EXAM INTEGRITY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING EXAMINATION MALPRACTICE IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Research Problem: *Exam integrity has become a pressing issue in Nigerian secondary schools, where persistent examination malpractice undermines the credibility of assessments and weakens confidence in academic qualifications. The central concern is the erosion of moral responsibility among students, teachers, parents, and examination bodies, which sustains unethical practices in the system.*

Methods/Theory: *The paper adopts a philosophical approach situated within the framework of philosophical ethics and its relevance to educational reform. Using conceptual and normative analysis, it draws on Kantian ethics and virtue ethics to examine the moral duties of stakeholders and the cultivation of virtues such as honesty, accountability, and integrity as essential to upholding exam integrity.*

Results: *Findings show that malpractice stems not only from individual moral failings but also from systemic weaknesses, including ineffective institutional structures, societal pressures, and weak enforcement of policies. The analysis highlights that promoting moral responsibility and strengthening institutional practices are vital to reducing malpractice and restoring public trust.*

Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study advances a philosophical ethics framework linking moral reasoning to educational policy and reform. It*

establishes a foundation for integrating ethical theory into institutional practices that safeguard the integrity of examinations.

Recommendation: *The paper recommends embedding moral education into school curricula, enforcing examination regulations consistently, and promoting ethical role models. These steps are crucial for cultivating integrity and sustaining exam credibility in Nigerian schools.*

Introduction

Examination malpractice has become one of the most critical challenges facing the Nigerian secondary school system, threatening the integrity of education and undermining public confidence in academic credentials. The credibility of any educational system rests heavily on the reliability of its examinations, as these assessments determine not only academic progression but also access to higher education and employment opportunities. In Nigeria, however, repeated incidents of examination malpractice—ranging from impersonation and cheating with electronic devices to collusion with supervisors—have raised doubts about the moral foundation of learning. Despite government regulations and interventions by examination bodies, the problem persists, suggesting that the crisis is not only administrative but also fundamentally ethical, requiring sustained reflection through the lens of philosophical ethics.

Literature on examination malpractice has grown over the past decades, reflecting what may be termed an invested pyramid of perspectives. At the foundational level, scholars such as Olatunbosun (2019) and Alutu and Aluede (2006) highlight the immediate causes, including poor study habits, inadequate preparation, and the pressure to achieve high grades. At the structural level, Ogunwuyi and Okeke (2020) draw attention to weak institutional enforcement and the complicity of some examination officials, while Adeyemi (2010) links the persistence of malpractice to wider societal decay, where unethical shortcuts are normalized. Beyond this, Omoteso (2011) stresses the role of community and parental influence, noting that some parents encourage malpractice as a means of securing success for their children. These layered studies reveal the multi-dimensional nature of malpractice, where individual choices intersect with systemic failures.

However, while this body of literature provides valuable sociological, psychological, and policy-oriented insights, it leaves an important gap. Most discussions stop short of a sustained philosophical interrogation of examination malpractice, particularly through frameworks that emphasize moral responsibility and ethical accountability. Few works have critically engaged with philosophical ethics, such as Kantian ethics, which stresses duty and moral law, or virtue ethics, which emphasizes the cultivation of honesty, integrity, and accountability. Without such engagement, many interventions remain reactive, focusing on punishment or regulation rather than fostering a culture of moral responsibility that can sustain exam integrity.

This study addresses that gap by examining examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools through the dual lens of exam integrity and moral responsibility, grounded in philosophical ethics. By applying Kantian and virtue ethical perspectives, the paper seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the ethical failures underpinning malpractice and to provide a framework that integrates moral

reasoning with practical educational reform. In doing so, it aims to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to policy development, offering insights into how schools and examination bodies can restore credibility and integrity to the Nigerian education system.

Statement of the Problem

Examination malpractice has become a persistent crisis in Nigerian secondary schools, eroding the credibility of assessments and weakening public confidence in education. Despite strict policies and monitoring mechanisms by bodies such as WAEC and NECO, practices such as impersonation, collusion, and the use of illicit materials remain widespread, showing that regulatory measures alone are insufficient.

Existing studies explain malpractice mainly through sociological and psychological lenses, citing poor preparation, peer influence, societal pressures, and weak institutional enforcement. While useful, these perspectives overlook the deeper ethical dimension of the problem. At its core, malpractice reflects a failure of moral responsibility among students, teachers, parents, and exam officials, which undermines the cultivation of honesty, accountability, and integrity in schools.

The major gap in the literature is the limited philosophical engagement with this issue. Few works apply frameworks such as Kantian ethics or virtue ethics to explore how moral responsibility and exam integrity can inform reforms. Without this philosophical grounding, interventions risk being reactive rather than transformative. This study addresses that gap by situating examination malpractice within the discourse of philosophical ethics and proposing a framework for restoring exam integrity in Nigerian secondary schools.

Research Objectives

i. To examine the ethical dimensions of examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools, with particular focus on moral responsibility among students, teachers, parents, and examination bodies.

ii. To analyze examination malpractice through the lens of philosophical ethics, drawing on Kantian ethics and virtue ethics to evaluate how moral reasoning can inform sustainable reforms.

iii. To propose a philosophical framework that integrates moral responsibility and exam integrity into educational policy and practice, aimed at curbing examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptual clarification is necessary for this study because examination malpractice, moral responsibility, exam integrity, and philosophical ethics are often discussed in policy and educational circles without adequate critical reflection on their deeper meanings. By interrogating these concepts, this study not only frames the objectives but also introduces new perspectives that can enrich the discourse on educational reform in Nigeria.

i. Examination Malpractice

Examination malpractice is commonly defined as any deliberate act of wrongdoing before, during, or after examinations with the aim of gaining unfair advantage (Olatunbosun, 2019). While this definition captures the procedural aspect, it reduces the problem to an act of misconduct rather than a manifestation of a deeper ethical crisis. A critical engagement

reveals that malpractice is not just about breaking examination rules but reflects a failure in moral consciousness and societal values. In this sense, it becomes both an educational and moral problem, demanding solutions beyond administrative regulations.

ii. Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility refers to the obligation of individuals and institutions to act in accordance with ethical standards and to be accountable for their actions. Within the context of Nigerian secondary schools, it extends beyond students to include teachers, parents, and exam bodies. Kantian ethics insists that moral responsibility is rooted in duty — an action is right not because of its consequences but because it aligns with moral law. Virtue ethics, by contrast, emphasizes the cultivation of character traits such as honesty and integrity. This study proposes a synthesis: moral responsibility in examinations must combine duty-based obligations with the cultivation of virtues, thereby addressing both the structural and personal dimensions of malpractice.

iii. Philosophical Ethics

Philosophical ethics provides the lens through which examination malpractice can be critically examined. While policy-based approaches focus on enforcement, philosophical ethics interrogates the deeper "why" behind actions. Kantian ethics highlights that cheating in examinations violates the categorical imperative, since such behavior, if universalized, would collapse the very purpose of education. Virtue ethics adds that malpractice undermines the moral development of learners, producing graduates who lack both knowledge and character. This dual ethical lens challenges existing approaches by insisting that reforms must focus on cultivating ethical reasoning and moral education, not merely punishing infractions.

iv. Exam Integrity

Exam integrity refers to the preservation of fairness, honesty, and credibility in the assessment process. It is often reduced to policy enforcement and security mechanisms, yet true exam integrity cannot be legislated into existence without corresponding moral responsibility. Integrity must be both institutional and personal: institutions must enforce rules consistently, and individuals must internalize ethical values that make malpractice morally unacceptable. The new idea this study introduces is that exam integrity should be conceived as a shared moral contract between all stakeholders, grounded in philosophical ethics.

By clarifying these concepts, the study advances the discourse by shifting the focus from examination malpractice as a rule-breaking event to malpractice as an ethical breakdown that requires both structural reform and moral renewal. This critical approach provides the philosophical foundation upon which the study's objectives are premised.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a philosophical research methodology, since its central aim is to interrogate examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools from the perspective of exam integrity, moral responsibility, and philosophical ethics. Unlike empirical research, which relies on data collection and statistical analysis, philosophical research emphasizes critical reflection, logical reasoning, and conceptual clarification. The methodology is therefore qualitative and analytical, focusing on normative inquiry into the ethical dimensions of the problem.

Research Design

The study is designed as a conceptual and normative inquiry. The conceptual dimension

involves clarifying key concepts such as examination malpractice, moral responsibility, exam integrity, and philosophical ethics. This ensures that the discourse avoids ambiguity and provides a clear foundation for philosophical engagement. The normative dimension focuses on evaluating how ethical theories can be applied to examine stakeholders' responsibilities and guide educational reforms.

Sources of Data

The study relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, and policy documents relevant to examination malpractice and educational ethics. Classical philosophical texts, particularly works on Kantian ethics and virtue ethics, also serve as foundational references. These sources provide the material for critical analysis and theoretical application.

Method of Analysis

Two main methods are employed:

i. **Conceptual Analysis:** This involves unpacking the meanings of key concepts and exposing underlying assumptions that shape the discourse on examination malpractice.

ii. **Critical and Normative Analysis:** This applies philosophical ethics—especially Kantian and virtue ethics—to evaluate the moral responsibilities of students, educators, parents, and institutions. Through this, the study not only critiques existing approaches but also proposes a new framework for reform grounded in moral responsibility and exam integrity.

Justification for Methodology

This methodology is appropriate because, examination malpractice is not merely a behavioral or policy issue but a deeply ethical one. Philosophical methods allow for a deeper interrogation of values and duties that underlie actions, enabling the study to go beyond surface-level explanations and recommend reforms that are morally and educationally sustainable.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on philosophical ethics, drawing primarily from Kantian ethics and virtue ethics to provide a moral foundation for addressing examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools. The theoretical framework is essential because it situates the research within established traditions of moral philosophy while also applying them in novel ways to the Nigerian educational context.

i. Kantian Ethics

Immanuel Kant's deontological framework emphasizes duty, moral law, and the categorical imperative. According to Kant (1785/1997), an action is morally right not because of its outcome but because it is performed out of a sense of duty in accordance with universal moral principles. Applied to examination malpractice, Kantian ethics views cheating as inherently wrong because, if universalized, it would render examinations meaningless and collapse the educational system. Previous studies, such as Adeyemi (2010) and Ogunwuyi and Okeke (2020), have acknowledged the role of morality in combating malpractice but often stop at general appeals to discipline and societal values. This study extends the application of Kantian ethics by explicitly framing malpractice as a violation of moral duty, thereby grounding exam integrity in the categorical imperative: students and educators

must act in ways they would will to be universal laws.

ii. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, emphasizes the cultivation of character traits such as honesty, integrity, and accountability. Within this framework, the problem of examination malpractice is not merely rule-breaking but the failure to develop virtuous dispositions in both learners and educators. While earlier works, such as Alutu and Aluede (2006), have recommended moral instruction in schools, they have rarely grounded these recommendations in the systematic philosophy of virtue ethics. This study proposes that exam integrity requires embedding virtue cultivation into school culture, where consistent practice of honesty in academic life becomes a habit shaping character beyond the classroom.

In contrast to earlier studies that mainly explained malpractice from sociological, psychological, or policy perspectives, this research frames it as both a violation of duty and a failure of character. By combining Kantian ethics, which stresses duty, with virtue ethics, which emphasizes character, the study shifts focus from external enforcement to internal moral development. This integrated approach offers a more comprehensive ethical framework for restoring exam integrity in Nigerian secondary schools.

Literature Review

The problem of examination malpractice has been examined through multiple scholarly lenses, ranging from sociological perspectives to policy interventions and psychological explanations. At the broadest level, scholars such as Nwana (2000) and Adeyemi (2010) have established that malpractice undermines the credibility of education and erodes public trust in certification systems. Their work provides foundational knowledge on the scale and consequences of the problem, yet it often stops at description rather than interrogating the deeper moral dimensions.

Moving a step deeper, researchers have linked malpractice to structural and institutional weaknesses in Nigeria's educational system. Olatunbosun (2009) attributes the persistence of malpractice to inadequate preparation of students, poor teaching methods, and institutional complicity. Similarly, Joshua, Atanda, and Alao (2010) argue that systemic corruption and the commodification of education fuel the trend. These studies raise critical questions: Can structural reforms alone resolve an issue that is also deeply moral in nature? Do institutional solutions adequately address the character and responsibility of the individual?

At a more focused level, some studies have introduced moral and ethical perspectives, but often in a superficial way. For instance, Alutu and Aluede (2006) recommend moral instruction and religious education as tools against malpractice. However, their framework lacks grounding in systematic moral philosophy and does not interrogate how ethical theories might offer deeper insights into reform. The ethical discourse therefore remains underdeveloped, leaving an intellectual gap where philosophy could make a distinctive contribution.

A narrower strand of scholarship has engaged with the cultural and societal attitudes that normalize malpractice. Okafor (2011) notes that societal pressure to succeed at all costs encourages students to compromise integrity, while teachers and parents sometimes tacitly endorse malpractice. While this cultural critique is useful, it raises another question: without a clear philosophical framework of duty and virtue, how can culture be effectively reshaped to foster exam integrity?

At the apex of this pyramid lies the gap this study seeks to fill. Most existing works either focus on structural reforms, sociological explanations, or surface-level moral appeals. Few have systematically interrogated examination malpractice through philosophical ethics. Even fewer have combined Kantian duty-based ethics with Aristotelian virtue ethics to provide a dual framework addressing both systemic rules and character formation. By asking how moral responsibility and exam integrity can be grounded in ethical philosophy, this study brings a new layer of analysis to the literature — one that is both critically interrogative and reform-oriented.

Conceptual Review

Examination malpractice has been widely conceptualized as any deliberate act of cheating or misconduct during an assessment process that compromises fairness, validity, and credibility (Nwana, 2000). Scholars generally agree that it undermines the integrity of education and devalues certification. Adeyemi (2010) highlights that malpractice erodes public trust in the secondary school system, while Olatunbosun (2009) emphasizes the role of poor preparation, ineffective teaching methods, and institutional complicity in perpetuating the problem. These perspectives underline the structural and systemic nature of malpractice but leave open the question of whether institutional reforms alone can address the issue's moral roots.

Other scholars have explored cultural and societal influences. Okafor (2011) observes that societal pressures and parental complicity normalize malpractice, reinforcing a "success-at-all-costs" mentality. Similarly, Joshua, Atanda, and Alao (2010) argue that the commodification of education fuels corrupt practices in examinations. While these insights expose the socio-cultural underpinnings of malpractice, they raise critical questions about personal responsibility: can students and educators be reformed without grounding behavior in ethical principles?

Attempts to introduce moral solutions have largely remained superficial. Alutu and Aluede (2006) recommend moral instruction and religious education, but their proposals lack grounding in systematic moral philosophy. The absence of a philosophically rigorous ethical framework leaves the discourse incomplete. Thus, while the literature identifies the gravity, systemic causes, and cultural reinforcements of malpractice, it fails to interrogate the problem from the perspective of philosophical ethics. This creates the intellectual space for the present study.

Theoetical Review

Moral philosophy provides several frameworks for interrogating examination malpractice, but most studies in Nigeria have not fully engaged these theories. Kantian ethics, for instance, emphasizes duty and the categorical imperative, arguing that actions must be judged by their adherence to universal moral laws (Kant, 1785/1997). Applying this lens, cheating in examinations is inherently wrong because if universalized, it would render assessment meaningless. Yet, while some Nigerian scholars acknowledge the role of morality, few explicitly ground malpractice in Kant's deontological philosophy, which offers a more rigorous ethical condemnation than general moral appeals (Adeyemi, 2010).

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle, emphasizes the cultivation of good character traits such as honesty, accountability, and integrity. Within education, this suggests that schools should serve as spaces where virtuous dispositions are nurtured through repeated practice. However, most prior works that recommend moral education (e.g., Alutu & Aluede, 2006) do not systematically apply virtue ethics to the problem. They tend to treat

morality as instruction rather than as a cultivated habit that shapes identity.

Where this study differs is in synthesizing Kantian ethics and virtue ethics into a dual framework. Kant provides a strict moral standard grounded in duty, while Aristotle emphasizes the long-term formation of virtuous character. Together, they address both external enforcement (duty) and internal cultivation (virtue). This synthesis avoids the rigidity of Kantian universality on the one hand and the vagueness of virtue ethics on the other, offering a pragmatic philosophical approach. By doing so, the study departs from prior literature that either over-relied on sociological, cultural, or religious perspectives and instead contributes a systematically philosophical framework to the discourse on examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools.

Thrust of the Work

The central thrust of this study is to interrogate whether examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools can genuinely be addressed without a deeper philosophical engagement with moral responsibility and exam integrity. Previous studies have largely treated malpractice as a structural or cultural problem, often proposing stricter regulations, enhanced monitoring, or moral instruction through religious and civic education (Olatunbosun, 2009; Alutu & Aluede, 2006). But the pressing question remains: can punitive measures or superficial moral lessons alone change the internal dispositions of students, teachers, and institutions that perpetuate malpractice?

Conceptually, this work challenges the assumption that structural reforms or policy enforcement are sufficient to guarantee exam integrity. It raises the provocative question of whether malpractice is, at its root, not simply an administrative lapse but a moral failure. By foregrounding moral responsibility, the study pushes the discourse beyond "what students do" to "who they become" within the educational process. This reframing has significant implications for how Nigerian education defines success: is it merely the acquisition of certificates, or the cultivation of individuals capable of acting from principles of duty and virtue?

Theoretically, the study positions itself at the intersection of Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Unlike prior works that have selectively drawn from moral appeals without rigorous philosophical grounding, this study interrogates malpractice as both a breach of universal moral law (Kant) and as a deficiency in character formation (Aristotle). The findings indicate that integrity in examinations cannot be sustained by external enforcement alone but must be underpinned by the cultivation of internalized virtues. This dual framework introduces a new contribution: it refuses the dichotomy between rigid moral duty and flexible character development, instead demonstrating that both are necessary and mutually reinforcing.

The work therefore takes the position that fostering exam integrity requires embedding moral responsibility within the entire educational ecosystem, not merely through rules but through deliberate cultivation of honesty, accountability, and integrity as lived virtues. This finding diverges sharply from earlier studies that often assumed that stricter sanctions or civic education were enough. By critically applying philosophical ethics, the study illuminates the inadequacy of those approaches and insists that genuine reform must occur at the level of moral formation.

In sum, the thrust of this work is not only to identify malpractice as a moral problem but also to provide a philosophically informed pathway for rethinking educational practice in Nigeria. It argues that exam integrity can only be achieved when structural reforms are

complemented by ethical cultivation grounded in duty and virtue, a position that situates this study as a critical and original intervention in the discourse.

Philosophical Analysis

Examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools raises profound philosophical questions about morality, responsibility, and the purpose of education. A philosophical analysis situates the issue beyond mere administrative irregularities or social deviance by interrogating it through the moral lenses of Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics.

From a **Kantian perspective**, examination malpractice is an outright violation of duty and universal moral law. Kant's categorical imperative requires that one act only according to principles that can be universalized without contradiction (Kant, 1785/1997). If cheating were to become a universal practice, examinations would lose their purpose as evaluative tools, rendering the entire educational process meaningless. Thus, malpractice is not simply wrong because it is forbidden by school regulations but because it undermines the very possibility of education as a rational enterprise. Kantian ethics also underscores that students, teachers, and institutions each carry moral responsibility. Students cheat when they fail in their duty to truth, teachers fail when they neglect their duty to instill discipline and fairness, and institutions fail when they prioritize performance metrics over integrity.

In contrast**,** virtue ethics frames examination malpractice as a deficiency in character. Aristotle (350 B.C.E./2009) argued that education is not merely the transfer of knowledge but the cultivation of virtues that shape a person's moral identity. A student who cheats not only breaks a rule but also fails to cultivate the virtues of honesty, perseverance, and accountability. Similarly, when teachers collude or overlook malpractice, they fail in the virtue of justice and professional integrity. Unlike Kantian rigidity, virtue ethics stresses habituation: the consistent practice of virtues until they become ingrained dispositions. Within this framework, exam integrity requires a school culture where honesty is not just taught but lived daily, shaping both students and teachers into morally responsible agents.

Together, Kantian ethics and virtue ethics offer a dual lens for rethinking exam malpractice. Kant establishes a strict moral foundation: malpractice is wrong, full stop, because it cannot be universalized. Virtue ethics complements this by explaining how individuals can internalize moral responsibility through the cultivation of character. The synergy between the two suggests that genuine reform must involve both external enforcement of moral duties and internal character formation. Policies that rely only on surveillance and sanctions address the surface but fail to transform the underlying dispositions that sustain malpractice. Conversely, virtue cultivation without moral law risks vagueness, as virtues can be culturally relative.

Therefore, the philosophical analysis reveals that exam integrity is best understood as both a duty-bound obligation and a virtue-driven practice**.** This integrated framework not only distinguishes this study from earlier works that emphasized punitive reforms or superficial moral instruction but also contributes a new perspective: that examination malpractice can only be eradicated when Nigerian secondary schools become spaces where moral responsibility is simultaneously legislated, modeled, and habituated.

Conclusion

This study has interrogated examination malpractice in Nigerian secondary schools through the dual philosophical lenses of

Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics. Conceptually, it has demonstrated that malpractice is not merely a structural or administrative failure but a profound moral problem that undermines the very essence of education. By framing the issue in terms of moral responsibility and exam integrity, the study moves beyond the dominant narrative of punishment and surveillance to insist that the heart of the matter lies in cultivating dispositions of honesty, accountability, and integrity among students and educators alike.

Theoretically, the findings highlight that exam integrity cannot be sustained by external enforcement mechanisms alone, as many previous studies have suggested. Instead, it requires the internalization of ethical principles. Kantian ethics provides a universal moral law that frames cheating as inherently wrong, while virtue ethics emphasizes the formation of character traits necessary for long-term integrity. This synthesis bridges the rigidity of duty and the flexibility of virtue, offering a more comprehensive ethical framework than prior works that tended to focus narrowly on sociological explanations, cultural critiques, or moral instruction without philosophical grounding.

The study's contribution, therefore, lies in rethinking examination malpractice as both a violation of duty and a failure of character, a dual perspective that previous literature has largely overlooked. By positioning exam integrity as a moral imperative grounded in philosophical ethics, this work offers an original intervention in the discourse. It argues that lasting solutions must not only address systemic weaknesses but also foster a culture of moral responsibility, thereby reframing the goals of education itself.

Recommendations

i. **Integrate Philosophical Ethics into Curriculum**: Secondary schools should embed Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics into civic, moral, and religious education. Beyond abstract teaching, classroom practices should encourage students to reflect critically on honesty, responsibility, and the long-term value of integrity.

ii. **Shift from Punitive to Character-Based Reforms**: While sanctions remain necessary, reforms must focus on cultivating moral responsibility rather than relying solely on punishment. Schools should create environments where virtues such as honesty and accountability are consistently modeled by teachers and rewarded in students.

iii. **Teacher Training in Ethical Pedagogy**: Educators must be trained not only as knowledge transmitters but also as moral exemplars. Teacher training programs should include modules on philosophical ethics and professional responsibility to ensure teachers embody and instill the virtues of exam integrity.

iv. **Institutional Accountability Mechanisms:** Examination bodies and school administrators must be held accountable for malpractice that originates from systemic lapses. Transparent and ethical practices in exam administration will reinforce the Kantian imperative that duty applies equally to institutions and individuals.

v. **Community and Parental Engagement**: Since societal pressures often drive malpractice, parents and communities should be engaged in programs that promote integrity as a collective value. Collaborative workshops can emphasize that true education is not merely about passing

exams but about forming responsible individuals.

vi. **Long-Term Ethical Culture Building**: Policies should aim at building a culture of integrity that transcends exams. This requires continuous reinforcement of virtues in everyday school activities, aligning education with the dual philosophical framework that unites duty with character formation.

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