

HERCULEAN “MYTH” ASPECTS OF ATHLETICS*

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Abstract. The “mythological” interpretation of athletics reveals how far the phenomenon of sporting achievement is embedded in cultural fiction and argues that sporting contests do symbolize some culturally significant and “mythical” functions which provide reasons for the attraction and fascination of sport from the viewpoint of the athlete as well as the spectator. Modern “myths” are real – socially real – in some sense, although secular in make-up. Since “myths” and “mythical” functions do impinge on attitudes and social as well as individual basic orientations, it is important for the philosophy of sport to develop further the “mythological” interpretation of athletics.

Key words: sportive achievement, “mythological” interpretation of athletics, top-level athletics, mythical ideal, ideal-type.

A “Mythological” Interpretation of the Fascination with Top Level Sport

An aesthetic interpretation of athletics was outlined by Roland Barthes (1964). From the spectator’s viewpoint, sports contests would represent a modern variant of dramatic struggles between the heroic roles of an almost archetypal symbolic force. This reception by the public of sport encounters encompasses a kind of epic, replete and emotionally laden with interconnections of social unification, partisanship, and personal identification. The spectator experiences the sport contest as a vicarious participant similar to the way he views a drama on the stage. Barthes would primarily stress the “mythical” significance of sports contests for the spectators.

He referred to the *Tour de France* and its reception by the public as a dramatic epic. The heroes of the epic are the cyclists. But they are reduced to their “characteristic essences,” the “uncertain conflict” of which is the subject of the epic – staged in a Homeric landscape, fought by stylized “supermen” escorted and supported by their vassals. In their roles, the men are matched against each other and against nature. Elements, roles, landscapes are personified, the contestants are somehow “naturalized,” styled as quasi-natural forces or elements succumbing to natural forces in a world where only four movements are allowed: “To lead, to pursue, to forge ahead, to fall back” (Barthes 1964, pp. 118, 115).

Also Magnane interprets the “modern myths of sports” as a “complete projection system” to explain the world and vicariously to identify oneself with the values of an “unofficial” culture. Estranged from the elusive “official culture,” the average man would search for elements of another culture in sports and in the mass media. Thus, sporting

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events become a special “set of signs.” In this “other culture,” this “sporting mythology” he would somehow experience a sort of “indemnity” for the real disadvantages of fate, find some compensation and confidence. Thus, the “sporting mythology” would open an “access to ontology” (Magnane 1964, pp. 109f.).

These metaphoric episodes, conveying a relatively rough compensation thesis about the indemnity function of vicarious sports experiences, are in need of further elaboration and more detailed analysis. The efficacy of myths cannot be reduced to only one unique compensation function. Magnane’s own statement, which he did not analyze in any detail, states that sporting myths are “a set of signs” by which the sportive man explains how the world operates (ibid., p. 97). His single reference to the cathartic function in the sense of theory of ancient theatre could have figured as the point of departure for a more differentiated analysis¹. The drama of modern day athletic sport displays effects analogous to the theatre of antiquity, although starting from a clearly different, non-religious, basic situation. Being “carried away” relieves the compassionate and enthusiastic adherent of other social and personal problems by vicariously involving him in archetypical struggles between opposing roles within restricted frames of reference. The sport role symbolically reflect his own problem situation or, at least, some of his problems of tension, stress, anxiety, the dynamics of winning and losing, etc.

The achievement principle in sport is an ideal *abstraction*, a “pure” utopian construction of achievement behaviour norms that are scarcely to be found in pure form in the world of labour. This sporting achievement principle may be viewed as representing, relatively speaking, the “pure essence” of achievement behaviour, and its standardization and valuation occur through symbolic incarnation, within a realm of exemplification which renders a possibility of strict measurement, visibility, and thus of simple understanding. On the other hand, this abstraction is not earned to an extreme whereby we would lose sight of the correlations, similarities, or analogies of this stylized behaviour model, to corresponding ones in everyday life. Similarities are present, visibly presented, and maintained to such a degree that the identification of the spectator with his own aims and patterns of behaviour is assured, especially since he identifies with the sporting representatives of the group. Therefore, in addition to the “character essences” (Barthes), that is, the “mythical” stylizing of roles, there are similarly stylized, abstract “purified” patterns of *behaviour* to be found in sport which might be called “interactional essences” or pure ideal norms of role interaction in the fighting confrontation model. They find their archetypical-“mythical” expressions in the sports contests of top-level athletics. That model of an “achieving society” in this “mythical” and ideal-typical pattern, (i.e. after Max Weber a pointed, selectively restricted, and yet visible, dynamic incarnation), might be correctly understood as a “mythological” interpretation.

¹ However, Aristotle’s theory about the cathartic effect of tragedy does not deal with the compensation of everyday frustration. According to Aristotle, the drama reconstructs the impersonal myths of gods. It displays religious significance and provides catharsis as a purification of the spectator from an excessive amount of fear and compassion. The catharsis theory, however, can be analogously exemplified with respect to sport by interpreting sport as a locus for symbolic, “mythological” role confrontation and dramatic staging.

Magnane does not care about defining the term 'myth' or 'mythology' at all. He implicitly refers to the characteristic features of "myths," that is, culturally-historically developed fictional models constituting and conveying sense and meaning by staying with typical examples and incarnation within visible models and images as well as by rendering projections and the explanatory power of this semiological system. In this analysis, 'myth' is understood to mean neither a comprehensive *Weltanschauung* ("world view") in images nor an ideological system of belief statements which serve cognitively to justify empirical results or normative convictions. Instead, 'myth' here designates a model symbolizing normative designs, projections, and valuations and how they have developed historically in the cultural tradition. The symbolization is represented in exemplifying patterned situations and typically evidenced by dramatic staging of these familiar structures. Myths disclose and constitute sense and significance of the less familiar phenomena. While ideologies serve cognitively to interpret self and the world, myths, by the way of example or exemplification, would a *normative* constitution of meaning and ideal images mostly engender in, typically, visualized instantiation. Myths in this sense, and in contrast to Barthes' (1964, pp. 88 ff.) conception, figure less in closed and hierarchical systems of statements than they do in their stylizing, selective and sense-constituting functions. These might be called the "*mythical functions*" of exemplified action patterns. However, we might follow Barthes in that the consumer of a myth interprets sense composition in a causal-naturalistic way understanding 'meaning' "as a system of facts": "Myth is understood as a system of facts, although it represents only a semiological system", that is, a system which constitutes and mediates significance, sense, and meaning, (ibid., p. 115).

All that has been said about the symbolic-mythical function should not be misinterpreted to mean that sport truly and isomorphically mirrors the principles according to which an industrial society and an "achieving society" is structured. The stating of empirical results about social behaviour in any case has little to do with this "mythological" interpretation.

"Sport is a microcosm" and "mirror of social processes," stated VanderZwaag (1972). His thesis that the significance of sport for the individual is derived from interpretations and projections of social processes is clearly relevant for the sport consumer. More specifically, sport as a symbolic microcosmic representation of archetypical role dynamics functions as a modern "myth"; only this additional aspect, refining the microcosm thesis on a semantic level seems able to explain the fascination of competitive athletics. It is easily compatible with the fact that roles are reduced to the simplest confrontations. Opposition, struggle, in-group, out-group, victory or defeat, representing all-or-nothing or yes-no-outcomes – the human tendency to establish and rely on dichotomies and building in-groups against outsiders, clearly denotes an articulation field which renders a dramatic "mythical" incarnation in visible forms.

The thesis about sport as a microcosm of social processes, if understood literally, seems to place too much emphasis on representation while it concentrates on a mapping function. It also neglects the normative character of the model, the "mythical," the archetypical, and the abstractive element. The microcosm hypothesis is descriptive, empirical, and social scientific – and as such, is too general and vague. A philosophical

interpretation cannot be totally resolved in an empirical, scientific description or explanation. Sporting life is not only normal life in a nutshell; it does not represent the focus of everyday existence. Sporting life represents a model, but the model is in part an ideal model of a pointed and contrasting life featuring some essential traits and dreams in “mythical” symbolization and exaltation. Sport as a “mythical” model of symbolized, competitive role behaviour is governed by archetypical norms. From the spectators’ point of view, this “mythological” interpretation may provide a valuable partial explanation, or at least a plausible illustration of the fascination of top-level athletics. Projections, worlds of symbols, relative detachment from daily life, microcosm, identification, and dramatic staging all concur in the above, “mythological” interpretation and may serve to explain the peculiar position of athletics between usual behaviour and abstract ideal patterns. Thus, the “mythological” encompasses the somewhat modified microcosm thesis in a meaningful manner.

A “Mythological” Interpretation of the Athlete’s Role

The “mythical function” and interpretation of this sport phenomenon developed thus far refer only to the reception of sport contests by the spectators. The athlete as the agent has been neglected in this interpretation. Both Barthes and Magnane deal only with the sports consumer and his tendency to “mystify” the champion as a kind of semigod. A “mythological” interpretation of sport actions *from an actor’s perspective* was not designed nor performed by either Barthes or by Magnane. Nonetheless, such an interpretation can be developed in connection with the previously outlined “mythical function” for the sports consumer.

Behaviour, motivations, needs, and valuations by the spectator and sport consumer, as significant as they may be for any understanding of top-level athletics from a quantitative and theoretical point of view, cannot provide the only basis for a philosophical interpretation of the social realm of sport. Although the top athlete tends to orient his actions toward some aspects of the public response, his action cannot be explained simply by taking into consideration his orientation towards an audience. His behaviour cannot be completely resolved in such social categories as an adaptation to social expectations of achievement, the producer on the “achievement market,” or the internalization of the collective achievement principle, as some social critics of sport have tried to do. Furthermore, man, as a cultural and symbolic being trying to achieve an active constitution of self, is dependent not only on the satisfaction of biological needs. Even biological needs are overridden by cultural rituals and habits which cultivate a way of satisfaction. Man strives to materialize abstract cultural goals, lives up to fictitious values, and abides by normative conventional rules in order to accomplish self-determination and realization, self-differentiation, and self-confirmation. This self-affirmation need not be a conscious, manifest goal at all. Sport achievements which are institutionalized and valued within their proper cultural framework present a particularly attractive medium of demonstrative individualization, self-development, and self-confirmation for younger men with reference to goals and value patterns which are emotionally approved in the culture. Athletics proffer an opportunity for distinction in an otherwise predominantly conforming society – an opportunity which may emphasize individualistic

values². Weiss’ interpretation of top-level athletics as the “concern for excellence” and the desire to excel through bodily action or through the body, gains its relevance and actuality in this connection (1969, p. 3 et passim). This ideal-typical interpretation of the athlete as an incarnation of the man who strives for personal distinction is based on the values of Western civilization. There is no evidence that these motivations and values are universals. Cultural historical roots, e.g., the Greek orientation to ideals of *agon*, the Christian high valuation of the individual, of individual life and fate including the Protestant ethic of self-confirmation, asceticism, inner-world orientation, and activism as Max Weber (1905) had so cogently stressed, are alternate motivations.

Insofar as the athlete strives for ever-improving traits and achievements in athletic performances, he certainly is impregnated by *cultural* factors. The individual, nevertheless, can and may use this cultural challenge in order to constitute and document his uniqueness or peculiarity by personal feats and accomplishments, e.g., by sporting achievements. This is true regarding his self-assessment as well as his regard for his social status. The aspect of self-judgment can be separated only analytically from social assessment. In order to gain self-realization and self-assessment, *social* comparing in the sense of self-classification and social competition seems to be indispensable within the framework of the Western cultural tradition. The guiding norms and principles of athletic behaviour, and the establishment of goals can be interpreted as being reduced to “essential,” “pure” idealized patterns, or quasi-abstract contents – the achievement principle, the competition principle, and the equality principle. The latter simply means equality of opportunity. These guiding norms are represented and incarnated in sports contests in an almost ideal-typical, pure, and relatively independent model of realization which certainly has social significance in affecting attitudinal and social orientations.

Although seemingly totally individualistic, even Weiss’ interpretation leaves some space for supplementary *social*-philosophical analysis – not only in selecting and institutionalizing criteria and action patterns or in orienting achievement comparisons to competition, but also in the thesis that the athlete must be an ideal incarnation of what man is or man can be through his body. What can be achieved represents a fascinating plea, and request for almost everyone. This normative ideal image of excellence can be seen as constituting a kind of plea which is designed for *social* influence and interaction. In reference to Weiss’ interpretation, man as a stance-taking, acting, and valuing being cannot fully ignore the artistic, perfect sport movements in their successions of dynamic tension and release. Sporting action provides a normative image which includes a motor and visual appeal. Weiss’ final metaphysical excursus has to be recalled. Using his freedom with maximum effect, the athlete faces total “actuality.” In unification and identification with his body, he is the incarnation of those laws which govern the operation of the perfect, although mortal, body. Therefore, the ideal athlete – “one with

² One might object that a cult of the individual is superfluous and useless and does not justify the remarkable social expenditures devoted to such institutions as sports. This objection, however, is short-sighted. At first, the concern throughout is with a *social* institution meeting social demands and social requirements of integration, symbolization and “mythical” functions. Furthermore, cultural and social interconnections always materialize via individual actions within institutionalized social frameworks.

those laws” – embodies and displays, in a time-bound limited instantiation, a super-individual and super-temporal “eternal reality” in “co-presence” of “matter” and its “meaning.” The ideal athlete represents mankind in the endeavour to achieve maximal results. He would become a part of “eternal reality” somehow symbolically escaping the “remorseless flux of time.” The athlete is “sport incarnated, sport instantiated, sport located for the moment” and thus a prominent incarnation of man and his uniqueness in his striving for eternity (Weiss 1969, pp. 243ff.).

If one does not pay too much attention to the Platonistic essentialism in this philosophy of eternity, it might be useful to state that the reference to actuality may present the link necessary to integrate Weiss’ views with an existential-philosophical interpretation. More importantly for our argument, the above mentioned eternal reality can only be a *symbolic* one. No eternal laws of nature render the athlete himself “eternal.” His example would instantiate a symbolic fiction which can be held meaningful only as a part of an immaterial cultural system. As a *cultural* idea, it is an incarnation of a norm, which obtains a super-individual significance. It is only in this manner that Weiss is able legitimately to argue that the athlete represents mankind in its maximum endeavour to achieve. The athlete incorporates a “*mythical ideal*”. Is he, then, a Hercules or a Prometheus, or sometimes even a Narcissus? The ideal of cultural achievement beyond the requirements of survival and everyday affairs somehow makes man the culturally creative, spiritual, intellectual, and symbolic being he is. By extending the lines of Weiss’ interpretation, the athlete can be interpreted as representing a “myth,” instantiating a sort of “mythical” figure of a Herculean-Promethean kind; he is a *cultural symbol*, a man capable of extraordinary feats which can only be accomplished by complete devotion.

By implication, Weiss’ metaphysics of top level athletics and achievements also leads both to the interpretation that sport is a pointed representation of a “mythical” model of symbolized, archetypical competition in which achieving behaviour is governed by ideal-typical norms, staged and instantiated in visible dynamic forms. Although Weiss, in his analysis of the athlete, refers only to the achievement capacity of the individual without extending his interpretation to the mentioned “mythological” one, this variation could be easily and harmoniously attached to his analysis. Weiss reduces too individualistically and abstractly what one might perhaps, albeit misleading, call the “pure mythical essence.” He refers exclusively to the pure personal striving for achievement and excellence in itself. He abstracts from the social modelling situation only in the structure of which, and by the impregnation of which, achievements can be accomplished and compared with each other. The integration of the phenomena of sporting achievement with the ideal-typical social constellation of sport contests, and the culturally developed interpretations, might diminish some of the abstractness, individualistic restriction, and isolation of this interpretation.

The “mythological” interpretation was originally developed as an aspect of the spectator’s fascination. It can also be based on an interpretation of the role and function of the athlete himself. Throughout, both interpretations make sense solely and in combination, both of them being partial aspects within the philosophical approach. The social as well as the individual lead to the same model, a model which renders a necessary connection between *social* philosophical and *individualistic* philosophical

analyses. From the perspective of an ideal-typical understanding of the athlete's role, different traditional one-factor analyses in the philosophy of sport are also easily arranged around certain core interpretations without a single one of them explaining all phenomena of sport from an actor's point of view. This multifactorial and multifunctional interpretation of sport unites the social philosophical perspectives and the individualistic ones. Partial interpretations are relativized, united, and interlaced. Most differences are reduced to differences of aspect and emphasis. Furthermore, the pluralistic and multifactorial approach allows for a relatively bold and new "*metaphysical*" thesis, namely a cultural-philosophical interpretation of sport as a modern staging of a kind of "myth," a dramatic visibly instantiated interplay of competitive and archetypical roles, behaviour patterns and normative principles.

The "mythological" interpretation presented has yet to be applied to specific sport disciplines in detail. Further differentiations and modifications of a pluralistic interpretation of sport in general have to be elaborated. A single interpretation will always be a selective and ideal-typical one. To be sure, there are characteristic differences between sport disciplines corresponding to different types of basic sport situations, probably implying modifications within the "mythological" interpretation itself. Such typical and essential structural differences are to be found between team sports and individual disciplines; between sports requiring and displaying speed and those kinds which rely purely on bodily strength; between endurance contests and rhythmic-aesthetic performances; between disciplines cultivating skill and control of the body as well as accuracy of movement and those consisting of bodily contact and encounter of man against man; between sports movements coordinating exactness and finely structured phases in detail and those consisting of mastering a strange medium such as water or air and their respective resistances; between sports that upgrade equipment to a degree much closer to perfection and those dispensing with equipment and also with the standardization of the environment which we have in a sporting facility as e.g., in cross-country and orientation running. Between sports where the athlete sits in or on a vehicle like a boat or bicycle and those relying on well-exercised cooperation with an animal, for instance a horse; between sports of conquest of nature, such as mountaineering, which are devoted to the confrontation with and mastering of challenges of nature, and those requiring the mastering of highly artificial equipment, such as shooting; between team sports where the overall score is gained by an addition of points referring to single achievements or those where only a specific transmission event is conducted by the coordination of team members, as in relay running, and those genuine team sports where the overall performance is established by an immediate addition and/or coordination of forces of the respective members, such as rowing, or where an overall structure of the game is conducted by interaction of special role-holders who make a social network as, for instance, in ball games.

The multiplicity of situations, action patterns, goals and tasks, value aspects, and standardizations is remarkable and far from being exhausted by the previously mentioned list. The attractiveness and fascination of each unique sport depends also on its specific characteristics as perceived by both the athletes and the spectators. Even the symbolic-"mythological" interpretation is narrowly connected with such specifics. One might

recall the opposition of nature when the mountaineers are challenged by a storm – a symbolic drama against ruthless nature, combined with some attraction of impending existential “boundary situations” of utmost exposure and impending danger. By contradistinction, in what time might a man run a certain distance under standardized conditions of a carefully prepared artificial track? Not even this fascination of speed can be fully explained in a rational way without reference to some symbolic “mythical” basic situation of autonomic and mobile man.

Weiss would maintain that some laws of nature are revealed in athletic records indicating “what man really is.” According to that view, top level athletics and records render some tentative answers to this Kantian question. While this may be true, it probably has less to do with natural laws than with symbolically modelled, “mythical” situations and challenges of man which are, although based on natural conditions, culturally impregnated and do not refer only to his endangered situation within nature, but also to the basic patterns of intra-specific group confrontations – that is, socially structured situations. Although a compulsion to confront nature remains, it is then over-laid by a symbolically *interpreted* cultural model. Toynbee’s idea of challenging the “cultural being” by natural as well as social conditions has some partial relevance here, even in artificially established and culturally modified Weiss would maintain that some laws of nature are revealed in athletic records indicating “what man really is.” According to that view, top level athletics and records render some tentative answers to this Kantian question. While this may be true, it probably has less to do with natural laws than with symbolically modelled, “mythical” situations and challenges of man which are, although based on natural conditions, culturally impregnated and do not refer only to his endangered situation within nature, but also to the basic patterns of intra-specific group confrontations – that is, socially structured situations. Although a compulsion to confront nature remains, it is then over-laid by a symbolically interpreted cultural model. Toynbee’s idea of challenging the “cultural being” by natural as well as social conditions has some partial relevance here, even in artificially established and culturally modified.

Some Similarities to “Myths” of Technology

Where is the place of the athlete between Hercules and Prometheus? Prometheus allegedly brought fire and culture to man. Sometimes Prometheus is interpreted as a mythical figure of technology and man’s reigning over nature. The link which bridges the gap between a philosophy of technology and philosophy of athletics is still missing. Connecting these subject matters of philosophical interpretation by such a link, or at least by an analogy, is expected to provide fruitful stimulations for both realms. The desire and motivation to extend the frontiers, to cope with challenging risks and adventure in a rationalized and standardized form is deeply characteristic for both phenomena, technology as well as sport.

It is not surprising that the “sporting myth” with its specific tradition and development has progressed along with Western civilization. The dream of reigning over nature by sheer will power and rationality, controlling and increasing vitality, represents a certain power motive which is then transferred to role interactions between men. There is also a rationally controlled comparison of strength, or other sporting capacities, in

confrontation with an opponent who is to be overwhelmed, without a serious dependence on power domination and submission existing between two partners or teams. In sport, this actuality and this rational control engender a decrease in seriousness and power dependence. This points to a primary characteristic difference with technology; all the more reason why analogies and similarities as well as characteristic differences and interconnections between technology and sports should be analyzed in the future. Such characteristic differences do exist and should not be minimized by looking for analogies and interconnections. A differentiated analysis has to reveal both commonalities and differences.

Philosophical interpretations of sport as well as of technology along these lines may indicate that "mythological" interpretation and "mythical" functions are not outdated models of a romantic past. In secular form, although mostly hidden, they continue to be effective. The "myth" of technological power over nature and of permanent technological progress certainly represents an essential motivation pattern of Western culture without which, for example, the expenditure for space programs would hardly be understood. The "peaceful" competition of the super powers in space can also be understood as motivated by a common "myth." It is illusionary and utopian to try to abolish or to suppress this Western ideology. For the analogous "myth" of sport, then, intriguing similarities to some specific variants of the technological "myth" can be stated, although fortunately without the immediate urgency and pressure encountered in technological innovation. Sporting achievements might be compared to space adventures, particularly since the existence of mankind is not dependent on either one. (To travel to another star is another cultural "mythical" dream of mankind.) The analogies referring to top-level athletics, which fortunately are not as expensive as spacecraft launching and space expeditions, seem to be found near at hand. The "technological age" is far from being as rational as it pretends to be. Apparently, it needs its own secular "myths." Top-level athletics undoubtedly have to be mentioned along with these.

Regarding these parallels and analogies, it is not surprising that the new social criticism of technology and technocracy and the new cultural criticism of sport converge in the criticism of achievement motivation, achievement principle, and achievement behaviour. Technocracy may be understood as total dominance of technological processes or mechanization and as a trend, by technical and organizational means and by ruling experts, to subdue human factors (see Lenk 1972, 1973). Are athletes "technocratic beings" or technocratically manipulated? There is no space to discuss these intriguing problems here. However, with respect to the fashionable social criticism it can be stated that although sports are predominately conservative and technocratically organized and administered today, the actions and the intentions of top athletes are neither necessarily so conservative nor technocratic in themselves. Does not the athlete take risks to blaze new frontiers of human achievement behaviour?

This can never be done by exclusively emphasizing methods, techniques, and procedural requirements; it is achieved by deep personal commitment and devotion. The achieving athlete necessarily displays extraordinary human endeavour and total involvement which cannot be technocratically induced. Herculean-Promethean "myths" as ideal patterns pertaining to human performance exclude conservatism. While it is true that the

system of official power elites in sport definitely is in need of a reform, the athlete himself is, at least ideally, though not necessarily individually, beyond the scope of this social criticism.

Concluding Remarks

Somehow, risk-taking in technological as well as intellectual endeavours and art design and in philosophy is comparable to venturing in sport. This interpretation reveals how far the seemingly everyday phenomenon of sporting achievement is embedded in cultural fiction and argues that sporting contests do symbolize some culturally significant and “mythical” functions which provide reasons for the attraction and fascination of sport from the viewpoint of the athlete as well as the spectator. Despite its tentativeness and simplicity, the “mythological” interpretation may turn out to be very realistic. Stating a “mythological” interpretation does not in itself mean that one subscribes to the “myth.” Modern “myths” are real – socially real – in some sense, although secular in make-up. Philosophy, among its other tasks, has to analyze the content, scope, prerequisites and implications of such “myths.” Since “myths” and “mythical” functions do impinge on attitudes and social as well as individual basic orientations, it is important for the philosophy of sport to develop further the “mythological” interpretation of athletics especially since the social significance of top-level sport in mass media societies is growing even larger.

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