

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man's face, focusing on his eyes and the bridge of his nose. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, giving him a menacing and intense expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

'The perfect read to go with fava beans and a nice Chianti ...'

Dr Maurice Guéret

PSYCHOPATH?

WHY WE ARE CHARMED
BY THE ANTI-HERO

STEPHEN McWILLIAMS

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I

INTRODUCTION

DISSECTING THE PSYCHOPATH

'The man without moral feeling is the kind who will take an oath with no sense of responsibility ... a base kind of person, lacking in the most elementary sense of decency and capable of absolutely nothing.'

– *Theophrastus*

Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell* tells a tale of murder from a rather unique viewpoint. In the days before his impending birth, an eavesdropping but powerless foetus bears unlikely witness to his father's demise at the hands of his mother and her illicit lover. Amid the drama, the unborn narrator makes reference to the sympathy we sometimes feel for a villain. 'We can't help siding with the perpetrators and their schemes,' he observes, 'we wave from the quayside as their little ship of bad intent departs. Bon voyage!'¹ How right he is. There are countless literary and cinematic examples of anti-heroes whose nefarious deeds do little to dissuade us from cheering them on. In the end, everyone loves a fictional psychopath.

And, by this, we don't mean the ordinary villains in almost every novel, action film or television drama. Few of us care when Goldfinger gets his comeuppance in Ian Fleming's classic

novel. But there are key anti-heroes for whom we seem quite happy to shelve our own moral compasses as we root for them to prevail. We are seduced by the protagonists in Tarantino and Hitchcock films. We empathise with the talented Mr Ripley. We are so fascinated by Kevin Khatchadourian that we feel the relentless need to talk about him. And we positively tremble with glee at Hannibal Lecter's culinary assertion (with regard to a census taker who once tried to test him) that he 'ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti'.² He inhales sharply through his teeth and sends a shiver up the spine. And yet, deep within ourselves, we find him compelling.

Our fascination is not confined to fiction. In 2014, millions of viewers in Ireland and the UK tuned into Channel 4's *Psychopath Night* to experience the chill of interviews with real-life serial killers. Curious about their own levels of psychopathy, over two million people subsequently took an online psychopath test devised by the British experimental psychologist Kevin Dutton.³ Netflix seems to carry several series about serial killers at any given point in time. Peruse the shelves of any bookshop and witness the health of the non-fiction crime genre. The real criminal trials of psychopathic killers and fraudsters (especially if they happen to be middle class) are guaranteed to fuel months of media scrutiny and speculation. Of course, as the details of their heinous crimes emerge, these individuals rarely transpire to be likeable, notwithstanding their notoriety and the assumption that they were once very charming in the eyes of their victims. But fictional psychopaths are different. Many

of them maintain their appeal even as we witness their dirty deeds in excruciating detail.

But what *is* a psychopath? One of the purposes of this book is to explain exactly that, illustrated by the often-charming anti-heroes we encounter in well-known novels, films and television series. Broadly speaking – and we will return to this in more detail later – the psychopath is a manipulative person who fundamentally lacks a conscience and has a lifelong history of engaging in a wide range of irresponsible, unethical or criminal activities for personal gain. He (for it is most often a *he*) lacks empathy or any sense of remorse and if confronted tends to blame others for his unscrupulous activities. He is often overtly likeable (at least, initially) because of the attention he pays to making a good impression upon those he thinks will be of use to him in his pursuits. This superficial charm may revert to glibness, but with narcissistic or even grandiose overtones. Promiscuous sexual behaviour, many short-term marriages or relationships, adultery and so forth are common. The psychopath lies pathologically (creating what some experts have termed a ‘psychopathic fiction’) to cover up his actions, or more often for the sheer hell of it, even when lying is totally unnecessary. The psychopath gets bored easily, is impulsive and has a constant need for excitement. He lacks any realistic long-term goals.

When we think of psychopaths, we are naturally reminded of the prison population. But a mere fifteen to thirty per cent of inmates are psychopaths. Still, they commit a greater variety

of crimes and are often more violent and aggressive than other prisoners. They tend to be more predatory in nature and are less likely to feel any kind of remorse or guilt for the suffering they have inflicted on other people. They are also far more likely to reoffend. So, even though psychopaths make up less than one per cent of the population, they inflict a much higher proportion of the physical, psychological and socioeconomic damage suffered by society.

But not all psychopaths are serial killers. Indeed, not all are prisoners, even if this is a more likely outcome for them than for the average person. Conservative estimates suggest there are around thirty million psychopaths in the world – at least one in 200 of us, possibly more.⁴ Many of these people function perfectly well – to a degree – in everyday life, even if some of the people around them soon learn to dislike them. Many psychopaths use their manipulative skills to carve out impressive careers as CEOs, lawyers, police officers, politicians, advertising executives, estate agents, soldiers, surgeons, and – yes – even the occasional psychiatrist. Serial killers, on the other hand, typically have more than mere psychopathy. They might, for example, have what is termed *paraphilia* (an unusual or extreme sexual fetish that may involve some sort of violence).⁵ Combine psychopathy with paraphilia and we have a dangerous individual indeed.

THE PSYCHOPATH THROUGH HISTORY

The psychopath is nothing new to society. Around 300 BC,

Theophrastus – a student of Aristotle – wrote about psychopathic traits in a certain type of individual he named ‘The Unscrupulous Man’.⁶ Such an individual, according to Theophrastus, ‘will go and borrow money from a creditor he has never paid ... When marketing, he reminds the butcher of some service he has rendered him and, standing near the scales, throws in some meat, if he can, and a soup-bone. If he succeeds, so much the better; if not, he will snatch a piece of tripe and go off laughing.’

He also remarks that ‘The man without moral feeling is the kind who will take an oath with no sense of responsibility ... By nature, he is a base kind of person, lacking in the most elementary sense of decency and capable of absolutely nothing. He leaves his mother without support in her old age ... He knows the inside of the town jail better than his own house ... In court he is capable of playing any role: defendant, plaintiff, or witness. He knows a good many rascals.’ In short, popular lore – from Greek and Roman mythology to the Bible and plays of Shakespeare – is filled with stories of individuals with psychopathic traits.

So, what about psychopathy from a more scientific viewpoint? Around 200 years ago, the French psychiatrist Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) described the phenomenon of *manie sans délire* (insanity without delirium), which he regarded as profound immorality and antisocial behaviour in individuals who are often highly intelligent and have no overt signs of mental illness. The British physician James Prichard (1786–

1848) later described a similar (albeit broader) phenomenon as *moral insanity*.

The concept of psychopathy as a *personality disorder* rather than a treatable mental illness has been hotly debated for centuries. The British psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1835–1918) was among the first to assert that the inability to tell right from wrong was innate in some people like, for example, colour blindness. In parallel, the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin (1856–1926) set out the criteria for what we now call psychopathy, while his Austrian counterpart Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) described the phenomenon as the ‘underdevelopment of the superego’. In Freud’s view, therapeutic intervention required the ‘patient’ to want to get better, which was by definition almost never the case. Much debate ensued, with some psychiatrists arguing that psychopathy was an illness, and the law strongly refuting this claim and citing the inappropriate medicalisation of criminal behaviour.⁷

The actual term *psychopastiche* (psychopath) was first coined in 1888 by the German psychiatrist J. L. A. Koch (1841–1908). By the early part of the twentieth century, the label had become rather unwieldy and seemed to include anyone vaguely abnormal. The comparatively imprecise concept of *sociopathy* was first suggested in 1930 by the American psychologist George Everett Partridge (1870–1953) to describe the superficially charming criminal. To this day, there is some confusion between the terms *psychopath* and *sociopath* leading to their sometimes-interchangeable use.

PSYCHOPATHY VERSUS SOCIOPATHY

So, what are the differences between the psychopath and the sociopath? Our modern view of pure psychopathy really began with the American psychiatrist Hervey Cleckley (1903–84) who, in his book *The Mask of Sanity* (1941), was the first clinician to narrow the definition of psychopathy to sixteen characteristics.⁸ Based on Cleckley's work, the Canadian psychologist Robert D. Hare refined the concept to produce the *Psychopathy Checklist* (1980), which he revised further in 1991 (the PCL-R).⁹ This semi-structured inventory has become the essential modern tool for clinical psychologists around the world to determine whether or not an individual is a psychopath. It is outlined in more detail in Chapter 2 and we will refer to it frequently in this book.

But to summarise briefly, the *Psychopathy Checklist* contains twenty key items divided into four domains (*interpersonal, affective, lifestyle* and *antisocial*). For each item, the individual may score zero (meaning the item is absent in their normal behaviour), one (meaning it is present to some degree) or two (meaning it is definitely present). For example, 'lack of remorse or guilt' is one of the affective traits. A person with a consistently healthy sense of appropriate guilt (you or me, for example) would score zero for this item. A person who never feels guilt about anything (regardless of what heinous crimes they might have committed) would score two. A person who feels only occasional guilt in specific circumstances, or who feels guilt less than would ordinarily be expected for things

they have done, might score one.

The checklist must be based on the individual's life generally and not just on a specific event or offence they may have committed. A score of thirty or more indicates a high level of psychopathy, although a score of twenty-five is often accepted for research purposes (as we will do in this book). However, some researchers (including Kevin Dutton, professor of experimental psychology at the University of Oxford) assert that such a cut-off score is rather arbitrary and that people have varying degrees of psychopathy that are useful for their own success and essential for a functioning society. Either way, the average man on the street will score only four on the *Psychopathy Checklist*. The average woman will score even less.

Psychopathy, as we can see, is a well-defined personality disorder. Sociopathy, on the other hand, is not really defined at all; it is a more informal (and arguably somewhat obsolete) term that describes an individual with a persistent pattern of behaviours and attitudes that are at odds with what society considers socially acceptable and lawful. Usually, however, sociopathic behaviours are said to be appropriate within the sociopath's subculture or social milieu – such as in a criminal gang. For example, the Mafia boss Tony Soprano (see Chapter 12 of this book) should be regarded as a sociopath rather than a psychopath.

Some commentators regard a sociopath as having a more defined moral code with a greater capacity for guilt, empathy, loyalty and caring relationships. The sociopath may even have

a conscience, albeit in a narrower context than is normal. Moreover, a sociopath may go to greater lengths to hide their distress and unacceptable behaviour from certain people, where a psychopath may not bother. Finally, some researchers suggest that sociopaths are essentially the result of adverse or neglectful childhood environments. Of course, this is often true of psychopaths too, but (unlike sociopaths) they also tend to be temperamentally abnormal from birth. It could be said, therefore, that psychopaths are partly ‘born’ of genetics and biology, while sociopaths are exclusively ‘made’ by adverse early experiences.

THE ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER

To complicate matters slightly, there is a third entity with similar features – the *antisocial personality disorder*. This is broader than psychopathy and perhaps three to four times more common. While such individuals are deceitful, impulsive, aggressive, reckless, irresponsible and remorseless, with behaviour that is ultimately unacceptable to society (including, for example, a lot of petty and opportunistic crimes), they may have empathy, humility and depth of emotion like the rest of us. Essentially, they behave badly but they can have feelings.

It’s worth pausing to explain the term ‘personality disorder’. We all have personalities, right? Some more than others indeed, but where does the word ‘disorder’ come into it? Well, because psychiatric illnesses and conditions might otherwise dissolve into mere fragmented opinion, modern psychiatry likes to have

specific criteria for diagnosis. Two similar classification systems exist today: the World Health Organisation's *Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders* (currently in its tenth edition: ICD-10); and the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (currently in its fifth edition: DSM-5). The DSM-I first appeared in 1952 and contained the term *sociopathic personality*, while its updated sequel in 1968 (the DSM-II) replaced this with the more modern term *antisocial personality disorder*. With each update, definitions have generally become more refined.

According to both the DSM-5 and the ICD-10, '[specific] personality disorders' require evidence of enduring patterns of behaviour that deviate markedly from the cultural norm and affect how a person thinks, feels, controls impulses and relates to others. Any deviation must be long-standing (usually present since late childhood or adolescence), inflexible and poorly adjusted ('maladaptive') to a broad range of personal and social situations – such as at home, at work, while out with friends and so forth. The result must be distressing for the individual or those people close to them. Finally, a personality disorder cannot be attributable to illness per se (either psychiatric or physical). Illnesses are episodic; personalities are permanent.

It is estimated that up to fifteen per cent of the population has a diagnosable personality disorder. Various different types exist. A common one in psychiatric settings is the *emotionally unstable* (or *borderline*) personality disorder (more about that with Tom Ripley in Chapter 6). We have just mentioned the

antisocial (also known as *dissocial*) personality disorder and will discuss the *schizoid* personality disorder in Chapter 10 (in relation to Dexter Morgan). Other examples include the *paranoid* (think of your angry, suspicious uncle who constantly spouts conspiracy theories and is quick to take offence), *histrionic* (your shallow, seductive, theatrical friend who loves to gossip endlessly between cosmetic surgery appointments) and *schizotypal* (the aloof and eccentric woman down the road who believes in ghosts and holds séances) personality disorders. In addition, there are *anankastic* ('OCD-like'), *anxious/avoidant* ('super-shy'), *dependent* ('super-clingy') and *narcissistic* ('super-self-important') varieties. Just as many of us have a few psychopathic characteristics without being full-blown psychopaths, most of us have some of the above personality traits without having personality disorders. By definition, most people are just normal.

PSYCHOPATHY VERSUS PSYCHOSIS

It is important to reiterate that psychopathy is not mental illness. More specifically, psychopathy has nothing to do with *psychosis* – even though the two words share a first syllable and are phonetically quite similar. Unlike psychopathy, psychosis (the commonest form of which is schizophrenia) involves *hallucinations* (hearing or seeing things that aren't there), *delusions* (fervently believing things that aren't true), *thought disorder* (mixed-up thinking that makes communication very difficult) and *negative symptoms* (social withdrawal, speaking

less and dropping out of work or education). However, people with psychosis are no more likely to be psychopaths than you or I.

In this regard, there are certain prominent fictional characters that have no place in this book beyond the next few paragraphs. A fascinating case in point is the 2003 film *Donnie Darko*, the directorial debut of screenplay-writer Richard Kelly. Set in October 1988 in the small American town of Middlesex, the film enjoys a backdrop that is unashamedly 'eighties' in style: stonewash jeans and mullet hairstyles abound, while the principal characters discuss the relative merits of George Bush and Michael Dukakis for president. The genre, meanwhile, is a skilful and rather unique hybrid of horror, science fiction, suspense and teen comedy.

Jake Gyllenhaal plays the eponymous character, a troubled teenager with paranoid schizophrenia (but *not* psychopathy) who sometimes forgets to take his medication. Donnie experiences vivid auditory and visual hallucinations of a human-sized rabbit named Frank, who commands him to perform heinous acts of vandalism and arson. Donnie willingly undertakes these tasks while on nightly somnambulant walks; on one occasion, for example, he damages a bulldog-shaped school statue, planting an axe in its head and writing, in large letters on the ground beneath, 'They made me do it.'

To complicate matters, Donnie narrowly escapes death early in the film. He is out sleepwalking when a large jet engine falls from the sky (stay with me here; there's a point to this) and

crash-lands directly on his bedroom. He is not hurt because he is not there (Frank, the human-sized rabbit, has arguably saved his life), but, more curiously, the aviation authorities cannot identify any plane that has crashed in the vicinity or any airline willing to claim ownership of the engine. This inexplicable event becomes a foreshadow of Frank's reappearance to announce to Donnie that the world will end in precisely twenty-eight days, six hours, forty-two minutes and twelve seconds. Faced with this rather pessimistic prophecy, Donnie undertakes the formidable task of trying to understand what is real and what is not.

Any objective viewer can see that Donnie is experiencing a psychotic episode. Not only does he endure hallucinations, paranoid delusions and a variety of other symptoms synonymous with schizophrenia, but his symptoms last the minimum one-month period required by the ICD-10. He even has a few negative symptoms thrown in for good measure, with little dialogue and a penchant for truancy. Yes, Donnie is also a rather chilling character with an expression that can be simultaneously blunted, mocking and menacing. One need only look at the famous scene where he strides portentously with an axe over his shoulder, his head bowed slightly and his eyes staring angrily ahead. But Donnie is not superficial or grandiose. He does not lack remorse or empathy, nor does he seek stimulation. And there is no versatility to his antisocial behaviour.

On the contrary, Donnie displays depth, sensitivity, intelligence and – above all – a conscience. This is in stark contrast to many of the other characters in the film, who often provide

comic relief in the form of an absurdly shallow and easily led community. Most notable is local schoolteacher Kitty Farmer, who obsequiously worships a sleazy self-help guru (who may well be a psychopath). Meanwhile, Donnie's consistent anchor to the real world is his girlfriend, Gretchen Ross, to whom he forms a clear emotional attachment. She, in turn, accepts his eccentricities without question. Donnie Darko is simply not a psychopath.

The same is true of various other leading characters in literature and film. Despite the title in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho*, the motel owner Norman Bates is not a psychopath. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Norman believes to a delusional extent that he is, in fact, his own mother (whom, it transpires, he killed many years earlier). Like Donnie Darko, Norman most likely has psychosis. A less plausible but nevertheless possible diagnosis is a condition known as *dissociative identity disorder*. This is a rare neurotic illness in which more than one separate personality exists in the same individual, usually as the result of a deep-rooted trauma. For the record, the 'split personality' of dissociative identity disorder has nothing whatever to do with schizophrenia, which is described above. They are two entirely separate illnesses. Either way, Norman is not a psychopath.

This brings us neatly to *The Strange Tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. If the main protagonist of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic horror story has any psychiatric diagnosis at all, it is once again dissociative identity disorder. It is certainly not

schizophrenia. Indeed, we might argue that Dr Henry Jekyll requires some psychopathic traits to explain the self-indulgent unleashing onto the world of his evil creation. Grandiosity, deceitfulness and irresponsibility spring to mind, although it is unlikely Dr Jekyll would tick enough boxes to earn the label of psychopath.

And finally Walter White, the anti-hero of the much-hyped television series *Breaking Bad*, is not a psychopath. Indeed, the very premise of the story is that an apparently weak, sick and unlucky man ventures into the underworld of illegal narcotics and must survive despite the fact that he is clearly a novice. Initially naïve but determined, he gradually evolves into a hardened criminal as the story develops. In many ways, he is just a family man who thinks he has nothing left to lose. In Walter (played by Bryan Cranston), there is ample evidence of humility, empathy, remorse, self-control and the acceptance of responsibility. His motives (to earn money for his family who will outlive him) are wholesome and admirable to a degree, even if his methods are not. Perhaps the series challenges the viewer to consider whether they would act the same way in similar circumstances.

SEED OR SOIL?

So, are psychopaths born or are they made? This is the theme of Lionel Shriver's novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in which a mother examines her conscience in the aftermath of her teenage son's Columbine-style massacre at his American high school.

Since the early 1990s, tests that examine the electrical activity in certain parts of the brain (*electroencephalograms* – or EEGs) have shown that such activity is different in psychopaths relative to the general population. These brainwaves (which relate to attention to stimuli and contextual memory) affect the way we evaluate and profit from experience – essentially so we can avoid repeatedly making the same mistakes. It seems emotional memory (remembering how one once felt) is different for psychopaths, meaning they are less likely to experience fear or anxiety in relation to bad things that may have happened to them previously.

Subsequent to this, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have also compared the brains of psychopaths and non-psychopaths.¹⁰ The fact that oxygen-rich blood and oxygen-poor blood each send out differing MRI signals allows for a technique known as *blood oxygen level dependent* (BOLD) imaging. Because active parts of the brain need more oxygen, fMRI scans can thus determine which parts are active during certain observable tasks. As with EEGs, the fMRI research has highlighted differences between the psychopathic and the non-psychopathic brain. Specifically, the affected areas include: the *limbic system* (the part of the brain that deals with emotion), especially the *hippocampus* (the part that helps us process and store emotional memory) and the *amygdala* (the part that helps us profit from experience); the *temporal pole* (the region of the brain that helps us integrate what we see and hear for subsequent higher processing); and the *orbital frontal cortex*

(the part of the brain behind the forehead, just above the eyes, that regulates the input of emotions into our decision-making). This is not an exhaustive list but you get the picture. Scientists have identified a lack of integration between the language and emotional components of thought which causes psychopaths to have difficulty understanding the emotional content of words. This can lead to the rather chilling experience of a serial killer describing their heinous crimes in the calm way they might recount what they had for breakfast.

Some scientists hypothesise that these differences in brain activity may be present from an early developmental age, possibly even from before birth. Twin studies support the idea that genetics accounts for at least half of an individual's likelihood of becoming a psychopath. What remains is likely nurture. Certainly, an adverse childhood will increase the risk of psychopathy, but can psychopaths emerge from idyllic family environments too?

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the protagonist, Eva, is the reluctant mother of a child to whom she cannot relate. From birth, he shows little interest in her, cries incessantly, fails to develop his milestones normally and shows a reluctance to play. Over time, he develops into a manipulative and violent individual. In research (when real psychopaths are interviewed and their childhood histories are examined) it often transpires that they formed an abnormal attachment to their parents, argued with siblings (this sometimes resulting in assault) and consistently had few friends. They also wet the bed long

beyond what might be considered normal, set fire to things and were cruel to animals; these last three items are sometimes referred to as the *MacDonald triad*. Punishment throughout childhood typically proved ineffective and these individuals eventually engaged in a teenage life of petty crime, drug and alcohol use, and precocious sex.

Although psychopaths often come from unstable family environments with disinterested parents, this is not always the case. Some have affluent and well-adjusted parents (like the fictional Kevin). Equally, most children reared in adverse circumstances do not grow up to become psychopaths. Researchers have found that evolving psychopaths are often callous and unemotional as children and score differently on certain psychometric tests that relate to the amygdala and the orbital frontal cortex. They are worse at grasping abstract concepts such as metaphors. Moreover, evolving psychopaths are not deterred by the prospect of punishment and – as any parent will testify – this makes child rearing a real challenge. Overall, the emerging consensus is that certain individuals are born with a deficit in emotional intelligence but otherwise have a normal IQ. Negative childhood experiences can exacerbate this emotional deficit and ultimately produce a psychopath.

So, can it be treated? Bear in mind that psychopathy is a personality disorder and not a psychiatric illness. A handful of studies have shown that treating psychopathy with positive reinforcement (rewarding positive behaviour – when you can find it – rather than simply punishing negative behaviour)

can be effective in the short term. Such studies are few and far between, however, and their results are hotly contested. Psychopaths are expert manipulators and many will give researchers whatever answers they think necessary to gain early parole. The prevailing belief is that the best way to limit a dangerous psychopath's effect on society is simply to keep him or her away from it.

Psychopaths in real life can often appear quite likeable, especially if we have something they want, such as access to our money, power or influence. In such cases, the psychopath will go to considerable lengths to convince us that they are the type of person we should trust. Once they have exploited us and we cease to be of use to them, they will abandon us and we will be left wondering what on earth happened. In some instances, we may not even realise we have been conned, especially if nobody points it out to us. Either way, it is a myth that a real psychopath can never be likeable; sometimes it will just take the benefit of hindsight to work out their true character.

'A glorious compendium of raffish, seductive, destructive characters who charm their way into our hearts and then destroy us from the inside out ... essential reading.'

Brendan Kelly, Professor of Psychiatry

Ever wondered why your spine tingles when Hannibal Lecter escapes from custody? Or why a narcissistic, womanising assassin for Her Majesty's Secret Service is revered worldwide as a fictional hero? Or why you feel a thrill when Frank Underwood manipulates a naïve senator? Or why you root for Tom Ripley to avoid the clutches of the Italian police?

Psychopath? takes you on a journey through the world of fictional villains and anti-heroes – the lying, the cheating and the murder. But are they psychopaths in the true sense? Guided by the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, this book examines whether a psychologist might come to that conclusion. More importantly, it asks why you long for the anti-hero to succeed. How, with each nefarious deed, your sympathy and loyalty are garnered, pulling you in deeper with every scene or turn of the page until finally, irresistibly, you find yourself utterly charmed by the psychopath.



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