

About Metaphors and Monsters

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Review Essay:

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Abstract: Metaphor analysis is an established part of qualitative social research. Therefore, the current book by Peter ADAMS, a psychologist from New Zealand who has been working for years on the renewal of rhetoric, is taken here as an opportunity to reflect on the power of metaphors. First, I will outline the author's theory that metaphors are actors of their own kind, that metaphors can combine with other metaphors and then grow into "monster metaphors" that shape not only people's thoughts but also their actions. In the second part of this article, ADAMS' position is then subjected to criticism from an action theory perspective.

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"We generally give our ideas of the unknown
the color of our ideas of the known" (PESSOA, 1995 [1982], p.62).¹

1. Metaphor Analysis as Part of Qualitative Social Research

Metaphors, i.e., saying that phenomenon A is essentially similar to phenomenon B, can be found in all types of oral and written communication. Metaphors are used either consciously or routinely by human actors as a means to illustrate something to other people. They are used to convince people of something, to deter them or to lure them onto a specific path: whenever the aim is to persuade people to do something with the help of communicative action, metaphors are usually utilized. Metaphor analysis therefore has a special and particularly important place in any kind of hermeneutics (REICHERTZ, 2016) and discourse analysis (KELLER, 2011). [1]

For centuries, classical rhetoric in particular has been concerned with the various forms of metaphor and their conditions for success and power. Only in recent decades have social scientists increasingly begun to analyze the forms and effects of metaphors in the context of qualitative research (HARLOFF, 2019; KASTEIN, 2021; PFALLER, 2022; SCHMITT, 2003, 2010, 2011, 2017). A combination of social science and rhetorical analysis has so far been rather rare. Therefore, it is also interesting for qualitative social research to take a look at the book "Monster Metaphors: When Rhetoric Runs Amok" by the renowned social psychologist Peter ADAMS from 2023, precisely because the author claims to be able to give new impetus to rhetoric with his book. Peter ADAMS' book can be understood as a late homage to Paul FEYERABEND (1924-1994). ADAMS was greatly impressed and influenced by FEYERABEND's lectures that he attended as an 18-year-old student at the University of Auckland in the summer semesters of 1975 and 1976. [2]

In the following, I will elaborate and present ADAMS' main arguments in order to then critically assess the book from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. First, I will present ADAMS' argumentation (Sections 2-4), then my own position on the function of metaphors (Section 5). I will then elaborate ADAMS' central thesis, according to which metaphors lead a life of their own and combat other metaphors (Section 6) and examine ADAMS' narrative style (Section 7). Lastly, I will critique and evaluate ADAMS' argumentation (Sections 8-9). [3]

1 All translations from non-English texts are mine.

2. First Impression: The Title

Peter ADAMS is a psychologist working in the Department of Medicine at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where he has long worked on gambling addiction and earned an international reputation. In his new work, "Monster Metaphors," he looks at rhetoric. In particular, he examines the effect of metaphors when they become prevalent in a society and, in his view, become monsters. [4]

The book itself consists of three parts. In Chapters 2-4 he explains how *monster* metaphors are created and how they behave. In the second part, namely Chapters 5-9, four case studies show how *monsters* grow up and become dominant, while in the third part (chapters 10-12) strategies are explored on how to resist these metaphors and how to break their dominance. [5]

The title of the book "Monster Metaphors: When Rhetoric Runs Amok" deserves special appreciation. ADAMS' trick is to describe the metaphor itself with another metaphor, namely that of the monster, which is why the book then repeatedly describes the way of life of monsters (which appear in the book mainly in the form of dinosaurs). A striking pointillism drawing of a Godzilla-like- dinosaur in the colors red-black-blue adorns the cover of the book. [6]

ADAMS' main thesis is that metaphors sometimes become monsters and chase away whatever competition is found in the wild. Another metaphor used by ADAMS is that rhetoric, not a metaphor, sometimes runs amok, especially when a metaphor has grown into a monster. This can be understood to mean that rhetoric (if one takes the subtitle seriously) then destroys everything that stands in its way. So much for the message of the title. [7]

3. What are the Questions of the Book?

What questions is the book about? In short, ADAMS is concerned with clarifying why some metaphors flourish and spread and why they work. Or, in other words, how do metaphors succeed in becoming big, in displacing others, in killing and devouring others, and thereby becoming even bigger themselves? Why are metaphors convincing? Are they rooted in our experience? And to what extent have they already penetrated our bodies and become flesh? Here ADAMS clearly refers to the book "Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and It's Challenge to Western Thought" by LAKOFF and JOHNSON (1999). [8]

4. How Does ADAMS Situate Himself in the Discourse?

ADAMS sees his book as part of a new rhetoric (p.32), which has been used for a 100 years to restore the lost reputation of classical rhetoric. He critically engages with classics of rhetoric, in particular Max BLACK, Donald DAVIDSON, and Robert FOGELIN. For ADAMS, their approaches are inadequate. In contrast, his chief witnesses include authors such as Roland BARTHES, Kenneth BURKE, Jacques DUBOIS, Hans-Georg GADAMER, Roman JACOBSON, and Ivor RICHARDS. These authors all agree that they attribute language (not speech as a communicative act) to an active role in the construction of knowledge and understanding. [9]

ADAMS' emphasis on metaphor and the mental content that metaphors trigger is already unmistakable here. Contrary to classical rhetoric (for example that of ARISTOTLE, which attributed a decisive role for persuasiveness to the speaker and his character²), in ADAMS book there is a clear turning away from the speaker and a greater importance placed on the effect of the speech. For him, it is primarily speech and its forms that have power. [10]

Within the scholarly discourse on metaphors, ADAMS largely subscribes to the cognitive approach of LAKOFF and JOHNSON (1980). According to them, metaphors primarily represent cognitive concepts. They achieve their effect because they awaken mental contents (frames) and thus suggest actions to people. Like LAKOFF and JOHNSON, however, ADAMS does not reduce the cognitive effect of metaphors to individual consciousness; he too (like NIETZSCHE in 1980 [1873]) supposes that metaphors become part of a culture and, through the culture of a society, compel people to think certain thoughts and, through that, to have certain attitudes, feelings, and actions. [11]

Like LAKOFF and JOHNSON, ADAMS believes that metaphors can do quite a lot. For him, they can have a great impact under certain circumstances. For example, when metaphors become very significant and dominant in a field to the point of influencing and shaping people's thoughts, they also become part of their bodies and thus become an "embodied mind" that controls human actions. Incidentally, the argumentation is similar to that of LAKOFF and JOHNSON (1999). [12]

In ADAMS' view, metaphors possess a life of their own, they evolve, travel, and are always changing (p.8). Metaphors can die out and rise again, they do not belong to an individual consciousness but are part of a culture. In the words of the author,

"[w]hile monster metaphors are, of course, not autonomous sentient beings, there are some aspects that give this device some credence First, monster metaphors do not belong to individual minds; they certainly travel through individual minds but they also

2 In his rhetoric, ARISTOTLE rightfully ascribed great importance to the speaker for the persuasive power of the speech. For him, the character of the speaker, his ethos, has "almost the most important persuasive power" (1999 [335 a.Ch.], p.12; see also REICHERTZ, 1999a).

travel separately and belong more to a collective or a community of minds. Secondly, the strength and influence of a monster metaphor varies over time; they are birthed, they grow, they mature and they can die" (p.8). [13]

However, ADAMS makes a significant extension to LAKOFF and JOHNSON's approach regarding the scope and interconnectedness of metaphors. Here he takes up considerations of David GORDON (1978) and Dedre GENTER (1983) and develops their ideas of metaphors in his own way. In order to better understand the meaning of this extension, I would like to briefly discuss the specificity of metaphors. [14]

5. Metaphors as Media of Thinking and Acting

For ADAMS, a metaphor, that is common in rhetoric, is a stylistic figure of speech in a particular form. Namely, in the form of saying that a particular phenomenon A is like phenomenon B, or that phenomenon A and phenomenon B are isomorphic. To give a few examples: life is (like) a roller coaster (Ronan KEATING³); people act out in social interaction (GOFFMAN 1959), passionate play is an addiction (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), or, following ADAMS, doctors are the new high priests of our society and metaphors can grow into wild animals. [15]

As a rule, however, someone who uses metaphors never asserts a complete isomorphism between phenomenon A and phenomenon B, but always only in certain respects. And this is where ADAMS comes in. He argues that metaphors do have the power to equate not only phenomena A and B, but also the relations that A and B each have to each other. They have this power because metaphors never specify in which respect they assert an isomorphism of two phenomena, rather it depends on how far the users make or allow an equation. [16]

Accordingly, the trick of a metaphor is not only to claim that two things are isomorphic, but also to claim that some or all of the relations in which the two things stand have an isomorphic relation (p.220). Indeed, if one says that doctors are the high priests of the present day, then one is also saying that all relations that connote doctor are also the same as the relations that connote high priest. If one were to spell out ADAMS' thesis, then sick people are close to sinners and doctors then have a good relationship with God. This thought is extremely interesting, but also bold [17]

And sometimes the idea may be true. But for many or most metaphors, I think this thesis is not empirically accurate. For example, classical rhetoric has maintained that the equation of phenomenon A with phenomenon B is always valid only in certain respects; that is, life can be compared to a roller coaster only in the respect that there is also often an up-and-down and that this up-and-down can sometimes be frightening but also fun. The fact that you must pay an entrance fee, a roller coaster can only be found in certain places, and it is part of

3 This refers to his song "Life is a rollercoaster" from his debut solo album from the year 2000, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpBTTIXzuGY> [Accessed: December 23, 2023].

an amusement park demonstrates that not all characteristics of a roller coaster apply to life. As another example, comparing life with a play. Life has some similarities with a play, but is definitely not always a stage: we only "act" in certain respects, namely in the sense that we take on social roles and recite certain scripts. In real life, we do not really perform like actors in a play because the consequences are real, there is no story arc that closes after three or four acts and can be repeatedly performed in a similar way. When King Oedipus dies, he comes back to life after the performance, only to die again at the next performance. In real life, people die only once. [18]

According to common usage, metaphors are linguistic signs (usually lexemes or groups of lexemes) that are used against their normal, simple and straight usage (normally in a figurative sense, see REICHERTZ 1999b). If metaphors were taken at their word, what was said would make no sense and one could only react "nonsensically." The use of metaphors suggests not to take the lexemes literally, but to understand them as a reduction of an abstract fact to a sensually perceptible, concrete image and to treat them as such. The listener is asked to imagine, in a certain way, the unfamiliar as the familiar. Metaphors do not say anything, their use *show* first and foremost. Every metaphor is based on an analogy. Starting from the assertion (not put up for discussion) that two things or processes are in some respects similar in their structure (and in other respects dissimilar), the conclusion is drawn (or suggested) that these things or processes are also similar with regard to certain problems of action. [19]

Metaphors necessarily are the result, so my opinion, from communicative constructions, i.e., from the communicative creation of order for the purpose of meaningful further action. And therefore, metaphors are media of thinking and acting—even if in the medium of language⁴. What is meant is that the use of metaphors influences the thinking of members of a culture through their cultural ties. Certainly, metaphors can also be media of individual thinking, but this is (neither in my opinion nor in ADAMS') not primarily intended. Through their use, the culture to which they belong also creates paths for social thinking, i.e., it creates pathways for people's thinking and thus also shapes the thinking of individuals. [20]

Metaphors are predominately used when, in the face of new developments and phenomena, a (certain) order should and must be established mentally so that "meaningful" action can continue. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the wake of the development of novelty, a multitude of metaphors will continue to arise. And then it must always be discussed whether and when a metaphor is overwrought. Those using metaphors do not explicitly claim that every aspect a metaphorical object possesses is identical to every property of the real-life object.

4 See also the work of LAKOFF and JOHNSON, which is to be understood as a sociology of knowledge. They come to the following conclusion regarding the relationship between metaphor and language: "Metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language" (1980, p.153). In revising this cognitivist position, LAKOFF and JOHNSON (2003 [1980]) withdrew the psychological-individual concept of cognition and addressed culture more as the instance that pre-structures thought, affects, and physicality (for criticism of LAKOFF and JOHNSON, 1980, see above all SCHMITT, 2017).

Rather metaphors only suggest that specific aspects (and thus limited respects) of A coincide with the aspects of B. [21]

6. The Life of Metaphors

In ADAMS' view, metaphors live, develop, and because they travel around the world and can combine with other linguistic forms, increase their power. Metaphors tend to form groups (p.24), are related to each other, and form a field. They support each other and justify each other. According to ADAMS, the "holy trinity" consists of metaphors, synecdoches, and metonymies: the first positions the framework, the second builds categorical connections, and the third forms associative connections. Together, they are almost unbeatable. He argues all three figures are equally important, they overlap, they complement each other, and they reinforce each other. [22]

Because in the sense of ADAMS metaphors can describe what we experience, explain how things work, activate our imagination, and ultimately evoke strong emotions (pp.55ff.). In short, metaphors help people express themselves, explain the world, and evoke emotion. According to ADAMS, metaphors bridge gaps in the explanation of the world (p.63), and one can only agree with him. [23]

ADAMS thesis is that metaphors have a seductive power of their own. They are tools of thought and can therefore influence, shape, and even control people's beliefs and actions. However, the power lies not only in putting things in order, but in creating an order of the relations of things (p.243). The function of metaphors is then (following ADAMS) not only to say that a single thing is like another thing in certain respects, but the function of metaphors may be to transfer the order of things that we know to unknown things and assert that their order is similar. Metaphors help to make unknown terrain more accessible (p.23). The order itself does not have to be completely expressed in the metaphor, but the metaphor ensures that people recognize the unspoken and use it to find their own way through the unknown. Metaphors would convince without providing reasons; they would light a fire in our consciousness (ibid.), fuel our fantasies, and help us to understand. According to ADAMS, the latter is the prerequisite for us to be able to act. With metaphors one can, and here I expressly agree with ADAMS, sometimes get to the heart of something very precisely and encourage people to develop and express a new idea. [24]

However, for ADAMS, metaphors also have a dark side, as they can close off the world rather than opening it to new possibilities. One example of this is the equation of mental stress with physical illness. In recent decades, it has become commonplace to speak of *mental illness* and to build a healthcare system around mental illness that corresponds to the system for physical illnesses. Despite various counter-movements, such as anti-psychiatry in the 1970s, it has not been possible to break the power of the metaphor of mental illness. Metaphors, once they have achieved such dominance, would then act as barriers, cause mental blocks, and close off new readings and alternative interpretations. [25]

In addition to the theoretical chapters at the beginning of the book, there are four chapters with empirical examples (pp.90-185), in which ADAMS critically investigates four leading metaphors. First, he uses discourse analysis to examine the idea of *mental illness*, which, in his perspective, is conceived in parallel to physical illness. Second, he looks at the metaphor of the *free-flowing market*. Third, he explains that the metaphor of science produces a *mirror of nature*. And last, ADAMS expresses the idea that men are naturally *superior*. [26]

Of particular interest to ADAMS is the discussion of science as producing a mirror of nature. He is very keen to deconstruct this metaphor. This concern was, if one believes his words (p.140), a decisive motive for writing this book on monster metaphors. As a reader, I wonder whether ADAMS is generally concerned with the form and power of metaphors, or rather with a critique of the conditions of society and empirical science, which still allows itself to be heavily guided by the dominant metaphor as the mirror of nature. [27]

The last two chapters of the book are devoted to the question of how monster metaphors can be combated (p.224) and who is responsible for creating monster-free spaces; whereby ADAMS sees three areas as having a duty: politics, science, and the media. All together, they are responsible. For him, individual people play a central role here, fighting either as knights or as fools against the dragon (pp.208ff.), i.e., the monster metaphor. [28]

This shows very nicely how closely ADAMS is connected to Paul FEYERABEND, but it is precisely here that he is unfaithful to him. If ADAMS focuses primarily on the power of the rhetorical figure in the metaphors, he focuses primarily on the people in the fight. Instead of politics, he is therefore more interested in linguistic criticism and a vehement plea for political and scientific pluralism. In his counter-proposal, ADAMS is primarily concerned with creating spaces that are free of monster metaphors, as these have—due to their destructive potential (p.230)—weakened society, prevented progress, and opened the way to corruption and particularism. [29]

7. ADAMS as Narrator

As already mentioned, ADAMS' book is essentially a homage to Paul FEYERABEND. He shares FEYERABEND's skepticism about the idea that science can only recognize the world in one way. ADAMS' entire book is an assault on the power of linguistic metaphors, which restrict creativity and channel thinking because they give the impression that there is only one way to truth or happiness. The book is a plea for freedom of thought and independent thinking. [30]

Paul FEYERABEND's resistance to the established scientific establishment and their way of writing can also be seen in the narrative and writing style of ADAMS. He uses or cultivates a unique and stubborn way of writing. Again and again, he appears quite deliberately as the narrator, telling long stories about the monster called metaphor, who suppresses or even kills his rivals. In these narrative sections, the monster metaphor first takes shape and then comes to life. ADAMS

gives it this life. He creates the monster as a living being. The monster wants to get bigger and bigger and dominate more and more. It strives for supremacy, fights, and destroys its competitor metaphors.

"... but, every now and then, one metaphor manages to front up to the current monster and to survive, ready to fight again. Then, in the process of a series of encounters, it might just summon enough might to defeat the incumbent monster and take over the rule. During the *regnant stage*, the now fully formed monster, hardened by constant sparing and conflict, has attained a dominant position from which it can rule over its realm" (pp.71f.). [31]

In ADAMS' work, a metaphor fighting for power becomes overtime this all-devouring monster that stands alone and rules—and this monster then forces people to think in a certain way and thus determines their actions. Over the course of the book, more and more stories are told about this monster, so that it takes on more shape and comes to life with each chapter. In this way, stories are often told at the beginning of a chapter to illustrate a concept which is then theoretically explained further in the discussion. To understand ADAMS' argument, it would be sufficient to read only these narrative parts. [32]

At the end, Peter ADAMS' literary alter ego accuses the monster with the following words: "You're only big because you've wiped out your competition. [...]. You force people to think there's only one way of looking at things—your way or the highway" (p.247). But the monster meekly returns the reproach: "Ah, everyone appreciates order. No one really wants to upset the order to which they have become accustomed" (ibid.). This is certainly good from a literary and didactic point of view, but in terms of the matter at hand, the transformation of metaphors into living beings with intentions seems to me to be overdrawn with a past and a future. [33]

8. Criticism of Monster Metaphors

Calling metaphors "monsters" and bringing them to life as such in narrative texts is a nice rhetorical trick or a personification. But ADAMS gives the metaphors more life and power than they actually have. What ADAMS repeatedly overlooks are the people who use metaphors. Once established, metaphors may be routinized and used by people without clear awareness, written down, disseminated, and taken on journeys. But before the routine, there are always critical phases in which the appropriateness of metaphors is consciously discussed. There are phases, especially at the beginning, in which metaphors are consciously preferred and deliberately used by people and institutions, precisely because they promote the interests of these people and interest groups. Making reference to New Zealand's neoliberal "Rogernomic" policies of the 1980s, ADAMS notes that,

"[w]ith the promise of a stronger economy benefiting everybody, the ruling clique led by the personable figure of its minister of finance, Roger Douglas, implemented a raft

of changes that included removing most forms of subsidy, cutting benefits, selling state assets, restructuring down government agencies and reforming taxes" (p.127). [34]

ADAMS shows all this again and again in the examples in the empirical chapters—namely how certain metaphors are brought into play and made dominant by certain groups with certain interests. For example, when he explains the metaphor of the free market and shows how certain groups of interests can be brought into play (pp.115ff., 127ff.). Nevertheless, he sticks to linguistic criticism and his only means is enlightenment, or more precisely, his only means is the publication of a book. [35]

I think ADAMS' definition of the power of metaphors from language falls short; the power does not come from the linguistic form of metaphors. Metaphors are not living beings, they are a special kind of human sign. More precisely, using metaphors is a special kind of communicative action in which every form of social and communicative power (REICHERTZ, 1999b) is used. Metaphors do not expand, but people use metaphors. In cultures metaphors will be used in an increasing variety of areas. It always takes human actors to claim that a metaphor makes something comprehensible, and it always takes human actors to believe this. [36]

The metaphor contains a message. However, the message comes from people who bring it into the world and vouch for it because it is always people who use metaphors and use them for their own purposes. Metaphors do not have a life of their own. Without their use by people, they would be dead. Only their use by human actors brings them to life and keeps them there. People let metaphors die when they say, for example, that passionate gambling on slot machines are not caused by the gambling devil himself, but rather is an expression of a mental illness (namely, an addiction known as "pathological gambling"). In this case, the religious metaphor of the gambling devil did not die by itself, but its death was caused by medical actors who wanted to drag passionate gambling out of the realm of the religious and into the realm of the medical. [37]

There is no doubt that metaphors, when used by many, can be linguistic constructs that predominate in a culture and are therefore part of the dominant culture, influencing the thoughts and actions of all members of the culture. It then appears as if they are something substantial that influences people, but they are nonetheless expressions made by people for people. [38]

From this perspective, the power of metaphors results above all from the social and communicative power of the speakers—this is one important source of the power of metaphors. However, users can only develop power through the use of metaphors if they succeed in threading themselves into the culture of the respective society through the use of the metaphor—in other words, if the metaphor is able to meaningfully connect the past, present, and future of a society. The use of metaphor must therefore be a special achievement. [39]

This special achievement of the metaphor could be seen in the fact that it not only hears and understands the voices of the present, but also the voices of the past and the future⁵. Due to this multi-perspectivity, it can connect the present to the past as well as orient it towards a future design. Passionate gambling on vending machines could then be understood as a current variation of gambling for real stuff like money (found in all cultures) with cards, dice etc., which is no longer explained with the metaphor of the gambling devil, but instead the metaphor of mental illness. This metaphor then makes it possible to use the means of the present time (in this case, psychotherapy) to deal with current and future problems, and to hold out the prospect of a fundamental solution to the issue in the future. [40]

With such an interpretation of the present, the respective action is placed in the past and the future and thus also given a transcendent meaning. In other words, through the (successful) metaphor, an important current and serious action problem for a group is solved, and a solution is proposed for which the future of the group is connected to its present and past. [41]

The use of metaphors therefore not only connects the new to something arbitrarily familiar (and thus in a certain sense "explains" it as a case of something familiar), but also links the new to something of familiarity through its use. In this way, users of metaphors assert an analogy, interpreting the new as a continuation or variant of something familiar. They do this by emphasizing some aspects of the new, fading out some features, dramatizing others—in short, metaphor users interpret the new as part of a common world. The users, not the metaphors, provide the new with (action) meaning. And it is only on the basis of this sense-making by human actors that metaphors suggest readings, ways of dealing, values, and also follow-up research. [42]

The social discourse about the "appropriate" metaphor is therefore always a social dispute between those "interested" in the new, namely the inventors, the producers, the users, the educators, the sociologists etc. about what meaning; i.e., what practical consequences the metaphor has or should have. Metaphors are therefore not only media for the development of a cognitive order, but also and above all media for the communicative construction of reality (KELLER, KNOBLAUCH & REICHERTZ, 2013). [43]

5 Here I take up MEAD's reflections on the special achievement of charismatic identity. This must "understand the voices of the past and the future. Only in this way can an identity secure a voice that is more powerful than that of the community" (1973 [1934], p.211, see also pp.260ff.).

9. What is the Message?

What ADAMS wants with his book, in terms of relativizing the power of metaphors by reflecting on them, is in this sense the reformulation of a statement by NIETZSCHE that truth is the lie that we have forgotten is a lie, "So what is truth? A moving army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically enhanced, transferred, decorated and which, after long use, seem fixed, canonical, and binding to a people: the truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are such." (NIETZSCHE, 1980 [1873], p.314)⁶. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, one can only agree with this. [44]

Overall, the book is a knowledgeable, exciting, irritating, and also a political book. It is definitely worth reading. [45]

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6 According to NIETZSCHE, people need a truth in order to be able to coordinate their actions. If people do not have the same truth, this becomes very difficult. LUHMANN (1984) disagreed, stating that consensus is no longer necessary in differentiated societies.

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