

Drees's What Are the Humanities For?

with Peter Harrison, "Defining and Defending the Humanities"; Michael Ruse, "Willem Drees on the Humanities"; Douglas F. Ottati, "Theology among the Human Humanities"; Lisa L. Sienmark, "Who are the Humanities For? Decolonizing the Humanities"; Donald L. Drakeman, "Some Second Thoughts about the Humanities"; and Willem B. Drees, "The Coherence and Character of the Humanities: A Reply to Critics."

DEFINING AND DEFENDING THE HUMANITIES

by Peter Harrison 

Abstract. In response to Willem Drees's *What Are the Humanities For?*, this article compares the ways in which, historically, the humanities and natural sciences have established their relevance and social legitimacy. Initially, from the period of the scientific revolution, the sciences had usually sought to justify themselves in terms of the moral and religious goals characteristic of the humanities. During the nineteenth century, however, considerations of practical utility came to displace the more traditional forms of justification. These new criteria have made it increasingly difficult for humanities disciplines to establish their legitimacy. This situation is related to patterns of secularization and also has implications for science-religion relations. Along with the secularization of the humanities, their increasing pluralization has also weakened their capacity to present a united front. The humanities are perhaps not as coherent as Drees suggests, although a rhetoric of coherence might well be crucial for establishing their contemporary relevance.

Keywords: humanities; science and religion; social legitimacy; STEM; two cultures

The year 1667 saw the publication of the *History of the Royal Society*, a work produced by the prelate and preacher Thomas Sprat. Given that the Society first met in 1660 and had only received a formal Royal Charter and its official name in 1663, writing its history at this early juncture might seem to have been a little premature. Close consultation of Sprat's *History*, however, reveals that its true purpose was less to provide a chronological account of the founding and activities of the Society than to offer an apologetic defense of its methods and potential accomplishments.

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The fact that its author was better known for his literary abilities than his scientific achievements offers a further clue to the work's true purpose: it was a public relations exercise. Sprat's *History* was intended to help establish the legitimacy of a scientific enterprise that was considered by many to be politically suspect and of dubious social utility. Many of Sprat's contemporaries held that literary, theological, philosophical, philological, moral, and historical pursuits—activities that we would now classify among the humanities—was where the real action lay. By way of contrast, the new-fangled experimental sciences seemed to aim at crudely utilitarian goals and, even then, were judged to have been unsuccessful in accomplishing them.

The wheel has come full circle. In the twenty-first century, it is humanities disciplines that are on the defensive and facing the demand to provide justifications for continuing taxpayer investment, or worse, their very existence. University departments in Arts and Humanities Faculties are shrinking, and while undergraduate employment prospects remain strong, it is very different case for doctoral graduates seeking academic positions. There are also worrying signs of growing political hostility to the humanities. In my own country, the present conservative government has recently doubled the fees payable by university students in most humanities majors, in a crude attempt to discourage that study option. The pretext for this policy has been the dubious premise that present humanities graduates are insufficiently “job ready.” In reality, much of this hostility has been driven by ideological considerations and a distorted perception of what really goes on in universities. More generally, while circumstances may vary in different national contexts, it is safe to say that the modern humanities find themselves in a situation that bears comparison to that faced by the fledgling experimental sciences: they are regarded as politically suspect and lacking social usefulness. The challenge is to establish the identity, value, and social utility of twenty-first century humanities.

In *What Are the Humanities For?* (2021) Willem Drees offers a robust response to this challenge, providing a thoughtful and articulate narrative about what the humanities are and why they continue to be relevant in the modern world. He begins with a helpful contrast between the goals and methods of the humanities and natural sciences, going on to offer examples of how humanities scholarship helps promote cultural understanding in vital ways. The book's conclusion directly tackles the question of the usefulness of the humanities, drawing upon both utilitarian considerations—how the humanities provide essential skills that deliver economic benefits—and broader considerations that stress the role of the humanities in enriching human culture. Drees also makes useful reference to the existing repertoire of arguments made by defenders of the humanities. In addition to developing its own case, the book thus offers a very handy

compendium of the kinds of arguments that can be deployed for this purpose.

For the most part, I am deeply sympathetic to the goals and content of the book, and have little to say by way of critical commentary. But the book does raise (for me at least) a number of historical questions that I believe to be worth exploring further, and which shed light on the present predicament of the humanities. In what follows, I will focus on two in particular. The first concerns the relative fortunes of the humanities and the natural sciences and the extent to which there might be a competition between them for social legitimacy. Does it follow, for example, that as long as the natural sciences continue to enjoy a secure social status the humanities will inevitably struggle to make the case for their importance and usefulness? This is not about a direct competition, I hasten to add, but whether the successes of the natural sciences have irrevocably changed the standards by which intellectual enterprises are judged. The second question is to do with Drees's proposal that the humanities comprise "a coherent domain." Such coherence might seem to be a prerequisite for mounting a cogent defense of their relevance. I am not entirely convinced that the humanities comprise a coherent domain, but wonder at the same time whether a *rhetoric* of coherence might be important for their defense. Here again, the contrast case of the sciences, and the success of the "STEM" (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) label in particular, might suggest that artificial alliances linked to political advocacy have proven to be a more successful legitimizing strategy than mounting cogent arguments about coherence (even if the latter actually better reflect the true state of affairs). In any event, a brief survey of the longer history of intellectual endeavor in the West points to the contingent nature of our present disciplinary configurations. In all of this, I am also interested in the historical relations between science and religion, and how that bears on the present discussion. In what follows, then, I will primarily be concerned with historical considerations, and in the conclusion will offer some brief reflections on the relevance of these considerations to the contemporary concerns addressed in Wim Drees's impressive book.

WHEN "HUMANITIES" RULED

I have begun with an episode from the history of the early Royal Society because it points to what I think is an interesting historical tension between two types of value commitments that favor the humanities and the natural sciences, respectively. My question is whether this tension gives rise to a kind of zero-sum game: is the social status of the humanities necessarily inversely proportional to that of the natural sciences?

As already noted, during the period of the scientific revolution objections to the new experimental science were surprisingly commonplace. Best known, perhaps, is Jonathan Swift's savage satire of the Royal Society in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In his voyage to Laputa, the eponymous protagonist pays a visit to the "grand academy of Lagardo," where he encounters an assortment of eccentric individuals conducting absurd and impractical experiments. This was a thinly veiled attack on the usefulness of the experimental program of the Royal Society. Swift's derision of the new science was by no means unprecedented. In the latter half of the seventeenth century, not only was the Society lampooned in literary and dramatic productions, but it was the subject of direct and more sober criticism in a number of prose works. The standard complaint was that experimental science involved undignified manual labor, that it had crudely utilitarian goals, and that, even then, it fell well short of achieving them. By way of contrast, the more traditional educational pursuits—"humanities" *avant la lettre*—aimed at moral and religious edification, and were largely successful in doing so.¹ One critic, for example, contended that cooking up chemicals and cutting up bodies would "never prove of any great use." Useful knowledge consisted in moral edification: "To *moralize* men is the best *use* of any worldly thing which can be made" (Casaubon 1669, 24, 31). Another complained that experimental science was incapable of producing "that Moral discipline which instructs us in the nature of virtue and vice." This lofty goal could not be accomplished, he argued, by peering through telescopes and microscopes (Stubbe 1670, 14).²

Denunciations such as these prompted the publication of Sprat's *History* along with a number of other defensive responses, including one by the renowned experimentalist, Robert Boyle. The first line of defense, interestingly, was to accept the criteria that were then in play, but argue that the new sciences could in fact satisfy them. One apologist thus insisted, implausible though it might seem to us, that the new science "will assist and promote our *Virtue*, and our *Happiness*; and incline us to employ ourselves in living according to it" (Glanvill 1676, 25). Part of the argument here was that through the experimental study of God's works, we learn more about God's nature and our moral duties. Robert Boyle ran this line, too, arguing that the advantages of the new science lay in both its reasoning and inventions:

By the one [reasoning], sound notions are proposed to the reader's apprehension from the contemplation of God's creation and the governance of the world, and thereby good matter is suggested to his affections for the advancement of his devotion: by the other [inventions], there are divers things delivered, which may tend to enlarge man's power of doing good: by them, in the whole, both honour to God, and our charity to our neighbors may be assisted: in which two, the substantial part of all the most noble, not only

human, by Christian virtues, both speculative and practical, are certainly contained. (Boyle [1663] 1772, 2)

It is the second element of the argument that is significant, because in essence it amounts to the claim that the practical, utilitarian benefits at which science aims can ultimately be resolved into arguments of the first kind—that is, arguments based on virtue and religious edification. Practical usefulness, in short, is not an end in itself, but is to be understood as the expression of the chief of the Christian virtues—charity (Harrison 2015, 131–36).

Two features of this situation are noteworthy. First, that the legitimacy of experimental science in its infancy rested on its capacity to appeal to the ruling assumption that the goal of intellectual activity was moral and religious edification. The pursuit of science, it was argued, had *intrinsic* value as a morally directed project. Second, at the same time, part of the long-term success of defenses of the new science lay in the fact their legitimizing strategies initiated a subtle transformation of these original criteria of usefulness. At first, utilitarian considerations were grounded in a further appeal to the virtues and, especially, Christian charity. However, in time, practical utility came to be considered as an end in itself. As we will see in more detail below, this was a protracted process. It took until the nineteenth century for modern science to be understood as an enterprise that excluded reference to moral and religious considerations.

For now, my suggestion is that this long-term historical development already offers some insight into contemporary plight of the humanities. In a way, the humanities now find themselves in a situation akin to that faced by the early modern sciences. There has been a reversal of the power relations such that now it is the humanities that must couch their defenses in the utilitarian terms that seem to be the home ground of the sciences. (I say this while still conscious of the fact that “blue sky” scientific researchers encounter, to a lesser degree, some of the same difficulties faced by humanities scholars.)

There is, however, a crucial way in which the present differs from the seventeenth century. No one now seems much interested in inquiring whether utilitarian considerations themselves require a deeper justification. In other words, the early modern connection between utility and Christian virtue that apologists for the sciences were able to exploit is no longer available. In any case, the humanities themselves, for better or worse, have relinquished their role as guides to virtue and moral action, effectively disqualifying them from avenues of appeal that were available to their pre-nineteenth-century counterparts. Jumping over a few steps in the argument, we might conclude that secularization has played a significant, albeit largely unacknowledged role in the present plight of the humanities, since the overarching normative framework within which the religious

justifications of knowledge enterprises—both humanistic and scientific—were once advanced has all but eroded away, leaving behind only a thin residue of utilitarianism. We now appeal by default to pure utility since that is all we are left with.

SCIENCE AND VALUES

The leap from the seventeenth century to the present is a large one, but it serves the purpose of placing the relevant contrast in high relief. There were, of course, important intermediate stages, worth passing (and admittedly oversimplified) mention. The insight that the natural sciences could act as sources of moral and religious edification remained a powerful theme in the robust physicotheological tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Blair and von Greyertz 2020). This tradition amounted to more than simply science-informed arguments about divine design in nature, with many examples of the genre intended to inspire sentiments of piety and devotion. English naturalist John Ray thus declared in preface to his classic *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (1691) that part of his goal was “to Stir up and Increase in us the Affections and habits of Admiration, Humility, and Gratitude” (Ray 1691, preface).

These ambitions are not unrelated to the German tradition of *Bildung*, a term now typically rendered as “education,” but which traditionally encompassed aspects of moral and religious formation. For reasons of brevity, mention will be made of just one or two relevant considerations. In the eighteenth-century Prussia, it was commonly argued that it was what we would regard as humanities disciplines that contributed to the right kind of moral and intellectual formation. Especially important were the “fine sciences” (*schöne Wissenschaften*)—essentially the study of the classics, along with ancillary disciplines of languages, history, geography, ancient mythology. Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), for example, contended that study of the fine sciences contributed to the things that makes humans truly human: namely, a sense of truth, beauty, and goodness (the so-called Platonic triad) (van Bommel 2015, 68–73).

But well into the nineteenth century, arguments were also made for the morally edifying power of the natural sciences, in an attempt to “piggy-back” on the standard arguments used to defend literary and humanistic programs. Geologist Karl von Raumer (1783–1865) thus argued that geology had the capacity to inculcate in students a deep wonder at the depths of divine wisdom. Moritz Drobisch (1802–1896), a professor of mathematics at the University of Leipzig, maintained that the study of astronomy could have a powerful moralizing and religious effect (van Bommel 2015, 53–58). We encounter comparable arguments in the English context. Geologist George Fairholme (1789–1846) contended that the “great end of the study of Geology ought to be, a *moral* rather than a

scientific one” (Fairholme 1883, 28).³ Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873) likewise thought of geology as integral to the liberal arts education on account of its deeper philosophical and theological significance (Brooke 1988, 158). John Stevens Henslow (1796–1861), Charles Darwin’s sometime mentor, advocated for greater prominence of the natural sciences in the university curriculum on account of their potential role in religious and moral training (Henslow 1851; Layton 1973). In short, into the nineteenth century, moral and religious considerations continued to provide a key avenue of appeal for those arguing the case for the social relevance of academic pursuits, including the natural sciences.

These examples highlight the fact that past sources of disciplinary legitimation were very different from ours, and also hint at the different configurations and hierarchical relations of the disciplines. In Germany, not only there were the “fine sciences,” but also the “faculty sciences” (theology, law, medicine), the “higher sciences” (physics, mathematics—although, confusingly, the high sciences were sometimes equated with the fine sciences). Even then, these classifications, and the implicit hierarchies that they sustained, were regularly contested. It was claimed, by figures such as Friedrich August Wolff, that philology was the purest science; Immanuel Kant subsequently denied scientific status to the previously favored “fine sciences”; and so on. If this seems confusing, the general point is that the apparent logic of disciplinary groupings changes over time, and while the ultimate source of their legitimacy might remain relatively constant, their capacity to appeal to it also varied.

Viewing matters from this larger scale historical perspective thus raises the question of the ultimate coherence of any disciplinary grouping including, by implication, our own “humanities” and “the natural sciences.” The phase of history that most directly set up the conditions for the present divisions between the natural sciences and the humanities, and that also witnessed a gradual move away from the traditional moral and religious sources of legitimation, was the nineteenth century. During the 1800s, both the humanities and natural sciences experienced centrifugal pluralizing tendencies that threatened their unity and coherence.⁴

THE UNITY OF THE SCIENCES AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

In 1834, the gifted Cambridge polymath William Whewell bemoaned the fact that the physical sciences were in danger of disintegrating under the weight of increasing specialization. The subject matter of the sciences, he cautioned, was being divided into “infinitely small allotments” and the whole enterprise was like “a great empire falling to pieces” (Whewell 1834, 58–60). Whewell believed that what was needed to redress this was a single term that encapsulated the profession of those committed to science. His suggestion: “scientist” (Ross 1962). Although it took some time for this

neologism to garner broad acceptance among those it purported to designate, by the end of the century the “scientist” not only lent a semblance of unity to the once disintegrating empire of science, but it also became a badge of intellectual respectability for those who professed it. Today, “scientist” is the most globally trusted profession, and the invention of term is a necessary condition for that state of affairs.⁵

The other important marker of scientific authority to emerge in the nineteenth century was the idea of “the scientific method,” popularly understood as a readily identifiable approach, common to all the natural sciences, which generates reliable knowledge in an unparalleled way (Thurs 2011). The notion of a single scientific method, needless to say perhaps, is largely a fiction. At the same time, the English word “science” began to take on its modern meaning, as describing a set of activities that now explicitly excluded reference to moral and religious considerations. As one Oxford graduate recollected about his mid-century student days, “science” had not then referred to “cutting up cats,” but ethics, and study of Joseph Butler’s *Analogy of Religion*. “Science” wrote another, used to refer to attainment in Aristotle (this, paralleling to some degree the German “fine sciences”) (Harrison 2015, 145–48). Now “science” meant the natural sciences—a combination of the traditional fields of natural philosophy and natural history—but divested of the older appeals to moral and religious justifications. In what is perhaps the first definition of modern science, the religious writer William George Ward observed in 1867: “We shall, ‘for convenience’ sake, use the word ‘science’ in the sense which Englishmen so commonly give to it; as expressing physical and experimental science, to the exclusion of theological and metaphysical” (Ward 1867, 255n).

These exclusions represent a major reversal of the standard ways in which the formal study of nature had been justified. They were reflected in subsequent definitions of the scientific vocation. William James proposed, in his famous lecture “The Will to Believe,” that science was “absolutely impersonal” (James [1896] 1912, 7). No sense of moral formation and religious wonder here. In his equally celebrated lecture on science as a vocation, Max Weber made a similar point. Who now, he asked, “apart from a few overgrown children in their endowed chairs or editorial offices” still believes that the natural sciences can tell us “anything about the *meaning* of the world” or about “the road to happiness.” For good measure, he added that we can also forget about science “as a path to God” (Weber [1917] 2020, 22–23).

These developments represent the turn-around with which we began. Once the legitimacy of natural sciences had depended crucially on their playing to the strengths of the humanities, they were relevant insofar as they could demonstrate their applicability to questions of religion, values, meaning, and moral formation. Now their strength was thought to lie in their value-free objectivity and independence from moral and

religious considerations. This latter development was especially marked in the post-Darwinian controversies of the Victorian age, when individuals like Thomas Henry Huxley and John Tyndall self-consciously sought to distance the sciences from religion, and indeed to drive a wedge between them. This was accomplished as much by political as intellectual means. As historian Frank Turner powerfully argued some years ago, there was a strong professional dimension here. At stake was social and epistemic authority, and the professional status of scientists *vis a vis* more traditional authority figures, especially the clergy. As Turner tells it: “During the first half of the nineteenth century the major characteristics of British science were amateurism, aristocratic patronage, minuscule government support, limited employment opportunities, and peripheral inclusion within the clerically dominated universities and secondary schools” (Turner 1978, 360). All of that has dramatically changed, not least owing to the political activities of Huxley and his allies.

Part of the political strategy employed by Huxley was to directly attack the sources of authority of established religion (Barton 2018, 362–444). Hence, the science-religion conflict myth received a significant boost during this period (although its roots go back much further). In the late nineteenth century, an artificially unified “science” was imagined to represent an advanced stage of historical development that was supposedly at odds with a more primitive and irrational religion. Rather than harnessing its fortunes to religion and questions of value and meaning, science was now promoted by some of its chief advocates as “not-religion,” and in more extreme cases as an enterprise destined to replace religion. These attitudes echo down to the present day. If we wonder, for example, why the erstwhile Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford, Richard Dawkins, spent so much of his time attacking religion, it was because he intuitively believed that the legitimacy of science depended on its being in an oppositional relation to religion. To attack religion was to promote science. The University of Birmingham’s current Professor of Public Engagement in Science seems bent on continuing in much the same vein. At any rate, and cutting to the chase, my proposal is that the construction of a conflict between science and religion also tells us something interesting about the present relations between the sciences and the humanities.

LESSONS FROM THE SCIENCES?

What does this long history have to do with the present state of the humanities and the cogent case presented by Wim Drees in his book? As I hope is obvious by now, over the past 400 years we see shifting patterns of alliance between various disciplines, but one clear trend in the sources of their legitimation. On the first score, we might wonder whether the humanities can in fact be envisaged as “a coherent domain” or whether they

are just another contingent configuration characteristic only of the present historical moment. On the second, the trend in question involves a move away from justifications of the disciplines in moral and religious terms, and their replacement by more simple appeals to pragmatic and utilitarian considerations. It is partly this that now separates the disciplines that can appropriate the utilitarian justifications (scientific and technological fields) from those that cannot (the humanities).

Two further underlying trends are noteworthy here. First, as the references to Max Weber imply, secularization has now complicated any simple appeal to a shared religious worldview, which in various guises lay behind traditional Western justifications of the pursuit of knowledge (even if only implicitly). The present predicament of the humanities, I would suggest, turns out to be linked to a broader pattern of secularization that has obviated appeals to the intrinsic value of anything. Second, closely related to secularization is the collapse of a common metaethical framework, which again renders impossible a simple appeal to shared values as a way of grounding the legitimacy of a non-utilitarian intellectual enterprise.

It can be argued, with some justification, that humanities scholars have themselves been complicit in both of these developments, with the vestiges of its once unified ethical project now represented by a smorgasbord of bespoke, quasi-moral projects that cannot be related back to a coherent ethical theory. A full accounting of this is a discussion for another occasion, but it does relate to the intriguing suggestion of Galt Harpham, whom Drees cites on page 12 of *What Are the Humanities For?* to the effect that the humanities “reflect a specifically American, or at least Western, and secular version of human being and human flourishing, and that the entire concept might be a mere provincial prejudice.” This is precisely the kind of observation that complicates a cogent defense of the humanities, and it comes from one of our own. It may, of course, be true. But in my analysis, the contemporary humanities represent not so much a secular version of human being and flourishing, as a *secularized* version that lacks its original transcendental justifications. And it is the latter that complicates efforts to secure its legitimacy—at least in the way that it was done in the past.

This brings us the issue of the coherence of the humanities and how it relates to how they might be defined and defended. I think it helps to understand how we got to where we are today. But I also think that there are important lessons in the success of the sciences. Overstating the case a little, the natural sciences were made to cohere in the nineteenth century not primarily on account of any shared essence, but through rhetorical and political strategies—the invention of “the scientist” and “the scientific method,” along with the mobilization of professional organizations and networks. These were accompanied by new narratives about science and social progress, sometimes linked to the conflict myth, which gave the newly aggregated sciences their place in history. In more recent times,

the STEM acronym represents an even more conspicuously artificial hybrid, the primary purpose of which is political, in both broad and narrow senses.⁶ STEM also is exclusionary (in spite of valiant attempts on the part of some to argue for STEAM, which includes Arts), not least because its political force would be diminished were it open to all comers. In the real world, not every child can receive a prize, and this takes us back to the question of whether, given finite economic resources, there will be an inevitable competition between humanities and nonhumanities disciplines not just for resources but, more fundamentally, for claims to legitimacy.

Although my aim in this analysis has mostly been directed toward understanding rather than advocacy, we can imagine what might follow in terms of practical strategies. It might be that sophisticated scholarly accounts of the humanities of the kind that Drees offers need to be supplemented with additional rhetorical strategies and “political” activities. These would rely less on cogent argument than rhetoric (in the positive sense) and narrative making.⁷ Another lesson to be learned from the sciences is that “public engagement” and “the public understanding of . . .” are specialist roles. Perhaps we need specialist positions in the public understanding of the humanities both to counter the proliferation of false perceptions about our disciplines and also advance the positive case for their importance. Finally, much of the present discussion is focused on the institutional contexts in which humanities teaching and scholarship takes place. But on analogy with the growing interest in “citizen science,” it is important to recognize that there is genuine community interest and involvement in the humanities and their subject matter. Some of the best prospects for preserving the mission of the humanities lie in tapping into the passion and enthusiasm of the general public. That resource is future-proof because, as Wim Drees has so ably demonstrated, the questions that the humanities disciplines grapple with—how should we live, how should we argue and judge, who are we—are both pressing and perennial.

NOTES

1. Although the expression “the humanities” derives from the Renaissance expression *studia humanitatis*, only in the 1920s does the English expression “the humanities” begin to have wide currency.

2. For examples of secondary literature on this theme, see Syfret (1950), Benedict (2001, 46–51), Gaukroger (2005), and Harrison (2015, 124–36).

3. So too, Henry Brougham, who insisted that a scientific education needed to be underpinned by natural theology, characterized natural theology as “an exercise at once intellectual and moral, in which the highest faculties of the understanding and the warmest feelings of the heart alike partake” (1845, 147). On this theme, see Proctor (1991), Yeo (1993), and Topham (1992).

4. For the splintering of the humanities in the nineteenth century and the contemporary relevance of this development, see Adler (2020, 33–88).

5. See, for example, “Scientists are the most trusted people in the world,” It is a fact... scientists are the most trusted people in the world | Ipsos accessed April 15, 2021.
6. On the history of the acronym and its uses, see, for example, Sanders (2009) and Blackley and Howell (2015). I am aware that a common deployment of STEM relates to a putative “STEM crisis” that may seem to parallel the crisis of the humanities. But the difference is that the STEM crisis narrative is premised on the assumption that everyone knows that STEM is vital, the problem being how to operationalize that conviction.
7. The relatively new acronym “SHAPE” (Social Science, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy) instantiates some of these ideals. See <https://thisishape.org.uk/?s=09>, accessed April 22, 2021.

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