

Creating a materialistic psychology – sources and influence of Spinoza in Vygotsky's works

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Abstract

This study focuses on the sources and influence of Spinoza in some Vygotsky's works, with regard to the creation of a materialist psychology based on Marxism. Connecting psychology to other fields of knowledge, it discusses references to Spinoza done by Vygotsky in the context of the latter's argumentative style. I argue that his attitude toward Spinoza aimed at a critical appropriation. Furthermore, the article outlines the influence of Engels, Plekhanov and Deborin on Vygotskian thought and discusses their interpretations of Spinoza's work as materialistic and deterministic. Finally, the paper assumes the resemblance of Vygotsky with respect to the Plekhanovist trend, yet fed by a revolutionary zeitgeist which pushed him towards a critique of dualist psychologies, rejecting mechanistic materialism and standing out by Spinozist presence to shape a new natural psychological science of emotions.

Keywords: Cultural-historical Psychology, Spinoza, Materialist Psychology, Soviet Psychology, Vygotsky, History of Psychology.

1. Introduction

In two parallel historical processes, the academic significance of the ideas proposed by the Belarusian psychologist Lev Semionovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) and the Dutch philosopher Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677) has been growing internationally in past decades. The first process happened within Psychology and began from the 1930s to the second half of the 1950s: the concept of consciousness, sidelined by Soviet Pavlovism and American Behaviorism, started being reshaped by cognitivism (Alvarez & Ríó, 1991), as well as Vygotskian psychology. At that point, Jerome Bruner, a major American Cognitivist scholar, started an intellectual exchange with Vygotsky's pupil, A.R. Luria, who uncovered their fight against Pavlovism on behalf of a broad concept of mind. Subsequently, the rising popularity of Vygotsky's psychology was used in the process of "reconquering" this concept in North American context.

The second process was the Stalinist Thaw, the unearthing of Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1956 (Dosse, 2007) and the subsequent worldwide publicity of those crimes – in the context of politics and intellectual debate – became the first step in dropping Stalinist Marxism-Leninism trend. New trends in philosophy and human sciences could blossom¹.

Subsequently, Althusser (1974), Negri (1981) and, in the last two decades, Morfino (2008), made provocative attempts to integrate Spinoza's ideas to contemporary leftist thought, while in Latin America, Chauí (1999) conducted a rich original research on Spinozist philosophy. As the author highlights, such a trend has deep political implications. It is concerned with the affection and analyzes the political nature of passions, beyond a mere psychological dynamic decoupled from public life (Chauí, 2005). Most researchers in Psychology select emotions as a subject, while a few other works have mentioned Spinoza's influence on Vygotsky with regard to other aspects of cultural-historical psychology (see Derry, 2004; Jantzen, 2009; Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008).

In his lifetime, Vygotsky can be counted among intellectuals who produced their own meanings to "scientific materialism" before full-blown Stalinism took place². Striving for social justice as well as a better understanding of Soviet Union's legacy, I explore the sources and influence of Spinoza in Vygotsky's Psychology by (1) tracking Vygotsky and Spinoza's relations in the context of the former's author style and oeuvre, (2) assessing the sway of Marxist interpreters of Spinoza and other sources upon Vygotsky's psychology. Many concepts of a renewed critical psychology (as emotions, experiences, consciousness, personality, individuality) depend on it – it is crucial to make new senses and tracks emerge from Vygotsky's project. Embedded in a broader context of crisis in capitalist economy and deepening of

¹One of the most important new trends was the structuralism. Claude Lévi-Strauss, its main scholar, was followed by many intellectuals who, at least for a short period, shared his worldview – especially Lacan, Jakobson and Althusser (Dosse, 2007). Interest in Spinoza and the Spinozist tradition was renewed in mainstream sociological thought as well. Twelve years after the Thaw, Spinoza gathered importance in academic debate, especially through the book "Spinoza, tome 1: Dieu (Éthique, livre I)" (Guéroult, 1968). Authors such as Macherey, Balibar and Tosel stood out by Spinoza as a source that could be used to develop a non-metaphysical materialism, redefining the relation between philosophy and politics (Tassone & Thomas, 2008).

² Stalin's "Great Break" (1929-1932) was a period of deep changes which followed Stalin's victory over his enemies. It was marked by a huge loss of intellectual freedom, as well as an enforcement of peasantry into collectivization farms towards a "break" with Russian backwardness (see Netto, 1982).

inequalities (see Harvey, 2014), this paper assumes the essential task of assessing part of psychological science produced by the Soviet Union, as an experimental society which, in spite of many problems, endeavored to produce social justice, renew socialism and overcome capitalism.

1. Vygotsky and the Marxist interpreters of Spinoza in the Soviet Union

By about 1877, Spinoza and Hegel were the philosophers most discussed in Russia (Maidansky, 2003). Yet, it is important to acknowledge the tremendous impact of the Russian translation of Marx's "Capital", published in 1872 (see Baron, 1963)³.

Translations of Spinoza's works and those of his French and German interpreters appeared in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan and Odessa. However, no Russian author would unreservedly support Spinozist ideas: critiques by religious, Kantian and Hegelian thinkers were published.

Analyzing Maidansky's list (2003) of Russian Spinozists, it is possible to say that Vygotsky was familiar with Shestov, Solov'ev, Deborin and Plekhanov, all of whom had studied Spinoza. A N. Leontiev, one of Vygotsky's collaborators, published "The Teaching about Emotions at Spinoza" (Jantzen, 2009). However, there is not consistent evidence that he further developed this issue or Spinozist ideas. Vygotsky did not have truly "Spinozist pupils".

When Vygotsky was a teenager, his father gifted him Spinoza's "Ethics," which was acquired during a business trip (Vygodskaya, & Lifanova, 1999). According to A. N. Leontiev (1991), Spinoza was Vygotsky's favorite philosopher. As it was later identified by Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut (2008), the Belarusian author took Spinoza as a personal model, becoming a great admirer of Spinozist ethics. The authors add that

The fact that the parents sought out an enlightened religious tutor is once again testimony to the family's rationalist values. As we show later, Vygotsky's familiarity with Jewish scripture and with Spinoza's philosophy found repeated expression in his scientific works throughout his entire career (Kotik-Friedgut, & Friedgut, 2008, p.20).

Later, it is fair to say that Engels, Plekhanov and Deborin were noteworthy Spinoza's sympathizers, loosely influencing Vygotsky's attachment to Spinozist ideas.



The epigraph to "The Psychology of Art" (Vygotsky, 2001c) is a quotation from the third part of Spinoza's "Ethics," reflecting upon the undiscovered skills of the body, idea which finishes the book as well. However, as one can observe in further works (see Vygotsky, 1991a;b, 1999, 1996, 1995), he was familiar with almost all works by Spinoza, which he mentions briefly in his "Teaching about Emotions" (Vygotsky, 1999): "Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being," "Political Treatise," "Letters," "On the Improvement of the Understanding". Vygotsky (1999) is a manuscript dated 1933, which intended to ensure Spinoza a position in the science on emotions. Unfortunately, the author could never finish his

³ Regarding Marx's view on Spinoza, Hull's (2000) observes that Marx's references to Spinoza are scarce; they are reproductions of statements that, despite being mostly positive, do not suggest a great commitment to Spinoza's philosophy. Roughly, Vygotsky's relationship with Spinoza was akin to Marx's, as described in Hull: "Marx's engagement with Spinoza can thus best be described as a critical appropriation, a reappropriation which reads the materialist elements of Spinoza against the ones which will be received into Hegelianism." (p. 27)

manuscript and fulfill this goal. The plan was to make Spinozist monism as a guide to a new monist and materialist science on emotions, bringing body and mind together.

Maidansky, in a view similar to Kline (1952), argues that

After 1917, Spinoza's philosophy unexpectedly met with approval from Russian Marxists. (...) It meant that the basic philosophical principles in Spinoza and Marx were perfectly identical. And some of Plekhanov's disciples, headed by A. Deborin, even defined Marxism as "neospinozism," inciting thereby a vehement debate. (2003, p. 203)

Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1818), the true "father of Russian Marxism" (see Baron, 1963)⁴ quotes Engels in "Bernstein and Materialism" (1976a) asking himself the epistemological sense of materialism. He points out how, in "Ludwig Feuerbach," Engels regarded as materialist philosophers those who emphasized the primacy of nature over the spirit, the "ontological problem" (see Kline, 1952).

Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other – and among the philosophers, Hegel, for example, this creation often becomes still more intricate and impossible than in Christianity – comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism. (Engels, 1846)

From this reasoning, Plekhanov concluded that Spinoza was materialistic. In the same article, he reports a conversation with Engels, in which he asked, "So do you think, (...) old Spinoza was right when he said that *thought* and *extent* are nothing but two attributes of one and the same substance?" "Of course," Engels replied, "old Spinoza was quite right" (1976a). Plekhanov says that Marx and Engels would have never abandoned Spinoza's viewpoint.

In another text, "On the Alleged Crisis in Marxism" (1976b), Plekhanov claimed that all the materialisms of the century were Spinozisms that had become more or less self-conscious. Furthermore, he criticized Spinoza's inability to abandon theology and defend the notion of God being distinct from nature – an objection raised by Feuerbach and approved by Marx and Engels.

According to Maidansky (2003), Abram Moiseyevich Deborin (1881-1963), a Jewish philosopher and disciple of Plekhanov, made a distorted Spinoza's portrait – he rarely referred to him in his writings, and when he did, it was through secondary references to Engels, Feuerbach and Plekhanov (Maidansky, 2003). Deborinists went far enough to call Spinoza "Marx without a beard" (Kline, 1952).

However, I claim that a reading of "Spinoza's World View" (Deborin, 1952), a paper published in 1927, displays the awareness of Deborin regarding the bases of Spinoza's doctrine and, in obvious agreement

⁴ It would be hard to underestimate Plekhanov's importance to Soviet Marxism. Even after the political split of the Russian Social-Democratic Party in 1903, putting aside Lenin's partisans, the "Bolsheviks", from Plekhanov's "Mensheviks", Lenin acknowledged how important Plekhanov had been in the dawn of Russian Communism. Ten years later, he still bore the hope that would be possible to unify the movement, once he had a true respect toward Plekhanov as a theoretician, if not for his politics.

with Plekhanov, assorted Spinoza as an atheist, a materialist and a forerunner of Marxism⁵. In writing some biographical remark on the philosopher, Deborin expresses sympathy for the sociopolitical misfortunes which hit Spinoza. He follows, emphasizing the courage Spinoza displayed in his struggle against religious orthodoxy and the establishment of the Dutch bourgeoisie.

Apparently, Deborin's goal was to bring attention to Spinoza's philosophy by portraying his exemplary life –very similar to the Enlightenment's Spinoza portrait (see Chau, 1999), which Deborin (1952) himself reported to know. Yet, his paper is indeed biased: he endows Spinoza, an example of modesty, with a taste for the "civilized life", saying that the Dutch "assigns an extremely important role to mechanics and technology that is, in contemporary language, to the development of the forces of production; since this leads to an increase in our power over nature" (id, p.9). This view on Nature was typical of the Bolshevik radical drive to modernize Russian territory, bearing little resemblance with Spinoza's 17th century rationalism, which has developed before the blossoming of the Industrial Revolution.

2. Deborin and Vygotsky

My analysis of Vygotsky's "Collected Works" and other writings reveals that he partially relied upon Plekhanov's writings to develop his psychology. References to the first great Russian Marxist are abundant in Vygotsky (2001c, 1999, 2001b) yet more scarce in Vygotsky (1991a, 1996). Beyond Plekhanov, Tunes & Prestes (2009) defend that Vygotsky and his group was close to Deborin's thought. Once Deborin was the major Russian Marxist who stood by Spinoza during the 1920s (see Kline, 1952), as well as who wrote more about him (at least three papers dedicated to Spinoza). I have chosen to compare more carefully his ideas on Spinoza with Vygotsky's.

From the abovementioned Vygotsky's texts, as well as Deborin (1952), one can identify similarities in: (1) claiming the aspects of Spinoza's worldview which tended toward Marxism. "It will help contemporary psychology in what is most basic and major – in the formation of the idea of man, which would serve as a type of human nature for us" (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 105); (2) there are shortcomings in Spinoza's method, yet Deborin (1952) does not explain this criticism. Vygotsky (1991a), assumes that a psychological science could not be geometrical, an attribute which was at the core of Spinozist method; (3) the notion that Spinoza was a determinist, as well as a materialist author (that is, one who studied everything in terms of causality), idea that could be traced back from Feuerbach through Engels and Plekhanov; (4) the belief that Spinoza's "Ethics" defines man's place in nature and derives a way of life from the knowledge of the passions and impulses. These last two ideas are quite true to Spinoza's oeuvre – one can find them throughout the "Ethics" as well as in commentaries on his work (Spinoza, 2008; Chau, 1999, 2005).

Vygotsky intended to modify Spinoza's theory, which considered that all manifestations of mind should be directed to one end,

giving birth to a system with only one center [...] to Spinoza, the one idea is God or Nature. Psychologically, this is not necessary at all. However, the man certainly could synthesize to a system not only isolated functions, yet creating also only one center to the whole system (1991b, p.92)

⁵ The portrayal of Spinoza as an "atheist of system" can be tracked back on the French Radical Enlightenment. Ever since then, Spinozism has been used to fight mainstream religion, supporting the endeavor for secular State (see Chau, 1999). Such a trend became a sway upon Engels, as well as Plekhanov, Deborin and Vygotsky.

Despite never fulfilling his goal of performing a “modification” in Spinoza’s theory, Vygotsky wanted to prove scientifically how the personality could be the “synthesis” of mental functions, bringing parts together with their whole. Therefore, he means creating a new, improved type of personality, full of harmony and perfection, probably on behalf of his final goal: the creation of a new man to a new society (see Vygotsky, 1991a). Deborin would rather pick “attainment of the highest human perfection” (1952, p.9) as the final end of all Spinozist human actions and thoughts, fully ignoring the God’s role in Spinoza’s thought. In this subject, Deborin’s choice was commenting Spinoza’s Treatise “On the Improvement of the Understanding” rather than the “Ethics”, as Vygotsky did.

Deborin (1952) was published in 1927; Vygotsky’s (1991b) article was released in 1930. It is quite a coincidence that similar ideas were presented in these two works – yet the latter does not quote the former in the subject of ascribing “one end” to personality, Vygotsky could have read Deborin’s paper. Once Spinoza was so popular at that point, another possibility is that the idea of the “one end system” was spread among Russian Marxists – and each author interpreted it in different ways.

In 1927, Vygotsky’s (1991a) Spinozist comparison of the future psychology as resembling “dog” as much as the constellation of “Canis” evoked it, had also been done by an important Deborin’s paper of 1926 (“The subject of philosophy and of dialectic”, see Deborin, 1964). A difference: Deborin addresses differences between two popular trends of revolutionary materialism, without other remarks on their future. However, both authors speak about an external resemblance which concealed crucial differences, a shared epistemological remark.

3. Spinoza and Materialism through the Vygotskian style

Readers of Vygotsky can, perhaps, remember of a pattern: while assessing other authors’ data and viewpoints, he highlights how a researcher had solved a problem or how he had failed in doing so. This is his attitude with respect to Stern and Piaget, Blonsky (Vygotsky, 1996) as well as James & Lange (Vygotsky, 1999). Typically, when addressing Spinoza, Vygotsky’s argumentative style tends to alternate criticize and praise. Therefore, to ascertain the relevance of Spinozist ideas to a psychological materialism is a complex task: it is not enough merely uncover the similarities between Spinoza and Vygotsky. The references to Spinoza in Vygotsky’s works are entrenched in the philosophical basis of the historical-cultural perspective – task broader than the present article.

However, in short, I argue that Vygotsky aimed to establish a relationship of critical appropriation with Spinoza’s work. As it was shown previously (see Toassa, 2009), Vygotsky’s references to Spinoza are fragmentary. Yet it is important to remember that Vygotsky (1991a) disapproved eclectic attempts at blending elements of different theories, knitting scientific patchworks instead of a solid science. The intention was to safeguard the status and reliability of psychology among the human and natural sciences. Commentaries regarding Spinoza in Vygotsky (1991a, 1999) show that he was unwilling to treat Spinoza’s work superficially. He was very committed to make psychology to join other sciences of neural activity – which he considered dualistic – in a Spinozist background, essential to surpass the ongoing dualistic framework towards a materialist psychology.

In his “Teaching of emotions”, Vygotsky repeatedly conveys the notion that Spinoza was a materialist author. The fact that the Belarusian labeled Spinoza’s monism as a materialism and often identified both terms, without fully clarify the true nature of the “matter” would appear to be mistaken. However, one should take into account the incompleteness of “The Teaching about Emotions”, as well as

the authoritative words by Engels, Plekhanov and Deborin, which followed in the same direction. Kline says that,

Deborinists and orthodox Marxists have insisted that the line of demarcation lies rather in the solution of the ontological problem – the relation of matter to consciousness. Materialism, they point out, make matter primary and basic, whereas idealism gives priority to mind and consciousness. And by this test, Spinoza was a materialist. (1952, p.26)

4. Spinozist ideas in a cultural-historical psychology founded on historical materialism

Although, in his writings, Engels did not write on Spinoza's philosophy at length, Morfino (2008) has a lot to say about the creative philosophical crossroads at which Marx's partner placed himself. Following Dietzgen, Plekhanov and Häckel, Morfino believes that Engels's knowledge of Spinoza would have been mediated by Hegel, his critical admirer. Suggesting that Engels subscribed to both Hegel and Spinoza's outlooks (position similar to Deborin, 1964, "Hegel and the dialectical materialism", published 1929), Morfino examines the two texts in which Engels refers to Spinoza: "Anti-Dühring" (1877) and "Dialectics of Nature" (1883). Both focus on nature as well as sciences which interpret it. The answer addressed by Engel to Plekhanov (1976a) on the unity of substance can be considered as a classical era replica, which pointed out the correctness of Spinoza's ideas and was not alien to the notion of German materialism in the 19th Century (Morfino, 2008), strongly fed by the Enlightenment.

Sini (cited by Morfino, 2008) argues that, contrary to the mainstream notion in the history of philosophy, Spinoza – not Kant – carried out the Copernican revolution. That is, Spinoza would effectively have been the first to explain nature by forming a framework of non-teleological and non-anthropomorphic explanations about natural phenomena in place of using the idea of a transcendent being. This explanation, akin to Deborin (1952) while ascribing atheism, anti-dualistic and a deterministic view to Spinoza, would have made the latter an important precursor to Marxism. Following this direction, Vygotsky (1999) argues that the theological aspect of the "Ethics" was a mere appendage, which did not affect the essence of Spinozist materialism. His argument may have been aimed at interlocutors uncomfortable with the quasi-identity between God and nature that permeates the "Ethics", repeating the discomfort that had been previously expressed in his 1930 text (see Vygotsky, 1991b), as I analyzed before in this paper.

"Vygotsky's crossroad" is somehow similar to Engel's. In his major work on foundations of scientific psychology, "The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" (1991a), similarly to Spinoza (2008), he overlaps nature and reality. From this standpoint, even historical materialism could be understood as natural science. Evoking Hegel's familiar claim, "the real is rational, the rational is real" (Hegel, 2001, p. 18), Vygotsky proposes the following: "extending the term 'natural' to everything that exists in reality is completely rational" (p. 387). Therefore, all psychological studies are part of reality, reality is nature, and nature is intelligible – or rational. Kline (1952) says that, according to Engels, Spinoza had followed the Greeks, assuming that Reason could not be contrary to Nature. This assumption is an interesting point, in which Hegel and Spinoza's viewpoints appear to converge, most probably through Engels, in Vygotskian thought⁶.

⁶See also Chau (1999), who ascribes to Spinoza the assumption that the reality is completely intelligible. Morfino states, "Engels, therefore, like Spinoza, holds that nature is a universal interconnected totality, the parts of which cannot be separated from the whole other than by abstraction." (2008, p. 14). In concurrence with Spinoza, Engels claims for the necessity to abolish the notion

This view supported Vygotsky's chase for a science on emotions that (1) avoided the old, mechanistic materialism in which the physiological research on emotions was embedded, concerned only with comparative psychology (studies comparing humans to other animals), (2) settled his commitment to a psychology which, like Spinoza (2008), took human emotions/affections as part of nature, not as virtues or vices. For example, the Dutch was highly critical of religions which took "wrath" or "envy" as sins, not passions ordinary to human nature. Therefore, a new identity is assigned to the concepts of *realism*, *naturalism* and *materialism* (Vygotsky, 1991a), helping Vygotsky, following the profane spirit of October Revolution, to put God aside – no matter if it could be regarded as identical to Nature or not.

Vygotsky's sympathy for Spinoza and his legacy to a holistic science thus becomes more understandable. In the second part of the "Ethics," Spinoza states that the mind-body relationship constitutes a compound individual, a part of nature which is fully embedded in a physical and social milieu. Criticizing those who have sought for ready concepts of historical materialism in the works of classic Marxist authors; who lacked psychological concepts, Vygotsky – pretty much like Deborin (see Kline, 1952) – claims the scientific basis of Spinoza's work by stating the following:

Behind Spinoza's hypothesis is all the physics of Galileo: it manifests itself, translated into philosophical language, the whole accumulated experience (mainly from the natural sciences, which were the first to know unity and regularity of the world). And who could generate that doctrine in psychology? Plekhanov and others are always interested in local objective: polemic objective, general explanatory context, but not independent thinking, generalized, elevated to doctrine (1991, p. 367).

Similarly, Bottomore (2001) assumes the existence of internal aspects of the concept of materialism as a philosophical (ontological, epistemological, practical) and historical problem, permeated by transient political objectives of Marxism's classic authors.

Vygotsky (1991a) aims to develop a psychological science that would not be subjected to the influence of political transient reasons, could have contemporary and universal applications, and be placed in the broader context of a comprehensive dialectical materialism, as he understood it. In this direction, he positively regarded Spinoza's ideas on how individuals could master their own emotions, tending to show a pathway towards the self-regulation (1996, p.245), from passivity to activity (1996, p.307), taking freedom as a process which depended upon development of thinking (1995, p.288). The art, crucial to change mind and body together, would help to forge the "new man". As Spinoza said, "no one could reckon future possibilities to art or life, once no one has defined what the body is able to do" (cited by Vygotski, 2001c, p.329).

5. Final considerations

Vygotsky was strongly attached to Spinoza's oeuvre, to which he was introduced even before switching to Marxism after the October Revolution. It is fair to say that his relation with Spinoza's oeuvre, in spite of being fragmentary, had important similarities with Plekhanovist trend among the Russian Marxists philosophers, led by Deborin during the 1920s (see Kline, 1952).

that nature is invariable, as well as to overcome the old metaphysics, which separated cause and effect, placing the ultimate causes of the Universe outside its own laws, creating a metaphysics to which God overrules the physical Nature.

Yet, despite Vygotskian intentions of performing a critical appropriation of Spinoza, Vygotsky's scarce remarks on the philosopher embrace ethical and epistemological questions of great importance to foundation of a new materialist psychology. Questions like: what is the human nature? Is it possible to figure out an alternative model for it? How to change it? Spinoza certainly could help in the development of knowledge and mastering our own passions. To my view, these concerns are absent from Deborin's philosophy, yet it can not be confirmed without analyzing more of the latter's work – which envelops at least three articles on Spinoza.

Among the Russian Marxists who made a positive assessment of Spinoza, Deborin was who wrote more about it. Indeed, there are great similarities between Deborinist and Vygotskian remarks on Spinoza. Creating a materialist psychology from a deterministic and naturalist viewpoint could rely only partially on the classics of Marxism, which – quite understandably – bore local political objectives, instead of walk into a solid scientific journey to create “a new man to a new society” (see Vygotsky, 1991a), led by an atheist and naturalistic ethos, overthrowing any sign of Russia's catholic past.

The readings of Spinoza in Soviet Union suffered a meaningful loss after the Stalin's “Great Break”, 1929-1932. The Marxism-Leninism as Stalin viewed it had to be the only trend allowed in sciences and philosophy. Yet, a recent renewal of critical Western thought from 1950 onwards strives to bring Marxism and Spinozism together, developing a new conception of individuality within society, fully supporting true democratic socialism as a main goal of the 21st Century.

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