

# A CRITICAL PRESENTATION OF ARISTOTLE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIOPOLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

*Aristotle is a great philosopher of the ancient period in Western Philosophy. His works and contributions to philosophy, education and civilization, span through all fields of learning. His relevance in his age and subsequent years has not waned, even in our own generation. The thrust of our present work is to examine his contributions, particularly in the areas of sociopolitical philosophizing. In so doing, we shall be scooping materials from his works, analyzing them vis-à-vis other scholars contributions and critically augmenting the areas we feel need fine and proper approaches. It is hoped this would beef up literature in the field and assist budding scholars in understanding this sagacious sage of antiquity.*

**Keywords:** Critical, Sociopolitical, Philosophy and Presentation

## INTRODUCTION

### ARISTOTLE'S BACKGROUND: LIFE AND TIMES

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. at Stageira in Chalcidice which was then under the dominion of Macedon. Aristotle's father was a physician who attended to Amyntas, the King of Macedon. Later, when Philip succeeded Amyntas as King of Macedon, he (Philip) employed Aristotle in 343 B.C. to teach his young son, the future Alexander the Great. Aristotle taught Alexander for about two years. Although the content of what he (Aristotle) taught him (Alexander) is not known, but one can decipher from Alexander's military invincibility that the diversity and fecundity of Aristotle's philosophical mind must have opened the young Alexander to the wisdom of different military tactics. It must have been in appreciation of Aristotle's tutelage of him also, that Alexander, the great, made him in-charge of Alexanderian school of taught that was located in Egypt.

Before his rise to academic prominence, Aristotle left Stageira in Macedon to Athens at the age of seventeen (17) to study Mathematics, Ethics and Politics in the famous Academy of Plato. He stayed in Plato's Academy for twenty (20) years, learning and teaching. It must have been during this period that he wrote those dialogues on ethical and political matters which Plutarch called Platonic (dialogues). He left the Academy after Plato's death in 346 B.C., crossing the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor, where he settled in Assos in the Troad with some of his companions. Here, to satiate his "rapidly extending intellectual interests," he continued his scientific studies, especially in marine biology, the physical world and man's place in it. These studies helped him in forming a general outlook on man. "Man was an animal, but he was the only animal that could be described as "political," capable of, and designed by nature for life in a polis" (Aristotle: The Politics 1981:13). This general outlook on man will influence Aristotle's contributions to

sociopolitical debates, issues and philosophy.

Aristotle got married to his first wife from Macedon around this time of his intellectual development, but went back to Athens by 336 B.C. with his family. By 336 B.C. also, King Philip (Alexander's Father) who was preparing to invade Asia, having grouped Greek States into a kind of federation, was assassinated. It was Alexander, his son, who succeeded him and led the expedition. Aristotle, with the support of Macedonian upper class and Macedonian Antipater, whom Alexander left in charge, while invaliding the Eastern world, had no difficulty in establishing his school, the Lyceum, with its adjoining Walk (Peripatos) in Athens. It was this Lyceum and Peripatos that occupied Aristotle's most important and productive periods of existence. While Alexander reigned and was conquering the Asian countries, Aristotle, his teacher, enjoyed unrestricted academic freedom and prosperity. However, "The news of Alexander's death in 323 was a signal for a revival of anti-Macedonian feelings at Athens and Aristotle judged it prudent to retire to Euboea, where he died in the following year (322 B.C.) at the age of about Sixty-two (62)" (Aristotle 1981:14).

At the Lyceum, Aristotle lectured with a staff of lecturers that were as vast and diversified as he was. He had ingenious people like the botanist, Theophrasian, author of the popular work "Characters." The branches of knowledge they lectured include: the *theoria* (*theoretike*), which is truly philosophical and truly scientific, based on the methods of observation and contemplation. The courses taught were theology, metaphysics, astronomy, mathematics, biology, botany, meteorology. The other branch is the practical (*Praktike*) in which they taught Ethics, Politics, Rhetoric and Poetics, using the methods of collecting, studying and analyzing available data. The knowledge or sciences in this group have practical aim and relevance; therefore, the students are expected to be practitioners in a sense. This idea of knowledge for use/utility or "power" (in the words of Francis Bacon) is no less evident in the fields of Ethics and Politics. "In ethics and Politics, for example, it does not suffice to learn what things are; they must find out also what can be done about them" (Aristotle 1981:15).

It is with this sagacity of mind and blend of thoughts that Aristotle ventured into sociopolitical realm (having studied so many constitutions). We shall briefly examine his contributions to sociopolitical philosophy from four different perspectives namely:

- a. His Conception of Man, The Theory of the State, Constitution of Government and Ethics
  - b. His Conception of Law and Justice in the State
  - c. His Theory of Equality, Sharing of Power and Property, Economic Theory and Systems of Government and Ideology
  - d. His Educational Policy, Principles and Theory.
- A. Aristotle on Man, State, Government and Ethics: Aristotle is one of those earliest authors who have homogenous perception of the nature of man. He believes that man by nature is social and political, endowed with the power of intellect for rational and moral reasoning, as well as the power of speech for communication, affecting and influencing his existential domains, either positively or negatively. He writes:
- Nature... does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech.

Speech... serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so, also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between men and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, just and unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state (Aristotle 1981:60).

On the origin, nature and purpose of the state, Aristotle based his theories on several premises, according to Puja Mondal (<https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com...>). "...the origin of the state depends on the triangular nature of the human soul..." According to Aristotle, "life manifests through several forms – vegetation, animals and men. The vegetative soul performs only two (2) functions, viz; nutrition and growth. ...the animal soul is vegetative soul and passion; human soul, on the other hand, is vegetative soul (appetite) coupled with the animal soul (passion) and reason." This principle naturally followed, even in the society, where the vegetative soul is seen as manifesting in the family, the animal soul in the village, while the human soul is seen as manifesting in the state. So, the state for Aristotle is natural and organic and not artificial or conventional as some social contract theorists hold. The state for him is the highest kind of community or human organization.

Thus, just as the human soul retains the features of the vegetative and animals souls, the state naturally incorporates the family, made up of men and women, masters and slaves as well as the village structure; for several families combined make a village, several villages form a state – provided that it is self-sufficing.

Worthy of note also is that Aristotle's derivation of the state from the "triangular nature of the human soul" is related to his theory of causes. According to his causal theory, the final cause is the end or purpose "which a thing attains," that is, its essential form. He reasons that, "...the state is the natural end and culmination of the other and earlier associations, which were themselves natural; the state therefore exists by nature" (Aristotle 1981:55). In other words, "the human society, when fully developed, becomes a state and thus, the nature of human society, for what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature" (Aristotle 1981:55). Thus, "the state, though later in time than the family, is prior to it," just like the whole of an organism is prior to its part. The implication of this is that an individual or a village cannot "fulfill his/her purpose unless he/she is part of a state" (confer: Aristotle *The Politics* 1981:55). The state,

"...provides all men's needs (materials, social, religious etc.), and offers them the fulfillment not only of living, but of living "well" in accordance with those virtues that are peculiarly human. The state is thus "all – providing," which is best, which is characteristic of natural ends" (Aristotle 1981: 55).

The state, therefore, being self-sufficient and all-providing by nature, has the responsibility of not only "...securing life itself," but "...it continues in being to secure the good life" (Aristotle 1981:59). This is why man cannot afford not to be in a state. Stressing this point, Aristotle writes:

...man is by nature a political animal (*politikon zoon*). Anyone who by his nature and not simply ill-luck has no state is either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman – he is like the

war-mad man condemned in Homer's words as 'having no family, no law, no home... he is a non-cooperator... (Aristotle 1981:59-60).

By this explanation of the natural existence of the state, Aristotle distinguishes himself from the position of social contract theorists especially, those who taught that the state is alien and hostile to man, such as Thomas Hobbes. It should be observed that, by this natural and organismic theory of the State, Aristotle would unwittingly, be joining camp with totalitarians, who subsume the individual, his/her rights and privileges, under totalitarian and authoritarian principles. It may also be pointed out that although Aristotle rooted the origin of the state to association of villages, then to families and finally to the human soul, yet, he did not stretch the logic from the human soul, to its (soul's) ontological origin.

### **B. On Law and Justice:**

The aim or purpose of the state for Aristotle is the good life; the state, according to him, is not merely a society “for exchange and the prevention of crime.” It is “an association intended to enable its members in their households and their kinships (gene, clans) and villages ...to live well; its purpose is a perfect and self-sufficient life... and that, we hold, means living happily and nobly” (Kalos, “fine,” “good”) (Aristotle 1981:198). But to realize the happy life in the polis (state), Aristotle has recommended a constitutional government which lives according to Laws and justice. He praises the founder of the state, who introduced law as the greatest of benefactors, “for without law man is the worst of animals, and law depends for its existence on \*the state” (Aristotle 1981:55). However, Aristotle has different characteristics of laws as “order,” “reason,” and “agreement.” Generally,

Laws are ...rules that produce a kind of order in the actions and desires of the citizens, which are devised in a rational manner by a legislator and which are effective only if the governed accept and obey them (<https://lawexplores.com>aristotles-...>).

According to Aristotle, there are two (2) sources of this law or orderliness viz; nature and reason. From this perspective, the purpose of law would be moral, that is, “to make men good and righteous, above all, to serve the common interest” (<https://www.cambridge.org>...>)

Law then is a prescription for the good of all departments of life. For Aristotle, “Laws prescribe for all the departments of life, aiming at the common advantage, either of all the citizens or of the best of them, or of the ruling class, or on some such basis” (Aristotle, Ethics 1976:173). The prescription of law is in form of a commandment of some kinds of behaviour or a prohibition of others. For “the law commands; some kinds of behaviour and forbids others ...” (Aristotle 1976:173). Examples of some “goodness” and “wickedness” which the law enjoins (commands) and prohibits (forbids) include: brave conducts, such as, not leaving one's duty post, or taking to flight, or throwing away one's weapons; or fearing the outcome of acting from one's good conscience. It also include the commandments on temperate conducts, such as not committing adultery or assault, not stealing what belongs to another, or greed in taking possession of a common good. The law also commands (enjoins) patient conducts, such as refraining from blows

or abuse, waiting for one's turn in temporal distributions, bearing the injuries and pains that may be necessitated by one's state or calling in life. While the law commands (enjoins) bravery, temperance and patience, it forbids (prohibits) their opposites, such as cowardice, intemperance and impatience. For Aristotle, the Law is right, if these conducts commanded or forbidden are rightly enacted; but the law may not be right, if what it commands or forbids and enforces is an improvisation (an act of improvisation/improvising) such as edicts and bylaws or regulations. Aristotle maintains that if what the law commands or forbids is rightly enacted and perhaps, properly enforced, there would be justice, a universal justice, which is complete virtue. In this sense, we may also add that there could be just law(s) or unjust law(s) depending on whose or what purpose the law is serving or meant to serve.

ON JUSTICE: Justice is attributed of law(s) if its purpose is good or virtuous, that is if it is serving a moral excellence. Aristotle noted that the virtue meant here is “in relation to somebody else” (Aristotle 1976:173). It is also in this sense that justice is “regarded as the sovereign virtue” or the summation of virtue. Justice is the sum of virtue or complete virtue because its exercise requires obedience to an external factor or somebody else, while other virtues do not necessarily require their possessor to exercise them “in relation to another person” (Aristotle 1976:174).

There is no gainsaying the fact that obedience to oneself is sometimes very hard not to talk of offering it to another person. Aristotle puts this fact succinctly in this way: “...there are plenty of people who can behave uprightly in their own affairs, but are incapable of doing so in relation to somebody else (Aristotle 1976:174). For Aristotle, justice is “a social virtues that belongs to people insofar as they live with, cooperate with and rely on others (<https://www.colorado.edu>> lee-justice). It has to do with “proper relations with and fulfillment of obligations to others” (<https://www.colorado.edu>>lee-justice). Aristotle defines justice in terms of its opposites, whereby he determines what justice consists in, and its opposite becomes unjust (justice). This type of determination works well with certain sorts of “opposite;” such as justice. However, the “equality part (of justice) has to do with not grasping far more than what is fair” (<https://www.uvm.edu>>notes/crant<sub>4</sub>).

Consequently, Aristotle notes that there are two (2) types of justice, namely, universal justice and particular justice. Universal justice is had when one is obedient to laws or is said to be virtuous. Particular justice is further divided into two (2), namely, “distributive justice and remedial or corrective justice” (<https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com>>...). Distributive justice “involves dividing benefits and burdens fairly among members of a community...” In this sense, the state is expected to “...divide or distribute goods and wealth among citizens,” in order of their merit. According to Aristotle, distributive justice manifests in “the distributions of honour or money or other things that fail to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution (for in these it is possible for one man to have share either unequal or equal to that of another)” (<https://www.jetir.org>>papers). It is also in this sense that Aristotle will consider justice as “treating equals equally and unequals unequally (meaning people get what they deserve)” (Retrieved November, 2021 – <https://study.com>>learn>plato-aris). Thus, it is not surprising that Aristotle justifies slavery on the grounds that the slave is naturally inferior to the master. According to him:

...one has to admit that there are some who are slaves everywhere, others who are slaves nowhere: And the same is true of noble birth: nobles regard themselves as of noble birth not only among their own people but everywhere,” ...it is expedient for one to be master, the other to be the slave, whereas the one must be ruled, the other should exercise the rule for which he is fitted by nature, thus being the master” (Aristotle 1981:72-73 (1255<sup>a21</sup> & 1255<sup>b4</sup>)).

C. (1). On Equality: Thus, justice for Aristotle, just like Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic, is in favour of the stronger or superior, since apart from being inferior or a slave by natural endowment, one could also be a slave by being a prisoner of war, having been conquered by the superior power or forces of his master or victor. So, as a matter of fact, slaves or inferiors have no proper claims in distributive justice. However, Aristotle still believed that distributive justice (which concerns mainly political privileges), was the most powerful law to prevent revolution. This is so because this type of justice gives room for proper and proportionate allocation of offices, honours, goods and services, the only requirement for a beneficiary being membership (a citizen) of the state (polis) in question.

C. (2). Sharing of Power: Aristotle “...rejected democratic as oligarchic criteria of justice and permitted the allocation of offices to the virtuous only owing to their highest contributions to the society, because the virtuous people are few. Aristotle believes that most of the offices should be allocated to those few only” (Article Shared by Puja Mondal: <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com>>...). By virtue in respect of justice, Aristotle means “*a rational mean between bad extremes.*” Defining “*the mean,*” he says:

The “mean” of justice lies between the vices of getting too much and getting too little, relative to what one deserves, these being two (2) opposite types of injustice, one of “disproportionate excess,” the other of disproportionate “deficiency” (Aristotle 1976:67-74, 76 (1129<sup>a</sup>-1132<sup>b</sup>, 1134<sup>a</sup>)).

C. (3). Sharing of Property: At this juncture, it may as well be proper to point out that Aristotle considers justice both as a political, as well as a moral virtue. Thus, the other type of particular justice, which deals with moral issues, is known as remedial or corrective justice. Remedial (corrective) justice is further “divided into two (2), dealing with voluntary transactions (Civil Law) and dealing with involuntary transaction (Criminal Law).” All laws and issues relating to commercial transactions are dealt within the remedial and corrective justices or actions. This moral justice aims at restoring what an individual had lost due to injustice of the society. This type of justice prevents from encroachments of one right over the other. According to Aristotle, “...corrective justice requires us, in some circumstances, to try to restore a fair balance in interpersonal relations where it has been lost” (from: Western Theories of Justice in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Aristotle pointed out the areas covered by remedial or corrective justice as relating to “voluntary and commercial activities such as hire, sale and furnishing security. These actions involve aggression on life, property, honour and freedom. In brief, this justice aims at virtue and moral excellence of character and it is for this reason, it is called corrective justice.”

Thus, for Aristotle, justice consists in what is lawful – universal justice and what is fair – particular justice. In respect of fairness, justice involves equitable distributions – political virtue and correcting or remedying of what is inequitable, which is a function of moral virtue or justice. To determine proportionate equality or equity, would involve the determination of “the intermediate” position between someone's unfairly getting “less” than is deserved and unfairly getting “more” at another's expense” (Aristotle 1976:67-74, 76(1129<sup>a</sup> – 1132<sup>b</sup>, 1134<sup>a</sup>)).

What this justice as fairness means, for Aristotle, is that everyone is given or gets what is due him/her, regarding his/her circumstance – equality, and that no one is given or gets “less” or “more” than he/she deserves. However, it must yet be emphasized that Aristotle does not believe in equality. He sanctions the subjugation of women and slaves, as well as politically unequal or inferiors.

- C. (4). Economic Theory: Furthermore, Aristotle's economic theory is capitalistic as opposed to Plato's communism. He does not favour Plato's common sharing of women and by extension, children and fatherhood (patrimony). His preference is private ownership of property, but he adds, according Russell, that, “people should be so trained in benevolence, as to allow the use of it to be largely common” (Russell 119). His reason, according to Russell, is that: “benevolence and generosity are virtues and without private property, they are impossible” (Russell 199). Our position is that no economic theory is altogether good that it may not be faulted nor is any altogether bad that it may not yield success. Nevertheless, all need truthfulness, honesty and sincerity; above all, economic theories should be based on human concern, love and kindness for meaningful and positive impact.
- C. (5) System of Government: Moreover, Aristotle's system or theory of government does not favour democracy. He would rather go for monarchy, aristocracy or constitutionalism. He outlined three (3) kinds of good government in their descending order as: monarchy, aristocracy and constitutionalism with their opposites as: tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. But, he also noted some intermediate forms of government. Aristotle's determination of the goodness or badness of a government is based on the ethical qualities of the holders of power and not on the form of constitution. His preference for aristocracy (a rule of men of virtues) to oligarchy (a rule of the rich) is based on this contention that virtue stands in the mean (middle) and so men of excessive wealth (like the oligarchs) may not be virtuous. His doctrine of the golden mean in terms of virtues and happiness runs thus:

Mankind do not acquire or preserve virtue by the help of external goods, but external goods by the help of virtue and happiness, whether consisting in pleasure or virtue, or both, is more often found with those who are most highly cultivated in their mind and in their character and have only a moderate share of external goods, than among those who possess external goods to a useless extent but are deficient in higher qualities (Aristotle, *The Politics*: 1323<sup>a</sup> and <sup>b</sup> in Russell 200).

The rule of the best (aristocracy) is therefore preferable to the rule of the richest (oligarchy) “since the best are likely to have only moderate fortunes” (Russell 200). The only distinction between monarchy and tyranny, for Aristotle, is one based on ethical

consciousness. Here below is Aristotle's classification of different governments and their opposites:

S/N	GOOD GOVERNMENTS	S/N	BAD GOVERNMENTS
1.	Monarchy (Best)	1.	Tyranny (Worst)
2.	Aristocracy (Better)	2.	Oligarchy (Worse)
3.	Constitutionalism/Polity (Good)	3.	Democracy (Bad)

From the above, Bertrand Russell surmises that Aristotle's argument is: "Monarchy is better than aristocracy, aristocracy is better than polity (constitutionalism). But, the corruption of the best is worst: therefore tyranny is worse than oligarchy and oligarchy than democracy" (Russell 201).

From this position, one could say that Aristotle arrived at a qualified defense of democracy: "for most actual governments are bad and therefore, among actual (bad) governments, democracy tends to be best" (Russell 201).

As revolutions were rife in the Greek City-States, where Aristotle operated, he recommends three (3) things needed to prevent them, namely: (a.) Propaganda in education; (b.) respect of law, even in small things, and (c.) justice in law and administration, that is, equality according to proportion and for every man to enjoy his own (Aristotle, *The Politics* (1307<sup>a</sup>, 1307<sup>b</sup>, 1310<sup>a</sup>) in Russell 201).

In respect of the population of an ideal state, Aristotle opined that a state "ought to be large enough to be more or less self-sufficing, but not too large for constitutional government" (Russell 203). All said and done, Aristotle's theory of government follows his practical sense of wisdom in arguments. We concur with him that the system of government practiced may not be the problem, but the people practicing it, especially those at the helm of affairs (leaders). We also agree with him on the role of virtue and virtuous leaders and citizens for good and prosperous governance. However, we point out that the role of an absolute law-giver – God, in whom and through whom all virtuous acts gain relevance and to whom all man-made (positive) laws are referenced for meaningfulness and efficacy, cannot be down-played. Any system of government in practice depends on God and the application of Godly principles for its success.

A. Educational Policy and Theory: Nevertheless, education, for Aristotle, is inevitable for the achievement of political goals. But, his educational theory is deficient both in content or curriculum and in application, that is, to those who are beneficiaries. It is only the citizens, according to Aristotle, that could partake in the share of political power and education as well. His educational policy in the state is discriminatory against slaves who are to receive education, if at all, only in useful acts, such as cooking, but not full citizenship education. We note that Aristotle's policy in education was influenced by his objective for the state. For Aristotle, "the aim of the state is ...to produce cultured gentlemen, who combine the aristocratic mentality with love of learning and the arts" (Russell 204).



Thus, decency in speech, avoiding vulgarization, are to be cultivated in the education of the citizen. The education of the citizens' children is made to emphasize moral ideals and de-emphasize professional skills in athletics, as this may drift them from their political ambitions. For Aristotle, the purpose of education is for “virtue” (as stated in his Ethics) and not just for “usefulness.” The children of the citizens should learn drawing, in order to appreciate the beauty of the human form; they should be taught painting and sculpture as expressions of moral ideals, they may learn to sing and to play musical instruments enough to be able to enjoy music critically, but not enough to be skilled performers, for no freeman would play or sing unless drunk; they must learn to read and write, as they are “useful arts” for his political ambitions.

Aristotle's educational theory, principles and policies, found their highest practical expressions and perfection in Athens under the leadership of Pericles, among the well-to-do, not with the entire population. We observe that the thrust of Aristotle's educational policy is political; hence its contents and scope of applications are limited. Thus, we note that education serves multifarious purposes and as such, its horizons, contents (curriculum/curricula) and spheres of application (beneficiaries), is expected to be integral, comprehensive, all-including, all-involving and all-partaking. Education should be able to touch all aspects of man in his living environment and address all issues engaging man in his existence and involvements. Consequently, education should be able to touch the totality of man and his environment of existence from the perspectives of somatic/body affections and feelings, physiological/ anatomical levels, psychological/mental states, spiritual cum economic influences, scientific-technological developments, as well as health and total well-being. There should be no discrimination in the application of the values of education or its beneficiaries. Discriminatory attitudes based on sex, tribe, social status, political and social lineages, economic/financial positions or any such affiliations should be decried in highest terms in the delivery of education. However, content censorship of educational curriculum(a) may be necessary for people of particular ages and circumstances; but, utmost care must be taken to make sure that this does not become the general rule “*modus operandi*” (operational mode or means). Furthermore, care must be taken to ensure that education does not become a means of operation, suppression, deprivation or subjugation of some class of people in the society by depriving them or making it impossible for them to gain education and its values. For the aforementioned reason of censorship and educational application, educators, educationists, curriculum planners and implementers should first undergo serious and rigorous trainings in morals and religious prudence by competent, trusted and reliable experts.

## EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Aristotle and his mentor – Plato, have laboured so much to furnish Western Philosophy, education, and civilization with the skeletons and rubrics which have made them appealing to the entire world over the years. Aristotle, specifically, brought philosophy from platonic Olympian mountains of idealism to the accessible valleys of realism and made us see the other side of the coin of reason. We think their pedagogical and preparatory pace need commendation for the vast areas they covered, the issues they raised, the insights they brought and the explanations they gave. In our present exercise,

we examined Aristotle's contributions to sociopolitical, philosophy from the perspectives of his background, life and times, his notions, content and constitution of the ideal state, his ideas on law and justice, through his theories/systems of economics and government, to his educational policies and theory in the state (polis). We have also offered our own little assessments, observations and inputs to augment the areas we felt needed some fine polishing. It is our hope that working on the pedestal of venerable men and women of antiquity and ancient scholars and sages, and improving on their legacies, following Divine principles, can put the global human society on solid foundations in economic matters, sociopolitical fields, scientific and technological ingenuities, and other realms of learning.

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