

Why ethics?¹

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Abstract

In this address, the author explores the necessity of ethical reflection on our moral responsibility regarding the challenges of today's globalized world and the future of humankind in the midst of God's creation. In this context, the differentiation of modern ethics is seen as accompanied by the task to reintegrate the ethical discourse by means of an interdisciplinary exchange and to further especially the dialogue between theological and philosophical ethics. By agreeing on Hans-Richard Reuter's characterization of theological ethics, the author sees no shortcoming in its recourse to the Christian ethos but a representation of the general case that there is no such a thing as an ethics without position. Putting its emphasis on the element of self-transcendence of the human person in his or her relations of responsibility is what marks theological ethics as specifically "theological". That includes an understanding of the human person as a relational and communicative being, and of theological ethics as an integrative ethics of responsibility.

Keywords

Ethics of responsibility, Globalization, Human rights, Relational anthropology, Theological and philosophical ethics

Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychoanalysis, in his essay on humour, tells the story of a criminal who was one Monday morning brought to the place of execution. Looking at the gallows on which he was expected to hang soon, the man said: "Great, the week is starting well!" (Freud 1928). You may apply this kind of gallows humour to your present experience. Confronted with the question, "Why ethics?" on a Thursday

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afternoon, near the end of the week, you may sigh or groan: “Oh dear, the week is ending terribly.” Another fundamental problem! We have already had enough of them during the week.

But there is no other choice. At least, for me personally, this day is a fundamental challenge in itself, and I have to react by addressing a fundamental problem: Why ethics?

1. Let me begin by describing the personal situation that brought me to the selection of the topic. For my wife Kara and myself this Thursday afternoon is a very emotional moment. My thoughts go back to the day in 2013 when the late Vice-Chancellor and Rector of Stellenbosch University, Russel Botman, invited me to become an Honorary Professor of this University. As you may imagine, it was to my complete surprise. I was and I continue to be deeply moved by that honour. And it is with great sorrow that I miss, in this moment and in this audience, Russel Botman, the Vice-Chancellor, colleague and friend. With great appreciation and solidarity I welcome his wife Beryl Botman in the audience. I dedicate my professorial address to his memory, with personal gratitude, but also with high respect for his leadership in this university and with admiration for his devoted service to the church, the academy and civil society in South Africa and beyond, with admiration most of all for him as a person, as a human being. He is now a part of the “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) who is around us and encourages us to stay faithful in our journey.

At the same time, I express a gratitude that comes from my heart to Vice-Rector Professor Eugene Cloete for welcoming me so warmly as an Honorary Professor of Stellenbosch University. I include my sincere thanks to the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Professor Nico Koopman, and to the Head of the Discipline Group Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Professor Robert Vosloo, who, together with their colleagues, make Kara and me feel at home at this university, now already for many years. I add my thanks to Professor Hendrik Geyer, the Director of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS), who opened this “creative space for the mind” so generously for me on several occasions over the last years, and especially to my friend and colleague of thirty years, Professor Dirkie Smit, who does not like many words of gratitude, but deserves them.

I should also name numerous friends and colleagues with whom I had and still have close relationships since I first came to South Africa, from early on with the special help of Renier Koegelenberg. I had the privilege to be linked with Stellenbosch University since 1987 when I came here as a young Professor of Ethics to deliver my first lecture on the topic of human rights (Huber 1988). In that period of my life, my reflections on ethics were essentially influenced by the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The year before, in 1986, I was invited to deliver a keynote address to the National Conference of the South African Council of Churches, held in Johannesburg during the state of emergency ten years after the Soweto unrest (Huber 1986). "Hope in crisis" was the theme of this National Conference. My task was not so much to describe the crisis. There were Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and many other people in the 1986 audience who were much better prepared to describe this crisis. My task was rather to clarify that Christian hope is always hope in solidarity. Christian hope is never a hope for myself alone, but a hope for the other, for the community, for us all, even for the cosmos. That is the reason why in Christian faith the kingdom of God has such a core position as eschatological symbol. It motivates and clarifies the solidarity of hope. A crucial motif in the Christian ethos is therefore not to let alone those who are in crises, but to be for them messengers of hope.

In these very critical times during the 1980s, I learned to develop my ethics as an ethics of hope. And it happened to me that all of a sudden I had a motto for my personal life as well as for my involvement in ethics. The motto said: My hope is stronger than my anxiety (Huber 1996). That motto became the decisive line of continuity between my work as an ethicist at the German universities of Marburg and Heidelberg and my responsibility as a bishop and church leader in the fifteen years between 1994 and 2009.

I started my office as protestant bishop of Berlin on May 1, 1994. Only a few days later, I had visitors from South Africa. They had planned their visit to Germany long beforehand. Therefore they did not anticipate that they would be in Germany at the very moment in which Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President of a new, liberated and democratic South Africa. It was exactly this very day of Mandela's inauguration, the 9th of May 1994, when the group visited me. So we had the chance to celebrate together the great transformation to a democratic South Africa, committed to

justice and human rights. And we continued to celebrate this transition later on different occasions in Germany: when Nelson Mandela visited Berlin in person in 1996 and when we dedicated the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Prize in 1999 to Desmond Tutu and with him to Alexander Boraine as the two representatives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So, these people became messengers of hope for our people in Germany. They brought parts of the hope back to us, which we had tried to share with them in the times of apartheid.

Solidarity in hope is nowadays as necessary as in those former times. The tasks before us are tremendous. That is true for South Africa, which is still struggling with the big challenges of poverty and unemployment, of exclusion and injustice. Solidarity in hope is needed regarding the on-going crises in the systems of education and health and regarding the exploitation of land, water and natural resources. Europe too, with all its richness and affluence, has its own big economic, social and political problems. Day for day we have to follow the critical development in the East of the Ukraine. Together with this kind of crises, Europe has become unsettled in its trust in its own basic values and uncertain in its answers to the new challenges for a life together in a plurality of convictions and beliefs.

It may be that the recent violent attacks on human lives in the French capital Paris and the Danish capital Copenhagen seem far away to many South Africans. But the terrorist murder in the editorial offices of the satiric magazine “Charlie Hebdo” on the 7th of January, 2015, the subsequent acts of violence in the Jewish kosher supermarket “Hyper Cacher” and the murderous attacks in Copenhagen will influence the political atmosphere, not only in Europe, but on the globe. The situation is comparable with the shake-up after the attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11, the 9th of September 2001. Again we are challenged to preserve security without giving up freedom. Again we are confronted with the misuse of religion for the justification of deadly violence, and therefore all of us together need to critically evaluate and clearly resist extreme Islamist versions of Islam, without falling into the trap of producing a hostile stereotype of Islam as such. Big challenges!

Why ethics? Look at the daily news and you find the answer. Without a critical acquisition of our own guiding values and without a sober analysis

of the dominant forces in economy and politics, in the media, in culture and in religion, without an awareness of new forms of violence and of its justification we shall not find sufficient orientation in our present world. Without ethical reflection there will be no hope in the crises of our days. Therefore we need an ethics of solidarity in hope, of hope in solidarity.

2. It is a globalising world in which we are confronted with the necessity of ethical reflection. But we are not the first generation to experience processes of globalisation. They have a long history, but under different names. South African and European experiences overlap.

In South Africa, the periods of Dutch and British colonial rule demonstrate the interaction between Europe and South Africa that continued in the periods of the Boer republics, the hegemonies of the English and finally the Afrikaner establishment. The history of colonialism, segregation and apartheid, to which European powers contributed so intensively, continues to be present in the current situation in South Africa often described as “an incomplete transformation” (Terreblanche 2002:417-74).

From a European perspective, the obvious examples are the discovery of new worlds during the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern period, the European power claims over the so-called colonial areas in the nineteenth century, including the destructive innovation of “razor-sharply drawn frontiers” (Osterhammel 2009:179) and finally the military globalisation during the two world wars. From the perspective of the respective continents, the history of globalisation looks quite different. But as far as the history of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century is concerned, we can say that globalisation has become global. It has three primary hallmarks: the proclamation of universal human rights, the development of a worldwide communications network, and worldwide economic dependences.

Each of these characteristics is hotly debated. Whether human rights truly deserve universal recognition, is one of the controversial issues (Huber 2014). The fact that human rights continue to be massively violated in today’s world raises doubts about the effectiveness of the international protection of these rights, and the fact that they are justified primarily by appeal to traditions of the Western Enlightenment and to the Judeo-Christian tradition provokes opposition from the sphere of other

cultures. Comparable doubts are linked to the effects of worldwide digital communication. It is impossible to deny the existence of a worldwide network of communication, just as it is impossible to deny that we can transport people and goods over wide distances in very short time, and even more important: to organise astronomic financial transfers in milliseconds. But it is a matter of debate whether all of these establish a global solidarity; new forms of the concentration of power in the hands of Internet firms, financial corporations and states entail considerable risks. These risks are particularly obvious when we look at the expansion of economic power and at the autonomy that has been acquired by the financial markets.

Spatial distances are getting smaller while responsibilities grow. The plurality of our world is closer to us everywhere, and a central topic everywhere on earth is how we can live together in our differentness. There is no longer any place where we can be at home in such a way that we never experience otherness or encounter people who are different.

These processes are to a high degree determined by the progress of science and technology. This progress influences our relation to the future. The future therefore becomes the dominant mode of time for ethical reflection. Traditionally, both philosophical and theological ethics inquire into the criteria for action in the present. What ought I to do? Should I follow my intuitions or find my orientation in stable rules? Should I place my own interests in the centre or consider my duties vis-à-vis others? Do I follow the commandment of God or the voice of my own conscience? Traditional ethics is oriented to the goods that ought to be aimed at or preserved in one's behaviour, to the duties that are carried out or infringed, and to the virtues that were acquired or are put to the test.

New scientific and technical possibilities are today accompanied by far-reaching and sometimes utterly unforeseeable consequences for the future. We must take into account, at a sufficiently early date, not only the positive opportunities that open up here, but also the risks that are linked to them. Unlike the classical forms of an ethics that is oriented to principles or values, to laws or rules, ethics today is confronted by much greater uncertainties. It is often impossible to say with certainty what behaviour will allow us to avoid the risks and exploit the positive possibilities. The dominant trait in contemporary ethics is that it is becoming an ethics of responsibility.

Sustainability is one of its most important themes. Responsibility for future generations is an integral part of sustainability. For good reasons, the biblical Decalogue includes intergenerational solidarity into the basic moral rules for human life: “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Ex 20:12). But the range of such an intergenerational solidarity, as it is necessary in a world governed by science, technology and global economy, changes deeply under the influence of science and technology. Ethics is necessary because neither our genes nor our instincts are sufficiently developed to take into account the responsibility for people who are not our contemporaries but will live in a distant future.

Responsibility with regard to the future depends on many aspects. I mention only one of them, namely the age structure of societies. In European countries, the dominant factor is the continuous aging of the population. The average age of the German population for instance is 42,6 years; 20 percent of the population are over 65 and the average life expectancy is near to 79 years. In African countries, by contrast, the dominant factor is the scale of the younger generations. The outstanding example is Uganda where the population has an average age of 15 years. In South Africa, the average age is 24,1 years. Life expectancy in South Africa is according to a report of the World Health Organisation 56 years for men and 62 years for women. Only 5 percent of the population are older than 65. The National Development Plan for South Africa has among its main objectives to increase average male and female life expectancy at birth to 70 years until 2030. To honour father and mother includes different tasks in different countries. In Germany, it means to organise appropriate nursing for the large number of old people. In South Africa, it means to develop the education system, to create appropriate jobs with reasonable salaries, to reduce economic injustices and social discrepancies, to provide for a healthy environment and sufficient medical services and not to forget: to restrict the pandemic plague of HIV/AIDS in order to help people to have a future for their own lives (cf. Van Niekerk/Kopelman 2005).

Why ethics? Ethics is necessary as reflection on our moral responsibility for the future of humankind in the midst of God’s creation. In this sense, theological ethics is an explication of what we can call with John de Gruchy

(2006, 2011), Jens Zimmermann (2012) and others, a “Christian humanism” for our days.

3. In universities around the world, however, theological ethics is nowadays not the only form of ethical reflection. Not only theology but also philosophy is engaged in this area. Many academic disciplines are aware of the necessity of applied ethics in their respective fields: they develop Professional Ethics and Research Ethics. We all know the growing importance of Bioethics, Medical Ethics, Business Ethics, and so on. The differentiation of ethics in our times is remarkable, as could easily be demonstrated by the example of Stellenbosch University. This differentiation includes a renewed task to reintegrate the ethical discourse by means of an interdisciplinary exchange between the disciplines involved and to further especially the dialogue between theology and philosophy.

The interdisciplinary approach is especially important for the task of developing a sufficiently differentiated picture of the realities that we address in the formation of our ethical judgements. Theology has to contribute to that task in its own way, because it opens a specific access to reality in three main dimensions. The trust in God’s presence in the worldly reality and the expectation of God’s kingdom open a perspective of gratitude and hope. The insight into the separation of human beings from God, their seduction by selfishness and greed, their tendency to mistrust and hate leads to a sober analysis of human errors and mistakes. The experience of God’s liberating and renewing love opens our eyes for processes in which people are encouraged to transform realities in the spirit of love, guided by gratitude for God’s creation in its fullness and by equal respect for all human beings in their differentness, and oriented towards the protection of human rights, the partiality for justice, the sustainable use of natural resources and the promotion of peace.

I add another dimension of the theological task in ethics regarding the realities of our days. Theology examines the contribution made by the ethos of religion to ethical orientation today. In view of the widespread use of religion to justify intolerance and violence, theology contributes on the one hand to the necessary self-critique of religion. On the other hand it pays attention to the resonance that respect for the equal dignity of every

human being finds in the egalitarian universalism of religious traditions, especially in Judaism and Christianity.

These topics and the kinds of reflection that they deserve demonstrate that the confrontation between reason and belief or between autonomy and heteronomy does not give an appropriate picture of the dialogue between philosophical and theological ethics. Of course, the existence of fundamentalist forms of religious morality cannot be denied. Using the appeal to a divine authority, they try to withdraw what they define to be right from critical evaluation. But it is not at all evident that such fundamentalist positions really represent the approach of theological ethics. On the other side, we find in the sphere of “secular” thinking views discrediting all basic convictions that transcend the field of empirical knowledge as “delusion”. But again, it would not be correct to see this kind of argument, which also has a fundamentalist bias, as characteristic for philosophical ethics in general. Philosophical reflection may moreover be open to the insight that our knowledge depends on presuppositions transcending this knowledge. Theological ethics is, as Hans-Richard Reuter recently pointed out,

“in its recourse to the Christian ethos bound to a specific position. But that is not a weakness or a shortcoming. Instead theological ethics represents the exemplary case to demonstrate that there is no such thing as an ethics without position and perspective. All ethics begins with a concrete ethos lived in concrete communities and presupposes – irrespective of its intention to find general acceptance – particular cultural or religious convictions and symbolisations” (Reuter 2015: 21).

In any case, ethics has a double task of interpretation. In critically reflecting a concrete ethos, it helps to understand that ethos better and provides additional clarity and orientation for those who feel at home in this ethos. By arguing reasonably, ethics develops at the same time those contents of a concrete ethos that may contribute to a universalistic morality, and in this way it can contribute to living together in the plurality of convictions and forms of life. All kinds of ethics are confronted with this double task. Christian ethics provides a primary example. On the one hand, it is related to the specific social forms of Christian communities that try to follow in their lives and behaviour the Christian ethos, namely to love God and your

neighbour as yourself. On the other hand, Christian ethics addresses the question of universally binding moral rules, because they are necessary for living together in pluralistic societies with regard to the big challenges in a time of continuous transformation. There is not a “Rainbow Nation” without a common understanding of those elementary moral rules that bind the different colours to one bow.

That leads us to the question: What is “theological” in theological ethics? It is not a specific kind of method that may be used. Even in referring to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, theological ethics does not master a set of methods that differs fundamentally from other methods in order to justify moral rules and to correlate them with the concrete economic, social or political conditions under which an ethical judgement is needed. It is also not the case that theology has at its disposal a specific set of moral rules that is simply not accessible to other forms of ethics. No other ethical approach – religious or secular, theological or philosophical – is prohibited to use the Ten Commandments, the commandment to love God, your neighbour and yourself or the Golden Rule and to test their productivity for today’s ethical challenges. Theological ethics does not yet reach its own core as long as it uses the biblical traditions mainly as a collection of rules that simply has to be applied to the problems of our days. This procedure is not plausible because the moral rules of the biblical traditions are obviously rooted in their own times and cannot be applied to our present without critical reflection on their historical context and background. Much more important than the different moral instructions are those aspects and insights in biblical texts that have to do with the perception of the self and of the world, shaped by the experience of God’s presence in the world and by the encounter of human beings with a transcendent reality. “In ethical perspective the bible is in first instance not a source for norms but for the formation of identity” (Reuter 2015: 76).

Beyond the questions of what we are able to know, what we should do and what we might hope, we face, in philosophical as well as theological ethics, a more fundamental question, namely who we are. Ethics is constituted by the question of human identity, which does not include only our individual identity but also an identity common to us as human beings. Regarding this question of human identity, theological ethics puts its emphasis on the element of self-transcendence (cf. Joas 2013:158-170). Christian faith

sees human beings as persons opening the symbolic borders of their identity, referring in spontaneous as well as in reflexive ways to another than themselves and finding themselves constituted by these relationships. Reflecting the contingency of their existence – the contingency of the time and the place of their birth, the concrete conditions of their lives, the talents to shape their lives and to make their living – they open themselves for the experience that self-transcendence is the way to bring those contingencies together with a meaning, a purpose, or even a calling for their lives. This experience begins with the preparedness to understand life as a gift rather than a project and to accept it therefore in its finitude, its contingency and its vulnerability as unique and precious. This esteem for somebody's own life seems to be indispensable in order to be able to value other people's lives or even everybody's life as estimable, worthy to be protected and lovable.

The self-transcendence of human persons is therefore an irreplaceable implication built into a moral universalism with its recognition of the equal dignity of every human being. This universalism is for good reasons understood as a modern ethical achievement. But with all the necessary self-critical evaluation of violations against this universalism of dignity in the name of Christian faith, we have to keep in mind that we find essential preconditions of that universalism in the Jewish and Christian understanding of the human person. The idea that human beings are created in the image of God combines two essential elements: I see my own life as a divine gift entrusted to me, while I also understand the other's life as sacred because it is created in God's image, like my own. Therefore I lead my life in multiple relations of responsibility: I am responsible as author of my own life for the effects of my deeds and my failures on the life of others, as on my own, before an authority from whom I receive my life as a gift and from whom also the life of the other is created and gifted with an inviolable dignity. I do so each time in a concrete situation that demands my commitment (Reuter 2015:80). In this view, the "theological" in theological ethics is the self-transcendence of the human person in his or her relations of responsibility. Theological ethics can therefore be understood as an integrative ethics of responsibility.

4. Let me end with a reminder from fiction. In 1886, the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson published *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a novella that tells the story of the London lawyer Gabriel John

Utterson, who investigates remarkable occurrences involving his old friend, the physician Dr. Henry Jekyll, and the scoundrel Edward Hyde. As we finally learn, these two are one and the same person. Jekyll, a benevolent man and doctor of medicine, who is always ready to help, has discovered in himself the inclination to evil thoughts and wicked actions. Above all, he has learned that he can use medicine to transform himself for a short period into a dark companion in order to live out his wicked inclinations. After this, however, he assumes once more the form of the lovable Dr. Jekyll, again by the way of pharmaceutical treatment. The story has a terrible ending. The dosage of medicine required to turn Mr. Hyde back into Dr. Jekyll gets higher and higher, and Dr. Jekyll alias Mr. Hyde finally commits suicide (Stevenson 2003).

“Jekyll and Hyde” became a standard way of referring to the fact that many people have two sides; indeed, some must be regarded as split personalities. This division seems to be becoming a universal phenomenon under the circumstances of the globalising modern age, and this is why we hear of a “Jekyll and Hyde Syndrome” as a widespread condition that requires treatment.

On the one hand, empathy and respect, benevolence and readiness to help are regarded as significant values. On the other hand, however, it is expected that the individual should function in a society driven by economic priorities and considerations, in which competition and profit, suspicion and selfishness are the dominant motives. The norms of economic competition control more and more areas of life – examples are science and education, health and culture, sports and leisure activities. One’s personal life is increasingly subjected to the laws of the market, and one’s self-understanding is determined ever more strongly by self-assertion and profit seeking. It is becoming more and more difficult to turn Mr. Hyde back into Dr. Jekyll.

A split personality is not a convincing ethical model. The effects of the laws of the market must be confined to the boundaries that accord with the task of the economy. These laws should make goods and services available for everybody at affordable prices, and this means that they should make efficient use of existing resources. When the rules of the economy colonise other spheres in such a manner that they extinguish the efficacy of empathy

and solidarity, it is completely alien to the way the economy is meant to function. In fact, this poses a threat to the very conditions that enable successful economic activity, since the cohesion of society requires that people acknowledge each other's dignity, realise that they are responsible for the living conditions of future generations, develop empathy for each other, deal attentively with nature, and nurture reverence (each in his or her own way) for that which is sacred. Dr. Jekyll must tame the Mr. Hyde in himself.

Where are we to find the strengths necessary for this task? In addition to reason we must also look at the motives supplied by faith, generalising the instinct of empathy and the emotion of mercy that influence human conduct. The willingness to pursue justice depends on an emotional base; but this emotion cannot be restricted to our relatives and others with whom we live together. Our preparedness for love and mercy has to go beyond those borders. In this sense justice and love are closely connected (Nussbaum 2013). Justice needs the perspectives of care, empathy and mercy, because we recognise injustices if we look at the social reality with "the view from below" (Bonhoeffer 2010:52), with the eyes of the powerless, from the perspective of those who suffer under hunger and poverty. If one deducts compassion from justice it is no longer justice that remains. One damages justice as a personal attitude as well as an institutional virtue if one ignores the preferential option for the poor and the oppressed or for the vulnerable that makes one aware of the problems facing justice in society.

This insight into the indissoluble link between justice and compassion also entails a revision of the thesis that autonomy and justice characterise the development of morality in men, while the development of morality in women leads to empathy and care for others. We remain captives of a patriarchal way of thinking as long as we practice a binary allocation of these moral orientations to masculine and feminine patterns of behaviour (Gilligan 2011; see also Gilligan 1982). Both justice and care for others are elementary determinants of *human* existence. Justice vis-à-vis others also includes fair treatment of one's own self. Likewise, responsible caring for oneself is in accordance with care for others. As Carol Gilligan (2011) puts it, "(i)f it's good to be empathic with people and responsive to their needs, why is it selfish to respond to yourself?"

The allocation of moral orientations (justice is masculine, care for or about others is feminine) is abandoned. Justice is addressed to “the generalized other,” while care is addressed to “the concrete other” (see Benhabib 2011). Both of these are human, and this is why we should expect to find justice and care in men and women alike.

Theological ethics ought to pay close attention to a transformation currently taking place in life sciences and humanities. The separation of body and spirit, of emotion and reason, and of the self and its relationships to others has to be questioned. Another sign of transformation is the retracing of the capacity for empathy and care in the development of humankind back to the primates, and even further back (De Waal 2009; Hrdy 2009). The history of evolution means that the commandment to love one’s neighbour as oneself is inherent to us human beings. Natural scientists investigate the provenance of this aptitude, but we must go further and ask how it is that we unlearn something that is inherent to us. If the overvaluation of competitive economic behaviour makes us personalities with a Jekyll and Hyde Syndrome, a profound reappraisal is needed.

This reappraisal is the fruit of the insight that we humans are relational beings. It is here that theological considerations intersect with the insights of the natural sciences, and this means a shift of perspective from the dominant modelling approach to the individual as *homo oeconomicus*, the economic human, interested only in his or her own advantage, to the *homo communicativus*, the communicative human, interested in the relations with others and being aware of one’s own self-transcendence. Christian ethics is concerned with this kind of changed perception, understanding the human person ultimately as a relational and communicative being.

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