



Indian Philosophies, Ethics, and Pragmatism – Why should one be Ethical?

Nandan Kandanat *

Abstract :

Philosophy being an exploration into the ultimate truth of human life and existence, it can lead to greater understanding of the fundamental nature of our own existence. This understanding, in turn, gives one a certain purpose, intent and orientation on the evolutionary path and becomes a better version of oneself, in this life. A purposeful evolution oriented life steadies and purifies one's mind and its activities, and a self-disciplined, purposeful and conscious life leads to ethical behaviour towards everything external and internal. Expansion of "consciousness" is critical in the evolution of humans. Ethics is supremely important in leading a 'correctly balanced' and 'conscious' life for advancing further on human evolution.

Introduction

The supremely conscious *Vedic* sages taught their invaluable teachings through the six great Indian Philosophies (*Shad Darshanas*) which are aimed at ending of human sufferings. These philosophies are highly practical in nature. They provide effective tools to expand our consciousness here and now so that we too can expand our own awareness and knowledge and lead a correctly balanced life transcending our pain and suffering. This is

a self- contained stand-alone article on the subject. However, it is part of a larger article by the author appeared in the earlier issues of this Journal** and can also be considered as the concluding part.

The Purpose of Life

According to Indian philosophies, humans on earth are complex psychophysical and spiritual beings with an evolutionary trajectory in front. It has been at least 4

* Nandan Kandanat holds MA Degree in Consciousness Studies (USA), along with a Post Graduate Diploma in Business and Industrial Management (India) and a Diploma in Marketing (UK). An ardent follower of Yogic Science from childhood, he is also an accredited Meditation Teacher. Retired in 2019 as the Managing Director of an Engineering company in Dubai, he now lives in Tripunithura, Kochi, India. dhyanamarg@gmail.com / <https://dhyanaavidya.in/>

** See under 'Reference 5'.

million years since *homo sapiens* - the human species - have started walking our planet earth. No major Darwinian type of physical evolution has taken place to *homo sapiens* since then. Whatever evolution that has happened to *homo sapiens* is not external or physical, but is internal -evolution of their mind and intellect which are mere reflections of “**Consciousness**” that is ‘present’ in human species according to Indian Philosophies. *Prajnanam* is the *Sanskrit* word used in Indian Philosophical thoughts for Consciousness. One’s intelligence, awareness, knowledge, ability to comprehend etcetera are all reflections of the current state of expansion of Consciousness in that person. Consciousness is the fundamental reality. Consciousness is not a ‘thing’. It is a ‘quality’ like ‘light’. Consciousness is present not only in human beings but also in every object in the universe from a tiny spec of sand grain to gigantic galaxies, according to Indian Philosophies. But consciousness is present in varying degrees of intensity in them. Everything from minerals to plants and animals are “conscious” to the degree they express life and activities. The ultimate understanding of Indian Philosophies (in *Vedanta*) is, **Consciousness is all that there is. Everything is consciousness.** Everything exists in consciousness and everything collapses back into Consciousness. Consciousness gives rise to energy and energy gives rise to matter. The same consciousness imparts *‘sentience’, and awareness to matter in varying degrees so that this universe is made possible as we see it today. We are not body-mind organisms, holding consciousness; we are consciousness holding a body and mind as

our tools. The more conscious the body-mind organism becomes by expanding it, the more free and less bonded its existence becomes. The plant kingdom is more conscious than the mineral kingdom. The animal kingdom is more conscious than the plant kingdom. Humans are the most conscious beings in the animal kingdom. Amongst the human species itself, people are at different levels of consciousness, and each one is in the process of expansion of his/her consciousness and advancing in their continuum of evolution. The entire life on planet earth is designed to facilitate the expansion of “our” consciousness. This IS the highest understanding Indian Philosophies offer. The purpose of human life is to expand the CONSCIOUSNESS THAT WE ARE and get ourselves liberated from bondage and suffering. That is the purpose and direction of human life; an embodied life with a body and mind is the only opportunity to accomplish that - it is how important human life is. Observance of Ethics in life is to be viewed from this evolutionary standpoint.

Indian Philosophies - NOT “religion” but “User Manuals”

Compared to other forms of life. Consciousness in humans is in a relatively advanced state of intensity and expansion, making humans totally different from other forms of existence. It is also in an expansion mode, poised to give rise to more and more awareness and intelligence to humans in an evolutionary manner. Science and technology available on planet earth in the twenty-first century is the result of this expanding mode of consciousness over centuries and exponentially in the recent past and current (this twenty-first) century. It is noteworthy that

* ‘Sentience’ is the capacity to experience feelings and sensations.

expansion of Consciousness in humans has contributed to a spectacular rise in their living standards in leaps and bounds in the last two hundred years. Expansion of Consciousness is the primary purpose of our life, according to Indian philosophies. All experiences in one's life are exercises provided for that purpose. Human life is an evolutionary journey from a lower level of consciousness to a higher level of consciousness. Just as any journey needs roadmaps, tools, knowledge of the vehicle, knowledge about the destination so on and so forth, this journey of human evolution also needs all of them for a successful completion of the evolutionary journey.

The six Great Indian Philosophies are like the latest versions of 'user manuals' that come with new automobiles. The earlier versions of the 'user manuals' for human species were handed out to them at the early stages of their evolution, in the form of *Vedas*. *Vedas* are not religious texts, as widely misunderstood. They are various versions of the user manual for human species to guide and assist them in their journey from lower level of consciousness to a higher level of consciousness.

Philosophies are comparable to Science. *Sadhanas* are comparable to technology - applied science. There is nothing 'religious' about these user manuals. They are the recommended ways of life for the whole of humanity. For those who are leading a life based on these User Manuals, it is a way of life and NOT a religion. That is the reason why *Sanatana Dharma* (wrongly called "Hinduism" today, which is a misnomer) is a way of life. It is not a religion.

Humanity is now composed of some 8 billion individuals. These eight billion people are just one energetically interconnected aspect of the entire universe. We are as much energetically connected with the rest of the universe as our hand is physically connected with our body. The only difference is that these connections are invisible. Our past, present and future are all energetically connected, no matter what our present understanding is today. We are, therefore, connected with one another and with everything else around us - energetically. This truth is one of the final teachings that the Indian Philosophies give. *Advaita Vedanta* is the pinnacle of human understanding. Viewed from this perspective, we are not stand-alone separate entities, regardless of how differently we feel right now with our compromised state of 'consciousness'. We are an integral part of this universe - not physically, but energetically. Energy is the invisible scaffolding upon which physicality exists. To exist and function successfully in such an invisibly interconnected environment without making mistakes and to evolve from lower level of consciousness to higher level of consciousness, we need dexterity, agility, knowledge, tools, willpower and training. In short, we need to conduct our everyday lives 'consciously'. Indian Philosophies provide the tool box that gives that much-needed assistance.

Imagine a young adult without a driving license or enough training trying to drive a sophisticated automobile on a busy street. Pain and suffering will be the result of such an attempt. Likewise, we humans are comparable to this young driver, with no understanding of our role, purpose and mechanism of life, trying

to operate our sophisticated human system in an energetically interconnected world. Pain, disease and suffering will be the result. Indian philosophies, founded on Vedic knowledge, give the essential knowledge, training, tools, and a roadmap to live and interact successfully in this interconnected world. This has nothing to do with any religion - This knowledge is a gift to the entire humanity.

Modern day “Quantum Mechanics” is not revealing anything different either. “Theory of Everything” is also the beginning of conceptualization of a sound framework of physics that links together all physical aspects of the universe. String theory had already provided a theoretical framework for all particles, from photons to quarks, stating that particles are in fact one-dimensional strings and not zero-dimensional points. The science on earth is beginning to understand what the Indian Philosophies were talking about for millennia.

Conscious Living

With this much background information, let us now move on to Ethics and its imperativeness in “Conscious Living”. Hereafter, a way of life firmly rooted on this evolutionary path with the purpose and intent of expansion of consciousness will be expressed by the term “Conscious living”. There will be, accordingly, two purposes in our life. One is an outer one and the other is an inner one. Outer one is material welfare and the inner one is expanding one's consciousness. Both should be mutually complementary, which is possible only by “Conscious Living”. Conscious Living is the Golden Key that will open the doors to our further evolution, ending

all suffering, which is the prime objective of all Indian philosophies. Conscious living is not possible without practicing ethics in all walks of our life. Life will give opportunities galore to prove how ethical we have or have not become.

Definition of Ethics

All Indian Philosophies share a common ground when it comes to the concept of Ethics in life. Broadly speaking all Indian philosophies were codified in the period between the 5th century BC and 5th century AD. Ethics is, therefore, a very ancient subject in India. Consequently, various elements of ethics got well established in the Indian psyche directly or indirectly. The rules of conduct prescribed in Yoga Shastra are practically followed by all serious Yoga disciples for thousands of years. However, in the whole body of Indian Philosophies one will not find the word “Ethics”. The Sanskrit word “Dharma” is not equivalent to the English word “Ethics”. The word ‘Dharma’ has several contextual meanings ranging from personal duties to a social order to eternal truth. In the vast volumes of Indian philosophical literature, several words such as “seva” (service), “dana” (giving), “sattva” (purity in attitude and tendencies), “jnana” (knowledge), “samgraha” (comprehensive grasp), “samyama” (self-control), “puniya” (auspiciousness), “karuna” (compassion), “sat” (righteousness), “satya” (truth) etcetera are used to convey the aggregate of the idea contained in the English word “Ethics”. This is because the idea contained in the word “ethics” is not a separate subject in the Indian spiritual context. It is an inseparable integral

part of “Conscious Living”, discussed earlier. Ethical behaviour is a natural outcome of Conscious Living. A fully conscious life is the key in overcoming suffering in life.

In the light of the teachings of Indian Philosophies the definition of Ethics is fairly simple and straightforward. Any activity by means of our thoughts, words or deeds that helps in expanding the consciousness of ours or others is an Ethical action. Any activity by means of our thoughts, words or deeds that stops the expansion of consciousness in us or others is unethical. It is through expansion of consciousness or awareness that one can overcome pain and suffering in life, according to Indian Philosophies. Any activity, therefore, by means of our thoughts, words or deeds that helps in mitigating the suffering of ours or others is an Ethical action. Any activity by means of our thoughts, words or deeds that increases the suffering in ours or others is an unethical action. Observance of ethics in life, therefore, is of paramount importance in the Indian social context.

Ethics in Indian Philosophies

Indian ethics is founded on a strong and deep metaphysical foundation. Ethics is essentially spiritual in nature in Indian philosophies. We have seen that the goal of life is to transcend pain and suffering and move from duality to non-duality and experience the oneness of everything in existence. It is a quantum shift in our level of awareness. The resultant state of existence is technically called “Kaivalya” in Sanskrit in Indian Philosophies. The Kaivalya state is attainable only through spiritual discipline, according to Indian philosophies.

Ethics is one of the primary pre-requisites of this spiritual discipline.

In Indian Ethics, understanding the nature of our existence and our role in it as well as understanding and practicing moralism are the two wings of the spiritual flight leading to this Kaivalya state - the state of liberation from pain and suffering. The former is all about our inner life and the later is all about our outer life. Indian ethics seeks a balance between one’s inner and outer life. Moral laws or code of conduct are prescribed in the Sadhana components of all Indian Philosophies in such a way that it results in individual progress and social welfare at the same time. Due to the holistic non-dual world view of Indian Philosophies, the ultimate goal of ethics and morality is the wellbeing of humanity and not just individual welfare alone. This wellbeing is not limited just for the human kind either. It includes every living being, plants, birds, and animals, every visible and invisible form of life. Such is the foundational concept of Ethics in Indian philosophies. Ethics in Indian Philosophies has two aspects. One is the metaphysical aspect and the other is the physical or personal aspect. The metaphysical aspect of Ethics is concerned about leading a life in full understanding and compliance to the principles of Karma - the science of cause and effect. All six Indian Philosophies accept the existence and operation of the Law of Karma in one voice. The second aspect of Ethics is concerned about leading a personal life in full compliance to the Yama and Niyama principles prescribed in the Ashtanga Yoga. Yama is a set of five rules for our restraints or

self-control. Niyama are a set of another five rules for us to observe in our lives at all times.

Metaphysical Aspect of Ethics - The Law of Karma

All Indian Philosophies accept the immutable Law of Karma. Law of Karma is the general moral law which silently governs the life of the individuals. Law of Karma is the law of the conservation of moral values. Essentially, the Law of Karma states that for every effect there is a cause and for every action there is a reaction. A man performs an action, and he gets the remuneration for it, which is the reaction. If he gets attached to the remuneration part of the action-reaction cycle, he falls victim to his own Karma, because he becomes attached to the result of his action, where it is his attachment to the reactions that is going to motivate his further actions. At times, the remuneration for the action may be pleasant and desirable; at other times it may be unpleasant and undesirable. Consequently, man either loves the results of his actions or hates it. Regardless of whether the experience of the result of the action is positive or negative in nature, the love or hatred generated out of the action is an emotional 'glue' that gives rise to emotional "attachment". This attachment to the results of an action creates bondage and suffering, according to all Indian philosophies.

In the individual contexts in life, it is the individual's emotional attachment to the effect (a result) of a cause (an action) that acts as a 'glue' for triggering further domino effects. Hence, the primary remedy in removing the suffering in life lies in removing the bonding glue and snapping the domino effect of the

cause-effect chain by emotionally disengaging oneself with all effects that one's actions trigger. The secondary remedy lies in doing the right actions (causes) to create the right results (effects). These right actions are ethical actions. The common sayings such as, "what you sow, you reap", "what goes out comes around" etcetera embody this understanding of Karma instinctively passed on from generations to generation. Ethics is all about right thoughts and right actions. Observance of Ethics and emotional disengagement from the results of any action in life eventually liberates us from suffering. It readies us to evolve into the next level of our evolution. That is the significance of ethics in life.

All Indian Philosophies agree in unison that the Law of Karma is the only satisfactory and logical explanation for the existence of suffering in life. Karma is a hugely significant matter and the full impact of which will only be comprehended when we view it in the context of our essential nature discussed earlier. It is through realizing our real nature, understanding the law of Karma, and ethically re-modulating our life in conformity with the laws of Karma that we can stop suffering. It is how important Ethics is in our everyday life.

Ethics in Personal Life - The Yama and Niyama Principles

While the Law of Karma is the general ground-rule for the grand play of life on earth, individuals have ten personal behavioural laws, which are the cornerstones of ethics in Indian philosophies. These ten laws are divided into two groups, namely, *Yama* and *Niyama*, which are clearly laid out in the *Ashtanga* Yoga by Sage *Patanjali*. *Yama* precepts are restraining

in nature, generally defining the boundaries of our relationship with everything outside of us. *Niyama* precepts are for self-observance, generally defining the nature of our attitude with ourselves.

Reaching the highest state of consciousness requires a single-pointed and well-regulated mind that is free from all worldly desires. The necessary conditions for this include willpower, discrimination, full control of the mind, conscious direction of one's potentials towards the desired end, determination to obliterate ego, control over all inharmonious tendencies, and constant awareness of the ultimate goal. Observance of *Yama* and *Niyama* is the tool for preparing such a state of mind.

Yama: consists of five restraints one should impose on oneself in one's relationships with others. They replace the imperfections in us with virtues. They also form a code of moral and social laws that regulate one's interactions with others. These are :

Ahimsa (Non-violence): The literal meaning of the word *Ahimsa* is 'non-injury' or 'non-violence'. In the context of Yoga, the word means not causing any injury to other beings not only just physically, but also it means not causing injury to other beings either in words or in thoughts. It also means flowering of spontaneous love and care for all other beings. Practice of *Ahimsa* expands one's personality and gives stability of mind.

Sathyam (Truthfulness): Truthfulness is essentially non-lying either in thoughts, words or in action. Truthfulness has far reaching connotations. One needs to practice truthfulness at personal level, family level, social level, national

level, global level and at universal level too. This is absolute morality. People often lie without knowing the fact or for fun or for gossip. When this action is repeated it becomes a habit. Indian philosophies inform us that when one becomes absolutely truthful, he gains inner strength and all insecurities of life vanish.

Astheyam (Non-stealing): Absolute morality is practicing non-stealing of anything either in thoughts, words or deeds. It is a way to develop non-attachment and non-possessiveness in life. One should be content and be able to live with whatever one has, without going after desires and its fulfillment by stealing from others. Non-stealing is essential for social stability and security as well as for one's own development.

Brahmacharyam (Sensory Control): The literary meaning of the word "*Brahmacharyam*" is one who lives in *Brahma* Consciousness (The absolute, non dual Consciousness from which everything originates) all the time. However, generally this tenet is widely explained as abstinence from sexual engagements. On the other hand, Sage *Patanjali* used this word in a very broad sense to imply self control in every respect - control of one's all the five senses, not just sexual impulses alone. Absolute morality of **Brahmacharyam** is using all resources only for its intended purposes. Thus, for a stable and safe society as well as for the evolutionary progress for individuals *Brahmacharyam* is essential.

Aparigraham (Non-possessiveness): *Aparigraham* is non-hoarding of possessions and nurturing an attitude of detachment to possessions and becoming free of selfishness. True non-possessiveness is non-attachment to what one possesses. It does not mean that one should not plan for the future. It means all possessions should be need based and without

any emotional attachment linked to it. There will be no desire to gain anything nor would there be any desire to avoid losing anything. "Let it come, whatever comes; let it go, whatever goes" will be the mindset of a person practicing *Aparigraha*.

Niyama: They are the five key codes of self-observance critical for developing and establishing certain habits and an ideal personality. **These are Saucha** (Purity), **Santhosha** (Contentment), **Tapas** (Zeal), **Swadhyaya** (Self-study), **Iswara Pranidhaana** (Surrender to the Ultimate Reality). Observance of **Niyamas** makes one physically, mentally and spiritually strong.

Saucha (Purity): Purity of both body and mind is highly focussed in *Yoga*. While purity of the body gives a healthy body, purity of mind preserves the energy from dissipating, which is required for the expansion of consciousness. We all bathe our body everyday; but do we bathe our mind to remove the after-effects of the various emotional dramas that we play out in life? Lack of mental purity gives rise to psychosomatic diseases and mental disturbances. Purity of body and mind should become a part of one's personality.

Santhosha (Contentment): Contentment gives rise to joyfulness. Contentment is a state of mental tranquility, no matter what the outer circumstances are. Contentment does not mean inactivity; even when one is fully engaged in activities, inner tranquility and joyfulness can be retained, which enhances the quality of the activity one is engaged in. Every moment of one's life is what it is at that given moment - it can never be in any other way at that specific moment. It is far more effective to handle that moment with a tranquil mind and *Santhosha* than handling it with complaints, irritation and the like. Contentment and joyfulness should become a part of one's personality.

Tapas (Zeal): The word 'Tapas' is often mistaken for the absence of the body. It is not so. Any

activity can be a 'Tapas' when it is done with zeal, piety, seriousness, warmth, commitment, intense focus with a pure and balanced mind, with the highest good of mankind held in view. An attitude of *Tapas* in activities strengthens the willpower.

Swadhyaya (Self-study): *Swadhyaya* is a focused life long self-studying of scriptures with the intention of understanding life and our role in it. Learning does not end with the termination of studies at school or college. Learning is a life long process - but that needs to be done with extreme discretion.

Iswara Pranidhaana (Surrender to the Ultimate Reality): The word *Iswara* denotes the Ultimate Reality that generates and sustains this phenomenal world that we live in. It does not necessarily indicate the concept of God as religions commonly use it, although it may also include it depending on the level of understanding of a person involved. *Iswara Pranidhaana* is the act of constantly recognising the presence of the Ultimate Reality in everything and everywhere around us. In addition to the Law of Karma, *Yama* and *Niyama* are the unshakable foundation upon which the entire body of ethics is structured in Indian philosophies. *Yama* and *Niyama* are simple in articulation; but they are far too difficult in practice. Even a small degree of success in this direction will pay rich dividends in reducing one's suffering in life, *Samkhya* says. One has to develop the willpower to start inculcating the *Yama Niyama* practice in one's life. To develop the willpower one has to have the right knowledge in the first place to recognise the need for it. To have the right knowledge, one has to have the desire for the right knowledge to begin with. For this reason, proper upbringing with the inclusion of *Yama* and *Niyama* from childhood is immensely helpful in establishing a society based on ethical behaviour.

Consequences of Being Unethical

Essentially, the Law of Karma states that there is a consequence for every action we do - be it a positive action or a negative action

or a non-action which is also a type of action. If one understands the exact mechanism of how the consequence of an action is brought forth, using that knowledge one can skillfully perform in this world without attracting the consequences. Ethical instructions are the rules handed out for the purpose of not getting caught in the quagmire of action-reaction consequences. Ethical instructions are comparable to a traffic light on a pedestrian crossing. Red light at a pedestrian crossing is a warning to stop and avoid the consequences of crossing the redlight and knocking off a pedestrian. It is upto the driver to accept the warning and stop the vehicle or ignore the warning and cross the red-light attracting the myriad of possible consequences. If a driver is aware of the various possibilities of various consequences of crossing the red-light at a pedestrian crossing, he will surely slow down to stop as he approaches the pedestrian crossing, even without a red signal being there. A driver who is not aware of such possibilities of consequence can stop the vehicle seeing the red signal at a pedestrian crossing. That is the role of ethical instructions in social life.

Samkhya philosophy gives graphic details of the consequences of being unethical. As we know all of us have a certain level of automatic inner knowing of what is ethically correct or incorrect to do in a given situation. We refer to this inner awareness as our voice of “conscience”. The more we listen and act according to the inner voice of “conscience”, the stronger our voice of ‘conscience’ becomes. The more we ignore the inner voice of “conscience”, the weaker it becomes and eventually it becomes so feeble that we can hardly ‘hear’ it or even know its existence.

When we act against our conscience, our conscience is disturbed, resulting in many types of injuries to ourselves, according to *Samkhya*. The first 11 types of Injuries are the ones that affect our mind, our five senses of action (Verbalization, Grasping, Locomotion, Generation, Elimination) and our five senses of cognition (Hearing, Touching, Seeing, Tasting, Smelling). When we act against our conscience, the mind becomes restless, depressed, and inattentive. The resultant mind would lack self-confidence and would indulge in self-hatred. As a result, one would become fearful of themselves and would soon start spreading that fear to others. This is the beginning of self-deception. This is how the mind becomes fragmented when one starts functioning actively against one’s conscience, according to *Samkhya*. As a result of this fragmentation of our mind, our power of discretion is severely compromised.

The next set of injuries as listed below affect our special abilities that humans alone possess.

The ability to guess, and the ability for developing self-knowledge perishes. (Self-knowledge is the knowledge about the core of our existence that we intuitively acquire which is routinely beyond our sense perceptions)

The ability to comprehend the purpose behind a speech and gesture is destroyed.

The ability to learn, think, or interpret a communication is impaired.

The desire and ability to overcome the pain and suffering will disappear.

The ability to give and share with others is destroyed.

The ability to develop and maintain good friendships with others will be lost. It is also the ability to respect others and to recognize their core values and goodness in them. It is the ability to break down the walls of time and connect with other lives.

The next set of injuries are those affecting the Joy and Satisfaction, we derive in life. The *Yoga Sutra* (by Sage *Patanjali*) states that satisfaction resides in the realm of joyfulness. (Chapter 2, Forty-Second Sutra.) It is the antidote to the mind which is restless, depressed, and inattentive. *Yoga Sutra* describes these various types of “satisfaction” (verse 50) that get affected. These affect our character, time and destiny.

The most important point to note here is that we are hurting ourselves by not being Ethical. *Yoga Sutra* also suggests ways to avoid hurting oneself. *Yoga Sutra* advises practicing non-violence. It specifically says not to create internal conflicts by hurting one's own conscience. That is why *Ashtanga Yoga* teaches the rules of *Yama* in the very beginning itself. Why do we hurt ourselves? This is because of our own *Karmic* tendencies that are deeply ingrained in us. They are the remnants of our old experiences or life lessons that are deeply imprinted in our subconscious mind. They often force us to act against our conscience.

Conclusion

Is there a true freedom of choice? The Law of Karma is the Law of Consequentialism. What we sow, we harvest! What goes around

comes around! So, do we have true freedom of choice for our actions in life? Yes, we have the freedom of choice for actions as long as they are ethical actions. No, we do not have the freedom of choice for unethical actions, they result in pain and suffering through the karmic processes; eventually such actions will lead us to self-destruction. It is a purposeful universe that we live in. Creation is not an accidental occurrence. Life is not a punishment. Human life is an opportunity and a tool. Life is not merely for enjoying and embracing experiences that come our way, one after the other; it is a great opportunity for recognizing what is valuable and what is not. It is an opportunity to start living consciously and ethically. The goal of life is to be joyous always, away from pain and suffering - to be joyous without relying on any one object or on any one person. Indian philosophies state aloud and clear that it is possible to do so, here and now, in this life itself.

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