THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN CRIMINAL PROFILING: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *This article examines the fundamental role of philosophy in criminal profiling, with an emphasis on epistemological, methodological, hermeneutical, and phenomenological dimensions. Through an interdisciplinary analysis that integrates perspectives from the philosophy of science (Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos), epistemology (Quine, Goldman, Ross), hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricoeur, Heidegger), phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz) and the philosophy of mind (Polanyi, Ryle, Dreyfus), the study demonstrates how philosophical frameworks provide essential theoretical foundations for understanding the interpretative processes involved in constructing psychological profiles of unknown perpetrators. The research synthesises perspectives from forensic psychology and Western philosophical traditions to support the idea that profiling is not just a technical procedure, but a complex interpretative practice based on profound philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge, truth, causality and human understanding. By elucidating these philosophical foundations, the article contributes both to the development of theoretical criminology and to applied criminalistic practice.*

Keywords: *criminal profiling, philosophy of criminology, epistemology, hermeneutics, phenomenology, tacit knowledge, judicial psychology, legal epistemology*

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Introduction

Criminal profiling, defined as the systematic process of analysing behavioural traces and constructing probabilistic characteristics of an unknown offender, is one of the most complex and controversial investigative methods in the contemporary criminalistics arsenal[1] . In recent decades, this practice has undergone exponential development, evolving from an intuitive technique based on the experience of law enforcement agencies to a discipline that aspires to the status of applied science, based on empirical data and robust theoretical models. Recent research in the post-Soviet space, including the works of Bahteev and Lev[2], as well as the studies of Enikolopov and Li on the psychological aspects of profiling[3], have contributed substantially to the methodological understanding of this field. However, although the literature pays substantial attention to the technical and methodological aspects of profiling, the philosophical foundations underpinning this interpretative practice are rarely examined.

This gap is significant from an epistemological perspective. As researchers Bruce Arrigo and Christopher Williams argue in their seminal work Philosophy, Crime, and Criminology, the academic separation between philosophy and criminology has obscured the fact that notions of crime, law, and justice are deeply rooted in philosophical traditions[4] . Any practice of knowledge production is inevitably influenced by the epistemological, ontological, and methodological presuppositions of its practitioners. In the context of criminal profiling, these philosophical presuppositions often remain implicit and unexamined, which can lead to serious problems of methodological rigour and interpretive validity.

This article aims to fill this gap by systematically examining the philosophical dimensions of criminal profiling. We argue that a deep understanding of the philosophical foundations is not a sterile academic exercise, but a practical necessity that can improve both the methodological rigour and the validity of the interpretations produced by profilers. By clarifying the philosophical assumptions implicit in profiling practice, we can identify both the strengths and limitations inherent in this investigative method.

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[1] Y.D. Bakhteev, D.A. Lednyov, "The Concept and Properties of Criminal Profiling", in *Izvestiya of Tula State University. Economic and Legal Sciences,* No. 4-2, 2020, pp. 38-44.

[2] Ibidem, p. 40.

[3] S.N. Enikolopov, N.A. Li, "Psychological Features of Criminal Profiling", in *Psychological Science and Education,* No. 5, 2007, pp. 295-302.

[4] B. Arrigo, C. Williams, *Philosophy, Crime, and Criminology,* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006, pp. 1–15.

1. The epistemological foundations of criminal profiling

Epistemology – the theory of knowledge – is the essential philosophical foundation for understanding the nature of knowledge produced through profiling. Essentially, profiling raises fundamental epistemological questions: what kind of knowledge does profiling produce? Under what conditions can we consider this knowledge valid? What are the epistemic limits of inferences based on behavioural evidence?

Karl Popper, one of the central figures in 20th-century philosophy of science, proposed the criterion of falsifiability as the demarcation between science and pseudoscience[5]. According to Popper, a theory is scientific not if it can be confirmed by multiple observations, but if it is formulated in such a way that it can in principle be contradicted by empirical evidence. This position represents a radical critique of traditional inductivism and proposes a deductive view of the scientific method[6]. Theories are not constructed from observations, but are creative conjectures that must be subjected to rigorous tests of falsification.

Applying Popper's criterion to criminal profiling raises serious challenges. First, profiles are often formulated in a sufficiently vague manner that they cannot be definitively falsified. For example, a statement such as 'the perpetrator is probably between 25 and 45 years old, with secondary or higher education, possibly with military or security experience' is compatible with such a wide range of possibilities that almost any real suspect could be fitted into this profile by post-hoc interpretation.

Secondly, there is a serious problem of confirmation bias in reporting profiling successes. As empirical studies on the operational usefulness of profiling demonstrate, there is a systematic tendency to selectively report cases where the profile proved 'correct' (often through generous retrospective interpretation), while failures are underreported or ignored. This asymmetry in reporting makes it difficult to objectively assess the effectiveness of the method and suggests that profiling, in its current form, does not fully satisfy the Popperian criterion of rigorous testability.

However, it would be wrong to completely reject profiling based on these Popperian considerations. Even Popper acknowledged that falsifiability is not an absolute criterion that applies uniformly across all scientific fields[7]. He developed more nuanced concepts such as 'corroboration' and 'verosimilitude' to recognise that theories can have varying degrees of empirical support and proximity to the truth, even if they

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[5] Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery,* London: Routledge, 1959 [1934], pp. 40–42.

[6] Ibidem, pp. 27–34.

[7] K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge,* London: Routledge, 1963, pp. 33–65.

cannot be completely falsified or verified. In this more nuanced perspective, profiling can be understood as a practice that produces plausible conjectures which, although not fully testable in the strict Popperian sense, can be evaluated by their degree of consistency with available data and their practical usefulness in guiding investigation.

Thomas Kuhn, in his groundbreaking work The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), offered an alternative understanding of scientific progress through the concept of paradigm—a shared conceptual and methodological framework that defines legitimate problems and acceptable methods within a discipline[8] . Kuhn argued that 'normal science' takes place within an established paradigm, while 'scientific revolutions' occur when incompatible paradigms clash and one is eventually replaced by another.

From this Kuhnian perspective, criminal profiling can be understood as being in a pre-paradigmatic phase, characterised by fundamental disagreements regarding the appropriate methodology, criteria for success, and even definitions of central concepts. There are, for example, serious disputes about whether profiling should be a predominantly clinical activity, based on the experience and intuition of the expert, or predominantly actuarial, based on statistical analyses and formal predictive models.

Willard Van Orman Quine argued that scientific theories are fundamentally underdetermined by empirical data—that is, the same evidence can support multiple, incompatible explanatory theories[9] . This epistemological problem, known as the Duhem-Quine thesis, is particularly acute in forensic profiling. The same set of behavioural traces can be consistent with very different psychological profiles of the perpetrator. For example, the meticulous organisation of the crime scene could indicate either an obsessive-compulsive personality, professional experience in fields requiring attention to detail, or even a deliberate effort by the perpetrator to create a false impression in order to mislead investigators.

The problem of underdetermination is exacerbated by what philosophers call 'theoretical loading of observation' – the fact that what we observe is influenced by the theories and expectations we already have[10] . An investigator trained in psychodynamic psychology will 'see' different meanings in the same evidence compared to one trained in cognitive psychology or positivist criminology. This theoretical loading cannot be

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[8] T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 10-22.

[9] W. Van Orman Quine, *"Two Dogmas of Empiricism",* in *The Philosophical Review,* Vol. 60, No. 1, 1951, pp. 20-43.

[10] N.R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1958, pp. 4-30.

completely eliminated – it is an inevitable condition of all human observation and interpretation.

Alvin Goldman, in his work on social epistemology, argued that the production of knowledge is fundamentally a social process, and that institutional structures and social practices play an important role in determining the epistemic quality of the knowledge produced ([11]). In the context of profiling, this perspective suggests that the validity of a profile depends not only on the individual competence of the profiler, but also on the institutional structures that regulate the practice of profiling – professional training standards, quality control mechanisms, peer review protocols, and methodological transparency.

From this perspective, improving profiling is not just a matter of perfecting individual techniques, but requires systemic interventions to create institutional conditions that promote epistemic rigour and discourage flawed epistemic practices such as selective confirmation of hypotheses.

2. The hermeneutic dimension: profiling as an interpretative practice

Hermeneutics – the art and science of interpretation – provides an essential philosophical framework for understanding how investigators construct meaning from behavioural traces left at the crime scene. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the central figures in philosophical hermeneutics, argued that any act of understanding involves a 'fusion of horizons' between the interpreter and the object of interpretation[12]. In the context of profiling, this concept suggests that the investigator cannot access the meaning of a behavioural trace in a neutral, objective way, but always interprets it through the prism of his own horizon of understanding – formed by previous experience, theoretical knowledge, cultural prejudices and cognitive expectations.

The hermeneutic circle, a central concept in hermeneutic philosophy from Friedrich Schleiermacher through Wilhelm Dilthey to Gadamer, describes the dialectic between the part and the whole in the process of interpretation: understanding the parts (individual traces) depends on understanding the whole (the general context of the crime and the presumed personality of the perpetrator), and understanding the whole depends on understanding the parts[13]. This process is not a vicious circle,

[11] A. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 3–24.

[12] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Continuum, London, 2004 [1960], pp. 302–307.

[13] Ibidem, pp. 265–271.

but represents a hermeneutic spiral in which understanding deepens progressively through successive iterations.

In profiling, the investigator begins with specific observations – for example, the method of entering the home, the selection of the victim, post-crime behaviour – and gradually builds an overall picture of the perpetrator's personality and motivation. This overall picture then guides the reinterpretation of specific evidence in an iterative process of hermeneutic refinement.

Heidegger's concept of pre-understanding (Vorverständnis) is fundamental to understanding the limits and possibilities of profiling[14] . Martin Heidegger showed in Being and Time that any interpretation starts from a structure of pre-understanding – a set of assumptions and expectations that make interpretation possible, but which, at the same time, limit it. In profiling, this pre-understanding includes psychological theories about personality and criminal behaviour, previous experience with similar cases, and the conceptual categories through which the investigator organises their observations.

Gadamer expanded on this idea with the concept of 'productive prejudices' (produktive Vorurteile)[15]. Contrary to the common understanding of prejudices as exclusively negative, Gadamer argues that certain prejudices are not only inevitable but also productive – they open up certain possibilities for understanding. For profiling, this means that the investigator's prior experience and knowledge, while it may introduce certain biases, is also essential to the ability to recognise meaningful patterns in evidence that would otherwise appear chaotic or arbitrary.

Paul Ricoeur, in his works on narrative identity, offers a particularly relevant perspective for understanding how profiling constructs representations of criminal personality[16]. Ricoeur argues that personal identity is not a fixed substantial entity, but is constituted through coherent narratives about oneself. We understand who we are through the stories we tell about our lives – stories that give continuity and meaning to our fragmented temporal experience.

Applied to profiling, the concept of narrative identity suggests that what the investigator constructs is essentially a narrative about the perpetrator's identity, based on 'narrative fragments' – behavioural traces left at the crime

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[14] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1962 [1927], pp. 188–195.

[15] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method, op. cit.,* pp. 271–285.

[16] P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 113–139.

scene. The fundamental hermeneutic challenge is that this narrative must be constructed retroactively and without direct access to the subject's self-understanding – the central element of narrative identity in Ricoeur's conceptualisation.

Ricoeur also developed the concept of 'hermeneutics of suspicion', inspired by what he calls 'masters of suspicion' – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud[17]. These thinkers share the suspicion that the apparent meaning of human actions and statements often conceals deeper, unconscious or masked motivations and meanings. For Marx, behaviour is determined by class economic interests; for Freud, by repressed unconscious desires; for Nietzsche, by the will to power.

In profiling, hermeneutics of suspicion suggests that the investigator should not take criminal behaviour at face value, but should look for hidden meanings. For example, a murder that appears to be motivated by robbery may in fact conceal a personal motive against the victim, with the robbery element added to divert the investigation.

3. The phenomenological perspective: lived experience and corporeality

Edmund Husserl, the founder of modern phenomenology, proposed the method of epoché (suspension of judgement) as a way to access the essential structures of conscious experience[18]. Through epoché, the investigator brackets natural presuppositions about the existence and nature of objects in order to focus exclusively on how they appear in consciousness. Husserl calls this practice 'phenomenological reduction' – a method of returning to 'things themselves' as they are given in immediate experience, before any theorising or conceptualisation.

In the context of criminal profiling, the Husserlian method suggests the importance of a rigorous descriptive attitude towards behavioural evidence, attempting to temporarily suspend premature explanatory theories in order to allow the evidence to 'speak for itself'. This phenomenological attitude can help to avoid hasty interpretations based on preconceived theories and to uncover aspects of the crime scene that might otherwise be overlooked.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his seminal work Phenomenology of Perception (1945), expanded Husserlian phenomenology by placing

[17] P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation,* Yale University Press, New Haven 1970, pp. 32–36.

[18] E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy,* The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983 [1913], pp. 57–62.

corporeality at the centre of experience[19]. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not simply a material object in the world, but is our fundamental mode of 'being-in-the-world'. He introduces the concept of the 'lived body' (corps vécu, Leib) to distinguish lived bodily experience from the body as an anatomical object. The lived body is the seat of perception, action and expression – it is through the body that we have access to the world and that the world acquires meaning for us.

This phenomenological perspective on corporeality is directly relevant to profiling. Criminal acts are bodily actions – gestures, movements, manipulations of objects – that bear the mark of the perpetrator's unique bodily style. From this perspective, crime scene analysis is not just an inventory of objects and physical traces, but an attempt to 'read' the perpetrator's bodily style in the way they physically engaged with the victim and the environment.

Husserl identified intentionality—the fact that consciousness is always 'consciousness of something'—as the defining feature of conscious experience[20]. Consciousness does not exist in a vacuum, but is always directed towards objects, situations, or meanings. This intentional structure of experience implies that objects are always perceived within a horizon of meaning – a context of references and relationships that give meaning to the perceived object.

In profiling, the concept of experiential horizon helps to understand how the perpetrator perceives and understands their own criminal action. Criminal behaviour is not random or meaningless to the perpetrator, but takes place within a specific horizon of meaning – a system of values, beliefs, motivations and perceptions about oneself and the world. Profiling attempts to reconstruct this experiential horizon of the perpetrator based on behavioural traces.

Alfred Schutz, a student of Husserl, extended phenomenology into the social realm, exploring the structures of intersubjective experience and the social world[21]. Schutz analysed how we construct knowledge about other people and the shared social world, introducing concepts such as 'typifications' – schematic categories through which we organise social

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[19] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* Routledge, London, 2002 [1945], pp. 82–97.

[20] E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations,* Routledge, London, 2001 [1900–1901], Vol. 2, pp. 85–89.

[21] A. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World,* Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1967 [1932], pp. 3–20.

experience – and 'stocks of knowledge' – sedimented funds of experience and understanding that we bring to our social encounters.

For profiling, Schutz's perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of how profilers use typologies to categorise criminal behaviour and make inferences about perpetrators. These typologies (e.g., 'organised criminal' versus 'disorganised criminal') are not simply arbitrary categories, but are sedimentations of the collective experience of the investigative community, transmitted through professional training and practice.

4. Practical knowledge and expertise in profiling

Michael Polanyi, in his work The Tacit Dimension (1966), introduced the concept of 'tacit knowledge' to describe the form of knowledge that cannot be fully articulated in words or explicit rules[22]. His famous phrase – 'we can know more than we can say' – captures the idea that many of our practical skills involve an understanding that goes beyond our ability to express it explicitly.

Polanyi distinguishes between two modes of knowing: focal awareness – what is at the centre of our conscious attention – and subsidiary awareness – the elements we implicitly rely on in the process of understanding, but which remain in the background[23]. For example, when riding a bicycle, we focus on our destination and the obstacles in our path, while relying subsidiarily on a complex set of motor and perceptual skills that cannot be fully articulated.

In the context of criminal profiling, the concept of tacit knowledge is crucial to understanding the expertise of experienced profilers. A significant part of a profiler's competence consists of tacit knowledge – the ability to 'sense' what is significant at a crime scene, to recognise subtle patterns that cannot be fully specified in explicit rules, and to make intuitive connections based on accumulated experience. This tacit dimension of expertise explains why profiler training requires not only theoretical learning but also extensive supervised practice.

Gilbert Ryle, in his work The Concept of Mind (1949), introduced the influential distinction between 'propositional knowledge' (knowing that) and 'practical knowledge' (knowing how)[24]. Propositional knowledge

[22] M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 4.

[23] M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy,* Routledge, London, 1958, pp. 55–65.

[24] G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind,* Hutchinson, London, 1949, pp. 25–61.

consists of facts and truths that can be expressed in sentences – for example, 'I know that Paris is the capital of France'. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, consists of skills and abilities – for example, 'I know how to swim'. Ryle argues that practical knowledge cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge: knowing how to do something is not equivalent to knowing a set of facts or rules about how to do that thing.

This distinction is fundamental to understanding profiling. Training profilers involves not only imparting propositional knowledge (psychological theories, statistical data on types of crimes), but also developing practical knowledge—the ability to analyse a crime scene, conduct investigative interviews, and synthesise disparate information into a coherent profile. These practical skills cannot be fully reduced to explicit rules and require practice and experience to develop.

Hubert Dreyfus, inspired by the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, developed an influential model of skill acquisition that distinguishes five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert[25] . The distinctive feature of the expert, in Dreyfus's model, is the transition from deliberate, rule-based action to fluent, intuitive action that no longer requires the conscious application of rules. The expert immediately 'sees' what needs to be done in a situation, without going through an explicit deliberative process.

Applied to profiling, Dreyfus' model suggests that novice profilers begin by rigidly applying learned rules and procedures, while true experts operate with an intuitive, holistic understanding of the situation. An expert profiler can immediately 'see' the significance of a particular configuration of evidence without being able to fully articulate the reasoning process that led to this understanding. This intuitive expertise, while valuable, also raises challenges – how can an understanding that cannot be fully articulated be evaluated and validated?

Aristotle, in Nicomachean Ethics, introduced the concept of phronesis (practical wisdom or prudence) to describe the form of understanding necessary for ethical deliberation and action in particular situations[26]. Phronesis differs from both episteme (theoretical, universal knowledge) and techne (technical, productive knowledge). Phronesis involves the ability to

[25] H. Dreyfus, S. Dreyfus, *Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer,* Free Press, New York, 1986, pp. 16–36.

[26] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book VI, 1140a24-1140b30. [online] [accessed 24.10.2025]. Available at: https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.6.vi.html?utm

discern what action is appropriate in a particular situation, taking into account the context, circumstances, and ethical goals.

The Aristotelian concept of phronesis provides a valuable framework for understanding the practical dimension of profiling. Profiling is not a simple mechanical application of universal rules (techne), nor a theoretical contemplation of universal truths (episteme), but requires a form of contextualised practical judgement that takes into account the particularities of each case. An experienced profiler must exercise phronesis – the discernment to recognise which aspects of the situation are relevant, which approaches are appropriate, and how to balance methodological rigour with the practical realities of the investigation.

Conclusions

The philosophical analyses carried out in this article converge towards a much more nuanced and complex understanding of criminal profiling than that suggested by popular representations or even by many professional discourses. Profiling is not a simple technique of 'reading' behavioural clues to 'discover' the identity of the perpetrator, but a deeply complex interpretative practice, embedded in epistemological presuppositions, influenced by hermeneutic frameworks, based on phenomenological structures of experience, and dependent on forms of practical and tacit knowledge that resist complete codification.

Criminal profiling lies at the intersection of science and art, between theoretical knowledge and practical competence, between objectivity and interpretation. Efforts to treat it as either a purely scientific technique or an unfathomable mystical intuition fail to capture its true complexity. Bringing philosophical perspectives into dialogue with the practice of profiling is not a sterile academic exercise, but a practical necessity for the development of a form of profiling that is simultaneously more methodologically rigorous, more epistemologically reflexive, and more aware of its own limitations.

Philosophy teaches us to ask fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge, the limits of understanding, and the conditions for valid interpretation. These questions are not peripheral to the practice of profiling, but central to it. Only by seriously engaging with these philosophical questions can we hope to develop a form of profiling that is both practically effective and epistemically and ethically responsible.

Based on the philosophical analysis carried out, we can formulate the following concrete recommendations for improving the practice of criminal profiling:

1. Profilers should be trained to critically reflect on their own cognitive and interpretative processes. This includes awareness of potential cognitive biases, recognition of the epistemic limits of their inferences, and development of an attitude of epistemic humility towards the complexity of human behaviour.

2. Rather than seeking a single 'correct' profiling methodology, diversity of approaches and recognition of the legitimacy of multiple perspectives should be encouraged. Profiles should be presented not as 'truth' about the perpetrator, but as plausible hypotheses requiring further empirical validation.

3. Profilers should explicitly document their reasoning process, including the theoretical assumptions on which they rely, the evidence they consider relevant, and the inferences they make. This transparency facilitates critical evaluation and enables systemic methodological improvement.

4. Profiling teams should include members with diverse backgrounds—not just clinical psychologists and experienced investigators, but also anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and other specialists who can bring complementary perspectives. This epistemic diversity can help correct individual blind spots.

5. Training systems should recognise the importance of tacit knowledge and create opportunities for its development through supervised practice, mentoring and reflection on experience. At the same time, continuous efforts should be made to articulate and codify those aspects of tacit knowledge that can be made explicit.

6. Profilers should be trained in phenomenological methods of rigorous description, attempting to temporarily suspend premature explanatory theories to allow the evidence to 'speak for itself'. This can help uncover aspects that would otherwise be overlooked.

The analysis highlights the fact that criminal profiling cannot be conceived exclusively as an applied technique based on professional intuition or empirical experience, but requires a solid philosophical foundation. The integration of epistemological, hermeneutic and phenomenological perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of the inferential processes involved in the construction of behavioural profiles, as well as a clearer delimitation of their validity and limitations. From this perspective, it is necessary that the training of profiling specialists, the development of methodologies used and the probative evaluation of profiles within the criminal justice system be accompanied by systematic theoretical

reflection. Such an approach would contribute to the consolidation of criminal profiling as a mature scientific discipline, capable of critically assessing both the explanatory potential and the inherent limitations of its own practice.

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