

DREAMS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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Loving is a way of knowing, and for loving to know, it must personify. Personifying is thus a way of knowing, especially knowing what is invisible, hidden in the heart.

James Hillman¹

Introductory Remarks

Perhaps the most appropriate question to ask prior to attempting a study of the phenomenon of dreams, would be, *is there a point at all to dreaming?* In other words, do dreams have something important to tell us about ourselves and our inner, for the most part hidden, mental life, or are they just fanciful products of the biological state of sleep? Ever since the pioneer work of Freud and Jung on the subject we have no doubt that dreams are rich in insights about ourselves and our innermost identity. Thus, the present concern is with ways by which we can extract the most out of a dream, and here I will present James Hillman's² holistic approach to dream interpretation as a successful psycho-analytic tool in the unending struggle toward self-knowledge.

It is true that nowadays, of course, no study of dreams can afford to dispense with an account, however brief, of their biological aspects. To be sure, while

1. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 15.

2. On the life and works of the American Jungian psychologist James Hillman, see Athanasios G. Melissaris, *Personhood Re-examined: Current Perspectives from Orthodox Anthropology and Archetypal Psychology* (Katerini: Epektasis Publications, 2002), Ch. IV, 85-88. Cf. by the same author, «The Promotion of Otherness in the Work of James Hillman: A Review of His Theological Iconoclasm», *Gregorios o Palamas 794* (2002): 506-509.

dreams are indeed instructive about our personal identities, it should be kept in mind that they originate in the complex biological terrain of a central nervous system, which has to be accounted for in all modern psychological attempts to access the riddle of dreams. Furthermore, all schools of contemporary psychiatry and psychology have radically diverged from the Judeo-Christian, or Biblical, interpretation of dreams, which were seen by that age-long, pre-modern tradition as messages from God, bearing pieces of divine revelation³. Hence, although still ever seen as highly revelatory, dreams are nowadays taken to convey not divine mandates but clues to self-knowledge, though of course (it should be added) the one does not necessarily exclude the other. We are told that

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Sigmund Freud opened the way to a new approach to understanding dreams. For Freud, dreams functioned primarily to release and express repressed instinctual urges. The motive for dreaming was no longer God; rather, instinctually oriented wishes in search of fulfillment served as the catalyst for dream fantasy and imagery. Dreams focused on the preverbal, prelogical, «primary process» language of the dreamer. Dream symbols provided «the royal road to the Unconscious»⁴.

As summarized elsewhere,

the nineteenth-century psychology of dreaming represented a transitional period between the Christian/classical oneiric traditions of the twentieth century. Dreams of the classical period had a supernatural or transpersonal significance: they were regarded as messages from the gods to men (in the Christian tradition, from God to men). During the nineteenth century they took on an in-

3. The Bible is replete with instances of dreams meant as venues of divine revelation; for example, see Gen 28:12, Gen 31: 10-13, Gen 37:5-11, Gen 40: 5-15, Gen 41: 1-7, Num 12:6, Job 20: 8, Ps 73: 2, Ps 126: 1, Eccl. 5:3, Is 29: 7, Is. 29: 7, Jer 23: 28, Dan 2: 1, Dan 4:19, Joel 2:28, Matt 2:13, Matt 27: 19, Acts: 2:17. For a thorough analysis of Joseph's dreams in Genesis, see Ioannis K. Kornarakis, *Biblika Psychographemata* (Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Publications, 1986), 105-112 (in Greek).

4. Robert Weathers «Dream Theory and Research», in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, edited by Rodney J. Hunter, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 310.

terpersonal significance: they were regarded as messages from one person to another, or as mere epiphenomena of physiological states. In the twentieth century their significance is intrapersonal : they constitute a message from the person to the self⁵.

Sigmund Freud's Account of Dreams

Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theory, as expounded in his 1900 classic *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is perhaps the best-known modern explanation of dreams and dreaming. According to Freud, dreams are expressions of all the unconscious drives, fears, instincts and desires which are censored by the *ego*, but which also manage to resurface in slips of the tongue and in dreams. Freud soon discovered the importance of dreams to consist in giving clues about repressed feelings, which in turn caused psychological disorders.

In the first place, Freud sought recourse to hypnosis to recall repressed feelings and forgotten parts of dreams. However, as he met increasing difficulties in applying this technique to patients, many of whom could not even be hypnotized, he found another alternative technique, which he named «free association of ideas». But the difference in techniques notwithstanding, Freud's purpose was the same, namely, to bring to the surface the *one, true account* or interpretation of dreams as a clue to the patient's innermost personality.

Part of Freud's discovery was that these clues to the unconscious were given in symbols, in other words, that the language of dreams is always symbolic and needs to be carefully deciphered. But his mode of deciphering dream language was too formalistic and set, reflecting Freud's positivist proclivities, i.e., his firm hope to render psychology a predictable science in the verifiable manner of the natural sciences. It is this aspect of Freudian analysis that James Hillman challenges the most.

The Jungian Perspective

Way before Hillman, however, Freud's most famous pupil, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), had critiqued his teacher precisely on grounds of naturalis-

5. Hendrika Vande Kemp, «Therapeutic Use of Dreams», in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, edited by David G. Benner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), 329.

tic rigidity. Jung's divergence from his legendary teacher's doctrines extended well beyond his account of dreams, of course. For example, not only did he re-define the Freudian concept of the *libido* as to make it inclusive of all the energetic processes of life beyond mere sexual energy; he in fact gave the concept of the *unconscious* a universal or collective, as he named it eventually, character, as an enormous and inherited reservoir of mostly mythical *archetypes* that lurk in the back of our minds side by side with the personal unconscious.

Jung's category of the archetypes is actually very helpful toward an understanding of dreams, for it shows why some dreams may be explained by reference to a universal meaning applying to everyone, while others are simply private, concerning the personal life and circumstances of individuals only. On top of that distinction, crucial for a more accurate account of dreams in the context of psychotherapy, Jung strived to free dream language, which is always symbolic and thus demanding in its interpretation, from the naturalistic and positivist excesses of Freud's earlier «alphabet». And certainly, unlike Freud's overtly materialistic orientation, Jung made free, if carefully selected, use of myths, mysticism, metaphysics, and religious experience in his approach toward an understanding of dreams, sharing as he did his teacher's tenet the latter gave us unique access to the world of the unconscious, but broadening it to include the collective one, as well.

I. James Hillman's «Apophatic» Approach to Dreams

Jungian differentiation aside, recent advances in psychology point to the need for a departure from the rigidity of Freud's positivism as applied to dream interpretation as well, a departure just as radical as that made by early modern psychologists from the pre-modern, Biblical tradition, as described above. To this end, let us consider the fresh ideas of James Hillman's dynamic and pluralistic understanding of dreams and how they can educate us about ourselves and human nature in general.

Self-consciousness has been the single most crucial concern of the study of human personality from time immemorial. The Delphic exhortation «known thyself»⁶, as well as the Socratic Dialogues bear eloquent testimony to this consideration. Humanity is ruthlessly faced with the question, «Who am I? What

6. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, ed. E. C. Marchant, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 4:21. Cf. Basil the Great's similar exhortation in *Homily* 3, PG 31, 197-198. For more on self-

is my true nature?» *Oedipus Rex* may serve as a reminder of the pain and suffering that is often involved in the quest for self-awareness.

Time and again, philosophical speculation and, more recently, psychological research, attempted to shed light on the nature of the human soul, or at least (more modestly so) to simply assist us in our own search for our true self. If anything, being as much self-conscious as possible enables one to engage in healthier inter-personal relations, as well as to better adjust to one's family and work settings. However, as Hillman indicates,

Psychology never transcends its subjective premises in the psyche. Or, as Jung said in his Terry Lectures, the psyche is both the object of psychology and also its subject. Psychology gains its definition less through the development of an objective field than through the defining limits of the subjective person upon whose developments it depends⁷.

Hence the person who attempts (struggles might be a more appropriate term, sometimes) a self-examination is both researcher and the researched «item», which means that he or she may not be rid of his or her own inherent presuppositions. The problem is further complicated when the *unconscious* realm is taken into consideration, an area that is notoriously resistant to probes, for we always remain, after all, «the unknown» according to Carrel.

I strongly believe that self-consciousness is only partially possible, always subject to conditions and limitations. My belief is rooted in the concept of personhood as put forward by Metropolitan John of Pergamon (Zizioulas)⁸, who, based as he is on an original interpretation of Cappadocian theology, sees each human being as a unique, unrepeatable and utterly inexhaustible entity, that cannot, under any circumstances, be objectified or reduced to any single interpretation (Psychoanalytic, Marxist, etc.). What is above all emphasized here is our *mystery*, which refers to the failure of language to fully encapsulate the

knowledge in the context of a Christian anthropology, see Tomas Spidlik, SJ, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications Inc, 1986), esp. 87-94.

7. Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, 133.

8. For a biographical note, see Athanasios G. Melissaris, «The Challenge of Patristic Ontology in the Theology of Metropolitan of Pergamon John (Zizioulas)», *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999): 467-490, especially 467-469. For an overview for his theological contribution see Melissaris, *Personhood Re-examined*, Ch. III, 53-83.

human person, which is indefinable par excellence, and resistant to conclusive definitions. This is not to suggest a «supernatural» element in human beings, but simply to stress that what is truly a mystery is not something exotic or otherworldly, but on the contrary a concrete and yet elusive entity, an indefinable one, like the human person.

This is the reason that I personally disagree with Freud's wish to objectify the inner world, and to discover a single formula (after a typical positivist fashion) that would explain all human behavior. I think there is a discrepancy between that, and his discovery of the unconscious, which I see as prohibiting the objectification of our inner life. And that is the reason I was excited to read in Hillman's *Anima* that

...consciousness refers to a process more to do with images than will, with reflection rather than control, with reflective insight into, rather than manipulation of, «objective reality»⁹.

If I understand Hillman correctly, this is departure from classical Freudianism into Jungian territory, which seems to me less rigid. And it accords with my little experience in the Sacrament of Confession, which, if genuine and authentic, does not apply general rules and regulations to everyone, but addresses each person individually, according to their distinct needs. But Hillman doesn't escape Freudian rigidity for a wholehearted espousal of Jungian analysis of dreams, either. Instead, he keeps his critical distance from all watertight schools of psychoanalysis, anxious as he is to preserve the inner integrity of dreams from ideological or artificial interpretative lenses: «Dreams», says Hillman, «have been yoked to the systems which interpret them; they belong to schools – there are 'Freudian dreams', 'Jungian dreams', etc.»¹⁰.

Despite his criticism of Freud's ideas on grounds of positivist rigidity, Hillman does, in fact, follow Freud's lead in viewing dreams as «the royal way to the unconscious». Thus, he also focuses on an extensive study of dreams, in which, however, Hillman engages with entirely different presuppositions from the Freudian ones. He begins with the premiss that dreams have a content rich in imagery and symbolism to furnish us with, including profound insights about our innermost aspects, which may manifest themselves in «epiphanies», to

9. James Hillman, *Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion* (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1985), 93.

10. Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, 8.

borrow a literary term from James Joyce. «The dream is the teacher», writes Hillman, pointing to the revelatory character of dreams¹¹.

Hillman quickly hastens to depart from classical Psychoanalysis, by maintaining that dreams have to be lived rather than merely analyzed in what would often be a standard, dry interpretation. What he is really against is doing dreams the violence of objectifying them and dissecting them into quantitative, measurable units, for the sake of a supposed «accuracy» in their interpretation.

«If you can literalize a meaning, *interpret* a dream, you are off the track, lost your koan. (For the dream is the thing, not what it means). Then you must be slapped to bring you back to the image»¹².

To grasp Hillman's proximity to Jungian psychoanalysis (as opposed to Freudian), we need only consider Jung's following approach to dreams: «I take the dream for what it is. The dream is such a difficult and complicated thing that I do not dare to make any assumptions about its possible cunning or its tendency to deceive»¹³.

None of the above is to suggest a blind obedience on Hillman's behalf to Jung's ideas. For one thing, it should be understood that Hillman is a very independent thinker and far removed from standard schools of psychotherapy. His proximity to Jung's qualified psychoanalysis (purged from Freudian biologism) still never bound him to *analytical psychology* as Jung delivered it. In an interview to Laura Pozzo where Hillman was asked to clarify his relationship and debts to Jungian theory, he stated the following:

I don't emphasize, or even use, some of Jung's terms like: self, compensation, opposites, types, psychic energy. You won't find anything about mandalas and wholeness, and I don't refer much to Eastern thought, synchronicity, and the Judeo-Christian God-image... When I use the term «ego», I put ironic marks around it: the so-called ego, because for me the task of psychology it to

11. James Hillman, «An Inquiry into Image», Spring (1977): 87.

12. Thomas Moore, (Ed.), *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 245.

13. Jung, quoted on Andrew Samuels, *Jung and the Post-Jungians* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 230.

see through it and get around it¹⁴.

Still, the main bulk of Hillman's criticism is directed against Freud's work, not so much Jung's, and more specifically against Freud's deliberation to translate dreams into the ego's language. Hillman leans closer to Jung, who as we saw, took dreams for what they were, not daring to «make any assumptions about [their] possible cunning or [their] tendency to deceive»¹⁵.

In fact, dreams seem to furnish, in their puzzling obscurity, the perfect opportunity for an epistemological humility. For if truth is arrived at dialectically, and if it is always multi-dimensional, then we must always remain humbly aware of our ignorance, and open to the many, almost infinite, layers of existence that together make up reality. Above all, we should refrain from trying to encapsulate reality, for that would certainly be a folly. Instead, reality should be lived, become incarnate in the uniqueness of each and every human being, hence allowed to be «the ax for the frozen sea within us,» as Kafka said.

Friendship wants to keep the connection open and flowing. The first thing then, in this non-interpretive approach to the dream is that we give time and patience to it, *jumping to no conclusions, fixing it in no solutions*. Befriending the dream begins with a plain attempt to listen to the dream...¹⁶. We can have analysis without interpretation. Inrepretation turns the dream into its meaning¹⁷.

Andrei Tarkovski writes in *Sculpting in Time* that the dreams we remember best are the clearest ones, the most vivid, not the blurred images usually depicted in movies to distinguish reality from phantasy. From my own experience, I recall that the dreams that have made a lasting impression upon me are those that initially produced intense feelings, and those that I allowed myself to re-experience, instead of looking at them from a cerebral viewpoint. By contrast, those that I tried to dissect have always been elusive. This is because

14. James Hillman, «Psychoanalysis and Schools», in *Inter Views: Conversations between James Hillman and Laura PozzoI* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 30.

15. Jung, quoted on Samuels, *Jung and the Post-Jungians*, 230.

16. James Hillman, *Insearch: Psychology and Religion* (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1995), 59-60.

17. James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 130.

«The dream is not ‘mine’ but the psyche’s»¹⁸.

In fact, Hillman identifies three barriers to approaching a dream on its own terms, as he would like to do:

Materialism: connecting all psychic events to material events, placing the images of the soul in the service of physical tangibles. «Every translation of a dream into bread-and-butter issues of ‘real’ flesh and blood is a materialism.»¹⁹ He likens such concerns to the archetype of the great mother, Hera, and «Hera’s concerns with social realities, the problems of husbands and wives and families in the daily world»²⁰. The dream becomes a resource for solving problems so that life may flourish. These are attempts to return dreams to nature through naturalistic interpretations; nature though is a fantasy of the soul.

Such materialism is similar to Freud’s approach. It reduces the dream to sensations of pleasure and pain. There is less underworld, less depth, and one becomes more horizontally spread out (women’s energy goes often into horizontal connections; men’s may go into the individual hero journeys). Depression is the soul’s response to its lost underworld.

Oppositionalism: Hillman describes this logic of oppositionalism as the bedrock of our culture: Jung’s writings are full of such pairs: eros/logos; ego/self; first half/second half; individual/collective; anima/animus.

The dream is approached by means of opposites; for example, with the theory that the dream compensates for something by always presenting its opposite. When a dream is understood as compensation, it is always seen as partial, one-sided, unbalanced. To understand it you need the other half of the pair: the day time world. A dream is not complete, in and of itself. In therapy, Jungians try to fill in the blanks. Inevitably they constellate the hero with their ideas of wholeness and growth.

Christianism: Christ’s mission to the underworld was to annul it through his resurrected victory over death. Because of his mission, all Christians were forever exempted from the descent...²¹. The underworld became thoroughly moralized; death became equated with sin²².

18. Moore, *A Blue Fire*, 242.

19. Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, 69.

20. *Ibid.*, 71.

21. *Ibid.*, 85.

22. *Ibid.*, 87.

Hillman suggests the Hebrew world had sheol, and dreams were heard. Without the as-if world of fantasy and imagination, thought becomes action. Hillman suggests that the second commandment (Ye shall have no other gods before me) forbids imagination²³. Is there confusion between image and fact? The adulterous image in the heart equals adultery.

II. Dreams as Venues to a Dynamic, Open-ended Anthropology in the Work of James Hillman. Some parallels with Orthodox Christian Anthropology

How does Hillman, then envisage the psyche? His dynamic portayal of the human soul or psyche is not in terms of a static monad, but of «a communion of many persons, each with specific needs, fears, longings, styles, and language»²⁴. This description resonates with the dynamic understanding of the Christian God as given, among other pieces of Eastern Orthodox Literature, in Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Way*, where we read the following:

In the last chapter, we found that the most helpful ways of entry into the divine mystery are to affirm that God is *personal* and that God is *love*. Now, both these notions imply sharing and reciprocity. First, a «person» is not at all the same as an «individual». Isolated, self-dependent, none of us is an authentic person but merely an individual, a bare unit as recorded in the census. Ego-centricity is the death of true personhood. Each becomes a real person only through entering into telation with other persons, through living for them and in them. There can be no man, so it has been rightly said, until there are at least two men in communication. The same is true, secondly, of love. Love cannot exist in isolation, but presupposes the other... Personhood and love signify life, movement, discovery. So that the doctrine of the Trinity means that we should think of God in terms that are dynamic, rather than static²⁵.

23. Ibid., 115.

24. Moore, *A Blue Fire*, 37.

25. Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood: N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 28-29.

I deeply believe that any anthropology or psychological perspective which pays lip service to the multiplicity and diversity of human personhood, painting us in colors of stillness and repose is just not doing justice to what it means to be human. «Jung used a polycentric description for the objective psyche»²⁶, Hillman maintains, perhaps implying an early breach from Freud's flat idea of the psyche. Freud did, in fact, acknowledge the operation of three distinct agents within us, but saw only the negative tension in them, the struggle they are engaged in, how each tries to cancel the other out. And certainly, his unfulfilled wish to establish one single unifying formula explaining all human behavior, objectifying it to the utmost, fails, as far as I can tell, to perform a deep analysis of the psyche in a *contextual* sense.

Hillman, for one, fulfills the requirement. «The persons of dream represent the many personalities who have a role in the psyche's everyday dramas... From the start, the motive in polytheism is to *honor all sides*»²⁷. What I found particularly interesting is the point he is raising that the multiplicity in our souls does not in the least suggest a disorder (ie., schizophrenia), but it is actually the suppression of multiplicity that «returns in the form of disintegration»²⁸.

Far from suggesting that Hillman's inspiring work may serve as a backer of the Trinitarian doctrine, I can only express here my enthusiasm that the work of such profound thinkers as our author is in harmony with the anthropology of an age-old tradition, which is itself an extension of the same tradition's theology. I can see richness, diversity, multiplicity and space for growth in both. The latter is very important, for that is alive, it has been rightly said, which grows and relates.

III. Pastoral Applications of Dreams

Hillman's own insights on dreams²⁹, like those of the long psychoanalytic

26. James Hillman, «Psychology: Monotheistic or Polytheistic»? Spring (1971): 194.

27. Moore, (Ed.), *A Blue Fire*, 37-38.

28. *Ibid.*, 37.

29. Hillman describes three dominant views on dreams that informed Freud's first writings on dreams:

1. The *romantic* perspective: «the dream contained a hidden but important personal message from another world» (Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, 8), (the latent content);

tradition instituted by Freud, are not simply interesting from a psychological view in their own right, as curious mental phenomena, but concern us mainly for their beneficial application in pastoral care. If dreams are indeed, as psychologists have long ago concurred, with Freud, «the royal path to the unconscious,» then they should be seen as *compensatory*³⁰. That is, dreams reveal to us what we are ignorant of about our personalities, thus shedding ample light on what would otherwise be valuable but uncharted psychological territory.

As a result, a dream interpretation is not correct if it only articulates and comments on something we already consciously know. This is to say that the contents of dreams should never be taken at face-value, but rather as symbolic pointers to deeper layers of reality in the dreamer's inner and outer life, as clues to important truths that the dreamer is either ignorant of (for the most part, at least) or in the process of persistently denying those truths an audience. If the aim of pastoral care is precisely to give people assistance in achieving a healthier and more balanced life, then the goal cannot be enacted without an adequate measure of self-knowledge, which is precisely, as we just saw, what dreams are all about. Hence pastoral counsellors cannot afford to dispense with dream interpretation in dealing with a patient's psychological problems, given that self-knowledge is by all accounts a *sine qua non* for a successful psychotherapy.

In my view, Hillman's non-ontologicistic approach to dreams is a major step forward in dream interpretation and its application to psychotherapy, certainly ahead of Freud's static and positivist model. If anything, his fundamental premiss that we should surrender to the actual experience of our dreams instead of subjecting them to standard formulas of interpretation, resonates with the latest advances in depth psychotherapy³¹, which clearly indicate that «dream

2. The *rationalist* perspective: «Freud accepted the idea that the manifest dream, dream language as it appeared, was a worthless jumble of nonsense – for Freud, however, it was decipherable into a latent value and meaning.» (Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Ibid). Like the rationalists, he saw the dream as a) a temporary psychosis; b) using the residues of day as the building blocks of the dream. The dream is a rearrangement of the residues in accordance with instinctual needs of sleep and sexuality. The dream is a compromise between demands of night world and day world.

3. The *somaticist* perspective: Freud «agreed that the dream reflected physiological processes – mainly to do with sexuality and sleep.» (Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Ibid).

30. For more on this subject, see Charles G. Helms, «Dream Interpretation in Pastoral Counseling», in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 308-310.

31. Regarding the recent therapeutic use of dreams, J. B. Hersch and E. B. Taub-Bynum have

interpretation that is therapeutically or spiritually effective is not merely an intellectual exercise but an experiential process»³².

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suggested eight uses of dreams in short-term therapy. According to them, dreams 1) aid in setting a focus for treatment and planning its course; 2) aid in assessing the quality of object relations or interpersonal relationships; 3) aid in facilitating the expression of repressed affect; 4) aid in assessing the nature of transference; 5) provide a here-and-how focus emphasizing the affective component; 6) assist the patient in the search for meaning; 7) may actually serve as a form of resistance when dream reporting is substituted for the confrontation of primary affect; 8) may be used to translate insight into behavioral strategies. J. B. Hersch and E. B. Taub-Bynum, *Use of dreams in brief therapy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association Washington, D.C., August, 1982.

32. Helms, «Dream Interpretation in Pastoral Counseling», in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 309.

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