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Reflections on Our Techno-Therapeutic Age

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13th Annual Jubilee Centre Conference: Virtuous Leadership and Character

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a. Individualism and the Loss of Community in the Therapeutic Age

It is no exaggeration to say that one of the greatest educators of character in contemporary society is the field of psychology (see Arthur *et al*, 2024). As Philip Rieff (1987) anticipated in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, psychotherapeutic care has become our culture's dominant approach to making sense of and managing our experience of the world. And yet for all its impact and cultural cache, psychology has not been especially well equipped to address the fundamental questions of human flourishing. Relying upon models of cognitive functioning, unquestioningly assuming the values of our neoliberal technocratic age, and prioritising adaptation and individual fulfilment over the life well lived, the discipline has contributed to the whittling down of our moral imagination, the narrowing of our understanding of personhood, and the continued atomization of an already individualistic society (Goodman and Clemente, 2024a).

To see this, one need only compare the moral order that governs our contemporary moment—confused and self-defeating as it may be—with the values and assumptions that oriented human striving in previous epochs. Aristotle (1999), for instance, was keenly aware of

the influence “a proper upbringing in moral conduct” had on both the individual and the community (1095b). And, while he valued the wellbeing of individual—“the attainment of the good for one man alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction” (1094a)—he understood that the individual is not the author of his own wellbeing and that human persons only flourish in relation to one another. Seeing friendship as “indispensable,” a good that “enhances our ability to think and to act” (1155a), Aristotle insisted that our notion of justice and even the civility of our politics depends upon our concern for the prosperity of one another (see 1130a and 1155a, respectively). Put simply, there is no good for the individual that is not entangled with the good of one’s neighbours and one’s community as well. Or, as Aristotle (1981) notes in the *Politics*, “the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole” (I.II).

Contrast this with the modern culture of self-creation and self-fulfillment at all costs. No one doubts that we are living in a time of profound disorientation. The western world in particular faces a crisis of identity and meaning the likes of which it has not had to reckon with since at least the First World War, perhaps longer. And, in spite of the fact that suffering persons now seek help from mental health clinicians at a rate that far outpaces any other means of intervention or support, the issues seem only to be getting worse. Couple this with the relentless advance of digital technology into every aspect of our lives and the age in which we find ourselves is rapidly becoming one defined by mental anguish, isolation, loneliness, and despair. Yet before we can ask what remedies might be available for those bearing the wounds of such maladies, we must first contend with the profound suffering wrought by the challenges we face. We must examine the symptoms and try to understand whence they come. For as the poet

proclaims, “where the danger is, grows the saving power also” (Hölderlin as quoted in Heidegger, 1977, p. 28) and if we desire health, we must first understand our present illness.

b. Unlimited Possibilities: Anxiety as a Symptom of the Techno-Therapeutic Age

One of the defining symptoms of our current cultural malaise is the staggering increase in anxiety across society, borne especially by children and adolescents, but palpable throughout. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), nearly a third of US adults have experienced at least one form of anxiety disorder at some point in their lives (Goodwin RD, et al, 2020). What is more, a recent meta-analysis of 29 studies published in JAMA Pediatrics revealed that as much as 20.5% of the youth population worldwide experiences anxiety symptoms; that number is up from about 11.6% in 2012 and it continues to climb (DeAngelis, 2022). Yet whether one considers such statistical analyses or simply reflects upon one’s own experiences living through this technological age, one will find it difficult to deny the listlessness, angst, and discontent that characterize so much of contemporary life.

Before we can assess what accounts for this sharp uptick in anxiety, however, we ought first to examine what we mean when we use the term. For, while psychological measurements and diagnostic manuals can help us to identify and treat those suffering from anxiety-related disorders, the concept of anxiety remains opaque. Why this is the case may have something to do with the fact that anxiety is incredibly commonplace. We tend not to recognize, let alone understand, the things we experience most. More than that, however, is the fact that the cause of one’s anxiety is often elusive. Anxiety has a knack of striking when things are going well (see

Clemente, 2023). In the midst of struggle and chaos, it is noticeably absent. But when the calamity subsides and the tension is resolved, only then does it rear its menacing head.

This perplexing attribute garnered the attention of the 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who devoted multiple works to unpacking anxiety, most notably his 1844 meditation on the link between anxiety and Christian dogmatics titled, appropriately, *The Concept of Anxiety*. For Kierkegaard, anxiety is intimately linked with self-reflection, our awareness that we exist as individuals, and our ability to critically examine ourselves. He tells us that anxiety as we know it is rooted in subjectivity; to attempt to speak of it objectively is to abstract away from the individual's experience when it is precisely the individual who suffers the slings of anxiety and it is the individual who must learn to bear it.

Subjective anxiety, Kierkegaard writes, "is the anxiety that is posited in the individual and is the consequence of sin" (1981, p. 56). For him, sin is not a moral category. It is rather a misalignment, an awareness that one is not living as one should, that, as Tolstoy (2012) writes, "All that you've lived and live by is a lie, a deception, concealing life and death from you" (p. 51). It is, according to one Kierkegaard scholar, the feeling that one's life is "meaningless," the "inability . . . to find a value, a purpose, a justification for [one's] existence," leaving one unable to act, unable to choose (Beauchard, 2022, p. 21). Such inaction, we will see, is one of the chief symptoms of anxiety, a state to which Kierkegaard believes we all are subject, which for him is a universal condition of human existence:

> Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single living human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something

> or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that, just as the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain (1983, p. 22).

This universal sickness of the spirit is, according to Kierkegaard, a consequence of the fact that human beings possess a capacity not found in other creatures. We are self-conscious. Our psyches are not simply directed outward at the world around us. We can pause and reflect back upon our behavior. We can evaluate ourselves.

In an age of therapeutic self-help and techno-fantasies of self-creation, when we are encouraged from our earliest youth to be whatever we want to be, to make ourselves and reinvent ourselves, to promote ourselves online and present ourselves as we wish to be seen to others, we are taught to exercise our faculty of self-reflection more than ever. This capacity is not without its benefits. Self-examination has rightly been lauded throughout the history of human thought. As Socrates famously notes in Plato's *Apology*, "the unexamined life is not worth living," and part of the job of today's psychotherapists is to help bring to consciousness past experiences that remain repressed and thus hidden from their patients' conscious lives. Yet for Kierkegaard, the benefits of self-reflection do not come without their drawbacks. To be self-aware, he insists, is to be responsible, to recognize oneself as being implicated in the lives—and thus the suffering—of others. "In this very moment [of anxiety], everything is changed, and freedom, when it again arises, sees that it is guilty" (1981, p. 61).

When we reflect upon ourselves, we often notice the ways we have failed to live up to that responsibility, the times we have shirked or even simply neglected the things we ought to

have done. Such responsibility, Kierkegaard says, comes from the fact that, as self-conscious beings, we recognize the freedom we have to choose between various possibilities. “A tree among trees, a cat among animals,” to use Camus’s (1991, p. 51) famous formulation, never reflects upon the fact that it could have acted differently. It does not look back and regret its choices. Nor does it anticipate an unrealized future and see the myriad possibilities that lie ahead of it. Human beings, on the other hand, do. For us, anxiety is an anxiety about what we have done (or failed to do) and what we might do (or fail to do). It is an anxiety about the fact that, as free beings, we live with an infinite number of possibilities before us and an infinite number of unrealized possibilities already behind us.

“In anxiety there is the selfish infinity of possibility,” Kierkegaard writes, which leads to a kind of “dizziness,” the “dizziness of freedom” (p. 61), the realization that we are always capable of choosing to live otherwise. And yet, that infinity clashes with the finite nature of human existence. Our possibilities are limited by what Freud might call “the reality principle.” Our lives are made up of the moments we actually experience, but our psyches are racked by possibilities that have never or will never come to fruition. This conflict is often unbearable, leading to a kind of despair that Kierkegaard says amounts to the desire not to be oneself or, worse still, “not to will to be a self” at all (1983, p. 52). This yearning “to be someone else, to wish for a new self” (p. 52) is a hallmark of contemporary life, though we might be hesitant to call it “despair.” Yet in an age when our technology offers the illusion that anything is possible, that our choices are not limited or inhibited by the reality of the human condition, and our mental health regime teaches us that we bear no responsibility for one another, that our primary job in life is to care for our own well-being (see Goodman and Clemente, 2024a), who can doubt that we wish to be anything other than the finite, codependent creatures we are? Who can claim that

we understand what it takes to feel comfortable being ourselves, let alone what it means to flourish as individuals and communities?

c. A Generation of Prince Hamlets: Anxiety as a Result of Authority Ill-Used

There is no denying that the assumptions that undergird contemporary life—assumptions predicated on a break from the past, from tradition, from authority (Clemente, 2024), assumptions that have given rise to our culture of self-help, self-creation, and ultimately the despair of self-inclosure (see Kierkegaard, 1983, pp. 63-67)—are illusions. As such, they have intensified the anxiety and crisis of meaning that have plagued the west for much of modernity. In the face of such suffering, a question arises: Where might those hoping to understand what it means to live a good life in the midst of a culture of anxiety and despair turn for direction? What does it take to not only flourish as individuals but build communities capable of cultivating flourishing among its members?

At last year's Jubilee Centre Conference on "Virtuous Leadership and Character," we presented a paper in which we considered how virtuous leaders can help their organizations to scale while remaining true to the ethical call not to lose sight of individual persons in pursuit of organizational growth. That topic has had us reflecting upon that nature of leadership and the pitfalls that come with asserting control instead of justly administering one's authority. An example may help to serve the point. I (Matt) recently had the misfortune of using *The Tragedy of Hamlet* as an example in my course on technology and subjectivity and discovering that, to my dismay, few students had ever seen, let alone read, the play. To remedy this affront, I cancelled the last month's worth of assignments, and we spent the end of the semester working

our way through a litany of plays by the Bard as well as a few notable works by other authors, including Calderón's underappreciated *Life Is a Dream* which, when read in light of the techno-phantasmagoria we currently live in, proffers profound insights. What struck me most about revisiting *Hamlet* in a class on the shaping influence technology has on the modern mind is how similar the protagonist is to my students, unable though they were to fulfill his dying request to "tell my story" (V.II). For while the play is about many things, the theme that resonated most with my undergraduates was the difficulty Hamlet faces in cultivating a sense of self, especially in a world full of pretense and falsification.

Listen, for instance, to Hamlet's assessment of the deceptiveness of the women around him and ask yourself if the same critique might not be made of the ways we misrepresent ourselves online: "God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another; you jig and amble and lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't—it hath made me mad" (III.I). There is a case to be made—as, indeed, Hamlet suggests—that the apparent insanity of the prince of Denmark is a direct response to the posturing of those with whom he lives, the dishonesty of his family and friends in the face of the tragic nature of human existence. Who among us hasn't felt frustrated with the hypocrisy we find on social media? Who hasn't, in the course of one's daily bombardment by advertisers, influencers, and imposters of every stripe, felt that one might be going a touch mad? And yet, if Hamlet's psychological suffering is at least partly attributable to the onslaught of deception that characterizes our relationships—both proximal and virtual—it is also the result of having been stunted by his parents' inability to puncture that veneer of unreality and teach him about the deeper truths of our fragile condition.

Elsewhere, we have written on the difficulty human beings have confronting our own mortality (Goodman and Clemente, 2024b). This, we suggested, helps to account for the proliferation of distractions occasioned by the pervasive use of digital technology in modern life. Such anxieties, however, are far from unique to our time, and before we relied upon the screen as a means of shielding us from the thoughts we'd rather not entertain, we devised other methods for doing so. While Shakespeare never gives us Hamlet's father in the flesh—we only ever meet the deceased king's apparition—there is a good deal of evidence that he, like us, was ill-prepared to meet his ultimate fate. Whatever it was that prevented him from setting his affairs in order before he died led the king to also neglect teaching his son how to cope with his eventual absence. This can be seen in everything from the way the prince idolatrizes his late father—comparing him to Hyperion and other ancient deities (III.IV)—to his paralysis in the face of his uncle Claudius's treason. It's as if, without the godlike authority of the king there to direct him, young Hamlet is completely lost, incapable of making a decision or knowing how to act.

Those of us who have people depending upon us, people whose well-being we care for more than our own, know the angst inherent in providing for others. No parent wants to imagine leaving his children behind, abandoning them to a life as cruel as it is cold. None of us like to think about what will happen in our absence, how our loved ones will fare when we are gone. Add to this the fact that King Hamlet was a king—that is, one accustomed to thinking of himself as an author of this world—and it is understandable why he seems to have neglected his paternal duty. None of us want to believe we are replaceable and no king lives to see his son on the throne. Still, as sympathetic as his plight may be, the problem facing King Hamlet—and the one facing us as well—is that some painful topics cannot be avoided, whether we are willing to

grapple with them or not. And worse still, there are some subjects that, when we choose to ignore them, provoke even greater suffering than they otherwise would.

In recent years, researchers have suggested that the mental health crisis being borne by today's youth may be attributable, at least in part, to the sharp decline in independent activity and unsupervised play among children (see Gray and Bjorklund, 2023). Put simply, parents today watch their children more closely and involve them in more structured, supervised activities than parents of previous generations. Along with a number of other contributing factors—from increased expectations around time spent on homework to the rise in need for afterschool care to the heightened prominence of organized sports—this uptick in supervision has arisen from a desire for increased safety and control. This, of course, makes sense. In a dangerous and oftentimes frightening world, we want our children to know that they can depend on us and that we will always be there to protect them. And yet, what happens when children who have grown up under the ever-watchful eyes of their parents find that they no longer have someone to look after them? How do young adults handle adversity when there is no parental hand to guide them through the challenges life sends their way? For Aristotle (1999), such maleducation leaves one ill equipped to understand the aims and expectations of adult life (1095a).

I (Matt) noted above the dismay I felt to discover that my students had never read *the* masterpiece of the western tradition. *Really?* I thought. *None of you have read Hamlet?* In some ways, however, discovering this lack of exposure to readings that may have proved too difficult was not so surprising. Those of us who teach at the collegiate level have seen time and again the anxiety and disorientation our students feel when they are met with expectations that exceed their previous experiences and can no longer fall back on the parental safety net. For an increased number of young adults, the situation becomes overwhelming. They have grown accustomed to

believing that there will always be an authority figure there to guide them. In its absence, they feel like Prince Hamlet, adrift, alone, and incapable of making the right decision.

This, of course, is not a radically new phenomenon. The transition from infancy to youth to adulthood has always involved the movement from utter dependence to greater degrees of self-reliance and autonomy. It is the job of parents, however, to facilitate this growth by preparing their children for the day when they will need to live without them, even if they hope that that day is reserved for a far-off future. Failing to do so stunts one's offspring by stifling their confidence and implicitly teaching them that they cannot overcome challenges on their own. Such messages—destructive as they may be—are rarely communicated directly. Rather, they are suggested by parents' behavior and the parameters those parents place upon the behavior of their kids. Worse still, they impact not only children's self-understanding, but parents' as well. Reinforcing the need many parents feel to be needed, this overemphasis on safety and supervision subtly suggests that their kids cannot survive without them. King Hamlet must be around, otherwise Prince Hamlet will be lost.

That this insistence upon one's own necessity masks a deeper anxiety about the fact that one will eventually cease to exist is not entirely obvious. On the surface, it seems as though parents' fixation with safety and supervision arises out of an abundance of caution for their children's well-being. And yet, the light is given to the lie when we see the myriad ways we as a society refuse to allow our children to grow up. Is it not the case that in recent decades our schools, our civic institutions, and even our homes have constructed various methods for keeping future generations dependent well into adulthood? Is it not the case that our culture continues to produce actors and athletes and aging politicians who refuse to pass the baton and instead insist upon staying in the limelight well past their prime? Naturally, none of us want to die. None

wants to think of his own death. But the pernicious refusal to contemplate mortality is at least partially responsible for our cultivation of a society that is becoming less capable of asking what it means to flourish and less confident that it can fulfill the requirements flourishing demands.

d. Literature, Laughter, and Love: Flourishing in the Face of Anxiety

"The thought of suicide," Nietzsche (1989) quips, "is a powerful comfort: it helps one through many a dreadful night" (p. 91). Taking one's own life is, of course, no laughing matter and few if any of us can say that our lives have not been touched in some profound and tragic way by the problem of suicide. Yet to give the philosopher his due, the wisdom of the aphorism resides in this—it recognizes that an attraction to death is a symptom, a sign of a deeper malady hounding its sufferer day and night. It reveals, as one recent literary theorist puts it, "that the meaninglessness of [one's] existence is too much to bear" and that one can find no remedy for it, no method by which to pursue a more meaningful life (Beauchard, 2022, p. 70). Self-slaughter is a desperate act, a last-ditch attempt to escape a life that has become unlivable or no longer worth living. What truly stands behind it is, as Camus (1991) rightly notes, an inviolable mystery: "An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart . . . The man himself is ignorant of it" (p. 4). Who can claim to glean one's true motives, who see into the secret recesses of another human being's soul?

Yet there can be no doubt that anxiety and the despair it gives rise to often lead to suicidal thoughts. And if, as our foregoing discussion suggests, we live in a culture built upon values that necessarily facilitate anxiety and offer few resources for confronting it, then it makes sense why suicide continues to be one of the leading causes of death in the western world. Such

despondency, we have said, evinces not so much a dissatisfaction with life as a desire to escape the burden of being oneself. When we despair, we long for life to be different and feel hopeless about the prospects of it ever being so. We no longer wish to be the people we are and cannot envision finding meaning or purpose in our lives. If this is the crisis that many in our society currently face, what can we say to them about human flourishing? How can meaning be sought in the midst of turmoil? How can one bear the strain of anxiety with dignity, courage, purpose, and grace?

In order to answer this, it may be helpful to meditate on a time when all of us faced similar feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and despair. Walking through crowded stores, eating in bustling restaurants, attending concerts and conferences such as this no longer incites the kind of surreal feelings many of us experienced upon returning to "normal" life in the wake of the global pandemic. There was a time, however, when such activities were unthinkable, when no one knew how the virus spread or who was most at risk, when families were prevented from seeing one another, and our churches, mosques, and synagogues were all boarded up. Try to remember those early days, the uncertainty, the anxiety, the dread. Now ask yourself: What did it mean to flourish at a time like that? What did our conception of the good life look like when those activities deemed "nonessential" came to a stop? How were we supposed to prosper when survival had become society's dominant value and all our typical markers of a good life had come to an abrupt halt?

Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program lists five central domains for evaluating human flourishing: 1. happiness and life satisfaction, 2. physical and mental health, 3. meaning and purpose, 4. character and virtue, 5. close social relationships (VanderWeele, 2017). There is no doubt that these are fundamental aspects of a life well lived. In the early months of

2020, however, each of these facets of flourishing was upended. Depression, anxiety, and discontent were rampant. We were discouraged from leaving our homes and told to put our physical and mental well-being on pause. Our lives were adrift, with no clear path forward and no certainty about the future. We were cut off from our communities and our ability to express our various talents and virtues were severely inhibited. In the midst of such peril, hope easily gives way to despair and the belief that one can live a rich, fulfilling life wanes. What is one to do?

For Aristotle (1999), it is at just such moments of moral and existential opacity that one needs exemplars who can model how to live—and perhaps even flourish—through crises. At the best of times, these role models will be found in our families, workplaces, churches, and local communities; they will be those who, like Aristotle himself, show us that justice is a fundamentally other-oriented virtue (1129b) and that the good life cannot be fully attained if one is not willing to direct one's actions toward "what is of advantage to others" (1130a). In times of anxiety, despair, and isolation, however, we may need to seek them in history, literature, and works of art. There we often meet individuals who underwent trials that resonate with our own, those who bore the slings of fortune with perseverance and grace. It is no accident that Albert Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague* became an international bestseller in the summer of 2020; his protagonist Dr. Rieux exemplifies the courage, wisdom, and love it takes to care for the sick and dying and to do so while keeping one's humanity intact. Nor should it surprise us that works of fiction can function in this way, that literature and art play an essential role in the cultivation of a good life.

In a recent letter on the literary imagination and spiritual formation, Pope Francis (2024) reflects on "the value of reading novels and poems as part of one's path to personal maturity."

Emphasizing literature's ability to "open up new interior spaces," to free us from "our present unremitting exposure to social media, mobile phones, and other devices," Francis insists that reading "helps us to avoid becoming trapped by a few obsessive thoughts that can stand in the way of our personal growth." It does so by reminding us that life as we experience it today is not the totality of existence, that circumstances change and that those who have cultivated resilient characters can—and often do—live meaningful lives even in the most harrowing of situations. More than that, it allows us to transcend ourselves, to lose ourselves in a good book and find therein lessons on the art of living from those who have thought deeply about what it means to live well. As C.S. Lewis (2012) notes, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do" (p.89).

To become more oneself—this indeed is the essence of what it means to live a good life. Contrary to despair as defined by Kierkegaard—the kind of despair that, as Aristotle notes (1999, 1138a) hurts not only the individual but the entire community—human flourishing involves being who we truly are, who we were made to be, even in the face of the most harrowing of circumstances. We in modern society spend so much time refusing to accept ourselves in our present condition, insisting that we will only be happy once we have attained our desired version of ourselves. Our therapeutic culture encourages us to envision the selves we want to be and our ever-developing technological capabilities teaches us to believe that we are boundless.

The truth, of course, is that the cause of our discontent is the desire to be different from who we are in the first place, the refusal to lovingly dwell in our lives with and for one another. Longing to not be ourselves, we flee into idealized images of who we would like to be but will never actually become. For Kierkegaard, despair is the despair we feel over this discordance, the

agony of not wanting to be oneself, of desiring to be a phantom, an imaginary vision of someone else. It is the desire to escape oneself or to not be a self at all, to be freed from the frailty and dependence of the human condition.

In the novel *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, the character Kirilov views suicide as a means of overcoming his fear of death. Were he able to walk to the edge and then take that final fatal step beyond it, he says, he would transcend his anxiety and annihilate the weakness inherent in his miserable existence. Kierkegaard disagrees. For him, the task of human life—the hard yet not impossible lot that we have been given—is to find a means of affirming life's goodness without denying its struggles. That, for him, is what it means to flourish. Despair, by Kierkegaard's reckoning, is another name for nihilism which Nietzsche spent his life fighting against. It is the insistence that life has no meaning and is therefore expungeable, a thing to be fled from or wiped out. In that way, it is not merely a precursor to suicide but an actual attempt, albeit in the mind, to negate one's existence. It is a "No" to life, an unwillingness to accept oneself as one is. Such feelings are not always fully conscious, but they impact those who suffer from despair all the same. What then is one to do?

An example might be gleaned from some of the thinkers with whom we have been dealing. They are, without question, eccentric to the point of folly. Kierkegaard, for instance, authored multiple works under various names, pseudonymously citing his own writing in order to attack and critique it. Nietzsche's intellectual autobiography (1989b) consists of a series of chapters with hilariously preposterous titles such as "Why I am So Wise," "Why I am So Clever," and "Why I Write Such Good Books." And Dostoevsky couldn't resist naming his most objectionable characters after himself—in *Demons*, a vile murderer bears his first name and in *The Brothers Karamazov* he lends it to the brothers' roguish father. Is such literary tomfoolery a

bit absurd? Perhaps. And yet finding a way to laugh at ourselves, to not take ourselves so seriously, to see the comic as ever bound to the tragic nature of human existence, can enable us to confront our despair by putting our tongues out at it. Or, if we are not quite capable of that kind of levity, then we can at least appreciate the authors who, like Aristotle, offer us visions of a life worth living.

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