

## Positive Moral Philosophy: A Proposal

### Abstract:

The essay proposes recognizing a new subfield of positive moral philosophy. After providing a working definition of the field, the essay discusses this field's loose relation to positive psychology, the non-logical and often unintended negative effects of theories of obligation and accountability on how we think about moral life, the rationales for introducing any new subfield, a set of guiding assumptions that characterize extant work in positive moral philosophy, and an exploration of literature exemplifying those guiding assumptions. Positive moral philosophy is devoted to investigating the nature of and the social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal contributors to moral success and progress; it attends to the reparative, appreciative, generous, and hopeful dimensions of our relation to self and other, as well as to the attractions of morality and aspirational ideals; it emphasizes varieties of elective, non-demandable moral action over demandable moral requirements.

For the past several years, I have been thinking that it would be useful to carve out a subfield of ethics devoted to pursuing what, for want of a better umbrella term, I think of as “positive” approaches to ethical life. Here is a working definition of the field I have in mind: Positive moral philosophy is devoted to investigating the nature of and the social, interpersonal, and intrapersonal contributors to moral success and progress; it attends to the reparative, appreciative, generous, and hopeful dimensions of our relation to self and other, as well as to the attractions of morality and aspirational ideals; it emphasizes varieties of elective, non-demandable moral action over demandable moral requirements. What makes a moral philosophy “positive” is, obviously, not just one thing. It might be positive because it develops a *constructive* account of the transition from less desirable moral point A—say, a level of moral development or a level of adequacy in social moral norms—to more desirable point B. This is different from simply critiquing point A and justifying why point B is what should be the goal. It might be positive because it focuses on *positively valenced* moral attitudes, including what

Strawsonians call the positive reactive attitudes, as well as on *alternatives to negatively sanctioning* interactions with wrongdoers. It might be positive because it focuses on or presumes the *attractiveness* of morality such that, for example, people may have moral aspirations and ideals and admire moral exemplars. It might be positive because focused on actions that *exceed* what is morally required. It might be positive because focused on *positive duties* of beneficence, care or supportiveness, rather than negative duties of restraint, or on *taking on* responsibilities to see that certain goods get promoted. These are, as it were, spokes on a wheel of positive approaches to moral life, to which more could be added. The field is, thus, internally diverse, as many fields of philosophy are. Positive moral philosophy does not pick out an ethical theory even if some ethical theories, such as virtue ethics or care ethics might largely qualify as ways of doing positive moral philosophy.

The resemblance of the proposed field name—“positive moral philosophy”—to another relatively new, exceedingly active, and controversial field—“positive psychology”—is non-accidental.<sup>1</sup> Although not an entirely new idea, positive psychology took off after Martin Seligman’s brief 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association. Seligman drew attention to psychology’s almost exclusive focus on diagnosing mental pathology and repairing psychological damage. Positive psychology did not aim to *replace* a psychology of malfunction but to take up the under-explored terrain of what enables and would enhance ordinary, everyday mental health. Seligman thus proposed a counterbalancing orientation for a

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of the controversy see Lazarus (2003), Held (2004), Kristjansson (2013). An early mistake of positive psychology was narrowly to focus on positively valenced emotional attitudes (hope, optimism, joy) and positive experiences (of well-being, happiness, fulfillment), neglecting the contribution of negative experiences to improving psychological health, e.g., by contributing to the development of coping strategies and resilience.

distinct field of psychological research—positive psychology—that would focus on supporting mental health (thereby preventing mental illness that would require remedy) and emphasize “the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual: optimism, courage, work ethic, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, the capacity for pleasure and insight, and social responsibility” (Seligman 1999). Positive psychology has come to be centrally focused on well-being and happiness, and the positive human traits, like hope, resilience, optimism, and gratitude that support human flourishing. This field didn’t come out of nowhere. before WW II, as Seligman observed in his presidential address, psychology had affirmed as its mission not only to cure mental illness, but also to make all persons’ lives more fulfilling. And as early as 1954, Abraham Maslow critiqued the negative orientation in psychology and used the term “positive psychology.”

Seligman’s advocacy of positive psychology depended heavily on the contrast with a psychology focused on *negative* psychological states of *malfunction or disease*. Although I’ll have something to say about negative aspects of moral philosophy, the defense of positive moral philosophy does not rest on any supposed contrast with a moral philosophy focused on moral malfunction—vice, wrongdoing, evil, systematic injustice and the like. The main branches of moral philosophy—ethical theory, moral psychology (including theories of moral accountability), and metaethics—are neutral. Ethical theory, for example, simply addresses questions about what is obligatory, forbidden, and permitted, or more generally, what we have most (moral) reason to do; moral psychology addresses the nature of moral agency, moral judgment, moral emotions, capacities necessary for successful agency as well as internal obstacles to successful agency. Further, because normative ethics aims to provide *moral*

*guidance* about what must be done or avoided, and because moral psychology illuminates what *successful moral agency* depends on, we might say that both are in some sense “positive.” The relevant contrast is instead between a positive moral philosophy focused on the positive “spokes” I’ve just described and a moral philosophy that largely ignores those spokes or appears to treat them as unimportant or “fringe” topics in moral philosophy. This ignoring or treating as fringe can, however, have the consequence—often neither logical nor intended--of producing a negative vision of moral life.

I’ll begin in Section 1 by saying something about that element of negativity about moral life connected with ethical theory and theories of accountability. The point is not to suggest that there’s something wrong with this theorizing, let alone that we should stop doing it. Rather the point is to motivate the proposal that it would *also* be a good thing to pursue the positive. In Section 2, I’ll offer general reasons for introducing new subfields in philosophy. And in Section 3, I’ll put meat on the bones of the working definition of positive moral philosophy by briefly describing what I take to be central assumptions of a positive moral philosophy. The aim there is not to rigidly circumscribe the field, since what falls in a field of philosophy is something for those who work in that field to develop. Rather the aim is to spotlight existent literature in positive moral philosophy and thereby provide a better sense of the range of topics it might pursue.

### **1. Negativity**

Just as Seligman’s concern with the absence of attention to the positive in psychology had earlier historical precedents, so there are historical precedents for my present concern with absence of attention to the positive in moral philosophy. Two notable examples are care

ethicists' critiques of modern moral philosophy, which they characterized as an "ethics of justice" focused on moral rights and negative moral duties of restraint. They recommended a counterbalancing ethics of care focused, among other things, on caring attitudes, practices of care, sustaining interpersonal relationships, and positive duties of caretaking. Virtue ethics—a second notable example—while possibly able to deliver a theory of obligation, nevertheless focuses on topics that are not on the main agenda of modern moral philosophy, including character development, moral education, the attractiveness of morality given its connection with human flourishing, and ideals of virtue.

A lesser known example is Edmund Pincoffs' expression of dissatisfaction with the disappearance of the positive given moral philosophy's focus on *problems*. In his 1971 essay, "Quandary Ethics," and his 1986 *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics*, Pincoffs observed that

there is a consensus concerning the subject-matter of ethics so general that it would be tedious to document it. It is that the business of ethics is with 'problems,' i.e., situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do; that the ultimate beneficiary of ethical analysis is the person who, in one of these situations, seeks rational grounds for the decision he must make.... (1971, 552).

The rational grounds, once provided, speak to the "conscientious man's" need to know what it would be right—that is, obligatory—for anyone to do in the same circumstances (564, 565). Pincoffs' objection is not that this is the wrong way of doing moral philosophy. It is not, as he says, "the wrong door through which to enter ethics" (571), but that there are other doors and the "house is a larger one than the quandarists would lead us to believe" (571). His particular concern was that there's no space to entertain questions about what it would be *worthy* of a person to do, given that person's *ideals* and the current formation of their

character, despite there being no obligation to do that worthy thing. Failing to go the second mile or to turn the other cheek may not be blameable, but may nevertheless exhibit the kind of person one is and the kinds of moral demands one makes on oneself. In language capturing positive psychology's concern with health rather than illness, he observes: "That the moral philosopher can be thought of as prescribing a regimen for a healthy moral life rather than a cure for a particular moral illness would surely not be news to Aristotle" (554). While the theories of obligation that are his target may not, logically, rule out the dimensions of a healthy moral life that interest Pincoffs—the cultivation of character and a moral identity, moral ideals, the election of what cannot be required by others as what is worthy of oneself—those topics, he thought, nevertheless had come to occupy a marginal place moral philosophy.

What got me thinking about positive moral philosophy—how it might be described and what it might cover—was reflection on the combined effect of ethical theories that are theories of obligation and theories of responsibility that are theories of accountability. Theories of obligation aim to tell us what we are required to, what may be demanded from us by others, and what, absent a passable excuse or temporary exemption from responsibility, we are blameworthy for failing to do. There is thus a very tight connection between the action guidance that theories of obligation aim to provide—guidance about the required and thus demandable—and what is potentially sanctionable via expressions of blame, moral protest, and social if not also legal penalty. There is also a very tight connection between that action guidance and the negative reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, contempt, disappointment, guilt, and shame (rather than positive reactive attitudes of gratitude, appreciation, admiration, self-appraisal, and pride). Unsurprisingly, theories of

accountability aim to tell us what persons must be like if they are to be held accountable, and blamed, for failing to do what they ought to have done.

Because people do not typically imagine themselves as the violators of moral obligation, thinking about moral requirements easily has the seductive effect of inviting us to take up the second-person position toward real or imagined others, to think about what treatments we are ourselves entitled to expect and demand of others, and to dwell on the resentments and indignations we might justifiably feel toward others.<sup>2</sup> For whatever psychological reason, talk about moral requirements and demands does not similarly seduce us into imagining ourselves as perpetrators tasked with character development or into imagining ourselves as victims who might respond with “meekness” rather than moral anger (Pettigrove 2012a), offer proleptic forgiveness in advance of any sign or remorse (Fricker 2019), “throw the veil of philanthropy” over apparent wrong-doing (Stohr 2019), adopt a stance of faith in humanity that wrongdoers might yet become better people (Preston-Roedder 2013; Moody-Adams 2015), or pursue reintegrative rather than punitive approaches to wrongdoers (Braithwaite 2000). (I will return to these topics in Section 3.)

The combined effect of theories of obligation and theories of morally responsible agency is thus to focus the mind of the reader, and writer, of moral philosophy on what does or might go wrong in moral life and the negative attitudes and demanding or controlling responses we might justifiably have toward people who go morally wrong.

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<sup>2</sup> Even when the proffered examples are of real or imaginary persons who are treated as they ought not to be, the seduction is to identify with the victims of wrongdoing rather than the perpetrators. That seduction may arise from the fundamental attribution error—the tendency to attribute others’ wrongdoing to culpable characterological faults and our own wrongdoing to situational factors that might provide an excuse from culpability.

Of course, determining what exactly people are morally required to do is vitally important for our moral life together. Theories of obligation enable critical reassessment of everyday assumptions about what it is permissible to do—assumptions that may be wrong. They clarify what morality requires in novel circumstances or when there are competing considerations for and against a course of action. There is much that goes wrong in our moral life together—seemingly increasingly so—that requires philosophical attention; and some of the most difficult questions about responsibility concern wrongs and harms that result from collective behavior. Thoughtful people who reflect on what is actually morally required within social arrangements and conditions that are far from perfect should indeed ask, “What are people morally required to do that they are not now doing but ought to be?” We make moral progress precisely by reflecting on our collective failure to come to grips with what morality actually requires within both routine social exchanges (for example, the moral importance of using correct pronouns for trans persons) and new circumstances (for example, the availability of statistical information about the correlation between particular traits and the likelihood of criminal guilt). This critical activity is an exceptionally good thing to engage in.

However, a focus on individual and social failure to recognize and act on moral requirements is, like psychology’s overwhelming focus on mental disease and disorder, an unbalanced and negative orientation toward understanding moral life. First, it invites applied normative ethics to focus on an ever-expanding list of normative requirements and thus resentable offenses. It also invites us to adopt a dismal picture of our moral life together as a life fraught with endless opportunities to justifiably take offense and to be the target of others’ resentments. (I say “invites” because I don’t think there’s anything about normative ethics that



requires these things.) What drops out of view is, among other things, the fact that a very large portion of our shared moral understandings appear correct from a critical, reflective perspective and there is a high level of compliance with a wide variety of moral norms.

Inattention to the extent and normalcy of successful moral performance combined with philosophical attention to self-interested incentives to behave badly sustain a picture of morality as a burden: Morality enters the scene as a constraint that must be justified--“Why be moral?” As Barbara Herman observes, “There is a familiar story that begins this way. Morality constrains. Liberty-loving people chafe, and demand justifying explanation. One might almost regard this as modern moral philosophy’s primal scene” (2000, 29). That primal scene makes it difficult to appreciate that morality does not operate solely as constraint. People not only acquire a moral socialization that enables automatic compliance with many social norms, but they often adopt moral ideals, include moral ambitions among their other ambitions (Pettigrove 2009), admire morally exemplary actions and persons (Brownlee 2010b; Zagzebski 2017) and desire to maintain a morally acceptable social identity. Morality, though sometimes a burdensome yoke, is often just part of normal to-be-expected social life as well as an attractive aspiration.

The presumed burdensomeness of morality produces an oddly one-sided approach to beneficence. Singer’s (1972) “Famine, Affluence and Morality” and Bernard Williams’s (1973) critique of utilitarianism for requiring that we be prepared to give up our ground projects launched a philosophical discussion of the potential over-demandingness of moral theories and a search for a theoretical justification for *limiting* morality’s demands. This is an important issue. But a focus on limiting morality’s demands has two unfortunate side-effects. One is

inattention to beneficence (required or not), the forms it takes, the capacities or skills involved in being beneficent, and how to encourage more and more effective beneficent activities. The other unfortunate side-effect is that when “What am I *obligated* to do?” is the central question, it may seem that doing the good but non-obligatory is unimportant. In a recent essay, for example, Sarah Buss (2019) took up the question of whether one is obligated to make grave sacrifices, e.g., of a minimally decent life or life itself, in defense of others’ human rights. It’s an important question. But the (nonlogical) implication is that should the answer be ‘no,’ then one can sigh with relief: “Not obligated? Then not my problem!” There of course might be saints or heroes who volunteer to take grave risks in defense of human rights, but what they do is purely supererogatory. And because the supererogatory doesn’t concern what I *must* do, then I can safely ignore it.

None of these observations about negativity are criticisms of theories of obligation or theories of morally responsible agency. To some extent, negativity is just part of moral philosophy doing its job of specifying what is owed to others and is thus blameworthy if omitted without an excuse. To some extent, negativity is a contingent, psychological side-effect, as is, for example, focusing on resentment rather than other options for attitudinal and behavioral responses to wrongdoing. To some extent, negativity is due to a contingent pattern of philosophical focus, as is, for example, a focus on morality as constraint rather than as attractive aspiration. The end result, however, is to move the positive to the outskirts and off the main agenda of moral philosophy.s

## **2. The Rationales for New Subfields**

New fields arise all the time, and for various reasons. Experimental philosophy introduced a new methodological approach to doing philosophy, tying the conduct of philosophy more closely to empirical work in psychology. Feminist philosophy introduced a way of selecting topics and generating conceptual resources across the subdisciplines of philosophy that was tethered to an underlying political commitment to illuminating and addressing oppression. Environmental philosophy and philosophy of technology, to take just two examples, zeroed in on challenging areas of contemporary human life.

Although the specific reasons for creating a new field vary with the field itself, there are common benefits that flow from naming a new area of research. One of the most important benefits is legitimation. By itself, naming a field doesn't automatically legitimize work in it, but it does render imaginable and feasible the sorts of things that do enhance the work's legitimacy: creating specialized journals, conferences, topical courses. That benefit is connected to several more: facilitating communication and collaboration among like-minded philosophers, producing a shared literature in a nameable field, and creation of more adequate conceptual resources. With a recognized field comes the possibility of presenting one's work, and having it evaluated as, a contribution *to that field* rather than to some other field under whose auspices one could do this work but within which it would likely seem fringe and thus insignificant. There's a difference, for example, between even the very best work on the concepts of race and gender framed as a contribution to metaphysics, where that work is bound to seem marginal, and that same work framed as a contribution to feminist philosophy, where it may appear enormously important. New fields do not move an extant and growing body of work from margin to center of established fields, but they do nevertheless "center" work that might

otherwise be regarded as fringe and not the real thing—not really philosophy, not really ethics, not really epistemology etc.

Intrinsically valuable work may not only seem fringe within an established field, but its positioning there may supply a distorting lens on the work. Both virtue ethics and feminist ethics of care, at present, are standardly grouped with consequentialist, deontological, and contractarian theories of obligation. This puts pressure on both to deliver a plausibly competing theory of right action and to downplay features of virtue ethics and care ethics that simply are not standard fare for theories of obligation, such as the relation between morality and human flourishing; the development of the perceptual, emotional, and cognitive capacities constitutive of virtue; virtues as ideals; practices of care; the moral significance of dependency relations; and capacities for perceiving and responding to particularities of relationships. Whether either would fare better if positioned within positive moral philosophy remains to be seen, but I suspect they would.

A second common benefit is intellectual gap-filling. Academic scholarship is a social activity. Communities of scholars inevitably converge on shared conceptions of the main problems in their field, the canonical works, the hottest current topics, and the central methodological approaches. With that, communities of scholars come to share views about what topics and readings undergraduate courses and graduate seminars should include in order to be a respectable course on topic X (say, ethics or metaphysics), thereby inducting the next generation of scholars into established, shared conceptions of the field. This is in many respects a good thing. But it also has an intellectually shuttering effect. It becomes difficult to imagine topics outside the established ones. We, as philosophers, are not taught to regularly ask

ourselves “What are philosophers not talking about that they should be given its human importance?” Instead, we are more likely to ask, “How can I advance an already established conversation within a scholarly tradition?” As a result, there are bound to be important gaps that need filling. For instance, rather than relying on armchair comments about what the “man in the street” thinks, experimental philosophy provided needed empirical evidence for how people actually think. Similarly, the creation of theories of oppression and non-ideal political theories filled an important gap in political philosophy.

A third benefit in at least some cases is that delineating a field makes it possible to think the connection between what appears to be work in quite different areas. Moral psychology, for example, is an internally diverse field, including work on the nature of agency, moral emotions, virtues, moral responsibility, egoism and altruism, and the relation between moral judgment and motivation, work that would otherwise be conceptually disaggregated into such fields as metaethics, virtue ethics, philosophy of emotion, and philosophy of human nature.

Establishing a new field in philosophy is especially worth considering under certain conditions: First, there is already a body of work fitting the proposed new field’s aim. Second, that body of work currently falls under one or more established fields within which the work appears marginal given the established field’s central research agendas, canonical literature, and methods. Third, while marginal to the established field or fields, there is good reason to think that the subject matter of this body of work is worth developing because of its human significance and because the current array of philosophical projects leaves important intellectual gaps. Finally, establishing a new field is worth considering when having that field

would enable us to think in interesting and productive ways about the connection between seemingly disparate philosophical projects.

Would a field of positive moral philosophy be beneficial and worth considering for the reasons I just suggested? The principal beneficiaries of the legitimizing effects of having a named subfield are those producing the work. One researcher in positive *psychology* speaks to the benefits of having a legitimate place for their work:

[When I got into studying happiness 20 years ago, 1981, I had a hell of a time. I didn't get promoted in my university because many of the older professors thought I was studying something pretty flaky.... The point is that people like Danny Kahneman and Marty Seligman made room for me to do my research with respect, and all of a sudden, for the past five years, I can say I study happiness...and people say that's great! And so I feel like the good thing that positive psychology has done is to give us some room to study with some respect for science, our science,...happiness, life satisfaction, optimism and growth and virtue and other positive topics (quoted in Held 2005, 5-6).

None of the work I'll mention in Section 3 would be perceived as "flaky." But I suspect that much, though not all, of it would be perceived as "fringe" in ethics: There may be very little else written on the same topic (for example, Brownlee's essay on aspirational ideals, and Arpaly's on beneficence); or it may be hard to know how to categorize the work (for example, Stohr's book on closing the gap between actual and ideal moral identity or Oldenburg's work on the moral training that following rules of manners provides); or it might be bucking standard approaches to a topic (for example, Pettigrove's recommendation of "meekness" and Fricker's account of forgiveness absent antecedent remorse as preferable or possible, respectively, responses to wrongdoers); or—and this is perhaps the litmus test for "fringe"—it's hard to imagine what undergraduate or graduate course in ethics one could teach that would include this literature (for example, the literature on moral progress).

There is already a rich, extant body of work that fits the working definition of positive moral philosophy I've proposed, some of which I'll describe in the next section. So, this isn't a case of building a house in an unpopulated region, but of building a house that better suits some of the population than the houses currently on offer. One of my main concerns is the extant body of work has the appearance of being more fringe than the human significance and philosophical importance if its topics warrant. A principal reason for establishing a field of positive moral philosophy is to enable gap-filling in moral philosophy. I've already briefly gestured at some of the gaps in moral philosophy. I'll have considerably more to say in the next section. Finally, whether a field of positive moral philosophy would be useful in thinking the connections between disparate work remains to be seen. That it do so is, perhaps, the least important consideration. Subfields of philosophy differ substantially with respect to their internal diversity. Nevertheless, even within highly diverse subfields, such as feminist philosophy that cuts across the major areas of philosophy, and moral psychology, there's surely some benefit to having peers working in the same subfield, familiar with the same canonical literature, and who are natural conversational partners at conferences devoted to the field.

### **3. Themes in Extant Literature**

Fields are identified not only via summary definitions of the field, like the working definition of positive moral philosophy I provided at the outset. They can also be identified via the shared assumptions that guide the selection of research topics. There are, of course, no shared assumptions *within* positive moral philosophy, since the field does not exist. A survey of extant relevant literature, however, suggests these as candidate identifying assumptions:

- a. Elective good actions (the supererogatory) constitute an important dimension of the moral domain.
- b. Respect does not clearly capture the basic moral orientation of beneficent, human and non-human welfare-enhancing, and socially contributory actions.
- c. Morality presents us not only with obligations, but also aspirational ideals.
- d. Moral requirements often do not operate as constraints, imposing a burden and placing us at war with morality.
- e. Taking backward-looking and taking forward-looking responsibility constitute important dimensions of being a responsible agent.
- f. Blaming is but one option for responding to apparent wrongdoing and not always the most constructive one.
- g. Capacity for good moral performance is acquired, improvable, and scaffolded within moral communities.
- h. Society-wide moral progress and moral revolutions have occurred.

Literature reviews are not fascinating reading. However, I claimed earlier that among the reasons for considering establishing a new field were the facts that there is already a sizable literature that falls within the field's mission, that the connections within that literature are difficult to see absent the right kind of unifying field, and that some work on topics of human importance—in this case moral importance—has a fringe status within the established field that currently “houses” the work. The following description of the kinds of philosophical issues and sampling of relevant literature is, thus, meant to do double duty. On the one hand, it puts flesh on the bones of the list of guiding assumptions. On the other hand, it will, I hope, make



evident that a field of positive moral philosophy is worth considering because of the human and moral significance of its topics.

As I detail the relevant questions and literature, I urge the reader to resist “But...” thoughts, such as “But surely blame is often warranted and serves a constructive purpose,” “But self-interested concern does often motivate wrong action,” “But moral misbehavior is commonplace,” “But the hierarchical structure of societies impedes recognition of wrongdoing and social change.” I remind the reader that positive moral philosophy is not proffered as a *replacement* for important work in moral philosophy but a way of *opening space* for a more expansive investigation of the moral domain.

**a. Elections constitute an important dimension of the moral domain.**

Morality is not limited to moral obligation—what we owe each other and what is demandable from a second-person standpoint. Supererogation is, of course, a familiar concept in moral philosophy, and defenses of a domain of supererogation have a long history (for example, Urmson (1958); Feinberg (1961); Heyd (1982); Portmore (2003); Ferry (2013, 2015); Archer (2016)). One question we might have about supererogation is why some morally favored actions are nevertheless elective. But we also might wonder why those who engage in admirable supererogation often report feeling obliged to act as they do (Archer 2015). And why do those opting not to make elections (e.g., turning down donation requests) frequently offer excuses if their refusals are not blamable (Trianosky 1986)? Does the classification of acts as supererogatory vary with individuals’ level of character development (Dougherty 2017; Archer 2016), social availability of examples of the compatibility of significant sacrifices with leading a good life (Carbonell 2012), or specific features of the moral community (Blum 1998)?

Although saintly and heroic action involving large personal sacrifices are spectacular moral elections, non-obligatory elections are a staple of everyday common decency, good manners, and intimate and community relationships. Many of those elections involve no appreciable sacrifice--such as allowing shoppers with fewer items to check out first or sending a birthday card to a friend. Though elective and appropriately responded to with "Thanks" or more substantial gratitude, the staples of common decency, good manners, and relationships are often also normatively expected and failures to make these ordinary elections invite normatively tinged disappointment and sometimes moral criticism or blame. Yet how can what is non-obligatory and fit for gratitude also be normatively expected such that omission of the elective is criticizable? Proposed useful conceptual resources include the notion of the suberogatory (Driver 1992), quasi-obligations (Calhoun 2004), and appeals as contrasted with demands (Mason 2017).

The morally elective makes its appearance in a different way in the Kantian notion of imperfect duties, where adopting an end is required but specific actions are elective. For Kant, a key imperfect duty is the duty of beneficence. Various forms of beneficence pervade our moral life together, from everyday kindness, to the attitudes and practices of care that feminist care ethicists drew attention to, to philanthropic activity, to both for-profit and non-profit institutions' social engagement. Part of the difficulty of thinking clearly about beneficence is that it is such an expansive category. Thus, it would be helpful to have analyses of specific types of beneficence. A search of PhilPapers.org turned up not a single essay devoted to kindness, (but, in sociology, see Brownlie and Anderson [2017], who begin by observing that sociologists, too, have largely ignored everyday kindness). A form of everyday beneficence

expected within personal relationships—supportiveness—received a single (but interesting) entry (Tsai 2018).

Given how dependent we are, and some people in particular are, it's important to investigate not only what beneficence and benevolence consist in (Darwall 2002; Fahmy 2010; Arpaly 2018; Mayr 2018), but also what social and educational conditions cultivate cultures of giving, responsiveness to others' vulnerability and need, and everyday kindness. One empirical study (Weber and Murnighan 2008), for example, concluded that the presence of consistent contributors in dictator games results in members contributing more and cooperating more often. The researchers attributed this to consistent contribution "prompting fellow group members to see the social norms that apply as more cooperative than they would in the [consistent contributors'] absence" (1350).

With respect to the differing kinds of elections, it's worth thinking about the role that individuals' self-concepts and commitment to moral ideals play in their willingness to make moral elections. Empirical studies of self-concept, both positive and negative, in motivating prosocial behavior are relevant. So is the role of commitment to ideals in practical reasoning. For example, as noted earlier, Pincoffs (1986) observed that we encounter "What ought I to do?" not as characterless, universal agents but as individuals with a formed moral character in which particular moral ideals prominently figure. He suggested that answering the question of what one ought to do is often not possible without first asking, "What is worthy of me?"

Finally, positive attitudes such as gratitude, appreciation, and praise are especially fitting responses to elective actions (even if they may also be fitting responses to some obligatory action [Helm 2019]). There is a large literature on gratitude focusing particularly on why it is

owed. Positive responsive attitudes might also be approached through the lens of Strawsonian reactive attitudes. Resentment is typically taken as the paradigm for modelling what reactive attitudes are like. But are the positive and negative reactive attitudes really symmetrical? And, more importantly, what should a substantive account of these responsibility-recognizing attitudes look like and why does expressing those attitudes matter (Macnamara 2013; Escheleman 2015; Telech 2020, 2021; Stout 2020; Calhoun 2021)?

**b. Respect does not clearly capture the basic moral orientation of beneficent, human and non-human welfare enhancing, and socially contributory actions.**

Kant had a profound influence on moral philosophy's attention to respect for others as rational, autonomous beings. Although respect involves accepting and acting on the imperfect duty of beneficence, substantially more attention has been given to perfect duties of respect—to what we owe each other (Scanlon 2000) and what may be second-personally demanded from us by others (Darwall 2009). Starting with Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), care ethicists argued for a shift of attention from respect for rights to care and responsiveness to human needs, dependency, and vulnerability. Focusing on our vulnerability invites attention to our responsibilities *for* others (Goodin 1985; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014) and what might be done—obligatory or not—to promote their welfare. How the basic moral orientation to human and non-human others' as vulnerable, needy creatures should be described is an open question. But there are certainly familiar, more specific attitudes in the neighborhood, such as empathy and sympathetic concern (e.g. Darwall 1998), compassion, and caring about others for their own sake (Helm 2009).

In a quite different vein, Saul Smilansky (2004) has proposed a basic orientation, not to others but rather to what one is doing as a moral agent, which he calls “contributionism.” His aim was to provide an alternative to consequentialism, deontology, contractualism and virtue ethics that takes caring about one’s contribution as at the center of moral concern. Although not developed, and evidently not receiving philosophical uptake, it’s nevertheless noteworthy in its effort to provide a framework for thinking about moral action that makes positive contributions to others and one’s social world at least as salient as refraining from harm.

**c. Morality presents us not only with obligations, but also aspirational ideals.**

The extensive literature, both Aristotelian (e.g., Annas 2011 ) and not (e.g., Arpaly 2014; Driver 2009), on the nature of virtue in general and of particular virtues constitutes the largest body of work in positive moral philosophy. For most individuals, perfect virtue and acquisition of perfect forms of particular virtues are at most ideals. Focusing on ideals invites us to think about morality as inherently *attractive*, rather than as a burdensome constraint on pursuit of non-moral interests. Those who exemplify ideals provoke a motivating admiration (Zagzebski 2017; Archer 2019; Kaupinnen 2019), a feeling of elevation (Haidt 2000; Thomson and Seigel 2016), and longing to be like them (Brownlee 2010b); and making our own progress toward ideals merits pride (McLatchie and Piazza 2017). Getting a grip on the attractions of morality involves not just specifying what ideal character and action consists in, but also the nature of moral aspiration and ambition (Brownlee 2010b; Pettigrove 2009) and how motivation by ideal works (Velleman 2002; Riggle 2017). There is also the question of how we are to fit ideals and exemplars into our theories of practical reasoning (Brownlee 2010a; and recall Pincoff’s stress on “What is worthy of me?”) and theories of obligation and virtue (Mellema 2010). Zagzebski

(2017) and Olberding (2012), for example, explicate moral theories grounded in what exemplary individuals are like (rather than starting from moral concepts), where exemplars are identified by appealing to pre-theoretical, admiring attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

We may wonder what it is about moral exemplars that make them attractive and leads us to attribute moral worth to their actions. Is their attractiveness aesthetic, a matter of moral beauty (Kidd 2019; Paris 2019)? Are different kinds of exemplars worthy of admiration on fundamentally different grounds (Urmson 1958, Blum 1988, Markowitz 2012)? Markowitz (2012) argues that we need to distinguish three distinct axes of admirability: those whose actions are consistently worthy (saints), those whose actions may not be morally worthy but are good ones that most people would not do (heroes), and moral experts who can expand others' knowledge enabling others to engage in morally worthy actions (sages). Do moral saints in fact exemplify an attractive ideal? Wolf famously argued they don't, while others have defended moral saints against Wolf's criticism (Blum 1988, Carbonell 2009). Sometimes what we admire in exemplars is their willingness to make sacrifices. But how should we understand "sacrifice" and what sorts of sacrifices are admirable (Carbonell 2015, 2018)?

**d. Moral requirements often do not operate as constraints, imposing a burden and placing us at war with morality.**

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<sup>3</sup> Although not focused on ideals or exemplars, Robert Merrihew Adams's, "Moral Faith" (1995), is interesting in its suggestion that the attraction of morality might depend at bottom on faith—including faith in morality itself and one's own moral convictions (against, for example, skeptical answers to "Why be moral?"); faith that other persons' lives are worth living (and thus worth taking as ends of one's own action); and faith that encouraging others to lead a moral life will be good for them. For a discussion of the relation between moral faith and moral progress see Moody Adams (2017).

The amount of attention given to the potential conflict between morality and self-interest, to self-interested temptations resulting in akratic failures to do the right thing, and to answering the question “Why be moral?” might easily suggest a picture of normal agents as endlessly at war with morality. By contrast, Herman argues that a “reasonable morality is well integrated into ordinary living not something we are endlessly at war with (like a diet) or a distant goal toward which we direct substantial amounts of our energy” (2007, p. 108). Morality comes to be well-integrated precisely because we are taught to be morally literate from an early age so that our self-interested aims are “seamlessly” woven with morality. The sociologist, Harold Garfinkel (1964) noted that simply in coming to “grasp the natural facts of social life,” we acquire thereby a commitment to motivated action on social moral norms (236). Or as Bicchieri (2006) argues in her work on social norms, socialization provides us with the tools for categorizing situations and scripts for acting within those situations, scripts that encode social norms. As a result, conscious deliberation is often necessary; instead, agents follow an “heuristic route” in which interpretation of situations, and consequent automatic activation of relevant scripts yields norm compliant behavior.

In short, everyday agents’ moral successfulness is extensive. What account of the constitution, nature, and exercise of agency best fits routine moral behavior? How should we understand practical activity that proceeds automatically rather than through reflective deliberation? What social conditions contribute to morally good conduct? Bicchieri (2017; 2018), for example, argues that information campaigns focusing on supplying practical reasons is not effective and explores what is. Stout (2011) argues that three factors explain prosocial

behavior: instructions from authority, beliefs about others' prosocial behavior, and the magnitude of benefits to others.

While it is important to understand the psychological and social factors that interfere with morally correct behavior (such as in-group favoritism, stigmatizing stereotypes, implicit bias, garden variety self-interest, peer pressure, not to mention morally arbitrary action-influencers like being in a hurry that situationists drew attention to), it's equally important to understand the psychological and social factors that enable routine, unproblematic moral action. How should we understand the moral psychology of agents who have the capacity for routine good conduct? The economists' model of rationally self-interested agents focused on rewards and penalties would seem to be the wrong model. This raises questions both about the effectiveness of penalties and rewards in holding people to account (Holroyd 2007) and about why we, who live in contexts of extensive compliance, so readily focus on failures to behave well. Stout (2011) investigates the variety of psychological factors that predispose us not to see unselfish behavior (in the forms of both moral restraint and active altruism) and to exaggerate human selfishness. But to the extent that rewards, such as increased social esteem, and penalties, such as being shamed, are effective, why are they effective? Instead of appealing to a model of the self-interested agent, Castro and Pacherie (2021) emphasize the fundamental need to belong that, in childhood development, antedates and explains the effectiveness of social emotions, like shame and guilt, and of reputational benefits. Finally, what moral attitudes toward responsible others best fit contexts of routine, good moral performance? There is a large literature focused negative reactive attitudes to performance failures as well as a large literature on trust invested in particular individuals. By contrast, default and general trust in



social participants who aren't expected to provoke resentment, better captures the routine attitude regarding others as responsible persons (Baier 1986; Govier 1997; Thomas 1989; Calhoun committed for publication; Walker 2006; Brennan 2021; D'Cruz 2019; Preston-Roedder 2017); see also Becker (1996) on non-cognitive trust).

**e. Taking backward-looking and taking forward-looking responsibility constitute important dimension of being a responsible agent.**

Discussions of backward-looking responsibility typically focus on the conditions under which individuals can be held to account and to a lesser extent who has standing to blame. The expectation, however, is that accountable individuals should *take* responsibility for having acted incorrectly. Thus, one might wonder not only about what taking responsibility involves (Radzik 2009), but also why individuals would want to participate in responsibility practices that make them vulnerable to blame and sanctions and to being expected to take responsibility by admitting fault, apologizing and making amends. We may do so in order to remain eligible for meaningful relationships (Bero 2020) or to be seen by others as worthy partners for cooperative projects (Alfano 2021). In a related vein, Mason (2018, 2019) argues that *electing* to take responsibility for nonculpable, inadvertent harms—electing to engage, as she says, in the “blame conversation” rather than to proffer legitimate excuses—has the important function of communicating our emotional investment in both personal relationships and impersonal relationships of respect.

Forward-looking responsibilities are responsibilities to see to it that something gets looked after (children, the success of a business, educational programs, etc.). Forward-looking responsibilities, like Kantian imperfect duties, leave the choice of specific actions to

discretionary judgment (Feinberg 1988-89, Goodin 1986, Calhoun 2019). Taking forward-looking responsibility is important to our social life together. Volunteering, sometimes in response to calls for volunteers, is central to many of our everyday activities. We volunteer for work responsibilities, volunteer to bring items to a potluck, volunteer to serve in non-profits. In doing so, we take on responsibilities and, in most cases, thereby become vulnerable to backward-looking performance assessments. That responsibilities can be taken on raises questions about the ethics of responsibility taking. How might taking on responsibilities be done well or poorly (Calhoun 2019)? Who ought to take on which responsibilities, and when are we obligated to take on responsibilities (Enoch 2011)?

What social infrastructure would support looking after one's responsibilities?

Williams (2006) explores the important moral function of institutions in defining roles and rules, distributing responsibilities, and ensuring responsibilities are filled. Brownlee (2020) argues for a right to socially contribute where she has specifically in mind a right to the material and temporal resources that enable individuals to contribute to the survival and well-being of others, especially those with whom we are in persistent, caring relationships and thus with respect to whom we have responsibilities.

Joining with others to take forward-looking responsibility for changing harm-producing practices and social arrangements may be especially relevant and effective for intervening in structural injustice (Young 2011, Bailey 2001). Young (2011) contrasts liability with social connection models of responsibility. Individual liability for harms of structural injustice may be impossible to trace; but absence of liability is compatible with being under an obligation to join

with others involved in processes of injustice and to take forward looking responsibility for altering those processes.

Examining the taking of responsibility sheds light on the meaning of being a responsible person. This is most obvious if we think about being responsible as a virtue. That virtue might include a disposition both to take backward-looking responsibility for incorrect action (including willingness to enter elective blame conversations) and to take on forward-looking responsibilities; conscientious in fulfilling one's obligations; electing to execute one's responsibilities in more demanding and creative ways than strictly required; and the ability to appropriately balance the plurality of responsibilities one might have under a complex division of moral labor (Williams 2008). In addition, Calhoun (committed for publication) argues that, because the expectation that individuals will elect to take on responsibilities is structured into our social practices, so that not everything that it would be good to do is made obligatory, our default conception of social participants as responsible persons includes the presumption that they are responsibility takers.

**f. Blaming is but one option for responding to apparent wrongdoing and not always the most constructive one.**

How may or should we respond to accountable agents when they fail to do what they are morally required to do? Resentment, indignation, moral outrage, contempt are all possible negative responses to moral failures. Those attitudes are naturally expressed in blaming, shaming, or sanctioning behaviors that hold individuals responsible. Both blaming and shaming attitudes and actions that hold individuals responsible seem important because of their fittingness, and their roles in expressing and maintaining self-respect, re-affirming norms

(Walker 2006), and motivating improved moral performance. Nevertheless, there are often more constructive, generous, and optimistic alternatives to blaming attitudes and the expression of blame, even if these come to us less naturally. These are especially worth exploring given the cultural explosion of expressed anger, resentment indignation, and outrage.

To begin, one might worry that these expressed negative attitudes, far from incentivizing moral improvement, simply produce defensiveness, hostility, greater efforts to conceal wrongdoing, and potentially exacerbate a shame-rage spiral (Braithwaite 2000). Thus, Pettigrove (2012a), for example, argues that meekness, understood as slowness to anger, is preferable to moral anger and is both compatible with self-respect and more constructive. Blaming itself can take more or less constructive forms. Braithwaite's (2000) notion of re-integrative shaming within legal conferencing relies on communications between wrongdoer, victim, and the support networks of both with the aim of illuminating the harms wrongdoing has wrought and enabling the wrongdoer to be both supported by and shamed before their friends and family.

What form blame should take, if at all, is an especially difficult question when wrongdoers are simultaneously complicit in and have had their agency impaired by social hierarchies. Mason (committed for publication) has put forward the interesting proposal that peer-to-peer criticism informed by an understanding of the incentives to complicity in structures of dominance-subordination might be an especially fitting and constructive response to complicity. She calls this the intelligibility stance.

The most obvious alternative to blaming responses is forgiveness. Of particular relevance to a positive moral philosophy are generosity-based accounts of forgiveness (Calhoun

1992; Allais 2013; Pettigrove 2012b) that avoid an exchange model, where forgiveness is offered only in exchange for remorse. Moody-Adams (2015) argues that forgiveness is always unilateral—that is, without expectation of remorse—and involves the victim detaching herself from narratives of victimization, extending interpretive generosity to the wrongdoer as someone who shares the human vulnerability to doing wrong, as someone who might change for the future, and as at some point in the past not having a bad character. Similarly emphasizing the possibility of generous forgiveness, Fricker (2019) distinguishes earned from gift (or proleptic) forgiveness. In the latter case, forgiveness is offered in advance of and with the hopeful anticipation of remorse, thus fulfilling the function of blaming without the necessity of expressing blame.

It is also possible to moderate our tendency to blame in the first place. Stohr (2019), following Kant, suggests that we “throw the veil of philanthropy,” over others’ actions, creating charitable narratives where possible of what they have done and who they may become in the future. By holding people in “fictive identities” of better selves, we invite them to inhabit those identities. In general, there’s something to be said for having faith in humans’ capacity for decency rather cynically expecting bad behavior (Preston-Roedder 2013, 2018). To have faith in humanity is to be disposed to look for evidence of other’s moral decency and to prefer, in the absence of decisive evidence, optimistic accounts of persons’ present and future actions and motives. By constructing narratives that cast individuals’ behavior in a better light than we have evidence for (indeed, sometimes contrary to the evidence), we will be better positioned to interact with others in a way that invites them to live up to a vision of their better selves.

**g. Capacity for good moral performance is acquired, improvable, and scaffolded within moral communities.**

Among the things we ought to do is cultivate our own and others' character. Thus, one question we might have concerns how to think about the cultivation of character and its importance (Baron 2009; Wong 2015).

Other people play a significant role in scaffolding our capacities for good moral performance. Expressed blame has some role to play, particularly if it aims to set before wrongdoers an ideal of responsible agency and prompt them to feel and act on self-directed reactive attitudes of guilt, shame, and remorse (McGeer 2019), that is, to take responsibility for what they have done. Restorative justice programs have just such an aim.

Some of the optimistic and generous alternatives to blame that I mentioned earlier scaffold improved performance, not by inviting the taking of responsibility and making amends for what was done but by inviting agents to, as Stohr puts it, inhabit fictive identities and act as though one were the better self that others convey to agents that they are--identities as honest, trustworthy, fair, etc. persons. Scaffolding others' moral performance in this way need not presuppose that we believe that others are those kinds of people or are likely to live up to our normative expectations. Despite reservations about others' capacity and willingness to behave well, we may still normatively hope (Martin 2014) and manifest hopeful trust (McGeer 2008; McGeer and Pettit 2017) as a way of boosting others' confidence in their agential capacities and inviting them to prove themselves reliable.

In a different vein, Aristotle emphasized the importance of habituation in developing the dispositions to act, feel and perceive characteristic of virtue. One way of understanding the

development of virtue is as the acquisition of a skill, including an embodied skill (Sticher 2018; Kolers 2020; Vigani 2021) whose exercise by the fully skilled individual is effortless and enjoyable, so that the phenomenology of virtue resembles that of flow experiences described by Csikszentmihályi (Annas 2008). Habituation and skill acquisition can take many routes. One route is everyday manners. In Confucian ethics, everyday rituals of good manners are taken to be fundamental in training our perceptions, desires, and emotions and to rendering mannerly behavior automatic (Olberding 2016; Berninger 2021; Cline 2016). In practicing good manners, we cultivate one of the most basic aspects of moral engagement--a self-presentation that is agreeable to others (Olberding 2016; Sherman 2005)--and learn how to offer up conventionalized tokens of respect, toleration, and considerateness (Calhoun 2000; Buss 1999; Stohr 2012 ). Good manners involve not just action, but also bodily comportment, tone of voice, and facial expression (Olberding 2016; Sherman 2005), features of correct moral performance that often go unnoticed despite their centrality to communicating morally desirable attitudes toward others.

Moral development begins, of course, in childhood. So how to make children good is an important question. How are children socialized into moral norms and moral perceptiveness (for an example of that socialization, see Burdelski 2013)? If exemplars make the moral life attractive, which narratives of exemplary individuals are most useful in moral education (Croce 2019; Engelen et al 2018)? And are we more likely to improve performance by inviting others to act on ideals or obligations? One psychological study concluded that “when inequality is framed in terms of moral ideals (vs. moral obligations) [white] participants were more inclined to

report courses of action which promote equal treatment of nonnative Dutch, and were less inclined to report inhibition aimed at preventing discrimination” (Does et al 2011, 565).

One capacity arguably needed for good practical reasoning is imagination (Bliss 2014; Pardale 2002). In both childhood and adulthood, literature develops capacities for moral imagination (Nussbaum 1992), enables imaginative practice of right action (Bommarito 2017) and empathetic attitudes (Ravenscroft 2011), and may convey moral knowledge (Carroll 2002).

Decent moral communities underwrite good moral performance. Stohr (2019) observes, that “the normative space of good moral neighborhoods...functions as a kind of scaffolding for our efforts to narrow the gap between our moral reality and our moral aspirations” (101). Although moral philosophers may aim to determine which social norms are legitimate, the actual sharing of moral norms within communities--from the small community of friends, to religious and work communities, to national and international communities—clarifies what is expected, renders some expected moral behavior routine, and enables us to make intelligible moral demands on each other. Cureton (2011) argues that the norms we share with others are a constitutive part of our solidarity relations, and the intrinsic value of solidarity gives us defeasible reason to do as the shared social norms require. In short, good moral performance is made possible by moral communities defined by shared norms and ideals; and improved moral performance is tied to improvements in those communities.

#### **h. Society-wide moral progress and moral revolutions have occurred.**

Social progress in moral beliefs and practices appears to happen. But how? With respect to new moral beliefs, there are questions concerning both how we are to judge whether change in moral beliefs represents progress (Jamieson 2017) as well as what’s involved in generating



new moral beliefs. Is forming new moral beliefs at the social level a matter of generating altogether new conceptual resources or deepening the understanding of existing moral concepts (Moody-Adams 1999, 2017; Hermann 2019)? With respect to morally improving social practices, we need to know what processes are effective in changing collective behavior. Bicchieri (2017) assesses the potential of such tools for change as legislative intervention, media campaigns, economic incentives, and group discussions; and Appiah (2010) explores the role of honor codes in moral revolutions (but see Eriksen 2019). Progress may require a body of trendsetters who model alternative norms (Bicchieri 2017) and socially and politically engaged moral enquirers willing to take risks in advocating social change (Moody-Adams 1999, 2017). The possibility of progress may, however, depend heavily on broader social economic conditions. Some social and economic conditions impede social acceptance of the dispensability of existing harmful practices despite social sympathy with the suffering they may cause (Pleasants 2010) or may trigger exclusivist tendencies in our evolved moral psychology (Buchanan and Powell 2016). At least some moral progress may best be described as a “moral revolution,” akin to Kuhnian scientific revolutions and involving gestalt shifts in how individuals and activities are morally perceived (Pleasants 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing exploration of key assumptions and research questions guiding work in positive moral philosophy has, I hope, illuminated the richness, innovativeness, moral importance, and above all, the positive orientation, of the body of work I’m recommending be called positive moral philosophy. I hope that exploration might also inspire worry among those

of us who teach moral philosophy about what justifies the exclusion of most of this work from the courses we teach on moral philosophy as well as doubts about the fringe status of this work in a field dominated by theories of obligation and theories of accountability.

Emphasizing the amount of extant work in positive moral philosophy might naturally raise the skeptical question, “If positive moral philosophy is already being done, what’s the point of formalizing a distinct sub-field?” It’s thus important to appreciate that, despite the appearance Section 3 might have created, the total volume of positive moral philosophical work is miniscule in comparison to what might be called “moral philosophy as usual.” Moreover, work guided by any one of the guiding assumptions is, so far as I can tell, being done entirely independently of work shaped by any of the other guiding assumptions. There simply is no unifying frame for appreciating a common philosophical investment in exploring the positive dimensions of moral life. Finally, recall the legitimizing effect of naming what a body of work is up to. That legitimizing effect is two-fold. On the one hand, there are in-group legitimizing effects: one comes to see one’s own work as part of a larger project shared with and valued by others doing similar work, regardless of how it might be esteemed within the larger discipline. On the other hand, there are out-group legitimizing effects: one comes to see one’s own work as something valued by one’s discipline. Feminist philosophers, for example, experienced the invigorating legitimizing effects of sharing a common project with other feminist philosophers, developing a literary canon, sharing ideas in conferences and journals long before feminist philosophy received substantial recognition in either the main fields of philosophy (such as philosophy of language or political philosophy) or in the larger discipline.

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