



# Confronting Death Consciously: A Look at Terror Management Theory and Immortality Awareness Theory

| Larry Dossey, MD |

The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of his life.<sup>1</sup>

—C.G. Jung

My childhood hero was Ted Williams, who is widely considered the greatest hitter in US baseball history and one of the greatest sports figures of all time. In the 19 years he played for the Boston Red Sox, he won the American League batting championship six times. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1966. He was the last player in baseball to hit .400; he hit .406 in 1941. In his last at bat in 1960, he hit a home run—a fitting way for him to retire—for a career total of 521 home runs.

For those who may not be baseball aficionados, let me interpret: these accomplishments, while not superhuman, are as close to it as we are likely to see for a long time—particularly since they occurred in an age relatively uncontaminated by drug-enhanced performance, which now bedevils many areas of sport, as everyone knows.

Williams was no pampered elite athlete. He was briefly involved as a draftee in World War II and was recalled for service in the Korean War in 1953, where he flew jets in combat as a Marine pilot. He flew missions with future astronaut and US senator John Glenn, who praised his performance. Williams' plane was hit, but he survived. He said, "Everybody tries to make a hero out of me over the Korean thing...I was no hero. There were maybe 75 pilots in our two squadrons and 99% of them did a better job than

I did. But I liked flying. It was the second-best thing that ever happened to me. If I hadn't had baseball to come back to, I might have gone on as a Marine pilot."<sup>2</sup> *That* was my childhood hero!

There is a backstory. My twin brother and I excelled at Little League and Junior League baseball, and we shared a great admiration of Ted Williams. My brother saved pennies and cashed them in for a 1\$ bill. He attached this to a letter in which he asked Ted Williams for an autographed photo. He addressed the envelope simply to "Ted Williams, Boston Red Sox." A few weeks later an autographed, glossy 8 × 10 photo of Ted Williams arrived in the mail. Attached to it was my brother's 1\$ bill. That clinched it for both of us.

When Williams died in 2002 at the age of 83 years, his youngest daughter and his son decided to have their father cryogenically preserved in liquid nitrogen at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Arizona at a cost of \$100,000. "I can tell you that my family chose cryonics out of love," the daughter wrote. "Our father knew we needed something to hold onto for hope and comfort and when we missed him the most, and if cryonics was the answer, then the solution was simple." Williams's head was severed from his body and they were frozen separately. The family hoped that scientists one day would figure out how to reattach preserved heads and bodies and bring them back to life. Although the decision to cryogenically preserve their father was furiously opposed by Williams's oldest daughter, as well as

by many of his adoring fans, his frozen remains now reside at Alcor.<sup>3</sup>

## CHEATING DEATH

Make sure to send a lazy man for the Angel of Death.

—Yiddish proverb

Why would anyone choose to be cryogenically preserved? Max More, the President and Chief Executive officer of Alcor, one of the world's largest cryonics companies, says, "I freeze people to cheat death." More has chosen neuro-preservation for himself, deep-freezing just his brain. "I figure the future is a pretty decent place to be, so I want to be there," he says. "I want to keep living and enjoying and producing."

As of 2014, 984 people had signed up with Alcor to be preserved when they die. At the time, people paid a yearly membership fee of about \$770 on signing up with Alcor. Preserving just their brain cost an additional \$80,000; preserving the entire body cost \$200,000. Some clients manage to obtain life insurance that covers the cost of their freezing.

More acknowledges that he and others do not particularly like the idea of being frozen for an indeterminate length of time. "We hate the idea in fact. The idea of sitting in a tank of liquid nitrogen not able to control our own destinies is not appealing. But it's a lot more appealing than the alternative, to be digested by worms or incinerated—that doesn't appeal to us at all."<sup>4</sup>

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## DYING TO DEATH

Die before you die. There is no chance after.<sup>5</sup>

—C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*

The example of Ted Williams's family shows that, while few people actually welcome death, a great many fear it, are horrified by it, and will do anything to forestall or even reverse it.

These methods crop up in medical literature from time to time. In 1905 physician J.L. Corning reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* his experience with a patient who was morbidly afraid of death. Dr. Corning claimed success by a method we would today call desensitization. He reported, "By...saying to himself when about to sleep, 'I die now,' I have sought, by autosuggestion, to make him feel that he already knew the worst that death could inflict on him; that, in short, he had died, to all intents and purposes, every twenty-four hours." Through his experience with dying patients, Corning concluded, "The dread of death is usually absent during the actual process of dying."<sup>6</sup> Not so, however, prior to the process.

Dr. Corning's technique is reminiscent of the enigmatic Buddhist saying: "If you die before you die, then when you die, you will not die."

## ERNEST BECKER

We live as if death is optional.

—Woody Allen

Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker documented the prevalence of death denial in his 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*. He observed, "[T]he idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man."<sup>7</sup>

Becker contended that we are largely unaware of how death terror influences what we think and do, because it is just too uncomfortable to think about. Thus, death fear and denial get shoved into the unconscious recesses of the mind.

Becker's emphasis on "the human animal" implies the universality of the fear of death. Death fear is not a modern cultural artefact; it haunts traditional cultures as well. Evidence is close at hand: Northern New Mexico, where I live.

Following the settlement of Northern New Mexico in the 17th century, a near-constant state of war developed between the Mexican settlers and the Navajo tribe. In his epic book *Blood and Thunder*, author Hampton Sides describes how the profound fear of death influenced the way in which the Navajos waged war on the settlers:

[The Navajos] seldom fought in large numbers.... [They] avoided killing wherever possible, because theirs was a culture that had a deep-seated fear and revulsion of death. They wanted nothing to do with corpses or funerals or anything connected with mortality. When a person died inside a Navajo dwelling—the round, windowless, dome-roofed *hogan* made of mud and timber—the body had to be removed from the structure by bashing a hole in the north wall and pulling the corpse through it; then the hogan had to be destroyed. The taint could never be washed out.... But the Navajos were perhaps the unparalleled masters of the raid. Small-scale warfare suited them. They were an evanescent people, proud thieves on horseback, adroit in the techniques of the swift attack and the quick disappearance.<sup>8</sup>

## TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

What do we say to the Lord of Death?

Not today.

—George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones*

Becker's influence has been enormous. Largely as a result of his work, three psychologists—Sheldon Solomon of New York's Skidmore College, Jeff Greenberg of the University of Arizona, and Tom Pyszczynski of the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs—developed terror management theory (TMT) in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Their goal was to test scientifically how the mere specter of mortality affects people's beliefs and behaviors.

Extensive empirical testing has yielded an abundance of data supporting the theory and its predictions.<sup>10</sup> In a 2015 interview, Solomon describes the essence of the theory and how he was attracted to it:

Well, in part, I became interested because as a young child when I realised that I would someday die I found that a decidedly unwelcome realisation. So, I have a personal stake in these matters. And then, quite by accident, as a young professor, I ran into a book by a now-deceased cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker called *The Denial of Death*. And what Becker proposed is that humans are unique because we're the only creatures that know that we will someday die and that our death can occur at any time.... And if that's all we thought about, according to Becker, we wouldn't be able to stand up in the morning.... [H]e says...that the way that we manage death-anxiety is by embracing culturally constructed beliefs that give us a sense that we are valuable individuals in a meaningful universe. And, according to Becker, the fear of death underlies almost everything that we do.... [I]t manifests itself in our need to preserve faith in our culturally constructed beliefs and, in a sense, that we're valuable individuals.<sup>11</sup>

Research in TMT suggests that the fear of our own death can influence the way we vote. In the run-up to the November 2016 election, presidential candidate Donald J. Trump capitalized on the principles of TMT, although he probably had never heard of the theory. His major premise was that America was being overrun by terrorists, rapists, drug dealers, criminals, and immigrants, and that the lives and fortunes of millions of Americans were in imminent danger. He alone, he said, could save us and restore a crumbling, imperiled, once-great nation to its former glory. In terms of terror management theory, this was a classic setup: scare the bejesus out of people, expose them to their impending doom, then with messianic pretensions offer ways of neutralizing their approaching destruction. As a Trump television ad proclaimed in October 2016, "DONALD TRUMP WILL PROTECT YOU. HE IS THE ONLY ONE

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WHO CAN.”<sup>12,13</sup> This real-life test of TMT involved the entire voting population of the United States.

Anticipating that this scenario might actually occur in the future, Solomon said prophetically in a 2008 interview:

[W]hen fears of death are aroused, people are more likely to embrace leaders who provide psychological security by making...citizens feel like they are valued contributors to a great mission to eradicate evil....The best antidote to this problem may be to monitor and take pains to resist any efforts by politicians or others to capitalize on fear mongering.<sup>14</sup>

[S]mart thinkers also will want to check their intuitive fears against the facts and to resist those who serve their own purposes by cultivating a culture of fear. As a culture, we should also work to teach our children and encourage our citizens to vote with their “heads” rather than their “hearts.” And it may also be helpful to raise awareness of how concerns about mortality affect human behavior. I hope that such measures will encourage people to make rational choices based on the political qualifications and positions of the candidates rather than on defensive needs to preserve psychological equanimity in response to reminders of death.<sup>10,15</sup>

## MEANING AND PURPOSE, WEALTH AND POWER

If an individual can establish some degree of personal significance, then her life will have been of value and she will not have lived in vain. Thus, terror management theory predicts that nearly everyone will search for meaning and purpose in their life as a hedge against the inevitability of the funeral parlor and the crematorium.

A widespread way of doing this is through the achievement of status and power. Carving out a place in history means the survival of one's legacy—a record that my life made a difference, that I mattered, that I shall not be forgotten. Accumulating wealth is a related strategy. This approach is not entirely fanciful. Although wealth cannot abolish death, it can significantly delay it. Abundant evidence shows that, on average, the wealthy *do* live longer

and enjoy better health than the less well-off and less well-educated.<sup>16,17</sup>

Another universal terror management behavior is religious involvement. If God loves me, then I am significant and my life has meaning and value. Again, this works to delay death. Evidence reveals that people who follow some religious or spiritual path live, on average, several years longer than those who do not follow such a path, and they have a lower incidence of major diseases.<sup>18,19</sup> The reasons for these effects have been discussed in depth by Jeff Levin, the psychosocial epidemiologist who first put this field, called the epidemiology of religion, on the scientific map.<sup>20,21</sup>

## PLANETARY CONSEQUENCES

The major problem of our time is the decay of the belief in personal immortality.<sup>22</sup>

—George Orwell

The consequences of death denial reach far beyond the individual. How we manage death terror affects the Earth itself. Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the 1992 book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, clearly saw this. He says:

I have come to realize that the disastrous effects of the denial of death go far beyond the individual. They affect the whole planet. Believing fundamentally that this life is the only one, modern people have developed no long-term vision. So there is nothing to restrain them from plundering the planet for their own immediate ends and from living in a selfish way that could prove fatal for the future.<sup>23</sup>

David Ray Griffin, philosopher of religion and theology at Claremont School of Theology, agrees:

I believe the human race now faces the greatest challenge in its history. If it continues on its present course, widespread misery and death of unprecedented proportions is a certainty within the next century or two. Annihilation of human life, and of millions of other species as well, is probable. Only, I am convinced, if we come to see human life as primarily a spiritual adventure, *an adventurous journey that*

*continues beyond this life*, will we have a chance of becoming sufficiently free from destructive motivations to effect a transition to a sustainable global order (emphasis added).<sup>24</sup>

Many of the individuals who utilize the wealth-status-power mechanism to deny their own death are also likely to deny the possible death of our environment. So there is a double aspect of denial at work in these individuals, as Sogyal Rinpoche and Griffin have realized.

This is particularly true of corporate leaders whose wealth comes from the exploitation of fossil fuels. They frequently condemn the scientific evidence for the threat of global climate change as a hoax perpetrated by a vast international conspiracy of scientists. Their criticisms are often surreptitious, because if publicly known they might be bad for business. The extent of their clandestine activities is jaw dropping. As reported in *Scientific American*, “The largest, most-consistent money fueling the climate denial movement are a number of well-funded conservative foundations built with so-called ‘dark money,’ or concealed donations...[from sources such as] Koch Industries and ExxonMobil....In all, 140 foundations funneled \$558 million to almost 100 climate denial organizations from 2003 to 2010....The climate change counter-movement has had a real political and ecological impact on the failure of the world to act on global warming.”<sup>25–27</sup>

## THE FAILURES OF MATERIALISM

The only secret people keep  
Is Immortality.<sup>28</sup>

—Emily Dickinson

Materialism is the doctrine that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications. Materialists assert that consciousness itself is a product of the material brain, and that it is destroyed with the death of the brain and body. Death terror and death denial are fueled by this dismal ideology. One of the bleakest descriptions of this outlook was provided by the materialist philosopher-mathematician Lord Bertrand Russell<sup>29</sup>:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end

they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought or feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system; and the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy that rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Some materialists manage their death terror by maintaining that they actually prefer annihilation with physical death to any sort of survival. Longing for immortality, they say, is a defect of character or a philosophical sellout in people too cowardly to face their impending doom. In the face of certain extermination, one should simply man-up and go quietly, proudly and bravely into that dark night.

There is a hint of this heroic martyrdom in Lord Bertrand Russell's famous comment, "I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation."<sup>30</sup> Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking essentially sanctions Russell's forlorn view, saying,

I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.<sup>31</sup>

Some materialists consider the idea of survival of consciousness following bodily death so dangerous that it must be put down at all costs. These efforts can shade into a deliberate cover-up that masquerades as an effort to protect science. Harvard psychologist William James reported that a leading biologist once told him,

Even if such a thing [survival] were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it suppressed and concealed. It would undo the uniformity of Nature and all sorts of other things without which scientists cannot carry on their pursuits.<sup>32,33</sup>

## BEYOND MATERIALISM

An increasing number of scientists now realize that the materialist doctrine, which asserts that the physical brain somehow produces consciousness and that consciousness is annihilated with physical death, is bankrupt in its claims about the origin and destiny of consciousness.<sup>34,35</sup> In their recent landmark book *Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness*, researchers Imants Barušs, professor of psychology at King's University College at Western University Canada, and Julia Mossbridge, experimental psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences and a Visiting Scholar in Psychology at Northwestern University, describe the death rattle of the materialistic worldview:

We are in the midst of a sea change. Receding from view is materialism, whereby physical phenomena are assumed to be primary and consciousness is regarded as secondary. Approaching our sights is a complete reversal of perspective. According to this alternative view, consciousness is primary and the physical is secondary. In other words, materialism is receding and giving way to ideas about reality in which consciousness plays a key role.<sup>36</sup>

Where does this leave terror management theory? Despite its significant insights, TMT is virtually devoid of any reference to the implications of consciousness research that have accumulated over the past few decades pointing to a nonlocal quality of consciousness, to which Barušs and Mossbridge refer. This is unfortunate, because these emerging findings are perhaps the best opportunity we have to annul the terror and denial of death in our modern era.

The reasons are straightforward. Evidence points decisively to the capacity of consciousness to operate nonlocally

in space and time, beyond the confines of the brain and body and the present. If there is a quality of consciousness that is genuinely nonlocal with respect to space, it is *infinite* in space, or omnipresent. And if consciousness is nonlocal in time, as the evidence indicates, then some aspect of consciousness is *infinite* in time, therefore, eternal or immortal. This evidence can reduce the fear of death by demonstrating that death does not annihilate consciousness. Something endures beyond the death of the brain and body—a conclusion based on empirical findings, not on religious persuasion as was the case in centuries past.

We humans, therefore, have a potent antidote to death-anxiety and fear. It is the realization that death has essentially been misconstrued—that, as Chief Seattle, the Native American visionary, put it, "There is no death, only a change in worlds."<sup>37</sup> This basic realization is ancient; it does not depend on consciousness research. But, as it has turned out, we moderns are blessed with more than visionary claims; we can draw on empirical findings to fortify the ancient insights.

An exaggerated claim? Hardly. Supporting evidence for a nonlocal, spatio-temporally infinite, immortal aspect of consciousness is profuse. It is available not only to researchers and academicians but also is easily available to the lay public. Here are a few recent books that contain thousands of additional references to work in this field: *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*<sup>38</sup>; *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*<sup>39</sup>; *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*<sup>40</sup>; *The Conscious Universe*<sup>41</sup>; *Entangled Minds*<sup>42</sup>; *Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness*, as mentioned<sup>43</sup>; *Opening to the Infinite*<sup>44</sup>; *The End of Materialism*<sup>45</sup>; *Science and the Afterlife Experience*<sup>46</sup>; *Consciousness Beyond Life*<sup>47</sup>; *Death Makes Life Possible*<sup>48</sup>; *The Last Frontier*<sup>49</sup>; *Margins of Reality*<sup>50</sup>; *The Non-Local Universe*<sup>51</sup>; *Quantum Reality*<sup>52</sup>; *When Did You Ever Become Less by Dying?*<sup>53</sup>; *The Presence of the Past*<sup>54</sup>; *Science and the Afterlife Experience*<sup>55</sup>; *Reality Begins with Consciousness*<sup>56</sup>; *Life Before Life*<sup>57</sup>; *One Mind: How Our Individual Mind Is Part of a Greater Consciousness and Why It Matters*<sup>58</sup>; and many more. In addition, numerous

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systematic and meta-analyses of the experimental work in this field are available in the peer-reviewed scientific literature.<sup>59–62</sup>

The most common objection to the assertion of immortality is that there is no evidence to support it. This is simply false. While it is true that no one from “the other side” has returned and held a press conference on the White House lawn announcing their survival of death, the evidence is compelling nonetheless.

Still, many cling to the objection that the entire possibility is irrational; it just does not make sense that consciousness could survive physical death. This objection may be set aside, for in 20th-century science the complaint that something does not make sense has little currency. Speaking in the context of modern physics, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman stated:

I'm going to describe to you how Nature is—and if you don't like it, that's going to get in the way of your understanding it. It's a problem that physicists have learned to deal with: They've learned to realize that whether they like a theory or they don't like a theory is *not* the essential question. Rather, it is whether or not the theory gives predictions that agree with experiment. It is not a question of whether a theory is philosophically delightful, or easy to understand, or perfectly reasonable from the point of view of common sense. The theory of quantum electrodynamics describes Nature as absurd from the point of view of common sense. And it agrees fully with experiment (emphasis in original).<sup>63</sup>

Do not keep saying to yourself, if you can possibly avoid it, ‘But how can it be like that?’ because you will get ‘down the drain,’ into a blind alley from which nobody has yet escaped. Nobody knows how it can be like that.<sup>64</sup>

## IMMORTALITY AWARENESS THEORY

If you don't know how to die, don't worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do this job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it.<sup>65</sup>

—Michel de Montaigne

Not to worry. We will all die successfully.

—Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

Terror management theory has contributed significantly to our psychological understanding. It has pulled back the curtain of our unconscious, revealing how our fear of death shapes our behaviors and beliefs. It has profound practical implications—alerting us, for example, to the chicanery of demagogues, as noted.

However, TMT stops short. It implicitly accepts the failed tenets of materialism, assuming that consciousness is produced by the workings of the brain and is eradicated with physical death. Terror management theory, therefore, *illuminates* our fears, anxieties and terrors, but does not tell us much about how to *eliminate* them. It leaves one asking, “Is that all there is?”

I do not doubt that the strategy of making death terror conscious and bravely confronting it works for some persons. When it does so, let us congratulate these individuals on finding solace: “Whatever Gets You Through the Night,” as John Lennon sang in 1974.<sup>66</sup> Yet, many find little comfort in this approach.

I, therefore, propose that we supplement—not replace—terror management theory (TMT) with what I wish to call immortality awareness theory (IAT), which asserts the survival of consciousness following physical death. As I have indicated, immortality awareness rests on a solid foundation of evidence that has been accumulating for more than a century. It is essential that we take this step, because the failure to relieve ourselves of death terror will continue to damage not only our own psyche but also the Earth itself as a consequence of the destructive wealth-status-power behaviors we now employ in denying death.

## AT THE BEDSIDE

In my practice of internal medicine, I occasionally had the opportunity to put immortality awareness to practical use with seriously ill patients who were unlikely to recover and who were approaching death. At the bedside, I would review the clinical situation with

a patient I will call “Joe.” I would encourage him to voice his concerns, anxieties, and fears. Then, if my intuition warranted, I would offer an opinion: “Joe, if our therapies don't work as we wish and you continue to go downhill—well, you are just going to have to settle for immortality.” This would usually elicit a nervous chuckle, followed by profound seriousness and sometimes tears. By the next day, after Joe had had time to digest our conversation, we would usually find ourselves in a place of complete honesty, without any need for superficial assurances or evasions. Questions would follow from Joe, such as, “How do you know about immortality? How can you be sure?” In our discussion, I would further make sure Joe understood he would never be alone; not only were his nurses and his physician, myself, available to insure his comfort but also he would likely be met in his transition by loved ones who have gone before him in death. This heart-to-heart exchange was usually accompanied by a deep sense of serenity and peace for both of us.

Most dying individuals need no instruction in how to negotiate life's final chapter. They have already made their peace, as Montaigne asserted, so an end-of-life interaction emphasizing immortality awareness is not for everyone. Yet, immortality awareness can be of immense comfort to those for whom fear, anxiety, and terror of death are real. Caregivers must listen to their own intuition and inner knowing about what is appropriate in each case.

## DECISION TIME

Although I think it highly unlikely, what if we are wrong? What if we have misjudged the evidence favoring the fundamental nature of consciousness and the survival of some facet of consciousness following death? What if Hawking is correct, that belief in survival is simply for “people afraid of the dark”? British playwright J.B. Priestley faced the consequences of being wrong about an expanded view of consciousness in his splendid book *Man & Time*:

I would rather risk the madhouse than enter the prison. I would rather believe too much—so long as I can do it without bigotry and

intolerance—than believe too little. If mistakes are to be made, I prefer to make the mistake of thinking this life too large, complicated, mysterious, wonderful, than to fall into the opposing error and see it smaller and simpler than my own imagination, tidy and all known, tedious. It is better to risk being taken in than to be shut out: Too much credulity can be foolish, too much incredulity may be death.<sup>67</sup>

So, we have a choice. We can blunder through our lives unconsciously denying death, desperately employing various methods to relieve the terror of our own extermination, mangling our own psyche and the Earth in the process. Or, we can engage the abundant evidence favoring survival, and deepen our awareness of the infinite, immortal aspect of who we are.

Not, I think, a close call.

—Larry Dossey, MD  
Executive Editor

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