**The purpose of Accounting Education: An autobiographical case study**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper describes the hegemony of restrictive economic thinking which has prevented accounting students from receiving a ‘proper’ inclusive education during the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond.

**Approach**: It adopts a socio/philosophical approach relying on the works of such authors as Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Rogers (1902-1987).

**Findings:** It argues that all individuals should take it upon themselves to find their own true selves. Those in society who are responsible for education must do all in their power to alert students to the need for them to be their true selves. It links this message to the adoption of sustainable business practices in society.

**Limitations**: The paper does not provide detailed suggestions on the contents of accounting courses, rather it provides criticism of some extant approaches to accounting education, and argues for a paradigm shift where such approaches exist. It is a case study and contains no statistically supported generalisations.

**Originality:** The paper argues for large changes in accounting education from the practices which have dominated academia over the past several decades. Its messages are not original but, I believe, many academics have not accepted the case that is made here. I believe this paper provides sound arguments, from an experienced academic, to support changes in educational practices, which I believe to be essential.

**Keywords:** Accounting Education, Existentialism, Sustainability, Agency Theory.

**The purpose of Accounting Education: An autobiographical case study**

*Like Nietzsche and Freud, Kierkegaard based his knowledge chiefly on the analysis of one case – to wit, himself. The central psychological endeavour of Kierkegaard may be summed up under the heading of the question he pursued relentlessly: How can you become an individual (Houe, 2011, p. 230).*

**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is not to provide detailed instructions on what ought to be included in accounting education courses; this has been done elsewhere, for example in the journal ‘Accounting Education’. Its purpose is to describe the hegemony of restrictive economic thinking which has prevented accounting students from receiving a ‘proper’ inclusive education in the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. It adopts a socio/philosophical approach relying on the works of such authors as Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Rogers (1902-1987).

Carl Rogers was a psychologist and US academic, who was deeply influenced by Kierkergaard’s legacy. “To be that self which one truly is” is a statement that Rogers adapted from the writings of Kierkegaard; it concisely described his mission for both himself and his clients (Podmore, 2011). This paper tells of its author’s journey, to date, as he attempts to be his true self, after being ‘educated for’, and working in, the business community.

The next section provides brief details of my early life, up to the end of my formal full time education. I then describe the difficulties I had after graduation, trying to work out how to fit in to society as a “business person”. This involved me in ‘discovering’ existentialism. Around age 40 I gave up my direct interaction with the business world and became an academic. I describe the global business problems that became known in the 20th century and suggest how education might be used to address them. I briefly describe how I have organised my own accounting classes to address the perceived problems.

My teaching style has been influenced by Kierkegaard’s thinking. The existential style of teaching was difficult in the academic climate of the 20th century, but has become easier as more people have come to recognise that the ‘laws of business’ hinder the development of a comprehensive educational system for students of accounting. I am pleased to believe that both in academia, and in society at large, many people are realising that we must change the way we think about business decision making, better to make sense of our lives.

**My early life**

I was born in to a working class family in England. My mother knew that if I received a good education I would thrive in modern society; she encouraged me to work hard at school. My mother and father had both lived through the Second World War. In the 1950s life had become much better for them and they believed that the force of science in society would quickly lead to a wonderful world. They marvelled at aeroplanes, televisions and medical advances. They wished their son to take a lead in the scientific developments of that time.

At school I did well in the national examinations I sat at age 16. I was then required to choose only three subjects to study, and be examined on at age 18. My parents were keen for me to become a scientist and I studied: Maths, Physics and Chemistry at their behest. I would have preferred to study subjects such as: English, History and Economics but I was easily persuaded that it was in my best interests to become a scientist.

My science teachers taught me that the keen minds of scientists, thinking rationally, would soon make our society an even better place to live. The need for rational thought, and the suppression of errant emotion, was vital if I were to be able to help discover the natural laws that controlled everything in our universe but had been hidden from humankind until recently. It appeared to some that we were living in the most exciting of times, and huge steps forward would come soon as more “universal truths” were uncovered. Professor Skinner was a leading psychologist and social philosopher at Harvard. In 1953 he declared:

The hypothesis that man is not free is essential to the application of scientific method to the study of human behavior. The free inner man who is held responsible for his behavior is only a prescientific substitute for the kind of causes which are discovered in the course of scientific analysis. All these alternative causes lie *outside* the individual (p. 477).

I did not enjoy my last two years at school. I felt uneasy at the way I was being ‘trained’ to think, but I could not explain why. I did not wish to go on to university in order to receive further training on becoming a scientist. I discovered an alternative, despite my lack of training in many areas of traditional university study; it was “Business Studies”. Business Studies was a new academic area at many universities. I decided to study Business Studies in order to move away from my scientific training, not for any positive reasons. My parents were a little disappointed but they were aware that many business people had ‘successful’ lives and so they accepted my decision.

Unfortunately the progress of the natural scientists had been noticed by many other leading thinkers of the time besides Skinner (above). In the 1960s, and for decades afterwards, many thinking people wished to be recognised as scientists. Economists espoused the ‘universal truths’ that governed market behaviours in society, and their reasoning was often taken as a base from which to develop further the new academic subjects of: Accounting, Marketing, Management Systems, etc. Nevertheless, the ‘laws’ of business did not appear as puissant as the laws of the natural sciences, and their logical consequences were not tenaciously imposed in the business studies classrooms of the time. The ‘laws’ were often introduced as, “something else to be thought of in decision making”, rather than ***the*** right way to the ‘correct’ answer.

My economics lecturers explained that if we thought of all humans as rational maximisers, always trying to obtain the largest returns from their decision making, and we accepted that all humans have equal and total knowledge of what is happening in the marketplace, then we could work out how people ought to behave. My lecturers never argued that their suggested premises were true, simply that if they were true certain things would follow in the resultant market place.

Simon (1959) observed how business people actually behave. He introduced the concept of “bounded rationality”, whereby managers are forced to impose boundaries on their decision areas because of the complexity of attempting to think holistically about problems. Such boundaries may prevent ‘optimal’ decisions being made; however “optimal” is defined. This rarely matters because managers will normally be safe provided their performances are considered ‘satisfactory’. Thus managers “satisfice” rather than “maximise”. Argyris (1990) went further in suggesting that maximisation is made even more difficult because business information is often purposely distorted by unethical individuals for their personal benefit. Baker and Bettner (1997) suggests that:

The scientific method - wherein relationships among naturally occurring phenomena are assumed to be enduring, quantifiable, and objectively determinable - is an incorrect paradigm that limits the perspectives for doing accounting research (p. 304).

Despite some individuals agreeing with Baker and Bettner, the economic premises associated with a perfect market situation were repeated endlessly throughout the 20th century and many individuals appeared to start to accept them to be true. A group of leading academics at ‘The University of Chicago’ devised a way of examining market behaviour through a lens they termed "Agency Theory” (see Goshal, 2005, for a discussion of this). As Goshal points out, Agency Theory suggests that employees and managers exhibit selfish, anti-social behaviour ‘normally’; systems must emerge to control such behaviour. Individuals are not to be thought of as caring people who wish to act so as to help fellow workers and others in their society, to be as good as they might be.

If everyone chooses to view the world through an Agency Theory lens, a society will be created that displays all the characteristics of Agency Theory. Contrast this with the natural sciences where, even when the vast majority of people believed the sun circled the earth every day, it never was so. The incorrect natural science beliefs could not change the true situation. However, poor social ‘science’ can change the business world and we must dispose of ‘bad science’ before it does permanent damage to society.

Whether right or wrong to begin with, the theory can become right as managers… adapt their behaviours to conform… this is precisely what has happened to management practice over the last several decades, converting our collective pessimism about managers into realized pathologies in management behaviors (Goshal, 2005, p. 77).

**Graduating in to society**

My first position after graduation was with a large Unit Trust company in The City of London. Despite having graduated, in retrospect, I believe I had not been educated properly (see later). At the time I did not recognise this. I took up a marketing position and completed the examinations of the ‘Institute of Marketing’ to help my career development. Later I decided to become a chartered accountant to develop my career further. The further ‘education’ I received from these professional bodies required me to rote learn many facts, and mathematical modelling techniques, in order to pass examinations. Although the qualifications helped me to develop my career, in retrospect I believe that much of my formal ‘education’ was actually a ‘socialisation’ process:

At an unconscious or unverbalized level, there is this desire for the products of our schools to be obedient, good followers, willing to be led. Those who are independent who think for themselves tend to "rock the boat". It is easier to manage an industry or an army with men and women who have learned to conform to the rules (Rogers, 1983, p. 304).

The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him (sic), [they] need not feel alone and anxious anymore. But the price he pays… is high; it is the loss of himself (Fromm, 1942 p. 186; cited in Lippitt, 2011, p. 102).

Kierkegaard (1849) also refers to such a person (cited in Furchert, 2011, p. 288):

[He] forgets himself, forgets what his name is (in the divine understanding of it). Does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd.

In London I met other graduates making their way in the City. In the 1970s many of them had studied “Humanities” rather than “Business Studies”. I made friends with a group of such people and we discussed the state of the world over coffees, or beers. This is where my adult education began. I had never heard of “existentialism” before this time. I was introduced to the books of Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Camus and others. I was taught how to consider data, express opinions and make decisions without having to demonstrate with mathematical certainty the correctness of my answers.

This was a wonderful time in my education but a difficult time in my life. I found myself re-evaluating my business studies education and recognising its limitations. I started to rethink the purpose of my life, but I did this mostly outside of my working day. I found myself living with calculative rationality (Longstaff, 1992) throughout my working days, but using other time to think of who I really wished to be. I started to realise that my primary goal was not to become a ‘successful’ businessman. It was more difficult to decide what I did wish to become.

In London I met up with an old school friend who was completing his PhD in Metallurgy at the City of London University. I introduced him to my new friends and we explored the new ways of thinking together. We decided to go to night-school where a clerical man (whose name I have long forgotten) was speaking for several months on “Existentialism”. He introduced us to the writings of Kierkegaard, but the main authors he chose for us to study were Dostoyevsky and Kafka. My ‘real’ self thrived on the learning from these classes.

When my first child arrived my family moved from London to Edinburgh; I became the Company Secretary for a property development company. Fortunately, one of my new found London friends, a native of Edinburgh, returned to Edinburgh at around the same time. He introduced me to another circle of friends; I considered these new friends had been properly educated and I enjoyed many good conversations with them. I continued to split my life between ‘worker’ and ‘educated thinker’; it was a difficult time. The position was complicated as my family grew with the addition of three further children; it seemed I must strive for financial success with a good salary.

Two years after I arrived in Edinburgh the property development company that employed me collapsed. I found employment at the local polytechnic (now Napier University) teaching ‘Accounting’. Most of my students wanted to become chartered accountants and I was paid to provide them with the type of education I had received in order to pass Accounting examinations. Although I had developed contempt for my own business studies education, I provided my students with a similar education. I was reasonably well paid for doing this and could live a ‘good’ life with my family, but I was not happy. I was not being that self that I truly was. According to Furtak (2011, p. 22), Ernest Becker (1924-1974) describes such a man as “culturally normal”, because he:

Imagines he has an identity if he pays his insurance premium, that he has control of his life if he guns his sports car or works his electric toothbrush… dares not stand up for his own meanings because it is more comforting to live embedded in a safe framework of social and cultural obligations and duties.

Eventually I decided to quit teaching, where I felt increasingly guilty for the ‘educations’ I was giving to our future business leaders. I become an accountant with a manufacturing company, and later with a power company. Throughout all of this time I enjoyed engaging in conversations with my circle of friends concerning the state of society, spiritual matters and even the state of education. I was pleased to have ceased to provide poor ‘educations’, but I remained unhappy to be attending work and pretending to be too concerned with profit maximisation. I believed most of my colleagues were “satisficers” but we all pretended to be “profit maximisers” and spoke as if we were; we were expected to participate in this weird ‘game’. I continued not to be that self I truly was.

**Becoming an academic**

Most people who had known of my work as an Accounting teacher would have agreed that I did the job well but I knew the paucity of the ‘education’ I was providing and left the job because of my sense of guilt. Back in industry I thought of the opportunity tertiary level teachers have to prepare their students to become good citizens and benefit society. I realised that if I had control over what, and how, I taught I might be able to gain satisfaction as a teacher. Furthermore I had been convinced through conversations that teachers should not teach in the way I had been taught, but rather they should provide a learning environment where students are able to choose how best to develop their own learning. I saw a position advertised for a “Lecturer in Accounting” in New Zealand. After discussions with my family, I decided to apply for the job. My application was successful and in 1987 I moved to New Zealand to start a new life as an academic.

At university I could not escape having to provide some ‘traditional’ education that allowed students to become chartered accountants but I was also able to set up optional courses of my own design. These were advertised to students and attracted those willing to participate. A friend had introduced me to the writings of Carl Rogers and many of these were concerned with education. I attempted to create courses where students were encouraged to develop themselves as good citizens with holistic outlooks on life. These courses were popular and I decided to continue to develop them further. I earned a PhD for my research in education. I was living a life that allowed me to become much closer to that self I truly was. As I became a more mature academic, I was able to provide more courses to senior students with contents of my own choosing.

**The huge problems which developed in the 20th Century**

The business environment changed enormously during the 20th Century. There were possibly no Multi-national corporations (MNC) in 1900 but in 2000 Utting reports, “The revenues of just five corporations are more than double the GDP of the poorest 100 countries” (p. 1). There are now huge MNC that control billions of dollars-worth of assets and influence the global environment in which we live. Many academics in the twentieth century agreed with Friedman (1970):

# …there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud (p. 125).

Milton Friedman (1912-2006) was an eminent professor of economics, and a US governmental ‘business advisor’, in the latter half of the 20th Century. Friedman won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1976. His influence on defining the role of business in society was immense and many people accepted his position uncritically; it freed business managers of moral and social responsibilities. However, in the second half of the twentieth century people at the United Nations (UN) became aware that, on a global scale, business operations were adversely affecting the quality of life of many people. In 1983 the UN created the ‘World Commission on Environment and Development’ (WCED). In 1987 WCED published ‘Our Common Future’. It made the case for a paradigm shift in the way that business decisions are made in order to save the world from business practices. In 1992 the UN organised an ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro. The summit had representatives from 172 governments who signed up to ‘Agenda 21’. It stated that a massive educational programme was required to alert the world’s population to the threats created by ‘poor’ business decision making. In 2002 a further ‘Earth Summit’ took place in Johannesburg. The UN commissioned a group of scientists (Doering et al., 2002) to report on the state of the world at that time. The report was extensive but the following brief excerpts illustrate its ‘mood’:

* The world is 78% poor, 11% middle income and 11% rich (p. 13).
* Nearly 26,000 plant species, more than 1,100 mammals and 1200 birds, 700 freshwater fish, and hundreds of reptiles and amphibians are threatened with extinction (p. 33).

The 2002 summit concluded with the signing of, ‘The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development’ and agreement that more education in the area of sustainable business practices was urgently required on a global scale:

We recognize that poverty eradication, changing consumption and production patterns, and protecting and managing the natural resource base for economic and social development are overarching objectives of, and essential requirements for sustainable development.

However, subsequent progress has not been good. A third Earth Summit was held, again in Rio, in 2012. Its concluding document titled ‘The Future We Want’ re-established recognition of the need for the changes identified at Rio 20 years earlier, but contained evidence that necessary progress had not been made:

We acknowledge that since 1992 there have been areas of insufficient progress and setbacks in the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, aggravated by multiple financial, economic, food and energy crises, which have threatened the ability of all countries, in particular developing countries, to achieve sustainable development. In this regard, it is critical that we do not backtrack from our commitment to the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment

and Development (p. 4).

The UN had also commissioned further scientific research at the start of the 21st Century, ‘The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report’, completed in 2005 stated:

Over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber and fuel. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth….. The changes that have been made to ecosystems have contributed to substantial net gains in human well-being and economic development, but these gains have been achieved at growing costs in the form of the degradation of many ecosystem services, increased risks of nonlinear changes, and the exacerbation of poverty for some groups of people. These problems, unless addressed, will substantially diminish the benefits that future generations obtain from ecosystems.

15, out of 24, of the ecosystem services examined for the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment were found to be being used unsustainably. All business managers, and business students, must become aware of the problems caused by unsustainable business practices. In this environment there have been many powerful managers who have appeared to live ‘successful’ lives, with the power to make life changing decisions for their fellow travellers. However, Pauchant (1995) reports that much in the world of management, and in life itself, has become devoid of meaning to many individuals:

After interviewing more than four thousand "successful" senior executives, managers and professionals in the United States Jan Halper [a doctoral student in 1988] concluded that many are ‘disillusioned by the fruits of their success, for it has often resulted in emptiness and confusion’ (p. 12).

In modern times many people strive to understand why they are alive and what the purposes of their lives are. There are large numbers of officially recorded suicides in the Western world. There are problems of alcohol and drug abuse, suggesting a high degree of rage out there. We pay for this in emergency wards and our medical bills, on our roads, and in our homes. In New Zealand the Parliament Commission for the Environment (2004) notes:

Existing education system can… present a dilemma for sustainability. They often support existing social practices and ideologies that are dominant in society. In a society that is operating in an unsustainable manner, unsustainable systems and ways of living can simplify be ‘transmitted’ from one generation to the next (pp. 40- 41).

Rogers (1983) provides a similar warning:

[Formal education] is one of the means by which the culture transmits its values from one generation to the next... This process is in upheaval with many of our young people declaring themselves "dropouts" from the confused and hypocritical value system that they see operating in the world..... The modern individual is assailed from every angle by divergent and contradictory value claims. It is no longer possible... to settle comfortably into the value system of one's forebears or one's community or one's church and live out one's life without ever examining the nature and the assumptions of that system (pp. 255-256).

The next section examines how we might change educational offerings in order to educate people best to participate in a sustainable business environment.

**Business Education for a Sustainable Business Environment**

Much contemporary management education encourages insufficient intellectual and/or ethical development; it leaves students with a lack of critical intellectual independence. This is not a new problem:

Teaching to be really educational should, therefore aim to provide such stimuli for the student that he goes forward seeking an understanding of the principles of his subject rather than sitting back smug in the knowledge that he “swotted” the correct material for his examination (Chambers, 1948, p.322).

Management education often encourages rote learning. Students may develop little understanding of the wider developmental requirements needed by good citizens. Whatever we do in the name of education, every policy and practice that we design and undertake must encourage students to live good lives and become that self that they truly are. We must respect learners’ potentials to be good human beings, and respect their rights to choose how they wish to develop (Kelly & Alam, 2009). To the extent that we fail to give this respect, we treat people as tools, as things, as human resources to be used for ends other than their own.

Education should better help people to seek out and enquire into the possibilities of life, the consequences of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ character, and decision making. Loyalty, courage, nature of good friendships, living for simple pleasures and for purposes larger than oneself are things that people need a chance to investigate and evaluate for themselves. Rogers (1983) suggests:

The only man (sic) who is educated is the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of *seeking* knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on *process* rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education (p. 120).

According to Podmore (2011), when Rogers states, “I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriate learning” (p. 246) he invokes the motifs of Kierkegaard. People need the opportunity to consider the nature of the “good society” that would enable them best to flourish. People will not get the society they dream about unless they confront the fundamental, structural, educational issues that stand in the way. Broadening students’ understanding of business in its social context will encourage creativity amongst students and promote the changes necessary to help mitigate socially and environmentally damaging activities. We must provide our young managers with the skills and confidence necessary to challenge the thinking in the business world which they join. The business education that is currently found in many of our business schools must be revitalised:

We believe that the study of management has lost… the ability of management scholars to think and reason philosophically about their discipline… we want graduates who think innovatively, holistically, can see the outcomes of their decisions, who constantly question and challenge convention (Goodman, 2009, p. 41).

In order to achieve this we must not only teach our students such techniques as discounted cash flow modelling and linear programming, we must also teach them about: existential thinking, critical theory and dialectical enquiry. At the Earth Summit in 1992 it was agreed that education for sustainability is, “…critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision making” (Parliamentary Commission for the Environment (PCE, 2004, p. 37). This agreement requires that we determine what “education for sustainability is”. The PCE suggests:

It aims to empower people of all ages and different backgrounds to contribute to a better future. It encourages people to ask lots of questions, challenge underlying assumptions, and to think for themselves. It looks at individual and systemic changes that are needed to resolve unsustainable practices. Education for sustainability will require people & organizations to see… that there will need to be a… redesign of many systems and established ways of doing things (ibid, p. 15).

The PCE is a governmental body in New Zealand and it is wonderful to have such a body championing such thinking but unfortunately the PCE appears to have little influence on the main New Zealand government, which remains less aware of what education should be about. People must be educated to think critically about their own values and the values (or lack of values) embedded in society. Citizens must not blindly accept the current situation. They must demand some collective responsibilities for making decisions regarding how society’s accumulated assets are to be used to achieve the best outcomes for humankind. They must demand change.

**My response in the classroom**

Kelly & Bather (2009) provides a full paper describing my work in the classroom. Here I will provide some brief notes on parts of my courses, which I feel have been influenced by the thinking of Kierkegaard and Rogers. I present my students with a list of “Learning Objectives” for each course, these include:

1. Citizenship: your ability to be aware of your own emotional, spiritual and societal values as well as your cognitive identities. Yourcourage to promote change.
2. Self-understanding, self-awareness, self-confidence and intellectual independence.
3. Knowledge of your role, and the role of management, in society.
4. A wish to question and evaluate, throughout life.

Each course contains 12 two-hour lectures. In these lectures I introduce such topics as: Corporate Governance, Stakeholder Management and Sustainable Business Practices; but I also include lectures on: Dialectical Enquiry, Critical Theory and Existentialism. For the existentialism lecture I make use of Pauchant (1995). This book criticises modern management practice and much of what is taught to management students in universities. In the lecture I caution students to be wary of any persons who tell them, in any given situation, that, “We have no choice”. Such individuals are almost always trying to pressure their audience to adopt some course of action favoured by them. I point out that:

1. in any situation it is always possible to identify several options as to how one might respond.
2. it is the responsibility of competent individuals to identify available options and make a choice as to which one they believe to be the best option to pursue.
3. individuals must accept responsibility for all choices they make, and know that some decisions will, in retrospect, appear to be poor ones; they can nevertheless learn from these.

According to Feddon (2011) Max Weber speaking to students in Munich stated:

It is immensely moving when a mature man – no matter whether old or young in years – is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul… that is something human… every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself in that position (p. 271).

I attempt to convince students that they must take responsibility for decision making but that often it is not possible to calculate ‘correct’ responses in advance. This is how life is. They must decide how best to cope with both decision making, and with taking responsibility for their mistakes.

**Conclusion**

Unfortunately in contemplating how to live well, many in modern society have adopted a scientific reasoning that has persuaded them to strive for goals that have been set without sufficient concern as to whether the goals are consistent with their living a good life and being that self which they truly are. It appears that morality is often subjugated to the pursuit of lesser aims such as the maximisation of short term profitability. Many people in the 21st century are not living, or attempting to live, a ‘good life’. They may never discover the selves which they truly are.

All individuals should take it upon themselves to find their own true selves. Those in society who are responsible for education must do all in their power to alert students to the need for them to be their true selves. This will maximise the students’ long-term satisfaction with life, and help in the development of the best possible societies.

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