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Mansplaining as Appropriation of Meaning

1. Introduction

When a man explains to a woman things that she already knows or, at least, has not asked him to explain, this is called *mansplaining*. The concept of mansplaining is now a widespread understanding. However, there has been little philosophical analysis of it. Federico Luzzi (2016), Casey R. Johnson (2021), and Nicole Dular (2021) are rare exceptions, although Luzzi only briefly touches on the subject. This paper presents an account of how mansplaining works, based on what I call the *jointness-based semantics* of speaker meaning (Miki 2019) and on my observations of a particular type of joint action that I refer to as *concessive joint action* (Miki 2022).

In explaining the mechanism of mansplaining, we face two challenges. First, we must elucidate that mansplaining functions as a speech act performed by a particular individual. It is not an abstract concept floating in the air but something that is done by a particular person in a particular situation by means of a particular utterance. This is, however, not the whole story. Mansplaining, as its name suggests, is also tied to a gender hierarchy. Thus, secondarily, we should discuss how mansplaining interacts with social structures. Previous studies have highlighted various aspects of mansplaining, but, as I will discuss, none of them have linked the individual and social aspects of mansplaining, or explained both. The primary aim of this paper is to fill this gap.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I review existing philosophical studies of mansplaining and discuss the characteristics and inadequacies of each. Section 3 gives an overview of the jointness-based approach of speaker meaning. In Section 4, I attempt to give a framework for the mechanism of mansplaining in terms of the formation of joint commitment.

2. Epistemic Injustice and Speech Acts

Rebecca Solnit (2014) reports the following exchange with the host of a party to which she was invited.

> … "So? I hear you've written a couple of books."
>
> I replied, "Several, actually."
>
> He said, in the way you encourage your friend's seven-year-old to describe flute practice, "And what are they about?"
>
> They were actually about quite a few different things, the six or seven out by then, but I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life.
>
> He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. "And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?"
>
> So I caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority. (pp. 5–6)

This "very important book" the host has mentioned was the one Solnit had written herself, namely *River of Shadows.* As the author of "the very important book," it is clear that she knows great deal about Muybridge. However, the host treats her as if she were ignorant and naturally unaware of "the very important book," even trying to impart information to her about it. According to Solnit, when a friend who was witnessing the conversation repeatedly informed the host that he was speaking of her book, he did not listen and would not stop explaining. This conversation is a typical example of mansplaining.

Luzzi (2016) and Dular (2021) discuss mansplaining in relation to "epistemic injustice," a term coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), who characterizes it as "a kind of injustice in which someone is *wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*" (p. 20, emphasis in original). She specifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. The former bears on this context.

According to Fricker (2007), speaker S is said to suffer testimonial injustice if S is awarded less credibility than otherwise because of the hearer's prejudice against S's identity (p. 4). If a woman is judged by the hearer to be less credible than a man saying the same thing because she is a woman, then she experiences a testimonial injustice.

Luzzi (2016) argues that cases of testimonial injustice occur that do not impinge on a speaker's credibility. One type, he finds, occurs when a person who does not belong to group G believes that members of G are sincere and that their beliefs tend to be true, although they are generally not doxastically justified (p. 207). Here, a non-G person gives due credibility

to members of G because this person tends to believe what G people say, but nevertheless, G people are not treated as actually knowing what they know, and thus, they suffer epistemic injustice. Luzzi identifies this as falling within the category of testimonial injustice.

In his response to possible objections, Luzzi indicates that mansplaining may be an example of this type of testimonial injustice without a credibility deficit. In mansplaining, he argues, men do not believe that what women say is necessarily false but that women generally do not have a good justification for what they believe (p. 208). Thus, according to his argument, a man can explain to a woman what she already knows because he considers that she only believes what she believes without justification, meaning that she does not *know* it.

Dular (2021) also discusses mansplaining in connection with epistemic injustice. According to her account, however, mansplaining involves not testimonial injustice but another type of epistemic injustice that she calls "a dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer" (p. 9). Her analysis goes as follows. In a testimonial exchange, the speaker is the giver of knowledge, and the hearer is the receiver of knowledge. However, when a woman seeks to communicate testimonial knowledge to a man, mansplaining causes an inversion of these roles. That is, the woman, who should be the speaker, instead becomes the hearer, and the man, who should be the hearer, likewise becomes the speaker. This prevents the woman from fulfilling her role as the giver of knowledge. Through mansplaining, therefore, men "unjustifiably and forcefully come to occupy such a role" (p. 10). As a result, "[m]ansplaining wrongfully denies one an epistemic identity of power, of one's very capacity to be the kind of full epistemic agent that *could contribute knowledge* to the resources of the epistemic community" (p. 15, emphasis in original).

(Note that the words "speaker" and "hearer," as used by Dular, do not refer to the speaker or hearer of an individual utterance. Of course, when a woman makes an utterance, the reality that she is the speaker of that particular utterance is not overturned by the mansplaining that is occurring. Rather, in Dular's sense, "speaker" refers to the one who plays the role of the giver of knowledge in the entire series of testimonial exchange.)

While both Luzzi and Dular discuss the relationship between mansplaining and gender hierarchy, they fail to capture how the individual utterances that constitute mansplaining function. Suppose, as Luzzi argues, that mansplaining involves epistemic injustice without a credibility deficit. This does not explain why this type of epistemic injustice occurs at all and in particular as in the speech act of *explanation*. When we perceive that someone believes something without justification for it, we do not always substitute an explanation on their behalf that provides justification, but we often ask questions, seeking to obtain justification from them or suggesting a joint discussion to identify a justification together. Why, then,

is mansplaining man*splaining*, a type of explaining? Dular also misses how individual utterances function. Let's say she is right and mansplaining leads to a shift of epistemic roles between speaker and hearer. How can this be accomplished by the particular type of speech act of explanation? How can an utterance, which is itself only the mundane speech act of explanation, have this effect? Luzzi and Dular have captured some of the social aspects of mansplaining sufficiently well, but they have left the individual aspects untouched.

Johnson (2021) analyzes mansplaining in terms of speech acts.[1] The core of her argument lies in what she calls "illocutionary pluralism," the claim that "an utterance can have more than one force" (p. 9). Johnson focuses on the hearers' response to an utterance.

Drawing on Sbisà (2007), she argues that an utterance's illocutionary force is identified with "the conventional effect that that utterance has on a relevant audience" (Johnson 2021, p. 11). Here, the hearers' uptake is determinative for an utterance's illocutionary force, and this uptake is a matter of convention. However, the way in which a hearer reacts to an utterance depends on that hearer. Using Johnson's example (p. 12), it could happen that when Martha utters "the window is open" in front of Penny and George, intending it to be a request, Penny responds to it in the way that is conventional for questions, and George does so in the way conventional for commands. Taking the speaker, Martha, as also a hearer of her own speech, we see three different conventional reactions to a single utterance. This multiplicity occurs, for example, when the speaker and the hearers belong to different communities that feature different conventions, each of which specifies a different way of understanding and responding to Martha's utterance. The utterance itself, Johnson argues, then has all of the three illocutionary forces per these three conventions. Of course, in some cases, one response (for example, Martha's) may take precedence over others for moral or other reasons, but this is not required by the linguistic characteristics of the utterance. It itself has multiple illocutionary forces.

Johnson applies this idea of illocutionary pluralism to mansplaining. Here, her focus is not as much on the utterance of the mansplainer as on the woman's utterance that precedes it. According to her, mansplaining is "a mismatch between conversational participants' reactions to a particular utterance," that is, it is a mismatch "between the reactions that a man audience member has to a woman speaker's utterance, and the reactions that the woman speaker (or some other audience member) has" (p. 15). In Solnit's (2014) example, she might well have said something like "I've been researching Eadweard Muybridge" before the host says, "And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?" Solnit

[1] She classifies mansplaining into three types: "well, actually" mansplaining, straw-mansplaining, and speech act-confusion mansplaining. Her argument focuses only on the third. This paper follows her lead and deals mainly with the type of mansplaining she calls speech act-confusion.

intended her utterance to be an assertion, to be followed by a conventional procedure for assertions. However, the host responded to it as is conventional for requests; thus, he gave an explanation. The point of Johnson's argument is that the host is not reacting this way out of a mistake or from ignorance. Instead, Solnit's utterance itself had two illocutionary forces enabling the host to react as he did without falling into inconsistency or irrationality. Mansplaining is a much deeper-rooted problem, which cannot be put away by simply saying "It's absurd."

Johnson associates the convention that is followed by the host with gender. In the convention the host adopts, Johnson points out, "women, speaking to [him], have to follow a different procedure than men in order to prompt the conventional reaction for assertions" (p. 17). However, as there is no convention for asserting-as-a-woman in our conversational community, "women are left unable to asset in certain conversational contexts" (ibid.). She also argues that ordinary encounters with mansplaining can cause frustration, exhaustion, epistemic stunting, and testimonial injustice to women.

Johnson's argument differs from those of Luzzi and Dular, in that it examines the reactions of particular participants taking part in particular conversations. However, this argument does not adequately explain how gender operates in particular cases of mansplaining. Suppose, as Johnson claims, that Solnit and the host have adopted different conventions and thus respond differently to Solnit's utterance. Let us, following Johnson's lead, further suppose that the host's convention lacks procedures allowing women to elicit conventional reactions for assertions. Why does the host's reaction take precedence over Solnit's in this particular conversation? Why do conventions of men take precedence in individual conversational situations, and women are forced to yield so as to make the alternation of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer that Dular describes happen? Johnson's argument about gender is not properly joined to her pluralistic claims about the illocutionary forces of the utterance in particular conversational situations.

Another lack appears in Johnson's argument. We recall that mansplaining is a species belonging to a genus sharing a similar structure. In this genus are, for example, whitesplaining, heterosplaining, and cissplaining. A gay man can be a target of heterosplaining, even if he also regularly mansplains. Should we, then, assume that each majority group has a convention for responding to an utterance of a member of the relevant minority group in a way that is appropriate to respond to requests, while that member of the minority group responds to it in a way that is appropriate to respond to assertions? Of course, it is possible to assert this, but then it would be necessary to explain why that same pattern is repeated across groups. A more promising approach would be to try to identify the common pattern.

I agree with the theorists discussed thus far on the following points: (1) as Luzzi and Dular state, mansplaining involves a form or some forms of epistemic injustice, and (2) as Johnson argues, mansplaining also results from differences between the responses of the speaker and the hearer to an utterance, and it is based on a plurality of illocutionary forces of an utterance. On the other hand, I also assume: (3) the link between gender hierarchies and specific utterances must be explained, in terms of the specific conversational situations, in which mansplaining occurs, and (4) this explanation should not be made by referring to conventions that would be specific to certain gender groups, but should also apply to whitesplaining, heterosplaining, cissplaining, and other similar phenomena.

3. Jointness-based Semantics

In this section, I discuss the jointness-based semantics (JBS) presented by Miki (2019), as a framework for explaining mansplaining. The basic idea of JBS is that the point of communication lies in the formation of what Margaret Gilbert calls a joint commitment between the speaker and the hearer.

To borrow Gilbert's example, joint commitment describes the difference between two people who are simply walking at the same speed in the same direction with a near distance between them and two people walking *together* (e.g., Gilbert (2002), Sec. 2). If you and I were walking at the same speed in the same direction with a near distance between us, and you suddenly turn and begin to walk back the other way without saying anything to me, I would have no right to criticize you. However, if we are walking *together*, and you turn to go back the other way without saying anything to me, I would have the right to criticize you. Gilbert views this type of mutual obligation as essential to the nature of joint action, claiming that it cannot be reduced to the personal commitments of the individual participants of the joint action. It is, she argues, derived from the joint commitment that the participants create when they begin to act together.

The concept of joint commitment shows the following features:

(1) "All joint commitments are joint commitments to do something as a body, where 'doing something' is construed broadly so as to include such psychological states as belief, the acceptance of a rule or principle of action, and so on (Gilbert 2002, pp. 32–33).
(2) "The relevant joint commitment is an instruction to the parties to see to it that they act in such a way as to emulate as best they can a single body with the goal in question" (Gilbert 2002, p. 33). For this, each party must fulfill its role in the joint action. Thus, they each

have an individual commitment, derived from their joint commitment.

(3) To form a joint commitment, it is necessary that "[e]ach party to the ensuing joint action says or does something expressive of personal readiness to participate in that action with the other party" and that "this is 'common knowledge' between the parties" (Gilbert 2002, p. 29). Further: "Just as the readiness of each is required to bring the joint commitment into being so the concurrence of each is required in order to rescind the commitment" (Gilbert 2002, p. 32).

JBS claims that the point of communication is to establish *a joint commitment to believing that the speaker believes such and such as a body* between the speaker and the hearer, while I use "communication" narrowly, such that communication succeeds if and only if a speaker means something and a hearer understands it. More specifically, I proposed the following in Miki (2019):[2]

(1) If speaker S means that p, and hearer H understands this, they form a joint commitment to believing, as a body, that S believes that p.

(2) When S and H form this commitment each accordingly forms an individual commitment, based on the second feature of joint commitment. I argued in Miki (2023) that S forms an individual commitment to behaving as if p whether or not S actually believes it, while H forms an individual commitment to behaving as if S believes that p whether or not H actually believes that S believes it.

(3) It is the case that S means that p if and only if S utters something expressive of personal readiness to participate in a joint commitment to believing that S believes that p with H and this is common knowledge between them. When H reacts to S's utterance in such a way that is expressive of the corresponding personal readiness on their part, H is said to understand S's utterance.

This analysis can only cover indicative utterances, and it does not attempt to distinguish between all of the various illocutionary acts, but, in Miki (2023), I proposed that by changing S's attitude that S and H are jointly committed to believing that S has to another, different illocutionary acts can be captured in the same framework. Briefly, for example, a request can be thought of as an illocutionary act that involves a joint commitment between S and H to believing that S hopes H will make it the case that p. Of course, to distinguish among various directive illocutionary acts, such as requests, orders, and so on, it is necessary to clarify the

[2] I envision JBS as an alternative to intention-based semantics (Grice 1957, 1968, 1969; Schiffer 1972/1988; Davis 2003; Green 2007). See Miki (2019) for more details.

commitments associated with each, but this paper will not go into that detail.

The point of my analysis here is that the core of communication is not the psychological state of the speaker and the hearer before or at any point during the communication, but the joint commitment they form, which shapes how they should behave *after* the communication. If S behaves as if p is not true after the conversation in which they meant that p and H understood this, S can be accused of lying, for example. Likewise, if H behaves as if S does not believe that p, they can be accused of not taking what S says seriously. This mutual obligation is at the core of communication, and this is not simply something derived from communication.

In JBS, communication involves the formation of a joint commitment between S and H, but when and how is it determined what S means or what the joint commitment that S and H form is? Gilbert seems to think that this is already determined at the stage of each participant's expression of their personal readiness: we form a joint commitment to X-ing as a body by expressing our personal readiness to X-ing as a body. Miki (2019) also followed this line. However, the nature of joint commitment is more complex.

Miki (2022) described a class of joint action that I call "concessive joint action ...[,] in which though a participant deviates from the initial shared goal the others concede so that they end up with achieving another goal, and the entire joint action is identified as the latter goal" (p. 29). The important point here is that a joint course of action is pursued through accusation-based correction. If one member of a joint action behaves in a way that deviates from the individual commitment derived from the joint commitment that structures it, the joint action does not immediately fall apart. The deviation can be corrected through the accusation of the other members, and the deviant member will return to the course. This joint action is then carried out, where each participant behaves consistently according to the joint commitment that was formed at the beginning of it and achieves what it dictates. This is a standard type of joint action. In concessive joint action, even where a member deviates from the path that is dictated by the relevant joint commitment, for whatever reason, the other members do not condemn it and instead make a concession. Because no correction occurs in this case, the participants update their interpretation of the joint commitment and adjust their respective individual commitments such that the deviation does not amount to a deviation in light of this adjustment. Therefore, all members except for the deviant one now have obligations that they did not initially assume when the joint commitment was formed and now have to direct their subsequent actions accordingly.

Applying this to the situation of communication, we find the following. Suppose that through S's utterance, a joint commitment is formed between S and H to believing that S believes that p. This commitment imposes certain obligations on both with respect to their

subsequent actions. Suppose, however, that H behaves in a way that violates the obligation, that is, for example, behaves as if S does not believe that p but rather that q ($p \neq q$). Even in this case, if H is S's superior, teacher, or otherwise in a position of power over S, and S cannot accuse H, S must concede. Then, they must update their interpretation of the joint commitment such that H's behavior does not count as a deviation. This makes them now subject to a joint commitment to believing that S believes that q. Due to the framework of JBS, S is now deemed as having meant that q, and an obligation is imposed on S to behaving as if it is the case that q. I call this type of situation, where the power of the hearer causes the speaker to mean something other than what they wanted to, the "appropriation of meaning."

It should be noted that, even where deviations and concessions occur, joint commitments do not thereby cease. This is because, as noted in the third feature of joint commitment, participants' agreement is required to rescind the commitment. If one participant deviates and others make a concession, the latter has also failed to ask the former to consent to the cessation of the joint commitment, and thus, no consent is formed. Thus, joint commitment continues to exert its normative force in a distorted form.

Let us return to mansplaining. My proposal is that mansplaining results from an appropriation meaning. I apply this framework in the following section.

4. How Does Mansplaining Work?

How does JBS explain mansplaining? My suggestions are as follows.

(1) Communication involves a joint commitment between the speaker and the hearer to believing that the speaker has an attitude such as believing, wanting, etc. toward a proposition p and subsequently imposes obligations on both regarding their subsequent behavior.
(2) The speech-act confusion identified by Johnson can sometimes be part of the reason why deviations from such obligations arise.
(3) In the case of a difference in social power between the speaker and the hearer, the hearer is more likely to concede than the speaker, while the speaker may be more likely to deviate, thereby giving rise to an appropriation of meaning. This difference may be, but is not limited to, gender-based differences.
(4) The types of epistemic injustice that Luzzi and Dular discuss can form contributions to or arise from the appropriation of meaning.

Since the first point has already been discussed in the previous section, I argue for (2)–(4).

As Johnson claims, an utterance can have the illocutionary power of an assertion and that of a request at the same time. Translating this into the language of JBS, it a joint commitment is formed through communication, it is underdetermined whether it concerns, for example, the speaker's belief or desire, and it has the potential for both. We assume that assertion involves a joint commitment about the speaker's knowledge and request involves one about the speaker's desires. When Solnit said "I've been researching Eadweard Muybridge" and the host showed understanding, the two formed a joint commitment concerning a mental attitude that Solnit had toward a certain proposition. What was the attitude and what was the proposition? Let us say that she considered the attitude to be her knowledge that she had a wealth of information about Muybridge. However, the host interpreted the attitude to be her desire to have information about Muybridge. What follows from Johnson's argument is that the fact of the joint commitment itself does not inform us which interpretation is better. It has the potential that covers both.

If the host and Solnit had consistent interpretations, neither would likely behave in a deviant way in the eyes of the other. However, where their interpretations differ, they are likely to do so. When the host said, "And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year" and then begins a lengthy explanation of it, in Solnit's view, he has deviated from the joint commitment that they have just formed. However, for the host, this deviation is not a deviation, of course, but simply behavior in accordance with the joint commitment that he believes that he has formed with Solnit. The bare fact of joint commitment itself does not establish which of two interpretations of it is correct.

How does this relate to gender? In various ways. For example, in many societies, due to prevailing gender norms, women tend to be considered "sassy," "bossy," or "hysterical" when they make accusations. These gender norms make it more difficult for women to rebuke deviations from joint commitments. When participants cannot agree on whether one of them is deviating from or remaining within a joint commitment, they may seek the help of those around them. When a woman and a man are walking together, and the man walks without regard for the woman's pace, does that form a deviation from their joint commitment to walking as a body? If there is no resolution of a conflict between them, they may each seek out their friends' opinion, or refer to relevant literature supporting their view. However, if the gender balance of the community to which they belong is skewed, there may be differences in terms of the resources available to them. The man may have more influential (male) friends in the community than the woman does. She may search the literature but unable to find anything written from a woman's perspective. In a case like this, it is more difficult for the woman to condemn, and it is therefore easier for the man to deviate. Generally speaking, in

a patriarchal society, men have access to more resources to support themselves than women do. From this, joint actions between women and men are likely to be concessive in a way that favors the men. Because the appropriation of meaning forms a subcategory of concessive joint action, it is also likely to appear in communication between a man and a woman.

Why does the appropriation of meaning take the form of interpreting a woman's utterance as a request rather than as an assertion so often that "mansplaining" becomes a useful term? Part of the reason for this can be seen in testimonial injustice that Fricker and Luzzi discuss. Due to prejudice against women, female speakers have downgraded credibility as subjects of testimony or are seen as forming beliefs without justification, even when they maintain credibility in the sense that Luzzi describes. Whichever happens, the result is a tendency for women to be perceived as not knowing what they know when they make utterances about it. As a result, if commitment to knowledge is required to make an assertion, a woman's utterance is less likely to be interpreted as an assertion than a man's, even if she intends her utterance to be an assertion. Thus, what Johnson calls speech act-confusion follows a particular pattern in which a man responds to a woman's utterance that she intended as an assertion in a way that is conventional for a request.

Epistemic injustice of the type that Dular discussed results from an appropriation of meaning. Recall that joint commitment is maintained, even in concessive joint actions. Thus, even where the appropriation of meaning, a subcategory of concessive joint action, occurs, and the speaker accordingly seems to have meant something that they did not intend to, the joint commitment formed in the communication continues to bind both speaker and hearer. When a woman's utterance is considered a request and treated as a request rather than an assertion, against her will, she still continues to participate in the joint commitment they formed, which means that she is now subject to a joint commitment between a speaker who made a request and a hearer who received it. In this commitment, the man, that is, the hearer, should explain things to the woman, and the latter must listen carefully. This forms what Dular calls "a dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer."

The interaction between appropriation of meaning and these two types of epistemic injustice is not necessarily one-directional. When a mansplaining type of appropriation of meaning takes place, the woman is directed to behave as the subject of a request. If women are more inclined than men to behave in such a manner, the prejudice that women are ignorant and frequently ask men to provide the information or justification they need is reinforced. Thus, the mechanisms of testimonial injustice Luzzi and Fricker focus on not only facilitate the appropriation of meaning but are also facilitated by it. The same is true for the Dular's type of epistemic injustice. When a subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer occurs, men are given more license to blame the other party and to justify themselves

than women are. This makes it easier for men to deviate and for women to make concessions, and, thus, makes it easier for the appropriation of meaning to take place in favor of men. The appropriation of meaning and the types of epistemic injustice affect each other in a bidirectional manner.

Please note how this discussion relates gender hierarchy to mansplaining but does not appeal to any conventions specific to gender groups. Gender hierarchies appear in communication in the shape of differences in the available resources for self-justification in the case of gaps between men and women in their response to a deviation from a joint commitment. Thus, social hierarchies that produce a similar resource differentials can cause something similar to mansplaining. Thus, mansplaining, whitesplaining, heterosplaining, cissplaining, and various other X-splainings can be understood as manifestations of this same mechanism.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents a perspective of mansplaining as an example of the appropriation of meaning, a phenomenon wherein the joint commitment that is formed, through communication, between speaker and hearer changes — via deviations and concessions — to something that the speaker did not anticipate, but continues to exert normative power over both participants in the conversation. Mansplaining can be perceived as a case in which appropriation of meaning occurs specifically based on the illocutionary ambiguity between an assertion and a request in an utterance. The appropriation of meaning is more likely when differences exist in the resources available to each participant for the accusation of others or for self-justification. Hence, mansplaining is systematically associated with gender hierarchy. However, this is not a phenomenon limited to gender and can arise in the context of various hierarchies that give rise to similar resource differences. My framework provides an account that fulfills the four conditions that must be satisfied to explain mansplaining.

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