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## Introduction. David Hume's epistemologies of aesthetic experience

Abstract

*When used with regard to aesthetic inquiries prior to the nineteenth century, the concept of "aesthetic experience" is subjected to the criticism of those who consider its a posteriori application illegitimate. At the same time, it seems undeniable that the concept was already present and developed during the 18th century: in particular, among British empiricists. For David Hume, the concept of experience results for many reasons foundational to his aesthetic reflection, especially when analyzed from the perspective of relation/contrast with the question of aesthetic judgment, alongside with the complex dialectical tension to which it gives rise between subjective aesthetic judgment and objective critical evaluation, individual appreciation and social taste, rational and sentimental reaction.*

Keywords

*David Hume, Aesthetic experience, Taste*

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### I. *Some preliminary remarks*

In his *Enquiry concerning human understanding* (1748), David Hume describes the value of experience as follows:

There are a number of circumstances to be taken into consideration in all judgments of this kind; and the ultimate standard, by which we determine all disputes, that may arise concerning them, is always derived from experience and observation. Where this experience is not entirely uniform on any side, it is attended with an unavoidable contrariety in our judgments, and with the same opposition and mutual destruction of argument as in every other kind of evidence. (*EHU*: 81)

In mentioning the relationship between experience and judgment, and the controversies it raises in historical and theoretical terms, this passage offers a useful starting point for reconsidering the meanings the two concepts – especially the former – take on in David Hume's work.

What was thought worth revisiting are the characters, values, and functions Hume attributes to experience not only in the general framework of his "science" of human nature, but also in his inquiry of experience from an aesthetic perspective and in its relation to judgment and aesthetic pleasure. These concepts in Hume must be kept separate despite the sometimes ambiguous similarities of the epistemologies concerning them (Gatti 2011). In Hume's aesthetics, the notion of experience in particular takes on meanings that cannot be flattened to a single definition; on the contrary, in its complex structuring, it actually represents almost an *apax* within 18th-century European aesthetic thought. The preliminary idea that gives rise to this inquiry is that the concept of experience is a kind of core around which other aspects of Hume's aesthetics seem to coagulate; and that it represents in a sense the borghesian *aleph* from which the nature and value of those concepts can most conveniently be observed.

According to a very personal rhetorical strategy which consists in asserting in the premise what will be questioned in the space of a few lines, Hume sets as the foundation of his own mature aesthetics (the one, to be clear, of the *Essays*) the idea that "beauty" is the objectified definition of an individual feeling of pleasure or displeasure which would therefore intervene to define the formal value of the contemplated object or work of art.

Limited to this definition and these aspects, however, Humean theory would be deprived of some of its most vivid and stimulating elements, which proved so fruitful *in sé* and for subsequent aesthetic thought; nor would it adequately account for the tensions that actually inform aesthetic experience according to the Scottish philosopher. Subject-object,

individual-society, reason-sentiment, nature-culture are contrasting issues that the philosopher seeks to dialectically recompose into a coherent unity through conceptual tools drawn from the fields of historicism, theory of mind and social science, among others.

It is often repeated that Hume's aesthetics proceeds to a critical revision and systematization of the theories and debates that had animated the first half of the 18th century; however, never before him had the question of aesthetic experience been subjected to such a thorough attempt to define it. Exemplary in this regard is the question of the assumptions of that particular kind of experience that leads to the definition of beauty, divided between cognitive processes and free sensibility. At the lens of Humean reflection, it is possible to reconstruct the fluctuating trends of thought that inform the many investigations into taste and beauty addressed throughout the first half of the 18th century by its leading theorists, from John Dennis to Joseph Addison, Lord Shaftesbury to Francis Hutcheson, William Hogarth to Edmund Burke.

Indeed, the idea of an aesthetic experience based on "feeling" as an index of specific formal qualities of the objects became more and more firmly established during the 18th century but not without opposition and contrast, and such controversial characters were dealt with also by Hume in his essay *Of the standard of taste* (1757); but even at the beginning of the century there were those who warned that mere individual reaction in no way could be taken as a criterion for judgment. Lord Shaftesbury, for example, in *The moralists* III 2 (1709) had first postulated the existence of an *inward eye* by which even an infant is immediately aware of the aesthetic quality of forms (Shaftesbury 1999b: 111). Yet, he had seen in that natural sensitivity the simple premise for the development of true taste that can only be achieved through the mediation of volition and reason:

What difficulty to be in any degree knowing! How long e'er a true taste is gained! How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledged the highest beauties! For it is not instantly we acquire the sense by which these beauties are discoverable. Labour and pains are required, and time to cultivate a natural genius, ever so apt or forward. But who is there once thinks of cultivating this soil, or of improving any sense or faculty which nature may have given of this kind? (Shaftesbury 1999b: 104-5)

Shaftesbury had insisted on this distinction between the natural sense of beauty and taste only to argue for another distinction that was perhaps more important to him: that between goodness and natural virtue, which are presented respectively in the same terms of natural premise and

progressive intellectual development that fosters the conscious exercise of moral judgment and action (Gatti 2000: 27-46): “And in this case alone it is we call any creature worthy or virtuous”, reads *An inquiry concerning virtue, or merit* I.ii.3 (1699), “when it can have a notion of a publick interest, and can attain the speculation or science of what is morally good or ill, admirable or blameable, right or wrong” (Shaftesbury 1999a: 204).

In this sense, Francis Hutcheson, who took from Shaftesbury the idea of a natural sense of beauty and carried it beyond the rationalistic limits within which the latter had endeavored to keep it, put forward the idea of an *internal sense* which, prompted by the aesthetic properties of the object, would react like any other human sense to the external action of the forms in terms of qualitative recognition (Hutcheson 1725: 7). And although he related that subjective reaction to an objectified formal source such as *unity in variety* (ivi: 15-7) Hutcheson was among the most adamant in upholding the subjective character of aesthetic evaluation, in accordance with a sensistic stance, so to speak, that finds not many other counterparts in 18th-century British thought.

Decidedly informed about the ongoing aesthetic debate in his own time, Hume intervened in the discussions then underway in an attempt to resolve the issue of the complex intersection of feeling and reason in the process of aesthetic evaluation, reluctant, like Shaftesbury, to invalidate the reflexive action of the latter in favor of the spontaneous motions of the former. For this reason, that same judgment which seems to be entrusted to individual sentiment both by philosophy and by common sense, is actually made by Hume to depend for its legitimacy on external and “general” rules. These guarantee not only the validity of the judgment, but also the legitimacy of the feelings involved in the aesthetic experience, which thus takes on characters and values thoroughly discussed by the authors of the essays presented here.

I have tried to show in an earlier study (Gatti 2011) how Hume’s aesthetics allows the concept of experience – conceived not in its contingent actualization (“I am having an aesthetic experience”), but as a past acquisition useful for recognizing here and now the formal qualities of the object – to be taken according to two distinct meanings: 1. experience as familiarity with the kind of beauty on which (formal) judgment is called upon: a notion that responds to Hume’s prescriptions regarding the requirements of the perfect critic; 2. experience as “lived life”, that is, as the acquisition of existential knowledge that enables us to understand and welcome in a more heartfelt and participatory way the emotional content of the poem or painting or piece of music submitted to our judgment.

This second point also finds correspondence in *Of the standard of taste*, where the feelings that make us lean toward one particular author or genre are said to change over the course of a lifetime for reasons that can implicitly be traced to the background of experiences available to readers or observers at different periods of their lives: “A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty” (*SOT*: 193).

It seems to me that these different conceptions of “experience” may also imply a differentiation of aesthetic evaluation, which can be divided into *approval* and *appreciation* depending on whether the experience occurs on a purely cognitive or also on an emotional level (Gatti 2011: 138-40). In the former case, judgment may concern the eminently formal elements of the work; in the latter, content and emotions communicated by the work and intimately shared and felt by the viewer intervene to intensify the aesthetic experience. Only in cases where these emotions are commensurate with the value of the work universally recognized by “experienced” critics do they legitimately contribute to the completeness of the aesthetic experience.

## II. *The development of Humean aesthetics*

What has been said so far is too brief a summary of a problem – the dynamics and processes involved in aesthetic experience – that runs through the overall development of Hume’s aesthetic thought, and finds a much more complex and thoughtful treatment in his writings. It is for this reason that, in order to show the evolution of Hume’s thinking in its foundational aspects, the aesthetics of sympathy in the *Treatise* is often compared with the greater variety and complexity of topics covered in the later *Essays*. In this regard, Eugenio Lecaldano calls into question such an evolutionary interpretation of Hume’s aesthetics, and tries to show how, and to what extent, certain distinctions or asymmetries in the various phases of Humean thought can nevertheless be traced back to a unified and coherent theoretical line. In his view, the aesthetic essays of the 1940s-50s would thus represent the development of the theoretical and methodological premises programmatically advanced in the *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40), and his research on taste must be referred to the philosopher’s professed

intention of keeping his philosophical inquiry within the “science of human nature”. The purpose, advanced by Hume in his famous “Advertisement” to the first edition of the *Treatise*, to devote the later parts (in fact, never realized) of the work to criticism as well as morality and politics (THU: 2) was not properly aborted; it came to maturity over the next two decades in a new, less systematized and more autonomous form, adopted by Hume after the notorious failure of the *Treatise* in the aftermath of its publication, due – according to its author – to the overly specialized and unpopular style of his early work. Continuity should then be sought in the methodological process, aimed at building a science of man on a firmly empirical basis, given the impossibility of defining in metaphysical terms the essence of mind no less than the reality of the external world.

The Humean idea of beauty that emerges from the *Treatise* consists not only of a feeling of pleasure or displeasure that accompanies such passions as pride, humility, love, and desire; but also binds primarily to the imagination, which has a strong bearing on the approval, for example, of objects whose usefulness is easily conceived even if they do not present particular aesthetic qualities to the senses. Both assumptions were later adapted to the theoretical system of the later essays, but from the standpoint of methodological approach Lecaldano notes that the writings following the *Treatise* present “analytical elaborations” but no “substantial changes” compared to his first work (*infra*: 24), running from historicist perspectives, for example in *Of the raise and progress of the arts and sciences* (1742), to political-commercial considerations, as in *Of refinement in the arts* (1742). Nevertheless, it is especially in the psychologistic approach of the essays *Of the standard of taste* and *On tragedy*, both included among the *Four Dissertations* of 1757, that a continuity with the science of human nature of Hume’s early work seems to persist. And it is precisely the entire arc of development of Humean aesthetics that Lecaldano seeks to summarize, up to its later theoretical phase, in which part of the Scottish philosopher’s most fruitful reflection is innervated.

Of course, such analysis is not carried out only in terms of continuity and consistent development. On the contrary, it does not fail to point out some inconsistencies or flaws in the Humean system, identifying a controversial point precisely in the empiricist assumption that, according to much of the critical literature, underlies Hume’s aesthetics. It lurks where the philosopher addresses the question of the moral implications of the artistic work.

The well-known passage in which Hume observes that those texts which describe deplorable customs and habits without blaming epithets

are to be condemned, writes Lecaldano, shows how much the philosopher assumed a normative and moralistic attitude towards the work of art, confusing “is” with “ought”. This exposes him to the same criticism he himself addressed in the *Treatise* to the defenders of prescriptive ethics built on the same logical *non sequitur*. Lecaldano’s interesting observation shows on the one hand that the relationship between aesthetics and morality was still a relevant issue in the second half of the 18th century; on the other hand, it reveals how a rigorous application of Humean principles can bring to light less obvious aspects in the structure of his theoretical system.

### III. *Individual and social values in Hume’s concept of experience*

In order to understand the role of aesthetic experience in Humean reflection, it is not inappropriate to preliminarily make some conceptual specifications. Timothy M. Costelloe directly addresses this issue by pointing out that the notion of experience in Hume implies both subjective and objective valences. Experience presents a private dimension accessible to the subject alone, who has personal awareness of the contents of his own perception and thought. At the same time, however, it seems not only to consist of those self-referential contents, but also to involve “social” elements such as historical-cultural mediation, shared mindset and language. In these terms, the distinction between individual and social epistemology discussed by Goldman and O’Connor (2021) can usefully be applied to Hume’s thought in order to show how the social value of experience in his theoretical system is greater than his empiricism has led to believe so far. Costelloe admits that it would perhaps be anachronistic to claim that Hume was advancing a full and conscious proposal for social epistemology in the terms advanced by Goldman and O’Connor. However, some passages in his works do not stray too far from the demands of social epistemology, such as the role of others in the formation of individual beliefs and opinions (Traiger 2010), and the presence in the *Treatise* itself of “trans-individual” language according to which the philosopher speaks in terms of “our experiences”, and “we learn thus...” (*infra*: 44). For Hume, much of what we know and believe often depends on what is stated or reported by others. And what happens in the realm of experience in general is also reflected in that of aesthetic experience, and in the notion of taste in particular. The famous episode of Sancho’s hogshead (*SOT*: 186) highlights, on the one hand, the objective component of aesthetic experience, which emerges from the fact that a more reliable standard of evaluation (that of

the two experts) exists regardless of whether someone rejects it or ignores it on the basis of mere personal impression; on the other hand, it shows that the truth of judgment is promoted not on the individual level but on publicly verifiable facts (the finding of the objects at the bottom of the hogshead). Thus, the verdict of the real critic, like testimony in general, becomes a source of our knowledge and subjective judgment regarding the aesthetic value of something. Both can change depending on the critic's positive or negative opinion, especially when this is demonstrated on objective grounds: such might be the case when an art expert tells us that we are admiring a painting that is actually a bad copy of a far better original. Costelloe observes that even common sense in Hume is considered according to two different hermeneutics. The first holds that there is no dispute over taste and that beauty is defined by individual feeling, and this can be seen as a kind of subjective epistemology; an opposite kind of common sense, on the other hand, refers to a generally accepted critical tradition and reflects the shared idea that some artists are better than others.

The dialectical overcoming of the opposition between individual and social, however, occurs through the second moment: the standard of taste referred to by Hume is formed through the observation of what "has been universally found to please in all countries and in all ages" (*SOT*: 184). The figure of the true critic himself is fundamental to understanding this process, because it is with his peers that he forms the standard of taste; and the testimony of the expert, where his verdict proves true, forms the belief and knowledge of others. Of course, the correspondence between testimony and true critic may be subject to criticism, but for Costelloe it remains certain in the end that, unless there are well-founded grounds for questioning it, we tend to trust critics and their verdict. Finally, the critic's own freedom from prejudice consists in silencing personal aversions or inclinations in order to express an impartial and generally agreeable opinion.

#### IV. *Hume's contextualism*

Crucial to contemporary inquiry into the nature of aesthetic experience is the question of the aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties involved in judgment. In the essay presented here Theodore Gracyk reads Hume as an *ante litteram* defender of complex contextualism concerning aesthetic properties, and a forerunner of the theories of Kendall Walton, who in *Categories of Art* (1970) offered one of the most relevant and thorough investigations on the subject.

Elements of continuity between the two authors are found in the idea that aesthetic perception changes according to the psychological differences of viewers. Familiarity with a certain kind of beauty makes perception finer (and more reliable) and, to this end, it can be educated and refined through practice. What Hume and Walton have in common is the idea – attesting to their contextualism – that historical data about artwork are nonaesthetic properties underlying aesthetic ones. In *Of the standard of taste* Hume actually warns that it is necessary to place a work historically within its own time in order to provide an evaluative perspective that is not affected by the prejudices of decidedly changed views regarding content or style (*SOT*: 190).

It is precisely a contextualist sensibility – more developed in the experienced critic – that gives validity to the judgment, since to disregard historical data about the work of art would mean failing to grasp its standard, contra-standard and variable nonaesthetic properties and, consequently, its aesthetic properties as well. This would invalidate a reading of Hume as an exponent of an *ante litteram* form of aesthetic empiricism, according to which the evaluation of a work of art involves only the visible elements and not the historical circumstances underlying it.

A relevant question addressed by Gracyk concerns the role of imagination in aesthetic experience. Referring to Stephanie Ross' assertion that imaginative fluency should be added to the requirements of the Humean true critic (Ross 2020), Gracyk points out that this assumption is actually already present in *Of the standard of taste*. Speaking about artistic creation, Hume actually warns that rules should not restrain the artist's imagination; on the other hand, from the point of view of fruition, Hume argues from Sancho's hogshead anecdote that the delicacy of the true judge's sentiment essentially coincides with the delicacy of imagination, a "metaphorical" name for taste (*infra*: 70). Such delicacy is not connatural to man, being the result of education and training aimed at developing the ability to detect the aesthetic properties of the work of art. "Hume's discussion of delicacy is therefore another variant of the Waltonian position concerning training as a prerequisite to detection of category-influenced aesthetic properties", writes Gracyk. "Consequently, fluency of imagination is built into the traits of true judges" (*infra*: 71).

Gracyk demonstrates that even outside the artistic realm, the aesthetic properties of an object produced by a craftsman, or by nature itself, actually depend on *imagined* non-aesthetic properties, quickly associated with the sight of the object: such is the case with utility as the basis of

aesthetic appreciation. The same can be said in the case of artistic objects, the purpose of which we must “carry constantly in our view” (*SOT*: 190) for a complete understanding of the aesthetic value of the work. It is the imagination that enables us to grasp the intended audience, the author’s purposes, the ends pursued by the work, without which we would fail to understand the reasons for the work’s existence – and for its existence *so-and-so*.

Given the theoretical similarities of Hume and Walton, Gracyk emphasizes at least one point on which the two authors’ views diverge. In Hume the thick concepts are at once descriptive and evaluative, in contrast to the position of contemporary critics, Walton included, who tend instead to deprive those concepts of evaluative connotations. According to Gracyk, the terms of aesthetic properties in Hume have an evaluative character because when a perceptual complex gives rise to a specific emotional response, its aesthetic properties are expressed by terminology which refer to a feeling of approval or rejection. In terms such as “elegant”, “cold”, and “ugly”, description and evaluation are fused together just as they are in our experience of those aesthetic properties. With its complex analysis of the themes briefly summarized here, Gracyk’s essay offers the reader an opportunity to observe the extent to which contemporary aesthetic categories allow for an updated and original reading of Hume’s writings.

#### *IV. The standard of taste and its dialectics*

The opposition between proponents of objectivist or subjectivist instances has long informed the debate on the notion of aesthetic experience in Hume. Giovanni Battista Soda takes a stand on this issue by rejecting an interpretation of Hume’s aesthetics in terms of rigid subjectivism, as well as the idea that the Scottish philosopher should be seen as the hypostasis of relativist and skeptical positions. Hume’s conception of taste, in fact, does not imply an actual opposition, but rather a dialectical tension between a “sensistic” approach and general norms. To understand this issue, it seems appropriate to proceed in two directions: namely, to ascertain how the human mind comes to establish a rule, or standard, of taste (objectivity); and how this in turn affects the human mind (subjectivity).

Soda argues that in Hume’s philosophy, rules influence and modify human beliefs and actions, which are thus regulated not only by a purely personal vision but also by universally shared canons. General rules arise

from a process of abstraction aimed at removing all that is merely contingent, and they are established on the basis of what the author calls the *tendency* of a set of cases. In the case of the rules of taste, Soda identifies as foundational the aforementioned “end or purpose” of the work (*SOT*: 190), which performs the function of giving unity to its components. The recognition of that end is the proper task of the true critic, whose judgment, formulated on the basis of a general rule, then acts on the mind of the spectator, creating a sort of “belief” which can modify the idea he had of the aesthetic value of an object. In the act of *believing*, the subject agrees with the shared rule: this is how subjective and collective elements, once again, bind together within the aesthetic experience, with all that this entails in terms of education and connections between taste and cultural history.

Hume advances the idea that the whole history of civilization was made possible by laws, which have been replacing the individual whim of the sovereign (cfr. Livingston 1998, and McArthur 2005, both quoted *infra*: 98); in the field of art, progress is made through patterns and prescriptions from tradition that somehow regulate the artist’s personal and free creativity. The prerogative of past models to influence the mindset of the contemporary public and critics is precisely an effect of the dialectical structure of taste, whose subjective dimension is nevertheless maintained in the influence it exerts in turn on the mind and beliefs of the individual.

Even in those essays that do not focus specifically on aesthetics, Hume shows how taste plays a considerable role – along with philosophy – in freeing men from superstition and enthusiasm. In the last section of the *Standard of taste* Hume strives to emphasize that art, when judged according to established rules, can lead to the disdain of religious fanaticism and excesses (especially religious ones) that may have inspired the artist in his composition. In Hume’s work, taste is thus a point of intersection between aesthetic conceptions, ethico-political theories and philosophy of experience.

#### *V. Hume and contemporary critical trends*

The 18th century was “the century of taste”, according to a famous definition by George Dickie, and the proliferation of essays on aesthetics from that era challenges the historian of ideas, who, far from having a paucity of evidence on that cultural period, actually has far too much.

This proliferation was brought about by the practices of aesthetic judgment that had become increasingly common during the 18th century (the public of the Salons, the spread of popular literature, the new interest of the masses in art). In such turmoil one of the most pressing problems became finding a way to establish the correctness of aesthetic opinions; this issue was addressed by Hume himself, who proceeded to outline a phenomenology of the true critic and its characters or requirements. However, the importance of Hume's reflection in the field of aesthetics can also be measured on his ability to anticipate some critical trends of the 20th century, which Giacomo Fronzi has accounted for by tracing some Humean suggestions in the theoretical systems of Theodor W. Adorno, Hans Robert Jauss and George Dickie.

As for Adorno, a revival of Humean topics can be found in his idea of the critic as a repository of aesthetic truths and reliability in terms of evaluation. In his theory about the listener, Adorno starts from a problem similar to Hume's: finding a method, or rule, that allows the listener to develop a reliable taste and avoid errors in terms of aesthetic evaluation.

The continuity between Hume's standard of taste and Adorno's theory of the social function of the true critic lies in the fact that both authors affirm the rarity of correct taste and the decisive function of criticism in identifying the truth of the artwork, its social value and, in Adorno's case, its possibilities for future developments. For Adorno, all this is hidden deep within the work of art, and only the experienced observer can identify it with certainty. For his own part, the Scottish philosopher also considered it essential to criticism to understand the truth of the work of art, represented by the end or purpose which must be grasped in order to judge its consistent and satisfactory realization by the artist. Further echoes of Humean aesthetics also seem to resonate in Adorno's description of the true critic.

Addressing the issue of the truth and value of the work of art, Jauss engaged in a critical debate challenging Adorno's view of a degenerated aesthetic praxis as a result of the culture industry. In Adorno's view, the omnipotence of the ideological apparatus can be resisted only by works that deny themselves to a general enjoyment; as well as by the solitary spectator who does not participate in the aesthetic pleasure of the masses. On the contrary, Jauss tends to privilege the intersubjective and relational moment of art fruition, and offers a model of aesthetic experience conceived as liberation *from* and *for* something, to be accomplished in the realm of productivity (consciousness creates a world as its own

work), receptivity (consciousness offers the possibility of a different perception of the world), and agreement with the judgment demanded by the work (*infra*: 124). Against the backdrop of this general framework, Fronzi points out that Jauss's aesthetics of reception actually finds an early origin in Hume, whose work bears witness to a decisive shift from the aesthetics of production (typical of many 16th-17th century treatises) to an aesthetics of the "spectator" – although, it must be said, a similar transition has informed 18th-century aesthetic debate since the days of Shaftesbury and Addison.

Finding similarities between Hume's aesthetic thought and Dickie's is somewhat more difficult because, in general, for the philosophers of the 1960s the question of aesthetic judgment was less compelling than that of defining art. But Dickie's institutional theory of art finds a kind of anticipation in what might be called Hume's institutional theory of taste, according to which a work can aspire to be classified as "beautiful" (and our judgment is correct in regarding it as such) if and only if a critical tradition formed by experts endowed with the requisites enumerated by Hume agrees in that verdict. Thus, for both philosophers, although two centuries apart, only at the end of an evaluative process whose protagonists are true "experts" and critics there will be, on the one hand, the definition of a formal datum as "beautiful", and, on the other, its categorization as "art".

In conclusion, much remains to be done to bring out the heterogeneous aspects of Hume's conception of aesthetic experience, if it is to be investigated in its epistemologies, dialectics, evolutions, and anticipations. These aspects have been subjected to an initial systematization here in order to open up further directions of inquiry into Hume's ever-living and compelling thought.

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