Article

The Relationship between Philosophy and Theology in Inter-War German Catholic Scholarship

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Abstract: This paper provides an introduction to the thought of four German Catholic philosophers of the inter-war era described by Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI as the most influential on his generation of seminarians. The focus of the article is on how they understood the relationship between theology and philosophy.

Keywords: sacred tradition; philosophy; theology; Romano Guardini; Josef Pieper; Peter Wust and Theodor Haecker

1. Introduction

In the autobiographical work *Milestones*, Joseph Ratzinger, who became Benedict XVI, remarked that the philosophical voices that moved his generation of seminarians most directly were those of Romano Guardini, Josef Pieper, Theodor Haecker, and Peter Wust (Ratzinger 1988, pp. 42–43). Each one of these scholars was riding on the crest of a wave of disillusionment with German Idealism. They opposed the sharp separation of philosophy from the theology fostered by Immanuel Kant and those who followed the tradition of Kant. This paper offers a window into the attitudes of this inter-war generation of German Catholic scholars. In each case, the members of this quartet acknowledged the distinction between theology and philosophy but thought that the two should be integrated and not separated into silos. In taking this position, they ran counter not only to the prescriptions of Immanuel Kant and others in the tradition of German Idealism but to the practices in universities world-wide where philosophy and theology are studied in separate departments and rarely brought into relationship with one another.

Since this special edition of *Religions* is focused on the relationship between Theology and Continental Philosophy, this paper will showcase the ideas of this quartet, not because they influenced the thought of Ratzinger/Benedict, but because they represent a particular tradition within the European ideas of the twentieth century that challenged the Kantian paradigm of how philosophy and theology ought to be related, or indeed, not related.

2. Roman Guardini (1885–1968)

The refusal to abide by the sharp separation of the disciplines was strongest in the work of Guardini who accordingly held professorial chairs, neither in philosophy, nor in theology, but in the Catholic *Weltanschauung* (at the University of Berlin from 1923–1939) and in the Christian *Weltanschauung* (at the University of Munich from 1948–1962). These titles allowed him to integrate the disciplines into a "world-view". Ratzinger remarked that 'Kantianism had shattered [Guardini's] childhood faith into pieces' and thus 'his conversion developed into an overcoming of Kant'. (Ratzinger 2013, p. 392).

This orientation ran parallel to movements in French Catholic thought of the time, above all to Maurice Blondel's criticism of 'extrinsicism', that is, the intellectual habit of drawing sharp separations between nature and grace, faith and reason, the secular and the sacred. Henri de Lubac, following Blondel, criticised "two-tiered thinking", the idea that grace is merely a "top up" for nature while faith is merely a "top up" for reason.

This extrinsicist approach to the relationships between the couplets nature and grace, faith and reason, and the secular and the sacred began late in Western history and was usually associated with innovations in the baroque era. In *Freedom, Grace and Destiny*, one of the few of Guardini's anthropological works to be translated into English, he argued that in contrast to the baroque era Catholic thinking and subsequent developments, Christian in the earliest years had what he called a universal view. St. Augustine, for example, drew no methodological boundaries between theology and philosophy, between dogma and its practical application to life. St. Augustine considered the whole of Christian existence as a totality with different inter-related parts. Even St. Thomas Aquinas, who was good at drawing distinctions, still offered a comprehensive synthesis. However, after Aquinas, 'philosophy is separated from theology, empirical science from philosophy, practical instruction from knowledge of reality' (Guardini 1961, p. 9). Guardini acknowledged that 'the effort [of separation] was not unjustified and has resulted in numerous valuable consequences', (presumably in the area of the natural sciences), but nonetheless, 'it has its perilous side because it deepens and solidifies the disintegration of modern man' (Guardini 1961, p. 9).

This disintegration is a major theme of Guardini's *The End of the Modern World*. In this work, he declared that 'no man truly aware of his own human nature will admit that he can discover himself in the theories of modern anthropology—be they biological, psychological, sociological or any other' (Guardini 1998, p. 80). For Guardini, any attempt to explain the human person without reference to grace was inadequate. In *Freedom, Grace and Destiny*, he declared:

> God did not design man as a "natural" being to fulfil his purpose, as do animals, within his natural environment. There is no such thing as the "natural" man. This is an abstraction which the theologian needs to draw certain distinctions and establish relationships. The only real man that exists is the man called to the order of grace. Either he obeys and is then raised above the merely natural level or he refuses obedience and falls below the level of nature into a debasing dependence on evil. "Pure Nature" when applied to man is an imaginary yardstick by which he cannot measure himself. (Guardini 1961, p. 130)

This idea that the concept of pure nature cannot in fact do justice to humanity ran counter to both the trajectory of baroque theology and the principles of German Idealist philosophy. In his *Theology of Karl Barth*, Hans Urs von Balthasar endorsed Guardini's route through this anthropological Scylla and Charybdis style strait. Balthasar wrote:

> To try to bring the truths of creation before the light of the truths of covenant and redemption is a task that neither pure philosophy nor pure theology can perform. It is a job for a "philosophy" that thinks and works in dependence on and as a function of theology. Romano Guardini has often expressly drawn our attention to this "third option" between philosophy and theology and devoted to this the main portion of his life work. (Balthasar 1992, p. 321)

Concomitant with his criticisms of dualistic modes of thinking, Guardini often spoke of the problem with rationalistic–mechanical thinking, an approach he associated with the discipline of mathematics. While it has its use in the study of mathematics, Guardini thought it was not master science, not some kind of 'first philosophy' because it has the effect of making what he called the "concrete living" 'disappear from the field of knowable objects'. It only gives access to one part of the whole of reality. For Guardini, the work of the intellect includes both *ratio* associated with logic, deductive reasoning, and thus mathematics, and *intellectus* associated with intuition. He believed that these two dimensions of the intellect played in concert, not only in the scholarship of the medieval Christian philosophers but also in classical Greek thought. In this context, he remarked:

> How strong were the forces of mystical lived experience and symbolic intuition in ancient Greece! A line runs from the Orphic cults to the Hellenistic mystery religions; the Eleusinian feasts manifestly culminated in a symbolic knowledge supported by a religious transmutation. However, these "mysteries" were not

considered superstition in contradiction with scientific seriousness; instead they stood within the overall framework of what constituted an accomplished personality. And the Greek people themselves did not feel hindered by the intellect in their artistic creations. It is evident that the abstract formation of concepts and the shaping forces of intuition and feeling did not cause any mutual harm here. (Guardini 1997, p. 19)

Against this background, Guardini concluded that 'the clear conceptual structures of a Thomas Aquinas, not to mention a Bonaventure or the Victorines, reveal their true and full meaning and all their energy in tension only when they are understood as the elaboration of the metaphysical or religious lived experience' (Guardini 1997, p. 21). Theirs was an imaginative or contemplative gaze open to the clarity of the concept. However, this field of vision is dramatically narrowed with the arrival of post-Kantian rationalistic-mechanical modes of thought. The task of today is, therefore, to expand the scope of reason by re-legitimising the work of intuition and by allowing each of the sub-disciplines within the humanities and social sciences to be integrated with one another by the "glue" of metaphysical principles.

3. Josef Pieper (1904–1997)

Pieper was based at the University of Münster from 1946 to 1976. Not only did Pieper's ideas inspire a young Joseph Ratzinger but it was Pieper who was responsible for bringing the philosopher Cardinal Wojtyła together with the theologian Cardinal Ratzinger, thus setting up what became a quarter-century partnership between the two men in what is otherwise known as the pontificate of St. John Paul II.

Pieper's field of expertise was described as philosophical anthropology. He had been a devoted student of Guardini. In his own words, 'I sat at your [Guardini's] feet from the time I was sixteen years old until about my twenty-third year—first at Rothenfels on the Main and later in the lecture rooms and seminar of the Berlin University' (Pieper 2015, p. 239). A decisive moment for Pieper was that of attending a lecture Guardini delivered at Rothenfels in 1924. It was on the subject of what Goethe and Aquinas had in common, something Guardini called 'the classical spirit'. Pieper interpreted this spirit as the idea that 'whoever wants to know and do what is good must direct his gaze to the objective world of being; not to his own "convictions", not to "conscience", not to "values", not to the "ideals" and "models" he has chosen. He must forget about his own involvement and look at reality' (Pieper 2015, p. 241). Reality, for Pieper, included the world of sacred tradition.

Where Pieper's project could be distinguished from Guardini's was in the degree of attention he gave to the concept of tradition. In this context E. Christian Kopff, the translator of Pieper's work, *Tradition: Concept and Claim*, drew attention to the influence of Werner Jaeger on Pieper's understanding of the relationship between faith (connected to a sacred tradition) and reason. According to Kopff, 'Pieper believed that "the most exciting conclusion of Jaeger's Aristotle book" [*Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development*, Oxford, 1924], is that "[t]he history of his development shows that behind his metaphysics, too, there lies the *credo ut intelligam*", the principle normally associated with St. Anselm of Canterbury' (Kopff 2008, p. xxv). In practice, this means that the work of philosophy is, at its best, influenced by the great wisdom traditions. This was also the position of the French philosopher Etienne Gilson (1884–1978) who defended the idea of a Christian philosophy against other French Thomists who took the view that philosophy to be philosophy had to be uncontaminated by theological influences (Sadler 2011). Gilson argued that even Descartes could not be understood without reference to the Christian scholasticism that preceded his own philosophical projects. Kopff noted that 'for Pieper, Plato and Aristotle begin from the sacred tradition as they knew it' while 'Thales, the first scientist, was probably inspired by Babylonian sacred tradition. The role of mathematics in science begins with the ancient Greek guru and mystic Pythagoras' (Kopff 2008, p. xxvii). Today, scholars would speak of traditions offering a hermeneutical horizon

for philosophical reflection. Alasdair MacIntyre's understanding of traditions and how they develop and influence philosophical research is consistent with this outlook.

In his entry on Pieper in the forthcoming *Ratzinger Lexikon*, Bernard Schumacher remarked:

> Intent on seeking the truth of human existence as a whole, and also the truth about the ultimate meaning of the world, Pieper denounces the reductionism of reason undertaken by Kant and scientific positivists, who reject the very possibility of any metaphysical rational knowledge and rule out considering faith in the act of philosophizing. The philosopher from Münster, on the contrary, defends an openness of philosophy to theology. (Schumacher 2023)

With Pieper, as with Guardini, there was the same appeal to expand the scope of reason. One of the maxims Pieper followed was that 'freedom acquired by the deliberate play of forgetting is empty'. He took this from the poet-philosopher Wjatscheslaw Iwanow (1866–1949) (Pieper 2015, p. 19). All human reflection, he believed, needed to take place within the horizon of a sacred tradition, a *theios logos*, rather than within a space from which all traditions had been dismissed as unscientific (Pieper 2015, p. 17). In his own words, he explained:

> I do not maintain that the philosopher is forced, in Plato's view, by virtue of the nature of the philosophical act, to have recourse to a theological interpretation of the world. But the thesis is as follows: the philosophical point of departure, as Plato understands it, not only does not require, but even forbids, the exclusion from the outset of super-rational information about the world as a whole. Such an exclusion is unphilosophical—because the philosopher is, to say it again, *per definitionem* concerned with the totality in all its aspects. (Pieper 2015, p. 163)

In another of his works on Pieper, Schumacher concluded the following: 'in opposition to a certain school of interpretation, according to which Greeks are without faith, Pieper points out, for example, that Plato recognizes in myth a holy revelation transmitted by elders and issuing from a divine source which he believes without being any less a philosopher'. (Schumacher 2009, p. 215)

4. Theodor Haecker (1879–1945)

Theodor Haecker, the third on Ratzinger's list of intellectual heroes, was not a professional academic but a translator and public intellectual. He was most well known as the person who translated Kierkegaard from Danish into German and some of the major works of St. John Henry Newman from English into German. He was also a mentor to the students associated with the anti-Nazi White Rose movement, and he is often presented as an example of a German intellectual who took the path of 'internal exile' or 'interior migration' during the Nazi era. In his *Journal in the Night*, a secret diary written during the Nazi era, he wrote:

> I am coming more and more to the conclusion that the history which derives from German idealism—a professorial history—is simply humbug. In that thin, pale atmosphere, personalities and passions evaporate. And no one could tell from reading it, that Satan was the Prince of this world. The idealistic school of historical writing ends, like idealistic philosophy, with 'as if'. (Haecker 1950, p. 109)

Eugen Blessing, author of *Theodor Haecker: Gestalt und Werk*, described Heacker's oeuvre in the following terms:

> It is not so much theology that Haecker wants to impart, but philosophy, or more precisely, philosophical anthropology, but it is his conviction in the exploration of the matter that the human and the Christian, nature and super-nature, are not two incommensurable worlds, since Christ lives in both. Philosophy and theology are not two completely separate disciplines. The supernatural is the

perfection of nature, the super-natural, of course, by which it is said that the natural is not at all a whole of itself, and therefore cannot be grounded out of itself alone: so that apart from the particular in the two areas of philosophy and theology there is also a peculiar common domain of Christian philosophy and of Christian philosophical anthropology. (Blessing 1959, p. 125)

This is very similar to the position taken by Guardini, Pieper, and Ratzinger's *Doktor Vater*, Gottlieb Söhngen. Söhngen spoke of a 'triple use of philosophy' with reference to the terms "*usus philosophicus*", "*usus theologicus*" and "*usus cosmicus*". The first is something like philosophical reflection without reference to a sacred tradition, the second is the use of philosophy to aid in theological reflection (the notion of philosophy as the handmaiden to theology), and the third is a kind of integration of reason and wisdom. All four philosophers listed by Ratzinger as influential for seminarians of his generation tended to work in this integrated field and focused their attention on philosophical anthropology (Söhngen 1978, p. 945).

Where Pieper was influenced by what he regarded as Plato's openness to sacred tradition, Haecker was inspired by what he perceived to be Virgil's anticipation of Christian *humanitas* in the figure of Aeneus. In his *Wahrheit und Leben*, Haecker declared that 'Virgil was not a prophet like Isaiah, he did not prophesy the birth of the Savior like the angels and the patriarchs and the prophets. . .but he designed a mythical material that had relation to the eternal truth of the angels and patriarchs and prophets' (Haecker 1930, p. 59). According to Haecker, Virgil's works evinced an *anima naturaliter christiana.* Haecker gathered elements of classical mythology, Hebraic and Christian revelation, and philosophy and wove them into a symphonic world-view. This *Christian humanitas* was then pitted against the culture of an impious German Idealism. What he perceived to be Kant's lack of piety had opened the tradition of German Idealism to the stupidity that was the neo-pagan "mythology" of fascism. An openness to something greater than the human self is the fruit of a pious disposition. Closure to the same narrows both the scope of reason and the possibilities for the world of culture.

5. Peter Wust (1884–1940)

Wust was a professor of philosophy at the University of Münster from 1930–1939. He was born in Rissenthal in Saarland, the eldest of eleven children. His parents hoped he would become a priest but he lost his faith when he was 21 and did not recover it until he was almost 40. He was outspoken in his opposition to fascism but, unlike others who opposed the Nazi regime, he was not executed or imprisoned because he died from cancer in 1940.

Although Wust was described by Benedict XVI as one of the four most influential philosophers for the Bavarian seminarians of his generation, his Wikipedia entry begins with the statement: 'Peter Wust was a German existentialist philosopher who is unknown in the English realm, for his works have never been translated into English to this day'. There was, however, one short essay by Wust titled "The Crisis of the West", published in English in 1931 while Bloomsbury Press is currently preparing to publish an English translation of Wust's *Ungewissheit und Wagnis* (Wust 1937) (Uncertainty and Risk). This translation should be available in 2024.

Wust had planned to write what he called a triptych or three major works. The middle panel of the triptych was *Die Dialektik des Geists* (*The Dialectic of the Spirit*) published in 1928, the panel 'on the right' was *Naivität und Pietät* (*Naivete and Piety*), first published in 1925 and reprinted in 2010, and the panel 'on the left' was to be *Die Philosophie des Diabolischen* (*The Philosophy of the Diabolical*). This panel on the left was never completed. A manuscript of lectures delivered in 1938–1939 on existentialism was posthumously published in 1947 and *Gestalten und Gedanken; Rückblick auf mein Leben,* his autobiography, was published posthumously in 1950. Between 1963 and 1969, Regensberg Verlag published Wust's collected works (*Gesammelte Werke*), edited by Wilhelm Vernekohl in 10 volumes.

Wust was at war with skepticism and he wrote that 'the interruption of dogmatic slumber, of which Kant spoke so enthusiastically, was ultimately nothing other than the beginning of the feverish dreams of skepticism, in a constantly troubled intermediate state that can be described as neither wakefulness nor sleep' (Wust 1927, p. 138). Moreover, he declared that Kant

> Allowed the tiny flicker…of our finite "ratio" to completely extinguish. With regard to the philosophical question as to the existence of God, he placed knowledge at zero in order to create room for faith alone, faith blind to reason. Thereby, without any doubt, he slipped into the error of absolute irrationalism of decision. (Wust 1937, p. 176)

Wust described his first major work *Auferstehung der Metaphysik* (The Resurrection of Metaphysics), published in 1920, as an attempt to clear the way for metaphysical thinking that had long been subjected to obstacles created by the prejudices of Kantianism (Wust 2010, p. vi). In a preface to a later work, *Naivität und Pietät* (1925), he reflected on the moment of his turn to metaphysics:

> So, all of a sudden, I do not know how or where from, the basic theme of the metaphysics of the spirit stood before my soul with full clarity, as the result of a long, lonely, agonizing search and struggle. But it now stood before my soul with all the severity and severe consequences that are given by themselves with the principle of the spirit. For it was now obvious to me that the alternative of nature and spirit, when the concept of the absolute comes into consideration, must be regarded as the most significant question of principle in all speculative reflection. If, as I now recognized, the spirit principle has the right of priority in this alternative of nature and spirit, then I said to myself that the *eidos* of the spirit must have an absolute culmination point beyond which its essential perfection cannot really be increased, because it is completely fulfilled in it. With that, however, I had finally gained the insight that in philosophy everything revolved around the crucial question of whether *pantheism or theism* could have the last word in the dispute of opinions about the ultimate questions of humanity. (Wust 2010, p. xi)

Wust came to the further conclusion that 'either the theistic way of thinking triumphs and with it philosophy as philosophy triumphs, or else pantheism triumphs and with it philosophy as absolute non-philosophy' (Wust 2010, p. 23).

Not only did Wust reject the Kantian separation of theology from philosophy, but he also rejected the Kantian separation of intellect and will. Consistent with St. John Henry Newman, he recognised the heart as a point of integration of all the faculties of the soul. In what he called his metaphysical anthropology, he rhetorically asked, 'what would remain of the spirit's volitional nature if all mental activity were merely a spectatorship and adjudication of the workings of two alien powers that only penetrated the human being from outside'? (Wust 2010, p. 60). Moreover, he declared:

> The living God of love and of grace does not apply Himself with His eternal call principally to the intellect, but rather above all to the "Heart", as the essential core of the human person. He turns Himself to that central "*intimum mentis*" within which—upon the boundary line between the unconscious and the conscious, the actual decisions of life always come to pass; those existential decisions which were born out of the totality of human nature. And thus it is profoundly sensible, if, precisely within the realm of the religious certainty of God, the intellect—which so easily tends to strike out against the thorn of love—is transferred into the deepest darkness that ultimately can be experienced within an existential situation. (Wust 1937, p. 212)

This anthropology is amplified in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, who was influenced by both Wust and Newman. In an essay on human dignity written in the late 1960s,

Ratzinger wrote that 'the organ by which God can be seen cannot be a non-historical "*ratio naturalis*" which just does not exist, but only the *ratio pura*, ie. *purificata* or, as Augustine expresses it echoing the gospel, the *cor purum*' ("Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God") (Ratzinger 1969, p. 155). Augustine understood that 'the necessary purification of sight takes place through faith (Acts 15: 9) and through love, at all events not as a result of reflection alone and not at all by man's own power' (Ratzinger 1969, p. 155). In later publications, Ratzinger would emphasise that love and reason are the twin pillars of all reality (Ratzinger 2003, p. 183).

The fact that the heart is seen to be a place of the integration of the various faculties of the soul, which are not isolated from one another, raises the question of how Wust sees the relationship between the work of the intellect that has been informed by revelation and that which has not. In this context, he spoke of a 'narrow bridle path between faith and disbelief' (Wust 1937, p. 91) and made the following comment:

> Natural reason is indeed capable, by virtue of the natural luminosity lent unto it, of pressing forth into the depths of the mysteries of the world. Yet in these final depths it then suffers the mysterious catastrophe of uncertainty in the midst of all the brightly streaming certainty of rational evidence. However, this mysterious death of its uncertainty amidst certainty need not necessarily drive it to spiritual suicide. It ought only to die in conformity with the natural side of its essence, in the uncertainty before the ultimate mystery of the world, in order to then celebrate in the supernatural certainty of faith its resurrection into a completely new clarity as a force of reason purified in the deepest intellectual destitution and now supernaturally exalted. (Wust 1937, p. 51)

This would seem to be a good discursive account of what Ratzinger called 'purified reason'. Wust also endorsed the Thomistic notion that the human person is created with a "*potentia obedientialis*" (obediential potential) for a relationship with God. He acknowledged that human persons may refuse to activate this potential, or they may let it lie dormant and atrophy. Nonetheless, even if a person lives in an irreligious manner, Wust believed that such irreligiosity still belongs to the realm of the religious. The realm of the natural, in other words, is also the realm of the religious. As he said, *Homo philosophus* and *homo religiosus* exist in a relationship of co-relativity or correlation. For Wust, a complete divorce between the two, as Max Scheler had attempted in his work *On the Eternal in Man*, was not possible (Wust 1927, p. 197).

Referring to the relationship between the will and the intellect, Wust suggested that 'within the depths of the person there unfolds, amidst the struggle between chivalrous high-mindedness and egoistic, mistrustful low-mindedness, a pure combat of will; either for the "yes" or for the "no"' (Wust 1937, p. 69). The chivalrous high-minded "Yes" demands piety, one of the classical Roman virtues, as Haecker had also emphasised. Wust noted that God reveals himself to children and to those pious souls who have preserved their simplicity of heart.

Within his philosophical anthropology, Wust also spent some considerable time on a discussion of what he called the "boundary situations" for the human person. These boundary situations are the three big issues of the religious realm of life: (i) the certainty of God's existence, (ii) the certainty of revelation, and (iii) the certainty of personal salvation. When approaching the boundaries, the person can either 'break himself in defiant egotism—or in loving surrender to the inscrutable, transcendent power that has nourished him in this darkness, be purified for the further reception of grace' (Wust 1937, p. 195). Wust concluded his anthropological vision with the statement:

> The living God of religion is the God of faith, of love and of grace. Through the medium of the conscience within the deepest core of the soul, man is addressed by this living God and, indeed, he is addressed by Him in a manner which nothing else in the entire world can simulate. Within this inner state of being-addressed,

man experiences a personal living counterpart: a 'Thou" with which he as a 'self"
knows himself to be in mysterious communication. (Wust 1937, p. 198)

There are strong parallels between Wust's conclusion here and the personalist philoso-
phy of the Jewish scholar Martin Buber, whose work has also been the subject of praise by
Joseph Ratzinger and Ratzinger's colleague and mentor Hans Us von Balthasar. Ratzinger
and Balthasar saw Buber as an example of someone who was trying to bring to the table of
twentieth-century philosophical issues the wisdom of his own theological tradition.

6. Conclusions

The quartet of mid-twentieth-century German Catholic philosophers surveyed above
were all seeking to escape from what they perceived to be the straitjacket of German
Idealism. They wanted to bring philosophy and theology and even elements of classical
mythology to play in concert in order to foster a humanism that would affirm the highest
wisdom of the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Christians. Included in this affirmation
was a defence of the notion of truth, including what the Greeks called "logos", along with
the good and the beautiful, and an affirmation of piety as a virtue required for the sound
operation of the intellect. As a consequence, they all found themselves in opposition to the
ideology and culture of fascism, and they all regarded the tradition of German Idealism as
a woefully inadequate weapon to wield against German neo-paganism.

Today the scope of reason has not merely been narrowed, but as part of a generational
reaction against the intellectuality of the tradition of German Idealism, reason itself is now
regarded as something dangerous, even toxic. For those who stand on the side of reason
and truth, and truth's partners' goodness and beauty, and who prefer Virgilian piety to the
Nietzschean will to power, the largely untranslated works of this quartet offer a field of
treasure to be explored by Anglophone scholars. They represent one particular approach
to the relationship between theology and Continental philosophy that is not all that well
known within the Anglosphere.

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