

# Ethics as Aesthetics: Foucault's Critique of Moralization of Ethics

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## INTRODUCTION

Whenever a person is involved in any action, questions are being asked. Why does he or she do it? Is it ethical or not? An act cannot be separated from man's self since it is part of his whole being or existence. We put much emphasis on the act because it is a representation of the person. The identity of the person is reflected by his action. In philosophy, this human act is studied in the concept of ethics. Ethics is defined as the science of human acts concerning right and wrong (Montemayor, 1994, p. 17). Any action is evaluated by societal concepts of good and evil. The non-conformity of the person to the laws and standardized moral principles of society may be punished as a consequence.

There are many traditional ways of evaluating the ethics of an action. According to Aristotle, a person must be virtuous to achieve his goals in life to be happy or self-fulfilled. This is called virtue ethics.

Also, another ethical approach by Immanuel Kant's *Fundamental Principles of Metaphysics of Morals*, he insisted that ethics is about practicing one's duty. On the contrary, Bentham (1988) and Mill (2002) on their understanding of morality are based on the consequence or the result of the act. An act is considered moral when it brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people.

Problems arise concerning morality. In traditional ethics, there is what we call "moralization of ethics". The ethical definition of good and evil is taken from the perspective of morality as mentioned previously. The societal decision-making of good and evil is established from the viewpoint of these traditional schools of morality. Everything is moralized from these viewpoints. In this paper, I will present another alternative to traditional ethics. This is the aesthetic ethics of Foucault.

A post-structuralist French philosopher named Michel Foucault offers a new concept of ethics. This new form of ethics is different from Aristotelian, Kantian and Utilitarian understanding.

Foucault's return to antiquity was motivated by his desire to develop a contemporary "post-moral (ity)" ethics of self-transformation (Hofmeyr, 2005, p. 27). This form of ethical structuring is no longer aided by the traditional way of thinking but what he calls "aesthetic way of life". In his three-volume books *History of Sexuality*, Foucault deliberately presents truth as subjectivity, and an ethical evaluation by self – regulated individuals.

Ethics is the self-relationship to itself or ethics as aesthetics (Foucault, 1994, p. 263). Foucault sees life being compared to a work of art. This approach focuses on the subject's self-identity towards truth.

I argue that while in the modern period of "moralized ethics" or traditional ethics which is the basis for good and evil judgment. There is a new approach to ethics called aesthetic ethics.

This paper will, therefore, present the following manner: first, I will present the moralization of ethic using the three tenets of morality (deontology, teleology and virtue ethics) to discuss moralization of ethics and results to the problem of morality. The second part of this presentation is Michel Foucault's post-modernist view of ethics. The aesthetical assumption towards action is evaluated from emotion, care of the self and personal choice. The third part differentiates between ethics as moralization and ethics as aesthetics. The last part is my critique of Foucault's new ethical idea. This paper will show that an act must not only be viewed from traditional moral standards but also the aesthetical dimension.

This paper attempts to present ethics as an enriching field of study. This will try to give a critical view to the question on the problem of moralization of ethics and how ethics should be determined.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study describes the two important goals of presenting the concept of ethics. The first column shows in what sense "moralized ethics" is defined as. This serves as the thesis. Within this column, three tenets of morality are identified as moralization of ethics: deontology, teleology and virtue ethics. The second column presents the anti-thesis which is the aesthetic aspect. Within this

second column, the concept of ethics as aesthetics is defined as to live or care of oneself, personal choice and beautiful existence.

Both perspectives are contradicting in principle but moralized ethics vis-à-vis aesthetic ethics cannot be separated. They play a significant meaning since aesthetics includes moral perceptions. There is a need to define ethics as “aesthetic morality.”

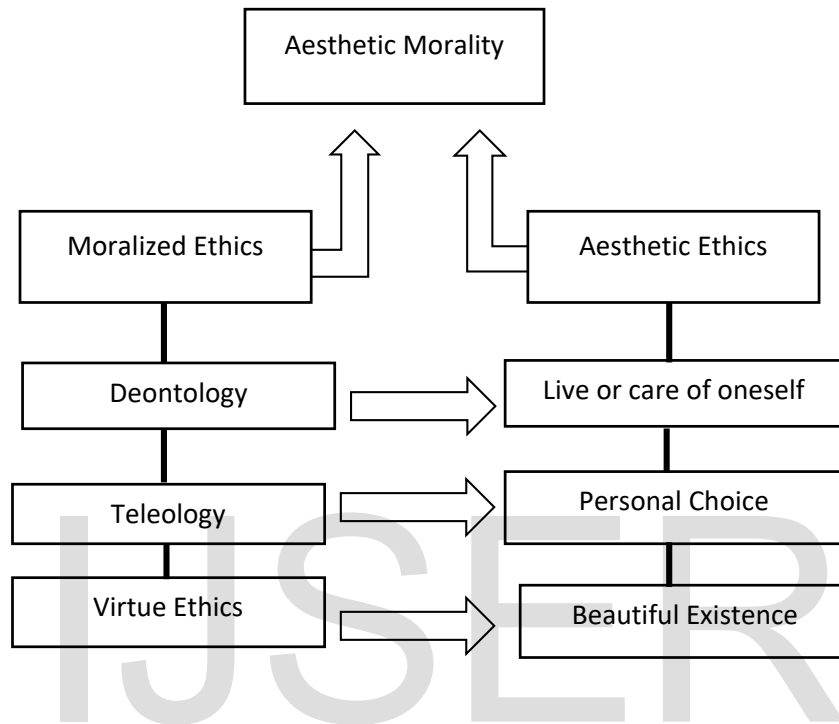


Figure 1: Developmental Presentation of the Movement of Ethics

The principal tenets on which I ground my investigation on *moralization of ethics* lie on the three foundations of ethics as morality which justifies the underlying principle of ethically evaluating the human act.

The first foundation is the deontological system of ethics, popularly introduced by Immanuel Kant in his work *The Categorical Imperative* wherein he points out that every citizen knows what is good since he is aided by reason. According to Kant, the reason is the source of morality, a kind of

knowledge that will lead to a better understanding of how to live a good life. Given human consciousness, reason actively works and decides in a situation where there is a need to act. Additionally, each person has to promote goodness, harmony, and collaboration for all.

The second form of ethics as moralization dwells on the teleological usefulness or commonly known as the "utilitarian principle" and was initiated by John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. This principle stresses the basic 'end' as the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons who agree about what is right. The substantial purpose of this theory is a look at how the end-results will promote the greatest happiness or pleasure to the many.

Lastly, the virtue ethics that concern on a life full of goodness. Aristotle sees that the morality of an act lies in 'moderation'. He shows that deficiency and excessiveness of the act do not promote goodness. The principle of "Golden Mean" is to be maintained to achieve proper, balance, for example, eating too much will make you unwell and same also with not eating at all.

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## Statement of the Problem

This study aims to understand the problem of the moralization of ethics. More importantly, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is moralization of ethics and why has it become a problem of ethics?
2. What is ethics according to Foucault?
3. Does Foucault succeed in offering ethics as aesthetics as his alternative to the moralization of ethics?

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a purely qualitative approach using secondary sources for the investigation of the problems. It will focus only on the discussion on ethics as the aesthetics of Michel Foucault. It uses the three tenets of morality to understand deeper what is defined as ethics.

The researcher will maximize online resources from the internet and scholarly approved research papers in the library to provide enough support to the arguments.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, I will discuss the grounds of morality under ethics. **What is moralization of ethics and why has it become a problem of ethics?**

Morality refers to that quality of goodness or badness in a human act (Montemayor, 1994, p. 35). Ethics in this sense becomes moral. Beauchamp and Childress (2011) state that common morality refers to norms about right and wrong human conduct that are so widely shared with common persons that they form a stable (although incomplete) agreement. Some moralists judge the moral value or worthiness of the action if it corresponds to how society judges it as fitted and true.

The term *moralization of ethics* is not yet used in other pieces of literature or discourses of philosophers in speculating their view regarding ethics and morality. I intend to coin this term since this study allows me to critique the previous understanding of ethics as far as Foucaultian philosophy is concerned. According to Foucault, modern era views ethics as judging the act based on the structure determination of society about what is good and evil. It becomes a universalized and holistic verification of judgment. The point here is that modern society is ruled by public domains. These domains are linked to the leaders, politicians, doctors and religious individuals who manifest authority over the lives of the others. Power relations manifest knowledge that governs and designs the other person.

In what sense is "moralized ethics" a problem of morality? The absence of morality in modernity prompted Foucault to do an excursion into the Greek culture and thought. He explains: "If I was interested in antiquity it was because the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules now disappearing has already disappeared" (Foucault, 2000, p. 256).

In Colin Koopman's *Genealogy as Critique*, (2013) she states that "modern moralities thus tend to be expressions of either a disciplinary form of power purified of a strong sense of freedom or a liberationist conception of freedom purified of a sense of the importance of power". In the introduction to his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault treats sexuality as becoming the center of the problem due to suppression of freedom because of being "unnatural" (Foucault, 1976, p. 139). The different spheres of the government, scientific development, and the church served as catalysts of the idea of sexuality.

The upshot of the system of modern morality according to Foucault is about the use of power. Wherein human beings find themselves in a position to appeal only in one of two options: either to the strict utilitarian rationality of disciplinary efficiency (think Benthamite bureaucracy) or to an uncompromising ideal of liberatory freedom (think Kantian autonomy) (Koopman, 2013, p. 186).

In this situation, modern morality is a problem of human activity. Where there is repression of the conduct as well as deprivation of feelings. Human beings lost their moral sense of being as free individuals. This prompted Foucault to search for an aesthetic existence as his response to the problem of morality.

Morality prevents the promotion of one's welfare. In Bolles' *Psychological Determinism and the Problem of Morality*, he explains that a person is not determined by his welfare instead he is determined by the moral laws of the society. To think of the effect of society's adherence in an equal relationship and just environment, laws are unbecoming to produce sufficient means to direct good ends. Bolles (1963, p. 184) believes that "laws do not apply to man because each man is unique, or the argument that man's behaviors are too complex to be explained".

In other words, there is a complexity of man's experience of morality such that morality is initiated not by him but the society's conventional prescriptions of what one *must* do. In Hume's

sense according to Bolles (1963, p. 185) "if a man is not constrained by external conditions, then he is free to act as he desires and that freedom in this sense is social and not psychological". Man cannot flourish and express his freedom. The problem of morality points to external authority, not by one's will.

Furthermore, the essence of our morality is due to our choosing by a "sense" of right and wrong than to recall the anguish that accompanied the development of approved behaviors (Bolles, 1963, p. 187). Thus, the personal aspect of one's speaking to direct the self-regulating activity in which it allows the individual to free himself from outsider's control. "Once a certain degree of conformity has become established in an individual, then that person not only begins to protect himself against the threats of his culture but also begins to earn the positive gains, rewards, that it offers" (Bolles, 1963, p. 187). The criminal is convicted by the standard moral law of the society that is to maintain the social order of the society. The criminal is not the agent of misfortune; he is its victim because of the law of the land that misfits to his previous experiences (Bolles, 1963). The conception of Bolles in the problem of morality is about the determination by society's structured environment that "unfree" the person to achieve his desire and goals in the future. This prompted Foucault to search for an aesthetic existence as his response to the problem of morality.

Following on the contention on the problems of moralization of ethics in modernity, Foucault prompted to search for an aesthetic existence, a philosophical notion that would serve as a standard ground for actions to be considered ethical.

**What is ethics according to Foucault?** What is the standard ground of action to be considered ethical? A philosophical discourse in ethics is a prominent topic of Foucault. The element of the political regime and philosophical discourse are his masterpieces. Foucault's re-examination of ethics is rooted in the ancient Greek's culture in search of the meaning of life.

Foucault concentrated on defining ethics and questioning the moral conduct of the person. During his interview in *College de' France*, he was asked this question: "What form of morality" must there be regarding the self as the subject of an investigation? Which aspect of myself or my behavior is concerned with moral conduct? (Foucault, 1990). Foucault replied by making a distinction among other perspectives. For the Christians, what is being valued as a moral aspect of

the self is "desire" while in Kantian view, it is "intention." For Foucault, however, it is "feeling". His ethical notion of ethics is formulated in the form of the aesthetical aspect of feeling. His resilient observation of the Greek culture is characterized by the imposition of the feelings than of action. The value of feelings has been exposed throughout by Foucaultian studies.

Regarding the question being asked during the interview as to what moral aspect is involved in one's conduct, Foucault views it in a form of feelings. Ethics for him is how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his conduct (Foucault, 1994). What he gives more emphasis about ethics is on the practice of the self.

Traditional knowledge of ethics is not anymore practiced by many, especially in the modern period. Creating a new form of ethics is continuing to arise in society, whether that conduct of the individual in the society is acceptable. The assumption of Foucault on the acts to be ethical provides a paradigm that society is evolving and continues to change the concept of ordinary ideas. For Trimpathi (2010) the subject of moral action and the self is in constant progress of creation. The problem today is on how the citizenry will assimilate this created conducts. The autonomous self-regulation activity makes Foucault conceptualize the new image of portraying the subject, the self as independent from the regulation or any traditions. There is a subjective form of behavior that dismantles the previous objective form of understanding the self.

Foucault's affirmation of creative artistry of the self is tied to Sartre's practice of creativity but he lately denies the affirmation and gives adoration to Nietzsche. "Yes, my view is much closer to Nietzsche's than to Sartre" (Foucault, 1985, p. 262). This study of Foucault reveals his quest on the modern problem of man in society and how to constitute himself inside the modern culture as the progress and freedom of the sciences is realized.

His critical awareness of the modern society is that it is *unbecoming* concerning how an individual is supposed to constitute his being as an ethical subject with his standard. Due to the structural and conventional authority of the society over the self, freedom becomes less actualized according to him. In this way, ethics has been moralized. There is a suspension of "self-cultivation" and "feeling" within the self. This leads him to analyze the contention of the self as a moral agent of his being by breaking away from structured norms and codes. Foucault calls it "aesthetics", a new



form of ethics. Later, he defines it as the concern of the "self as a practice of freedom" that is *ungrounded* from the domain of the public, the legislature, and the cultural and scientific knowledge.

Foucault wants to express one's feeling and self-constructive image to be the foundation of the real meaning of existence. He is against the modern subjugation of the self like what Marxism does. He invites us to move clearly into a unique way of emphasizing the demand for beauty and of one's own choice and freedom. The care of the self is Foucault's main thought of aesthetics which needs to be institutionalized.

Furthermore, aesthetics or ethics is about a selfish self. However, being a selfish self makes one selfless. If a person cares for himself, it is a choice that recognizes one's potentiality, creativeness, beauty, and limitations. Once it has been understood by "knowing yourself", a person can now actualize the moral conduct of his self with others and the community.

The aesthetic morality is the synthesis of Foucault's ethics which starts within the self by taking care of it. The self which is transformed is reflective of development from what is better to what is the best. It is one of the original responses that Foucault wants every individual to care for.

**Finally, does Foucault succeed in offering ethics as aesthetics as his alternative to the moralization of ethics?**

Foucault's philosophy of art or the aesthetics existence is post-modern. As a critical post-modernist philosopher, he questions ethics as fundamental to the very existence of the person who lives in a complex society. He challenged the great ideas of ethics in the modern period. His criticism explores how an individual is supposed to constitute himself as a free being. He was confronted with the problems of this actualization of the selfhood as a predetermination of the public domains. In the later part of his work in the *History of Sexuality* about the care of the self, he proclaims the advent of postmodernity as the form of freedom of a self-transformed person

Foucault's genealogical study portraying citizens during antiquity seeks the meaning of what is precisely the true self. What he prefers to work on is to present a series of problematic findings, which is the "work of the thought" to study the possible response to the "problematizations". In the sphere of public life, ethics has structured the subject to the laws and norms. He did not see the real

experience of freedom in this situation, but sees the prevention of the will. His move to the philosophical inquiry on ethics is archeologically told from the Greek's life. The presentation started from the ancient Greeks by examining their way of life, leaderships, and sexuality as practiced among them. He intended to provide an insightful philosophical discourse of ethics, not to find the solution but to know the questions and to question them.

I will move my interpretation of Foucault's major ideas on ethics, aesthetics, and freedom that are intertwined to each other.

### **Ethics cannot be Moralized**

As discussed previously, ethics as morality is a modern thought. As the philosopher of postmodernity, Foucault questions ethics as a problem of human life in "structured" and "unfreed" environments. Since his thought of the self as self-regulated, self-consciousness and subjective, such modern ethics cannot give a true meaning or identity of selfhood. For him, the modern world governs the way of life of the people based on what is good and bad according to the rules imposed by the ruling classes. For instance, his anti-Marxist ideology of the "utopic government" that marginalized individuals, the so-called "elite" prevented the actualization of their potentiality that had been detached from "private life". This means that a moral institution like the government has played a dominant role to evaluate the acts as good or evil. Abortion, for instance, is considered bad since it is unlawful according to the church and endangers the life of the patient. Even being a homosexual person is deemed unethical or immoral because it is not faithful to the prescription of the government and the command of God. The nonconformity to any policies of one's institution and culture is considered as a bad thing because someone violates it.

Ethics cannot be moralized because, for Foucault, ethics must express the freedom of the person away from the outsider's dictation of standards (laws, policy, and procedures). Aesthetic ethics is a philosophy that promotes a creative manifestation of the will and feelings, rather than the universal teleology and deontology. Ethics is likened to a work of art by an individual artist, a painter for example. In this situation, a painter as the subject of making a work of art is free to choose his masterpiece. Everything he does is to present a beautiful art for the audiences. What an artist portrays is his idea of art to be accomplished not the demand of the audience that he needs to follow. The

beauty of the art is not judged or determined by his public commentators but he defines the beauty of his work of art. Its subjective meaning is determined by the artist and it is by chance that the audience judge according to their objective determination of what is good art and what is not.

There is a rejection of morality because it is bounded by the law of others, the outsiders rather than his projection of the will. Everyone must be self-regulated so that one may find a better meaning to his life and a mastery of his ideal self or life.

### **Morality cannot also be Ethicized**

Morality is determined by how one's act is considered as good or bad concerning the norms, the culture, or the beliefs of a certain group. In this respect, morality is based on any group who judge a certain situation as of right and wrong. They cannot impose a universal principle of what is right or wrong since it will not guarantee that everyone will be in favor of it. As an example, the traditional belief of Muslims about eating pork is considered immoral by them because, in their context, it is sinful.

The same is also true with other believers who see some act as taboo due to disrespect of the laws or a belief therein. Morality for Foucault is authoritarian to the single group who defines a specific characterization of their own identity. There is an exclusive ruling by a hierarchical authority who points out the right value of doing good things and the punishment for non-compliance to the laws or policies.

Modern societies treat the world according to their standards. In Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, he writes that there was sexual repression in the public sphere among homosexuals. The priest, for example, gives his sermon that a homosexual relationship is immoral. The relationship that exists among homosexual persons is repression of one's will to love someone of the same sex. The moral judgment of the Church about such relationship is that sex is only permitted among opposite sexes. So, homosexuality is immoral. The dogma of the Church is forming the people to be morally upright and faithful to God as an exemplar of values.

However, other group members such as the Hitiro culture see homosexuality as an open relationship which is acceptable to them. Thus, morality in this view cannot be ethicized because some specific groups allow such practice according to their own conviction. What is wrong to one group may be right to another. This is a problem of morality. That is why it cannot be universalized.

### **Ethics as an Aesthetic is not better than Morality**

The aesthetic ethics of Foucault does not guarantee the exclusive aspect of ethics as the care of the self and the freedom in opposition to objectivism. Morality plays a part in understanding ethics. When actualization of the desired self is known by the subject, he relates with the other-self which is referred to as the family, the neighborhood and the community. If others know that the person understands his own identity as a free individual and acknowledges his potentiality, then morality appears. A person is valued as able to realize his actualities.

### **Aesthetic Self is a Selfish Self**

The thought that Foucault provides in ethics is to make oneself a "selfish self". The individualist, subjective and relativistic point of view of this aesthetic self, makes the person selfish in knowing himself as a free being. In other words, the self is the subject who is capable of knowing his whole being as rational and creative. It is capacity to express his desire; a projection of what he feels and the creativity, to be the master of his self. Such mastery pertains to the development of his physical strength, his rationalistic ability, his skills in playing musical instruments and all that he wants to improve in his life. However, it does not mean that the person neglects others and considers them as a means only of his selfish interest.

Moreover, there is still much interest in being a selfish person. When a person is selfish, the self as a subject of ethical development points toward a selfless self. If there is a fulfillment in the

interest of the person because he wills it, the self is ready to face the others to be helped. If the pianist, for instance, knows he is a pianist because of the desire and willingness to learn, he is no longer selfish if he does not know how to withdraw himself from the different audiences but share his potentialities as a well-equipped musician. There is a radiation of the inner development from self-cultivation.

It could be a reminder of Socrates's statement that to "know yourself" is to care and work on the self because others require knowing. It is, therefore, an avenue to be conscious of his inability to an ability that one becomes conscious to progress from the inability to ability. Hofmeyr describes it as "generous sensibility towards others" (Hofmeyr, 2005, p. 123)

### **Ethics as Aesthetic Morality**

Aesthetic ethics cannot be separated from morality. *The Care of the Self* is the last volume of *History of Sexuality* whose concern is with one's aesthetic existence. The problem of modernity for Foucault is that modern society treats every individual based on the concept of what is good and what is necessary objectively. Laws, codes, and norms are created to normalize society. But it has been argued by Foucault that this modern world which we are living does not conform to one's needs and wants. The fact is that there is a deprivation of choice and expression of one's will because of the structured way of life. This leads to Foucault's ethics of the care of oneself to be responsive to the individual aesthetic life.

Knowing oneself is notable as an act of one's existence. The practice of freedom is also caring for oneself. There are many ways that this aesthetic existence brings a sense of value to the person. To care for the self is to know who you are and what you are capable of doing, to become your true self. These have more to do with your strengths and weaknesses. By concentrating on your strength, you can work for the best while knowing your weaknesses will open an answer for improvement. It could be how you develop your writing skills, your talents and things you lack for personal development. However, this attempt for self-modification is not a form of deviation but improvement for the sake of your own self.

When this actualization is initiated, there is the possibility of self-actualization as the ground for ethical acts. It means that the true actualization of the self takes place when you reach the learned potentialities that make you better than before. Then you become a moral agent to your personal life. When the care of the self is being valued, there would be radiation of true self in the external aspects. They are in the form of your family, neighbor, and the community. Such value here is not anymore yourself but it is the care for the others. It is like the Kantian prescription of duty to care. In another sense, you will serve as an agent for the promotion of happiness, as the utilitarian's propose. Your self-portraying aspect is expressed consciously to provide a sense of relatedness, of meaning to others that you do not treat them as a means for your welfare. There is still a moral aspect of ethics found in Foucault aesthetics. If the community begins to understand this philosophy, then we do not need to be dependent on the law of society.

The aesthetic ethics of Foucault is distinct from the other study of ethics in that it begins with the self in the form of improvement which is a stylization of one's creativeness as a free individual. An aesthetic-morality is a form of ethical standard that everyone must know first and live.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude that ethics as morality and ethics as aesthetics is inseparable. Foucault's ethics as aesthetics is an artistic stylization of the self and practice of freedom. It entails a concern to value the inherent actual aspect of the self and the other-self. There is no full abandonment of the self and others.

Aesthetic Ethics is concluded in this way: first, ethics as morality is in the form of teleology, deontology and virtue ethics. The traditional understanding of morality is explained in these three forms. An act is determined to be good or evil based on these perspectives. If the person fulfills his duty, then he is moral. But when a certain duty is not fulfilled or actualized, then it becomes immoral.

Second, ethics is a synthesis of aesthetics and morality. Foucault's aesthetic ethics is the practice of a person's freedom, of personal choice and beautiful existence. However, it is also concerned with the duty in society, to seek what is pleasurable and to avoid pain in the greater number of people and to live a virtuous life.

Lastly, ethics is aesthetics in the form of care of the self. This new form of ethics is concerned with caring for oneself by practicing one's free will. This care of the self provides self-awareness, and improvement. Every person must first know himself a thorough examination if there is something to be improved and developed. This is not only for his concern to focus but also for social concern. This means that the concern for caring for the self includes social responsibility.

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