



The Existence of Evil in a Good & Omnipotent God's World

By Tim Walker



RECONCILED
CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

Introduction

*“God is so good,
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He’s so good to me!”*

*“He cares for me,
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High in the protective hills of religiosity, children are taught to believe in one unshakable truth; God is good. Yet down on the breaks of living, waves of tragedy buffet our fleeting shores – “My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?” (Psalm 6:3 NIV) Such a cry to God reaches for the defense of the goodness and omnipotence of God in view of the existence of evil. A finite study, such as this, in the seemingly infinite discussions that surround evil found in a Good God’s world, must first appreciate what it is not. This endeavor is not an attempt to summarize or critique the many theories pertaining to Theodicy, nor does it hope to discover the ever-elusive definitive answer to such an inquest. Rather, the work at hand is a journey back toward the irreducible minimums set up in God’s revelation of Himself, recognizing that any “answers” must be found amidst such parameters. More importantly, this endeavor, in no way, attempts to build a framework for ministering to the countless casualties left in tragedy’s wake. It hopes, however, to point toward the foundation upon which all true comfort must be constructed.

Surveying the Foundation A Search for the Irreducible Minimums

Anyone who has witnessed, first hand, the loss of a young parent, the burial of a still-born child, the pediatric diagnosis of cancer, or similar horrific sufferings knows intimately the desire to clearly understand why bad things happen to good people. But at what cost to truth will we search for that plush box of pseudo-comfort and make-believe peace in which we hope to squeeze God? Where is that point, in our desire to be ministers of Christ’s reconciliation that we become willing to cross the border of reality into the realm of a

god created in our image? Which attributes of the Almighty Creator God would we sacrifice on the altar of easy understanding? In fact, God and His self-revelation are the only source from which true comfort will ever flow. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."(2nd Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV) And again, "I remember your ancient laws, O LORD, and I find comfort in them."(Psalm 119:52 NIV) For was it not God who said, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you."(Psalm 50:15 NASB) While we must never succumb to cold, heartless theology in times of distress, it must be understood that no true comfort will ever be found outside the reality of the Comforter – God Himself. Then, what are these irreducible minimums? What is it about God that we must strive to embrace rather than explain -- learn to fear rather than ignore?

God is God

First and foremost we must embrace the correct perspective. God is God. This is not only true regardless of our belief; it is also the very definition of what we call faith. All that Christianity holds to be true rests in the essence of faith: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."(Ephesians 2:8 NIV) And through the writer of Hebrews, we understand just what this faith is; "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is."(Hebrews 11:6 NASB) God is God. It must never be our intent to use religious beliefs about God solely to shine light of understanding on our present sufferings. Rather we must, at all cost, seek the light which reveals Him. The notion of a god was not created that we might find answers to our existence. The eternal God created our existence so that through it we might find Him. John Hick, in writing Evil and the God of Love explains,

"[Theodicy] is said to represent a foolish pretension of the human creature, under the illusion that he can judge God's acts by human standards. Instead of seeking to justify the ways of

God to man we should rather be trying to justify the sinful ways of man to God, or, better still, we should like Job be tremblingly silent before His incomprehensible majesty and sovereignty.”¹

God, seen merely as a vehicle in our pursuit for answers, will undoubtedly lead to empty discontent. But, as we seek God, in Him we find all, “seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.”(2nd Peter 1:3 NASB)

Having then this correct perspective, what is it about God that we can know to be true and must refuse to deny? Before proceeding, allow me one word of caution. The final abbreviation to God’s revelation was made with the close of the Cannon. Any attempts to pick and choose a few scriptures to proof-text our theories will steer us away from God and away from our objective. We must embrace all of what God has revealed even when parts may not yet seem clear. My hope is that the verses showcased will serve as representatives of the entire scope of Biblical revelation. So what are these attributes?

God is Omnipotent

First, we must embrace that God is omnipotent. The understanding that God is God and that God is all-powerful is not only the center of our faith, it is the center of all reality. He is the Supreme Being. He is the Author and Sustainer of all life. Anything that is, finds its origin in

God: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host. He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.”(Psalm 33:6-8 NASB) And again, “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible,

¹ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 7.

whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”(Colossians 1:16-17 NASB) Some, in vain attempts at comfort, have lost focus of this reality. It, no doubt, seems obvious that between the, “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” of Genesis 1 and the, “The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” of Genesis 6, God’s perfection in creation had fallen vastly short of the intended goal. And we embrace, both in theory and in practice, the words of John; “We know...that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” (1st John 5:19 NIV) But can it be enough to throw our hands up and claim “fallen world”? If this be explanation enough, then at what point in history did God lose control of His creation? No, God is in control – both of that which we find comfortable to embrace and that which we find arduous; “I am the LORD, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.”(Isaiah 45:6-7 KJV) If our desire is to find and obtain true comfort, we must never stray from the reality that God is God, God is all-powerful, and God is in control.

God is Good

Directly related to and in constant proximity of this understanding is the reality that God is good. The idea of God as good is, at best, redundant -- perhaps similar to a yardstick being a yard or Fort Collin’s atomic clock being on time. God is the eternal. He is the constant. Therefore, it is absurd to say the standard is up to standard. What is good is simply that which conforms to the standard of God. This truth is found at the most fundamental parts of Biblical revelation, in that “the Covenant name for God, YHWH...was the causative form of the Hebrew verb ‘to be’.”(Exodus 3:14)² God is good because God is God. But, “by the goodness of God we mean nowadays almost exclusively His lovingness...and by Love, in this

² Bob Utley, *Paul Bound, the Gospel Unbound: Letters from Prison*, Study Guide Commentary Series New Testament Vol. 8 (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 1997), 11.

context, most of us mean kindness.”³ This notion of God, as loving and kind, shines throughout His revelation. Traditionally we go to Christ, “the image of the invisible God... the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3 NIV) to see God’s loving-kindness. And well we should, for “God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”(Ephesians 2:4-5 NKJV) And He sent Christ Jesus our Lord as the Triune Ambassador, “to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”(Luke 4:18-19 NIV)

But, we find beautiful expressions of God’s loving kindness to His people in the Old Testament as well. In Leviticus 26, we see a glimpse of God’s heart toward His people:

“I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. 'I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid. I will remove savage beasts from the land, and the sword will not pass through your country. You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you. 'I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you. You will still be eating last year's harvest when you will have to move it out to make room for the new. I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high.”(4-13)

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 27-28

God wants nothing but the best for us. He desires to do good to His children. His longing is for last year's harvest to be overrun by this year's. God is God; God is omnipotent; God is good. These three truths must find themselves to be the irreducible minimums of understanding that lay for us the only foundation on which a true Theodicy can be built.

The Reality of Evil How? or Why?

Embracing these realities still does not address the problem of evil. Even as God's self-revelation begins, we see evil's existence, "Now the LORD God had planted a garden... In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."(Genesis 2:8-9 NIV) The apostle Paul writes in Romans 8 of the "bondage and decay" brought upon the entire creation by evil. Then, the reality of evil being undeniable, how can we believe that God is God; God is omnipotent; and God is good? "David Hume put it succinctly when he wrote of God, 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?'"⁴ This, of course, speaks from the heart of the Theodicy debate. Perhaps a more pointed question, is not "How could God allow evil?" but rather "Why would God allow Himself to be subjected to the attacks of evil?" Millard Erickson explains that "the Triune God knew that the second person would come to earth and be subject to numerous evils: hunger, fatigue, betrayal, ridicule, rejection, suffering, and death."⁵ If in fact, as Erickson argues, this occurred so that God might destroy sin and the effects of evil out of love, why would he not just disallow evil?

⁴ David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, part 10. As quoted from, Millard J, Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd Edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 437.

⁵ Millard J, Erickson, Christian Theology, 2nd Edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 456.

The Necessary Divergence

This is precisely where we must diverge from the norm of Theodicy. Theodicy sets out to defend God's omnipotence and goodness in respect to the reality of sin. But, for those who seek Him, rather than mere answers to our existence, God needs no defense. There should be no consuming drive to find common ground between God and the existence of evil. We need not ask God to shed light on the reality of evil. Nor should we allow the existence of evil to disrupt our understanding that God is in fact God. Instead, knowing that God is God and that God is all-powerful and that God is good, let us embrace the reality that the existence of evil and suffering, at absolute least, is allowed by the one and only God. Thus, not asking how, but why. Perhaps, in this, we have come to the answer to our question -- the eternal purpose of God's allowance of evil. Our Lord cries, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."(Matthew 11:28 NIV); again, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."(John 7:37 NIV); and again, "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."(Revelation 3:18 NIV); and yet again, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you."(Psalm 50:15 NASB) How can we ever experience His calm without the burden from which we rest? His life giving spring, without thirst? His refined gold, white clothes, and healing salve without poverty, nakedness, and blindness? His deliverance, without our day of trouble? Could evil and suffering be intricately woven into the fabric of an omnipotent and good God working in the lives of His creation? This is the only logical step to take in a journey that begins with the realization that God is God, God is omnipotent, God is good, and evil exists.

A Physical Stage for the Spiritual Reality The Goodness of Suffering

From God's Vista

If there is hope of ever understanding how human suffering fits within God's eternal plan of goodness, we must fight to see things from His vantage point. How does God view human suffering? Let us first be encouraged in that whatever we discover to be God's view, it will most assuredly not be a distant or callused outlook. God's perspective is not only that of a Father whose children are in pain, or of the Creator who has allowed this to happen, but He sees with the eyes of His Son, Jesus. "The Son of God, King of Kings, by himself crossed the chasm between divinity and humanity and walked onto earth. His goal was to endure the thrashing due his creatures for their rebellion against his father."⁶ "Christ, being in very nature God...made himself nothing" for our sake. (Philippians 2:6-7 NIV) Thus, as we seek the One who is revealed in Scripture, we come to a God fully empathetic toward our present conditions.

God's view shown in Scripture reveals a dichotomy between His workings in the physical and His workings in the spiritual. Although not ever completely disjointed, His agenda for the two seems vastly diverse. We see in Scripture, the one true God being described both as the loving and personal Savior, "not wishing for any to perish" (2nd Peter 3:9 NASB) and as a seemingly indiscriminate potter, making "out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use."(Romans 9:21 NIV) The God making covenant with Abraham so that, "all peoples on earth will be blessed."(Genesis 12:3 NIV) is the same God that, "hardened the heart of Pharaoh King of Egypt."(Exodus 14:8 NIV) The loving Shepherd who would leave all His sheep just to run after the one (Luke 15), is the same jealous God who struck down Ananias and

⁶ Joni Erickson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 41.

Sapphira. (Acts 5) This dilemma is further observed in the 9th chapter of Paul's letter to those in Rome who are loved by God:

"It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.""(6-15)

The very letter, which clearly states that each person is "without excuse," "since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them"(Romans 1:20 & 19 NIV), also gives God sole authority for choosing who will be "loved" and who will be "hated." What conclusions then can be drawn from such an apparent paradox? Only that God's view involves a separation between our temporal existence in the physical and our eternal life in the spiritual. God's call upon Abraham was with the intent, that through His physical dealings with Israel, God might reveal Himself spiritually to all peoples. This context in Romans, with the contexts quoted from Genesis, Exodus, and Malachi, all speak to the physical temporality of God's dealings. Before, the twins had any opportunity to deserve blessings or cursings, love or hatred, God chose one to prosper in the physical and one to fail in the physical. To oversimplify this incredible undertaking, those looking on and seeing no logical reason why Jacob would thrive and Esau would flounder, must then

determine that there is a greater power involved than mere personal merit; “in order that God’s purpose in election might stand.” The point of Romans 9 and the purpose of His physical election are that, through temporal dealings, God might call all peoples to be “children of the promise.” God uses the physical as a wonderful stage to reveal the reality of the eternal.

We must never take this to indicate indifference from God toward His creation. In fact, this couldn’t be further from the truth. God created human life in His own image and all of what God created was looked on as good. Belittling human life draws us no closer to a clear and correct understanding. To borrow from physical events in the United States’ past, take into account the immense tragedy of the coordinated terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. If, indeed God is God and God is all-powerful, then we must conclude that what happened on that horrible morning happened with the permission of God. And, if indeed, God is good, then we must conclude that what happened on September 11th occurred ultimately for His good eternal purpose. What we must not conclude is that its cost was insignificant. Over 6,000 human, physical lives, created in the image of God, died that dreadful morning. Although in comparison to our eternal relationship with Almighty God the tragedy pails, we cannot lose sight that this goodness is costly.

Embracing this reality, it becomes clear that God will spare no expense in the physical to reveal Himself spiritually to each and every person. In the summer of 1969, a self-proclaimed nobody, Steve Estes, finally realized the greatest of teenage dreams – a personal invitation to the home of the most popular girl in school; “the crowd she ran with I saw only from across the gymnasium.” The moment’s cruel satire revealed itself in the life-sentence of Joni Erickson’s wheel chair. “ I tap my foot to James Taylor in the background; she just bobs her head. I eat my own lunch; someone has to feed her. I’ll be walking out that screen door in about thirty minutes; she’ll stay sitting in that chair till the Grim Reaper comes. And she wants to know if I think God put her there?” The words young Mr. Estes spoke that afternoon sent Joni Erickson on a

journey that would forever change her life. “If the Bible can’t work in this girl’s life – it never was for real. I clear my throat and jump off the cliff. ‘God put you in that chair, Joni. I don’t know why, but if you’ll trust him instead of fighting him, you’ll find out why --- if not in this life, then in the next. He let you break your neck because he loves you.’”⁷ Steve Estes recognized what we must embrace – no real comfort will ever be found outside of truth.

We are told by those who have given their lives toward reaching immigrants to the United States with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that they have a 6-month window of opportunity. After that, western individualism & consumerism renders the ground sterile. Oh how that must be a wakeup call for those of us born and raised here. Contrary to what we have been indoctrinated with, our physical life is not the axis upon which creation rotates. This life, no matter how hard or how easy, is but a stage on which God works to reveal Himself.

The Psalmist understood the physical as a relatively small price to pay for the eternal as he wrote, “You have dealt well with Your servant...You are good and do good...It is good for me that I was afflicted.”(Psalm 119:65-72) God’s eternal longing for His creation is intimacy. And goodness, in its purest form, is that which draws us closer to Him. (cf. John 17:3) What then, in the temporal, could be so great as to stand between us and our God? Praise the eternal Lord, that God set the precedent of His dealings toward us with the ultimate physical price. “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”(Hebrews 2:9 NIV) We must embrace the warmth emitted from the knowledge that God has not and will not spare anything in the physical to achieve His eternal, purpose of grace and mercy.

⁷ Joni Erickson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 12.

From Humanity's View

Can suffering be good? Could it be possible that this, which brings such pain and misery, is actually good? To aid in the adjustment of our view toward God's vista, let us seek help from those who have gone before us.

The apostle Paul, a true champion in the faith and a hero in suffering, ended his life just as he lived it. Tradition tells us that, Paul was beheaded for preaching the Gospel under Nero's bloody reign at approximately 64 years of age.⁸ But what stands as remarkable is not what he died like that but that he lived like that. And not only did he live like that, he chose to live like that. In Romans 5, we see a glimpse into his heart: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings."(3-4 NIV) Did Paul perhaps just have some sadistic tendencies? Was he just one of those strange individuals who reveled in misery? On the contrary, He prayed that God would remove his suffering. (cf. 2nd Corinthians 12:8) Yet Paul recognized and embraced the goodness in suffering, "we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts."(Romans 5:3-5 NIV) In Paul's understanding that God was indeed God, and was in fact all-powerful, and was most certainly good, he was able to embrace not only the call to persevere, but the understanding of such a call as well.

"The Christians life for Paul, was not the so-called good life of prosperity and ease. Instead it was a life of freely chosen suffering beyond anything we ordinarily experience. Paul's belief in God, and his confidence in resurrection, and his hope in eternal fellowship with Christ, did not produce a life of comfort and ease...No, what this hope produced was a life of chosen suffering. Yes, he knew joy unspeakable. But it was a 'rejoicing

⁸ dc Talk and The Voice of The Martyrs, Jesus Freaks. (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Albury Publishing, 1999), 253.

of hope' (Romans 12:12). And that hope freed him to embrace sufferings."⁹

He found that intimacy with God, brought strength and comfort amidst suffering, and that suffering brought about intimacy with God.

We further focus this view as we read Paul's words written to the Christians in Rome. Romans chapter 8 reads, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."(v.18 NKJV) He goes on to explain, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."(v.28) Here, we are tempted to define "good" on our own terms and then curse God for not fulfilling the promise. But, Paul allows for no such self-interpretation as he quickly reveals God's definition of good: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (v.29) God defines good as anything that serves to transform us into the image of Christ – toward "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."(Ephesians4:13) Paul helps us to understand God's tender commitment toward bringing us into this goodness: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"(v.32) God proved in the suffering of His own Son that He loves us enough to stop at nothing in this physical realm in the hopes of bringing us into the goodness of a character like Christ, and thus an eternal fellowship with Him. We must adopt God's definition of good and rest in His commitment to see it come to fruition in our lives.

Paul's seemingly radical view of Christianity is brought into focus when we realize that he was only following his mentor's lead. It was Christ –the man Jesus– who set for us the precedent for accepting the goodness in suffering. This reality is epitomized not so much in His dying on the cruel cross as much as in His being born in that manger. Knowing what lie ahead, He still chose to step into

⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. 10th Anniversary expanded edition (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1996), 214-215.

humanity, and being made a little lower than the angels, was crowned with glory because He suffered. (cf. Hebrews 2) Refer again to the words of a modern hero in Christ's sufferings,

“The Son of God, King of Kings, by himself crossed the chasm between divinity and humanity and walked onto earth. His goal was to endure the thrashing due his creatures for their rebellion against his father, Jehovah. To this day he requires suffering of all his followers, some intense – but only for their good, and never equaling what he himself passed through.”¹⁰

In freely choosing the goodness in suffering, Christ Jesus set the life precedent for Paul and for us.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me reiterate my original concern for such an endeavor as this. No doubt, as we traverse these foundational truths, your heart, as does mine, cries out for that morsel of divine peace to give the weeping mother starved for that which would soothe her anguished soul as she stares into the grave of her infant child. No doubt, this study falls desperately short of such peace. But this, that we have surveyed, is not intended to be the ministry of reconciliation, only the unmovable foundation. It speaks of the irreducible minimums to which we cling and from which God's Holy Spirit can gift us for the ministry at hand. True comfort will only be found in our Loving God, not in theories about Him, but in Him. Our job in bringing people unto reconciliation is simply to bring them to God through Jesus Christ. Adjusting His revealed attributes only serves to lead hurting people away from healing, comfort, and peace. We, God's church – “the fullness of Him who fills all in all”(Ephesians 1:23 NKJV), have the only serum for curing the world's misery. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He has

¹⁰ Joni Erickson Tada and Steven Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 41.

anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.”(Luke 4:18-19 NKJV) And later, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”(John 14:12 NIV) We have the truth. It needs no defense. It needs no protection. It needs only to be lived and given in love.

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