Kant cited Newton and Kepler as examples of individuals responsible for groundbreaking scientific revolutions, raising the question of whether they should be considered geniuses (AA 25:1410–1411).

In other words, with sufficient diligence and dedication to the study of physics, these principles or rules are accessible to others, allowing them to "think" and practice physics in a manner similar to Newton. By contrast, the creation of inspired poetry cannot be learned, regardless of one's mastery of the rules of poetic art or familiarity with excellent models. As Kant observes:

> The reason is that Newton could make all the steps that he had to take, from the first elements of geometry to his great and profound discoveries, entirely intuitive not only to himself but also to everyone else, and thus set them out for posterity quite determinately; but no Homer or Wieland can indicate how his ideas, which are fantastic and yet at the same time rich in thought, arise and come together in his head, because he himself does not know it and thus cannot teach it to anyone else either. In the scientific sphere, therefore, the greatest discoverer differs only in degree from the most hardworking imitator and apprentice, whereas he differs in kind from someone who is gifted by nature for beautiful art (AA 5:309).

From this, it becomes evident that Kant denied the existence of genius in the domains of science and philosophy. In the fine arts, no matter how extraordinary the ideas of figures such as Homer or Christoph Wieland may be, they cannot teach others to replicate their creative processes. Although their works may serve as models for "imitation" (*Nachahmung*), they cannot be replicated through mere "copying" (*Nachmachung*) (*AA 5:310*). Thus, within the realm of fine arts, one cannot acquire genius through practice or diligence, nor can one become a genius by learning. For Kant, genius either exists in fine arts, or it does not.

In contrast, the scientific and philosophical achievements of figures such as Isaac Newton are fundamentally different. These achievements are built upon systematic steps and processes, starting with simple concepts and advancing to more complex ones. The insights gained in science or philosophy are not exclusive to Newton himself but are accessible to anyone who studies Newton's work diligently. Consequently, scientific discovery, which can be acquired through effort and disciplined study, differs from artistic creation in a fundamental way: the greatness of scientific achievement lies in degrees of refinement and development, rather than being dependent upon innate talent or the workings of nature alone.[6]

Returning to the question raised at the beginning of this paper, Kant's definition of philosophy as *philosophizing* forces him to reject the idea of genius in science and philosophy. As discussed above, there are no rules or regulations to follow in fine arts, but merely the nature of the genius. Contrary to this, philosophy, according to Kant, is an activity where reason acts as legislation for cognition and action, providing us with rules and regulations to follow. Following the motto of enlightenment "dare to know," (*sapere aude*) Kant expected that the use of reason should not be limited to a small elite but should be open to all. Philosophy, as the advocate of the public use of reason,

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However, he explicitly referred to Copernicus's scientific revolution in cosmology as an instance of genius. Kant did not, however, explain why Copernicus qualifies as a genius while Newton does not (cf. Giordanetti, 1995, 414; Schlapp, 1901, 394).

[6] It appears that Kant's concept of genius hinges on the "learnability" of a discipline rather than on its capacity for "invention." While it is true that "invention" can be found in various disciplines, this does not align with Kant's definition of genius (cf. Giordanetti, 1995, 424–426).

should be accessible to every individual. One should have the autonomy to determine one's own will and action without intervention from authority, nor should one's will and action be subordinated to unlearnable artistic ideas of genius. Kant's exclusion of genius from science in his critical period stems from his conception of philosophy. He not only endorses the rational structure of scientific and philosophical cognition but also argues that philosophy as an activity should be in principle accessible to everyone. It is not merely that we should hope to promote our interest in science and philosophy, but these fields also play an important role in cultivating our practical wisdom and autonomy in public sphere (Williams, 2021, 927).

This same line of thought becomes evident when we shift our attention to the *pantheism controversy* involving Kant, Jacobi, and Wizenmann. Kant criticized Jacobi and his follower Wizenmann, who attacked and rejected reason and philosophy as the foundations of morality and religion in the context of this controversy. Jacobi argued that all attempts to ground reality in reason inevitably lead to *nihilism*. He and Wizenmann interpreted Kant's critical philosophy as no more than another version of Spinoza's pantheism, where existential reality is determined by mechanistic causality, thereby eliminating freedom entirely. As a remedy to this perceived *nihilism*, Jacobi and Wizenmann proposed the concept of the *salto mortale*, or a leap of faith, which requires grounding reality in faith rather than reason.

Kant's initial position on the controversy was ambivalent. In April 1786, he wrote a letter to his former student Marcus Herz, dismissing the pantheism controversy as "nothing serious; it is only an affected enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) of genius trying to make a name for itself" (AA 10:442–3). However, Kant soon reconsidered the implications of the controversy and changed his stance. Later that year, in October 1786, he published his essay *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* In this essay, Kant identified the dangers of endorsing the type of enthusiasm associated with genius, which rejected the authority of reason in favor of an irrationalism rooted in faith. He argued that such a position undermines human autonomy and implies political coercion. Kant remarked that while Jacobi and his followers might enjoy their "free flights of genius," this freedom ends the moment they deny the freedom of thought (AA 8:144).

Kant warned of the dire consequences of limiting access to truth to a select group, such as religious leaders, while rendering it inaccessible to the broader public. Such a scenario, he argued, would destroy the very foundations of enlightenment and the public use of reason. If we fail to recognize the importance of safeguarding the freedom to think, we not only render ourselves unworthy of freedom but also risk losing it entirely, thereby bringing misfortune to others as well (AA 8:146). Kant's unwavering belief in reason and its essential role in public sphere led him to reject the cult of genius, as it directly opposed the principles of enlightenment and autonomy.

4. Conclusion

Kant's views on genius are deeply intertwined with his broader philosophical beliefs. This paper has argued that Kant rejected the concept of genius in science and philosophy because he held that the capacity to think philosophically is not an exclusive gift but an ability that can be cultivated by anyone through diligence and

rational effort. Unlike the fine arts, which may require innate talent, philosophical knowledge, according to Kant, can be acquired through disciplined study and the systematic application of reason. Kant's commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment reflects his belief that all individuals possess the potential to use reason and think autonomously. By excluding genius from philosophy, Kant underscored his conviction that philosophical wisdom should be universally accessible, rather than restricted to a select few with exceptional natural abilities. This perspective reinforces his dedication to fostering a rational and enlightened society in which every individual has the opportunity to develop their understanding and autonomy.

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