

Exploring Angst as Human Condition: A Comparative Study of Søren Kierkegaard and Heidegger

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Abstract

Anxiety is a philosophical term originated primarily through the work of the nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. The term angst, which is often interpreted as ‘anxiety’, refers to the spiritual anxiety one experiences in the face of one’s own freedom. It is often contrasted with “fear.” Fear is an emotional response that humans experience when confronted with some potentially harmful or dangerous object or situation. For example, one might experience fear when facing a wild animal-Lion or when confronted by peers in a potentially embarrassing situation, such as public speaking. These psychological experiences of fear are marked precisely by the fact that the object or cause of the fear is known. One fears the wolf or the ridicule of others. But what distinguishes the philosophical notion of dread is that there is no object. In this short paper, we are going to make a comparative study of the Concept of anxiety according to Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. According to Kierkegaard it is dizziness and way to salvation whereas for Heidegger it is ontological.

Key Terms: Anxiety, Fear, Existentiality, Facticity, Fallen-ness, Despair, Death, Kierkegaard, Heidegger

Introduction

Human being’s search for truth is an on-going process. Different ages have brought forth different ways to arrive at truth. The sincere desire and effort to encounter truth vibrates in the minds and hearts of the sages of both the east and the west. This short presentation is a study into one of the important themes of role of anxiety in the act of thinking on Being. Through the Being of man’s being Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger expected to arrive at the Being in itself. It is interesting to note that many notions of Kierkegaard were

influenced by Heidegger such as themes of resoluteness, choice, death, authenticity, repetition possibility, the anonymous 'they' and of course the phenomenon of Angst itself.¹

1.1 Kierkegaard on Anxiety

What is important to Kierkegaard is to show what anxiety reveals about human being. That is, anxiety reveals that an individual is a self that is not automatically himself, but first has to become himself. In anxiety, an individual relates to himself as a spirit or a self. Kierkegaard attributes a universal meaning to anxiety. As a human possibility and as a human experience, anxiety reveals that an individual is a self, determined by the task of becoming himself. Kierkegaard also understands anxiety 'negatively'. In anxiety, we become unfree since we tie ourselves to an unfree state. If such an anxiety was an automatic part of human life, this anxiety could not be described as unfreedom. On the contrary, the precondition seems to be that human life can only succeed without anxiety. What is essential is to be free of anxiety.²

In essence, anxiety is a deeply dialectical experience. If anyone phrase can serve as Haufniensis' definition of anxiety, then it is the following: "Anxiety is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy."³To simplify, anxiety can be described as a feeling of attraction towards that which, at the same time, one feels repelled. It is a paradoxical form of desire, or a paradoxical form of fear.

For Kierkegaard anxiety is not just extraordinary. It is fundamental in any human life. This human life is in itself extraordinary. At the same time, Kierkegaard describes 'modern' ways of living that consists in making oneself 'ordinary' in order to avoid anxiety. In short, anxiety is fundamental but it is also possible to hide it or to try to escape it. In order to make the essential feature of anxiety stand out, Kierkegaard differentiates between fear and anxiety: fear applies to something specific while anxiety does not have a specific object; or rather the object of anxiety is 'nothing'.⁴

¹Coe K David, *Angst and Abyss* (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 217.

²Arne Gron, *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*, trans., Jeanette B. L. Knox (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1994), 47.

³Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson, trans., Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 42.

⁴Soren Kierkegaard, *Soren Kierkegaard a Bibilography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 266-269.

In the fifth chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard writes about how every individual must learn to be in anxiety, which is even seen as the ultimate. Thus anxiety is not only that from which a person should free himself, but he also has to learn how to be anxious in the right way. The anxiety that must be learned is anxiety as the possibility of freedom: “Only such anxiety is through faith absolutely educative.”⁵ So, freedom does not come without anxiety. For in anxiety the individual discovers freedom as his freedom; as the freedom by which he is defined.⁶ Thus he states that human being can be authentic from inauthentic self.

1.2 Heidegger on Anxiety and Disclosure of the Being of Dasein

In the sixth and the last chapter of the section One of *Being and Time*⁷ Heidegger introduces the question: How is it that in anxiety Dasein gets brought before itself through its own Being, so that we can define phenomenologically the character of the entity disclosed in anxiety, and define it as such in its Being, or make adequate preparations for being doing so. The main purpose of the analysis of anxiety is to bearing Dasein face to face with its Being. Anxiety (Angst) is the mood which discloses the being of Dasein to itself.⁸

Heidegger's question clearly insinuates that Dasein in its everyday existence is in a state of flight from itself and loses itself in the ontic world of beings forgetting the ontological prerogative of being open for Being, (potentially for Being). This state of Dasein is called 'fallenness' (*verfallenheit*). This falling or absorption of Dasein in the world of its concern makes manifest something like a fleeing of Dasein in the face of itself- of itself as an authentic potentiality-for-Being itself.

What is that from which Dasein is fleeing? That from which the flight takes place must be of a threatening nature, even if it may not be of a concrete and definite type as in the case of fear. It is a flight from oneself and its authentic potentialities (possibilities) in the fallen state and seems to be grounded in anxiety.

⁵Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, 155.

⁶Gron, 48.

⁷Joy Kaipan, *Invitation to Wholeness* (Bangalore: AsianTrading Corporation, 2009), 6.

⁸*Ibid.*

Anxiety, therefore, can be described as the ontological structure which is behind our everyday escape into idle talk (*Rede*), curiosity (*Neugier*) and ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*) which are the dimensions of fallenness.⁹

1.2.1 Anxiety and Fear

To bring sharply forward the aspect of anxiety, Heidegger contrasts it with the mood of fear. He warns us not to identify anxiety with fear. His interpretation of fear as a state of mind shows that in the face which we fear is a detrimental entity within the world which comes from some definite region. Fear is a fear of something: it is a fleeing from something in the world. But in the fallen existence, Dasein flees from itself, and so the threat does not come from anything within the world, because it is precisely to these that Dasein flees. The threat revealed by anxiety in a fallen Dasein cannot come from any definite thing whether ready to hand or present within the world. Anxiety does not know that in the face of which it is anxious. It is nothing and nowhere within the world. Therefore that which threatens cannot bring itself close by; it is already there yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one's breath, and yet it is nowhere. The obstinacy of the nothing and nowhere within the world means as phenomenon that the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety. What anxiety is anxious of is the nothing that is, the world as such. Or that which anxiety is anxious about is being in the world. The world disclosed in anxiety is a world containing entities and not a conceptual world. The experience of the world as nothing in anxiety brings things in the world into total insignificance and so makes manifest that of which anxiety arises is not of a thing: it is not any being at all; it is no-thing.¹⁰

As in anxiety everything in the world sinks into 'nothingness', the world can offer nothing, neither can the Dasein with the others. Anxiety thus, reveals to Dasein the impossibility of understanding itself in terms of the world. It throws Dasein back upon that which it is about-its authentic potentiality for- Being- in- the- world. It individualises Dasein for its own most Being in the world, which as something that understands, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. Anxiety thus deprives Dasein of the possibility of understanding itself from the 'world' and from the public explanations of other people. It throws Dasein back into its own ability to be in the world, for which anxiety is anxious.

⁹Vensus A. George, *From Being –in-the-World to Being –toward-Being* (Nagpur: SAC Publications, 1996), 44.

¹⁰Joseph Manikath, *From Anxiety to Releasement in Martin Heidegger's Thought* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation 1978), 10.

A fundamental characteristic of human existence emerges from this i.e. I am there; I am in the world-that is a fact. My existence is my own existence. My (individual) facticity is part of the disclosure of ontological anxiety, which presents Dasein to itself as an isolated possibility thrown into the world. However much my dispositions, abilities, circumstances and so on resembled those of another person, there would still be the unbridgeable gap between my existence and an existing that is his. Facticity is characterised, therefore, by the stark individuality and thrown-ness. The uniqueness of the mood of anxiety is that it detaches Dasein from beings and Dasein in the world and brings it purely to itself as a single being in the world. Dasein is its being free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. But this isolation is not for a renunciation of the world, but for an authentic existence in the world and not an inauthentic existence of *Das Man* (people).¹¹

Anxiety makes Dasein aware of its Being -in-the-world. At the moment of anxiety, the world of beings seems to lose its meaning, the world becomes 'uncanny' i.e. Dasein no longer feels at home. 'In anxiety one feels uncanny'. One can dwell in tranquillized familiarity and be comfortable when lost in '*das man*' due to an unexamined and uncritical life of everydayness. When in falling we flee into at home of public-ness, we flee in the face of the uncanny-ness which lies in Dasein. This uncanny-ness pursues Dasein inconstantly, and is a threat to its everyday fall-ness in the '*das man*',¹² though not explicitly. Now if I no longer feel at home in the world of everydayness, I am forced to focus on my own Being, and not that of the *das Man*. The analysis of anxiety is for the purpose of disclosing the Being of Das as care. But before we discuss this point, it will be good to have a short view of the 'nothing' disclosed in anxiety.¹³

1.2.2 Anxiety and Nothing

There is perhaps no philosopher like Heidegger who has tried to explain the experience of nothingness, revealed through anxiety. This is a theme running through the works of the early Heidegger` continued to a certain extent in his later works. This theme is clearly presented in two of his works i.e. *Being and Time* and *What is Metaphysics*. The 'nothing' and 'nowhere'

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Johnson Puthenpurackal, *Heidegger through Authentic Totality to Total Authenticity* (Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1987), 32.

¹³Manikath, 12.

experienced in anxiety in Being and Time leads to world as such and Being- in-the world and finally Care.¹⁴

In what is Metaphysics? The nothing experienced through anxiety opens the realm of beings - in -the whole and of Being itself of which nothingness is a veil. And in the ...effulgent night of Non-being (disclosed by) anxiety, there occurs for the first time the original openness of beings as: that they are beings and not Non- being. The explanation of nothing is not an affirmation of negativity or nihilism but a pass over to care in being and not to Being in what is Metaphysics.

The argument for a nihilistic interpretation of Heidegger`s philosophy is not well grounded. His main concern remains always the same, i.e. to bring contemporary science oriented Dasein to a genuine meditation on Being, the greatest of all philosophic themes. The elucidation of nothingness in Being and Time enables Dasein to be in the world in an authentic way and what is Metaphysics prepares Dasein for a genuine meditation on Being. “No one” remarks Warner Brock, but a thinker to whom the problem of Being is actual relevance could have conceived of this understanding. And not one of his readers who once grasps the metaphysical range of the problem of nothingness, i.e., its preparatory character of the conceiving and unfolding of the problem of ‘Being’ could ever come to interpret Heidegger`s approach as ‘nihilistic’.¹⁵

1.3 Care: The Being of Dasein

We have seen how Dasein fallen in the ‘*das Man*’ in the analysis of Angst, forced to stand back and reflect upon itself. Anxiety thus individualizes Dasein by making it feel not at home of its inauthentic self. It does not at all force to exist authentically; but presents it with the stage for the consideration of Dasein by focussing attention on the isolated, individualized Dasein. Thus the entire phenomenon of anxiety shows Dasein as factually existing being-in-the world. The fundamental characteristics of this entity are existentiality, facticity and being fallen. Dasein is shown threefold directedness.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

1.4 Existentiality

Dasein is ahead of its possibilities. Dasein projects possibilities. It is a kind of being which, in its Being is concerned about its own Being, or in other words, for the sake of its own. The structure by which its own to be is an issue for itself makes Dasein Being-ahead of-itself. It is a drive-towards – Being.¹⁶

1.5 Facticity

Dasein is already-in the world as thrown.¹⁷ The already express the inexorable facticity of thrown-ness, the impotence to undo what one is. “Existentiality is essentially determined by facticity”¹⁸. The potentialities of Dasein, therefore, are limited.

1.5.1 Fallen-ness

Dasein is not only thrown into the world, it has to choose to surrender itself to the world of the ‘das Man’. In this falling into the complacency of everydayness, anxiety brings disquiet and through the consequent uneasiness suggests that the dwelling places of the ontic are not Dasein’s true abode. But fallen-ness is not an occasional attitude. Hence, it too must be included on to the general characterisation of Dasein as Dasein.¹⁹ Being toward-death is essentially anxiety. Death we can conclude, is the authentic living, the inmost potentiality which binds together and stabilizes Dasein’s existence.

1.5.2 Anxiety and Death

In first chapter of the second section of *Being and Time* Heidegger adds to the analysis of Dasein as Care, a study of its term i.e. that point beyond which cannot exist. In this study, he tries to show the role of death as that which totalizes human existence. Dasein as long as it lasts, is always and essentially a not yet of what it will be, and when it dies it is no more. Death belongs to the Being of Dasein as soon as it is. Heidegger examines the process of Dasein in its term by his existential analysis of death. The proper exposition starts by demonstrating that and what sense, the Being-toward-death belongs properly to the being of Dasein. We have seen earlier how existentiality, facticity and fall-ness form the three main

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁷Puthenpurackal, 45.

¹⁸Manikath, 14.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

constituent characteristics of Dasein. As death belongs in a distinctive sense to the being of Dasein, death is defined in terms of these characteristics.²⁰

1.6 Comparative Study of Kierkegaard and Heidegger

In his work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, (1844) Kierkegaard analyzes the notion in terms of our freedom and the anxiety of choice. He uses the example of a man who when stands on the edge of a cliff realizes that he could hurl into himself over the edge at any moment. In this way, the man recognizes his own intrinsic freedom and the possibility of deciding his own destiny. This recognition causes a kind of “dizziness of freedom” in which the man becomes aware also of his own responsibility. Kierkegaard connects these ideas back to the story of Adam and original sin. Prior to original sin Adam did not know good or evil, and so he did not know that eating the fruit was “evil.” When God commanded him not to eat, however, Adam became aware of his own freedom and power to choose. Adam experienced the dread, then, as the possibility of either obeying God or dissenting from Him. Dread, therefore, was the precondition of original sin. At the same time, however, according to Kierkegaard dread is not an entirely “bad” thing. For the experience of dread also opens us to move from immediacy to reflection—that is, we achieve a greater degree of self-awareness and our basic human condition of sin. This awareness offers us the possibility of repentance, which through grace can lead us back to the Absolute Good or God.²¹

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger took Kierkegaard’s notion of anxiety and interpreted it in a more ontological manner. Traditionally ontology refers to the study of being, and it was the question of being which concerned Heidegger more than ethical questions. Nonetheless, he thought the question of being could only be answered by that being “for whom being was an issue.” That being is of course human being or what Heidegger called “Dasein.” Heidegger reinterpreted human being in a radically temporal way in terms of the finitude of our human existence. For Heidegger the recognition of the finitude of our existence comes through the angst or anxiety of our “being-toward-death.” That is, in our recognition that our future has an end we experience the temporal character of our being. Here too angst is associated with freedom. Heidegger, like Kierkegaard, speaks of the dizziness of possibility. Authenticity, is the acceptance of this angst which leads to the

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, 67.

recognition of “own-most possibilities,” that is, the possibilities which are open concretely to us. Authenticity is contrasted with an in-authenticity which forgets the temporal character of our being and instead falls into the everydayness of the ‘they’.²²

1.6.1 Despair in Kierkegaard and Heidegger

Kierkegaard, generally regarded as the founder of modern existentialism, reacted against the systematic absolute idealism of the 19th-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, who claimed to have worked out a total rational understanding of humanity and history. Kierkegaard, on the contrary, stressed the ambiguity and absurdity of the human situation. The individual's response to this situation must be to live a totally committed life, and this commitment can only be understood by the individual who has made it. The individual therefore must always be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Kierkegaard ultimately advocated a “leap of faith” into a Christian way of life, which, although incomprehensible and full of risk, was the only commitment he believed, could save the individual from despair. Kierkegaard termed despair the sickness unto death’. It is a sickness of the self, a dialectical malady that Kierkegaard said was the worst misfortune never to have had the sickness. Despair is outcome of misrelating within the self. In despair, we are not ourselves and one is not conscious of having a self.²³

Heidegger does not specifically speak of despair, since Dasein is in the world. He is always worried about his death. He has to find his authentic existence after death that unauthentic existence.

1.6.2 Death in Kierkegaard and Heidegger

According to Kierkegaard death is the end of earthly existence. Since he had a Christian background Kierkegaard held the view that death is the end of our *finite* existence but not a final end. “Death itself is a passing into life ... death is not the end.” Søren Kierkegaard died peacefully on 11 November 1855. On his deathbed, he felt that his earthly task had been completed and had prayed that despair would not overcome him at the end, for he wished his death to become a meaningful act. “The hospital records describing his condition recorded:

²²*Ibid.*

²³Kierkegaard, *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980).

He considers the sickness fatal. His death is necessary for the cause which he has devoted all his intellectual strength to resolving.... If he is to go on living, he must continue his religious battle; but in that case it will peter out, while, on the contrary, by his death it will maintain its strength and, he believes, its victory.”²⁴

There are four rather formal criteria in Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death: it is non-relational, certain, indefinite and not to be outstripped. In standing before death, one has cut off all relations to others. Death cannot be experienced through the deaths of others, but only through my relation to my death. Secondly, it is certain that we are going to die. Although one might evade or run away from the fact, no one doubts that life comes to an end in death. Thirdly, death is indefinite in the sense that although death is certain, we do not know when it going to happen. Most people desire a long and full life, but we can never know when the grim reaper is going to knock at our door.

Fourthly, to say that death is not to be outstripped (unüberholbar) simply means that death is pretty damned important. There's no way of trumping it and it outstrips all the possibilities that my power of free projection possesses. This is the idea behind Heidegger's famously paradoxical statement that death is the "possibility of impossibility". Death is that limit against which my potentiality-for- being (Seinkönnen) is to be measured. It is that essential impotence against which the potency of my freedom shatters itself.²⁵

1.6.4 Relevance of Angst in Kierkegaard and Heidegger

Their ideas are still constantly being explored and redeployed today by modern thinkers from a variety of academic backgrounds. Kierkegaard's significant achievements however were not always held in high regard. He passionately opposed the intellectualism and aestheticism of his era, and his provocative manner and extremely radical way of thinking were incompatible with nineteenth-century Danish religious and philosophical thought. As a result, eventually he became an outcast from his social and intellectual environment, Kierkegaard had accurately predicted his posthumous fame – he foresaw that his work would become the subject of serious study and would achieve acclaim for its originality and depth of insight. He mockingly anticipated that after his death, the individuals who would praise him would be

²⁴Michael Watts, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2007), 217.

²⁵Simon Critchley, "Being and Time"

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/06/heidegger-philosophy-being>
(accessed 4th February 2014).

professors ‘future members of the very same academic institutions that during his lifetime had strongly opposed his way of thinking. Kierkegaard’s wish for readers was to discover the truth for themselves. Most of us are facing or experiencing some sort of anxiety in everyday life. Even though all modern gadgets and technologies are promising relief and consolation from anxiety, it never gives permanent solution. For a believer Kierkegaard is offering a way out to face the anxiety and to be true Christian. It is also applicable to non-believer who does profess faith in deity or to say God, every human being believes there is some natural power that controls the entire world, they can trust in that power and tries to seek its intervention to get rid of anxiety.

Heidegger has shown that Anxiety is the part of the universal condition of being human, an ontological category or what he calls an ‘existential’ of that being whose being is an issue for it, namely Dasein. Very briefly, these ontological categories of Dasein include understanding (*verstehen*), disposition or atonement (*Beifindlichkeit*), and speech or discourse (*Rede*). Each is present in Dasein and each characterizes Dasein’s essential character; Dasein’s essence lies in its existence. Heidegger insists that these are true ontological categories of Dasein rather than Dasein’s ontical characteristics.

1.7 Critical Appreciation and Conclusion

Kierkegaard had accurately predicted his posthumous fame. He foresaw that his work would become the subject of serious study and would achieve acclaim for its originality and depth of insight. He mockingly anticipated that after his death, the individuals who would praise him would be ‘professors’ – future members of the very same academic institutions that during his lifetime had strongly opposed his way of thinking.

In this short study, we have tried to show how Heidegger arrives at the Being of Man as Care i.e. temporality. This has been achieved through an analytical study of Anxiety which is the fundamental state-of-mind. Anxiety shatters the “at-home-attitude” of man with the everyday-life (world) and forces him to focus on his own being. Man as thinking being is active in the search for meaning of Being.

The anxiety which aroused man to turn to Being develops into listening to being through release-ment. The role of man in the search for the meaning of Being i.e. truth changes into

the role of responding to the soundless voice of being, a still attentiveness to the truth of Being as unveiling.

After going through Heidegger`s philosophy one may feel whether Heidegger is diminishing the role of human activity in thinking. Surely, there is a diminishing of human subjectivity in the traditional sense. Thinking as representation is a willing, but thinking as release-ment is a higher activity than willing. Heidegger`s attempt, therefore, is not diminish the role of man but to enable him to have his roots well fixed in the ground through a thinking which renders him now to stand firm.

In all of these cases the dread, anxiety, angst, anguish, are products of the recognition that what we thought we knew about our existence isn`t really the case after all. We are taught to expect certain things about life, and for the most part, we are able to go about our lives as if those expectations were valid.

At some point, however, the rationalized categories we rely upon will somehow fail us and we`ll understand that the universe just isn`t the way we assumed. This produces an existential crisis which forces us to re-evaluate everything we believed. There are no easy, universal answers to what`s going on in our lives, no magic bullets to solve our problems.

The only way things will get done and the only way we will have meaning or value is through our own choices and actions—if, that is, we are willing to make them and to take responsibility for them. This is what makes us uniquely human, what makes us stand out from the rest of existence around us.

From this exposition, it is certain to understand that Kierkegaard has contributed a lot towards the flourishing of the modern existentialism. Some terms like: anxiety, freedom, fallen-ness, guilt, despair, temporality etc. as used in the modern existentialism were previously used by Kierkegaard in his philosophy. This is in no way an affirmation that the modern existential philosophy is Kierkegaard modernised.

From the above exposition, Heidegger recognises the influence of Kierkegaard in the existential philosophy but also affirms that Kierkegaard`s thoughts remain on the ontic level. That is to say that Kierkegaard`s thoughts lead more to the knowledge of other entities that are not Dasein. In other words, Kierkegaard used the terms like: anxiety, temporality freedom

etc but his manner of dealing with them was not philosophical. Although this is Heidegger's view but looking at it objectively it is philosophical because Kierkegaard tried to bring philosophy to human level, criticising.

From the Kierkegaardian notion, anxiety can be lived by man in a positive manner because it opens us from immediacy to reflection and it makes us become aware of ourselves as humans and this awareness offers us the possibility of repentance which can bring us back to the absolute God. For Heidegger, it is that which calls Dasein for authentic existence. I have tried to differentiate between their understanding of anxiety whereby Kierkegaard sees it from its religious point of view and Heidegger, from the non-religious view point. At least from this understanding, one can understand that while Heidegger is influenced by Kierkegaard, he still has his own way of philosophising which is distinct from Kierkegaard's.

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