

THE PERVASIVE QUALITY OF SELF-DECEPTION

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Abstract: J. Fernández claims in his paper titled “Self-Deception and Self-Knowledge” that first-order motivationalism cannot fully explain a type of self-deception characterized by its so-called “conflict” aspect. A first-order motivationalist account can explain why this kind of self-deception has the “conflict” aspect if an additional fifth sufficient condition requires a self-deceived subject to lack sufficient motivation to know the truth-value of the proposition that is the object of deception.

With my addition of a fifth sufficient condition to first-order motivationalism, we have a formulation of a position that survives Fernández’s criticism and satisfies his desiderata.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophical analyses of self-deception are based on the following question: How can one believe something to be the case and then convince oneself otherwise by one’s own doing? In his paper titled “Self-Deception and Self-Knowledge,” Fernández identifies at least two different features of self-deception: the so-called “normativity” and “conflict” qualities (Fernández 382). The type of self-deception discussed by Fernández (a type that has both features) is the same type that is to be discussed in this paper. I show how my modified version of first-order motivationalism, one particular account of self-deception, can explain why the peculiar type of self-deception identified by Fernández has the

“normativity” and “conflict” aspects. This type of self-deception is a result of an indifference to knowing the truth or a lack of motivation to know the truth. As I will show, the modified first-order motivationalist account survives Fernández’s criticism and satisfies his desiderata for an explanation of why both aspects of the type of self-deception that he addresses arise.

The second section analyzes the type of self-deception to be discussed in this paper and provides an overview of two accounts of self-deception. In the third section, I will provide a brief analysis of the “normativity” and “conflict” qualities of self-deception and identify the requirements for a satisfactory explanation of why these aspects arise. The fourth section gives context for the mechanism by which the necessary behavior for the “conflict” aspect is attained. I refer to this mechanism as a “filter” since it resembles one in effect. In the fifth section, I will show that my new formulation of the first-order motivationalist account does provide a causal explanation of both aspects of self-deception if understood in conjunction with Fingarette’s observations of the mind. In the fifth section, I also show that first-order motivationalism may only explain self-deception if the subject is indifferent to knowing or has no motivation to know the truth of the matter, and I demonstrate how this relates to Fernández’s criticism. The sixth section contains a review of what is discussed and some concluding remarks about the implications of this argument.

THE CLASSIC ACCOUNTS

I begin by exploring the vignettes of Bill, Jack, and Tom to introduce the type of self-deception of interest here. This leads us to an analysis of the three vignettes and to the “normativity” and “conflict” qualities of self-deception. I then mention intentionalism, which gives us a “methodological lesson” that motivates Fernández’s desiderata (Fernández 385). First-order motivationalism is presented along with Fernández’s criticism of the position. I then identify the question that

needs answering if the first-order motivationalist account is to explain why the “conflict” aspect of self-deception arises, specifically, “How can a desire for P not to be the case also cause a subject S to avoid information regarding P?”

The “Normativity” and “Conflict” Qualities

The type of self-deception discussed in Fernández’s paper is not the garden-variety type of self-deception. The type in question possesses two aspects, namely the “normativity” and “conflict” qualities. In brief, the “normativity” aspect is the intuition we have to hold the self-deceived subject culpable for the deception, and the “conflict” aspect is the tension between the self-deceived subject’s stated belief and the belief an observer attributes to the self-deceived subject due to the subject’s observed behavior.

To clarify the distinction between the aspects, we can take Fernández’s vignettes of Bill, Jack, and Tom:

Case 1: Bill’s love life

Bill fancies Kate. Bill has asked her out on many occasions, and Kate has always declined going on a date with him. In addition to this, Kate has complained to some common friends that she finds Bill obnoxious, which they have mentioned to him. Bill, however, continues pursuing Kate. Noticing this behavior, Bill’s friends have asked him whether he really believes that Kate fancies him. Bill claims, quite confidently, that Kate does fancy him, and she is just ‘playing hard to get.’

Case 2: Jack’s health

Lately Jack has been avoiding reading any magazine or newspaper article on medical issues. If they appear on a TV program that he is watching, he immediately switches channels. If they come up in a conversation to which he is a party, he changes

the topic. He has been scheduled to have a regular check-up with his doctor several times, but it is proving difficult for him to get this done. Each time the appointment is scheduled, Jack forgets about it and misses the appointment. Eventually, Jack's relatives have asked him whether he believes that he is sick, but Jack sincerely denies believing that.

Case 3: Tom's marriage

Tom has been trying to read his wife's e-mail correspondence for a few weeks. He has also attempted to overhear her conversations on the phone. He has checked her text messages on her mobile. He has sometimes followed her from a distance when she goes out. And he often asks her to give him a detailed account of her daily activities while she has not been in the house. Noticing some of this behavior, Tom's friends have asked him whether he believes that his wife is hiding something from him, but Tom honestly claims not to believe that. (Fernández 380-381).

In the case of Bill, there is no "conflict" quality since an observer has no trouble attributing to Bill the belief that Kate fancies him. This is because Bill's stated belief and his behavior both suggest that Bill believes Kate fancies him. In the case of Jack, his behavior suggests that he believes himself to be sick, yet he claims to believe that he is not sick. Likewise, in the case of Tom, his behavior suggests that he believes his wife is unfaithful, yet he claims to believe that she is not unfaithful. Thus, the "conflict" quality of self-deception can be found in the cases of Jack and Tom but not in the case of Bill. The "normativity" aspect shows in all three cases because it is easy to sense that Bill, Jack, and Tom are culpable for their self-deception. Note again that the "normativity" aspect is a common-sense intuition to hold a self-deceived subject responsible and that the "conflict" aspect is the tension between the belief suggested by one's behavior and the stated belief.

With these two aspects in mind, I move on to the classic accounts of self-deception and see if they can explain the presence of both aspects in Jack's case. Fernández considers three classic accounts of self-deception in his paper, and the two that I address here are intentionalism and first-order motivationalism. I will provide brief summaries of these accounts and their inadequacies according to Fernández.

Intentionalism

An analysis of intentionalism motivates Fernández's desiderata, which are desiderata for all explanations of self-deception. Intentionalism assumes that self-deception is similar to the interpersonal equivalent where some subject A intentionally deceives some subject B. So, on this account, self-deception amounts to a subject intentionally deceiving himself or herself about the truth-value of a proposition P. Fernández puts it more precisely:

If a subject S is self-deceived, then there is a proposition P such that:

- (1) S believes that P is not the case.
- (2) S has the intention to get herself to believe that P.
- (3) S believes that P.
- (4) S's intention is causally responsible for her forming the belief that P. (Fernández 383-384).

If correct, this position explains why the two aspects of self-deception identified by Fernández arise. The "normativity" is expressed because the subject has been dishonest with herself, and being dishonest with oneself is intuitively objectionable. The "conflict" is expressed because the subject's set of contradictory beliefs cause the incongruent behavior.

There are two problems with this position, and these problems come in the form of paradoxes named the “static paradox” and the “dynamic paradox” (Mele). The “static paradox” requires us to answer the question, “How is it possible for a subject to hold two contradictory beliefs about the same proposition at the same time?” The “dynamic paradox” requires us to answer the question, “How is it possible for a subject intentionally to deceive himself into believing something that he already believes to be false?” Fernández argues that the “static” and “dynamic” paradoxes present powerful arguments in opposition to the intentionalist position for two reasons. First, paradoxical reasoning is a deeply flawed form of argumentation. Second, although Fernández claims that these objections are not definitive, he says that it is difficult to see how these paradoxes are resolved (Fernández 384). He argues that other accounts should avoid both the “static paradox” and the “dynamic paradox” for the same reasons.

Fernández’s Desiderata

Fernández’s analysis of intentionalism furnishes valuable insights. Unless one intends to resolve the static and dynamic paradoxes, one should avoid using intentions to explain how self-deception works. Naturally, “these problems suggest a certain methodological lesson” (Fernández 385). According to Fernández, explanations of self-deception should:

1. Avoid the “static paradox.”
2. Avoid the “dynamic paradox.”
3. Avoid using any ad hoc resources.
4. Use as few intellectual resources as possible (parsimony). (Fernández 385).

These desiderata serve to arbitrate between competing explanations of self-deception (Fernández 385). In other words, the explanation that meets

these desiderata is a candidate for the best account of self-deception. With this in mind, we move on to consider first-order motivationalism.

First-Order Motivationalism

The first-order motivationalist claims that self-deception is the result of a false belief formed while the subject is under the influence of a motivational state. According to this account, a subject S believes some proposition (P), and there exists a motivational state E such that one believes P is not the case; S is in E, so S believes P is not the case (not-P). This motivational state E is the result of a desire for some state of the universe to obtain, and E is causally responsible for S's belief that P is not the case. This state causes the subject to consider evidence in a motivationally-biased way.

For first-order motivationalism, Fernández provides Alfred R. Mele's proposed set of sufficient conditions for a subject S forming the belief that P:

- (1) S's belief that P is false.
- (2) S treats data relevant, or at least seemingly relevant, to the truth-value of P in a motivationally biased way.
- (3) This biased treatment is a non-deviant cause of S's acquiring the belief that P.
- (4) The body of the data possessed by S at the time provides greater warrant for not-P than for P. (Fernández 385).

First-order motivationalism can explain why the "normativity" quality of self-deception arises. If the first-order motivationalist, for instance, spells out the case of Jack, then Jack's belief that he is not sick is easily explained because his motivationally-biased treatment of evidence leads him to believe that he is not sick. What we find intuitively objectionable in Jack's case is his biased consideration of evidence. The

objection is not against Jack's intention to deceive himself; the motivationalist view avoids intention as an explanation. The normative objection regards the fact that Jack considers evidence in a motivationally-biased way even though he does not want to be sick and thus forms a false belief about his health.

There is a problem, however, with explaining why the "conflict" of self-deception arises. According to Fernández, if we attribute to Jack a desire not to be sick, the first-order motivationalist has no recourse to explain Jack's avoidance behavior; you would expect Jack to be very interested in knowing whether he is sick or not. The problem with first-order motivationalism is that one would expect that someone who wants not to be sick would also be interested in knowing whether he is, in fact, sick. Would we not expect a desire for the world to be a certain way, or at least a different desire, to result in some motivation to know the truth and thus cause Jack to seek medical help? The question is, "How can a desire for P not to be the case also cause a subject S to avoid information regarding P?" In other words, how does Jack avoid medical information if he simply wants not to be sick, and why would he do so? This is the question I intend to answer in this paper because an answer to this question would amount to an explanation of the "conflict" of self-deception in terms of the first-order motivationalist account and would therefore show that first-order motivationalism survives Fernández's criticism.

RECAP OF THE "NORMATIVITY" AND "CONFLICT" QUALITIES OF SELF-DECEPTION

The "normativity" of self-deception is the quality that we have an intuition that the self-deceived subject is morally culpable and personally responsible for the deception. Usually we agree that self-deception is objectionable as a matter of common sense, but we may have trouble explaining exactly why we have this sense. So, an account of self-deception must explain why this sense arises because it is the common-sense view that self-deception is morally objectionable. We must have

grounds for accusing the self-deceived subject of being irrational in order to account for an instance of self-deception.

The “conflict” quality of self-deception is merely an observed disagreement between one’s stated belief and that which one’s behavior suggests. S claims to believe that P is the case; however, S’s behavior provides justification for an external observer to conclude that S believes not-P. It is conceivable that the cause of this disagreement is the result of some *motivation* aimed at obtaining P (for the universe to be a way such that P is true), which simultaneously causes S to behave in a way such that the belief that not-P can be attributed to S.

If this analysis of the “conflict” quality is correct, then an explanation of how some *motivation* of S for P to obtain causes behavior that justifies attributing to S the belief that not-P would explain why the “conflict” aspect arises and at the same time satisfy Fernández’s desiderata. First-order motivationalism already avoids (1) and (2) of the desiderata because it avoids the use of intention. First-order motivationalism also does not use ad hoc resources; hence, (3) is satisfied. The addition of only one condition would be in keeping with (4), so a slightly modified version of first-order motivationalism is a good candidate for a consistent explanation of self-deception.

FINGARETTE’S OBSERVATIONS OF THE MIND

In order to understand how first-order motivationalism can explain self-deception, we must first take note of Fingarette’s observations of the mind. My aim is to analyse Fingarette’s observations and apply the conclusion to first-order motivationalism. I intend to show in later sections how this application works in explaining why the “conflict” of self-deception arises. In this section I examine the passive processing of the mind and observe that it “filters” irrelevant sense-data, which enables the mind to focus on more important tasks. The link between the filter and an

account of the “conflict” of self-deception lies in the filter causing the observed behavior of the self-deceived subject.

In Fingarette’s essay, “Self-Deception Needs No Explaining,” he argues that a more complete understanding of the way the mind works would dissolve the problems philosophers find with cases of self-deception (Fingarette). In short, “all these discussions have been fundamentally misguided from the very start” (Fingarette 289), and the strange workings of the mind are responsible for self-deception. He observes that humans have the capability unconsciously to take account of and process sensory information unrelated to the task in which they are actively engaged. For example, I am writing these clauses, and at the time that I am focused on writing, there are sense-data with which I am faced. These sense-data include the angle at which I hold the pen, the thoughts colliding with my mind, and the hum and rattle of the AC. Even though the AC noises are irritating, I manage to stay focused on writing and sometimes even forget about it. Some part of my mind *filters* the hum and rattle from my sensory experience.

What is puzzling is that this filtering is not indiscriminate. Whereas some part of me can filter a mildly irritating but irrelevant noise from my conscious sensory experience, the filter would not attenuate the sound of a fire alarm as easily. This is not entirely due to the nature of the sound a fire alarm makes but due to the indication that the building may be on fire. Living is more important than finishing the paper, so the focused part of the mind is made aware of the situation. This passive information-processing and the response to the relevant items is the intelligent adaptable behavior that Fingarette observes in his paper.

The behavior, as previously described, can be considered “intelligent” because it accounts for some variance in the sensory information, the causal origin, and what the information means. Think of the fire alarm and how it is associated with life-threatening danger. This association would not be present if the fire alarm were regularly triggered

in the absence of real danger, and it would become like the AC's irritating noises—something to be ignored. The “adaptable” part responds to the information by shifting one's attention. Thus, humans have some capability that allows them, without focusing, to take account of and at the same time respond to events in a way that could be described as intelligently adaptable. Alone, this passive ability is not enough to explain *how* the deception is achieved. In section five, it will be shown that this passive ability combined with motivational states can explain how the deception is achieved.

IN DEFENSE OF FIRST-ORDER MOTIVATIONALISM

In order for an account to survive Fernández's criticism, I must show that it is possible and non-contradictory for a subject *S* to state the belief that *P* and behave as if *S* believes not-*P*. I intend to show that a new set of sufficient conditions for self-deception allows first-order motivationalism to explain why a case of self-deception has the “conflict” and “normativity” aspects. In demonstrating such, I aim to prove that this new formulation of first-order motivationalism does survive Fernández's criticism and satisfy his desiderata.

Given that indifference is a state of motivation, consider the following statements:

- I want it to be the case that *P* is true.
- I wish that *P* were true. (An alternate, less rigorous, formulation of that above.)
- I am indifferent to the actual truth-value of *P*.

I assert that there is no contradiction in the aforementioned statements. Although it would be counterproductive to say one wants to accomplish something and at the same time not want to know if that thing is indeed being accomplished, I can find no reason why such motivations are mutually exclusive. Hence, I find no reason why a desire for *P* to obtain necessitates some motivation to know if *P* has indeed obtained.

If I am correct, the following set of sufficient conditions for first-order motivationalism holds:

- (1) S's belief that P is false.
- (2) S treats data relevant, or at least seemingly relevant, to the truth-value of P in a motivationally-biased way.
- (3) This biased treatment of data is a non-deviant cause of S's acquiring the belief that P.
- (4) The body of the data possessed by S at the time provides greater warrant for not-P than for P.
- ***(5)** S does not possess a sufficient motivation to know what the truth-value of P actually is.

If S satisfies conditions 1, 2, 3, and 4, then this fifth condition may be added without fear of contradiction. As I will show, this fifth statement along with Fingarette's observations of the mind are jointly necessary for the first-order motivationalist to explain why the "conflict" of self-deception arises.

Fernández identifies the problem with first-order motivationalism as its inability to explain why the "conflict" of self-deception arises. How can the first-order motivationalist account for Jack's avoidance behavior? The first-order motivationalist explains that Jack deceives himself by being in a state E that causes him to consider evidence in a motivationally-biased way, and he thus comes to believe that P is the case when P is actually not the case. However, his behavior suggests he believes that P is not the case. Fernández expects that, in the case of Jack, someone who wants not to be sick would be interested in knowing whether one is, in fact, sick (387).

If Jack is, in fact, interested in knowing whether he is sick, then Jack must also be in some way motivated to know. How else could he be

interested in the matter of knowing? To expect that Jack is interested in knowing whether he is sick is to presuppose that Jack has a motivation to know what the truth of the matter is. As I have argued earlier, it is not necessarily true that a desire not to be sick results in a motivation to know the truth of the matter. First-order motivationalism cannot explain self-deception if the subject has a motivation to know the truth of the matter since a motivation to know the truth of the matter would cause behavior that is consistent with one's stated belief. First-order motivationalism may only explain why the "conflict" aspect of self-deception arises if the subject is indifferent to or has no motivation to know the truth of the matter.

Let us suppose that Jack is indifferent to knowledge of the truth of the matter; we can now make sense of his avoidance behavior. The first-order motivationalist can now say that the motivational state E (note that state E may include many motivations) causes Jack to consider evidence in a motivationally-biased way even after he has come to believe P. The state E persists because the causal desire persists, namely the desire for P to obtain. Because Jack is indifferent to knowing the truth-value of P, Jack has no reason to do anything that would lead to knowing the truth-value of P. Because Jack is motivated for P to obtain and now believes that it has obtained, he has reason to avoid information relevant to the truth-value of P. The reason for Jack avoiding information regarding the truth-value of P is that such information may challenge his belief and cause him to be irritated. Note that since Jack is indifferent to knowledge of the truth-value of P and already believes that P, additional information relating to the truth-value of P will appear to him irrelevant at best and irritating at worst. Thus, E is causally responsible for Jack's avoidance behavior because Jack is indifferent to knowledge of the truth of the matter and because Jack is motivated to have P obtain.

Thus, the first-order motivationalist explains Jack's avoidance behavior as a result of being in the state E and therefore explains why the "conflict" of self-deception arises. This is all predicated on Jack's lack of

a sufficient motivation for knowledge because Jack's avoidance behavior cannot be explained otherwise. If he was motivated to know if he was really sick, he would have reason to seek medical help.

This brings us to an extremely important question: How does Jack achieve avoidance behavior? Surely, Jack is not constantly thinking about the relation between the evidence that he happens to encounter and his self-deception because Jack does not constantly or actively think about his self-deception. However, according to Fingarette's observations and this "filter" concept, Jack has the capability passively to take account of information and engage in intelligent adaptable behavior.

This intelligent adaptable behavior allows Jack to achieve his avoidance behavior and therefore results in the "conflict" of self-deception. There exists a mental state E such that Jack considers evidence in a biased way; Jack is in E, and Jack's passive intelligent adaptable behavior identifies evidence related to Jack's self-deception. Some part of Jack is constantly considering evidence even when his attention is not focused on his self-deception. This consideration is simply being done passively and mediates his focused and conscious considerations. Jack's biased motivation culminates in his avoidance behavior because he has no sufficient motivation to know the truth that would prevent this avoidance behavior. Thus, first-order motivationalism accounts for the "conflict" of self-deception.

Moreover, this notion of "passive analysis" is not counterintuitive. Suppose, for instance, that you want to boil water on the stove so you can cook some pasta. All you need to do to start the process is turn the heat on (you have already put the water in the pot and the pot on the stove). You turn one of the knobs on the stove clockwise and form the belief that the heat is turned on under the pot of water. Further suppose that you shift your focus to preparing the sauce to go with the pasta. After some time, you glance at the pot of water, and you notice that no perceptible change has occurred. You then realize that you had turned on the incorrect burner

and form the belief that the pot is not being heated. You believed the pot of water was being heated but were not actively checking to see if it was. After considering evidence suggesting that the pot was not being heated, you came to believe that the pot was not being heated. By way of intelligent adaptable behavior, you passively identified evidence that implied the pot was not being heated and reached a particular conclusion about the state of the pot.

So, if you, the subject, had engaged in self-deception—if you had wanted the pot to get hot and did not want to know if it was getting hot—then you would have simply disregarded the evidence suggesting that the pot was not being heated and continued preparing the sauce rather than rectifying the belief about the pot being heated. Evidence relating to the state of the water is, at this point, irrelevant since you have no reason whatsoever to consider it. The point is, this passive intelligent adaptable behavior allows us constantly to identify relevant evidence and relate that evidence to some belief that is already possessed. It is by this mechanism that Jack achieves his avoidance behavior since, to Jack, the evidence relating to the state of his health is irrelevant and may be filtered from his conscious sensory experience.

Why does Jack engage in this self-deception? As the first-order motivationalist account suggests, Jack's self-deception is caused by a motivational state *E*, which results from a desire for the universe to be a certain way, and this state causes Jack to consider evidence in a motivationally-biased way. Jack desires merely not to be sick. In other words, a subject *S* is in *E* and therefore desires that some proposition *P* has a certain truth-value. This is not equivalent to desiring to *know* the truth-value of some proposition *P*. The desire not to be sick does not necessitate a sufficient motivation to know the truth of the state of one's health.

Suppose that a subject *S* has achieved self-deception according to the new first-order motivationalist account. Subject *S* possesses a desire for the truth-value of a proposition *P* to obtain, and *S*, after considering

evidence in a biased way, believes that P. What reason does S have to consider additional evidence relevant to the truth-value of P if S has no motivation to do so? Because S already believes falsely that P, any additional evidence relevant to P can suggest either P is true or suggest P is false. In the case that the evidence suggests that P is true, then S further confirms belief in P, which does not warrant S to change the belief that P. In the case that the evidence suggests that P is false, S is confronted with evidence that does warrant S to change the belief that P, and this evidence would probably irritate S and be filtered out of S's considerations.

It makes sense why Jack would avoid medical information. Because Jack merely desires not to be sick and because Jack already believes that he is not sick, Jack has no reason to consider evidence. Jack actually has a reason to avoid evidence because it can, at best, not challenge his belief and, at worst, challenge his belief. This is the reason why Jack behaves in a way such that an observer would have justification to attribute to him the belief that he is sick when Jack really just is not motivated to know the truth of the matter.

THE “NORMATIVITY” QUALITY AND THE FIFTH CONDITION

This account still explains why the “normativity” aspect of self-deception arises, which is required for an explanation of the common-sense moral intuition. Is there anything intuitively objectionable about wanting a situation to be some way and at the same time not wanting to know if the situation actually is that way? I say yes. The moral objection is to the motivationally-biased consideration of evidence. An additional objection would be that an indifference to the truth is counterproductive to achieving that which a subject is motivated to do.

There is something intuitively wrong about not wanting to know how something is and at the same time wanting that thing to be some way. Here are some examples:

- I want my bike to work, but I do not necessarily want to know if it will work.
- I want the final exam to be on Monday, but I do not necessarily want to know if it will be on Monday.

Intuitively enough, the person making these statements would be culpable for his or her own trouble. We now have grounds for accusing the subject of irrationality, so why the “normativity” quality of self-deception arises can be explained in the new account.

With the how and why answered and the first-order motivationalist account amended, it has been shown that the first-order motivationalist account survives Fernández’s criticism. This is because (1) unamended first-order motivationalism already satisfies the desiderata, and because (2) this section has shown that the new set of sufficient conditions holds for the specific type of self-deception characterized by “conflict” and “normativity.”

CONCLUSION:

The new set of sufficient conditions allows first-order motivationalism to explain forms of self-deception including those characterized by “normativity” and “conflict.” The philosophical position of first-order motivationalism has survived Fernández’s criticism while at the same time satisfying the desiderata. I amended first-order motivationalism by adding the condition that the subject does not possess a sufficient motivation to know what the truth-value of P actually is. With this amendment, first-order motivationalism survives Fernández’s critique because this new formulation of first-order motivationalism can explain why the “conflict” aspect of self-deception arises and because it satisfies the desiderata.

In an ideal world, motivation for some outcome to obtain should be coupled with a motivation to know the relevant circumstances

necessary for the achievement of that outcome; the lack of such motivation may lead to unintentional “filtering” of pertinent information. This also indicates that one can avoid self-deception even if one desires a situation to be some way as long as one also desires to know and is thus easily motivated to know how the situation actually is. Merely hoping that a situation is some way is not a sufficient condition for avoiding self-deception. One must avoid indifference toward the truth so that one may truly prevent self-deception.

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