

# Philosophical Fools:

An examination of Materialism in Denis Diderot's  
*Rameau's Nephew*

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Intelligent people are often sound reasoners, and it is by reason that people reach the most refined notions. Reason is the fundamental beginning of philosophy, and this holds true from the study of ethics to that of physics. In order to defend a position that is commonly taken to be unreasonable, it is necessary for a strong reasoner to show how the opposing argument is flawed. But a person who can take a seemingly foolish position, yet still produce a reasonable defense, is likely a brilliant sophist or a lucky fool. In fact, during philosophical dialogues, readers often expect one side of an argument to be weaker or somehow flawed. One benefit that a weaker position provides to a two-sided argument is an awareness of the flaws present in a faulty argument. Of course, an investigation does not always compare only two sides, and opposing positions will not necessarily be antithetical, but antithesis can be a useful method of demonstration. Arguments unfold in antithetically opposed positions many times in Platonic dialogues: so it is a practical custom for a successful reasoner to look for the weakness in each position of a dialogue. A strong reasoner will see the potential solution amid the faultier arguments, a greater truth hidden between the falsities; a cynic will strive to see the falsities that surround what people take to be true. It is because of their polemical attitude that cynics are often seen as foolish, since any energy they expend is not likely to reach people's common sensibilities. But fools can be a device for greater learning, because they will both demonstrate the falsities they take to be true and also reveal the truth in what is usually taken to be false. This role has been fulfilled by fools in the work of writers such as Cervantes and Shakespeare, and another great example of foolish wisdom is contained in Denis Diderot's dialogue, *Rameau's Nephew*.

Diderot's fool, Rameau, is a dialectician comparable to Sancho Panza or the fool from *King Lear*; and Diderot even seems to aim at unifying these fools under a single school of thought. Namely the materialistic condition that surrounds fools—both Sancho and Rameau are good examples—and all the rest of us by Rameau's reckoning. By showing how relatable the fool's position really is, Diderot sets the stage for a startling critique of stoic philosophy, materialism, and ultimately of French society.

Jean-Philippe Rameau was a French composer in the 18th century, contemporary with Diderot, and it is this man's nephew who is the focus of the dialogue. Rameau's nephew is a man who lives according to opportunity and often on the street. He warms himself at another's fire, and only finds himself feasting when at another's table. He is a professional leech, someone who prefers to seek wealth through the wealth of others. For readers to understand his social position and how he came to take it up is somewhat difficult, for it is a curious matter that someone completely able-bodied might choose to live only on the charity of others. Diderot explains Rameau's scam, "Somehow or other he had wormed his way into several good homes, where there was always a place laid for him, but on condition that he did not speak unless permission had been given"(Diderot 35). It is just as unreasonable for someone to live on charity alone as it is strange to see someone commit to indolence as if it were a philosophy. From the beginning, Rameau is painted as a sort of odd fellow who is certainly undeserving of either wealth or renown. His life in Paris is full of ups and downs, "Today, in dirty linen and ragged breeches, tattered and almost barefoot...Tomorrow, powdered, well shod, hair curled, beautifully turned out..."(34), so he both runs the risk

of poverty and gains a chance at wealth, but the wheel of fortune is always spinning.

Rameau is nonetheless willing to spin that wheel all for the chance at success, which for him is rooted almost entirely in the physical comforts and pleasures that come with wealth.

This text is a dialogue between Diderot and Rameau. Diderot inserts himself as an interlocutor, and he plays the straight man to Rameau's foolish behavior. Denis Diderot was an encyclopedist by trait, and philosopher by nature. He writes himself into this dialogue to represent the philosophical community, so he feels the desire to demonstrate to Rameau that a debauched lifestyle will only lead to further misery and abjection. Diderot is both the author of and a participant in this dialogue so that he can play the part of the sound reasoner at odds against a fool. Diderot can even effectively satirize himself among others by adding himself to the dialogue, and what his part as an interlocutor comes to represent is the virtue of moderation. Readers might expect Diderot's perspective to win out in the end, but in this dialogue it is never clear who reasons properly and who is merely speaking the most palatable truths. Only by examining their exchange of ideas can a person begin to take a side in this argument.

An example of an ambiguous end to an argument is seen early on during their discussion of truth and lies. Diderot wants to show Rameau that lies are not as useful as truth in the long run, while Rameau upholds that lying is always helpful to oneself. Diderot responds that, "...although a lie may be useful for a moment it is necessarily harmful in the long run...in the long run truth necessarily does good even though it may be harmful at the moment...Who is disgraced today, Socrates or the judge who made

him drink the hemlock?"(39). Rameau scoffs, "And a fat lot of good it has done him! Was he condemned and put to death any the less for that? Was he any less a seditious citizen? Because he despised a bad law did that do anything to prevent his encouraging fools to despise a good one?"(39).

In this short exchange lives the core of their conflict, for Rameau's uncompromising materialism is something that is difficult to reason around. What makes Rameau a materialist is his doubt in the benefit of virtue, which causes him to latch onto material pleasures for satisfaction. Rameau is critical of the starting premises which make Socrates' death seem noble: one being that the law should always be upheld, another that ultimate satisfaction lies in the pursuit of wisdom. Satisfaction from education is something that is taken for granted more easily in Plato's investigation of pleasure than Rameau can be comfortable with. A belief in a higher satisfaction found in learning is a vital aspect of Stoic philosophy. The Stoics arose out of an investigative era in Greek philosophy that was enraptured with virtue and fulfillment. Stoicism presents a type of virtue that is improved through equal temperament and the denial of pleasures. Stoics might defend Socrates' decision by arguing the validity of the noble virtues he enjoyed and which caused him to submit himself to the law. Rameau cannot accept that Socrates is vindicated in death thanks to some eternal sense of justice, because he is certain that a person's satisfaction in life has nothing to do with their vindication after death. Rameau likely thinks, as many people who have read the *Apology* at one point might, that Socrates could have easily lied to the council which sentenced him to death, and, by doing so, protected himself and his followers with no

real consequence to the state. Only after considering Socrates' speech carefully might a person believe that Socrates was the more just for following a law, despite it being a bad one, and that he could rejoice in the face of Justice even while the Athenian council led him to his demise. Rameau does not take seriously the idea that Socrates somehow benefited from the pride that forced him to speak truthfully. Even despite the fact that Socrates did speak the truth, the council of judges did not see him as any less guilty because of it. So Rameau has successfully rehashed an old debate that is centered around a concern much larger than the difference between right and wrong. It is not surprising that Rameau considers vice quite palatable, but it seems rather bold that he should also entirely doubt the benefits of virtue. It is skepticism that forces Rameau to question the purpose of virtue, and it is chiefly the purpose of virtue that is at stake in this dialogue. Rameau is bold from the beginning: he will not even allow Socrates a noble death! Evidently materialists do not consider the time after death as important to their own lives, and they have no initiative past their own experiences on earth.

The same issue is at hand in their discussion of literature, concerning the benefit of the authors who produce it. The general argument that surrounds this discussion is about whether it is better to gain success during one's life or to gain fame by merit after one's death. The subject of their discussion is Racine, whom Rameau reminds us was cantankerous and unpleasant to people in his personal life. Rameau argues that Racine should have dropped his art in favor of a more profitable venture and a more affable disposition; Diderot, of course, denies this. Diderot says, "Which would you prefer: that he had been a worthy person...a good husband, good father...but nothing more; or that

he had been a rogue, a traitor...but the creator of *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*, *Athalie*?", to which Rameau responds:

...all those fine things he created didn't bring him in as much as twenty thousand francs, whereas if he had been a worthy silk merchant...a wholesale grocer or an apothecary...he would have amassed a huge fortune and while doing so would have enjoyed every possible kind of pleasure. From time to time he would have given a coin to some poor devil of a clown like me for making him laugh...The man has only been any good to people he didn't know and after his death.(40-41)

This quote reinforces his materialistic philosophy and shows that, while Rameau can recognize the merit of these works, he will only strive to create pleasure and esteem for the time that he lives a mortal life. The point Rameau raises is legitimate nonetheless, and it is clearly a dividing issue between Diderot and Rameau as to whether people can find as much value in their character or virtue as they can in their financial worth or social privileges. Diderot's response to Rameau is this:

...just weigh the bad against the good. A thousand years from now he will still draw tears, still be the admiration of men in all countries of the world...He hurt a few individuals who are dead and gone and in whom we take little or no interest, but we have nothing to fear from his misdeeds or failings...He is a tree which has stunted some others growing nearby and smothered plants growing at its feet, but it has raised its head to the heavens and its branches have spread far and wide...If you make Voltaire less sensitive to criticism he will no longer be able to probe down into the soul of Merope, and will cease to touch your heart. (41-42)

Diderot's response is a classic "greater good" type rebuttal, one that suggests that the ends which affect many people positively justify the means which burden certain individuals. This is an unexpectedly impersonal answer, one that almost fails to appeal to the reader's sensibilities. It is true that people have benefitted from the writings of Racine and Voltaire despite, as our interlocutors claim, their pitiable existences. But this does not truly take Racine's and Voltaire's personal satisfaction into account, and the

way personal satisfaction is brushed off so lightly seems hasty. This is an example of Diderot's role in the dialogue serving as a sort of satirical device and, because of his ineffective argument, making readers more likely to scrutinize his philosophical perspective. If philosophers can use the utility of virtue to demonstrate its value, then Rameau is here actively trying to do the same with vice. Behind this there also seems a more elaborate contrast, one rooted in the difference between cynicism and stoicism, which can provide a reasonable template to this dialogue given a strong enough fool who gets the point across.

The operative allusion to cynicism comes about from Diderot's mocking remark that Rameau was mistaken for shaving his beard, and that he looks only a beard shy of being a sage. Rameau affably agrees that he is handsome, while Diderot jokes further that Rameau's bust should look fitting, "Side by side with Caesar, Marcus Aurelius or Socrates." (37) Rameau disagrees, "No, I should look better between Diogenes and Phryne. I am as impudent as the one and I am fond of consorting with the others." (37) Phryne was a well known courtesan in Greece, nearly contemporary with Diogenes, so Rameau uses these allusions to proclaim both his love of the flesh and of captious debate. Rameau's joke about Diogenes seems plainly to poke fun at Diogenes' ascetic temperament by associating it with his own foolish skepticism. But this ironic contrast between Rameau, a fool, and Diogenes of Sinope, the man who fulfilled cynicism to its greatest extent, is likely more apt than he himself realized. Cynics were traditionally extreme fundamentalist philosophers who practiced ascetic disciplines such as poverty and fasting. Diogenes, the most renowned cynic in history, even criticised Plato for both

misinterpreting Socrates' teachings and not practicing his moderation rigorously enough. Rameau is akin to Diogenes in his impudence, and his cynicism, but mostly they share a common poverty that seems to twist their characters and make them into fools.

Diogenes would have scorned Rameau for so actively chasing pleasure and comfort, but Rameau might even admire Diogenes in a certain way because of his rugged and peculiar mastery of crippling poverty. Rameau might have admired Diogenes' for his cynical feats, including admonishment of corrupt officials at the Agora, public masturbation, and living in a bath tub or barrel. Diogenes acted in a way normally taken to be outlandish in an attempt to naturalize and improve himself, to cast off the comforts that society provides. There is a story about Diogenes, that he, upon watching a child bring water to its mouth with its hand, discarded his own clay cup—one of his last possessions—in the realisation that he could go without it. Stories like this can inspire the greatest kind of admiration, but Rameau highly doubts the satisfaction that Diogenes supposedly attained. The great divide between Rameau and Diogenes is that Rameau cannot admire Diogenes' eagerness about his poverty, because Rameau has built his world upon the satisfaction of pleasures. Rameau makes his impression of philosophy clear in a description of his harsh uncle, Jean-Philippe. He says that, "He is a philosopher in his way. He thinks of nothing but himself, and the rest of the universe is not worth a pin to him...He's quite happy"(37), which is not a positive review of philosophers in general. From what Rameau has observed, a person needs only a bit of wealth and some sort of self-satisfaction to be happy. This begs readers to consider the

difference between philosophers who actively seek satisfaction through virtue and those who seek for it in rigorous study. The virtue of modesty, and the practice of ascetic moderation, is at risk of criticism in their discussion. Many philosophers note Diogenes as an example of ascetic vigor— sometimes associated with monastic values— but they themselves do not adhere to the assiduous poverty that Diogenes kept. Even among Stoics, Diogenes is an extreme example of asceticism. Because of the intensity of such a practice, it is rare to see philosophers who are willing to devote themselves to the virtue of poverty.

This difference in commitment is the beginning of moderation as a workable philosophy, because people both do not want to go without food, and, to a certain extent, cannot go without food. Acknowledging that people have basic needs is a foot in the door that leads to necessity of comfort and then of leisure. Cynical asceticism is the prerogative that ceases this development at its origin: by eliminating any trace of desire or wealth the cynics hope to rid themselves of unhealthy habits that lead to suffering. These cynics share the opinion of Rameau that people are motivated by selfish pleasures, and so they aim to improve their condition by actively engaging their sense of virtue every day. Rameau shows the same commitment, but it is pleasure rather than virtue which he is actively seeking from day to day. Rameau is just as cynical as Diogenes, perhaps even more so, but it is his added perspective as a materialist that makes him commit to hedonism rather than asceticism. This is perhaps the greatest irony in the comparison between Diogenes and Rameau— they are both brazenly engaged with their pursuit of satisfaction but on opposite ends of the spectrum.

Diogenes is a device that brings the entire dialogue together, and presents the reader with a basic philosophical conflict: is it going too far to live in a barrel to pursue satisfaction, and if so, how must a person moderate himself or herself so that they are not consumed by the little pleasures they do allow? Diderot uses the fool as a device to play with, for it is Rameau's life of license that Diderot examines and scrutinizes in the dialogue.

Starting with Rameau's source of income, Diderot exposes the method behind Rameau's indolent lifestyle. Rameau provides for himself in a variety of ignoble means, but quite commonly he calls upon his musical talents to reap an occasional wage. Most likely his talents arose from his childhood proximity to his uncle, and he was perhaps guided by the Senior Rameau's talents, and his familiarity with contemporary pieces which enlivened the symphonies he grew up around. Rameau uses this to his advantage to secure occasional work as a music tutor, someone who gives accompaniment lessons on the piano. As Rameau himself explains, it takes little effort to show up at someone's home and give a few pointers on technique. And there are many indecent tricks that go along with a job as a music tutor, such as misrepresenting one's own worth or acclaim. Rameau explains the importance of tips like seeming busier than one actually is:

They are customary in my profession. There is nothing degrading in doing the same as everybody else. I didn't invent them, and I should be peculiar and incompetent if I didn't conform. Of course I well know that if you start applying certain general principles of the sort of morality they all preach and nobody practices, it will work out that white is black and black white. But, Mr Philosopher, there is such a thing as a standard conscience just as there is a standard grammar, and then exceptions in every language...(61)

While Rameau admits that he is dishonest with his clients, he asserts that this type of dishonesty is customary in his line of work. If he did not act spuriously then he would not even be allowed the opportunity to attempt a lesson with a pupil, whether conducted honestly or not. His reputation as a teacher depends on his efficiency as a liar, and so his income is reliant on these exceptions to standard conscience, these idioms.

Rameau exposes the common conduct of successful professionals, but he does not set himself apart from them whatsoever. In fact, he depends on this common breach of morality in order to justify his remorseless behavior to Diderot. To be fair, it does provide reasonable justification: hearing about the idioms that surround all of us.

Rameau claims:

...merchant, banker, artisan, singing-master, dancing-master are all perfectly honest people, although their behavior departs from the accepted code in several respects and is full of moral idioms. The longer things have been established the more the idioms; the harder times get, the more the idioms increase. The job is worth what the man is worth, and in the end vice-versa, the man is worth what the job is. So we make the job worth as much as we can. (62)

The term moral idiom is amusing because it implies that there is a standard morality, but that this standard is broken or skewed so often that some exceptions to the norm have become a part of moral conscience. Rameau argues that the will to survive prompts a person to act dishonestly in his or her line of work, especially when the grounds for that dishonesty have already been set by custom. It is up to the reader to find truth within Rameau's position, since a lot of his behavior he claims to have picked up from society. It is not unimportant where he learned this behavior from, because every person has to deal with societal expectations and conform to them when necessary. To be successful, a clever person will pick up on the indecencies that allow even mediocre individuals to

put food on the table. If it came down to a decision of virtue versus subsistence, most people would be willing to compromise on their morals in order to live. The harder it becomes to earn an honest living, the more often examples arise of people living by any means necessary. Rameau openly admits that he is frustrated at his failure, especially because of his uncle's success in the musical field. Rameau says, "I have been and still am angry at being mediocre..."(87). He was talented enough to pick up the skill to play piano, but was not brilliant enough to be a striking success. Just because Rameau's life has not unfolded so swimmingly does not mean that his will to live is less vigorous. It is because of his fear of brutal starvation that his full intelligence goes into finding customs which he can manipulate towards his material prosperity. Lucky for him, Rameau finds idioms everywhere in society:

...one common idiom is to get as many customers as possible, and one common stupidity is to believe that the person with the most is the most competent. These are two exceptions to the general code which one must bow to. It is a kind of credit system— no intrinsic value, but the value conferred by public opinion. It has been said that a good name is worth more than a belt of gold. Now the man with the good name has no belt of gold, but I notice that nowadays the one with the belt of gold seldom lacks the good name. So far as possible we must try to have both, and that is my object when I advertise my worth with what you style nasty tricks and shameful little deceptions. I give my lesson and I do it well—that is the general rule. I let it be known that I have more lessons to give than there are hours in the day—that is the idiom.(62)

Rameau provides a clear example of moral idiom within this passage, and what he says is reminiscent of modern business on an industrial scale. People who connive to become inordinately more successful than they might deserve, based on the service they provide, are not at all rare in a professional setting. The paradox he offers about the relationship between wealth and renown is humorous and disarming, but it is also eerily familiar in light of modern American politics. Politics, as well as business all

across the globe, is affected by deviations from the general moral code. Rameau claims that if he exaggerates his ability and reputation, his wealth and fame will accumulate quicker and to a greater degree. Suddenly this dialogue seems to have shifted gears because, instead of simply scrutinizing an individual layabout, the readers are forced to consider the societal influences on Rameau and perhaps even on ourselves. Upon this consideration, it would be short sighted to simply brush Rameau's thoughts about society aside and label them mere complaints.

As the dialogue opens, Rameau happens to be in one of his impoverished low points. He had secured a position in a wealthy household, a position that seemed to him, "...without its being of any real consequence, for I am a person who isn't of consequence."(46) He could have remained if it were not for his misconduct, he erred in his foolishness and momentarily was not foolish enough. His story of his recent unemployment is highly enlightening about the psyche of the families which bring him in. He berates himself:

Rameau, Rameau, did they take you on for that? The stupidity of having shown a bit of taste, intelligence and reason! Rameau, old man, this will teach you to remain what God made you and what your patrons expected you to be. And so they seized you by the scruff of the neck, showed you to the door, and said: 'Be off with you, and don't show your face here again — the fellow has pretensions to sense and reason, it seems! Clear off! We've got those qualities ourselves, anyhow'. (47)

What these patrons want from Rameau is not a reasonable peer, but more likely a goofy subordinate they can condescend to. They take him in not out of pious responsibility, but out of a satisfaction in his obsequience. He occupies the fairly outdated role of jester to wealthy patrons and their social circles. In fact, it seems that he will do anything from giving piano lessons to playing romantic matchmaker for those who can afford it. He

says there is a terrible aspect to his debauchery, "...the self-contempt; that is unbearable"(49), but only because he does not have the skill to earn a fortune, and it kills him to see others just as slimy as he succeed where he fails. Rameau remorsefully reflects:

A thousand silly little wits with no talent or merit, a thousand little creatures devoid of charm, a thousand dull wire-pullers are well dressed and you go naked! How can you be such a fool? Couldn't you flatter as well as the next man? Couldn't you manage to lie, swear, perjure, promise, fulfil or back out like anybody else? Couldn't you go on all fours like anybody else? Couldn't you aid and abet Madame's intrigue and deliver Monsieur's love-letters like anybody else? (49)

The life that Rameau describes, or at least the talents he associates with, paint a miserable picture of a person's life. He has taken to any sort of degrading taskwork that might deliver him from poverty. There are certain moral norms that people are well aware of, but that are not adhered to assiduously; when someone takes advantage of human honesty and trust, there are plenty of opportunities for material gains. Readers might feel like the majority of the work Rameau is willing to do is accompanied by an unpleasant odor—but these are talents that he is afraid to neglect, since he so commonly finds others trying, and succeeding, to make the most of their sordid talents. It is for this reason that he strives to be the slimiest weasel, and the most deplorable person he can be. Rameau says, "You spit on a petty thief, but you can't withhold a sort of respect from a great criminal."(93) That type of character is what Rameau associates with the material success that he chases, so he does his best to pantomime the actions of great weasels who came before him. He really turns pantomiming into an art of his own liking.

Understanding the details of Rameau's schemes allows the readers to understand this societal operation as a whole. Rameau reveals that his particular skills, the ones which he hopes to share with certain respected elites, are mainly pandering and pantomiming. Rameau argues that the disparity between the wealthy and impoverished creates a behavior in people who go hungry that is not easily shaken off by pride. He says, "The worst thing is the subservient posture in which you are kept by need. The necessitous man doesn't walk like anybody else, he jumps, crawls, twists himself up, creeps along. He spends his life taking up positions and carrying them out"(120). Rameau is saying that persons in need, in his experience, will do anything to provide themselves with sustenance and meager pleasures. Those who share Rameau's professional calling adroitly understand that pride is the first quality to leave a person, if that person wishes to make the most out of their subservience. Rameau says about himself, "I am of the earth, earthy. I look about me and take up positions or find fun in watching the positions taken up by others. I am an excellent mimic...That is my act, about the same as that of flatterers, courtiers, flunkeys and beggars."(121) Rameau is honest to a fault, but his candor makes him humorous. His style brings the readers in, grabs their attention, and makes them fully consider what he says so to not miss out on the full effect of his jokes. Much of what Rameau says could be waved off as specious reasoning, but many times in this dialogue the punchline of Rameau's jokes is their surprising accuracy. After hearing Rameau's measurement of society at large, Diderot—as an interlocutor—considers the truth in this judgement. Diderot meditates on what Rameau has said, and then responds to Rameau:

Then, smiling as he did so, he began impersonating the admiring man, the supplicating man, the complaisant man...He is attentive to everything, picks up what has been dropped, adjusts a pillow or puts a stool under someone's feet...This man's antics, like the tales of Abbé Galiani and the extravaganzas of Rabelais, have sometimes given me furiously to think. They are three storehouses which have provided me with the absurd masks which I fit on to the faces of the most pompous individuals, and I can see a pantaloon in a prelate, a satyr in a judge, a porker in a monk, an ostrich in a minister of the crown and a goose in his first secretary.

'But by your reckoning there are lots of beggars in this world, and I can't think of anybody who doesn't know a few steps of your dance.'(121)

The three storehouses are Rabelais, the Abbé Galiani, and Rameau; and Diderot himself recognizes roles from the ridiculous tales these three tell in people whom he experiences in reality. To see a porker in a monk and an ostrich in a minister of the crown does not give high regard to the powers that supposedly shape societal virtues and duties. The very fact that Diderot—as the author—does not scrutinize Rameau's impression of society is reason enough to consider giving Rameau a chance to enlighten us as readers. The more careful the consideration of society becomes, the more the moral idioms reveal themselves. It seems lowly and abject to live a life slithering around on one's belly, but Rameau asserts that this is exactly the station many people have taken out of necessity. This arises perhaps out of a lack of any other option or, as in Rameau's case, due to the materialistic condition which makes him subservient to pleasures.

Rameau's analysis of service roles encompasses much more than fools and tutors; in fact, every position in a city seems to conform to occasional moral idioms. Diderot helps the reader to explore the materialistic condition a bit further when he says that nobody is exempt from this pantomime dance. When Rameau says that only the sovereign walks upright without taking up positions, Diderot disagrees. Diderot says:

The sovereign?...Do you think he doesn't find himself from time to time in the vicinity of a dainty foot, a little lock of hair, a little nose that makes him put on a bit of an act? Whoever needs somebody else is necessitous and so takes up a position. The king takes up a position with his mistress and with God; he performs his pantomime step. The minister executes the movements of courtier, flatterer, flunkey or beggar in front of his king...Good heavens, what you call the beggars' pantomime is what makes the whole world go round.(122)

The idiom goes even further than Rameau had considered. Diderot here proposes a behavior, a condition, that encompasses every person who means to receive something from someone else. This is exactly the type of behavior that Rameau emulates, and in his quest for success he means to fit into the positions of those in the upper echelon. His behavior already reflects those who have the wealth to enjoy leisure, he just lacks the wealth to afford such leisure. Rameau says:

...you don't know who it is you are up against; you seem unaware of the fact that at this moment I represent the most important part of town and Court. The opulent people we see in all walks of life may have admitted to themselves the very things I have been confiding in you, or they may not. But the fact remains that the life I should live in their place is identical with theirs.(64)

This is a direct accusation, in effect, of the wealthy elites of Paris. Of course Rameau does not mean to scorn the wealthy, because in fact he wants to share their tables, but he does make an example of them. Rameau feels that these people have set the standard behavior for those who possess wealth. He is tempted by the luxuries that wealth can afford; Rameau is aware of the lavish pleasures in high society and, because of his passion for materialistic pleasure, he cannot help but desire the pinnacle of base satisfactions. The one who truly scorns these wealthy hedonists is Diderot; the author is making sure the readers see that the Parisian aristocracy is not exempt from his judgement. Actually, they have become the focus of his judgement while Rameau is simply the model of their foibles, the extreme example. The effect generated by this

dialogue is much more pointed when considered as a critique of high society, but the content is still pertinent to any person who recognizes the conflict of vice and virtue within himself or herself. It is exactly this conflict which is left open to explore, because neither Rameau nor Diderot is convinced that the other has got his head on straight.

The final sequence of their discussion concerning the pantomime dance turns the attention away from the blamed elites, and focuses on the behavior of philosophers. While Diderot has admitted that moral idioms and pantomiming play a central role in society, he feels that there are philosophers who are the exception to this condition. Diderot responds to Rameau, "...there is one person free to do without pantomime, and that is the philosopher who has nothing and asks for nothing"(122), and Rameau immediately rebutes, "Where does that animal exist? If he has nothing he suffers. If he asks for nothing he won't get anything, and he will go on suffering."(122) Diderot intends to show that one's vices and virtues are contingent on one's desires. Rameau, sensing this oncoming argument, prepares to argue that no person is free from material desires or the suffering that results from unfulfilled pleasures. To help his own argument, Diderot provides Diogenes who, "...laughed at his needs,"(122) as an example of the ascetic temperament. Their exchange about Diogenes does not affect either man:

Rameau: ...Your Diogenes could not have had very recalcitrant organs with that austere diet of his.

Diderot: You are wrong there. The Cynic's habit was the same as a monk's and with the same virtue. The Cynics were the Carmelites and Cordeliers of Athens.

R: I get your meaning. So Diogenes danced the pantomime too, if not before Pericles then at any rate in front of Lais or Phryne.

D: You are wrong there too. Others paid a great deal of money to the courtesan who gave herself to him just for the pleasure.

R: But supposing the courtesan was busy and he was in a hurry?

D: He went back into his barrel and managed without.

R: And you advise me to do the same?

D: I'll be hanged if that wouldn't be better than crawling, cringing and prostituting myself.

R: But I must have a good bed, good food, warm clothes in the winter and cool ones in summer, leisure, money and lots of others things, and I would rather owe them to charity than have to work for them.

D: Then you are an idler, greedy, cowardly and with a soul of dirt.

R: I believe I've already told you that already. (122)

Diderot goes far enough to compare Diogenes' cynicism to the virtue of a monk, and he shows no sympathy for Rameau's skepticism on the subject. Diderot's rhetoric as an interlocutor speaks towards his admiration of cynicism, particularly the ascetic commitment to poverty. Rameau is certainly a cynic, and he often dabbles in poverty, but Diderot cannot respect Rameau's comic discipline. He treats Rameau sternly and without much compassion, which is another example of Diderot failing—as an interlocutor—to appeal to human sensibilities. Diderot uses Diogenes to show that it is not impossible for humans to chase satisfaction through the virtue of poverty, but a single example does not make a strong case. Rameau maintains his position and, while his stark honesty is utterly unsettling, modern readers should not have to struggle to understand his indolence. The fool's candor is so engaging because it delivers his position in a credible way, and makes him startlingly relatable. Every person can understand the feelings that prompt laziness, and every person has the same natural needs which lead to desires for pleasure. If Rameau represents human desires, then Diderot, in this dialogue, represents the virtue of reason that reminds humans about the danger of unrestrained desires. The issue with arguing this side against Rameau is that the only dangers Rameau will acknowledge are his potential lack of success and the certainty that he is a scoundrel. While Rameau openly accepts the moral implications of his behavior, it does not affect his position on the matter. It is clear that labels such as

'greedy' and 'cowardly' mean little to nothing in Rameau's eyes, and he even seems comfortable shouldering these accusations. If it is true that Rameau's vices and skewed sense of ethics are reflected in the human behavior he observes and reads about in literature, then it should not come as a surprise that he finds his position tenable. For that matter, the readers might also find Rameau's position tenable because it is a common thing to see people absorbed in their desires. All that Rameau has to do to survive this contempt is recognize himself as a scoundrel, which is a human reflection that is neither uncommon nor very hard to cope with. Exploring Rameau's potential lack of success is a different matter, yet likely a more rhetorically successful argument. Rameau responds to this approach inductively, and includes both his own opportunities and the previous successes of others to defend his plan for satisfaction. Plenty of people live their whole lives as scoundrels, and many of those people enjoy the type of success that Rameau pines for.

It is not only Rameau's persistence that makes him a good example, but also his tact, which has been refined by the importance he places on success. Much like a student of the Liberal Arts, Rameau's viciousness has been refined and improved by the works of literature he enjoys. Reading Molière prompts him to retain only those parts which appeal to him, and so he retains those parts that include lying, swindling, pantomiming, and uses them to refine his own act. Rameau elaborates on this:

When I read *Tartuffe* I tell myself: 'Be a hypocrite, by all means, but don't talk like a hypocrite. Keep the vices that come in useful to you, but don't have the tone or the appearance, which would expose you to ridicule.' Now in order to avoid this tone and appearance you must know what they are, and these authors have done excellent portraits of them. I am myself, and I remain myself, but I act and speak as occasion requires...And don't imagine that I am the only one who reads in this way. My only merit in the matter is

that I have done systematically, with an accurate mind and true aim in view, what most others have done by instinct.(82-83)

The more Rameau reflects on his indecencies, the more familiar his actions sound to self-conscious readers. People who read novels and watch movies are likely aware of the literary tropes and character insights that influence their own ideologies. Rameau champions the scoundrel and lauds the vices that keep his feet warm; and he is well aware of the appearances that either help or harm someone who acts disingenuously. It takes a special kind of person to be so self-aware as to form moral contracts with himself, but only out of concern for his effectiveness as a swindler. Rameau aims to perfect his art, and the best examples of moral dilemmas and indecent actions are often found in literature. It is evident that there are plenty of examples of materialistic and foolish behavior in works of popular writers, but the reason they include such examples is perhaps questionable. Some might say, Rameau included, that examples of foolishness are hilarious and exciting, and that they support a text by adding flavors from real life that are not so dreary and unimportant to those who think with their stomachs. Diderot might argue that characters like Tartuffe are a warning to both well and maliciously intentioned people, created to drive considerate readers away from vice and to inform them so that no person becomes foolish enough to get swindled. But nonetheless people will continue to be fooled, and an even greater amount of individuals will commit themselves to foolishness. All that Rameau aspires to take away from examples of foolishness is a stronger ability to provide for himself without being exposed. While he considers his behavior a result of natural impulses, Rameau is well

aware of a mindset in society—one he considers hypocritical—that scorns those who follow their baser inclinations.

The reason that Rameau must be adamant about the strength of natural desires is because his desires are the driving force in his life. He believes that the pleasures he chases are the only sure comforts on earth, and also that it is unhuman for a person to find satisfaction in the cardinal virtues alone. So whenever Diderot presents the antithesis to Rameau's pleasure seeking, and calls virtue the true path to fulfillment, Rameau cannot help but react skeptically. Rameau stands up to Diderot's virtuous persecution:

...you think that happiness is the same for all. What a strange illusion! Your brand presupposes a certain romantic turn of mind that we don't all possess, an unusual type of soul, a peculiar taste. You dignify this oddity with the name of virtue and you call it philosophy. But are virtue and philosophy made for everybody? Some can acquire them, some can keep them. Imagine the universe good and philosophical, and admit that it would be devilishly dull. (64-65)

Dullness is not necessarily a good argument for discarding virtue, but clearly dullness is a considerable factor of the ascetic lifestyle which makes it unappealing. Rameau raises another fundamental doubt about the practicality of virtue, one that is difficult to address with a short response. Diderot could argue that Rameau has not given enough consideration to a life of virtue, but then Rameau would only respond with more examples that lend strength to his skepticism. The best course Diderot can take is to make Rameau admit the flaws in his schemes, and to try to convince him that a person controlled by his own desires is limiting himself. This is where Diderot hits a dead end, and cynicism is the reason that there can be no resolution to their quarrel. Diderot and Rameau live in different worlds, or at least they accept different realities, and the chief

argument Rameau makes that separates their existences is one about human nature. This impasse should be as frustrating to the readers as it is to Diderot, and indeed it is out of frustration with certain people that Diderot was prompted to conceive this dialogue. This is a conflict between not only Diderot and society, but between each individual and his or her dark horse, their driving force. Rameau compares a cultivation of virtues within himself to an unnatural torture:

...it would be strange indeed for me to torture myself like a soul in hell so as to mutilate myself into something quite different from what I am. I should give myself a character quite foreign to me and qualities most praiseworthy (I grant you that, so as to have no argument), but which would cost a lot to acquire and land me nowhere, or worse from nowhere, because I should be continually satirizing the rich from whom poor devils like me have to make a living. People laud virtue, but they hate and avoid it, for it freezes you to death, and in this world you have to keep your feet warm.(68-69)

Rameau's doubts about the benefit of virtue shows that he is not only affected by his cynical view on human nature, but also by his pessimistic attitude towards his opportunity. Rameau can be called a cynic because he truly believes that humans are only motivated by their desires for pleasure. He believes the same about himself, and is compelled to follow any means necessary towards achieving those pleasures.

Accepting this contract, however, consequently limits him to positions in life dictated by the material costs of pleasure. Since the material costs of pleasure are a pressing issue to someone who works merely off easy opportunity, Rameau's options are decided by his skills. In this case, opportunity has afforded him a life as a jester, taking up positions for the chance to share someone's table.

It is easy to criticize Rameau's choices and blame his laziness for all the suffering he complains about. Indeed it is so easy, it should be shocking for readers to

consider that Rameau could at all represent a prevalent attitude in society and, perhaps, even the indolence and desire in every person. Rameau is the ultimate example, and he is a satire of certain men Diderot knew who pandered to higher powers to achieve their ends. But Rameau is also important as a demonstrative warning to everybody about moralising the utility of vice. Readers should be able to relate to the pantomime, to taking up positions under necessity, because most people can empathize with the transaction of respect for compensation. When a person bows to a superior power, especially a superiority dictated by opportunity, they sacrifice a portion of the respect they are due as an individual. Rameau has become comfortable enough to joke about his servitude, but what he reveals about these servile positions conveys a lack of respect on the part of his hosts. Rameau explains that:

...when you are miserable yourself you make others miserable too. That's not my idea, nor that of my patrons: I have to be gay, adaptable, agreeable, amusing, odd. Virtue commands respect, and respect is a liability. Virtue commands admiration, and admiration is not funny. I have to deal with people who are bored, and I have to make them laugh. Now what makes people laugh is ridiculousness and silliness, so I have to be ridiculous and silly, and if nature had not made me like that it would be simplest to appear so.(69)

Rameau is due the same rights as any other man, but he has forfeited equal respect. He takes up positions by his own choice, and he is aware that this choice makes him as big a fool in his host's eyes as he pretends to be for their entertainment. It is by lowering himself that he serves his purpose as jester, which reveals that the cruelest aspect of such employment is the satisfaction of the employer. This satisfaction is created by material privilege, and maintained by the illusion of virtue. As Rameau points out, there is no use for respectable qualities in a jester, and his patrons would rather that he be amusing and odd than dull and virtuous. So Rameau must work tirelessly to maintain

the illusion that his intelligence and honor are beneath those who feed him so that they do not grow bored of him or take insult at his presence. As much as he takes seriously the idea of starvation, Rameau is unrelentingly weary of the dangers that virtue presents. In order not to give himself away, not to lose out on the compensation he could be gathering, he must commit fully to the industry of foolishness. Rameau explains the life of a sycophant:

...for each single time when you must avoid being ridiculous there are a hundred when you have to be. With the great of this world there is no better part to play than jester...Supposing virtue had been the road to fortune, either I should have been virtuous or I should have simulated virtue as well as the next man. But people wanted me to be ridiculous, and so I have made myself that way; as to the viciousness, nature saw to that unaided. When I say vicious, it is by way of speaking your language, for if we came to a clear understanding it might turn out that what you call vice I call virtue, and that what I call vice you call virtue.(83-84)

In this passage Rameau mentions that he could have taken up a virtuous position, but that it was not a lucrative position to uphold. Vice and virtue are being treated by Rameau as means to an end, and in his eyes the only desirable end is material comfort. Using his musical talents to make beautiful and respected pieces serves the same purpose as performing his role as a jester for the rich. As long as he feels successful—and for him success is a material achievement—the means to that success are negligible. Rameau surely appears removed from reality because of his absurd actions and shocking candor, but this pleasure-fueled delusion of achievement is something visible in reality. In fact, it seems like this romantic idea of material success is something that still has its hands all over global business and politics. It even has its hands all over our children, our very own suburbs are enraptured by it! Stern ascetic virtues are not the way to get through to Rameau or to any who share his sentiment.

With this in mind, the author uses satire to effectively demonstrate a need to soften the philosophical perspective in order to be more rhetorically palatable.

If it were easy for Diderot to convince Rameau that poverty is as fulfilling as Diogenes felt it to be, then we would all have discarded our own clay cups long ago. Ascetic poverty is a common fantasy, especially in the romantic novels that fill people with the loftiest ideas. But these fantasies of poverty are capricious, people discard them once they grow tedious and boring. So, alas, there remains a disparity in society, and a general lack of concern masked by the most incredible pleasures available. This general attitude about the comforts of wealth, and all the idioms contained in it, has instilled in Rameau a discontent with little pleasures. Rameau is distracted by the dreams that society has to offer, and these dreams have deluded him into giving up on a career as a legitimate musician. These dreams make him a bad husband and father—he feels he is not worthy of his family without being successful. The only way he can give back to his son is by instilling in him the values of material wealth, and molding him into a conniving genius. Rameau says about the duties of a father:

...you musn't stupidly give a Spartan education to a child destined to live in Paris, which is what most fathers do, and they couldn't do anything worse if they had planned a cruel fate for their children. If the education is wrong it is the fault of the customs of my nation, not mine. I don't know who is responsible, but I want my son to be happy or, what comes to the same thing, honoured, rich and powerful. I know a bit about the easiest ways of achieving this, and I shall teach them to him as early as possible. If you wise men blame me the mob (and success) will absolve me. He will have money, I can assure you, and if he has a lot, then he will lack nothing, not even your esteem and respect.(110-111)

There should not need to be more evidence than this of Rameau's resolution in his materialism. He is willing to plow right over his son in defense of his delusions, but only from a moralist's perspective will Rameau be harming his son, because Rameau is

convinced that training his son for the rat race is the best way to prepare him for life. This parental sentiment likely plays a hand in perpetuating the societal standards that Rameau adheres to. Rameau says that most parents inadvertently teach their children idioms and social indecencies, "...everybody does that, if not systematically, like me, at any rate by examples and precept..."(111). Teaching children the opposite would require model behavior and the most upright virtue, which are characteristics that are hard to come by. While parents might urge their children into decent educations and honest work, they cannot help but reveal the importance of material comforts that their family enjoys. People learn to love the comforts of home and all the amenities that come with comfortable living; and if someone lacks these comforts it is standard behavior for them to work towards achieving them. The problem is that many people work towards this end and, like Rameau, suffer a loss of virtue brought on by a cruel hunger, "Ingenii largitor venter<sup>1</sup>."(78) Diderot's position on the pitfalls of vice has not changed, but he acknowledges that Rameau presents an apt depiction of society. Diderot thinks to himself:

In all this there was much that we all think and on which we all act, but which we leave unsaid. That, indeed, was the most obvious difference between this man and most of those we meet. He owned up to the vices he had and which others have—he was no hypocrite. He was no more abominable than they, and no less. He was simply more open, more consistent, and sometimes more profound in his depravity. I trembled to think what his child would turn out like with such a teacher. Certainly with theories of teaching so exactly made to the measure of our society he would go far...(111)

Diderot has a hard time arguing against Rameau because he must admit that indecency is often the most effective way of reaching material success. Material success is Rameau's only real goal, and he is not at all swayed by ethical arguments that wield

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<sup>1</sup> Latin: "The belly is the bestower of genius"

virtue like an undefeatable rhetorical weapon. If Rameau already acknowledges that he is discarding virtue and morality, and that his desires are a result of the basest inclinations in man, then there is not much else for Diderot to rebuke him for. The matter of utility has already been settled, and Diderot admits that Rameau's schemes are the most suitable line of work for a greedy idler. The fact that these two cannot at all see eye to eye about the pleasure of virtue is perhaps the most satirical aspect of the whole dialogue. It is the most prominent feature of Rameau's character that he both outright denies any satisfaction that has to do with virtue, as well as lauds the pleasures of vice. His ideas and behavior are an extreme example, but after considering the degree to which his ideas are reflected in society it becomes evident that his moral quirks are not an exception in human conscience, but the standard.

By showing the readers a lack of resolution to this dialogue, Diderot makes it imperative for us to consider both sides carefully. Diderot obviously wants to show the debilitating baseness of pandering to the rich, but he also demonstrates the need for more than simple virtue to sate a person's cravings. This is a conflict that Diderot has resolved moderately within himself:

I'm not above the pleasures of the senses myself. I have a palate too, and it is tickled by a delicate dish or rare wine. I have a heart and a pair of eyes, and enjoy looking at a pretty woman...But I won't hide the fact that it is infinitely more pleasurable for me to have helped the unfortunate...given some good advice, read something pleasant...(66-67)

Diderot's resolution might resonate with a person who has studied philosophy at length, someone who has absorbed the joys of learning and seen them reflected in the romantic camaraderie of Platonic interlocutors. Rameau is not this type of person and, though he has knowledge of the subject, he shows that stoic ideals are wasted on him.

He remains stubborn about the burden of virtue and leaves the dialogue with the same view on his position as when he arrived. Many readers likely realize by the end of the dialogue that Rameau represents the greater portion of society, which makes the difference between their own character and Diderot's all the more important to apprehend. Amid this difference between them is Diogenes, the framing device of the dialogue, who embodies the ascetic commitment to virtue. Rameau's skepticism about ascetic virtues should remind readers of the language that a person typically uses to explain why he or she could never be a monk. Even though people can empathize with noble virtues and admire those who uphold them, there is still a common condition of material desire that is prevalent in society.

Most people would regard Diogenes as a fool, maybe spare him as a holy fool, and it is rare to find philosophers who have agreed with Diogenes completely and reasoned themselves into becoming ascetic cynics. Preaching the ascetic virtues of radical philosophy will only make that preacher into a fool, because purely ethical rhetoric does not reach most people's sensibilities. But a person who willingly commits to a life of hedonism—someone who has considered both vice and virtue carefully yet indulges in copious pleasures—will likewise be treated as a fool. The author is offering a compromise between the two ends: not taking philosophy as far as Diogenes, and not letting desire go quite as far as Rameau. Rameau would call himself a realist, and he is certainly a materialist. The problem is that he lets his cynicism reach heights equal to Diogenes', but chooses to embrace material pleasure rather than discard it. Diderot can at least admire the virtue of Diogenes' asceticism, even if he does not find it important to

follow in his footsteps. Rameau, on the other hand, does not arouse admiration from Diderot because Rameau's philosophy lashes out against the common moral standard. This standard is where the interlocutor Diderot finds himself at the beginning of the dialogue, and it is likely where readers put themselves at the beginning of the dialogue as well. Diderot represents and defends the standard moral conscience, and so the readers join his side and expect his protection. However, by the end of the dialogue Diderot has let the standard moral conscience take quite a thrashing. The fool is redeemed by the end of the dialogue, at least in the eyes of a person who worships the material passions. This type of person is very much real and all too common, and the condition that holds him pulls at the reins in all our souls. Even those readers who wanted an outcome that preserved the moral standard should admit that Diderot's interlocutor lacks the striking rhetoric they might have expected in a convincing argument. Instead of being convinced by the virtuous position, often times the readers are suaded unexpectedly by the defense of vices and passions. Relatability is the utility of the fool, and the reason why great writers display the fool's perspective.

The fool lives in all of us, indeed, Diderot might even reveal to many readers how foolish they really are. The fool keeps seemingly great company despite all the dejection: rich men, musicians, and beautiful liars. Sounds like an exclusive soirée that most people only dream of attending. Most people chase worldly satisfactions, and since plenty of people consider that opportunity to chase pleasures to be the purpose of society, it is no longer offensive to admit such vices. In this dialogue, it does not seem resolved that virtue brings more satisfaction than vice, and the two sides leave the

argument equally unconvinced of the other's position. Diderot allows Rameau to make his point clear, while Rameau adds examples of moral corruption and material success throughout, and he even admits that Rameau's take on society is both entertaining and enlightening. However, despite this exploration into the reality of common moral idioms and pantomimic pandering, Diderot maintains his position on the value of virtuous or simple satisfactions.

The split in ideals between Rameau and Diderot only further accentuates the satire of hedonists and panderers, and it could be taken to mean that fools will never change their way. Diderot has shown that to be quite true: Rameau is not likely to change his attitude about desires, and it calls to mind the mostly static nature of the fools who came before him. That is the union of the fools, their common concern for physical satisfaction and considerable wealth. Some of these fools have been strong defenders of material satisfaction, and have argued their position as realists and not simply sophists. The realist's perspective is at the center of the defense for materialism, and many people unabashedly call themselves realists when they must defend conservative ideals. Diderot has made an outstanding criticism and satire of materialism and vice—it is one that should not be ignored by people who struggle with materialism. This dialogue shows that issues of material desire are deeply imbedded in the average psyche, but it does not glamorize Rameau's path to success. People who read *Rameau's Nephew*, but who still need to indulge in material satisfactions, will at least become conscious of their behavior, and they will have Rameau as an example to reflect upon. Diderot likely hoped that this dialogue would be an accomplished satirical

warning, and that it might educate even those who refuse to give up their dreams of wealth or success. What Diderot has provided is hardly a cause for readers to take up the ascetic virtues. Even the way of moderation is ambiguous: reading this dialogue will not provide a person with the guidance he or she needs to reach satisfaction.

*Rameau's Nephew* is a defense, as well as a criticism. It both defends the graceful consideration of virtues present in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and mocks his frigid personality which seems removed from reality. Modern readers are likely just as cynical as Rameau—I sure am—but, because of that lingering materialism brought on by human custom, people find it unnatural to abandon, or even moderate, their pursuit of natural urges. For a person to want to moderate their behavior, that person would need to both be conscious of a higher virtue, and also admire the grace or clarity that virtue can bestow on a person. Most readers could fit this description, but what keeps them from discarding material pleasures is the same kind of doubt that Rameau touts from the beginning of this dialogue, to its end. Diderot wrote a dialogue because it is a demonstration. It lets us become well acquainted with the fool, and the materialist position that he represents. Diderot shows that fools are more common than people notice, and that these fools even occupy the upper echelons of society. In this way the dialogue acts as a defense of the fool, because we are nearly all fools or at risk of acting foolish. But it is also a warning to those who have become consumed by foolishness, and a satire that is meant to pierce through the thickest skulls and force materialists to recognize themselves as such. In the same way, this dialogue satirizes the dense and often unrelenting philosophical perspective; upon reading to the end of

*Rameau's Nephew*, it should be clear to readers that one's rhetoric must be impeccable—or even godlike—if one were to convince another person to adhere to a lifestyle that is, as Rameau argues, against human nature.

It is amusing to reflect on the foolishness we all partake in and are enraptured by, but it also shames us to consider our dismissal of virtues due to doubts and fears. In the end we have to admit that we certainly enjoy passions, and that it is unnatural to deny these passions, but that does not make it any less dishonorable in the end for us to carry on as if the materialism that drives society is pure and noble. This dialogue presents a choice to readers: recognize the risks of materialism and begin to moderate—perhaps by adapting stoicism to fit the modern world—or continue the hedonistic lifestyle, but now with the awareness that all humans recognize the dishonorable foolishness in others. The fool is there for us at all times when we need him, and he is an excellent reminder of both our capacities and limitations as moral individuals. By showing how relatable the fool's position really is, Diderot brilliantly critiques the dangers of stoic philosophy, materialism, and society at large.

### Work Cited

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