Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology and Its Relevance to the Polemic of Science and Islamic Theology During Pandemic Covid-19

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas teologi filosofis dan relevansinya dengan isu antara teologi Islam dan sains di masa Pandemi COVID-19. Sudah banyak penemuan ilmiah tentang covid-19 seperti penularannya, pentingnya physical distancing, pentingnya memakai masker, pentingnya menghindari keramaian, vaksin, dll. Semuanya telah menjadi konsumsi publik. Akibatnya, terjadi perbedaan agama dalam masyarakat Muslim. Satu kelompok berpihak pada sains dan meniadakan ibadah komunal tanpa protokol kesehatan. Kelompok lainnya memilih "teologi Islam" dan tetap melakukan ibadah berjamaah tanpa protokol kesehatan. Untuk menjawab realitas ini, penting untuk melihat bagaimana al-Ghazali menangani filsafat dan teologi Islam secara harmonis. Seperti halnya al-Ghazali, masyarakat Muslim juga harus menghormati penemuan-penemuan ilmiah terkait pandemi COVID-19. Namun, tidak hanya menghargai penemuan-penemuan ilmiah, umat Islam juga harus ingat bahwa kehendak dan tindakan Tuhan melekat pada upaya sains untuk menangani pandemi COVID-19.

Katakunci: teologi filsafat, al-Ghazali, pandemi, sains, dan teologi Islam

Abstract

This article covers philosophical theology and its relevance to the issues between Islamic theology and science during Pandemic COVID-19. There were numerous scientific discoveries on covid-19 such as its contagion, the importance of physical distancing, the importance of wearing the mask, the importance of avoiding crowds, vaccines, etc. All of them have been public consumption. As a consequence, there was religious dissent in Muslim society. The one group took science on its side and negated any communal worship without health protocol. The other group chose "Islamic theology" and still conducted any communal worship without health protocol. To answer this reality, it is important to see how al-Ghazali handled philosophy and Islamic theology in harmony. Like al-Ghazali, Muslim society should respect scientific discoveries concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not only appreciate the scientific discoveries but Muslim society also should keep in mind that the will and act of God are attached to the efforts of science to handle the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: philosophical theology, al-Ghazali, pandemic, science, and Islamic theology

Introduction

In al-Ghazali's time (1058-1111), there was a long discourse of Islamic theology between occasionalism and causality (al-Akiti, 2009; Goodman, 1978; Tamer, 2015). Asy'ariyah theologians were the main supporter of occasionalism while Islamic peripatetic philosophers (Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, and so on) were on the causality side. Both sides were involved in a polemic that gave an impact on Islamic theology at that time (Griffel, 2014).

In handling that polemic, Al-Ghazali took the intermediate side. Al-Ghazali found himself placed betwixt and between in the polemic neither at the Asy'ariyah side with their occasionalism nor at the Muslim philosopher side with their causality (particularly Ibn Sina). As a Sunni theologian, the Thus-born thinker defends the independent act of God and at the same time adopts the determinism of Ibn Sina's cosmology (Griffel, 2009a, p. 8).

Al-Ghazali keeps that the act of God is independent. He believes that God is the only efficient cause (the creator) of the universe and every occasion on this earth is based on the will of God. However, al-Ghazali accepts the statement of causality although he strongly keeps the omnipotence of God. Al-Ghazali also believes that the relation of cause and effect (causality) is inevitable.

Al-Ghazali's acceptance of causality can be seen in his book Ihya' Ulum al-Din. He writes, "if you wish Allah will make your stomach full without bread, or make the bread come to you, or command the angels to chew the

bread for you and because of that your stomach becomes full—it will be only a proof of your foolishness about His act."(al Ghazali, 1982a, p. 248). Al-Ghazali succeeds in standing between occasionalism and causality. Frank Griffel called this philosophical theology (Griffel, 2009a).

Al-Ghazali's philosophical theology is interesting to study further, primarily in the middle of heated public debate between science and Islamic theology during the Pandemic COVID-19. Since the Pandemic COVID-19, science becomes more open. Publications of various scientific discoveries on covid-19 are widely conducted. Various classes of people from the scientists to the lay community can access the publications concerning covid-19. There are numerous scientific discoveries on covid-19 such as its contagion, the importance of physical distancing, the importance of wearing the mask, the importance of avoiding crowds, vaccine, etc, All of them have been public consumption and socialized by mass media almost every day.

At the same time, there is resistance in Muslim society in Indonesia (Indonesia here is just a sample, as a country with hundreds of millions of Muslims, Indonesia is certainly representative enough to describe the condition of Muslims in the world). The scientific discoveries such as suggestions to avoid the crowd and keep the physical distance completely oppose the communal worship of Muslim society. This certainly makes Muslim society in Indonesia find their selves in dilemma. Due to this fact, the two groups have polemic. The first group still decides to hold communal worship by saying the fear of God is more important than the fear of Covid-19. On the other hand, the second group decides to not hold communal worship as recommended by scientific discoveries.

It is important to explore al-Ghazali's philosophical theology more deeply. How the concept al-Ghazali's philosophical theology can harmonize occasionalism and causality? How much was the relevance of philosophical theology for the polemic of science and Islamic theology during the Pandemic?

The research on al ghazali and its relevance to the debate on science and Islamic theology during the covid-19 period, will certainly complement the study of al Ghazali. As far as the author has observed research on al Ghazali in the last ten years, the author still has not found a work that links al Ghazali's thought with the discourse of science and Islamic theology during the Pandemic. There are several studies that we can mention here, for

example, Shamsiah Banu Hanefar (Hanefar et al., 2016), Zuhri (Zuhri & Arif, 2023), José Bellver (Bellver, 2013), Taneli Kukkonen (Kukkonen, 2016), Yusuf Sidani (Sidani & Ariss, 2015), Akira O. Ruddle-Miyamoto (Ruddle-Miyamoto, 2017) Lev Weitz (Weitz, 2014), Dejan Azdajic (Azdajic, 2016) L. W.C. van Lit (van Lit, 2015). Of all the studies on al Ghazali above, none of them discuss the relevance of al Ghazali's thought to the polemics of Islamic science and theology during the pandemic. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that the presence of this research will further enrich the existing studies on al Ghazali.

Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology

Why is al-Ghazali worth being called the first Muslim theologian who actively promotes the naturalization of philosophy into Islamic theology, so that his teaching is worth being called philosophical theology? This question is going to be answered in this sub-chapter.

The works of al-Ghazali are an effort to integrate Aristotelian logic into kalam tradition, rational Islamic theology. Al-Ghazali always points to the primacy of syllogistic logic and pushes his colleagues in Islamic theology to adopt this rational technique. He works seriously to spread this logic, for example, in his autobiography, both al-Munqidh min al-dalal and tahafut, the relation of al-Ghazali with philosophy is well known (Al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 22–23; Marmura, 2005, p. 15.12-16.4). Numerous critics and interpreters have asked how he can adopt Aristotelian logic without adopting Aristotelian ontology (Griffel, 2016, p. 7). In the Aristotelian tradition, logic has close relation with the specific explanation of the main foundations of the world and their relation to each other. In other words, Aristotelian logic cannot be adopted without adopting Aristotelian ontology as well.

Al-Ghazali understands that relation. When he spread the logic from falasifah, he also asks his colleagues to follow fundamental assumptions that will change their attitude toward ontology and metaphysics. However, al-Ghazali becomes less open about this. When he describes his view on falsafah metaphysics in his popular works such as his autobiography, he changes his critique on metaphysics and appreciates metaphysics briefly (Al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 18–20). However, studying deeply on al-Ghazali's works in theology lefts no doubt that his view on ontology, the human soul, and astrology comes from Ibn Sina (Griffel, 2009b, p. 9). Furthermore, the rejection of three philosophical teachings as mentioned in tahafut al-falasifah is a part of the naturalization process of Aristotelian philosophy into Islamic theology.

Through this rejection, the book identifies the elements of Aristotelian which in his view are not worth being integrated. He focused on the three teachings, this Muslim theologian opens the discourse of Islamic theology into other fields in falasifah.

This article aims to explore al-Ghazali's philosophical thought from two points of view namely al-Ghazali's life and his teaching on cosmology. The reason the researchers choose this topic is that those two points are the biggest challenges to placing al-Ghazali as a thinker that is contributed to the naturalization process of falsafah into the discourse of Islamic theology. Generally, in writing al-Ghazali's life western scholars use al-Ghazali's autobiography, al-munqid min al-dhalal.

Western scholars have no appropriate added references in English about the life and works of al-Ghazali like notes of his pupils and his collection of letters which are written in Persian. These added references can be get from the middle of the twentieth century. There is a lot of information about the chronology of al-Ghazali. Especially, the collection of letters which are in Persian describes much about their condition in the last 15 years of his life. For example, in his autobiography al-Ghazali often refers to, in his letters, the crisis that made him leave Baghdad in 488/1095. However, in his letters written in Persian al-Ghazali mentions another event that is as important as his leaving Baghdad: in Dzul Qa'da 489/October-November 1096. One year after leaving Baghdad, he made a vow at Ibrahim's tomb in Hebron that he would not go to any rulers anymore, accept their money, or participate in their public debate"(Garden, 2011; Griffel, 2009b, p. 10).

Although in his biography he dramatically described clearly the reason he left Baghdad, he did not mention his vow in Hebron. The omission of this story has relation to people around him that said he broke his vow, that is why he has no intention to remind his autobiography readers about that vow. Leaving Baghdad and making a vow to not cooperate with any rulers are two different events that happened at the same time, although the readers of al-Ghazali's autobiography will not find this relation. There are eleven years between al-Ghazali's decision to leave Baghdad and his autobiography writing. It makes an important change in that event. By reading al-Ghazali's letters and studying the comments of his pupils we will get a more clear image of the reason he leaves his position at Nizamiyah madrasah in Baghdad.

The most interesting is his change from the most successful and intellectual person in Baghdad to a person who avoids popularity and chooses to leave privately in his homeland. This fact triggers the ideas about al-Ghazali's words in his works. Many researchers feel that the relation between al-Ghazali and falasifah is more ambiguous than his confession in his autobiography. The notion that al-Ghazali's teaching has been changing in his time is so popular that it becomes a part of scholars. However, In 1994 Richard M. Frank analyzed there are no theoretical development al-Ghazali's theology in his beginning works, which are published before his leaving Baghdad in 488/1095, and his latest works (Frank, 1994, p. 91).

Frank is correct about this; the is no appropriate proof to support the popular view that says al-Ghazali changed his position after his leaving Baghdad and moved from the path of Mutakallim (theologian) to the path of Sufism. Although this is true, some motives can be seen in al-Ghazali's works after his leaving Baghdad—for example, he focuses more on salvation in the hereafter—none of the al-Ghazali's works can be found in the beginning and says that al-Ghazali's theology has been changing cannot be defended.

One of the researcher's main interests in studying al-Ghazali's life is to explore whether the general view which is his transformation from a mutakallim (rational Muslim theologian) and an opposer of falsafah before leaving Baghdad, to be a Sufi, who avoids kalam and tries to reconcile Sufism with Islamic orthodoxy even with the falsafah can be traced from the authoritative references of his life. Although these references talk about the transformation in al-Ghazali's life, none of those that inform his teaching has an important transformation. Abd al-Ghafir al-Farisi (died 529/1134), one of his colleagues, writes eloquently about how intellectually arrogant the young al-Ghazali was then transforming to be a humble person (tawadu') (Griffel, 2009b, p. 52). But, the transformation is not about the transformation of a dogmatic theologian to be a mystic that is spoken very much in modern research. Furthermore, his contemporary tells us that al-Ghazali had been trained in Sufism by his teacher, al-Faramadhi (died. 477/1084), before his thirty.

This is ten years —or more—before his crisis which is written in his autobiography. In that book, al-Ghazali writes about his leaving Baghdad as a consequence of his finding in Sufism literature. One of his pupils, Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi (died 543/1148), informs that process is not incidental at all. That pupil says two years before al-Ghazali's leaving Baghdad, he has "accepted

the path of Sufism and find himself free from what he needs (zuhud)."(Griffel, 2009b) All the reports guide us to reevaluate the story of al-Ghazali's crisis that he had in 488/1095 and until now still dominates the western scholars that write about him.

al-Ghazali's cosmology is the biggest trait to get a coherent understanding of his theology. The word "cosmology" relates to the foundational views of the universe and how they influence each other. In al-Ghazali's case, cosmology is about how God creates everything and every occasion in this universe. In other words, cosmology relates to how God creates the universe and how He concerns his creation. For Western scholars, the basic problem of al-Ghazali's cosmology arise as soon as after 1904, when his work The Niche of Lights (Mishkat al-Anwar) was published for the first time. In this book, al-Ghazali reflects the principles of cosmology that were developed by the philosophers and it cannot be found in the earlier works of Sunni theologians.

The teachings in Mishkat al Anwar seem to contrast with his other works, especially in his book Balanced Book on What-to-Believe (al-Iqtisad fil-I'tiqad) (al Ghazali, 1982b, pp. 16–19; Al-Ghazālī, 1962, pp. 9–10). Thirty years later, researchers like W. H. T. Gairdner, Arent J. Wensinck, and Miguel Asín Palacios, have documented the differences, but they cannot provide more explanation. During the twentieth century, through the works of William M. Watt, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, etc. western scholars try to solve the puzzles except for the most problematic texts, that are mostly contradicting to al-Ghazali's teaching accepted by the public.

Lazarus-Yafeh proves the works do not use philosophical language and should not be associated with the Muslim theologian. Comparably, Watt has the same view on certain chapters in Mishkat al Anwar (Ghazzali & Buchman, 1998; Griffel, 2009b, p. 9). We the researchers find their arguments are not convincing; it is likely impossible that certain chapters can be added to the works of a leading scholar like al-Ghazali after he published them in his lifetime. Classical Muslim scholars greatly respect the textual tradition of a writer; all the manuscripts are validated by comparing them with the copies of the same works.(Griffel, 2009b, p. 10) The writer and the readers have the interested to keep the integrity of the published works. They can collectively identify the errors in the manuscript tradition even centuries after the book was published.

In the first publication in 1966, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh argues that al-Ghazali did not write methodologically the books with philosophical terminologies.This argument seems problematic (Griffel, 2009b, p. 10). Lazarus-Yafeh sees that the philosophical themes do not present in the works that are publicly accepted as al-Ghazali's works. This means that using philosophical language is not important and is a part of unauthentic addition to Ghazalian corpus. Since numerous researchers studying al-Ghazali's works that deny admitting he uses philosophical language. Every time the language uses, For Lazarus-Yafeh, it can be used to question the authenticity of his works. Lazarus-Yafeh rejects al-Ghazali's works using philosophical language simply because there are scholars who reject these aspects. It is not because the problem within the works uses philosophical language.

A new controversy over al-Ghazali started in 1992 when Richard M. Frank said that al-Ghazali left the cosmological system that is developed by Asy'ariyah, an Islamic theology school of thought which he comes from, and adopted Ibn Sina's cosmology. Frank said that al-Ghazali stopped believing God create everything in this universe instantly as is believed by Asy'ariyah. Moreover, he believed in the philosophical explanation that the power of God's creation extended the object of creation through a series of medium and second causes. Intellect is in room ninth that mediates the creation process to the room of sublunar which there are a series of second causes and the effects.

The cause of creation changes in harmony with the way it was made and implies that the action of God in prophetic miracle is impossible in a framework that is understood by Muslim theologians. According to Frank, al-Ghazali does not believe that God creates miracles as proof of his messengers' statements (Garden, 2011) However, the prophetic miracle is a fundamental element that is the most important in classical Asy'ari theology, and according to Asy'ari theology before al-Ghazali's time, it is an essential aspect of their theological system (Griffel, 2009a, p. 19).

In some articles that are published before and after 1992. Michael E. Marmura says that al-Ghazali's position never contradicts the fundamental principles of Asy'ari theology. Al-Ghazali holds the cosmological principle. By using strong proof, Marmura rejects the conclusion proposed by Frank. There is a possibility that al-Ghazali wrote two types of thought. The first supports Frank's analysis of philosophical cosmology and the second supports Marmura's interpretation that says al-Ghazali still holds traditional Asy'ariyah cosmology. This problem moves further. Frank and Marmura use

the same al-Ghazali's works to emphasize their theses. The works of al-Ghazali apparently can be differently interpreted as Frank or Marmura do (Griffel, 2009b, pp. 179–182). In recent years, we the researchers try to see the cosmological problem to break the academic deadlock on different interpretations proposed by Frank and Marmura. Although this is the first time we the researchers triggered by Frank's works, the readers will find that our conclusion on al-Ghazali's cosmology is different from Frank's.

We take the conclusion from both sides, Frank and Marmura. The right is what G.W. Hegel called dialectical progress. While Frank's and Marmura's works are the thesis and anti-thesis (or otherwise), this article considers a synthesis. Using Hegel's style, this article does not reject one of their works or make one of them useless. Moreover, this article aims to raise earlier theses, to improve, reconcile the conflict, and find a resolution for new development.

In this article, researchers try to offer a different interpretation of the different themes in al-Ghazali's thought on how God creates and manages the universe. This interpretation is of course not the only way to read al-Ghazali as we can see from Marmuta and Frank. However, we the researchers believe other readings do not take any interest in the theme that al-Ghazali takes important. For example, Frank accuses al-Ghazali as a liar when he wrote that God is the free agent that has independence in His action. Marmura forgets to take a small part of the note where al-Ghazali wrote the act of God is important. The researcher provides a reading that tries to reconcile two opposing arguments—and some other arguments in al-Ghazali's work that seem cannot be reconciled.

Standing in between Ash'arite dan Avicennan, al-Ghazali develops his cosmology. Al-Ghazali is a systematic thinker there so he is more indebted to Avicennan than to Ash'arite. It is because Avicennan is far more systematic than Ash'arite. Through his analysis, he adopts the cosmological determinism of Ibn Sina while becoming a Muslim theologian that defends the independence of God in His action. Al-Ghazali finds a solution for a theologian to adopt cosmological determinism that is relevant to the past in the 6th/12th century. Cosmology has become a part of physics but the contemporary cosmological systems still have space for natural law and energy array at the beginning of this universe—the so-called Big Bang—all the advanced developments from subatomic particles, atoms, galaxies, stars, planets, humankind including researchers. This fact is an important serial effect that cannot evolve all at once, the process has been starting since 14 million years

ago. As a theologian, al-Ghazali accepts this determinism. His view on the universe is similar although it is determined by the parameters of Ptolemy's geocentric cosmos which states the beginning of the universe does not start from Big Bang, but primum mobile (falak al-aflak), which is the utmost distance, the environment without stars, and the commanding intellect (Griffel, 2009b, pp. 253–260). However, this view is a deterministic view of the universe. Al-Ghazali holds patiently the view that the act of God is independent and God is the only "creator" or efficient cause in this universe. On every occasion, even the flap of a mosquito's wings is based on His will.

Furthermore, al-Ghazali's rejection of the theory of causality that is proposed by falāsifah does not mean he believes the extreme occasionalism or he does not believe in the theory of causality at all. In Ihyā', al-Ghazālī reminds Muslim society: If you wish Allah will make your stomach full without bread, or make the bread come to you, or command the angels to chew the bread for you and because of that your stomach becomes full—it will be only a proof of your foolishness about His act (al Ghazali, 1982b, p. 249; Ormsby, 2012, p. 80).

He also uses Ibn Sīnā's hierarchy of being to explain the five-level existence of text meaning in Fayshal al-Tafriqah. In this book, al-Ghazali explains that being in Qur'an or Hadith has five possible existences. (a) Essential being (*al-wujūd al-dzātī*), (b) sensory being (*al-wujūd al-hissī*), (c) imaginative being (*al-wujūd al-khayālī*), (d) intellectual being (*al-wujūd al-ʿaqlī*), and (e) metaphorical being(al-wujūd al-syibhī) (Al-Ghazālī, 1993, pp. 33–39). This al-Ghazali's theory as shown by Giffel (Griffel, 2004) is taken from Ibn Sīnā's theory on the inner sense (*al-hawāss al-bāthinah*). The conservative scholars were on the offensive against al-Ghazali at Madrasah Nizhāmiyyah in Nishapur.

This happened because of the infiltration of falāsifah teachings in his works. Hence, al-Ghazali's readers that shift from Tahāfut to other works will find in the book mentioned earlier that he uses skeptical games on the theses of *falāsifah* (Griffel, 2009a). It becomes clear that al-Ghazali's rejection of the theses of *falāsifah* in metaphysics and natural science implies that he does not object to their theses in other fields or even their approach and methodology generally in philosophy. At this point, it is clearer that what al-Ghazali does is more precisely a naturalization effort than a destructive critique of the philosophical tradition in Islam. Because what al-Ghazali does is an effort to

naturalize philosophy in Islamic tradition, especially kalam, it is no exaggeration to say al-Ghazali's teaching is philosophical theology.

The Relevance of al-Ghazali's Theological Philosophy on the Debate of Science and Islamic Theology during Pandemic

There have been a lot of changes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Everything becomes wide open. Publications of various scientific discoveries on covid-19 are widely conducted. Various classes of people from scientists to the lay community can access the publications concerning covid-19. There are numerous scientific discoveries on covid-19 such as its contagion, the importance of physical distancing, the importance of wearing the mask, the importance of avoiding crowds, vaccines, etc. All of them have been public consumption and socialized by mass media almost every day.

At the same time, there is resistance in Muslim society in Indonesia. The scientific discoveries such as suggestions to avoid the crowd and keep the physical distance completely oppose the communal worship of Muslim society. This certainly makes Muslim society in Indonesia find their selves in dilemma. Due to this fact, two groups have polemic (Samsuduhah, 2020).

The first group still decides to hold communal worship by saying the fear of God is more important than the fear of Covid-19. They believe that there are no reasons to not hold communal worship because it is God's commandment. For them not holding communal worship is an indication that the Corona virus is more afraid of than the God (Subekti, 2020).

On the other hand, the second group decides to not hold communal worship as recommended by scientific discoveries. They believe that avoiding destruction (*mafsadat*) is more important than seeking virtue (*mashalih*). Based on scientific discoveries, COVID-19 cannot be detected easily because it has to pass laboratory tests. Some of them do not feel sick but in fact, they are getting sick and could infect others. Accordingly, it is not easy to find who has been exposed to the COVID-19 virus in the crowded such as communal worship. It is worse knowing that the committees of communal worship are not paramedics that can detect the virus.(Sulaeman, 2021) Therefore, based on the reason to avoid destruction they decide to not hold or restrict the communal worship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this case, it is important to explore al-Ghazali's philosophical theology more deeply as explained before. When those two groups argue over science and Islamic theology, it is important to remind what al-Ghazali did to reconcile theology and philosophy in his time. To avoid ideological extremism, they have to learn from al-Ghazali's attitude toward the theory of occasionalism and causality. Like al-Ghazali, Muslim society should respect the scientific discoveries on the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, Muslim society should keep the view that the act and will of God are following science in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, Muslim society will not fall into the cult of scientific tradition or theological belief.

Conclution

Based on what researchers explained above, we can conclude as follows: firstly, The notion of al-Ghazali's philosophical theology is an effort of al-Ghazali to naturalize philosophy into the tradition of Islamic theology. It can be seen from his notion of cosmology. He placed himself betwixt and between Ash'arite and Avicennan. Afterward, al-Ghazali developed his cosmology. Al-Ghazali is a systematic thinker so he is more indebted to Avicennan than to Ash'arite. It is because Avicennan is far more systematic than Ash'arite. Through his analysis, he adopts the cosmological determinism of Ibn Sina while becoming a Muslim theologian that defends the independence of God in His action. However, this view is a deterministic view of the universe. Al-Ghazali holds patiently the view that the act of God is independent and God is the only "creator" or efficient cause in this universe. On every occasion, even the flap of a mosquito's wings is based on His will.

Secondly, Al-Ghazali's philosophical theology is relevant for reconciling science and Islamic theology during the COVID-19 pandemic that was divided before. Like al-Ghazali, Muslim society should respect scientific discoveries concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not only appreciate the scientific discoveries but Muslim society also should keep in mind that the will and act of God are attached to the efforts of science to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, Muslim society will not fall into the cult of scientific tradition or theological belief.

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