A Time to Study: Docility and the Role of Faith in Liberal Education

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What difference for a liberal arts university worthy of that appellation ought being Catholic to make? Catholicism is not some addition to the liberal educational framework of the university, like salt in the stew or icing on the cake; in a substantive sense, it is the stew or the cake. Reflecting on the intellectual virtue of docility, a virtue I will argue is indispensable for a liberal education, provides significant support for the claim just made about the difference that Catholicism should make for a liberal education. Such reflection will lead to a second claim: that it is only in a faith-based university, and especially a Catholic one, that the virtue of docility can be fully realized.

In American usage, the anglicized version of *docilitas*, 'docility', has fallen on hard times. Part of the contemporary demotion of docility has to do with the connections between docility and submission. Since we like to fancy ourselves as great lovers of freedom, the idea of being submissive to anyone or anything is often portrayed as being in opposition to freedom. But 'docility' is a tremendous virtue, and, though not entirely sufficient for learning since some degree of decent soil and other nutrients are required, it is nearly sufficient for learning since it can overcome great environmental obstacles in the performance of its work of making a learner submissive to the truth.

Docility is derived from the Latin docere, which means "to teach;" and its nobility is captured well in some cognates, such as when we bestow the title of "doctor" on one who has achieved a great mastery of learning in a particular discipline. Every virtue makes its possessor good and enables him or her to perform his or her proper work well. Docility is that virtue which actualizes the potential learner in each of us. It does so when it disposes us to receive from those persons, works of art, symbolic utterances, literary artifacts, and, indeed, nature herself the treasures they contain. Far from enslaving us to these teachers, docility enables us to realize that we can become free, as Augustine avers,1 only by subjecting ourselves to those truths. What that means for a learner is that we absorb, or assimilate, become measured by, or otherwise come to be one with the objects of reflection. Knowing, as Aristotle argues in the third book of his De Anima and Aquinas in questions 84-89 of the first part of the Summa theologiae, is a matter of becoming one with what one studies. We become what we know, according to our own proper mode of understanding.

Aquinas's reflections on the virtue of docility are spare, but one should not take this relative scarcity of reflection on this great virtue as evidence that he underestimates the significance of this virtue. In *ST* II-II, q. 49, article 3, Aquinas argues that docility is an integral part of prudence, the master virtue of the life well-lived. The mark of docility, Aquinas argues, is being ready to be taught, "Hoc autem pertinent ad docilitatem,

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¹ Of course, Augustine is talking about the Truth, the second person of the Trinity, in his declaration of the relation between submission to the Truth and freedom in the second book of *De Libero Arbitrium*, but insofar as all truths are for Augustine relatable to the first Truth, I think the extension of that same principle to secondary truths is warranted.

² Brian Davies, OP, argues that Aquinas has a robust and comprehensive theory of teaching and learning. See his, "Aquinas on Teaching and Learning," *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 95, No. 1060 (2014): 631-647.

ut aliquis sit bene disciplinae susceptivus." (ST II-II, q. 49, a.3, Resp.) The first objection in this question from the Summa theologiae asserts that docility is requisite for every intellectual virtue, and Aquinas lets that stand in his response, but he adds to this that it is in docility's being part of prudence that this is so. Prudence, Aquinas reminds us on many occasions, always takes counsel. In responding to the second objection that docility is not a virtue because it is a disposition of only some humans and not within our power to acquire, Aquinas argues that every human person has a natural aptitude for prudence, and that its acquisition requires significant effort on the part of every person: "[Each person] must carefully, frequently and reverently apply his mind to the teachings of the learned, neither neglecting them through laziness, nor despising them through pride (dum scilicet homo sollicite, frequenter et reverenter applicat animum suum documentis maiorum, non negligens ea propter ignaviam, nec contemnenes propter superbiam)." (ST II-II, q. 49, a.3, reply 2) Though the need to turn to the thought of the learned is more severe in the case of the unlearned, in his reply to the third objection Aquinas argues that even the learned have need to make recourse to other learned persons continuously, for no person is self-sufficiently wise.

There is no learning without the virtue of a standing readiness to learn from others, for we humans do not gaze on this world with the allseeing eyes of God. We see for ourselves only what we encounter. But, we have the benefit of being able to turn to others who have made sense of what they have encountered. Perfected docility renders one always ready to learn from others. Who are these others? Aquinas names them 'the learned', typically those who are wizened also by years of experience. These would include masters, current classroom professors in today's terms, as well as those who left their learning for us to receive through the texts they composed. But, how are the learned identified? Universities of course have a vital role in certifying those who are in fact worthy to profess a discipline. And yet, in the contemporary debates about higher education, there is much consternation concerning whether those bestowed with the title of professor are in fact worthy of this designation. Who should students trust to teach them? Moreover, considering the utterly vast number of books and articles available to the contemporary student, the guidance of professors to those sources of greatest

significance to education matters a great deal. How do we select which objects of study should be put before our students?

This is where the notion of a 'tradition', as in the Western intellectual tradition, or the Catholic intellectual tradition, has special relevance as holding forth for the learner those books, experiments, works of art, and other matters that are of central importance to their study. It is also the tradition that can provide some guidance to determining who in fact can be trusted as the contemporary conveyors of the tradition's treasures. Learning from the wise, and learning from the things the wise point us to, requires as well an educational environment, a culture that is conducive to study. Docility, the capacity of being taught, implies not just the sheer capacity to learn, but, as Fr. James Schall emphasizes in his article on docilitas, it implies as well the desire to learn, and in cultivating such a desire, one needs an environment in which one finds others who are similarly desirous.3 Such a culture, and the many acts of learning that take place within it, are best understood within the context of friendship. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that exercising the virtue of docility requires friendship; and, still further, I argue that a full appreciation of the virtue of docility requires us to see that a fully rich university education is a sort of friendship exercised for friendship. A fully rich and well deployed university education is the cultivation of four classes of friendship: first, a friendship with the truth of things; second, a friendship between professors and students; third, friendships between students and between professors; and fourth, and most significantly, a friendship with God.

To speak of one's relationship with the truth of things is to deploy the term 'friendship' in an analogous sense. Friendship in the full sense requires the sort of reciprocity that only persons can supply. However, this analogous sense does not stretch the sense of friendship as far as it may seem, and this is so because the truth of things, in their very being, do present a reciprocal partner, of sorts, with a learner. Things themselves *long*, so to speak, to be known, to be grasped and articulated. There is, to use a metaphor that Jacques Maritain was fond of, a nuptial relationship between the mind and things, a nuptial relationship that is predicated on something akin to mutual desire between beings and knowing minds.

³ James V. Schall, S.J., first published in *Utraque Unum*, Vol.2, (2009): 9-14; republished in *Docilitas: On Teaching and Being Taught*, ch. 16 (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2016), pp. 177-187.

Ultimately, this 'desire' of things to be known is due to their being already known and loved. This is something that Aquinas reveals with great clarity in the first question of his *Disputed Questions on Truth*: God in his ongoing creative act thinks the things he makes, and thusly extends their intelligibility to us. The things of this world are endowed with intelligibility precisely because they are already known. They "speak" to us with the voice of their creator.

That all beings "speak" to us through their being known by God does not ensure that they will be "heard" by us. To be sure, all human beings have the capacity to know things, to listen to beings, but this capacity requires attunement, attention, practice, and habituation. To listen to the truth of things, one needs to be educated. And, learning to listen well to the truth of things, to do so continuously, is to have become a friend of the truth. Friendship with the truth of things, then, requires an education in those habits of mind and heart that make us people of the sort of character that the truth of things are ready, so to speak, to befriend us. The cultivation of this friendship with the truth is, properly understood, a matter of becoming more fully human.

Such a claim concerns what Aristotle refers to as secondary rather than primary levels of actuality; humanity as the actualization or the coming-to-be-completely of our humanness, rather than our humanness. Implicit in this distinction between humanity and humanness is the notion of potential: we can become less or more what, by our nature, we already are. Whatever one's views about Aristotelian teleology, no sincere educator goes to work without at least a tacit teleology. It is education which works to transform a human from the person he or she is to the person as he or she can and even should be. Plato was the first great champion of thinking of education in these terms, and perhaps his most famous image for capturing his theory of education is the allegory of the cave at the beginning of Book VII of the Republic. In that allegory, the released prisoner is not stuffed with information, but rather is made to turn around and lift up his eyes to see first lesser and then greater things. The power to see, the power to know, is already present, what is required is the correct orientation.

Whereas Plato in the *Meno* turns to the possibility of the transmigration of souls to suggest a plausible metaphysics for an anthropology that can account for human knowledge, this is something

which Aristotle achieves with far more rigor through his introduction of being in the sense of potentiality and actuality. But it is worth noting that Plato and Aristotle are united in their appreciation for the founding assumption of a fully rich education: that there is a difference between the human being as one finds him and the human being as he can be, and that learning the truth of things closes that gap by transforming the human being more fully into what he already is. Both Plato and Aristotle took to heart the insight that an education requires the support of a community, and so they founded and maintained communities of inquiry. We know far less than we would like to know about the Academy and the Lyceum, but we do know at least that the bonds of friendship, those between master and student as well as those between students or between masters, were considered essential to the success of those communities of inquiry. These early schools helped set the stage, as did monastic communities and cathedral schools, for the birth of the university in the high middle ages, a birth shepherded by the Catholic Church's desire to formalize and shape students and masters by a rich dialogue between faith and reason.

We learn then from two of the fathers of the Western intellectual tradition that, however it is true, it is true that by learning the truth of things we can become more fully what we already are, and friendships among truth seekers are vital to that transformation. Education gives us our humanity, and its ends are tantamount to the ends of our lives considered as a whole. Alasdair MacIntyre, commenting in *God*, *Philosophy, and Universities* on Aquinas's views on the ends of education and the manner in which they were and are out of step with the views of most students, remarks:

For many therefore the point of their studies was—and is—to put those studies behind them. But from Aquinas's view the point and purpose of a university education is to teach students that such a view of their studies is mistaken, that their studies are or should be designed to direct them toward the achievement of their final end as human beings, to the achievement of a perfected understanding (*GPU*, 94).⁴

A fully rich university education is not something that one finishes, but rather something that a student spends a lifetime growing into and an eternity completing. It takes a great teacher, one motivated by

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

the love of friendship for his or her students, if students are to learn this lesson. And, it is not enough to learn the lesson. A student needs to heed the command to orient one's life toward the achievement of a perfected understanding.

And yet, how does one do that? It is one thing to be commanded, another to want to follow a command, and a third to be able to follow it. Although involved in one way or another with each of these stages, it is with this third thing that genuine educators, those who give themselves as potential friends to their students to show them how to make friends with the truth of things, especially find their purpose through striving to inculcate the intellectual virtues in their students. Indeed, whether talking about friendship with the truth of things, the friendships between those engaged in the work of education, or friendship with God, growth in and the exercise of a host of virtues is the proper work, the ergon, of a fully rich The fostering of the many virtues needed to university education. succeed in one's studies requires an ordering principle—a master virtue. Determining when and how and what to learn requires discernment. It requires a special application of prudence that Aquinas calls docilitas (ST The virtue of docility is a personal virtue, but it is only II-II, q. 49, a. 3). cultivated within a culture. No eighteen-year-old knows what best to study; he or she has to rely on her professors. And, not just on his or her professors, but on a tradition that yields certain lessons that are central to making sense of her life, her community, her world, and her God. Professors are charged with serving as the caretakers of that tradition and the education it entails so that he or she can make it her own, so that he or she can extend it and build on it in new and creative ways. He or she can only do this if he or she cultivates the virtue of docility.

The virtue of docility therefore makes us receptive to a tradition, and here that friendship which should exist between professor and students is of the greatest importance. Ours is a tradition, as MacIntyre has taken great efforts to make clear, of conflict.⁵ We are introduced to it by learning how to read central figures against each other, how to challenge and be challenged by what we study, and learning that, "that summons to participate in the project of Catholic philosophical enquiry is

⁵ See especially *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 230-234; and, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, pp. 169-170.

a summons to situate oneself within an ongoing set of conflicts, conflicts that we inherited from an extended history. That history is the history of a tradition." (*God, Philosophy, Universities*, p. 169). How are these conflicts to be navigated? How does a student avoid on the one hand the temptation to give up on the idea that there is some way to sort through the opposing parties and arrive at a more or less trustworthy answer to a significant question, and on the other the temptation to rest more securely than one should in a set of answers to controverted questions? The character of the professor, his or her modeling of the right disposition towards those conflicts which determine our tradition, as well as the care and love he or she has for the student, are essential to a student's making of that tradition his or her own.

Such a professor knows that his or her task is not simply one of teaching students how to think for themselves, for he or she knows that there are some things worth thinking more than others, some ideas are more worthy of respect than others, some texts are more worthy of one's time than others, and so on. In friendships we reveal to our friends our heart. We reveal what we are devoted to and take a special concern in. This is no less the case with regard to friendships that professors cultivate with students. It matters what one thinks about, and professors have the great obligation to direct their students to those objects of reflection they consider most significant. Within a fully rich university education, one rooted in the long Western tradition of learning, choosing those objects of reflection is not a matter of the whim of the professor. To name an institution a university is to indicate the ways in which the many inquiries, artistic creations, and pedagogical efforts undertaken across all of our disciplines are, as the etymology suggests, turned toward one thing. What is that one thing? To put the matter into a single formulation, it is the convergence of the many truths grasped by each of our varied disciplines. You might call this the unity of truth. It is not a uniquely Catholic notion that all truth is unified, or at least unifiable. As we have seen, two notable pagans, Plato and Aristotle, were convinced of this. So too were notable Jewish and Muslim thinkers, such as Moses Maimonides and Al-Farabi. A conviction that there is a unity to all truth, a convergence of truth, is what justifies the organization of multiple disciplines within a single institution. It is what makes a university one thing, as opposed to many, a multiversity.

Though the great Western intellectual tradition extends well beyond the university, the university is the particular institutional home in which the tradition resides; or at least, in which it ought to reside if a university is to be true to its name. The tradition itself provides guideposts for what and how to study, and those guideposts are not simply rules of thumb for engagement with others and the free exchange of ideas, but present deeply rooted principles which guide those engagements. Indeed, it would be a mistake to imagine that because our tradition is one of ongoing conflicts, there are no fundamental principles that, in one sense, anchor, and, in another sense, provide the shape-or the form-of the tradition. I argue that there are at least seven such principles to which professors within the context of a fully rich university education work to orient their students. Let me take a moment, painting with a very broad brush and assuming much familiarity from the reader with the history of Western thought, to articulate these principles first from the perspective of the ancient tradition, signified by the locus of Athens, and then their persistence and perfection within the Christian context, that signified by Ierusalem.

From its earliest beginnings the Western intellectual tradition has imagined itself in relation to something above and beyond it, something that history cannot fully capture because its mode of being is supernatural. We find this, for instance, in the elusiveness of the gods in Homer's Iliad, in spite of their anthropomorphism. It is more explicit in Parmenides' great poem when he is taken above the earth in order to receive the truth about being from the goddess, a truth that extends beyond the appearances of things since appearances are, as he says, but a glimpse of a hidden reality. From Parmenides the West learns how to think about being, and that in some way thinking and being amount to the same. What gives us confidence in believing that we might be able to participate in the godlike activity of a thinking being is the conviction that a human being is in some way a microcosm. It is Anaxagoras and Heraclitus who make the first and most definite strides toward articulating this position, and Heraclitus' admonition to search oneself becomes the cornerstone of the Socratic tradition in which living a life of reflection becomes identified with living well. Behind each of these thinkers lies the conviction that the universe is a cosmos, that is to say, it is an ordered whole. And so we find already four principles animating the Western tradition: (1) the universe

is ordered; (2) we can think about the universe as a whole and in its parts; (3) such thinking is a sharing in something beyond the merely human level; and yet, (4) engaging in this activity of thinking is perfective of our nature.

Not every lesson the young West yields puts the mind front and center. From the great tragedians we learn to wrestle with a universal feature of human life: pathos. Suffering attends to each of our efforts; it follows us whether we strive for greatness or pull back in fear of achieving difficult goods. Oedipus strives to avoid a wicked fate and runs straight into it. Orestes seeks to obey the gods's command to avenge a kinsman's death and bloodies his own hands with matricide. Yet as Aeschylus reveals in his conclusion to the Oresteia, such suffering provides moments for the intervention of the supernatural to reestablish order, an order whose maintenance requires reflection and the application of wisdom. Wisdom comes by way of suffering. We also find in the origins of the West ways to reflect on another universal human experience: eros. We learn from the great dramatists of the awesome power of love to divide as well as to unite. From Plato we learn that learning what and how to love is at the heart of the reflective life. Guiding eros, as the charioteer does in Socrates' second poem in the Phaedrus, requires not only intellectual focus, but the cultivation of the moral virtues. Living well requires far more than simply thinking rightly, for right thinking is necessarily dependent on the cultivation and exercise of the virtues of character. We can recognize three more animating principles of the Western tradition from these reflections: (5) suffering, fundamental to the human condition, is necessary for the acquisition of wisdom; (6) love, also fundamental to the human condition and of fearsome power, is educable; and, (7) there is no true intellectual virtue divorced from moral virtue.

What do these deposits from pre-Christian cultures have to do with a fully rich university education, especially one that explicitly seeks to do justice to the origins of the university *ex corde Eclessiae*, from the heart of the Church? It was Tertullian who first asked what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, and he argues in his work concerning the prescription of heretics that the answer is "nothing"—especially when it comes to the interpretation of scripture. Fortunately, this answer was not persuasive, but through wrestling with Tertullian's question and arriving at a very different answer, Christianity came to represent in many respects the

marriage of Athens and Jerusalem. The courtship began early, with St. Clement of Alexandria admiring the wisdom of Heraclitus and the Stoics who embraced him as their inspiration, and St. Justin Martyr, who tells us in vivid terms of the stages of his philosophical progress which came to fulfillment when he was evangelized. His conversion was not that of a man leaving a life of learning behind to embrace the faith, but rather one whose embrace of the faith in Jesus as the Christ professed him as the true philosopher. From such a perspective, one that regards with Pierre Hadot philosophy as a way of living, Justin's glance back into Athens established continuity between Athens and Jerusalem by seeing in Socrates the first martyr for the faith insofar as he died witnessing to the truth. St. Augustine becomes a champion of this union, combining in his own person the best of Western learning with a radical faith in the divinity of Christ, and we learn from his Confessions that such a marriage in him not only took time but involved much suffering. What we find in Augustine is not the mere amalgamation of disparate traditions, but the articulation of the Western tradition with Athens and Jerusalem now integrated and, so to speak, supercharged with creative potency.

In each of the Christian tradition's exchanges with non-Christian cultures it has retained within its essence those seven Western principles articulated above, but in retaining them the Christian tradition has also transformed them by seeing with the eyes of faith. For the Christian, a richer account and a greater hope are evident in those seven principles; to wit: (1) the universe is ordered because it is made by a loving creator; (2) we are made fit to understand reality because we are made in this God's image and likeness; (3) since God's act of making is the same as his act of knowing, each time we grasp a being we are sharing in what God knows; (4) the fulfillment of our personal destiny is to see this God face to face; (5) suffering does indeed lead to wisdom and all is ultimately redeemed through sharing in the suffering of Christ; (6) through embracing the love God has for us we can bind ourselves to the truth that liberates us; (7) and in following the way of Christ we find the greatest paradigm for the unification of the human virtues. We can add here an 8th principle unique to the Christianized West, which is that, in embracing the Catholic intellectual tradition, a fully rich university education can make sense of and, even more importantly, foster, our highest calling to cultivate

friendship with the God who through the sacrificial offering of His Son extends friendship to us.⁶

These principles are not the product of a fully rich university education as though they are simply conclusions to a historically extended argument. They are more like the rules of argumentation within the tradition, and are thereby applicable in an infinite number of arguments and disputations. Their mastery is not unlike how mastery of the fundamental principles of basketball allow for infinite creativity in how the game is played. Their mastery, together with a great deal of practice, can enable a student to achieve that goal Aristotle sets in *Parts of Animals*,7 to be able to judge well any argument. Rising above the level of ideology and popular opinion to the point at which one can scrutinize any argument is no mean task and requires a great deal of guidance from and argumentation with one's professors and peers. It requires a particular culture whose most important relationships are friendships.

Though I have focused especially on friendships between professors and students, the friendships between students are indispensable for a fully rich university education. Friendships form between students precisely because of their shared experiences in a common curriculum, close quarters, shared opportunities for spiritual growth and corporal works of mercy, and a hundred other ways. The intimacy that this environment fosters cultivates friendship between fellow students and their teachers that is centered upon what is in fact true, good, and beautiful— whose pursuit requires an introduction to the central conflicts of our tradition, opportunities to internalize those conflicts, and trust in one's professors and peers that ensures that, especially at points where a student feels lost or that study is pointless, the toils of a genuine university education are in fact worthwhile.

⁶ Such is, as Aquinas argues in ST II-II, q. 23, q. 1, the very essence of charity. See also my "Aristotle, Aquinas, and the Christian Elevation of Pagan Friendship," in *Love and Friendship*, ed. Montague Brown (Washington, DC: The American Maritain Association Press, 2013).

⁷ "For an educated man should be able to form a fair judgment as to the goodness or badness of an exposition. To be educated is in fact to be able to do this; and the man of general education we take to be such. It will, however, of course, be understood that we only ascribe universal education to one who in his own individual person is thus able to judge nearly all branches of knowledge, and not to one who has a like ability merely in some special subject." Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984): 639a6-12)

Through cultivating docility as the master virtue of a university education we become attentive to the truth of beings, an attention fostered in part by the attention we give to fellow seekers of truth within our universities. Through being attentive to each other, we learn better how to be attentive to the Almighty One who imbues beings with their truth, goodness and beauty, and deigns to enter into friendship with us. Through a fully rich university education we learn to be friends with God and therefore true citizens of the City of God. Aiding that friendship in our students and in ourselves is, I think, the primary task of a university, especially a university that advertises itself as providing a Catholic education.

A liberal arts university that does not include a serious institutional commitment to faith, or sidelines faith as some sort of additive and not a central feature of the education itself, simply cannot invoke to the same extent the central importance of docility, with its necessary reliance on a particular way of regarding the Western intellectual tradition, or the trust that is necessary in one's professors, or provide a sufficiently rich account for the particular structure of the curriculum. And, though some friendship with the truth would still be of central significance in a secular liberal arts environment, the supporting arm of faithful witness, the OTHER, so to speak, in the great dialogue between faith and reason, would be missing, or only present in a few who work to incorporate the perspective of one of the two major driving forces of our tradition. Finally, though again some students in a secular liberal arts environment may have faith, the explicit encouragement of all engaged within a Catholic liberal arts education to see cultivation of friendship with God as the end of their education, and indeed of their lives, would be missing as an institutional commitment, and thus the last end of liberal education would be much more likely to be frustrated. Finally, I would argue, though I do not have space to do so here, that without the role of faith within a liberal arts education, the natural faith we ought to have in reason is weakened or even lost, as Plato warns through the character of Socrates in his Phaedo of that misology which, like misanthropy, can arise if there are no pillars of surety we can rest our arguments upon (Phaedo, 89d-91c).

What I have described may not be the sort of education that students want, conditioned as they are to ward off anxiety about their

futures through a near exclusive focus on professional studies, but it is the education that they ought to want. What we want may not in fact be what is good. We may not desire what we ought to desire, what we must desire if we are to flourish, whether those desires are for real or apparent goods of education or for anything else. What we can learn from our tradition, one in which Aristotle and his heirs, most significantly Aquinas, play a particularly significant role, is that we need not be slaves to our desires, that we can bring to bear reasons that determine what is in fact good for us, good for us precisely because those goods are partially constitutive of our flourishing, and that we can train our desires to pursue such goods with consistency. But none of us can do this on our own. We need to be teachable, and we need to take time to study. And, being teachable and given the gift of time, we recognize that we need guides who extend friendship to us and we to them. And, finally, we need to use well what time we have in those seasons of our lives especially devoted study: a time to cultivate the vocation of the student and the virtue of docility.

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