



The problem of psychophysical agency in the classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the issue of psychophysical agency in the context of Indian philosophy, focusing on the oldest preserved texts of the classical tradition of Sāṃkhya-Yoga. The author raises three major questions: What is action in terms of *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (ca. fifth century CE) and *Yogasūtra* (ca. third century CE)? Whose action is it, or what makes one an agent? What is a right and morally good action? The first part of the paper reconsiders a general idea of action — including actions that are deliberately done and those that ‘merely’ happen — identified by Patañjali and Īśvarakṛṣṇa as a permanent change or transformation (*pariṇāma*) determined by the universal principle of causation (*satkārya*). Then, a threefold categorization of actions according to their causes is presented, *i.e.* internal agency (*ādhyātmika*), external agency (*ādbi-bhautika*) and ‘divine’ agency (*ādbidaivika*). The second part of the paper undertakes the problem of the agent’s autonomy and the doer’s psychophysical integrity. The main issues that are exposed in this context include the relationship between an agent and the agent’s capacity for perception and cognition, as well as the crucial Sāṃkhya-Yoga distinction between ‘a doer’ and ‘the self’. The agent’s self-awareness and his or her moral self-esteem are also briefly examined. Moreover, the efficiency of action in present and future is discussed (*i.e.* *karman*, *karmāśaya*, *saṃskāra*, *vāsanā*), along with the criteria of a right act accomplished through meditative insight (*samādhi*) and moral discipline (*yama*).

KEYWORDS

action; agency; Indian philosophy; psychophysical integrity; mental causation; *karman*

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WHO UNDERTAKES ACTION AND WHY?

The problem of psychophysical agency provokes numerous questions. Here, I will focus only on three basic issues to expose the view of Sāṃkhya and Yoga,¹ two closely related philosophical schools that emerged in ancient India. The questions to be considered in the context of these two classical Hindu *darśanas* are as follows: What is action in terms of *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (ca. fifth century CE) and *Yogasūtra* (ca. third century CE)?² Whose action is it, or what makes one an agent? What is a right and morally good action according to Sāṃkhya and Yoga thinkers?³

When seeking the answers to these questions, I argue that agency — as it is conceptualized by the philosophical tradition which is the subject matter of this study — should not be identified with personhood or selfhood, nor should it be motivated by the expected results of one's actions. My claim is that what challenges the Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophical perspective on action is the empowering of agency by revealing the agent's determinants and by 'imprinting' the right perceptual modes and behavioural procedures onto the agent's mind. These right modes and procedures are to prevent the self from being identified with the ego, or current 'doer', and to liberate the self from the illusionary engagement in 'voluntary action'.

Before we discuss agency in terms of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, let us first refer to some basic distinctions made in the contemporary philosophy of the mind. It will be helpful in situating the Indian view and will allow us to capture its specificity in contrast to the popular western conceptualization. As Alvin L. Goldman notices, a central question in the philosophy of action is what distinguishes human actions from events or doings in general (Goldman, 1994: 117). A standard answer to this inquiry appeals to a causal theory of action. Genuine actions or deeds are said to be deliberately done or undertaken to bring about some change in the world. They are events with a distinctive internal cause, such as intention, volition, belief or desire. In contrast, other events 'merely' happen to us, such as being rained on, falling down or snoring, and do not fall into the category of action because they are not caused by the suitable intentions or desires of the agent.⁴

¹ Sāṃkhya and Yoga are traditionally recognized in the history of Indian thought as two of six philosophical schools (Skr. *darśanas*) of the orthodox or brahmanical tradition, although they undoubtedly arose from common roots and the earliest doxographies do not identify Yoga as a separate school (Nicholson, 2011: 144).

² Apart from the oldest preserved texts of the classical system of Yoga (*i.e.* *Yogasūtra*, ca. third century CE) and Sāṃkhya (*i.e.* *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, ca. fifth century CE), both of which are the main subject of this article, I utilize the principle commentaries of Vyāsa (ca. fourth to fifth century CE), Gauḍapāda (ca. sixth to seventh century CE), Vācaspati Miśra (ca. ninth to tenth century CE) and the anonymous commentary called *Yuktidīpikā* (ca. seventh to eighth century CE) as primary sources.

³ For a general introduction to the idea of good in Indian thought, see Mohanty, 1999: 290–303.

⁴ This popular theory of action, however, faces some difficulties. For instance, some causal relationships between the mental events of the agent and his or her behavioural upshots are apparently unpredictable or inconsistent, which seriously shakes the

When we look closer at the concept of action as it is exposed in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (further referred to as YS) and in the *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* (further referred to as SK) of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, we can find no clear distinction between intentional human doings and events that 'merely happen'. Instead, we come across quite a different categorization indicating an alternative approach. The fundamental category in this context is 'transformation' (*pariṇāma*), covering both human actions as well as all worldly events or happenings in general. The Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition develops the doctrine of world transformation as the unified conception of change and grounds it in the general assumption that there is no essential, or ontological, difference between these two kinds of doings because both human actions and worldly events undergo the same kind of natural conditioning.⁵ In his commentary on YS, called the *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* III.13 (further referred to as YSBH), Vyāsa claims that every change is, in fact, nothing but the transformation of qualities (*dharmas*) which are always inherent in the substratum of qualities (*dharmin*), both in the knowable and the knower, and does not affect the substance (*dravya*) itself. The change of the *dharmas* may be threefold: (1) it can stand for the succession of the essential qualities of a substance (*dharmā-pariṇāma*); (2) it can refer to the sequence of the temporal qualities within a particular owner of the properties, *i.e.* *dharmin* (*lakṣana-pariṇāma*); (3) it can also mean the change of state or intensity of the present quality (*avasthā-pariṇāma*). Thus, every change, including human intentional doing, results in the change of properties (*dharmas*) which are modified only in the sense of changing their mode of existence (*bhāva*). Furthermore, according to Īśvarakṛṣṇa, every change undergoes the universal principle of causation, called *satkārya* (SK 9), where the effect is inherent in a cause and exists even before the casual operation. In other words, action brings to existence what has always potentially existed and did not only come into existence after the particular agent began to desire something or even came into existence itself. Therefore, no action can result in something that is of a different essence than its cause because action only transforms the unmanifested (*avyakta*) into the manifested (*vyakta*). The followers of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga doctrine of causation (*satkāryavāda*) claim the following: first, an effect is inherent in a cause due to the fact that non-being can produce or do nothing; second, the effect is made up of the same material as the cause; third, a specific cause is only

concept of volition. A classic example of such a 'wayward' causal chain, given by Donald Davidson, is a climber who holds another man on a rope and whose great desire to rescue his companion might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold (Davidson, 1980a: 79). The climber's action, though caused by his desire, is not something he intentionally or voluntarily does. Another example of a 'whimsical' causal chain could be 'akratic' action, or weakness of will, which is an action in which the agent intentionally does something against his better judgment, something that runs directly counter to his predominant desire or declared intention (Davidson, 1980b: 21–42; Mele, 2000b: 3–24; Mele, 2003: 76–79).

⁵ This natural, or in other words, 'physical' (from Gr. *physis*), conditioning of the objective reality is closely related to the genuine Sāṃkhyan idea of a perpetual dynamic interrelationship between three primordial constituents (*triguṇas*) of nature (*prakṛti*).

able to produce a specific effect (Keith, 1918: 73–74). Using a phrase from SK 15, transformation (*pariṇāma*),⁶ apart from being a process of the emergence of qualities, should also be understood as ‘separation’ and ‘distinction’ between the cause and its effect (*kāraṇa-kārya-vibhāga*).

The mutability of worldly events and our doings is determined by the combination and interactivity of three uncaused and eternal *guṇas*, or ‘strands’, namely *sattva* (which accounts for thought and intelligibility and is experienced as pleasure, thinking, clarity or detachment), *rajas* (which accounts for motion and activity and is experienced as craving, suffering or attachment) and *tamas* (which accounts for restraint and inertia and is experienced as delusion, dullness or depression) (SK 12, 13; Larson, 1979: 244–245; Jakubczak, 2003: 136–139). They may be interpreted on two levels: (1) as the material constituents or factors of physical reality (*prakṛti*), such as illumination, activation and heaviness, respectively, and also (2) as the psychic or moral conditions of action, such as pleasure, pain and indifference. Now, what seems really significant for the Sāṃkhya-Yoga approach is the equalization of the metaphysical status of external events, human doings and experiential responses to action. Thus, all of them, including the agent, undergo the same indiscrete and homogenous natural *triguṇic* conditioning.

However, this very broad sense of ‘activity’ or ‘doing’ as pervasive change (*pariṇāma*) being just the manifestation of a thing’s (previously latent) properties, including, for example, a stone’s involuntary fall into a river or the intentional throwing of a stone at a person, is definitely not sufficient when it comes to the discussion of moral issues. This kind of ‘agency’ (*kartr̥tva*) implies a capacity for reflection, and choice brings an additional context to the causal relationship, which is captured by the notion of *karman* in all the classical schools of Indian philosophy — Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina. As Roy W. Perrett emphasizes, the term *karman* originally referred to properly performed ritual action, but it was later ethicized to include any kind of correct activity, and the law of *karman* gained the meaning of:

[...] an impersonal system where [...] one’s present circumstances are the fruit of the seed of one’s past deeds, and one’s present deeds are planting seeds which will come to fruition in one’s future circumstances⁷ (Perrett, 1998: 64).

⁶ The earliest reference to the idea of spontaneous cosmic transformation occurs in pre-systematic Indian thought (ca. eighth to sixth century BCE) in *Maitrī Upaniṣad* VI.10 (*tri-guṇa-bheda-pariṇāmatvat*) and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.4–5, where the three *guṇas* are identified with fire (*rajas*), water (*sattva*) and earth (*tamas*) and with three colours, respectively: red, white and dark (or black). Thus, ‘everything is threefold and so all three elements exist in everything’ (*Chāndogya* VI.5.4: *sarvasya trivṛt-kṛta-tvāt sarvatra sarvopapattēḥ*). As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan notes, the Sāṃkhya system takes over the parallel of the *guṇas* through the colours discussed in *Chāndogya* (Radhakrishnan in: *The principal Upaniṣads*, 1953: 451–453).

⁷ A succinct discussion of the philosophical origins of the doctrine of *karman* is provided by Ganeri (Ganeri, 2007: 223–228).

WHO IS THE AGENT?

It is necessary for the agent, that is the being who is capable of performing an action that can undergo normative evaluation and be assessed as ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’, ‘good’ or ‘wrong’, to have the capacity to act voluntarily and take responsibility for his or her deeds (*karman*). The majority of classical Indian philosophers accepted that one’s *karmic* inheritance determines the range of options one has in his or her present life. They also ‘seek to articulate the role of human effort in light of both the causal weight of the past and the complicated set of current relationships that impinge upon individual agency’ (Dasti, 2014: 5). As far as volition is concerned, Yoga thinkers argue that any voluntary act or conscious intention, when translated into action, turns immediately into an involuntary factor of the future action, recorded as a ‘latent impression’ (*saṃskāra*),⁸ and then arises spontaneously as thoughts or fluctuations of the mind (*cittavṛtti*) to give an impulse to another desire, intention and action which will inevitably be preserved as a subsequent *saṃskāra* of the same kind to become an impulse of... and so on and so forth. This is how Patañjali explains the inescapable limitation of agency caused by the constant interaction between conscious and voluntary acts, on one hand, and subconscious inclinations, habitual behaviours and instinctive or automatic activities⁹ on the other. In light of the conception of mutual conditioning between actual doings and their latent imprints — which stand for, at the same time, a cause and effect of one’s volitions — the concept of ‘free will’ seems rather thin. Because even the most intimate desires (*rāga*) or aversions (*dveṣa*) are virtually conditioned, if not determined, by our previous actions, bearing fruit in the form of seemingly ‘spontaneous’ wishes motivating our actions, we should not overemphasize the sovereignty of volition in describing the nature of agency. Our will can hardly be considered free as long as our voluntary choice, and the act of decision, is determined by the latent trace of our previous actions (*saṃskāras*) in the form of our preferences, aversions, desires, fears, perceptual and behavioural attitudes *etc.* In other words, one’s will is never fully or really free before one has liberated oneself from the *karmic* inheritance of past deeds, and this may only be achieved by eradicating ignorance (*avidyā*) of the ultimate nature of reality, including the mechanism of human agency. This liberation from the past determinants of our own activity is identified by Sāṃkhya and Yoga thinkers with the final spiritual goal of *kaivalya*, *i.e.* ‘oneness’, the perfect isolation or emancipation, which implies detachment from all *saṃsāric* involvement and the natural *triṅguṇic* conditioning. Having achieved this purpose, the fruit of action is no longer desired by the agent.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the concept of *saṃskāra* in classical Yoga, see Whicher, 2005: 601–630.

⁹ Many complex actions, especially those which require a longer period of time to be mastered, such as typing, driving or playing the piano, become automatic. What makes them different from voluntary acts is that they do not seem to be preceded by any plan or intention to perform their subsequent phases, like typing a single letter or playing a single note.

Therefore, what seems more important is to figure out why one actually desires what one desires and how to achieve it.

Nevertheless, Yoga can by no means do completely without the concept of will. On the contrary, the yogic meditative discipline, if undertaken intensively and for a long period of time, can enable the Yoga practitioner not only to take control over his or her conscious processes and sensory-motor activities, but also to extend them to the involuntary physiological, habitual or automatic activities of the vital forces (*prāṇas*). Hence this relatively low significance of will in an average action does not rule out the extreme strength of volition that Patañjali ascribes to the agent in the meditative mode of consciousness.

If we focus on the regular and common mode of consciousness, the doer tends to perceive the continuous change of events either with *sattvic* understanding and insight, *rajasic* agitation and pain or *tamasic* dullness and ignorance. All these individual attitudes towards the result of doings may be identified with the elementary forms of experience (*bhoga*), namely pleasure and suffering. In the very first *karikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa's treatise, we learn that the basic motivation for seeking liberation is the torment of threefold suffering. Now, if we discuss threefold misery (*duḥkhatraya*) in terms of the philosophy of action, which in the Indian context inevitably involves the doctrine of *karman*, every experience of an individual — be it suffering or pleasure — is predetermined by his or her past actions. Thus, having consulted the oldest commentaries on SK (*Gauḍapādabhāṣya* in: *Sāṃkhya-kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa...*, 1964: 37–39; and *Suvarṇasaptati...*, 1932: 2–3), which agreeably elucidate the meaning of *duḥkhatraya*, we can distinguish between three causes of doings that result in painful and unwanted sensations: (1) internal (*ādhyātmika*), (2) external (*ādhibhautika*) and (3) divine or, in other words, coming from heaven (*ādhidaivika*). The internal cause includes both bodily and mental actions; bodily (*śārīra*) misery, such as fever, dysentery *etc.*, that arises from the disorder of wind, bile or phlegm may be of interest to medical science, while mental misery (*mānasa*) is related to will in the form of desire or aversion because it is a result of separation from what is dear or involvement with that which is disliked. The external actions cover both the intentional doings of other men and instinctive doings caused by the fear or desire of other living beings such as birds, serpents and mosquitoes, as well as accidental events caused by unmoving objects such as trees and stones. Finally, by superhuman actions 'caused by the heavens', the commentators mean all events and happenings caused by celestial phenomena¹⁰ such as the cold, wind, rain, thunder or lighting. In his *Tattvakaumudī*, Vācaspati Miśra notices that despite the hundreds of obvious remedies for misery caused by all sorts of actions, like medicine prescribed by a physician against bodily pain, the objects of enjoyment which comfort those whose suffer are produced by mental action or expert knowledge which is useful in eliminating external pain, as well as 'charms, incarnations and the rest' that help us to avoid superhuman troubles; in the end, we still need a final means to ultimately liberate us from the unwanted

¹⁰ This category may nowadays be identified with climatic or global conditioning.

results of action and change (TK in: *The Tattva-kaumudī...*, 1965: 5–7). This superior method is the insight knowledge which discriminates between the realm of change, including both potential or unmanifest (*avyakta*) and manifest (*vyakta*, SK 2) change, and the realm of inactive and immutable knower, being the principle of consciousness, *i.e.* the self (*puruṣa*).

Now, in an effort to answer the question ‘Who is the agent?’, or in other words, ‘How does the self relate to action?’, we should emphasize that the one who apparently has capacity to act is not the true self (*puruṣa*) according to Sāṃkhya and Yoga. First, this is because voluntary acts are undertaken by a dynamic and complex mind — *citta* in YS or *antaḥkaraṇa* in SK — within the realm of continual transformation (*prakṛti*). Second, this is because it is not the self who takes responsibility¹¹ for action by consuming its results. In other words, the self, being pure consciousness, cannot possess any *karman* that might affect it. Thus, who actually faces the music? The real carrier of *karman* is the ego-maker (*ahaṃkāra*), or the ‘I’ sense, which is opposed to the self in ontological terms. The sense of ‘I’ stands for incorrect self-identity, which is identifying one’s mind and body, *i.e.* the ego with the self. It implies the imposition of egotism (*abbimāna*), ‘I-am-ness’ (*asmitā*) and ‘mine-ness’ (*mamakāra*) on each experience or action that one undertakes.

In YSBH III.12, the mind (*citta*) is defined as *dharmīn*, or the owner of the features, both those which are given and not given in experience (*paridrṣta-āparidrṣta*). Thus, it is *citta* that perceives and acknowledges the features (*dharma*s) of objects. In contrast, the self (*puruṣa*) is understood as a non-objectified ultimately or genuinely subjective realm. Among the arguments given by SK 17 for the existence of *puruṣa*, there is the need of the enjoyer (*bhoktr*) of objects who must be apart from or opposite to the *guṇas*: *triguṇādviparyayād adhiṣṭānāt* (Larson, 1979: 261). Besides, no feature can be ascribed to the absolute self (*puruṣa*) because its predication is based on its inherent nature and not on the relationship between the self and its attributes. Any attempt to ascribe a feature to the true self (*puruṣa*) is defined by Vyāsa (YSBH I.9) in terms of conceptualization (*vikalpa*), which is an entirely verbal cognition that is empty of the object. Thus, from the statement ‘consciousness (*caitanya*) is the nature of the self (*puruṣa*)’ (YSBH I.9), one may wrongly imply that the self is a bearer of the feature of ‘*cit*’, while consciousness is *puruṣa* itself (*i.e.* *svarūpa*), not its attribute. That is why the true self (*puruṣa*) should be defined as *adharmin*, or featureless, contrary to the empirical self (*citta*), which is the actual owner of the features.

The *sattvic dharmas*, or features of the mind (*citta*), are only efficient in calming it down towards the final restraint of all fluctuations of the mind (*cittavṛtti*). Only the non-afflicted (*akliṣṭa*) fluctuations of a valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) result in liberation (*kaivalya*) from suffering (*duḥkha*) and ignorance (*avidyā*), states Patañjali in YS I.5.

¹¹ By ‘responsibility’, I mean here the ability to receive any kind of retribution or reward that the doer is to expect as a result of his or her previous activity.

WHAT MAKES ACTION SATISFACTORY FOR THE SELF?

To comprehend what makes an action right, we need to reconsider two more specific questions: (1) What makes action satisfactory for the self? (2) How should the right action be accomplished? First, we need to look at the terms closely related to human 'action' that occur in the texts of Sāṃkhya and Yoga. Two obvious and synonymous notions used in the *Yogasūtra* and *Sāṃkhyakarikā* are 'kriyā' and 'karman'. While the term 'kriyā' refers to any 'doing', 'performing', 'acting' or 'change' involved in the operation of *guṇa rajās*, the notion 'karman' stands for 'actions' that are the subject of moral evaluation, such as merits (*puṇya*) and demerits (*spuṇya*). Significantly, *karman* deposit (that is, the moral consequences of one's deeds) is preserved in the form of latent imprints (*saṃskāras*) in one's mind, which are to bear fruit in a future life. Thus, one's deeds are rooted in the afflictions (*kleśas*) caused by ignorance of the doer, and as long as the accumulated afflictions remain at the root of one's mind, the latent impressions of past actions (*karmāśayas*) are capable of producing another birth in the body of a particular species (*jāti*), determining the duration of existence (*āyus*) and conditioning the experience of pleasure and pain (*bhoga*) according to the virtuous and vicious actions that were previously performed (YS II.12–13).

Patañjali distinguishes two kinds of *karmāśayas*: those which must mature as they cannot produce complete results without being influenced by others (*aniyata-vipāka*), and those which become known (*vedanīya*) and bear fruit in the present life (*niyata-vipāka*, YS & YSBH II.12). Moreover, when the consequences of a single latent impression of action take place, another latent imprint based on the experienced feeling becomes a stronger subconscious latency called *vāsanā*, understood as a permanent disposition, instinct or habitual activity derived from many previous lives in which one repeated a given type of activity.¹² But most importantly, each immature impression of *karman* must inevitably bear its fruit, unless it is destroyed or deactivated by a contrary action or counteraction (*pratipakṣa bhāvana*) or by a proper insight (*pramāṇa*). For instance, the vicious *karmāśaya* born of latency arising out of anger is destroyed by the habit born of persistent practice of non-anger and benevolence or by insight into the destructive nature of this emotion, which results in a complete renunciation of anger. Another strategy for weakening perverse immoral inclinations, called *yama*, consists of giving up any wrongdoing, like injuring, lying, stealing, engaging in sexual indulgences and grasping objects of enjoyment. The practice of *niyama*, which is observance and persistent repetition (*jāpa*), aims to strengthen the right aspects of our bodily-mental nature, such as cleanness, contentment, mental and physical discipline, recitation and concentration on Īśvara.

According to its consequences, which are subjectively felt as pleasure or pain, action (*karman*) is divided into four types in YS IV.7: (1) white or that which

¹² One of the commentators says that '*karmāśaya* is like a seed, and *vāsanā* is like a field, or the birth and embodiment — determined by the latter — is like a tree while experience of pleasure and pain — produced by the former — is like its fruits' (Harihārananda Āranya, 2000: 147).

brings happiness; (2) black or giving pain; (3) white-and-black; and (4) neither white nor black (*aśuklakṛṣṇa*), which leads to neither happiness nor sorrow. The actions of an advanced *yogin* belong to the fourth category and are meant to be the best kind of actions one can undertake. Now, we can see even better how a particular action serves the self (*puruṣārtha*), or, in other words, what makes an action satisfactory in the greater scheme of things. Clearly, this sense of 'satisfaction' must not be confused with that what is enjoyable for the agent, or the 'I-maker' (*abamkāra*). The latter does his or her best to avoid pain and stick to happiness rather than go beyond both, which is the purpose of the *yogin*, the one who approaches liberation (*kaivalya*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

CONCLUSION

What challenges the Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophy of action is the empowering of agency by displaying the agent's determinants and by 'imprinting' in the agent's mind the right perceptual and behavioural procedures which prevent the self (*puruṣa*, *cit*) from being identified with the ego (*abam*, *citta*), or current 'doer', and from engaging oneself in 'ownership' of voluntary action. However, the key problem seems to arise in the following: How should such a right action be accomplished when there are two opposite tendencies within a human being? This dilemma is solved by the subordination of action to insightful perception. Both classical *darśanas*, Sāṃkhya and Yoga, recognize a strict correlation between liberation and true knowledge — the knowledge of the inner subjective conditioning, including subconscious latent factors or motivators, rather than the external circumstances of doings. Only when one has captured the mechanism of self-conditioning by one's own actions can one begin modifying the burdensome nature of doing. The crucial task is to de-condition one's actions or to transform their causal chains so that the agent may shift to a different perceptual procedure — thanks to the meditative mode of consciousness — and consequently endure the right behavioural procedure based on the non-egotist perspective. Though the empirical ego (*abam*) is the agent until ignorance is ultimately overcome, its action should become less and less focused on the 'mine-ness' (*mamakāra*) of one's will and more automatic or ritual-like. We could also call such a satisfactory right action ignorance- and doubt-free, or egolessly spontaneous, effortless and indispensable.

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