

# Transformations

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## 2009 Issue No. 17 — Bernard Stiegler and the Question of Technics

### Animality, Humanity, and Technicity

By Nathan Van Camp

“And if we already were no longer humans?”

(*The Fault of Epimetheus* 136)

#### I.

In the last thirty years, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has been engaged in developing a post-humanist political theory which, in line with post-structuralist theories, challenges the concept of sovereignty. The provisional climax of his project was the publication of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in which he coins a revised theory of what Michel Foucault had embryonically theorised as “biopower,” the regulation and control of the population by means of techniques which aim to subjugate the human body. Whereas Foucault considered biopower as a pre-eminently modern form of political power in contrast to premodern sovereign rule, Agamben rather suggests that Western politics as such have always been driven by an inextricable combination of the two, in the sense that “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (*Homo Sacer* 6).

The metaphorical figure through which Agamben explores the workings of biopolitics in Western history is the *homo sacer*. This term originates in ancient Roman law and designates the status of a person who is condemned by the people and could be killed without committing homicide. However, ritual practices to kill this person are not allowed. The reason why the conceptual structure of this figure is so hard to understand for both ancient and modern scholars is that it can be situated neither inside nor outside of profane and divine law and, thus, seems to be pending between these two realms. That is, the killing of the *homo sacer* is not legally sanctioned (it is not the execution of a death sentence), yet it also goes unpunished (when executed, it cannot be classified as homicide). Furthermore, the ban on sacrifice designates that the killing is not a divine punishment, but not a sacrilege either.

Agamben finds the metaphysical underpinning of this legal figure in Aristotle’s distinction between “life as such” (*zoē*), shared by all living beings (animals, men and gods), and political life (*bios politikos*), the way of life in which the “good life” (*eudaimonia*) can be attained. Hence, Agamben argues, to pass from mere biological life to political life implies that the former is a prerequisite of the latter, but only at the expense of being itself excluded from it. Therefore, the founding act of the *polis* is the transformation of *zoē* into *bios* through which emerges what Agamben calls sacred life or *bare life*, the life that may be killed but not sacrificed. Being neither included in political life, nor excluded from it, bare life is suspended in a zone of exception where it is abandoned to the power of sovereign violence.

Importantly, Agamben detects a clear link between Aristotle’s distinction between *zoē* and *bios* and his determination of man as *zōōn logon echon*, the living being that has the capacity to speak (*Homo Sacer* 7). Whereas both animals and men have a voice (*phonē*) as a means to express pain

and pleasure, only man has the additional capacity to speak (*logos*) and is, therefore, capable of establishing a political community in which his animal instincts can be transcended and a difference between fact and value can be made. Following Agamben's logic of exception, however, this means that there is no clear boundary to be drawn between the animal and the human, but that humanisation is only achieved by an "exclusive inclusion" of animality.

Crucial as this reference to the space of indistinction between *animalitas* and *humanitas* may be in the development of Agamben's theory, his prototypes of *homines sacri* such as the comatose, the refugee, and the "Muselmann," are not built on this distinction, but are solely related to the separation of *zoē* and *bios* within human life. It is only with the publication of *The Open: Man and Animal* that the problem elaborated on in *Homo Sacer* is explicitly thematised in terms of the human/animal distinction. This turn does not imply, however, as Matthew Calarco rightly stresses (179), that Agamben abandoned an anthropocentric perspective altogether, but it does promise to unlock a more profound insight into his main theme. His central thesis in *The Open* is that throughout Western history, there is a rhetorical "anthropological machine" at work that incessantly decides upon the humanity of man by separating human life from animal life. As a result, humanity has always been divided into forms of life which are more or less human than others (the slave, the comatose, the Jew, etc.) In this respect, the political task of the "coming community" would be to disrupt the anthropological machine by inventing ways in which animal life and human life would be reconciled.

Although the main body of *The Open* is dedicated to a discussion of Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* in which *Dasein's* openness to the world is defined in opposition to the animal's captivation [1], we will focus here on what Agamben presents as the *arche*-example of the modern anthropological machine, namely Ernst Haeckel's effort to solve the "problem of problems:" the origin of man. What is interesting in this particular example is that the mechanism Agamben detects in Haeckel's theory is identical to that which Bernard Stiegler encounters in his reading of the paleontological writings of André Leroi-Gourhan. But whereas Agamben concludes that "anthropogenesis is what results from the caesura and articulation between human and animal" (79), suggesting that this issue is a purely political one, Stiegler thinks that anthropogenesis must be thought as a new relation between the living and the non-living whereby the living being becomes inextricably bound up with inorganic organized matter (technics). Following Stiegler's argument then, I will argue that in order to render the anthropological machine inoperative it does not suffice to "show the central emptiness, the hiatus that separates man and animal" (*The Open* 92), that is, to merely guard the aporetic structure of this relation, but rather, that this aporia should be articulated in terms of technicity.

## II.

At a crucial moment in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben refers briefly to two animal figures. In the "threshold," where he introduces the idea of the concentration camp as the biopolitical paradigm of the modern era, he points to the fact that the "Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler has announced, 'as lice,' which is to say, as bare life" (114). Notwithstanding the uniqueness and enormity of the Shoah, this bestialisation of humans is not without precedent in European history. In the directly preceding section, entitled "The Ban and the Wolf," Agamben briefly discusses the figure of the "wolf-man." The mythological status this creature currently enjoys, conceals the fact that its origin is actually to be found in the juridico-political sphere. Tracing its history back to ancient Germanic and Anglo-Saxon sources, Agamben recognises in the *werewolf* a "brother of *homo sacer* without any doubt" (104), a criminal who is banned from the political community and whom anybody was permitted to kill without committing homicide. The wolf-man is therefore neither man, nor animal, but a form of life that is bound to dwell in the passage between animality and humanity.

Whereas in *Homo Sacer* Agamben ascribes this animalisation of the human to the workings of

sovereign power, in *The Open* he no longer confines his analyses to political discourse. Here he indicates that this mechanism is also active in other domains, such as in religion, science, and metaphysics. For example, he reminds us that the motif of the “wolf-man” did not only live on in the tales of folk mythology, but even reappeared in the writings of respectable 18<sup>th</sup> century scientists such as the founder of modern taxonomy Carl Linnaeus. Among the variants of the *Homo sapiens* he includes the *Homo ferus*, a “manlike animal” by which he alludes to the wolf-children or *enfants sauvages*. Cases such as this attest to the difficulties one encounters when trying to distinguish between the various forms of life and particularly to determine what exactly constitutes human life. The border between the human and the animal proves to be extremely porous and often seems to shift depending on the relevant criteria one takes into consideration. It is therefore, as Agamben argues, not a question of developing ever more accurate empirically sanctioned classification systems, but rather of recognising that the dividing line between the human and the animal is something that is articulated time and again (*The Open* 13). Carl Linnaeus’ contention, Agamben writes, that “man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human” (26), therefore provides us with the clearest description of what he calls the anthropological machine. The “sapiens” in the generic term “homo sapiens” does not so much refer to man’s rationality as that which elevates him above the animal, but rather to his peculiar status as a creature that has no defining characteristic except for the fact that he *knows* that he is human.

Agamben distinguishes two variants of the anthropological machine. The ancient variant functions by a humanisation of the animal, such as in the case of Linnaeus’ *homo ferus*. The modern anthropological machine, on the other hand, functions by an animalisation of the human. Here, the human is constituted by distinguishing between the properties deemed human and animal within man himself and by excluding the latter from the former. Agamben suggests that the logic underpinning this modern variant is what opens up the possibility for the Jew to appear as “the non-man produced within the man” or the overcomatose person as “the animal separated within the human body itself”, thus stressing its importance in the production of bare life (*The Open* 37).

Whereas Agamben detects in Aristotle’s distinction between the different functions of the soul (nutritive, sensitive and rational) in *De Anima* the metaphysical groundwork of the ancient anthropological machine (*The Open* 13-14), it was Darwin’s theory of evolution that set the terms on the basis of which the modern variant could establish itself. In the fifth chapter of his *Die Welträtsel: Gemeinverständliche Studien über Monistische Philosophie* Ernst Haeckel suggests that he has found a way to tackle the “problem of problems,” namely the question concerning the origin of man. But what makes his contribution to this enigma so remarkable, as Agamben stresses, is not his rigorous reconstruction of the history of man from his fish-like ancestors of the Silurian up to the man-apes of the Miocene, but his hypothesis of a transitional stage between the latter and the human properly, namely the “ape-man” (*Pithecanthropus alalus*) (*The Open* 34). As, on the one hand, this creature’s anatomy was fairly similar to present-day man in that it was biped and had the same skull-size, but, on the other hand, crucially deviated from him because it was mute, it was neither man nor animal. Haeckel considered this creature as the missing-link between the primates and man.

Agamben, however, remarks that Haeckel’s solution to the problem of how to conceive the passage between animal and man contains an aporia. By arguing that *qua* anatomical structure the “ape-man” corresponds point by point to present-day man, but crucially deviates from him in that he does not speak, Haeckel introduces with the linguistic an element that he presupposes to be specifically human, but that in fact has hardly anything to do with the physical traits he initially had set out as points of comparison. If one would take only the latter into consideration, then there would be nothing on the basis of which one could distinguish between the “ape-man” and man. Following the argument of Heymann Steinthal, Agamben points to the fact that Haeckel could therefore only uphold the difference between the two by imagining a stage in which man

could not yet speak. But “what would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself – only a *bare life*” (39).

However revealing this critique of Haeckel may be with regard to the workings of the anthropological machine, Agamben’s focus in *The Open* mainly remains its lethal outcome in political practices. Hence, when at the end of the book he invokes Walter Benjamin’s figures of the “saved night” and the “dialectic at a standstill,” Agamben no longer tries to conceive a more sophisticated or less lethal version of the anthropological machine, but rather a way to render it inoperative altogether by revealing the emptiness of the gap that separates animal and man, a quasi-religious gesture that would bring about a “Shabbat of both animal and man” (92). We can however wonder what might be gained by this substitution of a (quasi-)religious vocabulary for a metaphysical or scientific one. Does this move not merely transfer the pressing issue it addresses to the religious realm that, as Kelly Oliver (15) has rightly stressed, has been no less responsible for boosting the anthropological machine? Of course, by appealing to the messianic tradition Agamben tries to argue that this reconciliation between humanity and animality will only take place in a community and religion that is still largely to be invented. But does not even the prospect of their radical separation in this community to come mean that the machine’s binary structure will be preserved and with that also the possibility of a “posthistorical” anthropological machine? These observations might give us pause to wonder whether there is not a *third* term involved in anthropogenesis that does not so much release animality and humanity from the grasp of scientific and philosophical discourse, but radically rearticulates their relation *in* it.

### III.

According to the central argument of Agamben’s *The Open*, anthropogenesis draws on the opposition between man and animal. What is at stake in this process is nothing less than the very definition of the human. For Agamben, this is less a scientific issue than an ethical one as it underpins political attempts to distinguish between humans and non-humans within the human population. The question of the “humanity” of man must therefore, Agamben argues, no longer focus on the “metaphysical mystery of conjunction” of humanity and animality, but rather on “the practical and political mystery of [their] separation” (16).

But whereas Agamben’s argument is that the metaphysical definition of man as the conjunction of a body and a soul or as the living being that has the capacity to speak actually serves as a legitimation of the lethal practices engendered by the anthropological machine, Bernard Stiegler’s contention that the human must necessarily negotiate with technics to be itself in the first place rearticulates both the metaphysical and political implications involved in this issue in terms of *originary technicity*. Stiegler’s major claim is a fairly straightforward one. In non-technical life, all memory of individual experiences is lost with the death of the living being that was its support. In technical life or human life, as we usually call it, however, these individual experiences are exteriorised in technical objects – from flint tools to digital storage devices – which allow subsequent generations to experience individually a past that one has not lived and add something to it in turn. In other words, the human is not constituted through its opposition to the animal, but rather through its relationship with technics, or, as Stiegler calls it, inorganic organised matter. However, this does not mean that he thinks that technics defines the human positively by way of any biological determination. The origin of the human is fundamentally aporetic or, in his own words, there is a “default of origin.” Hence, technics is not itself at the origin of man, but that which comes only afterwards, *by default*, to fill in for an originary lack of origin.

It was Darwin’s theory of evolution that opened up the possibility to think the passage from animality to humanity free from both religious and rationalist presuppositions about man’s origin that in reality do not so much elucidate his genesis than celebrate the enigma as a sign of blessedness. Agamben’s discussion of Haeckel’s theory shows however that even an attempt to

explain this passage in terms of comparative anatomy and paleontological findings only cannot avoid reverting back to the “miracle thesis” and, thus, to the introduction of a transcendental element to save man’s “dignity.” This thesis functions by affirming man’s superiority over all other living beings as the only one that has the ability to transcend its own animality by means of a *logos*, soul, Reason or spirit, but only at the cost of leaving the question of how to conceive of the passage between the biological and the spiritual in the air. It is exactly this difficulty that Stiegler wants to tackle in his discussion of the writings of the French paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan in the third chapter of *The Fault of Epimetheus* [2]. Since for Stiegler the human is constituted through its exteriorisation in technical objects, its origin cannot be explained in either purely transcendental terms by appealing to, for example, spirit or language, or purely empirical terms such as genetic evolution. The former strategy leads, as Stiegler shows through a reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality Among Men*, to an aporia as it cannot avoid incorporating the idea of the human as a contingent being [3]. The latter strategy, on the other hand, as we have seen in Haeckel, equally leads to an aporia as it cannot avoid the transcendental question of origin. Stiegler’s own example of an empirical approach to this question is somewhat ambiguous. Although Leroi-Gourhan’s attempt to think the origin of man in relation to technics prepared the way for Stiegler’s own theory, he criticizes the paleontologist for ultimately reinstalling an opposition between the technical and the symbolic.

For Stiegler, Leroi-Gourhan’s originality is that he describes hominisation as a process of *exteriorisation* by which living memory is grafted onto the non-living (matter). As this non-anthropocentric concept defies the classical image of the human as simply an animal body to which the capacity for reflection is added, it calls the opposition between animality and humanity into question. A crucial event for the development of this theory was the discovery of the remains of the Zinjanthropian together with its tools in 1959, according to Leroi-Gourhan the first humanoid to have benefited from exteriorization. What was so important about this paleontological finding is that the small size of his brain pan urged the conclusion that what was decisive in hominisation was not cerebral development, but the erect posture and the new functional organisation of the body that ensued from this novelty in the history of life:

The “freeing” of the hand during locomotion is also that of the face from its grasping functions. The hand will necessarily call for tools, movable organs; the tools of the hand will necessarily call for the language of the face. The brain obviously plays a role, but it is no longer directive: it is but a partial element of a total apparatus, even if the evolution of the apparatus tends towards the deployment of the cerebral cortex. (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 145)

The erect posture brought about the suspension of genetic constraints. The direct result was the appearance of both the tool and language to fill in for this lack of genetic programmability. Cortical development can therefore only be an effect of exteriorisation. It will only stabilise with the dawn of the Neanderthalian whose neuro-equipment is fairly similar to ours. In other words, all this hints to the conclusion that in the different stages of hominisation up to *Homo Sapiens* “one can see hardly any other permanence [...] than the fact of technicity” (149).

However, the problem for Stiegler is that Leroi-Gourhan also maintains that from the Zinjanthropian up to the Neanderthalian, “tools were still, to a large extent, a direct emanation of *species* behavior” (*Gesture and Speech* 97), which means that he thinks that in this archaic period of thousands of years technical evolution was still mainly determined by the rhythm of cortical development, itself propelled by genetic selection, and thus essentially of zoological origin. What is at issue here is the latitude that became available with exteriorisation. At any rate, it must imply that these archaic humans already had the capacity for anticipation because the performing of a technical gesture requires, as Leroi-Gourhan himself explains, “a good deal of foresight on the part of the individual performing the sequence of technical operations” (97). Consequently, Leroi-Gourhan introduces the hypothesis that they must have had a “technical consciousness,” but not yet a full-fledged “symbolic consciousness,” something that will only emerge with the



Neanderthalian when an extraordinary increase in anticipatory capacities was accompanied with the stabilisation of the evolution of man's neuro-equipment. Just as Haeckel could only explain the passage from the animal to the human by presupposing language as the ultimate sign of humanity and then expelling man's muteness as already and not yet human to an imaginary "ape-man," Leroi-Gourhan's belief that what is specifically human is its symbolic reflexivity forces him to describe man's ordinary technicity as attached to the animal instinct of conservation. With this he actually admits that "archaic humans will finally not have been fully human, and thus not humans at all" (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 157).

Stiegler reads this as contradictory to Leroi-Gourhan's original intention, namely to furnish a theory of anthropogenesis as something which corresponds point by point to a technogenesis (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 45). Such a theory should in any case have the merit of thinking technicity as that which constitutes the human and not some instance of "spirituality." Leroi-Gourhan in fact comes close to recognising as much, but in the end he gives a determining role to cortical development, implying that *Homo faber* was actually only an animal and that the genuine origin of the human is the acquisition of a faculty for symbolisation. Stiegler strongly disagrees:

There is no such [second] origin because technical differentiation presupposes full-fledged anticipation, at once operative and dynamic, from the Australanthropian onwards, and such anticipation can only be a relation to death, which means that symbolic intellectuality must equally be already there. Reflective intellectuality is not added to technical intelligence. It was already its ground. (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 163)

The central issue in this discussion is the concept of exteriorisation and the implications thereof. By ultimately reinvoking cortical development as the main determinant in technical evolution, Leroi-Gourhan apparently ignores these implications and thus threatens to lose all progress he made in constructing a non-anthropocentric theory of the emergence of the human. The difficulty Leroi-Gourhan find himself confronted with is the ambiguity of the term "exteriorisation." It gives the impression that it should be preceded by some kind of "mental" interiority, something that would act as its origin. But given the fact that Leroi-Gourhan himself had asserted that the brain was only a beneficiary of the rupture of exteriorisation, there cannot be anything of that kind, whether it is in the guise of a neurological impetus or a premature consciousness. What has therefore remained unthought, according to Stiegler, is the possibility that the "interior and exterior are [...] constituted in a movement that invents both one and the other," so that "neither one precedes the other, neither is the origin of the other, the origin being the coming into adequacy [*con-venance*] or the simultaneous arrival of the two" (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 142, 152). The challenge is thus to think what Stiegler calls the "mirror proto-stage" or an "instrumental maieutics," the structural coupling of the human and technics that makes the constitution of the one impossible and unthinkable without the other.

In the archaic context that was set up by Leroi-Gourhan this means that the cortex both informs and is informed by the flint tool. Given the rupture of exteriorisation, the only way to understand technical and cortical evolution is by thinking corticalisation as a process of reflection upon the conservation of experiential memory in the support constituted by the technical object. Thus it can never be determined whether it is the human that invents the tool or the tool that invents the human. Stiegler calls this structural coupling of the human and technics "epiphylogenesis," "a recapitulating, dynamic, and morphogenetic (*phylogenetic*) accumulation of individual experience (*epi*)" (177). Whereas all living beings are constituted by genetic and epigenetic memory, only with the human is the latter conserved and accumulated beyond the loss of the individual that was its support. Epiphylogenetic memorisation therefore consists of the exteriorisation of experiential memory in artificial supports that in turn allow experiencing a past that one has not lived, a crucial condition for humanisation. If with his exteriorisation thesis Leroi-Gourhan wanted to contest the gap that separates the animal and the human, he surely failed. By drawing up an opposition between *Homo faber* and *Homo sapiens* or, in other words, between the "animal human" and the "spiritual human," he simply reinstalls it at another level. Since the absence of

any stable defining trait from the Zinjanthropian to the Neanderthalian seems to defy the idea of the unity in the human – as Leroi-Gourhan himself has argued – it would be better to conclude that the human can only be defined negatively, by the mutual constitutive relation it entertains with technics. It is in this sense that it can be said that anthropogenesis and technogenesis are the same phenomena considered from two different points of view.

#### IV.

Stiegler's merit is to have shown that the origin of the human is not to be found in either a transcendental or biological essence, but in the mutual constitutive relation between epigenetic memory and epiphylogenetic memory. This solution to an enigma as old as man himself obviously challenges Agamben's position that it is in opposition to the animal that the human is rhetorically "constructed." Moreover, it eclipses Agamben's rather obscure conclusion that to stop the anthropological machine we have to "risk ourselves in the emptiness separating man and animal" (*The Open* 92). What is at stake here is thinking the passage from the animal to the human without relapsing into the anthropocentric pitfall, something which Agamben deems impossible but Stiegler nevertheless seems to have achieved by thinking this passage from the genetic to the non-genetic in terms of technicity.

Some commentators have however suggested that Stiegler's analyses contain themselves a residual form of anthropocentrism (Beardsworth; Bradley; Roberts). Arthur Bradley, for example, has argued that thinking technics exclusively as a means towards anthropogenesis leads, on the one hand, to a naturalisation of all other biological life and, on the other hand, to a complete humanisation of technics (94-95). Stiegler's argument that "epiphylogenesis is a break with pure life" (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 140) seems indeed to imply that the human is the only living being that exteriorises itself in technical prostheses. This would mean that Stiegler does not succeed in overcoming the classical anthropocentric move of elevating the human above the animal, but that he simply reformulates it in terms of technicity. By insisting on the fact that the human is the only living being that can pass on its individual experiences through technical memory supports (*Philosopher par Accident* 49), Stiegler also ignores, according to Bradley, the vast body of empirical studies that show that various species of animals also use tools in a way that is at least close to epiphylogenesis (Bradley 97). At the same time, the impossibility to do away with these exceptions that dwell at the threshold of humanity also seems to confirm Agamben's view that it is impossible to bypass the anthropological machine.

We would, however, do injustice to Stiegler's philosophy if we consider it as utterly anthropocentric in the classical meaning of that word. If the danger of anthropocentrism is most critical when it straightforwardly opposes the animal to the human, then no worse could be done than to install an insurmountable gap between them on the basis of some transcendental property. In this respect Stiegler's refutation of the "miracle thesis," that is, the positing of some form of "spirituality" without an understanding of its provenance, is rather an attempt to diminish anthropocentric violence than its continuation by other means. I think that Agamben's reading of Haeckel shows that this is also what he thinks the anthropological machine is about. Referring to Haeckel's biased concern to define the human as a *zoon logon echon*, he writes:

Indeed, precisely because the human is presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside. (37; emphasis added)

Moreover, the suppression of both blatant and latent anthropocentrism could just as much lead to its opposite, namely the effacing of all differences between the animal and the human. This strategy is however no less dangerous than the one it contests. As Agamben puts it:

When the difference vanishes and the two terms collapse upon each other – as seems to be happening today – the difference between being and nothing, licit and illicit, divine and demonic also fades away, and in its place something appears for which we seem to lack even a name. (*The Open* 22)

I think this is also what Stiegler means when he says that “the contestation of oppositions must not eliminate the genesis of differences” (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 163). Thinking anthropogenesis as mutually constitutive with technogenesis implies that the human is not a spiritual miracle that is added to animal body, but that hominisation is “the pursuit of the evolution of the living by other means than life” (*The Fault of Epimetheus* 135). Whether this will silence the anthropological machine once and for all or rather generate new border skirmishes will however remain open to question.

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### Endnotes

1. For a similar critique, see Jacques Derrida (2008), pp.141-160.
2. *La faute d'Épiméthée*, the first volume of *Technics and Time*, appeared in 1994, followed by *La désorientation* in 1996, and *Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être* in 2001. Bernard Stiegler has planned to write two more volumes in the near future. In this essay I will use the English translation of the first named work by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (1998).
3. For Stiegler's reading of Rousseau, see *The Fault of Epimetheus* (83-133). For an excellent commentary on Stiegler's reading of Rousseau, see Roberts (2006).

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