



Some Remarks on Averroes' *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* Book Alpha Meizon

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Research Article

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Abstract: Averroes, considered to be the greatest Aristotelian commentator in the Middle Ages, has written three different types of commentary on almost all the works of this great philosopher: short, middle and long. These commentaries have been translated into Latin and Hebrew in the early period, and profoundly influenced both Medieval Europe and Jewish thought for centuries. The effect of Averroes in the West was to spread the whole of Europe under the name of Latin Averroism. The text what you have consists of some remarks about the translation of the commentary on the 'Book Alpha Meizon', the second book of Averroes' *Tafsīr Mā Ba'd at-Ṭabī'a*.

Keywords: Aristotle, Averroes, *Metaphysics*, Long Commentary, the Book Alpha Meizon, linguistical aporias, conception.

Introduction

This paper aims at explaining about the commentary on the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’, the second (in original Greek, first) book of Averroes’ *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*.¹ The only Arabic manuscript of the work is found in the Leiden University Library.² The Arabic text of the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’ used by Averroes has been translated by Naẓīf b. Yumn (second half of the tenth century). This book begins from A.5, 987a6, that is, at the end of Section 5. Neither does the translation of the first five sections of this book nor the commentaries written on them find. Besides, there are no missing parts of the great commentary in the Latin and Hebrew translations. Walzer held that the beginning of the Book Alpha Meizon was no longer available in twelfth-century Spain.³ According to Bertolacci, Naẓīf’s translation was to complete probably missing in Ustāt’s translation.⁴ When Ibn al-Nadīm narrated the men who translated philosophical works of Aristotle into Arabic, he did not mention Naẓīf’s translation.⁵

¹ Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1990). Expressions in the work such as [T] and [C] that are located in the translation are made up of the first letters of the Latin terms ‘Textus’ and ‘Commentus’, and are set by Maurice Bouyges. The first of them points to the Arabic text of *Metaphysics* and the latter to Averroes’ comments. It was used symbols like [a], [b], [c] and so on for Averroes’ citation to Aristotle, and [A] to refer to the relevant part of the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’. Expression [987a...] have been sent to numbering in the text of Aristotle made by Immanuel Bekker.

² *MS Leiden*, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Or. 2074. For presentation to MSS, see Maurice Bouyges, “Notice”, Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, xxvii ff.

³ Richard Walzer, “On the Arabic Versions of Books A, α and Λ of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958), 217.

⁴ Amos Bertolacci, “On the Arabic Translations of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 15 (2005), 249; Bouyges, “Notice”, lvi. Related to the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’, see Bertolacci, “On the Arabic Translations of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, 253ff.; Bertolacci, “The Arabic Version of the Book Alpha Meizon of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and the Testimony of MS. Bibl. Apostolica Vaticana, Ott. Lat. 2048”, *Les Traducteurs au Travail. Leur Manuscrits et Leur Méthodes*, ed. J. Hamesse (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2001), 173ff.; Walzer, “On the Arabic Versions of Books A, α and Λ of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*”, 217ff.

⁵ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig: Verlag von FV Vogel, 1872), I 244 and II 109.

1. Averroes' *Tafsīr* and the Book Alpha Meizon

Arabic *Metaphysics* (ما بعد الطبيعة) begins with the Book Alpha Elatton (مقالة الألف الصغرى) instead of the Book Alpha Meizon (مقالة الألف الكبرى). The first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is attributed to Theophrastus by Albert the Great. He claimed that the statement "All men by nature desire to know"⁶ at the beginning of *Metaphysics* did belong to Theophrastus and this book was not crucial in Arabic translation, as exemplified al-Fārābī for this.⁷ Albert's thesis does not include any evidence; on the contrary, the most works on *Metaphysics* in Arabic philosophical tradition mention either the Book Alpha Meizon or its content. Furthermore, Theophrastus' metaphysical work is available in Greek, Arabic and Latin,⁸ and when we compare it with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, it seems that this cannot belong to Theophrastus. Thereinafter we are going to discuss this by quoting passages from Avicenna and al-Shahrastānī. Also, it shows us that *The Book on the Science of Metaphysics* by Abdallaṭīf al-Baghdādī opposed to this claim.⁹

The subject of generation and corruption is frequently

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, trans. David Ross, *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. David Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-52), VIII, A.1, 980a21.

⁷ Albert the Great, *Analytica Posteriora*, ed. Augusti Borgnet, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia* (Parisiis: Apud Ludovicum Vives, 1890), I,t2, II 22. In his treatise al-Fārābī does not mention the Book Alpha Meizon. This is because al-Fārābī probably had not a translation of this book. See al-Fārābī, *Fī Aghrāḍ al-Ḥakīm fī Kullī Maqāla min al-Kitāb al-Mawsūm bi al-Ḥurūf*, ed. Friedrich Dieterici, *Alfārābī's Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1890), 36.

⁸ Dimitri Gutas published it including in Greek text and Medieval Arabic translation, English translations of Greek and Arabic texts with introduction, commentaries and glossaries, as well as the Medieval Latin translation, and with an excursus on Graeco-Arabic technique. Theophrastus, *On First Philosophy (Known as His Metaphysics)*, ed. and trans. Dimitri Gutas (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁹ For the commentary on the Book Alpha Meizon, see Abdallaṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb fī 'Ilm Mā Ba'd aṭ-Ṭabī'a*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, *Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī Bearbeitung von Buch Lambda der Aristotelischen Metaphysik* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976), 97-100. Also for Arabic *Metaphysics* and Abdallaṭīf al-Baghdādī's metaphysical work, see Cecilia Martini Bonadeo, 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī's Philosophical Journey: From Aristotle's *Metaphysics* to the 'Metaphysical Science' (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

emphasized in the Book Alpha Meizon. Even though Aristotle argues that this subject belongs to natural science, he covers this issue in his *Metaphysics* because Ancient Greek natural philosophers made subject ‘things that come-to-be and pass-away’ for metaphysics. Whereas coming-to-be and passing-away represent potentiality, metaphysics does actuality.¹⁰ For Aristotle, there is a big difference between being ‘potential’ (δυναμεις / بالقوة) and being ‘actual’ (ἐνεργεια / بالفعل). According to him, while the actual is what comes-to-be and passes-away, the potential is not.

It is necessary to be coming-to-be for a passing-away, and also for coming-to-be an act, namely motion. For this reason, while the matter is potential in itself, the things that come-to-be from the matter are the actual. Because, as Avicenna points out, something is not the potential in every respect, that is, there is no potency for what is impossible to be actual.¹¹ For Aristotle, actuality is more superior qualification than potentiality, because potentiality makes possible ‘not being’ at the same time. However, since the actual always represents the existent, and since eternality and necessity require to actuality, the actuality regarding Aristotle already holds itself to be potential in itself. According to him, actuality is prior in a stricter sense also; for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially.¹²

Aristotle says that Empedocles’ views of ‘love’ (φιλία / محبة) and ‘hate’ (νεῖκος / عداوة) are less contradictory than other philosophers in regards to reasons and principles.¹³ Empedocles put to love and hate the four elements and tried to explain coming-to-be and passing-away of beings in the universe by mingling and

¹⁰ Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, C.1a, I 56.

¹¹ Avicenna, *al-Ilāhiyyāt min Kitāb ash-Shifā’*, ed. Ḥasanẓādah al-Āmulī (Qum: Maktab al-Ilām al-Islāmī, 1997-8), 189. See *as-Simā’ at-Ṭabī’i*, ed. Muhittin Macit and Ferruh Özpılavcı (Istanbul: Litera Yayıncılık, 2004-5), I 99.

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, Θ.8, 1050b6-8. For an exhaustive explanation, see David Ross, *Aristotle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 183-5.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, B.4, 1000b12-7; Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, C.15t, I 256.

alteration of these elements. Aristotle mentions in his *On Generation and Corruption* that Empedocles does not accept any form of coming-to-be and passing-away except for mingling and alteration of the elements.¹⁴ Birth and death also occur in that way.

Averroes uses the word 'muthul' (مثل), commonly used in Arabic in acknowledgment of Greek 'forms' (εἶδος / ἰδέα), in the sense of 'prototypes', and suggests the term 'şuwar' (صور) for Plato's forms. Averroes knows that Plato used mathematical things borrowed from Pythagoreans as an intermediate entity between the ideal world and the real world, and makes a distinction between forms and mathematical objects. It is also seen that the same sensitivity is observed in Latin translation and that the word 'forma' was used instead of forms and 'exemplaria' instead of prototypes.¹⁵

2. Some Linguistical Aporias in the Book Alpha Meizon

Translations made in the early period had problems linguistically. Since the Greek philosophical concepts have not yet formed in Arabic, translations were carried out in ordinary language, and sometimes the usage of this terminology caused to some mistakes. For this reason, in some translations, Greek concepts were transferred to Arabic as they are and Arabicized. For instance, in the first translations made from Greek into the Arabic language, the term 'element' was translated into Arabic as 'uṣṭukus' (أسطقس) instead of 'unṣur' (عنصر) in the form of the Greek word 'stoikheos' (στοιχείοσ).

By the term 'scientific philosophy' (الفلسفة العلمية), Averroes refers to the manner of 'apodictic' / 'burhānī' (ἀπόδεικτική / برهانی) based on clear evidence. In Latin, it was used 'philosophia

¹⁴ Aristotle, *De Generatione et Corruptione*, trans. H. H. Joachim, *The Works of Aristotle*, II, 314b5-15.

¹⁵ *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum Libri XIII cum Averrois Cordubensis in Eosdem Commentariis*, trans. Michael Scot, *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis*, vol. VIII (Venetiis: Apud Iunctas, 1562), T.50, 27G.

speculatia' correctly.¹⁶ Again, the term 'forms' (εἶδη) in Greek is translated into Arabic as 'anwā' (أنواع), which means 'species'. Although this translation is sometimes accurate, it can cause wrongness in some places. Much as the Arabic translation used the predicate 'genus' for Plato's *Form of the Good* and 'species' for other forms, because of participating from that Form and coming under it for each of them, this distinguishing based upon the genus-species distinction in the logic cause not to be understood. Again, Averroes uses the expression 'mathematical species' (الأنواع التعليمية) instead of 'mathematical objects' (τὰ μαθηματικά). Regarding this passage, Avicenna's expression 'mathematical things' (الأمور التعليمية) states the matter more accurately.¹⁷

Arabic translation of *Metaphysics* used by Averroes is not a variance with Aristotle's text sometimes. For example, the name Cratylus in the original text, who is the teacher and friend of Plato, was mistakenly written Democritus in Arabic translation.¹⁸ Passages quoted by al-Shahrastānī are correctly called Cratylus.¹⁹ Again, regarding Socrates, it is stated that he is not interested in the universals. In Aristotle's text, however, it is mentioned that Socrates seeks after the universals in ethical matters.²⁰ Averroes, on the other hand, in his *Short Commentary on the Metaphysics* says that in the time of Socrates, philosophers maintained that

¹⁶ *Aristotelis Metaphysicorum Libri XIII cum Averrois Cordubensis in Eosdem Commentariis*, T.5, 7F. For Aristotle's theory of demonstration, see Ali Tekin, *Varlık ve Akıl: Aristoteles ve Fârâbî'de Burhan Teorisi* (Istanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2017).

¹⁷ Averroes, *Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd at-Ṭabî'a*, C.6g, I 69; Avicenna, *al-Ilāhiyyāt min Kitāb ash-Shifā'*, 320. See also Bertolacci, "On the Arabic Translations of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", 262.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, A.6, 987a33. Averroes, *Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd at-Ṭabî'a*, T.5, I 63.

¹⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa an-Niḥal*, ed. William Cureton (London: The Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-6), II 288. For a comparative table of the copies of al-Shahrastānī and Naẓîf with the original text, see Bertolacci, "On the Arabic Translations of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*", 264-6.

²⁰ "Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions." Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, A.6, 987b1-4.

there were eternal and universal intelligible and taught that they existed outside the soul in the same way as they existed in the soul, yet simultaneously they maintained that these intelligible were the principles of sensible substance.²¹ Alexander of Aphrodisias said that Socrates occupied himself with ethical questions and seeking the universal, he paid no attention to natural things, but he was the first to concern himself with definitions.²² Thomas Aquinas remarked that Socrates was unwilling to make any investigation into the nature of physical things, but only busied himself with moral matters. And in this field, he first began to investigate what the universal is, and to insist upon the need for definition.²³ Suárez claimed that Socrates applied “what things there are above us, don’t matter to us”. And he would also counsel “search not things higher than yourself”.²⁴

One of the greatest fault in the translation is to translate the ‘earliest philosophy’ (πρώτη φιλοσοφία) at the end of the Book Alpha Meizon as the ‘first philosophy’ (الفلسفة الأولى) namely metaphysics. Aristotle here means the natural philosophy in the early period, but the translator, Naẓīf b. Yumn, misunderstands this conception, afterward, the translator mistranslates the statement onward.²⁵ Accordingly, this leded Averroes to make a misleading comment. But Averroes could not take care of the use of the term ‘first philosophy’ that Aristotle gave the name of ancient philosophy worked by the first philosophers or physicians. It is bizarre for a philosopher like Averroes to be deceived

²¹ Averroes, *Talkhīṣ Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, ed. ‘Uthmān Amīn (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1958), 51. Also for English translation, see *On Aristotle’s “Metaphysics”: An Annotated Translation of the So-Called Epitome*, trans. Rüdiger Arnzen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 70.

²² Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Aristotle’s Metaphysics 1*, trans. W. E. Dooley (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 77.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), I 1.10.152.

²⁴ Francisco Suárez, *A Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics or A Most Ample Index to the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John P. Doyle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 1.q19, 29.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, A.10, 993a15. Cf. Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, T.50, I 160.

to such a translation, although he knows Presocratic philosophers could not improve on the material cause. Averroes repeated this kind of misconceptions in the “Proemium” to the ‘Book Lambda’, by explaining the book names of Metaphysics, such as used the ‘Book Iota’ (Yā’) instead of the ‘Book Kappa’ (Kāf).²⁶

3. Sample Passages Concerning the Subject

3.1. Some concepts from Averroes’ commentaries on the *Metaphysics* (Arabic and English)

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I
55

لما كانت القدماء الأول من الطبيعيين قد اتفقوا على أن المبدأ لجميع المتكونات واحد من الأسطقات الأربع، فبعضهم كان يضع أنه النار، وبعض أنه الهواء، وبعض أنه الماء، ما عدا الأرض.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I
56

وإنما قال “...كأنه نوع هيولي...” لأن الهيولي بالقوة وهذه بالفعل، ولأن الهيولي بالحقيقة هي التي لا تكون ولا تفسد، وكل واحد من هذه كائن فاسد، وهؤلاء لم يشعروا من الأسباب إلا بالسبب الذي على طريق الهيولي.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.6a, I
66-7

اعتقد أن المعاني التي توجد لأشخاص نوع نوع واحدة بعينها، وهي حدود الأشياء هي أمور

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I
55

Since the first ancients of the naturalists had agreed that the principle of all the existents was one of the four elements, some of them used to put it as fire, some as air, and some as water, except the earth.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I
56

He said “...like the material species...”, since the matter is potential while these [principles] are actual, and since yet the matter, in fact, does not come-to-be and pass-away while each of these [principles] come-to-be and pass-away. They did not comprehend causes except for material cause.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.6a, I
66-7

He believed that the meanings singly existed for individuals of

²⁶ Averroes, *Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a*, III Proe., 1393-1405.

ضرورية خارج النفس، وسماها صورا ومثلا أي هي صور للأشياء المحسوسة ومثل للطبيعة.

Talkhīṣ Mā Ba'd aṭ-Ṭabī'a, 51

فلما كان في زمن سقراط ورأوا أن ههنا معقولات أزلية، قالوا بوجودها خارج النفس على الجهة التي هي عليها في النفس، ورأوا أنها مع ذلك مبادئ الجوهر المحسوس.

each species are the same, and they are the definitions of things outside the soul necessarily and called them forms and examples, that is, they are forms of the sensible things and examples of nature.

Talkhīṣ Mā Ba'd aṭ-Ṭabī'a, 51

In the time of Socrates, they maintained that there are eternal intelligible and held that their beings are outside the soul in the same way as they exist in the soul, yet simultaneously they maintained that these are the principles of sensible substance.

3.2. Comparison of Ross' translation of *Metaphysics* with Naẓīf's Arabic translation (incorrect translations)

Metaphysics, 987a29-b2 (Naẓīf)

[Tafsīr Mā Ba'd aṭ-Ṭabī'a, T.5]

After the systems aforementioned existed the philosophy of Plato, whose philosophy was following those [philosophers] in most respects, but in some, his philosophy was agreeing on the Italians. The first thing that occurred after Democritus was the views of Heraclitean philosophers about the fact that all the other things have a constant flux and there is no knowledge about them; these opinions he held even later. As for Socrates, he spoke of only ethical matters, not something of the uni-

Metaphysics, 987a29-b4 (Ross)

[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]

After the systems we have named came the philosophy of Plato, which in most respects followed these thinkers, but had peculiarities that distinguished it from the philosophy of the Italians. For, having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), these views he held even in later years. Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the

versal nature...

[In Arabic translation b3-4 is missing]

Metaphysics, 987b14-6 (Nazîf)

[Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd at-Tabî'a, T.6]

But they disputed about the sensible things and the mathematical species, saying of the latter that they are intermediate between those things. Some of the sensible things are permanent and non-moving, the species that [pradicate] to many things. The species is that thing existed for each thing.

Metaphysics, 988a8-15 (Nazîf)

[Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd at-Tabî'a, T.9]

He has used two causes that of the essence of a thing and the material cause. The species are the cause of essence of all other things. As for the species, [their cause is] the one; and what the matter is of which the species are predicated on them, and of which is asserted in the species. For the essence of the dyad is great and small. Again, he has assigned the cause of the good and the praised to the elements, one to each other. Those are what we said in the investigation actualized about the firsts.

world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions.

Metaphysics, 987b14-6 (Ross)

[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]

Further, besides sensible things and forms he says there are the objects of mathematics, which occupy an intermediate position, differing from sensible things in being eternal and unchangeable, from forms in that there are many alike, while the form itself is in each case unique.

Metaphysics, 988a8-15 (Ross)

[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]

He has used only two causes, that of the essence and the material cause (for the forms are the causes of the essence of all other things, and the one is the cause of the essence of the forms); and it is evident what the underlying matter is, of which the forms are predicated in the case of sensible things, and the one in the case of forms, viz. that this is a dyad, the great and the small. Further, he has assigned the cause of good and that of evil to the elements, one to each of the two, as we say some of his predecessors sought to do.

Metaphysics*, 993a15-6 (Nazîf)*[*Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd aţ-Tabî'a*, T.50]**

It is worth for the first philosophy to investigate the view of all things because it contains to all principles and on what the first is.

Metaphysics*, 993a15-6 (Ross)*[*The Works of Aristotle*, VIII]**

For the earliest philosophy is, on all subjects, like one who lips, since it is young and in its beginnings.

3.3. Comparison of Averroes' *Tafsîr* with other books (Averroes vs. Avicenna and al-Shahrastānî)

Averroes, *Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd aţ-Tabî'a*, C.31d, I 125

He means that the substances of this separated forms are not one of the substances of these sensible things. Because, those [forms] are the eternal, while these [sensible things] come-to-be and pass-away. Thus, it is not possible to be reasons for them, neither have the forms nor the efficient causes.

Averroes, *Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd aţ-Tabî'a*, C.6g, I 69

Some people opposed to the Heraclitean doubt that disappearance of knowledge about sensible things and things in the sensible that are the mathematicals.

***Metaphysics*, 987a32-b2 (Nazîf) [*Tafsîr Mâ Ba'd aţ-Tabî'a*, T.5]**

The first thing that occurred after Democritus was the views of Heraclitean philosophers about the fact that all the other things have a constant flux and there is no

Avicenna, *al-Ilâhiyyât min Kitâb ash-Shifâ'*, IV.3, 189

As for the particular things which comes-to-be and passes-away, on what they said, the potency in them is before the action in time; and as for the universal or eternal things that do not pass-away, if particular, they do not advance potential things at all.

Avicenna, *al-Ilâhiyyât min Kitâb ash-Shifâ'*, VII.2, 321

As for the mathematicals, in his opinion, they are the meanings between the forms and the material things.

al-Shahrastānî, *Kitâb al-Milal wa an-Nihâl*, II 288

Aristotle, in the Treatise Alpha Meizon of the Book *Metaphysics* reported that Plato frequented Cratylus during his youth, and wrote down at his dictation what

knowledge about them; these opinions he held even later. As for Socrates, he spoke of only ethical matters, not something of the universal nature...

[In Arabic translation b3-4 is missing]

he related from Heraclitus namely that all the sensible things are corruptible, and knowledge does not embrace them. Then, after him, he frequented Socrates, whose doctrine was to seek definitions without investigating the nature of sensible and other things.

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