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1 Monotheism and Hope

Paul Tillich believed that the essence of religious attitudes is "ultimate concern." Ultimate concern is "total." Its object is experienced as numinous or holy, distinct from all profane and ordinary realities. It is also experienced as overwhelmingly real and valuable – indeed, so real and so valuable that, in comparison, all other things appear empty and worthless. As such, it demands total surrender and promises total fulfillment.

These attitudes seem fully appropriate only if their object is maximally great – so perfect and splendid that nothing greater is conceivable. And indeed, Paul J. Griffiths has argued that "if there are any transcultural universals in the sphere of religious thinking, it is probable that . . . the attempt to characterize, delineate, and, if possible . . . exhaustively define maximal greatness" is "among them" (Griffiths 1994, 59). The nature of maximal perfection is controversial, however.

For one thing, the *form* a religious community's ultimate concern takes (and the conception of its object with which it is bound up) varies from one religious community to another. Ultimate concern may take the form of worship and involve praise, love, gratitude, supplication, confession, petition, and the like. But it can also take the form of a quest for the ultimate good. The object of the quest is an existentially appropriated knowledge of the ultimate good or a union with it that transforms us and overcomes our wrongness. The two forms of ultimate concern may be combined or may exist separately. Christianity and theistic Hinduism combine both. In Theravada Buddhism and Taoism, on the other hand, ultimate concern typically takes the second form but not the first.

In practice, a religious community's conception of the divine is largely determined by its conviction that the object of its devotion is maximally great, by the spoken or oral texts it regards as authoritative, and by metaphysical assumptions and valuations widely shared by the community's members. Of course, these sources aren't independent of one another. The form that ultimate concern takes in a community *incorporates* its most fundamental evaluations, and the authoritative texts that express and shape its ultimate concern present pictures of the world and our place in it that include explicit or implicit metaphysical claims. The Buddhist's picture, for example, expresses the vision of a world in constant flux – devoid of fixity or any kind of permanent substance.

Since the form that ultimate concern takes, the texts regarded as authoritative, and the metaphysical assumptions and evaluations inextricably bound up with these forms and texts vary from one religious community to another, it is hardly surprising that conceptions of maximal greatness vary as well.

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The most striking disagreement is between those who regard the divine reality as personal and those who do not. Theists believe that even though the object of their ultimate concern transcends all finite realities, it is more like a person than anything else with which we are ordinarily familiar, and they typically conceptualize it as a maximally perfect person. Persons are rational agents, however – beings who have beliefs about themselves and act on the basis of them. The major theistic traditions have therefore described ultimate reality as an omniscient mind and omnipotent will. Other religious traditions are nontheistic. Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism are examples.

Advaita Vedanta's rejection of theism is a consequence of its insistence that "Brahman [ultimate reality] is without parts or attributes . . . one without a second" (Shankara [traditional attribution] second half of the eighth century, 101). If the Brahman has *no* properties, it necessarily lacks the properties of omniscience, perfect goodness, omnipotence, and personhood, and cannot therefore be understood as God.

The rejection also follows from Advaita's conviction that Brahman contains no internal diversity ("is without parts") and is identical with the whole of reality ("is one without a second"). If the Brahman is all there is, for example, then there is nothing outside Brahman that could serve as an object of its knowledge. And if it is devoid of internal diversity, there can be no self-knowledge either, for self-knowledge involves an internal differentiation between the self as knower and the self as known. Nor can the Brahman be a causal agent. If the Brahman is maximally perfect, it must be unlimited. But it *is* limited if something exists outside it. The Brahman must therefore be all there is. If the Brahman is identical with the whole of reality, though, and Brahman contains no plurality, then reality as a whole is an undifferentiated unity. The space-time world with its distinctions between times, places, and events is consequently unreal. *Real* causal relations are relations between two real things, however. So Brahman is neither the cause of the space-time world as a whole nor of the events in it, and is thus neither the space-time world's creator nor its ruler. It follows from these considerations that Brahman is neither an omniscient mind nor an omnipotent and active will. It cannot be a maximally perfect *person*, therefore, and so can be *God*.[1]

[1] Advaita does contain what might be called "theistic elements." For example, it distinguishes the nirguna from the saguna Brahman. The former is the Brahman without attributes. The latter is the Brahman with attributes and is roughly described in the way that theists describe God. The nirguna Brahman is the Brahman as it really is, however, while the saguna Brahman is ultimately illusory. Yet even though Advaita believes that, like all conceptualizations of the Brahman, the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good cause of the space-time world is ultimately false, it regards it as superior to other conceptualizations. Furthermore, Advaita describes the real Brahman as an infinite, joyous consciousness (albeit a consciousness that has no objects or

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Some nontheistic religions are totally devoid of elements even remotely resembling theism. According to Theravada Buddhism, for example, a person is simply a collection of interrelated experiences and body states called "dharmas." The dharmas are causally conditioned and transient. (They last for at most a few moments.) Furthermore, the realm of the transient and causally conditioned is the realm of suffering or unsatisfactoriness (duhkha). One cannot therefore construe maximally perfect reality as a person. To do so would imply that it was impermanent, causally conditioned, and unhappy. Ultimate reality (nirvana) is not conscious and it does not act. It is more like a transcendent place or state than a transcendent person.

Other examples of nontheistic ultimates are provided by the Emptiness traditions of Zen and Madhyamika Buddhism, the Daosim of Lao Tzu, and the Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yangmin.

Monotheism

Monotheists think that God is not only personal but the unique source of created being who possesses an omnipotent and all-sovereign will, and is the only proper object of total devotion. Monotheism needn't entail that there aren't any other so-called gods, however. While the Vaishnavism of Ramanuja's and Madhva's Vedanta and the Shaivism of Shaiva Siddhanta are clearly monotheistic, they don't deny the existence of the other gods of Hindu mythology. The Vaishnavas, for instance, downgrade the importance of Indra, Brahma, Shiva, and the other deities. They are *creatures*, called into being by Vishnu, who act as his servants. They thus have more or less the same status as angels in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

Moreover, while some self-proclaimed monotheisms have been accused of polytheism, the accusation is arguably unjustified. Kabbalistic Judaism, Christianity, and the Vaishnavism of theistic Vedanta are examples. None of them posit the existence of independent sources of the whole of creation, independent omnipotent and sovereign wills, or distinct and independent objects of total devotion.

First consider the Kabbalah. The *Zohar* (after 1275) identifies the first principle with the En Sof or infinite (unlimited). The En Sof is "the hidden God" or "innermost being" of God, without attributes or qualities. Because it

contents and is thus "empty"). Because Advaita refuses to ascribe either knowledge or activity to ultimate reality, though, it is essentially nontheistic. Its maximally perfect reality isn't the God of the theistic traditions – all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, the sovereign lord of heaven and earth. It is instead an "infinite ocean" of joyous empty consciousness – impersonal, inactive, and anonymous.

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lacks attributes, the En Sof is incomprehensible and thus, in a strict sense, nonpersonal (although it reveals itself as personal).

The hidden God manifests itself in the sefirot, however. These are conceived as God's attributes, or as divine spheres or realms, or as stages (in his self-manifestation). They are also regarded as names that God gives himself, and together form his "one great name"; or as God's faces or garments; or as beams of his light. They are also sometimes pictured as the branches of a tree whose root is the En Sof, "the hidden root of roots." (Alternatively, the En Sof is depicted as the sap that circulates through the branches and maintains them.) The branches are thought of as extending through the whole of the created order; created things exist solely in virtue of the fact that "the power of the sefirot lives and acts in them."

There are ten sefirot or stages in God's self-manifestation. A brief discussion of the first three will be sufficient for our purposes. The first is, perhaps surprisingly, characterized as Nothing or the Abyss. (We are said to catch glimpses of it when things alter their form or disappear; when things change or are destroyed. Nothingness or the Abyss becomes "visible" for "a fleeting . . . moment.") This mystical no-thing-ness is God's Supreme Crown.

Both Wisdom and Intelligence emerge or emanate from the Crown. Wisdom is the "ideal thought" of everything that will emerge in creation. The idea exists at this stage in a confused and undifferentiated form, however. Wisdom is sometimes pictured as a fountain that springs out of Nothingness (the Crown) and from which the other sefirot will flow, sometimes as a seed or germ from which everything develops, and sometimes as a point. (The idea behind this last image is that just as the movement of a point generates a line, and the movement of a line generates a surface, so the "movement" of Wisdom [together with the "movement" of Intelligence] generates the other sefirot.) Intelligence is the principle of "individuation and differentiation" and "upholds" what is "folded up" in Wisdom. (If Wisdom is the "confused" or undifferentiated thought of creation, Intelligence is that thought become clear and distinct [Scholem 1946, 207–9, 213–20; Epstein 1959, 236].)

The doctrine of the divine emanations or sefirot might already be thought to compromise God's unity. But matters become still more problematic in an influential treatise that was composed in Provence around 1230 and (falsely) ascribed to Hai Goan.

According to its pseudonymous author, "three hidden lights" are found in the "root of roots" that exists "above the first sefirah" – "the inner primordial light," the "transparent (or ultraclear) light," and "the clear light." These "lights" are one thing and one substance that "are found without separation and without union, in the most intimate relation with the root of roots" or

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(more strongly) are the very "name and substance of the root of all roots." The three lights are the immediate source of "the three supreme sefirot of 'Pure Thought,' 'Knowledge,' and 'Intellect,'" but whereas the sefirot "themselves are clearly created [or emanated?] . . . the triad of the lights illuminate one another, uncreated [and unemanated?] without beginning in the hidden root." According to Pseudo-Hai, then, a triad exists *in the hidden Godhead itself*.

Later Kabbalists were aware "of a possible connection between these ideas and the Christian Trinity," but explained the latter as a corruption of the former. Jesus and his disciples were themselves "real Kabbalists, 'only their Kabbalah was full of mistakes'" – their doctrine of the Trinity was the result of a misinterpretation of the doctrine of the three lights! Whatever one thinks of this, there *are* striking similarities between the two doctrines. But there are also important differences. The lights "are neither persons nor 'hypostases' in God," for example, and there is no mention of "specific relationships" between them (such as begetting and being begotten), or "spiration" and "procession" (Scholem 1987, 349–54).

The suspicion of Christian influence was by no means restricted to the Pseudo-Hai's doctrine of the three lights, however, for "philosophical opponents of the Kabbalah" had already suggested "that the doctrine of the ten sefirot was [itself] of Christian origin" (Scholem 1987, 354). Nor was this criticism easily laid to rest. Thus Isaac bar Sheshet Parfat (1326–1408) says that he had "heard a philosopher speak in a defaming manner of the Kabbalists," saying, "'The Gentiles [Christians] are believers in a trinity, and the Kabbalists are believers in a ten-ity'" (Gellman 2013, 46).

The general problem, of course, was that on its surface at least, the doctrine of the sefirot seems incompatible with "God's unity." Rabbi Azriel of Gerona (d. 1238) addressed this issue in his "Explanation of the Ten Sefirot." In the first place, the higher sefirot, at least, have always existed "in potentia *in* the Eyn Sof before they were actualized" (Azriel 1986, 93, my emphasis). Moreover, because "the receptor [the sefirah] . . . unite[s] with the bestower [ultimately, the En Sof] in one power . . . the two are really one." So the answer to our difficulty is apparently this. The emanation of the sefirot is compatible with God's unity because (unlike created beings) the sefirot are contained within the En Sof in a potential or undifferentiated form and because (since their power is the power of the En Sof) there is ultimately only one power. Thus, "no emanation is radiated forth except to proclaim the unity with the Eyn Sof" (Azriel 1986, 93–5). Or as Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto claimed in the first half of the eighteenth century, "the sefirot are not separate from the one who emanates, for they are like the flame connected to the coal; and all is one, a unity that has

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within it no division" (Gellman 2013, 46). Whether considerations like these fully resolve the problem is a moot question, of course.

Still, the Kabbalah is only one strand within Judaism. By contrast, the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of both Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi are firmly rooted at the very heart of Christianity and Shri Vaishnavism respectively. Perhaps as a result, these traditions have devoted much more thought to reconciling monotheism with elements that, on their face, seem at odds with it.

Christians are not tritheists, for they do not regard the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct gods. The Western or Augustinian tradition, for example, does not think there are three distinct powers, intellects, or wills since, in its view, the divine power, intellect, and will are aspects of a single divine essence that subsists in three "persons" or "hypostases."

Another view, though, is implicit in the position of many second- and third-century church fathers, some western Christian Platonists, and the Eastern Orthodox Church as a whole. The Trinitarian views of Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) are fairly typical of this position. There are three hypostases or "persons." Each has its own individual essence. But all share a common generic essence (namely, divinity), so that each member of the Trinity is eternal, necessarily existent, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the like.

"There is not a trinity of [independent] principles," however, "but . . . only one principle or fountain of Godhead [the Father] . . . from which the other[s, namely, the Son and the Holy Spirit] are derived." They together constitute one entity ("one entire divinity"), as "the root, and the stock and the branches" constitute "one tree," or as the sun, the light, and its splendor are "undivided" and form one thing. Indeed, there is so "near a conjunction" between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as can be found nowhere else in nature. The relations between them are necessary and eternal; they are "indivisibly and inseparably united." Moreover, each person inheres or indwells in the others, and they are all "*ad extra* one and the same God, jointly concurring in all the same actions," being all "one creator" (Cudworth 1678, 598, 616–20).

Nor is each member, in abstraction from the others, an appropriate object of total devotion and unconditional commitment. In spite of the aberrations of some Christians, it is reasonably clear that the object of the Christian's ultimate concern is the Trinity *as a whole*, and not one or more of its members considered in isolation. Christian attitudes toward the Father, for example, are inseparable from Christian attitudes toward the Son. Christ is worshiped *as* the Son of the Father, for instance, and the Father is worshiped *as* the one who fully reveals himself in Christ.

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The Shri Vaishnavas provide another example of a monotheism that is "tainted" by elements that appear to be in tension with it. Their picture of reality is clearly monotheistic. Problems are created, however, by the fact that the scriptures on which the Shri Vaishnavas draw closely associate Vishnu with his consort Lakshmi. In the *Pancaratras*, for example, "the five functions associated with God's oversight of the world," namely, creation, preservation, destruction, and "obscuration" and "favoring" (roughly, withholding and bestowing grace) are sometimes ascribed to Vishnu and sometimes to Lakshmi (Kumar 1997, 23–4). Again, while Ramanuja and his great predecessor, Yamuna, have little or nothing to say about Lakshmi in their philosophical writings, she plays a significant role in their devotional works, which describe her as the mediatrix between Vishnu and his devotees. Yamuna described her as inseparable from the Lord, for example, and insists that while nonintelligent and intelligent beings (including the gods such as Brahma and Shiva) are "only a small part of God's reality, . . . the divine consort" is "the equal match of the Lord, . . . sharing the same auspicious qualities" (Kumar 1997, 61). Ramanuja, too, claims that Vishnu and Lakshmi are "eternally associated" and asserts that both possess "the multitude . . . of unlimited, unsurpassed, and innumerable auspicious qualities" (Kumar 1997, 66–7). All of this is regarded as compatible with the oneness or nonduality of God. The precise relationship between Vishnu and Lakshmi was left undefined, however, and it remained for later generations to work out fuller accounts that both respected Lakshmi's importance to ritual and devotion and at the same time protected monotheism. There were two major resolutions.

The first is represented by Lokacarya (1213–1323). For Lokacarya, the divine consort's role is subordinate and, perhaps, ultimately nonessential. Lakshmi "displays the three essential attributes of a mediator: mercy . . ., dependence on the Lord [Vishnu], . . . and nonsubservience [to] another [than the Lord]." Her ability to mediate between the souls and their Lord is thus ultimately dependent upon Vishnu. In other words, Shri Lakshmi "mediates not as an equal partner of the Lord . . . but only as his dependent and subordinate." There is even a suggestion that Vishnu can himself function as a mediator without Lakshmi's existence. Thus Lokacarya "points out that in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna himself becomes the mediator, whereas in the *Ramayana*, Sita becomes the mediator." (The relevance of this remark becomes clear when one recalls that both Krishna and Sita's consort, Rama, are avataras or "descents" [very roughly, incarnations] of Vishnu [Kumar 1997, 102–7].) Lokacarya, then, preserves monotheism by more or less downgrading Lakshmi's status.

Venkatanatha (1268–1369) offers a different solution. He does distinguish "the two [salvific] functions of the Lord and his consort," the Lord being

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"depicted as the father who disciplines the sinner," and Lakshmi as the divine mother who intercedes for him. The distinction between these two functions is not absolute, however, for the divine consort merely "bring[s] out 'the Lord's natural compassion' so that that compassion becomes the basis for the spiritual rebirth of the offending devotee" (Kumar 1997, 120–1). Moreover, (and most important) there is no real or ontological difference between the divine father and the divine mother. Lakshmi is an inseparable attribute of Vishnu. Since a substance and its inseparable attributes "share in the same essential nature," and since one can't understand a substance without understanding its "essential and inseparable attribute[s]," the Lord and his divine consort form "a single reality" (Kumar 1997, 146–7). Thus "whenever Bhagavan [i.e., Vishnu] is referred to, Lakshmi should also be considered as referred to," and when one offers oneself to either, one is offering oneself to both since the deity to which one offers oneself "is single [though] it rests with two" (Kumar 1997, 124). Venkatanatha thus preserves monotheism by denying that God and his divine consort are ontologically distinct.

The Transcendence of God

There is little doubt that the appeal to and adoration of mystery is a characteristic feature of much Christian thought and practice. Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, begins his *Mystical Theology* by asking the Trinity to guide him to the "most exalted" and hidden secrets of Scripture, which "exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where . . . the mysteries of heavenly truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness" (Dionysius 1957, 191). Nor are themes like this peculiar to Christian mystics and mystical theologians. They are commonplace in the Church Fathers and in a number of later Christian theologians.

Consider first John Chrysostom.

> St. Paul said: "The Lord . . . dwells in unapproachable light." And pay heed to the accuracy with which Paul speaks . . . He does not say: "Who dwells in incomprehensible light," but "in unapproachable light," and this is much stronger than "incomprehensible." A thing is said to be incomprehensible when those who seek after it fail to comprehend it, even after they have searched and sought to understand it, but it does not elude all inquiry and questioning. A thing is unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be investigated nor can anyone come near to it. [Yet] suppose . . . we forget Paul and the prophets for a moment, [and] mount up to the heavens . . . Do you think that the angels in heaven talk over and ask each other questions about the divine essence? By no means! What are the angels doing? They give glory to God and they adore him, they chant without ceasing their triumphal and

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> mystical hymns with a deep feeling of religious awe. Some sing: "Glory to God in the highest"; the seraphim chant: "Holy, holy, holy," and they turn away their eyes because they cannot endure God's presence as he comes down to adapt himself to them in condescension. (Chrysostom 1984, 100)

In *Proslogion 15*, Anselm exclaims: "Lord not only are you that than which a greater cannot be thought, but you are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, if you were not this same being something greater than you could be thought – which cannot be" (Anselm 1965, 137).

Commenting on this passage, M. J. Charlesworth observes that Anselm is reminding us that "even if we understand God to be 'that than which nothing greater can be thought,' we do not thereby have a *positive* or *determinate* knowledge of God" (Anselm 1965, 81, my emphases), and refers us to the reply to Gaunilo where Anselm says that just as one can think or understand "the ineffable" though one can't "specify [or describe] what is said to be ineffable; and just as one can think of [or understand] the inconceivable – although one cannot think of what 'inconceivable' applies to – so also 'that than which a greater cannot be thought' . . . can be thought of and understood even if the thing itself cannot be thought or understood" (Anselm 1965, 189).

Aquinas says that "since our mind is not proportionate to the divine substance, that which is the substance of God remains beyond our intellect and so is unknown to us. Hence the supreme knowledge which man has of God is to know that he does not know God, in so far as he knows that what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him" (*de Potentia*, q. 7 a 5, quoted in Rahner 1974, 58–9). Karl Rahner seems to me to be correct in arguing that, because "the reason for saying" that knowing God involves knowing that one does not know God "holds good for the beatific vision" as well as for the veiled glimpses of God we have in this life, "there is no reason for not applying it to the knowledge of God in the beatific vision" (Rahner 1974, 59).

One of the most powerful statements of this view is given by John Chrysostom, who exclaims: "let us call upon him, then, as the ineffable God who is beyond intelligence, invisible, incomprehensible. Let us call on him as the God who is inscrutable to the angels, unseen by the Seraphim, inconceivable to the cherubim, invisible to the principalities, to the powers, and to the virtues, in fact to *all* creatures without qualification because he is known *only* by the Son and the Spirit" (Chrysostom 1984, 97, my emphases). Why do the seraphim "stretch forth their wings and cover their faces? For what other reason than they cannot endure the sparkling flashes nor the lightning which shines from the throne. Yet they did not see the pure light itself nor the pure essence itself. What they saw was a condescension accommodated to their nature,"

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Chrysostom 1984, 101). So unless the beatified see God more clearly than the angels do, even they do not grasp God's essence! The mystery of God is thus ineluctable.

Nor are appeals to mystery peculiar to Christian worship and reflection. Maimonides believed that God can only be described negatively, and the Kabbalists thought that while "the God of religion" has many names, "the *deus absconditus*, the God who is hidden in his own self, can only be named . . . with the help of words . . . which are not real names at all . . . The early Spanish Kabbalists," for example, used terms like "'Great Reality,' 'Indifferent Unity,' and above all En Sof [the infinite]." Isaac the Blind called the hidden God "that which is not conceivable by thinking," and thus not "He who is not, etc." (Scholem 1946, 11–12).

But if God is an ineluctable mystery as Chrysostom, Anselm, Maimonides, and others maintain, then he can't be caught in our conceptual webs. While we can perhaps say what God is not, and deploy symbols, analogies, and the like to express the divine mystery, no positive statement about God is literally true. Yet if that is the case, theists must qualify the claim that God is a person. While God may be analogous to persons in certain respects, and personhood may be an appropriate metaphor or symbol for the God of the Hebrew Bible or of the New Testament, for Allah, for the Vishnu of Ramanuja or Madhva, or for the Shiva of Shiva Siddhanta, God is not literally a person. Only a few contemporary evangelicals believe *that*.

But neither are William Alston, William Rowe, and others clearly correct in saying that "a symbolic or metaphorical statement S is [cognitively] meaningful only if what it expresses can be replaced by some [cognitively] meaningful literal statement S*" (Rowe 1968, 137). If there were some positive literally true statements about God, in their view, we could use those statements to determine which symbolic or metaphorical or analogical statements about God approach the truth more closely than others do. In their absence, however, while symbols, metaphors, or analogies might somehow *point* to God, they don't increase our understanding of him.

This commonly accepted view is arguably mistaken, however. For one thing, poetry seems to provide counterexamples. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, expresses what young love is like better than any set of literal statements could.[2] A more important point, though, is this.

[2] An anonymous reader has correctly pointed out that the play arguably includes "actual claims" about "[the nature of] young love." But while it is true that we can learn various facts about young love from the play, it doesn't follow that we can therefore *feel* or vicariously *experience* what young love is like. Arguably the *poetry* of the play can sometimes make this possible.

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