

Frege, Sentence-questions, Questions, and Thoughts

a dialogue

Introduction

In the last forty years Dummett, Hanks, Künne, and Bobzien have claimed that when Frege wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, he thought that the sense of a sentence-question [Satzfrage]¹ was not a thought [Gedanke] ((Dummett 1981: 307–308); (Hanks 2007: 142–143); (Künne 2010: 427–429); (Bobzien 2021: 163–164)). Recently, Textor has claimed that when Frege wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, he thought that the sense of a sentence-question was not a question [Frage] (Textor 2021: 227 fn.2). I think it is possible that when Frege wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, he thought that the sense of a sentence-question was a question *and* a thought. To show that this possibility should not be overlooked, I have written a dialogue in which Frege responds to Dummett, Hanks, Künne, Bobzien, and Textor.²

Bobzien seems to think that when Frege wrote ‘Die Verneinung’, he thought that the sense of a sentence-question was not a question (Bobzien 2021: 163–165). I think it is possible that when Frege wrote ‘Die Verneinung’, he thought that the sense of a sentence-question was a question *and* a thought. Hence, I have also written the dialogue to show that *this* possibility should not be overlooked either.

Acknowledgement: I thank Maria Zanella for her questions and thoughts.

- 1 “Is 3 greater than 5?”, “Is the sun bigger than the moon?”, „Ist Sauerstoffgas kondensierbar?“, and “Did Socrates believe in the gods?” are sentence-questions. „Wo liegt Jena?“, “When did Kepler discover the elliptical orbits of the planets?”, and “Which natural number is the only even prime number?” are not sentence-questions: Frege would have called them word-questions [Wortfragen].
- 2 The possibility that *at some point* Frege thought that some questions were thoughts has, I think, already been entertained. Künne seems to have thought that by the time Frege wrote ‘Der Gedanke’, Frege thought not only that sentence-questions and assertion-sentences expressed the same thoughts, but also that sentence-questions expressed questions and that some questions were thoughts (Künne 2003: 157–158, 167–168). Nevertheless, Künne later wrote that in 1892 Frege was not yet of the opinion that sentence-questions expressed thoughts and that in 1892 Frege thought that sentence-questions expressed questions but not thoughts (Künne 2010: 428).

“I thought that *some* questions *were* thoughts”

Dummett, Hanks, Künne, Bobzien:

You thought that the sense of a sentence-question was a thought when you wrote ‘Der Gedanke’. But before, when you wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, you thought that the sense of a sentence-question was *not* a thought...³

Frege:

I didn’t! When I wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, I thought that the sense of a sentence-question *was* a thought.

Dummett, Hanks, Künne, Bobzien:

But you wrote this:⁴

The subordinate-sentence [Nebensatz] with “that” [„daß“] after “command” [„befehlen“], “ask” [„bitten“], “forbid” [„verbieten“] would appear in direct [gerader] speech as an imperative [Imperativ]. Such a thing [ein solcher] has no Bedeutung, just a sense [Sinn]. A command [Befehl], a request [Bitte] are indeed not thoughts [Gedanken], but nevertheless they stand, with thoughts, on the same level [Stufe]. Hence in the [den] dependent [abhängigen] subordinate-sentences [Nebensätzen] of “command” [„befehlen“], “ask” [„bitten“] etc., the words have their indirect [ungerade] Bedeutung. The Bedeutung of such a sentence is therefore not a truth-value [Wahrheitswert], but a command, a request and the like.

It is similar with the dependent [abhängigen] question [Frage] in phrases [Wendungen] such as “doubt whether” [„zweifeln, ob“], “not know what” [„nicht wissen, was“]. That here too the words are to be taken in [in] their indirect [ungeraden] Bedeutung is easy to see. The dependent [abhängigen] question-sentences [Fragesätze] with “who” [„wer“], “what” [„was“], “where” [„wo“], “when” [„wann“], “how” [„wie“], “whereby” [„wodurch“] etc. seem at times to be very close to adverb-sentences [Adverbsätzen], in which the words have their normal [gewöhnlich] Bedeutung. These cases [Fälle] distinguish themselves linguistically through the mood [Modus] of the verb. In the subjunctive [Konjunktiv] we have a dependent [abhängige] question [Frage] and indirect [ungerade] Bedeutung of the words, so that a proper name [Eigennamen] cannot generally be replaced by another of the same object.

In the cases so far considered, the words in the subordinate-sentence [Nebensätze] had their indirect [ungerade] Bedeutung, and this made it explicable [daraus wurde erklärlich] that the Bedeutung of the subordinate-sentence itself was also an indirect [ungerade] one;

3 (Dummett 1981: 307–308); (Hanks 2007: 142–143); (Künne 2010: 427–429); (Bobzien 2021: 163–164).

4 (Frege „Über Sinn und Bedeutung“ 2008: 35 [38–39]). I produced this translation of the relevant part of ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’ with the help of aids (see the Appendix). Dummett cites the page numbers of the relevant part (Dummett 1981: 307). Parts of the relevant part (and translations thereof) are cited by Hanks, Künne, and Bobzien ((Hanks 2007: 142); (Künne 2010: 428); (Bobzien 2021: 163–164)).

i.e. not a truth-value, but a thought [Gedanke], a command, a request, a question [Frage]. The subordinate sentence could be understood as a noun [Nennwort], indeed, one could say: as a proper name [Eigennamen] of that thought, command, etc., which [welcher] it occurred [eintrat] as [als] in the context of the complex sentence [Satzgefüge].

Frege:

If I understand correctly, you think that I thought:

that if the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was a question then the sense of a sentence-question was a question;

that no question was a thought; and

that the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was a question.

Hence you conclude that I thought that the sense of a sentence-question was a question and not a thought.

Textor:

But they're wrong. You thought that the sense of a *word-question* was a question, but you didn't think the sense of a *sentence-question* was a question.⁵

Frege:

Actually, you're all wrong. I *did* think the sense of a sentence-question was a question. But I also thought the sense of a sentence-question was a *thought*. I did *not* think that no question was a thought. I thought that *some* questions *were* thoughts. Let me explain.

I wrote that no command was a thought and that no request was a thought. But I didn't write that no *question* was a thought because I thought that *some* questions *were* thoughts.

I thought that an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was similar to a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“ for at least three reasons: first, that the words of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ (other than „ob“) had their indirect Bedeutungen and so did the words of a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“ (other than „daß“); second, that the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was the sense of a main-sentence [Hauptsatz] and so was the Bedeutung of a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“; third, that the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was not a truth-value and the Bedeutung of a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“ wasn't either.

But I also thought that an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was different from a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“ because I thought that the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was a thought but that the Bedeutung of a „daß“-sentence of „befehlen“ or „bitten“ was not a thought.

I thought that an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was to a sentence-question what a „daß“-sentence of „sagen“⁶ was to an assertion-sentence. So I did think that if the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was a question then the sense of a sentence-question was a question.

5 (Textor 2021: 227 fn.2).

Maybe someone would have thought otherwise,⁷ but *I* thought that the Bedeutung of an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ was a question. This is why I discussed „ob“-sentences of „zweifeln“ in the same paragraph in which I discussed other subordinate question-sentences whose Bedeutungen I thought to be questions.

I didn't think that the senses of the other subordinate question-sentences were thoughts. I thought that those question-sentences were to word-questions what „ob“-sentences of „zweifeln“ were to sentence-questions. I had already made the distinction between word-questions and sentence-questions prior to writing 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'⁸ and prior to making the distinction between sense and Bedeutung.⁹ Prior to making the distinction between sense and Bedeutung I thought that sentence-questions contained "judgeable content" [„Beurteilbarer Inhalt“],¹⁰ but I did not think that word-questions contained "judgeable content". Similarly, when I wrote 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', I thought that sentence-questions contained thoughts, but I did not think that word-questions contained thoughts. I wrote „eine Frage“ [“a question”] in writing „ein Gedanke, ein Befehl, eine Bitte, eine Frage“ [“a thought, a command, a request, a question”] because I thought that *all* of the subordinate question-sentences I had discussed had *questions* as their Bedeutungen but *not* all of them had *thoughts* as their Bedeutungen (that is, my writing „eine Frage“ was not unnecessary).

“I didn't avoid using the word „Frage“ for the content of a question-sentence in ‘Die Verneinung’”

Bobzien:

But why did you avoid using the word „Frage“ [“question”] for the content of a question-sentence in ‘Der Gedanke’ and ‘Die Verneinung’?¹¹

Frege:

I didn't avoid using the word „Frage“ for the content of a question-sentence in ‘Die Verneinung’! Let me explain what I wrote. First I reiterated some things I had written in ‘Der Gedanke’, and I wrote a footnote which I need to clarify:¹²

6 Frege thought that the Bedeutung of a „daß“-sentence of „sagen“ was a thought and Frege thought that the sense of an assertion-sentence was a thought (Frege „Über Sinn und Bedeutung“ 2008: 29, 33 [32, 37]).

7 In *The German Language and its Literature [Die deutsche Sprache und ihre Literatur]*, Dr. Max Wilhelm Götzinger (a German grammarian writing in the 19th Century) wrote that an „ob“-sentence of „zweifeln“ had the form of a question-sentence, but had no ‘underlying’ question (Götzinger 1839: 270 §125. 2.). He wrote „Die Form des abhängigen Fragesatzes erscheint bisweilen, ohne daß eine Frage zu Grunde läge.“, and cites the „ob“-sentences of „zweifeln“ later in the paragraph. I became aware of this book by reading (Künne 2015).

8 (Frege „Logik 1879–1891“ 1983: 8).

9 See the editors' footnote (Frege „Logik 1879–1891“ 1983: 1–2) or the translation of the relevant part of it (Frege “Logic 1879–1891” 1979: 1).

10 (Frege „Logik 1879–1891“ 1983: 8).

11 (Bobzien 2021: 165).

12 (Frege „Die Verneinung“ 1966: 54 [143–144]). I produced the translations of the parts of ‘Die Verneinung’ which are given in the dialogue with the help of aids (see the Appendix).

A sentence-question contains the request [Aufforderung] to either acknowledge [anzuerkennen]¹³ a thought as true or reject [verwerfen] it as false. For it to be possible to fulfill this request correctly, it must be demanded: that from the wording of the question [Frage], the thought which it concerns [es sich handelt] be undoubtedly [unzweifelhaft] recognisable [erkennbar]; and secondly, that this thought not belong to fiction [Dichtung]. In the following, I always assume these conditions are met. The answer [Antwort] to a question [Frage]¹ is an assertion [Behauptung] which is based on a judgment, whether it is answered in the affirmative or the negative.

¹ Here and in the following I always mean a sentence-question [Satzfrage] when I just write “question” [„Frage“]

This footnote is misleading. What I meant was that whenever I was writing of a question-sentence or of a type of question-sentence and just wrote „Frage“ [“question”] (as opposed to „Satzfrage“ [“sentence-question”] or „Fragesatz“ [“question-sentence”]) I meant *sentence-question* [Satzfrage] (and not *word-question* [Wortfrage]). It is not the case that I *always* meant *sentence-question* when I wrote „Frage“ [“question”]: later, in writing of something which I thought could be contained by a sentence-question, I wrote „Frage“ [“question”] but I didn’t think a sentence-question could ‘contain’ a sentence-question, even though this might have been implied by what I wrote in this footnote.

My meaning *sentence-question* whenever I wrote of a question-sentence or of a type of question-sentence and just wrote „Frage“ is similar to my meaning *sentence-question* and not *word-question* when I wrote „Fragesatz“ [“question-sentence”] in this part of ‘Der Gedanke’:¹⁴ „Fragesatz und Behauptungssatz enthalten deselben Gedanken“ [“A question-sentence and an assertion-sentence contain the same thought”]. Also in ‘Logik 1879–1891’¹⁵ I wrote „der Frage“ [“the question”] and wrote this footnote: „Es ist hier natürlich nur von der Satzfrage, nicht von der Wortfrage die Rede“ [“There is here, of course, only talk of the sentence-question, not of the word-question”].¹⁶

13 See (Künne 2013: 57, 59–63) for a discussion of „anerkennen“.

14 (Frege „Der Gedanke“ 1966: 35 [62]).

15 (Frege „Logik 1879–1891“ 1983: 8).

16 See also (Textor 2021: 227). Textor said that it seemed that in ‘Logik 1897’, Frege first excluded question-sentences “in general” from expressing senses which were either true or false “only to give, ten pages later,” an example of an assertion-sentence which expressed the same thought as a sentence-question (Textor 2021: 227). He thought that “the ensuing confusion” would be “dispelled” if we were to “bear in mind” the footnote from ‘Logic 1879–1891’ (Textor 2021: 227). Textor thought that Frege should not have “unguardedly” written that question-sentences were not truth-evaluable, and should have instead written that sentence-questions were truth-evaluable but word-questions were not (Textor 2021: 227).

This is a translation of the relevant part of ‘Logik 1897’ (produced with the help of aids, see the Appendix), in which Frege discusses the predicate [Prädikat] „wahr“ [“true”]:

Of course [wohl] one [man] mostly [Am meisten] ascribes [legt...bei] our predicate to sentences; however the desire-sentences, question-sentences, request-sentences, and command-sentences are to be excluded and only the assertion-sentences come into consideration, those sentences, in which we communicate facts, put forward [aufstellen] mathematical laws or natural laws.

(Frege „Logik 1897“ 1983: 140)

Textor seems to have thought that Frege thought, or that Frege should have thought, that a sentence’s having a true or false sense was a sufficient condition for its being true or false. If Frege did think this, or should have thought this, I do not know why. I grant that Frege wrote „wenn wir einen Satz wahr nennen, meinen wir eigentlich seinen Sinn“ [“when we call a sentence true we really mean its sense”] (Frege „Der Gedanke“ 1966: 33 [60]). (See also (Frege „Logik 1897“ 1983: 140).) However, this does not even suggest that Frege thought that a sentence’s having a true or false sense was a sufficient condition for its being true or false. See also (Künne 2003: 168).

Now, I think I was responding to my colleague Bruno Bauch in ‘Die Verneinung’,¹⁷ and I was considering the view that the being of a thought consists in its being true. Hence I wrote:¹⁸

Here, however, a difficulty arises. If the being [Sein] of a thought is its being true [Wahrsein], then the expression [Ausdruck] “false thought” [„falscher Gedanke“] is just as contradictory [widerspruchsvoll] as the expression “non-being thought” [„nichtseiender Gedanke“]; then the expression “the thought that three is greater than five” [„der Gedanke, daß drei größer als fünf ist“] is empty, and therefore it should not be used in science at all, except between quotation-marks; then one should not say “that three is greater than five is false” [„daß drei größer als fünf sei, ist falsch“] because the grammatical subject is empty.

I thought I would confront this view of thoughts with my view, stated explicitly in ‘Der Gedanke’,¹⁹ that a sentence-question contains the same thought as a corresponding assertion-sentence. Hence I wrote:²⁰

But can one not at least ask whether something is true? In a question [Frage] one can distinguish [unterscheiden] the request [Aufforderung] to judge [urteilen] from the special content [besonderen Inhalte] of the question [Frage], which shall be judged [beurteilt]. In the following I will call [nennen] this special content simply the content [Inhalt] of the question or the sense [Sinn] of the corresponding [entsprechenden] question-sentence [Fragesatz]. Now, does the question-sentence

“Is 3 greater than 5?” [„Ist 3 größer als 5?“]

have a sense, if the being of a thought consists in its being true? If the being of a thought consists in its being true, then [dann]²¹ a thought cannot be the content [Inhalt] of the question [Frage], and one is inclined to say that the question-sentence [Fragesatz] has no sense at all. But that²² probably comes from one immediately recognizing the falsehood.

I thought that even if one would have been inclined to say that the sentence-question „Ist 3 größer als 5?“ had no sense because one thought it was obvious that it should be answered in the

17 (Schlotter 2006).

18 (Frege „Die Verneinung“ 1966: 54 [143–144]).

19 (Frege „Der Gedanke“ 1966: 35 [62]).

20 (Frege „Die Verneinung“ 1966: 54–55 [144]).

21 I could have written any of these two simpler sentences instead (“Then a thought cannot be the content of the question, ...”, “If so, then a thought cannot be the content of the question, ...”) but I did not because I think there might have been a mistake in Geach’s translation and I want the reader not to misunderstand what Frege wrote. Geach’s translation is: “If not, the question cannot have a thought as its content...” (Frege “Negation” 1997: 347 [144]). But I think it is the *protasis* of the preceding conditional question-sentence which is relevant to the understanding of the „dann“ of the sentence to be translated, not the apodosis. Frege was explaining the consequences of the being of a thought consisting in its being true: the content of „Ist 3 größer als 5?“ couldn’t have been a thought if the being of a thought consisted in its being true; if the being of a thought didn’t consist in its being true then the content of „Ist 3 größer als 5?“ might have been a thought—a thought which was false. If it were the apodosis which were relevant to the understanding of the „dann“, and Geach’s translation of “if not, ...” were a correct translation of the sentence to be translated, then Frege would have written that if the question-sentence „Ist 3 größer als 5?“ did not have a sense, then one would have been inclined to say that it had no sense at all. But it would not have made sense for him to have written this. Frege was not pointing to a connection between it not having a sense and one’s inclination to say so. Frege was pointing to a connection between it not having a thought as its sense and one’s (alleged) inclination to say that it had no sense at all.

22 “...that inclination...”.

negative, one would not have been inclined to say of a sentence-question for which it was not obvious whether it should be answered in the the negative, that it had no sense (regardless of whether it should be answered in the affirmative or the negative). I thought one would have to agree that a sentence-question of that kind contained “a question” [„eine Frage“] and thus had a sense. Hence I wrote:²³

Now does the question-sentence [Fragesatz]

“Is $(\frac{21}{20})^{100}$ greater than $\sqrt[10]{10^{21}}$?” [„Ist $(\frac{21}{20})^{100}$ größer als $\sqrt[10]{10^{21}}$?“]

have a sense? If one were to have found out that the question [Frage] should be answered in the affirmative, one could accept the question-sentence [Fragesatz] as meaningful [sinnvoll]²⁴, because it would have a thought as its sense. But what if the question [Frage] should be answered in the negative? Under our assumption that the being of a thought is its being true [bei unserer Voraussetzung], it would not have a thought as its sense.²⁵ But the question-sentence [Fragesatz] would still have to have some sense or other [irgendeinen Sinn], if it were to contain [enthalten] a question [Frage] at all. And is something not in fact asked in it? Can't getting an answer to it be desired?

These last two questions were rhetorical. I thought it obvious that one could desire that one get an answer to the question(-sentence), and that something was in fact asked in it. I thought that one would therefore be forced to accept that the question-sentence contained a “question” [„Frage“]. Here I didn't mean *sentence-question* when I wrote „Frage“; this is what I was referring to before when I was clarifying my footnote. When I wrote „Frage“ here I meant what I meant in ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’ when I wrote „Frage“ in writing „ein Gedanke, ein Befehl, eine Bitte, eine Frage“. I wrote that the question-sentence would have to have some sense or other if it were to contain a question. I wrote this because I thought the question it would contain, were it to contain a question, would be the sense of the question-sentence.

Bobzien:

I thought that you might have thought that the question which it would contain would not be its sense but would instead be a combination of its sense with a request.²⁶

Frege:

I didn't think that. Of course, should such a combination have existed, the existence of it would have entailed the existence of a sense of the question-sentence, hence the conditional I wrote (“the question-sentence would still have to have some sense or other, if it were to contain a question at all”) would have been true. But I thought it was true for a different, perhaps simpler, reason. I

23 (Frege „Die Verneinung“ 1966: 55 [144]).

24 “...as having sense/as having a sense...”.

25 “If the question should be answered in the negative, then, under our assumption that the being of a thought consists in its being true, it would not have a thought as its sense.”. “In that case, on our supposition, we should have no thought that was the sense of the question.” (Frege “Negation” 1997: 347 [144]).

26 (Bobzien 2021: 165).

thought it was true because I thought that if it were to contain a question, the question it would contain would be its sense.

At the time of writing ‘Der Gedanke’ and ‘Die Verneinung’²⁷ I still thought that the content of a sentence-question was a thought, having already thought this at the time of writing ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’. Hopefully now it is clear that at the time of writing ‘Die Verneinung’ I still thought that the content of a sentence-question was also a question, having already thought this at the time of writing ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’.

In short, when I wrote ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, ‘Der Gedanke’, and ‘Die Verneinung’ I thought that some questions were thoughts, and I thought that the sense of a sentence-question was a question *and* a thought.

Appendix

The sources used in producing the translation of the relevant part of ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’ were: a physical copy of *Funktion, Begriff, Bedeutung* (edited by Günther Patzig) from 2008; a digital copy of ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’²⁸ which has been created by scanning a physical copy of the hundredth volume of *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*; and the excerpt in (Künne 2010) on page 427.

The source used in producing the translations of the relevant parts of ‘Der Gedanke’ and ‘Die Verneinung’ was a physical copy of *Logische Untersuchungen* (edited by Günther Patzig) from 1966. The source used in producing the translations of the relevant parts of ‘Logik 1879–1891’ and ‘Logik 1897’ was a digital copy of *Nachgelassene Schriften*.

I have used a number of aids in producing the translations. I consulted three versions of Max Black’s translation of ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’: “On Sense and Reference”, in the second edition of *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*; “On Sense and Meaning”, in *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*; and Michael Beaney’s edited version, “On Sinn and Bedeutung”, in *The Frege Reader*. I consulted Michael Beaney’s edited version of Peter Geach and R. H. Stoothoff’s translation of ‘Der Gedanke’ and his edited version of Geach’s translation of ‘Die Verneinung’, both in *The Frege Reader*; and I also consulted A. M. and Marcelle Quinton’s translation of ‘Der Gedanke’ in *Mind*. I consulted Long and White’s translations of ‘Logik 1879–1891’ and ‘Logik 1897’ in *Posthumous Writings* from 1979, and Michael Beaney’s edited version of the latter translation in *The Frege Reader*.

In addition to these translations, I also used as aids: Michael Beaney’s glossary and introduction to *The Frege Reader*, (Schlotter 2006), (Künne 2013), (Künne 2015), (Bobzien 2021), (Textor 2021), the 1997 revised edition of *The Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*, the fourth edition of the *Collins German Dictionary: unabridged*, Google Translate²⁹, Google Books Ngram Viewer³⁰, the Reverso Context³¹ search engine, and the IDS corpora (see the Bibliography).

27 (Frege „Die Verneinung“ 1966: 55–56 [145]).

28 Which can be found at https://deustextarchiv.de/book/show/frege_sinn_1892.

29 <https://translate.google.com/>.

30 <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

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[The title in the book is simply “Logic”, I have called it “Logic 1879–1891” to help avoid confusion with the other work of the same name in the same book.]

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[The title in the book is simply “Logic”, I have called it “Logic 1897” to help avoid confusion with the other work of the same name in the same book.]

Frege, Gottlob (1983) „Logik 1879–1891“. *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach. Felix Meiner Verlag. pp. 1–8. <https://meiner.de/reading/web/?isbn=9783787304905>

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