Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*[1]

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Introduction

Last year was the 300th birthday of David Hume. Very old! But he is also very young and over the many years I have been reading Hume, I have met people who have learned from him, despite his age! Every time I come to the text I learn from him.

Where does he stand on religious matters? Some people think he was a deist, some that he was an agnostic, some that he was a sceptic, and some that he was an outright atheist. Well, I guess they can't all be wrong completely about this, but what is so impressive is that across the whole of the European Enlightenment he was one of the two greatest writers within philosophy of religion and theology. I conclude that if the majority opinion is right and that Hume does not believe in God, then you don't need to believe in God to be a good theologian. It actually helps not being a believer in God from one important point of view, for it means you can step back and have a slightly more distant and therefore more objective perspective of the scenery.

The fact that some people say he was a deist, some that he was a sceptic, some that he was agnostic and some that he was an atheist, suggests that there is a certain lack of clarity somewhere. The obvious thing is to say is that the lack of clarity is in the text. Actually I don't think the text lacks clarity. I think that it is plain as a pikestaff where Hume stands on the matter of God's existence and that there is a lack of clarity in a number of the commentators who are bringing various agendas and partis pris to work on their interpretation. What you get isn't so much an account of Hume as an account of the interpreter.

So let me start by saying that Hume had something to say about religion in one of his very earliest writings, an extant letter written at a time when he was having something approximating to a nervous

breakdown. To the end of his days he was still thinking about religion, worrying about it, writing even on his deathbed about religion. The very last things he was working on were finishing touches to his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. That is not really to say he finished the book but to say instead that the book ended when he died. So here's a man who does not stand at a great distance from religion. For whether he said 'yes' to it or 'no' to it he was thinking about it all the time and probably gave it a lot more thought than do many people who are profoundly religious.

What I shall do in this lecture is to talk to you about where I think he stands on the fundamental question of religion – that concerning the existence of God.

Hume had a two-pronged attack on the question. He distinguishes early in his career between two distinct problems which can easily be confused. One of them is the nature of the process of belief formation: How do we fetch up with a belief in the existence of God? The other question is: How can we demonstrate that God exists? Now, these two questions are profoundly different in respect of the sort of methodology one would use to approach them, because a question about belief formation, why a belief occurs to you or how it comes to occur to you, is first and foremost a psychological question. Why do people fetch up believing in God? We find all sorts of very strange accounts, a lot of them nothing to do with reason or intellect. It's a quite separate question from whether we can demonstrate that God exists.

Hume's writings

Hume wrote two extended works on religion, one called *The Natural History of Religion* and the other *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. One of the things that these two titles have in common is the word 'natural' and here I take my starting point from something that Prof Stewart Sutherland was saying earlier, in what I thought was a marvelous lecture. That is, that Hume approached things from the point of view of a natural scientist. We start from where we are. We are natural creatures living in the natural world which we access through the exercise of our natural faculties – the various senses and

so on. We think about the world on the basis of ideas that have come to us through our experience of the natural world. Hume is going to start where he feels about as secure as he feels anywhere and that is *experience*, the undeniable experience of the world that he lives in, and he's going to approach questions about religion from where he is, a natural creature in the natural world.

This is his subject throughout his life. His *magnum opus*, philosophically speaking, is his *Treatise of Human Nature*. We've got to listen to that title. Human nature. Why is he on about that? The answer is that he thinks that human beings are natural beings. We are parts of nature and therefore it is appropriate to investigate human beings using a methodology that is appropriate for the investigation of nature. Let's say with Hume, that human beings are an appropriate object for natural scientific investigation. If we look around the world we discover all over the place human beings with religion so let's consider religion also as part of the natural world, part of human practices and human beliefs. In all of this we want to know, given that these human beliefs are part of our nature, just how did they come to be formed in us? I don't want to go into any of the details regarding his answer, I just want to say that he engaged in an exercise which was known during the period of the Scottish Enlightenment as conjectural history. One investigates the beginnings of things, the real origins of things that are so far back that there is no historical evidence at all. Examples might be: What is the origin of government? What is the origin of society? What is the origin of language? Hume was interested in the origin of religion.

A natural study of religion

As there are no texts available contemporary with the beginnings of religion, what we've got to do is something else. What we have to do is construct as detailed an account of human nature as we possibly can and ask: Since this is what human beings are like, how would human beings *be* in the most primitive circumstances we can imagine human beings in? So Hume puts his thoughts, developed in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, to work on matters to do with religion. He wrote his *Natural History of Religion* about one decade after writing the

Treatise of Human Nature so he knew about human beings and now sets himself to ask about the early origins of religious belief. He gives an account in terms of human fear because in those earliest primitive days human beings were even less able to deal with the catastrophes of nature than we are today. Put it this way, we are still pathetic and hopeless in many circumstances but we are better able to deal with, say, the savagery of animals than people once were.

Origin of religion stemming from fear

Where we live in fear, there is a tendency that Hume noticed amongst people to personify things. There is a category of rhetoric – *prosopopoeia* – the rhetorical figure of personification, and he says, this is the way we look at a cloud, or a cloud formation and we see someone standing or sitting on a horse or something of this sort, the way we see a face in the moon. This is *prosopopoeia* – personification. We look at the great things in nature, water sources, fire and so on, and we start personifying the elements and think, 'Sometimes they do terrible things to us'. Since we tend to personify we start to think, 'If this is doing something so terrible to us maybe it is being malevolent towards us, in which case we have to respond as best we can. Do we know how to propitiate it?' Gradually there forms an idea of spirits and Hume thought that naturalism in that sense, spirits in nature or animism, was the early origin of religion and it was polytheistic and was grounded in fear. He thought that religion began with fear and it developed with fear. All the things associated with religion – such he called priestcraft – began with mountebanks and charlatans coming along with the secret of how to propitiate the spirits; they were a class of people with specialist knowledge on how to propitiate. This is Hume's story. There is a lot to be said in favour of this and things to be said against it. However, I am just wanting to say this is the Humean story of how religion started and it is a totally naturalistic story and that is the crucial thing about it.

We might want to tinker with the details or give a radically different story. For example, there is someone coming to lecture in a few months time at the University of Glasgow who will be speaking about theistic belief on the basis of neuroscience. There is now something

called neuro-theology which is hard at work. It suggests that if you stimulate certain nodal points in the brain you get religious belief. This in fact is a version of where Hume is at, that is to say we fetch up with religious belief and the question is: Can we give a naturalistic account of how we come by that belief? And suppose we can give a naturalistic account, what do we say about that?

Well, there's one thing I want to say about that. When I was young there was a particular story about the strength of religion that was doing the rounds in which it was argued that fundamentally religion has got to be right because belief in it is almost universal. This was known in my early days as the kerygmatic argument for the existence of God. If you've got a belief that is nearly universal this does suggest there has got to be something to it. Hume doesn't deny that but the question is: What is there to it? Does it follow that it is true? The answer is 'no'. What follows from the fact that there is an almost universal belief, he felt, is that there is some mechanism almost universally placed in the human psyche or in the human brain even, which prompts us into having certain beliefs. The fact that we've got these beliefs does not in the least mean that the beliefs are true; it means that is the conclusion you may have to draw if you start off as a natural scientist raising the question about what the natural origin of belief in God might be.

What is the question?

It is not to say, of course, that the proposition that God exists is not true. What I'm saying is that the question 'How does the belief come to be formed in our heads?' is totally irrelevant to the question 'Does God exist?' You can produce the human story about how the belief forms, whether it's a story from neurology about how belief forms, or from any number of other sources, but they say nothing at all about the intellectual underpinning that you would require. Hume knew that very well and no doubt thought, as I do, that there is probably hardly a soul on this planet who believes in God because they've read Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion* (his ontological argument about the existence of God) and said to themselves, 'Wow, that's a really valid argument! I can't help believing in God as of now.' I bet not a soul came to believe in God via Anselm's argument for the existence

of God. As a matter of fact we know that not even Anselm came to believe in the existence of God because of this argument, since he precedes the argument with a prayer to God. This is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. It is on the basis of this in fact that I am myself wishing to argue. Far from anybody coming to believe Anselm's argument for the existence of God, Anselm doesn't actually have an argument for the existence of God. That's not what he is trying to do. What he is trying to do is understand God by way of an argument, otherwise it doesn't make much sense to say, as he does, 'Oh God, please give me understanding so that I may deepen my faith.' That doesn't sound like a prelude to an argument. This is a man who is as far from needing an argument for the existence of God as anyone could be. Like everybody who does believe in God, perhaps we want to pause for a minute to wonder for a minute what we actually do believe. What is the content? What is this God? What is the *modus essendi*? What is the mode of being of the being who is God?

Mechanisms

So, to stay for a moment with Anselm, we begin by thinking of the God that exists. We therefore have an idea of God in our mind. Because I say God exists and I've got some idea of God, God cannot exist only in my mind; because I think of God as perfect, and if God only exists in my mind he cannot be perfect, so he must have being that is external to me as well as internal. But not external being like mine. My being is a contingent being, his must be a being of such a nature that he cannot *not be*. Anselm goes deeper and deeper until he ends up with, not a belief in God as previously, but with a deeper understanding of what he was assenting to in faith.

Let's make a distinction here between coming to believe in God by some naturalistic route and knowing an argument for the existence of God, and let's recognise that merely understanding the psychological mechanism involved in the formation of the belief goes nowhere near answering why one ought to believe or what the intellectual justification is for the belief.

Can you give a justification? Hume, as a philosopher, is interested in that question of intellectual justification. He says, the mere fact that

more or less everybody believes doesn't mean that it is true, so I am now asking as a separate question: Why should we believe it, if the fact that everybody believes is not itself an argument?

Round about the time Hume started work on the *Natural History of Religion* (we are not absolutely sure of the dates but it was possibly around 1749–50 – it was eventually published in 1757) he set to work on his religious *magnum opus*, his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which is without peer amongst writings on religion during the European Enlightenment (not just the Scottish Enlightenment). I think the only person that comes anywhere near him is Immanuel Kant.

The *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

There's something post-modern about the *Dialogues*. There are three personae there, talking about religion and the existence of God: there is Philo who is a careless sceptic; Cleanthes, who I fondly think of as a moderate clergyman, who is described at the beginning as an accurate philosopher; and Demea who is described as rigidly orthodox. The word used of Demea is 'inflexible'. This information comes before the *Dialogues* start. The *Dialogues* are the content of a letter that a young man named Pamphilus wrote to Hermippus. All of this is important for a certain reason. Pamphilus wrote to Hermippus to say that the previous day he had been listening to a most interesting conversation which he was sure Hermippus would be interested in. Clearly Pamphilus has a good memory because he then proceeds to write a hundred pages, and with very dense argumentation. He says modestly, it's the best he can do! Who are these people? We don't know too much about that but we learn almost at the start of the *Dialogues* that Pamphilus is the tutee of the moderate theologian/clergyman, Cleanthes. It is Pamphilus who says that Cleanthes is an accurate philosopher and complains about the other two because one is careless and the other is inflexible. You might think this is a biased source, a tutee staying on the right side of his tutor. But what I want to point out is that Hume was anticipating trouble. There were a number of folk, mostly clergy, who were not at all happy about what Hume had to say, indeed some of them were downright hostile. Stewart Sutherland reminded us that

Hume applied for the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh in 1745 and was rejected. It was not the town council but very largely the committee of clergyman who stopped him in his tracks. Hume knew that he was going to have trouble with some members of the clergy as they had already shown what they were capable of: having prevented his appointment to the Edinburgh Chair, they shortly afterwards again stopped him in his tracks when he went for the Logic and Rhetoric Chair at Glasgow.

Now, the drift of the argument in the *Dialogues* is not a very agreeable one from the point of view of a certain kind of religious person. One of the personae in the *Dialogues* is really speaking on behalf of Hume – that's Philo. But Philo doesn't declare this; he's just one of the three characters. But the point is, if anybody attacks Hume because of something that is said in the *Dialogues*, Hume can reply 'Why do you ascribe that view to me? It is in the mouth of either Demea or Cleanthes or Philo and they are all disagreeing with each other. Why do you think this one is me?' And what's more, having established the enormous distance between himself and the text of the dialogue, Hume can go one stage further – it's not that we are getting the actual text that came from their mouths, we are getting the memory of it that the tutee of one of the participants wrote for a pal of his! So it's Pamphilus's memory, and Hume might even say, 'Well Pamphilus was mis-remembering anyway, so it's not just that this doesn't represent my view, maybe this wasn't said at all.' Hume has placed himself at maximum distance so no one can attack him. Nobody was taken in by this because it was difficult to forget that Hume had actually written the book. Even if you can't precisely ascribe a particular view to Hume, the fact is that there is one drift of argument, one particular line that people would not like and it was brilliantly argued, so whether it was held by Hume or not he was giving the best argument to the devil. It might have been better for Hume if he had toned it down a little bit.

I am reminded of something that Thomas Aquinas said in the *Summa Theologia* about disputes the church occasionally sets up with folk. If you do set up a dispute with somebody in a different faith community, set it up in such terms that you will win, because if you lose you might set at risk the faith of the faithful. Better to give no

argument at all than a bad argument or even a good argument that can be trumped by another argument that is even better. So whether or not Hume's arguments are really strong or in the end they are not valid, if they are persuasive then for the sake of the faithful they are better not said, because at the end of the day something of sovereign value is at risk, namely salvation, somebody's immortal soul. So you've got to be careful here. One well understands the strength of the attitude of some of the Kirk ministers. Well, Hume couldn't care less about the strength of the position on the other side. The question was, how good were their arguments?

He comes clean quite early on, in that the three protagonists all agree that there is no point looking at *a priori* arguments for the existence of God (arguments that do without experience, such as Anselm's argument that if you have an idea of God in your mind you can conclude that there must be, outside your mind, something corresponding to the idea inside your mind). The grounds for rejecting such arguments don't matter at the moment. The point is that that they are rejected with very little discussion in the course of the *Dialogues*. In that case what are we left with?

An orderly created world?

We are left with what I began with, which is the fact that Hume is approaching all of this from where he is, namely a creature, a human being, a piece of nature using his sensory receptors to look out on the natural world and see what we can learn about the existence of God. The *Dialogues* is a text, therefore, placed very firmly within the European tradition of natural theology which depends heavily on the work of scientists, in the sense that you argue that if indeed the natural world is the work of a Creator, an artificer God, a God who made this world, then God must have left his fingerprints on it. He must have put something of himself into the world that he created so that it is not just a natural world, eternally separate from him, but a *creatum* in eternal relation to the Creator. In that case an appropriately slanted investigation of this *creatum* will reveal marks of the Creator, somehow or other. It was thought in particular that since a natural being was investigating nature by the use of his natural faculties then

natural science was what he was doing. Understood from a Humean perspective, the science of man is one way of doing natural science. When the natural scientist turns his gaze upon human beings he is doing natural science and the science is the science of man and it's for this reason that the methodology that was developed by Francis Bacon (the Baconian method) that was taken up by Newton was immediately appropriated by theologians as well. Here was a brilliantly successful method of observation and experimentation. They thought, 'It works for all other parts of the natural world, we are part of the natural world, it should work for us too.' Therefore Hume approached his theological goal in his capacity as a natural scientist in the same sense in which Bacon was a natural scientist and in the same sense in which Newton was a natural scientist. There was therefore no divide between the science of man and the natural science of Newton, not, at least, in respect of the methodology of the natural sciences.

So Hume looks round and he sees an orderly world and he raises questions about it. He wonders whether the cosmos can be understood to have the marks of design, marks of an artificer in the way a human artefact has. We have only to look at a watch to know that it isn't a bit of plant life; it took intelligence to make it, it is not an organism. You can't give an account of the origin of a watch in the same terms as you give an account of the origin of a piece of seaweed or dandelion or a piece of rock. This is human intelligence, human thought; someone thinking teleologically went to work on this. It's plain that the watch is made to tell the time. In that case why don't we say, 'Is it not plain that as a watch is made to tell the time, so the eye is made to see?' If we are going to be teleological is it not in biology and botany you find teleologies as clearly as anywhere? What other reason could there be for this particular chemical configuration if not to reproduce a certain outcome?

Hume agrees that teleology works very well when we are talking about the human being – we make plans, we have intentions, these are our goals and much of what we do is done in relation to goals we have set ourselves. Our behaviour is to be understood in terms of something that lies not so much in the behaviour as beyond it in the outcome. The outcome is only in the behaviour, but the outcome is somewhat

beyond the behaviour which is being engaged in, in order to produce a certain result. Hume, however, has pages of argument against this.

Made in God's image?

To begin with, Hume doesn't like the speed with which the theologians have moved from talk about human beings and their plans and their intentions to talk about a divine artificer. The argument from analogy is very tricky to handle. Let's say there's some very vague analogy, but then what are we talking about? We look out on our world, about which, I have to say, it seems we know almost nothing. We look out on a tiny little fragment of it, and that's all we've got. We have no reason to believe that what we are seeing is all there is. What we are seeing, in fact, is almost nothing of the natural world, only some tiny little corner of a minute fragment and for a brief period of time. Let us therefore note that there may be infinite ways of producing things by nature of which we know only one or two or three. We know some ways of producing things for they are ways that we use. But why should we suppose that we are so important in the universe that we provide the model, even an imperfect model, of the Creator of the Cosmos? What impertinence on our part! Who knows what extraordinary ways there may be of producing things, ways that we with our brain limitations could not get our minds around? Let's go easy on the whole matter of human beings as an analogy or as a rhetorical figure for God.

This is the drift of Hume's argument against analogy especially as we have to remember that our knowledge of human artefacts is based upon a vast amount of experience. Consider houses; we watch them being built. When we come across a house we don't say, 'What on earth is that doing there? How an earth did that come to be?' We watch people build houses and we've had ample experience, and if we want we can watch the watchmaker making watches – so we know about the process from the start. This is the natural scientific approach. He observes what is within the bounds of experience. So we can talk about human creativity on the basis of personal experience. But when we are talking about the creation of the world, who was around to observe that? On the basis of what experience? What evidence do we

have of the creation of the world? In a related context Hume famously remarked that the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. We've really got no evidence about the creation of the world. We weren't there. Nobody was there and nobody told us about this. We've got no idea how such a thing was done or what indeed was done. What does creation from nothing mean? I will not go into the question of whether creation *ex nihilo* is a biblical concept but the idea of a creation *ex nihilo* seems to have been taken on board in some special way. I'm dubious about it myself, but creation *ex nihilo* seems to have been taken on as what the Bible teaches. All I'm saying, along with Hume, is that if we are going to be natural scientists then we have to remain silent on this because we haven't got the evidence.

The fact of 'evil'

So here's Hume speaking as a natural scientist saying, 'We have no experience about this but this is a metaphysical matter about God as Creator.' But there is something else worrying him, namely that on the basis of Holy Scripture God is being accepted as just, forgiving, merciful, loving, a God who is providential, watching over his creatures; and Hume says 'Let's have some evidence.' God is perfectly good, God is omnipotent. However, granted that there are evil things in the world, how might we explain these away and still be left with a workable concept of the perfectly good God? Hume is not looking at it from that point of view. Hume is looking at it from the point of view of a natural scientist who starts with his mind clear of belief in the existence of God. He looks out on the natural world and wonders whether the evidence he finds would give him good reason to believe that there is an omni-benevolent God. So he is not starting off by believing in an omni-benevolent God and then saying, 'How do we deal with the fact of evil?' He's starting from the fact of evil and saying, 'Since there is evil here, how do I get from the fact of evil to belief in an omni-benevolent God?' He's starting from the opposite position to most theologians who are already granting the benevolence of God and then seeing evil as a problem. From Hume's perspective, belief in evil is no less an obstacle to coming to believe in an omni-benevolent God. It is not enough to say that 'most of what's around is good', and

concluding that 'since there's more good than evil God must be a good God.' No, if God is omnipotent and he's also omni-benevolent, there would not be an iota of evil in the world. Hume is saying that there is a very strong argument, an overwhelming argument, in his opinion, that even if God exists there is not any evidence at all that God is a morally good God, a providential God watching over and taking care of his children as a shepherd his flock.

Human artefacts linked to human intelligence in the universe?

Let me return to a matter raised earlier, that of the argument from analogy for the existence of God. Does Hume absolutely reject analogy? I believe the answer is 'no' and my argument is based on the assumption that Philo in the *Dialogues* is Hume's adopted persona. Writing on his deathbed and surely picking his words as carefully as anyone could, Hume affirms that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence. So he is not denying analogy outright. I'm inclined to think that, having allowed that there is an analogical relationship between human artefacts and the cosmos he then qualifies this so comprehensively that you may wonder what on earth this analogy could be. What I'm saying is that he's stepping back, he's distancing himself. He refuses in the persona of Philo to say that there is absolutely no analogy. So where does this leave us?

Leaving the question open

Hume doesn't say there is an analogy and he doesn't say there isn't, but he's leaving it open. However, he does make it quite clear that it needs to be left open because with our frail reason we cannot settle the question. So where are we with this argument? I want to remind you that Hume was a cradle Calvinist. His father died when Hume was very young, two years old, and his mother, a dedicated Calvinist, brought him up with his siblings. He knew what the Kirk of those days stood for, not to mention that many of his truly close friends during the Enlightenment were dedicated churchman – one thinks for example of Hugh Blair who occupied the pulpit of the High Kirk of St

Giles for forty-odd years (as well as being the first Professor of Belles Lettres at Edinburgh). I think there's some Calvinism that Hume took with him throughout his life and I think he was deliberately leaving the door open. Calvinism, if I may so put it, is a rather broad church and within it there is an element which I would say was quite strongly fideistic. What I am speaking about here is that we can distinguish two of the great faculties of the human mind, the faculty of intellect and the faculty of will.

During the High Middle Ages onwards the Dominicans were distinguished from the Franciscans on the grounds that the Dominicans said that intellect had primacy in relation to will. The Franciscans said that it was the will that had primacy in relation to the intellect. What this amounts to crucially is that both sides believed that faith included a movement of the intellect and a movement of the will, and one of these two had primacy. The hard-headed fideists said 'Faith is by a movement of the will'. Nobody was ever saved by a good argument. Reason isn't going to get you there, so it is not just Hume who thinks that reason can't deliver; fideists agree with him on this matter, believing as they do that it is the will that does the work.

If you take the Humean line of the frailty of reason you are not necessarily arguing against Calvin, that is to say against certain particular interpretations of Calvin. Indeed Calvinists may well assume that Hume is on their side. In using one's intellect people are running a risk because of the damage of the Fall. It is not that the Fall caused the damage, the Fall was the damage being done, the corruption of the human mind, the corruption of the intellect being part of that.

An atheist or a sceptic?

Hume is no more able to demonstrate the non-existence of God than he is able to demonstrate the existence of God. In so far as he is a natural scientist, Hume does not know that God doesn't exist. Yet we are talking about one of the profoundest philosophers of Western culture, one who held that the faculty of reason has a natural home in a natural world and becomes less and less competent to answer questions the further questions get from the natural world. But if, in

the end, Hume can no more prove that God does not exist than prove that he does, atheism is not an intellectually sound option. That's to say Hume might still be an atheist but if he is he is an atheist as a dogma. But the evidence better supports the contention that he was a sceptic: not saying yes to God but not saying no. In this, he was acting as a wise man proportioning his belief to the way that he read the evidence. Few people, however, take that from their reading of the *Dialogues.*

Conclusion

On this basis I want to make one last point. A lot of criticism of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is based upon a false conception of what the book is about. The peculiar thing is that if you read that book you discover that Hume is not discussing whether God exists. Hume's question is whether there are any good arguments for the existence of God and he says that so far as he knows there aren't any. But to say there are no good arguments for the existence of God is not at all to say that God does not exist. It's just to say that reason cannot deliver on that particular question. So is he turning his back on religion? No. We can believe by a movement of the intellect constructing an argument and assenting to the conclusion, but we can also believe by a movement of the will. That latter is a fideistic move and it is certainly a move sanctioned by some parts of the Calvinist community. Hume failed to find good arguments for the existence of God but did not at all close down the possibility that God does actually exist.

I don't see how you can call that an atheistic position. I agree that he was not a theist. But he is not denying a deistic God, for he is allowing the probability of a remote analogy between the cosmos and the human artefact. I think it is best simply to say that Hume was no theist, no atheist. He was a very sophisticated and very subtle sceptic on matters of religion.

Note

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