Diderot’s Pyramid: the Encyclopedia as an Esoteric Monument

If the cultural and intellectual movement commonly referred to as the Enlightenment could be defined by one distinguishing feature, it would be the first occurrence in Western history of a form of philosophical propaganda. Over the course of the 18th century, the philosophical quest for truth, which in principle is an individual undertaking, becomes the focus of a collective undertaking aimed at public conversion that runs counter to Christian proselytism. This transformation in philosophical inquiry does not take place unnoticed, nor do the key players fail to grasp what is at stake. In fact, the philosophes themselves ponder their own identity, asking “What is a philosopher?” This question of philosophical identity no longer consists primarily of seeking the best way to live, as it has in the past. Equally important, or even more so, is finding the best way of converting as many people as possible to freedom of inquiry and therefore of presenting the broadest possible avenue for the pursuit of truth. In other words, in the context of the Enlightenment, philosophy becomes “impure” in the sense that the philosophes concern themselves with strictly rhetorical aims (asking how they can persuade the largest number possible to join the philosophical camp).¹ The philosophes of the Enlightenment are heretics of philosophy in the sense that they renounce philosophy’s anti-rhetorical vocation as defined by Plato.

As the architect of the Encyclopédie, Diderot has a crucial role to play, not only in coordinating the authors but also in theorizing a new form of enlightened propaganda. This second aspect will be our focus in the limited scope of this article. The hypothesis we put

forward is that Diderot defines the broad outlines of the new philosophical strategy by continually confronting the question of a double doctrine, which is to say a distinction between an “outer” or exoteric doctrine (intended for laypeople) and an “inner” or esoteric doctrine (reserved for insiders). This redefinition of the philosophical mission has major consequences on both philosophical identity (what is a philosopher?) and the ethos of the philosophe (what image should a philosophe present of himself to the public to persuade as many people as possible of his approach’s legitimacy?) Taking a serious look at Diderot’s rhetorical identity will allow us to better understand his strategy for imparting philosophy and thereby avoid reducing him to the rank of the mere “popularizers” or “propagators of a thought current already supplied by the so-called radical and clandestine Enlightenment.”

If Diderot incessantly ponders the double doctrine’s legitimacy, it is not with the goal of relegating it to the dark corners of history, but rather to constantly question what it means to be a philosopher.

**The Pythagorean veil**

Although Diderot first encounters the idea of a double doctrine well before the encyclopedia project, in particular by reading Shaftesbury, it is probably translating and adapting Brucker’s *Historia critica philosophiae* that leads him to examine this question more closely. The erudite Protestant’s work provides Diderot with the substance for all of his articles

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on the history of philosophy. But the distinction between esoteric and exoteric doctrines is a recurring theme when it comes to most schools of philosophy in Antiquity. In the article “Exotérique & Esotérique”, Samuel Formey is very likely inspired by Brucker, whose texts he would later abridge and translate in his *Histoire abrégée de la philosophie*. He defines this distinction in the following terms:

The philosophers of Antiquity had a double doctrine; one outer, public or *exoteric*; the other inner, secret or *esoteric*. The first was taught openly to everyone, while the second was reserved for a small number of select disciples. It was not that different points of doctrine were taught in public or in private; the same subjects were presented but treated differently, according to whether the lessons were addressed to the multitude or to the select disciples.

Diderot’s interest is clear from the start of the *Encyclopédie* project, since in his impatience, he addresses this distinction himself in the article “Acousmatiques,” of which the least we can say is that it would seem superfluous to Diderot if it did not give him the opportunity to transcribe, starting with the letter A – in other words, from the very first volume of the *Encyclopédie* – the description of the double doctrine practiced by Pythagoras that we find in Brucker’s work:

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To understand the *acousmatics*, it is necessary to know that the disciples in the school of Pythagoras were divided in two separate classes by a veil; that the first class, the most advanced, who underwent five years of silence without having seen their master at the rostrum, and having always been separated from the others the entire time by a veil, were finally admitted into the sort of sanctuary from which he had only been heard, and saw him face to face; they are called *esoterics*. The others, who remained behind the veil and had not yet been silent long enough to deserve to approach Pythagoras and see him speak, were known as *exoterics* and *acousmatics* or *acoustics*. See *PYTHAGOREAN*. But this distinction was not the only one between the *esoterics* and the *exoterics*. It seems that Pythagoras told these disciples only emblematic things; but that he revealed these things to the others as they were, without any concealment, and that he told them the reasons.

The only response given to the objections of the *acoustics* was αὐτὸς ἒφα, or “Pythagoras said so.” But Pythagoras himself resolved the objections to the *esoterics*.

With this artifice of presentation, which is rather common throughout the entire *Encyclopédie*, the double doctrine is mentioned fairly specifically on three occasions, in the articles

“*Acousmatiques*” (Diderot, 1751), “*Exotérique & Esotérique*” (Formey, 1756) and

“*Pythagorisme*” (Diderot, 1765). Diderot’s text is significant in the way it differs from

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9 “*Acousmatiques,*” in Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes* (1776), 5:272. “Pour entendre ce que c’était que les *acousmatiques*, il faut savoir que les disciples de Pythagore étaient distribués en deux classes séparées dans son école par un voile ; ceux de la première classe, de la classe la plus avancée, qui ayant par-devers eux cinq ans de silence passés sans avoir vu leur maître en chaire, car il avait toujours été séparé d’eux pendant tout ce temps par un voile, étaient enfin admis dans l’espèce de sanctuaire d’où il s’était seulement fait entendre, & le voyaient face à face ; on les appelait les *ésotériques*. Les autres qui restaient derrière le voile & qui ne s’étaient pas encore tus assez longtemps pour mériter d’approcher & de voir parler Pythagore, s’appelaient *exotériques* & *acousmatiques* ou *acoustiques*. *Voyez PYTHAGORICIEN*. Mais cette distinction n’était pas la seule qu’il y eût entre les *ésotériques* & les *exotériques*. Il paraît que Pythagore disait seulement les choses emblématiquement à ceux-ci ; mais qu’il les révélait aux autres telles qu’elles étaient sans nuage, & qu’il leur en donnait les raisons. On disait pour toute réponse aux objections des *acoustiques*, αὐτὸς ἒφα, *Pythagore l’a dit* : mais Pythagore lui-même résolvait les objections aux *ésotériques.*”

10 Less specific allusions to the double doctrine can be found in Diderot and Yvon, “*Ame*”; Yvon (attributed to), “*Aristotélisme*”; Yvon, “*Celtes (Philosophie des)*”; Diderot, “*Eléatique (secte)*”; Diderot, “*Encyclopédie*”; Diderot,
Formey’s article. First, it does not focus on a distinction between “select disciples” and the people, referred to as “the multitude,” but instead on a separation between novices and initiates in the framework of an introduction to philosophy. Diderot clearly examines the question of a philosopher’s relationship to the people in other articles of the Encyclopédie, but this nuanced vision should encourage greater caution among critics: the double doctrine actually masks a tripartition (between the people, the novices and the initiates) via an elision of one of the terms (in the articles we have just cited, Formey makes no mention of the novices, and Diderot no mention of the people).

Comparing the two articles also reveals one of the major issues connected with the double doctrine: the relationship between philosophy and religion. Formey rehabilitates the double doctrine against its detractors, simultaneously defending “the secrets of the schools and of the mysteries” that “the Greeks called by a single name”: in other words, he argues in favor of philosophical esotericism and religious esotericism. He justifies this dual defense by referring to the hybrid character – both philosophical and religious – of the “Egyptian priests, who were the custodians of the sciences”. Initially combining the roles of “judges and magistrates,” they had made “the public good” the goal of their “secret instructions,” which perfectly legitimized the interest of the “Greek legislators” who came to learn the “art of government” from them. It is hardly surprising that Diderot does not subscribe in the least to this defense of religious esotericism and that in his own article “Egyptiens” he vehemently condemns the Egyptian priests...
for withholding knowledge. Priests obscure their doctrines not to protect themselves from the people, but to deceive them and keep them in ignorance. Any religious doctrine constitutes a kind of inversed encyclopedia in which ideas are increasingly false as they become more interconnected:

Everything has to do with human understanding; the obscurity of an idea spreads to those ideas around it: a mistake casts darkness on contiguous truths; and if it so happens that in a society there are individuals interested in forming, so to speak, centers of darkness, soon people will be immersed in total darkness. We need not fear this happening: never have the centers of darkness been so rare and constricted as now: Philosophy is progressing steadily, and light accompanies and follows it.

“Philosophy” is anti-religion. By simply inverting the terms of this condemnation, we can see the significance of the philosophical project as Diderot views it. The *Encyclopédie* is in fact this philosophical project, a work in which one truth sheds light upon “contiguous truths” and with which a society of selfless individuals gradually enlightens the people. The challenge for Diderot therefore consists of defending a certain usage of the double doctrine while presenting the respective rhetorical identities of the philosopher and the priest as radically opposed.


How then can philosophical inquiry accommodate a method of obscuring the truth that priests had so misused? Why is Pythagoras not condemned along with Orpheus or Xekia (Buddha), that “impostor [who] had two kinds of doctrines: one made for the people and the other secret, which he revealed to only a few of his disciples”? The fact that Diderot abstains from criticizing the double doctrine of Pythagoras becomes all the more striking. In his eyes, the Greek philosopher is indeed one of the main disciples of the Egyptian priests, but also a “philosopher of the first order”, martyred by the “vicious Crotoniates who cut his throat at the age of one hundred and four, then elevated him among the gods and made a temple of his home.” Like Formey’s Egyptian priest, Diderot’s Pythagoras is a hybrid figure (philosophical and religious), but involuntarily so, since his divinization is only the grotesque mask of his killing.

This heightens the ambivalence of the article “Acousmatiques”: it is Diderot (and not Brucker) who designates the Pythagorean school as a “sort of sanctuary”, for, although not a religious group, it dangerously imitated a religious practice. The physical separation between initiates and novices may also remind Diderot of the physical separation – common at the time in Catholic churches – between the choir and the nave, reserved for the clergy and laypeople, respectively. And the “Pythagorean silence” seems quite similar to the monastic vow of silence. Finally, the observance of the principle of authority imposed on the exoterics (“Pythagoras said so”) can easily be compared to the anti-philosophical attitude of the pious. In spite of these characteristics, which could tarnish the image of Pythagoras, Diderot seems eager to cast him in

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17 Diderot, “Asiatiques,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 5:517: “cet imposteur avait deux sortes de doctrines: l’une faite pour le peuple, l’autre secrète, qu’il ne révéla qu’à quelques-uns de ses disciples.” This article is anonymous, but is attributed to Diderot by Naigeon (see Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 5:513, note 1).
18 See “Pythagorisme,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 8:163: “un philosophe du premier ordre”; “ces féroces Crotoniates qui l’égorgerent à l’âge de cent quatre ans, le placèrent ensuite au rang des dieux & firent un temple de sa maison.”
a positive or even resplendent light, in particular with the cross-reference to the article “Pythagoricien” (in reality “Pythagorisme”), while isolating the parts of his philosophy originating in “superstition or ignorance” in the article “Abstinence des Pythagoriciens.”19 With some strategic cross-referencing on Diderot’s part,20 it becomes clear that the Pythagorean method is venerated in spite of its Egyptian origins. Diderot’s way of dealing with Pythagoras can probably be explained by his desire to show a distinction between a right and a wrong application of the double doctrine. If the Egyptian priests abused secrecy to gain control over people’s minds, Pythagoras used it with complete legitimacy, since his purpose was to protect himself from “the peoples, who are always stupid, jealous and wicked.”21 In a paradoxically Christian way, it is purity of intention that allows Diderot to identify Pythagoras as a true philosopher rather than a leader of a religious group, and therefore to hold him up as a model.

The double doctrine is commendable as a measure of defense on the part of the philosopher, who always has the threat of persecution hanging over him; but it is absolutely reprehensible in priests, who use it for the purposes of trickery and manipulation. The Egyptian origins of knowledge therefore constitute a challenge and a temptation for nascent philosophy. Orpheus “goes from Thrace, his homeland, to Egypt, where he learns philosophy, theology, astrology, medicine, music and poetry,” then “travels from Egypt to Greece, where he is honored by the people,” but this immense knowledge transfer is sullied by the art of manipulating the people that he also brings back from his journey, as this “eloquent deceiver . . . causes the gods

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19 See “Abstinence des Pythagoriciens,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 5:232; “Chair,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 6:322.


21 “Pythagorisme,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 8:163: “Les peuples qui sont toujours stupides, jaloux & méchants . . .”
to speak to gain mastery over a herd of savage men.”

Similarly, Diderot is probably attentive to Kaempfer’s theory – reported by Brucker – that Buddha “was African . . ., had been raised on philosophy, and the mysteries of the Egyptians” and had “taught the Indians the dogmas that he himself had taken from Egypt.”

Unlike Orpheus and Buddha, Pythagoras remains first and foremost a philosopher, for the double doctrine is for him only a “manner of presenting the truth” whose purpose is to protect him from persecution. By tracing this very clear line of demarcation between the right and the wrong usage of the double doctrine, Diderot rectifies the unconditional praise of Formey, who did not establish this distinction at all.

**Pythagoras 2.0**

The Pythagorean method as described in the article “Acousmatiques” suffers from a significant flaw: the distinction between those who see and hear the teacher and those who only hear him has no meaning except in the context of oral teachings. Is the philosopher’s identity therefore not dependent on this orality? The use of writing also implies the taking of additional risk and therefore requires an adaptation to the double doctrine. Diderot mentions one potential strategy in the article “Platonisme”:

> The fate of his teacher [Socrates] had made him circumspect; he was a partisan up to a certain point of Pythagorean silence; he imitated the priests of Egypt, the most taciturn and hidden mortals. He is occupied more by refuting than by proving, and he almost

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22 “Grecs (philosophie des),” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 7:331: “il passe de la Thrace sa patrie dans l’Egype, où il s’instruit de la philosophie, de la théologie, de l’astrologie, de la médecine, de la musique, & de la poésie… Il vient de l’Egypte en Grece, où il est honoré des peuples”; “Orphée fut un fourbe éloquent, qui fit parler les dieux pour maitriser un troupeau d’hommes farouches.”


24 “Jésus-Christ,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 7:479.
always escapes the reader’s malignancy using a large number of speakers who are alternately wrong and right. . . . he should perhaps not be read so much for the things he says as for his manner of saying them. . . .

The Platonist exoteric writing approach therefore consists of employing dialogue to better mask one’s feeling, but also – as Brucker indicates in a passage that is not transcribed by Diderot – using irony (“he did indeed use irony”).

In a note, Brucker agrees with Augustine that Plato learned from Socrates this “art of concealment” that makes his doctrine “obscure and uncertain.”

It seems that after his stay in Vincennes in 1749, which has made him “circumspect,” Diderot, who borrows Brucker’s book in November 1750, is very mindful of the “Platonist lesson” it contains: his main philosophical works after this point – if we except the Encyclopédie articles – are Le Rêve de D’Alembert, Le Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville, Le Neveu de Rameau and Jacques le Fataliste, i.e. dialogues in the style of Plato, in which irony and alternating among points of view play a major role.

Although the example of Plato makes it possible to imagine an initial break between oral and written teachings in the transmission of the “art of concealment,” there remains a major difficulty to which Diderot alludes in an article whose essential nature is masked by the trappings of Latin erudition in its title (“Aius-Locutius”): adapting the double doctrine to a second major

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25 “Platonisme ou philosophie de Platon,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 8:115: “Le sort de son maître l’avait rendu circonspect; il fut partisan jusqu’à un certain point du silence pythagorique; il imita les prêtres de l’Egypte, les mortels les plus taciturnes & les plus cachés. Il est plus occupé à réfuter qu’à prouver, & il échappe presque toujours à la malignité du lecteur à l’aide d’un grand nombre d’interlocuteurs qui ont alternativement tort & raison… il est peut-être moins à lire pour les choses qu’il dit que pour la manière de le dire…” The passage I emphasize is a comment added by Diderot. Compare with Brucker, Historia critica philosophiae, 1:661-62.

26 Brucker, Historia critica philosophiae, 1:661: “utebatur enim ironia.”

27 Ibid., note e: “Dissimulandi hanc artem a præceptore Socrate Platonem accepisse, indeque obscuram & incertam doctrinam suam fuisse, jam observavit Augustinus de C. D. l. VIII c. 4” (“As Augustine has already observed in De civitate Dei contra paganos, book VIII, chapter 4, Plato learned this art of concealment from his teacher, Socrates, and this explains the obscure and uncertain nature of his doctrine”).


29 See Jacques Proust, Diderot et l’Encyclopédie, 247.
technical breakthrough, the invention of the printing press. Cicero’s double doctrine is the
starting point for Diderot’s reflection:

It is difficult to reconcile the singular veneration that the pagans had for their gods with
the patience that they also had for the discourses of certain philosophers. Did the
Christians whom they persecuted so much say anything stronger than what we can read in
Cicero? The books On Divination are merely irreligious treatises. But what an impression
must have been made on the people by certain pieces of oratory in which the gods were
constantly invoked and called forth to witness events, in which Olympian threats were
recalled to mind – in short, where the very existence of the pagan deities was
presupposed by orators who had written a host of philosophical essays treating the gods
and religion as mere fables! Can we not find the solution to all these difficulties in the
scarcity of manuscripts in ancient times? In those days the people hardly read: they heard
the discourses of their orators and these discourses were always filled with piety toward
the gods, but they were ignorant of what the orator thought and wrote about them in the
privacy of his own house. These works were available only to his friends.30

The example of Cicero allows Diderot to reflect again upon the Platonist concealment technique
that implied a distinction between exoteric writings and esoteric oral teachings. The situation is

http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.297. Originally published as “Aius-Locutius,” Encyclopédie (Paris:
d’accorder la vénération singulière que les païens avaient pour leurs dieux, avec la patience qu’ils ont eue pour les
discours de certains philosophes: ces chrétiens qu’ils ont tant persécutés, disaient-ils rien de plus fort que ce qu’on lit
dans Cicéron? Les livres de la Divination ne sont que des traités d’irreligion. Mais quelle impression devaient faire
sur les peuples, ces morceaux d’élucuion où les dieux sont pris à témoin, & sont invoqués; où leurs menaces sont
rappelées, en un mot, où leur existence est supposée; quand ces morceaux étaient prononcés par des gens dont on
avait une foule d’écrits philosophiques, où les dieux & la religion étaient traités de fables! Ne trouverait-on pas la
solution de toutes ces difficultés dans la rareté des manuscrits du temps des Anciens? Alors le peuple ne lisait guère:
it entendait les discours de ses orateurs, & ces discours étaient toujours remplis de piété envers les dieux: mais il
ignorait ce que l’orateur en pensait & en écrivait dans son cabinet; ces ouvrages n’étaient qu’à l’usage de ses amis.”
inversed since with Cicero it is the writings that are esoteric (i.e., that reveal his atheism) and the public speeches that are exoteric. Diderot shifts his focus from concealment techniques in the “art of writing” to how various ways of circulating ideas affect the double doctrine. Esoteric writings are made possible by a very limited circulation of manuscripts. This strategy became obsolete, Diderot implies, with the invention of the printing press. The solution he suggests to the authorities is to grant total freedom of expression solely to authors publishing in Latin, which is to say a language whose obsolescence guarantees an esoteric function:

But a way of granting the respect that we owe to the beliefs of a people, and to a national religion, with freedom of thought, which is so desired for a discovery of the truth, and with public tranquility, without which there is no happiness either for the philosopher or for the people; this would be forbidding any writing against the government and religion in the vulgar tongue; allowing those who would write in a learned tongue to be forgotten, and prosecuting only their translators.31

This subversive proposal by Diderot, although buried in an article with the obscure title of “Aius-Locutius,” receives ire from Père Berthier in the Journal de Trévoux of November 1751:

First, the Author reasoning on the safety of the Ancients with regard to the religion of their Gods, attacked by Men of Letters, and attributing this conduct to the rarity of Manuscripts, has he not noticed that such a reason has not been possible since the invention of the Printing Press; and that it would today be very dangerous to print Books

31 “Aius-Locutius,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 5:315-16: “Mais un moyen d’accorder le respect que l’on doit à la croyance d’un peuple, & au culte national, avec la liberté de penser, qui est si fort à souhaiter pour la découverte de la vérité, & avec la tranquillité publique, sans laquelle il n’y a point de bonheur ni pour le philosophe, ni pour le peuple; ce serait de défendre tout écrit contre le gouvernement & la religion en langue vulgaire; de laisser oublier ceux qui écriraient dans une langue savante, & d’en poursuivre les seuls traducteurs.”
that oppose Religion, because the copies of these Books could multiply in very little time, and in a thousand different forms?\(^{32}\)

Berthier’s criticism is both very perceptive – the mode of circulation is indeed the main focus of the article “Aius-Locutius” – and desperately naive – since the solution Diderot indicates claims to have found an equivalent to Cicero’s double doctrine in the new technological context ushered in by the invention of the printing press. Boldly and cleverly, Diderot confirms his point of view in the article “Casuiste” (published in January 1752), arguing that Pascal, with his *Lettres provinciales* (1656-1657), had – by denouncing them – pulled out of obscurity a crowd of casuists that would have been better left in the shadows of Latin. Diderot’s reply is bold in that he doubles down rather than backing off. It is clever – or even perverse – because he lumps together with the “dangerous” authors not philosophers, but casuists, in particular the Jesuits, who were attacked by the herald of Jansenism. How could Père Berthier, himself a Jesuit, now deny the casuists of his own congregation the freedom to publish “in a learned tongue”?\(^{33}\) This controversial episode is not only amusing, but above all shows how Diderot fools the most informed critics of the encyclopedia project by replying to them on particular points of scandal while keeping leeway for developing – in various scattered articles – a general theory of the double doctrine adapted to his era.

For Diderot, the figures of Pythagoras, Plato and Cicero are models that one should not identify with but rather draw inspiration from to view the double doctrine with a fresh eye. The


three philosophers allow him to answer three questions, respectively: “What is the best way to initiate? To write? To circulate?” The double doctrine is thus based on a set of initiation, writing and circulation techniques that goes beyond that “art of writing” so masterfully analyzed by Leo Strauss. Diderot also ponders the best way of adapting this strategy for imparting philosophy to the technological evolution of humankind: his article “Egyptiens” addresses the double doctrine in the context of the invention of writing (first using hieroglyphics, then an alphabet) and “Aius-Locutius” examines the impact of the invention of the printing press. What Diderot suggests is that the double doctrine is threatened with obsolescence only if we fail to take into consideration these successive technological breakthroughs that transform the very nature of philosophy. Leo Strauss perceptively comments that the “art of writing” changes once philosophy stops being seen as a privilege and becomes activism: “After about the middle of the seventeenth century an ever-increasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such.” But Strauss – who refers to Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau, but not Diderot – seems unaware that this metamorphosis in the “art of writing” has already been theorized by its architect in the main philosophical propaganda machine of the Enlightenment.


35 Leo Strauss, Persecution, 33.
The Cynic exception

Diderot encounters the double doctrine’s most formidable opponent not in the person of an ideological adversary such as Père Berthier, but in that of his close friend Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As early as 1751, in a note in his “Réponse à Stanislas,” Rousseau condemns the “internal doctrine” whose history “would prove a terrible blow to ancient as well as to modern Philosophy.” This is Rousseau’s opportunity to denounce the hypocrisy of Pythagoras and Cicero in very similar terms: if the former “gave [his disciples] secret lessons in Atheism while solemnly offering Sacrifices to Jupiter,” the latter “in the company of his friend laughed at the immortal Gods he so emphatically invoked from the Rostrum.” This passage being contemporaneous with the publication of volume 1 of the Encyclopédie, containing the articles “Acousmatiques” and “Aius-Locutius,” it seems reasonable to assume that the two friends have had a rather animated discussion of the role of philosophy and the legitimacy of the double doctrine. We could place Formey, Diderot and Rousseau at different points on a continuum of favorability to esoteric concealment: Formey moderately praises the double doctrine of priests and philosophers, Diderot praises the double doctrine of philosophers but totally condemns that of priests as an instrument of ignorance, and Rousseau rejects the double doctrine entirely, viewing it as a characteristic trait of ancient and modern philosophy.

But are things really as clear and simple as Rousseau would like? Is he outside of all philosophical traditions? There is one philosophical tradition that seems to be an exception to the

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37 Rousseau, The Discourses, 42. See Rousseau, Discours sur les sciences et les arts, 46: “il leur donnait en secret des leçons d’Athéisme, et offroit solennellement des Hécatombes à Jupiter…Ciceron, qui se moquoit avec ses amis des Dieux immortels, qu’il attestoit avec tant d’emphase sur la Tribune aux harangues.”
double doctrine and with which Rousseau is frequently associated, he himself claiming an affiliation with it on many occasions: this is of course Cynicism. The figure of Diogenes the Cynic authorizes the use of a straight talk that is well removed from the prudent inner doctrine. It is significant that the article “Cynique” (1754) by Diderot, who once again draws material from Brucker, is one of the rare articles devoted to a philosophical school of thought from Antiquity that makes no allusion to the double doctrine. Unlike Pythagoreans and Platonists, Cynics shun any appearance of mystery, seeking instead “publicity”:

They displayed themselves in particular in sacred places and in public squares. Publicity was in fact the only thing that could mitigate the apparent license of their philosophy. The slightest hint of secrecy, of shame and of ignorance, would from the start have attracted to them injurious names and persecution. Complete openness spared them such trouble. How, indeed, could one imagine men would think ill of doing and saying what they do and say without any mystery?

Diderot considers the pursuit of “publicity” specific to Cynics not as proof of superior virtue but as a secondary strategy that philosophers may prefer over the double doctrine specifically because the latter can sometimes harm rather than protect them. In the article “Pythagorisme” (1765), he cites as one of the causes of the Pythagorean school’s decline “the secret that was kept

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39 “Cynique, secte de philosophes anciens,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 6:533: “Ils se montrèrent particulièrement dans les lieux sacrés & sur les places publiques. Il n’y avait en effet que la publicité qui pût pallier la licence apparente de leur philosophie. L’ombre la plus légère de secret, de honte, & de ténèbres, leur aurait attiré dès le commencement des dénominations injurieuses & de la persécution. Le grand jour les en garantit. Comment imaginer, en effet, que des hommes pensent du mal à faire & à dire ce qu’ils font & disent sans aucun mystère?”
between [his followers] and that made their opinions suspect.” Should we then consider the article “Cynique” as his reply to Rousseau’s condemnation? Diderot seems to be telling him that after all, the Cynic attitude he has adopted is itself only a philosophical strategy comparable to the double doctrine. This interpretation seems supported by a rather strange digression on Cato:

From this we see that the virtue of Antisthenes was a sad one. Which will always happen when one persists in forming for oneself an artificial character and false morals. I would like to be Cato; but I think it would cost myself and others a great deal, before I became him. The frequent sacrifices that I would be obliged to make to the sublime figure that I would have taken as a model would fill me with an acrid and caustic bile that would spill out of me at every moment. And this is perhaps the reason why some sages and certain austere pious people are so subject to bad humor. They continually feel the constraint of a role that they have imposed on themselves and for which nature has not made them; and they take out on others the torment they give themselves. But not everyone is suited to adopting Cato as a model.

Rousseau criticizes the figure of Cicero – celebrated in “Aius-Locutius” – as a paragon of philosophical hypocrisy. Diderot himself seems to reply that the sublime figure of Cato is a model that is impossible to emulate. In his article “Economie ou Œconomie” (1755), Rousseau

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40 “Pythagorisme,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 8:182: “le secret qui se gardait entre eux & qui rendit leurs sentiments suspects.”

41 “Cynique,” in Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 6:537, emphasis mine: “D’où l’on voit que la vertu d’Antisthene était chagrine. Ce qui arrivera toujours, lorsqu’on s’opiniâtrera à se former un caractère artificiel & des mœurs factices. Je voudrais bien être Caton; mais je crois qu’il m’en coûterait beaucoup à moi & aux autres, avant que je le fusse devenu. Les fréquents sacrifices que je serais obligé de faire au personnage sublime que j’aurais pris pour modèle, me rempliraient d’une bile âcre & caustique qui s’épancherait à chaque instant au-dehors. Et c’est là peut-être la raison pour laquelle quelques sages & certains dévots austères sont si sujets à la mauvaise humeur. Ils ressentent sans cesse la contrainte d’un rôle qu’ils se sont imposé, & pour lequel la nature ne les a point faits; & ils s’en prennent aux autres du tourment qu’ils se donnent à eux-mêmes. Cependant il n’appartient pas à tout le monde de se proposer Caton pour modèle.” See Jean Starobinki, Diderot, 213-19; Stéphane Pujol, Le Philosophe et l’original. Etude du Neveu de Rameau (Mont-Saint-Aignan: PURH, 2016), 98-103.
rejects this claim by contrasting citizen Cato of Utica with the paragon of the cosmopolitan philosopher, Socrates. Clearly, Diderot and Rousseau do not simply have a theoretical debate about the best way of propagating the truth: each also struggles to impose a rhetorical identity that is incompatible with that of his adversary.

Apart from these face-offs, Diderot’s position does remain ambivalent. Although Rousseau radically condemns philosophy and the inner doctrine that is supposed to always characterize it, Diderot develops a much more nuanced theory of philosophical strategy that includes an entire continuum of attitudes ranging from Pythagorean or Platonist prudence to the martyrdom for truth epitomized by the death of Socrates. The article “Pythagorisme” thus gives him an opportunity to praise philosophical courage, and with a rather surprising sleight of hand to transform Pythagoras from a model of prudence into an example of courage.

The condition of the sage is very dangerous: there is hardly a nation that is not soiled with the blood of several of those who have professed it. What should one do then? Must one be senseless among the senseless? No; but one must be wise in secret, that is safest. But if some man has shown more courage than we feel, and if he has dared to openly practice wisdom, decry prejudices and preach the truth to the peril of his life, will we blame him? No; our judgment will instantly conform to that of posterity, which always throws upon the people the ignominy with which they claimed to cover their philosopher.


43 “Pythagorisme,” in Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, 8:163: “La condition de sage est bien dangereuse: il n’y a presque pas une nation qui ne se soit souillée du sang de quelques-uns de ceux qui l’ont professée. Que faire donc? Faut-il être insensé avec les insensés? Non ; mais il faut être sage en secret, c’est le plus sûr. Cependant si quelque homme a montré plus de courage que nous ne nous en sentons, & s’il a osé pratiquer ouvertement la sagesse, décrier les préjugés, prêcher la vérité au péril de sa vie, le blâmerons-nous? Non ; nous conformerons dès cet instant notre jugement à celui de la postérité, qui rejette toujours sur les peuples l’ignominie dont ils ont prétendu couvrir leurs
In death, the philosophical martyr combines the two opposite strategies of Pythagorean prudence and Cynic straight talk. The editorial strategy employed by Diderot, who is known for his versatility – his works range from unpublished “esoteric” writing and the exoteric articles of the *Encyclopédie* to the limited-distribution texts in Grimm’s *Correspondance littéraire* – seems inspired by an in-depth reflection on the range of strategies for imparting information with which a *philosophe* is confronted.

**The tree hides the pyramid**

If Rousseau is such a threat to Diderot, if he haunts him this much, it is because he embodies the radical refusal of a new technology for imparting philosophy (in other words, an update to the double doctrine) in favor of a rhetorical strategy founded entirely on the ethos of sincere men, whether this ethos is conceived on the Cynic or Christic model. Diderot does conceive of the double doctrine in terms of *knowledge technology*, since he presents some general theoretical thoughts on a range of techniques aimed at ensuring the preeminence of the Enlightenment. This redirection of esotericism is precisely what Arthur Melzer describes as the new form of “Enlightenment esotericism” or “political esotericism” that progressively erases classical esotericism as defined by its defensive, protective and pedagogical functions.

However, Diderot’s theory of modern esotericism does not appear where we would expect it, i.e., in the *Prospectus*, but in the article “Egyptiens” (1755), in a digression about the pyramids.

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philosophes.” The first four sentences of our translation are borrowed from Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 139.


45 See Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, esp. ch. 8:235-84.
Although the tree of knowledge inspired by Chancellor Bacon is presented as a model for knowledge organization and presentation, the pyramid is what Diderot sees as the model for knowledge transmission.

At first glance, Diderot’s digression on the pyramids seems to be a random conjecture of purely anecdotal interest. Presumptuously dismissing the hypotheses of specialists in Ancient Egypt, the philosopher effectively imagines he is uncovering the secret of the pyramids, asserting that their purpose was undoubtedly conserving and passing on to future generations all the knowledge accumulated over centuries:

The rare genius able to reduce all the variety of sounds of a language to a limited number, to give them signs, to establish for himself the value of these signs, and to spread their understanding and make them familiar to others, never existed among the Egyptians in the circumstances where they would have been most useful; these peoples, therefore, harried between the disadvantages and the need to attach the memory of facts to monuments, must naturally have thought of building some that were solid enough to resist the greatest upheavals forever.

Diderot first presents the pyramid as a supplement: the Egyptians were forced to attach the “memory of facts” to monuments due to the lack of an alphabet that would have allowed them to substitute easily decipherable symbols for the hieroglyphics known only to an educated elite. But

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does a regime of censorship not also force the philosopher to seek out a supplement equivalent to transparent transmission by using the double doctrine? Diderot’s further reflection on the pyramids suggests such an interpretation:

> Everything seems to concur to support this opinion: . . . the shape of the new pyramids on which it was decided, if my conjecture is true, to fix the state of the sciences and the arts in Egypt; the pyramids’ angles, designed to show the cardinal points of the world, and which were used to this end; . . . the incredible solidity of the buildings that were made from them; their simplicity, whereby it can be seen that the only task that was set for them was to have a good deal of solidity and a large surface area; the choice of the pyramidal figure, that is, a body with an immense base that ends in a point; . . . a decided taste for useful things, which can be seen at each step one takes in Egypt . . .

Certain textual clues suggest that Diderot speaks of this not merely as a conjecture by a scholar of the Antiquities, but as a model for knowledge conservation and transmission. After all, his *Encyclopédie* also aims to “fix the state of the sciences and arts” in his country and to create a “monument” of useful knowledge – which is to say a means of recalling (*monere*) the memory of this knowledge – for posterity. Although the invention of writing, and then of the printing press, has transformed the technical context, there is still a need for a new knowledge-transmission technology that offers as much “surface area” (exhaustiveness) and “solidity” (longevity) as possible. The choice of a “body with an immense base that ends in a point” also seems to follow the natural movement of the mind, which rises from the most technical knowledge to the least

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48 Diderot, “Egyptian philosophy.” See Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, 7:124: “Tout semble concourir à fortifier cette opinion: . . . la forme des nouvelles pyramides sur lesquelles on se proposa, si ma conjecture est vraie, de fixer l’état des sciences & des arts dans l’Egypte; leurs angles propres à marquer les points cardinaux du monde & qu’on a employés à cet usage; . . . la prodigieuse solidité des édifices qu’on en a construits leur simplicité, dans laquelle on voit que la seule chose qu’on se soit propose, c’est d’avoir beaucoup de solidité & de surface; le choix de la figure pyramidaire ou d’un corps qui a une base immense & qui se termine en pointe ; . . . un goût décidé pour les choses utiles, qui se reconnaît à chaque pas qu’on fait en Egypte . . .”
tangible of abstractions. In this sense, the pyramid’s summation movement would be the
inversed reflection of the analytical order represented by the tree of knowledge. The end of the
digression focuses not on what allowed the pyramids to last for centuries, but on what made their
loss of meaning possible:

All discerning minds weighing these circumstances will have no doubt whatsoever that
the pyramids were built to be covered one day with the political, civil and religious
science of the country; . . . that the pyramids should be seen as the bibles of Egypt, whose
characters were perhaps destroyed by time and revolutions many centuries before the
invention of writing; . . . in a word, that these monuments, far from making the pride or
stupidity of this people eternal, are the testimonies of their prudence and the inestimable
price they placed on the preservation of their knowledge. And the proof that their
reasoning was not mistaken is that for countless centuries their works have resisted the
destructive action of elements they had foreseen, and that they have only been damaged
by the barbarism of men, against whom the Egyptian wise men either did not think of
taking precautions or felt it was impossible for the right ones to be taken.49

If the invention of writing inspires Diderot to look for a structure equivalent to that of a pyramid
in the Encyclopédie – metaphorically, an encyclopedia is a kind of paper pyramid, the
quintessential work whose structure covers the most surface area and has the most solidity – it

circonstances, ne doutera pas un moment que ces monuments n’aient été construits pour être couverts un jour de la
science politique, civile & religieuse de la contrée; …qu’il ne faille regarder les pyramides comme les bibles de
l’Egypte, dont les temps & les révolutions avaient peut-être détruit les caractères plusieurs siècles avant l’invention
de l’écriture; …en un mot que ces masses, loin d’éterniser l’orgueil ou la stupidité de ces peuples, sont des
monuments de leur prudence & du prix inestimable qu’ils attachaient à la conservation de leurs connaissances. Et la
preuve qu’ils ne se sont point trompés dans leur raisonnement, c’est que leur ouvrage a résisté pendant une suite
innombrable de siècles à l’action destructive des éléments qu’ils avaient prévue; & qu’il n’a été endommagé que par
la barbarie des hommes contre laquelle les sages égyptiens ou n’ont point pensé à prendre des précautions, ou ont
sentî l’impossibilité d’en prendre de bonnes.”
also leads him to contemplate the insufficiency of the Egyptian technology. The pyramids withstood the “destructive action of elements” but not that of humans. This human barbarism was twofold: it consisted of disfiguring the pyramids not only physically, with pillaging of all types, but also figuratively, since the Egyptian priests misused monuments that had become illegible due to the loss of the hieroglyphic language:

The hieroglyphic figures, depicted in stone, originally designated different natural phenomena, but when their meaning was no longer understood, in people’s minds they came to represent divinities . . . hence the bloody disputes that arose between priests when the working part of the nation was no longer in a state to supply its own needs as well as the needs of the idle part.  

Initially materialistic, the Egyptians fell prey to the priests once the monuments of ancestral knowledge bequeathed by earlier generations became temples and the philosophical language became a purely symbolic and sacred one. The double doctrine of the priests thus resembles a perversion of the pyramid technology: due to a terrible combination of ignorance and manipulation, the “hierophants” made ill use of a monument that had become illegible.

We must take a lesson, suggests Diderot, from this great Egyptian disaster. Every undertaking aimed at discovering and accumulating knowledge must anticipate and plan for conditions in which it could become illegible or disfigured in the future. Rousseau is also

50 Diderot, “Egyptian philosophy.” See Diderot, Œuvres Complètes, 7:132: “Les figures hiéroglyphiques représentées sur la pierre désignèrent dans les commencements différents phénomènes de la nature; mais elles devinrent pour le peuple des représentations de la divinité, lorsque l’intelligence en fut perdue & qu’elles n’eurent plus de sens; de là ces contestations sanglantes qui s’élèvèrent entre les prêtres, lorsque la partie laborieuse de la nation ne fut plus en état de fournir à ses propres besoins, & en même temps aux besoins de la portion oisive.”

51 See Diderot, “Egyptian philosophy.”

obsessed by the potential disfigurement of his work, but he fears the a vast conspiracy aimed at personal defamation, whereas Diderot wants to prevent the misappropriation of knowledge and ward off a future collapse of civilization. As a matter of fact, a civilization that fails to envision its own demise cuts itself off from all hope of resurrection. But the invention of writing and the printing press made this restoration of knowledge conceivable and enabled these “precautions” that the Egyptian sages had neglected or deemed impossible. The encyclopedia that Diderot wants needs to be oriented not only to posterity, but to people who have survived ignorance and barbarism:

The most glorious moment for an opus of this nature would be that which immediately follows some great revolution which has suspended the progress of the sciences, interrupted the labors of the arts, and plunged a portion of our hemisphere back into darkness. What gratitude the next generation following such troubled times would feel for the men who had feared them from afar, and taken measures against their ravages by protecting the knowledge of centuries past!53

An encyclopedia is a pyramid that has succeeded. In other words, Diderot deliberately conceives of it as a model for knowledge transmission, but a model to be improved upon. He hopes the encyclopedia will build a better sanctuary – that keeps knowledge out of the reach of barbarians –, a better monument – that conserves it for posterity more effectively (thanks to the

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reproduction made possible by printing), and a better code – the key to deciphering it being provided within it, for example with the presentation of the cross-referencing system.

**The curse of the Sphinx**

The new pyramid of knowledge that Diderot imagines is both a monumental construction project and a demolition venture aimed at “overturn[ing] an edifice of muck” and “dispel[ling] a vain pile of dust”⁵⁴ accumulated over centuries of superstition and prejudice. But it is not characterized only by this controversial tension: it is itself inhabited by inner tensions generated by the very nature of the encyclopedia project. First of all, this new knowledge-transmission technology means the end of trade secrets, the revealing of technical procedures specific to each craft, and an adaptation of the double doctrine as soon as the heights of philosophical truths are reached. In other words, if the base of the pyramid is luminous, its tip is surrounded by mist. The ideal of transparency accounts for Diderot’s railing against the “narrow minds, unkind souls, indifferent to the fate of the human race” who consider “that a well-made encyclopedia, a general history of the arts, should be nothing but a big manuscript carefully locked up in the monarch’s library, and unavailable to any eyes other than his” but who “at other times . . . will rave at the mystery shrouding Egyptian temples: they will deplore the loss of ancient knowledge . . . .”⁵⁵ The impenetrability of the pyramids is a mark of disgrace that Diderot uses against his adversaries. And at the same time, as we have seen over the course of this study, he views the

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adaptation of the double doctrine according to the pyramid model. For in Diderot’s writing, a pyramid itself has two sides, one exoteric (as a model for the non-divulgation of useful knowledge) and the other esoteric (as a model for the conservation of useful knowledge and the safeguarding of philosophical truths). Rousseau’s accusations against the *philosophes* deliberately ignore the complexity of this discursive device, simply reducing the double doctrine to a sophisticated form of duplicity. Faced with a philosophical identity made complex by the implementation of the new knowledge-transmission technology invented by Diderot, Rousseau has an easy time affirming the ethos of the sincere or authentic man, whose motto – *vitam impendere vero* – constitutes a condemnation of philosophy.56

The second tension that characterizes the encyclopedia project – at least as Diderot conceives it – derives from a desire to overcome the impenetrability of language. This is one of the main obstacles along the path to the perfect encyclopedia: “We are thus blocked in our project for transmitting knowledge, by the *impossibility of making the entire language intelligible.*”57 The goal of the encyclopedia’s editor is not only to organize information and subvert the established prejudices, but also to create a usage of the language that will perpetuate – or embalm – it for later generations. Diderot attributes the vague and obscure style that threatens the plans for a totally intelligible language not to vices of character or a decadence of taste, but to the absence of a pyramid:

> Intolerance, *the lack of the double doctrine, the defect of a hieroglyphic and sacred language*, will forever perpetuate these contradictions, and continue to blemish our finest

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productions. Often we do not know what a man has thought about the most important matters. He wraps himself in affected abstruseness; even his contemporaries do not know his sentiments; and it must not be expected that the *Encyclopédie* will be free from this defect.\(^5\)

It is because no one has yet built this new pyramid that would preserve both knowledge and its authors and promoters that enlightened scholars must write in an intentionally obscure style. Diderot’s challenge is to build a work that will play a role similar to that of the pyramids, but in the absence of a “hieroglyphic and sacred language”. The solution Diderot proposes is not to return to Latin – as the article “Aius-Locutius” might seem to suggest – but to use French as if it were a dead language:

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We will repertory indiscriminately all the expressions that our greatest poets and finest orators have used and may use. It is posterity above all which we must have in view. It is in any case an invariable standard. There is no need to shade words one has no tendency to confuse, when the language is dead.\(^5\)
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To write for posterity is to sacrifice nuance, allusion and irony in exchange for complete intelligibility. While Diderot’s remark specifically concerns the issue of synonyms and not the encyclopedia project as a whole, this pursuit of an “invariable standard” in the name of future legibility seems to characterize the entire undertaking. Once again, Rousseau’s œuvre provides an enlightening counterpoint on this subject, since he personalizes the issue of the intelligibility

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\(^5\) Diderot, “Encyclopedia,” emphasis mine. See Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, 7:258: “L’intolérance, le manque de la double doctrine, le défaut d’une langue hiéroglyphique et sacrée, perpétueront à jamais ces contradictions, & continueront de tacher nos plus belles productions. On ne sait souvent ce qu’un homme a pensé sur les matières les plus importantes. Il s’enveloppe dans des ténèbres affectées; ses contemporains mêmes ignorent ses sentiments; & l’on ne doit pas s’attendre que l’Encyclopédie soit exempte de ce défaut.”

of language. The fundamental challenge is no longer to ensure the survival of intelligible inscriptions beyond the eras of barbarism (the goal of the encyclopedic pyramid), but to fight the unintelligibility of his own words here and now. *Barbarus hic ego sum, quia non intelligor illis.*

The third tension that seems to characterize the encyclopedia project concerns the philosopher’s ethos. The immense effort that Diderot puts into crafting a new way of conveying and preserving “enlightened” knowledge comes at the expense of clarity in his rhetorical identity. The figure of the philosopher is erased not only by the encyclopedia but also more generally by a set of techniques for imparting philosophy inspired by reflection on the double doctrine. To borrow the distinction made by Max Weber, this almost exclusive attention to developing new rules for circulating and transmitting philosophical activity comes with a loss of charisma. Inversely, Rousseau considerably reinforces his ethos as an authentic man and increases his extraordinary charisma by subverting the rules of the Republic of Letters. The controversial and philosophical positions held by Diderot and Rousseau can only be understood as a pair or as mirror images of each other. It is rather remarkable that when Diderot finally decides to fight Rousseau once and for all on the battlefield of ethos, it is only after the death of his former friend and in a book – *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (1778) – that the question of the philosopher’s role is finally addressed directly, through the figure of Seneca. This final work may resemble a kind of pentimento – an artist’s overpainting – that does not affect the underlying logic of the relationship between the *philosophe* and the citizen.

Diderot and Rousseau both write for posterity, but for the former writing has a *monumental* function.

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60 “Here I am the barbarian, because those men do not understand me.” My translation. Rousseau cites (and slightly alters) this verse from Ovid’s *Tristia* in the preface to his *Dialogues*, in Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 1:657.

(inscribing useful knowledge for future generations), while for the latter its purpose is

*testamentary* (attesting to the truth for posterity via an impressive sacrifice). Unlike Rousseau, Diderot will never need to be pantheonized, since he already lies enshrined in the monument he has bequeathed us.

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