



## Psychoanalysis and Falsifiability

### A revision of Popper, Adler and Freud's references<sup>(1)</sup>

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Setting Marxism aside, in this article we intend to examine Popper's references to Adler's individual psychology and to psychoanalysis. It is apparent that Popper was familiar with the former –both in theory and practice, provided that he worked with Adler in Vienna– but he does not prove to know the latter as well, neither its practice nor its founding texts. Among these texts, there are some in which Freud addressed Adler in particular to criticize him. Adler went on to take a separate way and abandoned the name "psychoanalysis", adopting "individual psychology" to refer to his own discipline. Popper criticism on Adler has several points in common with Freud's. We will try to show that Popper took some conclusions about individual psychology and made them cover psychoanalysis without taking into account if they were pertinent to Freud's work. For example, Popper presented the *inductive explanation* as a method and *verification* as a practice. Although these are valid for individual psychology, they are not for psychoanalysis.

As these references are still being credited by several well-known psychoanalysts, as Milner<sup>(1995)</sup> and Miller<sup>(2010)</sup>, we consider it is necessary to review the differences between the two disciplines.

First, it is important to point out the circumstantial character of Popper's references to Marxism, individual psychology and psychoanalysis. These disciplines were chosen by Popper due to the great admiration his friends felt for them:

*(...) I found that those of my friends who were admirers of Marx, Freud, and Adler, were impressed by a number of points common to these theories, and especially by their apparent explanatory power. (...)*

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### Introduction:

Popper included his criticism of psychoanalysis in the conference through which he presented the route that led him to introduce falsifiability as a criteria for "*distinguishing between a genuinely empirical method and a non-empirical or even a pseudo-empirical method*" (Popper, 1963); that is to say, a criteria to tell apart a science from a pseudo-science.

Along with Marxism and Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, Popper presented Psychoanalysis as a pseudo-science. He explained that he chose these three disciplines for the great admiration his friends felt for their explanatory powers, namely the power to find verifications, a quality belonging to the inductive method.

Thus, its truth appeared manifest; and unbelievers were clearly people who did not want to see the manifest truth; who refused to see it, either because it was against their class interest, or because of their repressions which were still "un-analyzed" and crying aloud for treatment. (Popper, 1963)

This circumstantial reference shows a strategic presentation of the problem that Popper confirms later in the conference, when he discusses Hume's empirism and criticizes Kant. From the three disciplines that Popper calls pseudo-sciences; individual psychology was the only one the philosopher knew closely, as he had worked with Adler in social aid clinics in Vienna working-class districts. Regarding that experience, Popper tells us of a particular episode to justify his conclusions:

*(...) As for Adler, I was much impressed by a personal experience. Once, in 1919, I reported to him a case which to me did not seem particularly Adlerian, but which he found no difficulty in analyzing in terms of his theory of inferiority feelings, although he had not even seen the child. Slightly shocked, I asked him how he could be so sure. "Because of my thousandfold experience," he replied; whereupon I could not help saying: "And with this new case, I suppose, your experience has become thousand-and-one-fold."*

Popper's anecdote exemplifies the explanatory character of Adler's practice, but it is not possible, in turn, to extend it to Freud's by posing that the only difference between individual psychology and psychoanalysis is the underlying theory through which they explain an occurrence. In the former, it would be the theory of the inferiority complex and, in the latter, the theory of sexuality. Popper argues that both disciplines share the method of explanation by induction.

Nevertheless, Popper only seems to be working with two references to Freud's writings -*Remarks on the Theory and Practice of Dream Interpretation*- from which he only quotes an excerpt taken out of context, and a paraphrased reference from *The Ego and the Id*. We will analyze both in this article.

Freud, however, had made public the differences between Adler's individual psychology and psychoanalysis, and also his and Adler's political and personal differences. This is clear in the following excerpt, published in 1916, three years before the date Popper first stated his dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis, individual psychology and Marxism. It is remarkable that Popper did not include Freud's comments on Adler, which we quote here:

*(...) Psychoanalysis has found as its first task the explanation of the neuroses; it has taken the two facts of resistance and transference as starting points, and by bearing in mind the third fact of amnesia in the theories of repression, it has given justifications to the sexual motive forces of the neuroses and the unconscious. Psychoanalysis has never claimed to give a perfect theory of the human psychic life, but has only demanded that its discoveries should be used for the completion and correction of knowledge we have gained elsewhere. But Alfred Adler's theory goes far beyond this goal. It pretends to explain with one stroke the behavior and character of men as well as their neurotic and psychotic maladies. As a matter of fact, Adler's theory is more adequate to any other field than to that of neuroses, which he still puts in the first place because of the history of his origin. I had the opportunity of studying Dr. Adler many years (...) When I had recognized Dr. Adler's slight talent for the estimation of the unconscious material, I expected that he would know how to discover the connections between psychoanalysis and psychology and the biological bases of the impulses, a discovery to which he was entitled, in a certain sense, through his valuable studies about the inferiority organs. He really bring out some thing, but his work makes the impression as if -to speak in his own jargon- it were intended to prove that psychoanalysis was wrong in everything and that the significance of the sexual impelling forces could only be due to gullibility about the assertions of neurotics (...)* (Freud, 1917)

We can observe in Freud's words a coincidence with Popper's statements about Adler's practice: the doctor's disregard for the account of his patients. We also notice that Freud points out something that Popper was not able to see: Adler's skepticism towards the patient was caused by his growing apart from the idea of sexual drives, which Freud developed precisely by focusing on the patients' accounts. Thus, while Popper considers they are two different theories but share the same method –*explanation*–, Freud, in the meanwhile, considered psychoanalysis different enough from individual psychology, as he considered the patients' accounts and the analyst's *interpretation* to be the basis of his discipline.

Nowadays, discussions about psychoanalysis and falsifiability ignore any references of Popper's criticism to Freud –even in those texts written by psychoanalysts–. Popper's objections against psychoanalysis are considered accurate, ignoring the fact that his criticism actually referred to individual psychology.

As precedents for our work, we will briefly explore the ideas of Jean Claude Milner and Jacques Alain Miller. The latter comments that patients who engage in free association do not produce random results. He agrees with what Popper has pointed out about verifiability as a "logical weakness in psychoanalysis", although he does not consider this as an obstacle for clinical practice. Miller also claims that the epistemologist Karl Popper has outlined that psychoanalysis has no scientific value because the idea that "it is not by chance" is always verified. This way, what Popper claims about psychoanalysis verifiability would be true as it corresponds to the logic of chance in this discipline. At this point, we do not object what Miller says about chance in psychoanalysis. What we do object is that Popper says psychoanalysis verifiability could somehow correspond to that logic, as Popper was actually referring to Adler's practice. If we suppose Popper's ideas of verifiability are founded on an accurate knowledge of psychoanalysis' free association, we would be accepting, through an omission of criticism, all of that Popper derives from verifiability: that psychoanalysis provides *verifications* through *explanation*, that psychoanalysis' logic is inductive, that it works according to the psychoanalyst's expectations and that these expectations suggest the patient. (Popper, 1963)

All of this contradicts what Freud wrote. We will quote Freud on this regard later. Our other precedent is Jean Claude Milner, who poses that there is a matching between falsifiability and psychoanalysis, as both are sciences of contingency. For falsifiability, contingency is fallible; as it consists of that which may be infinitely different of what it is, and in psychoanalysis, according to Lacan, contingency is sexuality:

(...) I will advance that sexuality, in as much as psychoanalysis speaks of it, is nothing other than this: the place of infinite contingency of the body. If there is sexuation, rather than not, is contingent. That there are two sexes rather than one or many is contingent. That one in on one side or the other is contingent. That such somatic characteristics are attached to sexuation is contingent. That such cultural characteristics are attached to it is contingent. Because it is contingent, it touches infinity. (Milner, 2000)

Following Lacan, Milner poses that falsifiability in psychoanalysis depends on its status as a science of contingency. Miller, following Popper, asserts the verifiability of psychoanalysis. However, the two approaches share the fact that they have been taken without revising Popper's references to Adler and Freud.

Popper asserts that the theoretical difference between individual psychology and psychoanalysis is of no importance in practice. Individual psychology is based on the inferiority complex and psychoanalysis is based on repression, even if this does not change their method (explanation) and their end (verifying the theory). The difference Popper points out is, for Freud, determining for a practice other than explication: sexual repression led psychoanalysis towards *interpreting* symptoms. However, Popper is right to link Adler's theories on the inferiority complex with the practice of *explanation*.

We do not mean to pose a difference between explanation and interpretation within Popper's framework. According to Popper, empirical explanation –induction based on repetitions– is an interpretation, as there is a previous expectation to the repetition of an event that makes us perceive the event as a repetition. Thus, Popper claims that repetition is the interpretation of an event as repetition. Popper also believes that this rectification of Hume matches Kant's idea that our mind does not take its laws from Nature (or from experience), as Hume posed, but instead it dictates its laws to Nature through interpretation. Popper adds that Kant was wrong to think we will succeed in our imposition because "*Nature very often resists quite successfully, forcing us to discard our laws as refuted (...)*" (Popper, 1963)

We arrive then at the moment of falsifiability, the resistance that refuses conjecture or interpretation. According to Popper, these are the basis for inductive interpretation: *conjecture*, and resistance or refutation: *falsifiability*.

Popper points out that individual psychology is within what he calls explanation or conjecture, which is an inductive interpretation that leaves resistance aside. Interpretation in psychoanalysis, however, considers the moment of resistance as a starting point for free association and, according to Freud, the method it uses is the hypothetical deductive.

In order to provide an answer to the problem Popper posed on suggestion in psychoanalysis, we must trace it back to its origins. Psychoanalysis is born, precisely, when Freud decides to pull away from practicing hypnosis and instead tries free association with his patients. The main difference between hypnosis and free association is that the latter refrains from leading the patient towards a certain "goal". That is what hypnosis and Breuer's cathartic method did.

(...) In the year 1909, when I was first privileged to speak publicly on psychoanalysis in an American University, fired by this momentous occasion for my endeavors, I declared that it was not myself who brought psychoanalysis into existence. I said that it was Josef Breuer, who had merited this honor at a time when I was a student and busy working for my examinations (1880-1882). Since then, well-intentioned friends have frequently repeated that I then expressed my gratitude out of all due proportion. They considered that, as on previous occasions, I should have dignified Breuer's "cathartic procedure" as merely preliminary to psychoanalysis, and should have claimed that psychoanalysis itself only began with my rejection of the hypnotic technique and my introduction of free association. (Freud, 1917)

When Freud abandoned hypnosis, he also abandoned suggestion, as hypnosis' goal. Without hypnotic suggestion, a new dynamic emerges, that of *resistance* and *transference*, and psychoanalysis theory is henceforward defined as a part of that dynamic. In the context of the controversy with Adler, this definition was provided:

(...) It may, therefore, be said that the psychoanalytic theory endeavors to explain two experiences, which result in a striking and unexpected manner during the attempt to trace back the morbid symptoms of a neurotic to their source in his life-history; viz., the facts of transference and of resistance. Every investigation which recognizes these two facts and makes them the starting points of its work may call itself psychoanalysis, even if it lead to [p. 10] other results than my own. But whoever takes up other sides of the problem and deviates from these two assumptions will hardly escape the charge of interfering with the rights of ownership through attempted imitation, if he insist upon calling himself a psychoanalyst (...) (Freud, 1917)

It is necessary then to tell apart what Freud called free association and what Adler understood for free association, and to examine the theoretical consequences of this difference. Reading the examples provided by Adler, we can conclude that what he calls free association is not the same technique that Freud used, but rather the opposite. Following Adler, the individual psychologist would associate on the patient's associations, while Freud, on the other hand, would recommend following free association with the analyst's evenly-suspended attention. The following paragraph is useful to understand Adler's reasoning:

(...) We must remember that the person under observation would not know what to do with himself were he not oriented toward some goal. As long as we are not acquainted with the objective which determines his 'life-line', the whole system of his recognized reflexes, together with all their causal conditions, can give us no certainty as to his next series of movements. This may be brought into harmony with practically any psychic resultant. This deficiency is most clearly felt in association-tests. I would never expect a man suffering from some great disappointment to associate 'tree' with 'rope'. The moment I knew his objective, however, namely suicide, then I might very well expect that particular sequence of thoughts -expect it with such certainty that I would remove knives, poison, and weapons from his immediate vicinity.

If I look at the matter more closely, we shall find the following law holding in the development of all psychic happenings: we cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal" (...) (Adler, 1927)

Hypnosis is abandoned and evenly-suspended attention is used in the practice instead, thus, an interplay of forces that accounts for the unconscious dynamics emerges: resistance and libido. Resistance is presented as a limit to the recollection: whenever the patient encounters a resistance to remember something, the analyst invites him to engage in free association of purposive ideas:

*(...) In the psychoanalysis of neuroses the fullest use is made of these two theorems – that, when conscious purposive ideas are abandoned, concealed purposive ideas assume control of the current ideas, and that superficial associations are only substitutes by displacement for suppressed deeper ones. Indeed, these theorems have become basic pillars of psycho-analytic technique. When I instruct a patient to abandon reflection of any kind and to tell me whatever comes into his head, I am relying firmly on the presupposition that he will not be able to abandon the purposive ideas inherent in the treatment and I feel justified in inferring that what seems to be the most innocent and arbitrary things which he tells me are in fact related to his illness.* (Freud, 1900)

When Freud became aware that the goal could be transferred onto the treatment, he abstained from receiving such transference, setting aside the role of understanding through the evenly suspended attention technique (the analyst listens without a goal).

If the patient's free association is substituted by the analyst's associations –as it occurred in Adler's case–, it is to be expected that there is no "resistance". If there is no resistance, there is no recovery of what is sexually repressed, originating from the paternal prohibition which dictates that not everything is possible.

Instead, there is the will to power (*Wille zur Macht*), and we may say that is the will of the individual psychologist over that of the patient. This is what Popper's anecdote says about Adler's practice in the paragraph we have quoted, and it is also what one of Adler's patients said, according to his own records.

According to Freud, Adler streamlines the sexual factor by setting it on the power realm: "*(...) Adler is so consistent in this, that he considers the object of evincing domination over the woman to be on the top, as the mainspring of the sexual act (...)"* (Freud, 1917)

While Freud believes that free association must not have a goal, Adler poses that knowing the goal is necessary to understand the purpose of free association. Adler inverts the two terms, as he refers to the psychologist comprehension, and not to a comprehension to which the patients could arrive by themselves as a result of their own association process. We should note that Adler does not point out how he obtains his knowledge of the patient's goal –clearly, once again he is making his own interpretation of what the patient's goal is, and this is what he prompts during the association.

The lack of resistance prevents the analyst from reaching the patient's unconscious. Therefore, the psychic difference between conscious and unconscious is ignored. In Adler's words: "*(...) Everyone develops a final goal, either consciously or unconsciously, but ignorant of its meaning (...)"* (Adler, 2003)

The difference between conscious and unconscious is overlooked, which in a context of a theory that disregards repression is very significant. As Freud has underlined, primal repression is what sets apart the conscious and the unconscious, and secondary

repression is what pursues the return of what is repressed and, this way, it creates symptoms of substitutive satisfaction.

Setting repression aside, Adler's theory is focused on the Ego. Precisely where Freud placed it: “(...) Adler's theory was, from the very beginning, a 'system', which psychoanalysis was careful not to become. It is also an excellent example of a 'secondary elaboration' as seen, for example, in the process which the waking thought produces in dream material. (...)” (Freud, 1917)

For Adler, to focus on the Ego does not mean that he is only focusing on consciousness as, according to Freud, there is much unconscious content on the Ego, but this content is the non-repressed unconscious, and it comes from the Id. We can see that what Adler calls “resistance” in no way may correspond to what Freud defines as “resistance”, in the context of what is forgotten and the repressed unconscious. Adler's resistance would correspond more or less to what Freud has called “resistance of the super-ego” (feelings of guilt) or “resistance of the Id to healing” (negative therapeutical reactions) related to the non-repressed unconscious. Adler described it as a phenomena complex, including stubbornness, contradiction, hostility, directness, an ability to distance oneself, a lack of serious goals, etc. (...) (Adler, 1927)

Since Adler does not provide an account for repression, neither does he consider the “symptom” as Freud understood it (a satisfaction that substitutes another, repressed). Instead, Adler talks about “patient's arrangements”, which are understood as *deliberate actions* of the patient, neither conscious, according to Adler, nor unconsciously repressed. In Adler's thinking there is no meta-psychological theorization of the separation between conscious and unconscious, instead there is a social theorization:

“(...) The neurotic goal might nullify itself coming into direct opposition with the feeling of the community (i.e. with consciously held attitudes and values) then its life plan is formed in the unconscious. (...)” (Adler, 1927)

Even if Adler acknowledges that the patient may not thoroughly understand the meaning of the life plan, he disregards the division of “the personality”, as he calls it, in conscious and unconscious. For him, nothing is repressed, be it conscious or unconscious. This is the reason why he arrives to an individual psychology, taking “individuality” as a basis, derived from “an integrated life-plan”. (Adler, 1927)

As he does not work with the repressed unconscious and the patient's account, Adler is faced with the non-repressed unconscious, and with the super Ego and Id resistances. The Id resistance is seen as the resistance to healing itself. Freud and Popper agree on this respect: Adler does not pay any heed to the patient's account; he does not even need to listen to the patient in order to produce an interpretation.

Freud's practice, on the other hand, goes from the experience of resistance to the experience of transference, prompted by setting suggestion aside. It is necessary to keep this in mind, as one of Popper's assumptions about psychoanalysis was that the analyst expectations would suggest the patient.

When Popper makes his criticism, he references two Freudian texts: a non-textual passage of *The Ego and the Id*, and *Remarks on the Theory and Practice of Dream Interpretation*, a lesser work from which he only quotes a paragraph and misinterprets its meaning. The latter was originally meant to be a modification or to be included in *The Interpretation of*

*Dreams*<sup>(Freud, 1900)</sup>. What Popper takes from it is a comment Freud makes about suggestion. Popper concludes that the analyst expectations suggest the patient, and his subsequent reactions towards the treatment. Freud's phrase reads as follows:

(...) So that if anyone wishes to maintain that most of the dreams that can be made use of in analysis are obliging dreams and owe their origin to suggestion, nothing can be said against that opinion from the point of view of analytic theory (...) <sup>(Freud, 1923)</sup>

The problem is that Popper fails to quote the paragraph that immediately follows that statement:

(...) In that case I need only add a reference to what I have said in my *Introductory Lectures* [(1916-17) Lecture XXVIII], where I have dealt with the relation between transference and suggestion and shown how little the trustworthiness of our results is affected by a recognition of the operation of suggestion in our sense. (...) <sup>(Freud, 1923)</sup>

This paragraph is crucial, as it clarifies that suggestion is a manifestation of transference, namely a transference of love that, according to Freud must not be required –meaning that suggestion itself must not be exploited by the analyst. This lack of correspondence on behalf of the analyst regarding transference is achieved in the midst of the free association technique. If the analyst does not produce any associations, he does not introduce his own purposive ideas in the treatment (his ideas and his unconscious desires) and, consequently, the only expectations present in the analysis are those of the patient.

Popper did not take into account the Conference nº28 of the *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, so we will amend that oversight:

(...) Anyone who has himself performed a psychoanalysis has been able to convince himself innumerable times that it is impossible thus to suggest anything to the patient. There is no difficulty, of course, in making the patient a disciple of any one theory, and thus causing him to share the possible error of the physician. With respect to this he behaves just like any other person, like a student, but he has influenced only his intelligence, not his disease. The solving of his conflicts and the overcoming of his resistances succeeds only if we have aroused in him representations of such expectations as can agree with reality. What was inapplicable in the assumptions of the physician falls away during the course of the analysis; it must be withdrawn and replaced by something more nearly correct. By employing a careful technique we seek to prevent the occurrence of temporary results arising out of suggestion, yet there is no harm if such temporary results occur, for we are never satisfied with early successes. We do not consider the analysis finished until all the obscurities of the case are cleared up, all amnesic gaps filled out and the occasions which originally called out the suppressions discovered. We see in results that are achieved too quickly a hindrance rather than a furtherance of analytic work and repeatedly we undo these results again by purposely breaking up the transference upon which they rest. Fundamentally it is this feature which distinguishes analytical treatment from the purely suggestive technique and frees analytic results from the suspicion of having been suggested. Under every other suggestive treatment the transference itself is most carefully upheld and the influence left unquestioned; in analytic treatment, however, the transference becomes the subject of treatment and is subject to criticism in whatever form it may appear. At the end of an analytic cure the transference itself must be abolished; therefore the effect of the treatment, whether positive or negative, must be founded not upon suggestion but upon the overcoming of inner resistances, upon the inner change achieved in the patient, which the aid of suggestion has made possible (...) <sup>(Freud, 1920)</sup>

We should keep in mind that Freud abandoned suggestion. However, far from satisfying the transference with his representations expectations, Freud let patients free to produce their own associations, introducing their own thoughts and dreams. It was not Freud but the patients themselves who first started mentioning dreams in their accounts.

*(...) My patients, after I had pledged them to inform me of all the ideas and thoughts which occurred to them in connection with a given theme, related their dreams, and thus taught me that a dream may be interpolated in the psychic concatenation, which may be followed backwards from a pathological idea into the patient's memory. The next step was to treat the dream itself as a symptom, and to apply to it the method of interpretation which had been worked out for such symptoms. (...)* (Freud, 1900)

Let us revise the order of Freud's discoveries:

*(...) Other doctrines which were contributed to the cathartic method through my efforts thus transforming it into psychoanalysis, are the following: The theories of repression and resistance, the addition of the infantile sexuality, and the usage and interpretation of dreams for the understanding of the unconscious. (...)* (Freud, 1917)

We would like to point out that setting aside suggestion means, first, the transference of sexuality, and also the introduction of *interpretation* as an analytic method. Also, we will examine Adler's theorization on transference and how it leads to *explanation*:

*(...) Freud has repeatedly pointed out that analysis must realize these resistance phenomena which are frequently connected with transference. Since according to our view the psychic relations involved in these two questions are different (from those of Freud) and are frequently misunderstood, I shall attempt to discuss them in relation to the above-mentioned case (...)* (Adler, 1927)

*(...) On the other hand, in our case, we arrived at the concept of "resistance" after long explanations. I wanted to make clear to her the confrontational character of her neurosis. She complained: 'You always want to be right'. It was she herself who always wanted to be right. (...)* (Adler, 1927)

We quote Adler's conclusion:

*(...) Love transference directed to the physician is, then, unreal, and must be understood as farcical. It is unnecessary to consider it as "libido" and, to sum up, it is not even a transference but a general plan, a habit, born in infancy, an expression of the search for power. (...)* (Adler, 1927)

Finally, after revising Popper, Adler and Freud's references, we reach to the conclusion that Popper gave sufficient account of being familiar with Adler's practice and the fundamental aspects of his theory. However, when he tries to extend those conclusions to psychoanalysis theory and practice, it becomes evident that his understanding of psychoanalysis was biased by his previous knowledge of individual psychology.

As regards the acceptance of individual psychology and psychoanalysis, we arrive to the conclusion that also in this case Popper has extended the acceptance of individual psychology towards psychoanalysis as the latter, far from being accepted, has always been resisted. To support this stance we can revise both Freud and Adler's works. According to Freud:

(...) As I have recognized long since that it is the inevitable fate of psychoanalysis to arouse opposition and to embitter people, I have come to the conclusion that I must surely be the originator of all that characterizes psychoanalysis. (...) (Freud, 1917)

Meanwhile, individual psychology's acceptance is attested by Adler's statements:

(...) It has been easy to explain to psychologists, pedagogues and neurologists this policy of individual prestige. A science of prestige tries to set itself apart from the influence of our individual psychology, and through circumlocutions and skirting they pretend to fight our discoveries while actually they intend to appropriate them – this is something that does not surprise me or my disciples. (...) (Adler, 1927)

This outline regarding the knowledge, the spread and the acceptance of psychoanalysis and individual psychology is sufficient for the time being.

Acceptance (defined as "comprehension") of individual psychology is coherent within a practice where the psychologist imposes his own goal to the patient. Individual psychology is accepted (comprehended) easily, as it is a product of the resistance of the unconscious or, according to Freud, an instance of secondary process: it censors all that is related to sexuality.

Nevertheless, we should also consider that another feature of conditioning is the reappearance of symptoms, once the patient is de-suggested. This is why we see the return of individual psychology and, confused with it, the always resisted (per Freud's words) psychoanalysis. We consider proof of this resistance the confusion shown by Popper regarding both disciplines.

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