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Cristóbal Méndez’ medical ideas about the influence of joy and pleasure (rather than humor) upon health

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The purpose of this paper is more than simply disclosing the ideas of the early modern physician Cristóbal Méndez (c. 1500-c. 1553) about the healthful benefits of joy and pleasure stirred by moderate physical exercises. In order to make clear the physiological principles underlying Méndez’ reasoning, this paper also details two former alternatives to today’s humor therapy, including the long-standing belief of laughter being a vocal-respiratory exercise.

Key Words: Cristóbal Méndez, physical exercises in early modern times, emotions and laughter in the sixteenth century, ancient humorism, today’s humor therapy.

Título: “Las ideas médicas de Cristóbal Méndez sobre la influencia de la alegría y el placer (en vez del humor) en la salud.”

El propósito de este ensayo trasciende la discusión de las ideas del médico premoderno Cristóbal Méndez (c. 1500 – c. 1553) sobre los beneficios de la alegría y el placer en la salud, estimulados por ejercicios físicos moderados. Para explicar los fundamentos fisiológicos del pensamiento de Méndez, este trabajo se ocupa también de dos antecedentes de la actual terapia del humor, incluyendo la antigua idea de la risa como ejercicio respiratorio-vocal.

Palabras clave: Cristóbal Méndez, ejercicios físicos en tiempos premodernos, emociones y risa en el siglo XVI, humorismo antiguo, terapia actual del humor.

Introduction

Apart from a book on physical exercises addressed to the laity, very little is known about the Spanish-born physician Cristoval Mendez (c. 1500-c. 1553), nowadays referred to as Cristóbal Méndez. According to the survey conducted by Álvarez del Palacio (1996a, pp.
23-34), after enrolling in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Salamanca in 1526, Méndez embarked, in 1528, for Mexico, where he lived until 1545. During the 17 years he stayed in Mexico, he maintained a close relationship with the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), due to his being the personal physician of Cortés' second wife and family.

Maybe owing to this prestigious connection, in 1536, Méndez was designated to the “Tribunal del Protomedicato” (i.e. the College of Physicians) of the city of Mexico. Furthermore, in 1538, he came before the Spanish Inquisition, prompted by an accusation originally put forth in 1531 claiming that, at Méndez' suggestion, he and two colleagues had commissioned a local goldsmith to forge three golden seals made under a certain favorable zodiacal conjunction. Far from fanciful, such conduct was grounded in a long-standing tradition. Indeed, dating back to ancient Mesopotamia, the medical use of amulets, talismans, and seals having magical properties has long integrated Hermetic practice, as investigated by Alfonso-Goldfarb (1999, p. 173, footnote 320). But in the eyes of the Spanish Inquisition, Méndez' suggestion was taken as a supernatural deed.

However fascinating it would be to dwell upon Méndez' supposed involvement with magical seals, this paper shall focus on another angle of this little known Cinquecento physician. The intention here is to probe into Méndez' ideas about the influence of two mirthful emotions —namely, joy and pleasure — upon health, on the basis of his already mentioned book on physical exercise. Printed in Seville in 1553 and comprising four “treatises”, its full title is Libro del exercicio corporal, y de sus prouechos, por el qual cada vno podra entendr que exercicio le sea necessario para cöservar su salud. Again according to Álvarez del Palacio (1996a, p. 34 and 1996b, pp. 211-229), originally totaling 72 pages, this book appears to be Méndez' sole known publication, either in life or posthumously.

The Ancient Humoral Theory

As anticipated by the title of this paper, Méndez' reasoning is different from our current appreciation of the ample medical benefits of humor. Incidentally, for the most part, these benefits have been recently surveyed for a Spanish-reading public by Rodrigues Cabezas
Cristóbal Méndez' medical ideas about the influence of joy and pleasure...

(2002, pp. 43-62) and Alemany & Cabestrero (2002, pp. 111-184). This difference in appreciation occurs not only because our physiological understanding has changed a lot since Mendez' age, but also because humor began to stand for a sui generis aesthetic category only by the turn of the eighteenth century. Before that time, humor was designated above all the liquid and semiliquid fluids entering into the constitution of living beings, particularly the four cardinal humors underlying humoral theory. To be brief, the canon of four basic humors, each made up of two primary qualities, appears to have been initially formulated by the author of the Hippocratic treatise, "On the Nature of Man". According to this text (Hippocrates [c. 390 BC], 1999, pp. 406-417), blood is hot and humid; yellow bile, hot and dry; phlegm, cold and humid; and black bile, cold and dry. The doctrine of the four temperaments (i.e., sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic), on the other hand, is medieval and conflicts with the nine kinds of complexions propounded by Galen of Pergamum (c. 129-199 AD). Just for the record, in the treatise titled "Mixtures" (in Galen [2nd century AD], 1997a, p. 225), the Pergamene physician explains that these nine varieties consist of one well-balanced mixture and eight ill-balanced ones. Of the latter, four are "ill balanced in a simple sense (wet, dry, cold, or hot)" while another four are "ill balanced in a composite sense (hot and wet, hot and dry, cold and wet, cold and dry)." As explained by Galen ([2nd century AD] 1997b, pp. 202-207 and pp. 246-265), the ill-balanced mixtures total eight because the primary qualities seldom mix equally, and opposite mixtures (such as hot and cold) cannot co-exist simultaneously. So long as not amounting to a morbid imbalance, these eight ill-balanced mixtures constitute healthy complexions, each bearing characteristic physical, mental, and even physiognomonic traits.

Eighteenth-Century Serioludricous Humour

Humoralism prevailed in Western medicine for nearly two millennia. When it was on the wane, humor acquired a brandnew meaning. In the words of the literary scholar Louis Cazamian (1965, pp. 411 and 388), beginning in eighteenth-century England, humour became "a special mode of pleasantry", having "more to do with seriousness than with mirth." As rightly noted by Cazamian (1965, p. 308), "the growth of modern humor, both as a notion and a name, is involved in a good deal of obscurity." For him, "modern humor" – or,
more precisely, English serioludicrous humour – evolved from a two-stage process with roots in the age-old humoral system. The first stage culminated in the “humours comedies” of the poet and dramatist Ben Jonson (c. 1572-1637). As explained by Cazamian (1965, pp. 309-316), these comedies dramatized two denotations of humour that were quite popular in England in the second half of the sixteenth century: namely, an idiosyncrasy occasioned by a natural but out-of-the-way complexion or, rather than a genuine eccentricity, a falsely affected one. Again in the words of Cazamian (1965, pp. 393, 319 and 329), extending “from 1660 to 1750 or 1800” the second stage comprised “changes which have left no direct record.” Its climax was the advent – this time in the realm of literature – of “modern humor.” More circumscribed than the humours satirized by Jonson, it came to designate the unique mental “power of saying queer, paradoxical, and funny things, quite seriously.”

As suggested by Machline (2004, pp. 474-475), however, rather than crowning humoralism, the English conception of serioludicrous humour seems to have developed outside humoral theory. For instance, according to Clancy (1953, pp. 16-19 and 20-23), Jonson’s use of humour in the sense of genuine idiosyncrasy seems to have flourished from an Elizabethan dissatisfaction with the doctrine of the four temperaments, while the use of humour in the sense of feigned affectation probably derived from neo-classic canons of character portrayal. Reputed by Clancy to be a trigger for the latter sense, the Renaissance cult of individualism certainly helped expose the modest typology of the four temperaments. For that matter, as argued by Machline (2004, p. 475), early modern debates about humoral theory often comprised efforts to broaden the range of human complexions. Additionally, again according to Machline (2004, pp. 475-476), the fact that Jonson’s denotations of humour were still in vogue in eighteenth-century England contradicts Cazamian’s thesis that “modern humor” was the climax of a progressive, two-stage process rooted in humoralism.

**Today’s Conception of Humor**

As better detailed in Machline (2003, pp. 1-2 and 2004, p. 473), since the nineteen-hundreds, the eighteenth-century English conception of serioludicrous humour gradually accumulated so many meanings, that
Cristóbal Méndez' medical ideas about the influence of joy and pleasure...

it reached the point of losing many of its original characteristics. The result is that nowadays humor seems like an over-sized umbrella, encompassing all kinds of seriocomic, playful, and laughable modes pertaining to distinct rhetorical, dramatic, literary, graphic, and even musical genres (strictly speaking, genres as disparate as irony, farce, satire, parody, and caricature). In short, humor currently stands for any cognitive stimulus eliciting pleasure and provoking, as a response, if not a hearty laugh, at least a brief smile, a knowing look, or any similar gesture signaling connivance.

On top of this extensive polysemy, as explained by Fry (1994, pp. 118-119), beginning in the 1930s but most notably since the 1970s, the world has been witnessing a growing “humor-use movement”, whose underlying premise is “that the stimulatory and cathartic effects of humor can provide both physiological and psychological protection and/or relief from the detrimental impacts of negative stress, thus enhancing survival and quality of life.” Still, according to Fry (1994, p. 119), to assist patients to “combat the demoralizing impacts of their illness”, this “humor-use movement” has included, since the outset, the adaptation of clowning techniques into medical facilities. Additionally, as rightly noted by Rodrigues Idígoras (2002, pp. 220-221), this movement is now engaged in comforting victims of warfare and poverty as well, thanks to initiatives like the non-governmental organization “Payasos sin Fronteras”. This one in particular, originally founded in 1993 by the Barcelona clown Tortell Poltrona to cheer up children in Bosnia, currently heads an entire world wide brotherhood of “Clowns without Borders” (Payasos sin Fronteras).

A Long-Standing Alternative to Today’s Humor Therapy

From what has been seen so far, humor therapy was unthinkable in Méndez’ age. Then and even formerly, medical theory had a similar alternative. Summarizing Galen ([2nd century AD] 1997b, pp. 100-149), Hall (1974, pp. 821-829), Machline (1998, pp. 3-4), Olson (1986, pp. 40-55), and Rather (1965, pp. 1-5), this alternative involved making the most of the somatic effects of mirthful emotions such as joy and pleasure. Formerly, emotions were called accidentia animae; that is to say, accidents of the soul, or passions or affections of the soul. For Plato (c. 428- c. 348 BC) and his followers, for example, passions were regarded
Vera Cecilia Machline

as sensual, inward “movements” of the appetitive faculty of the soul, which were capable of bringing physical changes in the body. According to Aristotelian physiology, as the seat of all vital and mental powers, the heart expanded or contracted, depending on the heating or cooling nature of the ongoing passion. For instance, joy and pleasure dilated the heart and warmed the body, whereas grief and fear occasioned constriction of the heart and the ensuing feeling of coldness. As pointed out by Temkin (1973, pp. 88-89, 121 and 181), in spite of Galen’s Platonizing view, which led the Pergame physician to give the liver, the heart, and the brain a share of man’s threefold soul (i.e., appetitive, spiritual, and rational), the heart remained the center of life. Thus, unless reason intervened, the heart continued subservient to the passions, whose physical effects included not only cardiac commotion but also change in the qualitative make-up or in the mutual balance of the humors.

In short, emotions have long been taken into medical consideration. Formally speaking, however, they were incorporated into medical theory in the wake of twelfth-century Galenism. As explained by Temkin (1974, pp. 97-114), this occurred thanks to either the Arabic author, or the Latin translator, of the primer Isagoge Johannitti, thus titled because, since its debut in the West, it has remained inaccurately attributed to the Nestorian scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq al’Ibodi (809-c. 877), better known in the Latin West as Joannitius. This textbook was also called Introductio in Artem Parvam Galeni, which is to say, “Introduction to Galen’s Short [Medical] Art”, although it diverges from the original ideas of the Pergame physician, as pointed out by Bylebyl (1971, pp. 482-485). According to Joannitius ([9th century AD] 1974-1975, pp. 328-335) and Rather (1968, pp. 337-347), together with ambient air, food and drink, sleep and watch, motion and rest, as well as evacuation and repletion, the passions comprised the sex res non naturales, literally speaking, the “six things non-natural”. Despite being exogenous to the body, these six “non-natural” sets of factors could either promote or undermine health, depending on their proper use or misuse. In other words, their application was conditioned to circumstances such as the age, sex, occupation, physical state, and temperament of the patient, as well as the season of the year. Were this not enough, such circumstances had to comply with the principle
of moderation. Like the “six non-naturals” an expression which became outmoded only at the turn of the twentieth century, moderation holds true even today. But, in contrast to the “non-naturals”, temperance derives from the classical doctrine of the mean, which possibly goes back to Pythagorean cosmology (fl. 6th century BC).  

Among the passions, moderate mirth in particular (which has been recognized for its reinvigorating power since biblical times) was often stressed in late medieval regimens for health. For example, well-known among historians of medicine is the reminder of an allegorical “Doctor Merry-man”, along with a “Doctor Quiet” and a “Doctor Dyet”, in the opening lines of the Elizabethan version of the Regimen Sanitatis Salernitani (The School of Salernum, [1607] 1970, pp. 74-75). As surveyed by Olson (1986, pp. 55-89), traditional means to arouse joy and similar emotions among the clergy and the nobility mentioned in late medieval writings (yet bearing a remarkable similarity with many of today’s choices of relaxation) include taking walks; engaging in friendly conversation; listening to lyric songs or instrumental music; contemplating beautiful manuscript illustrations; reading or listening to cheerful stories; and watching stage presentations involving dance, pantomime, or acrobatics.

Another Traditional Alternative to Today’s Humor Therapy

As hinted by the first item in the above list, a second long-standing alternative to today’s humor therapy is the practice of moderate, recreative physical exercises, that are likely to stir mirthful emotions. A topic relevant to gerontology, this alternative was explored to the full by Méndez, owing to the public he intended to address.

According to Berryman (1989, pp. 517-521), like the passions, sports and exercise were also amply discussed in ancient medicine before integrating the “non-naturals”. For Galen ([2nd century AD] 1997, p. 55), for example, medicine could be characterized “as the art whose aim is health, and gymnastics as the art whose aim is good condition”. Differently from the passions, however, exercising the body became a variation of “motion and rest”. Furthermore, despite their hygienic attributes, physical activities seem to have been largely neglected in the Middle Ages, except in knightly circles and in maybe one or two
monastic orders. As noted by Álvarez del Palacio (1996c, pp. 35-42), early modern times witnessed a dear interest in physical fitness, thanks to the concern of Renaissance humanists in establishing a well-rounded education for the new, ascendant bourgeoisie. In other words, inspired by the classical ideal of a harmonic development of both mental and physical faculties of mankind—epitomized by the Latin maxim *mens sana in corpore sano*, borrowed from a longer saying of the Roman satirist Juvenal (c. 55–c. 127 AD)—many humanists included sports and exercise in their pedagogical curriculum. But far from carrying through a mere revival of classical education, many humanists recast an early modern pedagogy, this time usually intended for both boys and girls coming from all social classes.

A good example is Vittorino Rambaldini (c. 1378–1446), better known as Vittorino da Feltre. One of the first and most famous Italian humanist educators, da Feltre’s greatest pedagogical achievement was not a scholarly treatise but the grammar school on the outskirts of Mantua called “La Giocosa”. As detailed by Woodward (1996, pp. 31-32), this schoolhouse originally was a villa built in 1388 named “La Gioiosa”, from *gioia*, i.e., joy. After the painting of new frescoes of children at play, its name was changed to “La Giocosa”, from *jocosa*, which derives from *jocus*—strictly speaking, jest, but after blending with *ludus*, it also means physical sports. In the words of Woodward (1996, p. 36, footnote 2), da Feltre aimed to create “the complete citizen.” To achieve this goal, he made drastic innovations in the classical Trivium and Quadrivium, as lengthily surveyed by Woodward (1996, pp. 37-72). Needless to say, da Feltre also gave careful consideration to physical education. According to Álvarez del Palacio (1996c, p. 47), by providing his students with a well-balanced training of the body, he expected them to “develop social habits and self-discipline.” For that reason, physical sports should involve all parts of the body, respect the principle of alternation, and combine gymnastics, swimming, horsemanship, fencing and ball games, on top of assorted athletic modalities related to running, jumping, and throwing traditional weapons.

Another humanist educator worthwhile mentioning here is Richard Mulcaster (c. 1531-1611), who wrote two books concerning the instruction of boys and girls belonging to all social classes. According
to Barker (1994, pp. xiiv-xxii), the first book, whose longer title has been shortened to *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, was originally published in 1581. In brief, it presents a general outline of Mulcaster’s pedagogical principles, an ample discussion of exercises, and some remarks on institutional structure. Published a year later and titled *The First Part of the Elementarie*, the second book was the beginning of an unfinished detailed description of the curriculum Mulcaster wanted to see established in schools meant for children up to the age of twelve. These description was abruptly cut short by a lengthy digression into English spelling.

In *Positions*, Mulcaster ([1581] 1994, pp. 63-123) examines some eight outdoor and eleven indoor exercises. Of the latter, six were vocal exercises, namely, loud speaking, loud singing, loud and soft reading, much talking and silence, laughing, and weeping. Different from the first four modalities (which earned a chapter apiece) the last two are discussed in a single chapter. After weighing their suitability for children, Mulcaster ([1581] 1994, pp. 72-73) dismisses weeping altogether and approves of laughing. The same thing happens later on when Mulcaster ([1581] 1994, pp. 106-109) prefers archery to hunting and some varieties of shooting. As pointed out by Barker (1994, pp. xxiv-xxvii), this discrimination derives from the fact that most of the exercises examined in *Positions* were borrowed, adapted, and sometimes directly translated from the scholarly *De arte gymnastica libri sex*, which was written by the Italian physician Girolamo Mercuriale (1530-1606) and whose *editio princeps* dates from 1569. Consequently, while Mercuriale’s treatise (which was further expanded in the second edition of 1573) mainly deals with ancient sports and exercises mentioned in earlier writings, Mulcaster’s *Positions* attempts to fashion pedagogical guidelines for Elizabethan children.

As surveyed by Finney (1968, pp. 441-443), other early modern thinkers besides Mercuriale ([1573] 1973, pp. 200-207) and Mulcaster ([1581] 1994, pp. 72-76) regarded laughing as vocal-respiratory exercise. A point which none of the above three makes clear, however, is whether they are referring to “genuine” laughter or to “falsely” provoked bursts of laughter, such as the self-induced fits currently practiced in “Laughing Clubs”. According to Machline (1998, pp. 5-8), sixteenth-century scholars often distinguished laughter stirred by
risible stimuli from the kind occasioned by "illegitimate" causes such as tickling, rupture of the diaphragm, humoral imbalance, or excessive intake of wine. Consequently, only "genuine" laughter used in moderation was considered good for the health, owing to its being a double movement of expansion and contraction, ensuing from two passions, like joy and sadness.

**Méndez' Account of Physical Exercises**

Laughter is not mentioned at all in Méndez' *Libro del exercicio corporal y de sus prouechos*. On the other hand, mild crying for infants, both before their feeding and until they start walking, is recommended by Méndez ([1553] 1996, p. 347). This omission may be due to his belief that laughing was not a complete exercise, or that, as noted by Machline (1998, pp. 2-3 and 6-7) it was improper to the well-mannered. This omission may also derive from the fact that Méndez' booklet was published 17 years before the *editio princeps* of Mercuriale's encyclopedic *De arte gymnastica* came to light. Moreover, whereas Mercuriale intended to offer his peers a thorough work on a number of ancient sports and exercises, intercalated with observations on their medical effects, Méndez aimed to provide for a lay, Spanish-reading public a concise yet pleasant compendium on physical exercise. In other words, as noted by Berryman (1989, pp. 522-525), Méndez' book pertains to the early modern "how-to-do" literary trend which, according to Bell (1999, p. 6), derives from advice manuals already in vogue in the later Middle Ages.

In brief, the first "treatise" of Méndez' *Libro del exercicio corporal y de sus prouechos* gives a general account of physical exercises, while the other three "treatises" focus on the best exercises for preserving one's health in conformity with sex, age, the seasons of the year, the main meals of the day, and the four complexions. In the words of Méndez ([1553] 1996: 264), "exercise is a voluntary motion upon which breathing becomes fast and frequent." As detailed by Méndez ([1553] 1996: 264-265), our body performs essentially three movements: "natural", "voluntary", and a "mixt of both."

"Natural" movements include those of the lungs and of the pulses because, regardless of our will, we cannot interfere with them. We "can increase them (as said before), but it is not up to us to cease or
begin them”, just like “many other movements in our body similar to these ones [having to do with breathing and the flowing of blood].” For Méndez, a good example of a “mixt” movement is the one occasioned by hunger, i.e., the “very sad sentiment” in the upper part of the stomach when our body asks for food. Raised by a series of “natural” movements involving the veins and the liver, hunger also is a “voluntary”, –and thus, a “mixt” movement– because its fulfillment depends on our decision to eat right away or later on, or simply not eat at all and ultimately starve to death. In short, according to Méndez, “natural” movements are beyond our will, while “voluntary” and “mixt” ones are those which depend on will. Unfortunately, Méndez never makes clear his position on the nature of the passions. Yet, in the light of the above explanations, it appears that passions would fall under the class of “mixt” movements. An indirect confirmation of this conjecture is the provision curtly stated by Méndez ([1553] 1996, p. 266) in the first “treatise” of his *Libro del ejercicio corporal* that “mixt” and “natural” movements were subjects about which he had nothing to say to his readers.

As repeatedly explained by Méndez ([1553] 1996, pp. 276-283, 286-287, and 324), physical exercise is good for health because it increases bodily heat, facilitates physical operations like digestion, and engenders the dissipation or the elimination of harmful superfluities. But, of course, like other “non-naturals”, physical exercise is wholesome, provided it does not infringe on moderation. According to Méndez ([1553] 1996, pp. 284-288), physical exercise is most profitable when it meets four conditions. The third one is continuity without undue interruption until proper finalization, usually signaled by shortness of breath, which constitutes the fourth condition. The first and second conditions have to do with the proper attitude to be adopted by anyone committed to keeping fit. The first is exercising free will because, in contrast to one’s daily chores, physical exercise is not compulsory. The second condition is deriving “joy and pleasure and much recreation” from physical activities. Having fun while exercising the body is important because “the passions of the soul are a major cause of [...] health or sickness”. Probably because Méndez assumed that his readers were already fully aware of the healthy properties of joy and pleasure, as stated in the first “treatise”, he did not trouble to detail these properties.
Instead, Méndez mainly deals with exercise. Of their many varieties, however, Méndez focuses particularly on the exercises suited for a public leading a good but sedentary life, more inclined to engage in a physical activity when it amounts to some kind of entertainment as well. A proof of this intent is the fact that, before closing the second “treatise” of his Libro del exercicio corporal, Méndez ([1553] 1996, pp. 284-287, 313-318, and 322-327) emphatically recommends, for men and women alike, taking walks. Anticipating the excuse that there is hardly any time for even a short walk, Méndez explains that walking can be done either indoors or outdoors, with the advantage that it allows for other activities, such as talking aloud and swinging the arms, or praying and attending to business.

Conclusion
Méndez’s Libro del exercicio corporal y de sus prouechos is a good example of the specialization reached by early modern “how-to-do” literature. Addressed to a Spanish-reading, well-to-do laity, it aims to convince that public of the hygienic benefits of physical exercise. To achieve this goal, Méndez goes as far as arguing that the best physical activities are those that bring joy and pleasure, or recreation in general, and that these can be reconciled with a busy life. Even though originally intended for an early modern public, Méndez’ arguments are, overall, valid even nowadays. As to their conception, the biographical data our author included in his compendium suggest that these arguments were conceived during the 17 years Méndez lived in Mexico.

Notes
1 First presented at the VI International Congress of the International Society for the Study of Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies, held in 2002 in Guadalajara, Mexico, this paper belongs to a research into the debate about the humoral theory between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, integrating a collective thematic project carried out by members of the Centro Simão Mathias de Estudos em História da Ciência (CESIMA), in Brazil. Titled, “The complex transformation of the science of matter: between the composite of ancient knowledge and modern specialization”, this collective enterprise is supported by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP).
2 As further explained in Joannitius ([9th century AD] 1974-1975, pp. 321-328 and 336-370), besides six exogenous “non-naturals”, there were seven endogenous “naturals” and at least three “contra-naturals” related to sickness.
In verse 356 of the Tenth Satire of Juvenal ([c. 100-127 AD] 1992, p. 98), one reads, "Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano", which is to say, "you ought to pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body."

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