

## ***Agape* and *phronesis* as pedagogical virtues**

"Jack shall have Jill; Nought shall go ill"

Things go ill. Our life is like grass, flourishing today and fading tomorrow. One day the whole world shall collapse. And yet Jack and Jill dream about a new world – a better life in the future. What could be their small contribution? They know that human living always is a fusion of good and bad. Their unborn child will surely experience both. But are there small, promising emendations to be made? What may give direction to the process? Where is it possible to start? "Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue / We will make amends ere long" (Shakespeare, 1990, p. 166 and 173).

Aristotelian and Christian ethics play an important part in our cultural tradition. *Phronesis* (practical wisdom or judgement) is the leading virtue in Aristotelian ethics. *Agape* (unconditional love) has a similar position in Christian ethics. The two concepts exemplify the tension between a calculative and a non-calculative ethics. How should we understand the relation between *agape* and *phronesis*? Is it possible to combine these virtues – and in what way, eventually? What consequences may this understanding have in educational context? I contend that these virtues should be seen as central "pedagogical virtues". The word "pedagogical" is chosen because of its connection with *paideia* (rearing of children, culture). We should share the best in our culture with the children.

*Agape* has always been important in my Protestant Christian tradition, but I have never read much about it. *Phronesis* became vital to me (Wivestad, 1974) through reading of *Wahrheit und Methode* (Gadamer, 1965) and because of its origin in Greek tragedies (Aubenque, 1986, troisième partie; Wivestad, 2000). I intend to use much of the academic year 2003-2004 to search for a clearer understanding of the relation between the two concepts, and I hope for criticism and good ideas to guide my further studies. The search is motivated by the expectation that it can give direction to pedagogical processes of emendation in my neighbourhood. Any change may be called development or reform. Emendation is more demanding – it combines correction and improvement.

It is always possible for us to start here and now with some kind of emendation. The good example in practice is more powerful than wise ideas and treatises (Pestalozzi, 1781/1977, Vorrede, p. 5-6; Comte-Sponville, 2001, p. 1). My dream is a network of small groups consisting of parents and other adults in the neighbourhood, persons interested in pedagogical practice and in the exchange of experiences. They help each other in practice, and they meet regularly in homes, churches, health care centres, schools ... to listen to poems and music, to look at pictures and films or to talk about literature they have agreed to read before the meeting. They discuss how they ought to live – live in a context where children are learning by their example – and they encourage each other to emend small elements in their life style and in their relation with the children in their neighbourhood (Wivestad, 1989). This could be done everywhere in some form, but for me it would be a particular challenge to start such groups in the local community where I live. Further studies and deliberations are needed to find different ways to initiate "pedagogical dialogue groups" or "neighbourhood groups", and to propose contents and guidelines for the processes in them. Philosophical problems will be related to the aims of such groups and to the understanding of how emendation processes should be nurtured.

## **Pedagogical virtues**

In antiquity a slave called *paidagogos* was responsible for the care, transport, protection, character formation, moral guidance and intellectual tutoring of the child (Marrou, 1964, p. 201-202). Today these functions are more specialised. If different professions (teachers of children at different age levels, personnel in health and social care, etc.) stick to a segmented view of the child's situation and limit their responsibility, then the needs of the child may not be served (Tavernier, 1999). Therefore all adults who have a relationship with children should reflect on basic pedagogical questions. Klaus Mollenhauer (1994, p. 17-21) has formulated two basic questions: What in our pattern of life do we really wish to transfer to the next generation? And are the things we wish to transfer and the things we do transfer, really good for the child? Such questions may give direction to a search for "eine allgemeine Pädagogik", a common, general pedagogy or "pedagogic"? (The concept 'pedagogic', encompassing both the art of *paideia* and the academic study of it, is used in German-influenced languages. It was formed in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, probably in analogy with rhetoric and didactic. Does the word "pedagogy" indicate that this "art" has been placed in a practical sphere outside the academic studies?). To become better pedagogues, it may indeed be valuable to engage in a discussion focused on eminent pedagogical experiences in our cultural tradition. We should search for important "forgotten connections" – an understanding of / "die in der europäischen Bildungsgeschichte entwickelten Prinzipien pädagogischer Orientierung" / "the principles of pedagogical orientation developed in the European history of human education" (Mollenhauer, 1974, p. 179). But knowledge of such principles is powerless unless the understanding is integrated in our person, our being; integrated with our own experiences, feelings and habits and states of character. Better pedagogues have to be better human beings.

Aristotle understood the virtues as *hexeis*. A *hexis* is not a passive state in the person, but an "active condition" for deliberation, choice and action. A *hexis* is "a way in which we deliberately hold ourselves, taking hold of the feelings and dispositions that are in us merely passively" (Sachs, 2001, p. ix). *Phronesis* (practical wisdom) is the key virtue in Aristotelian ethics (Aubenque, 1986, p. 64-65). It is an intellectual virtue integrated with character virtues like courage and temperance. It connects general rules and particular situations, both in the slow discursive deliberation before choosing an action, and in the swift aesthetic seeing of the nuances in the situation, awakening just those feelings, virtues and rules which are appropriate to the realities of the unique situation. *Phronesis* "is 'seeing' in the here and now where the noble (*kalon*) actually lies and so also where the mean [between excess and deficiency] lies, whether this be the mean in one's own affairs, one's family's, or the city's" (Simpson, 1997).

In the film *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (Kieslowski, 1993) a composer is engaged by the European Council to prepare a concert celebrating the unification of Europe. Before he has finished the composition, he and his little daughter die in a car accident. His wife survives, tries to start anew without any relationships, but is gradually involved in her neighbourhood and in her previous life. In the end she completes her husband's work: "Song for the unification of Europe". The text is an excerpt of the beautiful Greek poem about *agape* (unconditional love, charity) in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13. The film is helping us to see that individual freedom has its place within a generous, loving fellowship, doing well even towards persons we have reasons to hate. Could European citizens be gathered in a celebration of *agape* as the most important human virtue?

Why focus especially on *phronesis* and *agape* as pedagogical virtues? Many other virtues are also important in our relation with children, for instance justice, honesty, humility, humour, patience, ... But *phronesis* is necessary in order to activate the other virtues appropriately in the actual situation, and is therefore fundamental. *Agape* is said to encompass and transcend

the other virtues (Comte-Sponville, 2001, p. 266-270, 281). How should the relation between *phronesis* and *agape* be understood? I want to approach the question by studying the two words (especially *phronesis*) and the traditions they belong to.

## ***The words agape and phronesis***

*Agape* is a central Biblical concept. It was not known by Aristotle (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 174-175, 182). The noun, *agape*, is derived from the Greek verb *agapan*, which "was associated with the care of underlings such as children or servants". The caring action should express "respectful or unselfish love" (Ventimiglia, 2000, p. 9). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible beginning around the middle of the third century before Christ, *agape* and related words are frequently used. *Phronesis* and related words are also used in the Septuagint (Hatch and Redpath, 1998, p. 5-7 and 1439). The New Testament uses the verb *phronein* as to think, to assess, to feel, to be minded, to have concern for, to savour (Acts 28,22; 1 Cor. 13,11; Phil. 1,7; Phil. 3,15; Phil. 4,10; Matt 16,23) both in a positive and negative way. It is a way of thinking which is engaging the whole person. The adjective *phronimos* is used about what is wise or assumed to be wise (Matt. 25,2; 1 Cor. 4,10; 2 Cor 11,19). The substantive *phronesis* is used only twice. In Luke 1,17 "*phronesei dikaion*" is translated as "the wisdom of the just", and in Eph. 1,8 "*sophia kai phronesei*" as "wisdom and insight" (Revised Standard Version) or "wisdom and prudence" (King James). The translators of the Old Testament and the writers of the New may have known the Aristotelian tradition. But they do not make the sharp differentiation between *sophia* and *phronesis*, which Aristotle accentuates in his *Nicomachean ethics* (NE), book VI, chapter 7 and 8. *Phronesis* (including *techne*, special know-how) is an active condition for the attainment of practical wisdom concerning what is good for oneself, while *sophia* (including *episteme*, special knowledge) is directed towards exact theoretical wisdom about the universal and the eternal, a wisdom that is irrelevant in ordinary life.

Pierre Aubenque (1986) contends that the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (in opposition to Plato's concept) is founded on a broad and popular Greek tradition. It is not the abstract ideas, but the "good persons" we know, persons we admire, which give content to the concept of *phronesis*. "Regarding practical wisdom we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it" (NE VI.5 1140a 25. I normally use Ross' translation). Like *psyche* has also *phronesis*, both in sound and meaning, connections with our breathing. The word *phrenes* was used about the diaphragm (Aubenque, 1986, p. 156). The verb *phronein*, to think, is used in Hippocratic literature as synonym with "sane thinking" (p. 159). And the word *sophrosyne*, temperance, belongs to the same family as *phronesis*. Both require moderation (p. 160). Deep breathing and clear thinking is helpful in difficult situations. A source to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* may be found in the Greek tragedies. And a refrain in the tragedies is that the practically wise man knows his own limitation (p.161-162).

Sophocles' *Antigone* represents for us a situation where a man who believes he is absolutely right also has the power to stop all criticism. King Creon displays a lack of *phronesis*. The combination of power and assumed correct knowledge causes the tragedy.

The sons of the former king of Thebes, Polyneices and Eteocles, have killed each other, Polyneices as the leader of a foreign army from Argo, Eteocles as leader of his kinsmen defending Thebes. The army from Thebes won the battle. Creon, the new king of Thebes, has ordered that nobody should be allowed to bury Polyneices, because of his collaboration with the enemy. He reasons like this:

I would not be silent if I saw ruin, instead of safety, marching upon the citizens. Nor would I ever make a man who is hostile to my country a friend to myself, because I know this, that our country is the ship that bears us safe, and that only when we sail her on a straight course can we make true friends. (Sophocles, line 185-190)

Antigone, the sister of the dead brothers, disobeys the King's orders, referring to "the unwritten and unfailing statutes given us by the gods" (455). King Creon sentences her to death. Thereby he gets a conflict also with his son, Haimon, who loves Antigone. Haimon listens to his father's arguments, and then propose an alternative line of thoughts, starting in this way: "For my part, to state how you are wrong to say those things is beyond my power and my desire, although another man, too, might have a useful thought" (685). He refers to persons who silently respect what Antigone had done, and continues:

Do not, then, bear one mood only in yourself: do not think that your word and no other, must be right. For if any man thinks that he alone is wise [*phronein monos*] – that in speech or in mind he has no peer – such a soul, when laid open, is always found empty. ... the pilot who keeps the sheet of his sail taut and never slackens it, upsets his boat, and voyages thereafter with his decking underwater. Father, give way and allow a change from your rage. For if even from me, a younger man, a worthy thought may be supplied, by far the best thing, I believe, would be for men to be all-wise [*epistemes pleon*] by nature. Otherwise – since most often it does not turn out that way – it is good to learn in addition from those who advise you well. (705-722)

A precise *episteme* is something divine, and if we base our actions on apparent correct but in practice insufficient knowledge, the consequences may be fatal. Haimon contends that it is better to try to balance against each other “les discours vraisemblables”, the different tenable propositions containing some relative truths, and then chose the least evil action, being fully aware of the uncertainty and risk in the situation (Aubenque, 1986, p. 163-164). Creon is, however, sure to be right. He refuses to deliberate alternatives and will not seek compromise. Instead he attributes bad motives to his critics.

Antigone dies, Haimon and his mother commit suicide, and the King has to admit that he is guilty, due to his lack of insight in his own limitation: "I have murdered you, son, unwittingly, and you, too, my wife – the misery! I do not know which way I should look, or where I should seek support" (1340). The choir answers this with a beautiful hymn to *phronesis*:

Wisdom [*to phronein*] is provided as the chief part of happiness, and our dealings with the gods must be in no way unholy. The great words of arrogant men have to make repayment with great blows, and in old age teach wisdom. (Sophocles, 1344-1347)

## ***Biblical and Aristotelian traditions***

*Agape* and *phronesis* have their roots in two traditions with quite different conceptions of man.

In the first chapters of Genesis it is told that human beings are created in the image of God – determined to live in a free fellowship with God. They have some kind of similarity with God, may talk with God and are responsible towards God. Man gave names to all the animals, in the beginning. Language makes it possible for us to see connections between the elements of the universe. We have got this ability in order to learn and think and act as responsible guardians, helping God to maintain life in our cosmos and in our home (*oikos*), which is continually attacked by the forces of chaos.

For Aristotle there is a great distance between human beings and God (Aubenque, 1986, p. 81). The most divine are the things that cannot be otherwise than they are, the eternal laws, for example the repeated circular movements of the stars (p. 67, note 3). The beings composing the universe are "of a far more divine nature than human beings" (NE 1141b1, Irwin). Human actions are determined by us, they are not governed by divine providence. Aubenque contends that / "la prudence est le substitut proprement humain d'une Providence défaillante" / "prudence is the appropriate human substitute for a failing divine Providence" (Aubenque, 1986, p. 95). Prudence (in Latin *prudentia*) enables us to look ahead (*providere*) and prepare for an uncertain future, avoid dangers, deliberate ends and means and achieve something good for ourselves and our fellow beings.

In Christian understanding God is not remote, detached from human affairs. God is actively interfering in human history, and Jesus Christ is the clearest image that we can have of God. Jesus embodies God's love, *agape*, a love (charity) that "seeketh not her own" (1 Cor. 13, 5). God's love is given without conditions, and should be passed on to others in the same way, like in a trust-, play- and love-relation between children and parents.

Corresponding to the difference between the divine and the human, the Greek society ranked the male citizens highest, because they were free to rest from manual work and pursue theoretical studies. Women, children and slaves came next in rank. The barbarians did not at all belong to the *polis*, the community.

The Christian community should be universal and egalitarian. The outward differences should not matter for those who are living in relationship with Christ. "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free (1 Cor. 12, 12-13). The greatest human being is not the strong, intelligent and succeeding adult, but the weak, dependent and trusting child. "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18, 2-5). For the Christian, hope for a better future is to be in Christ, be filled with his *agape* and do the works of *agape*.

Both *agape* and *phronesis* presuppose that human life has a *telos* (a final aim), but the understanding of the final aim is different. In Biblical tradition the central aim is to have a good relation with God. In Aristotelian tradition the human *telos* is to realise our special human possibilities. We may therefore expect a conflict or at least a tension between *agape* and *phronesis*.

### ***The relation between agape and phronesis***

To answer the question "who is my neighbour", Jesus tells the eminent story about a man who was knocked down and robbed. The priest and the Levite saw the injured man lying on the side of the road, and hurried on. The Samaritan felt compassion with him and helped him (Luke 10,29-38). Were the priest and the Levite prudent, taking no unnecessary chances for themselves and their waiting congregation? Or perhaps their anxiety blocked their vision, so that they did not see the realities of the situation? Aristotle says that our suppositions about what we should do in action may be "corrupted and perverted by what is pleasant or painful" (NE VI.5 1140b17). When we act wrongly, we don't apply what we know to be good in general – to the actual unique situation.

The foreign Samaritan, however, was "seeing with the heart". I suppose that his *telos* of life influenced his immediate perception of the whole situation. The story is used as a parade

example of charity. Was the Samaritan also prudent? Practically wise persons (*phronimoi*) are able to "see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general" (NE, VI.5 1140b10). For Aristotle "men in general" were members of his own city or state. The robbed man did not belong to the Samaritan's kinfolk. And the Samaritan's action was not good for himself, at least in terms of time and money. *Agape* seems to be the Samaritan's dominant virtue. But perhaps is also *phronesis* necessary? *Phronesis* would help him to see the important details in the situation. And when he had seen that the man on the side of the road was "half dead", he had to deliberate how to help: avoid being robbed himself, find ways to ease the man's misery and find a safe place for his healing.

Does *agape* set the aim and *phronesis* seek out subordinate ends and means? Probably both these virtues have to do with the whole process of aims, ends and means. The recommendation to be "wise (*phronimos*) as serpents and innocent (*akeraios*) as doves" (Matth. 10,16), I interpret as an urge to act prudently within a guileless integrity (cf. Rom. 16,19). *Agape* is a creative source to all that is well for the other, and it is blocking anything that may harm the other, even when the other is an enemy. *Agape* prevents egoistic-opportunistic actions. But so does also *phronesis*? Aristotle argues against the interpretation of *phronesis* as mere "cleverness" (NE VI.12 1144a24-35), and concludes: "it is impossible to be practically wise without being good". The understanding of "being good" is not constructed primarily by the individual, but is given "roughly and in outline" by reference to tradition and the example of persons we have experienced as "good persons" in the community (NE 1094b20 and 1140a 25). But can good traditions and positive authorities give sufficient protection against opportunism?

Modern man seems to follow Machiavelli more than Aristotle and the Bible. The prudent leader portrayed in *The prince* (Machiavelli, 1997) knows "how to assess dangers, and to choose the least bad course of action" (p. 79). He is neither "over-confident" nor "too suspicious" (p. 58-59). He understands the time and circumstances (p. 98), grasps the opportunity (p. 20), and is "prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary" (55).

Immoral actions are controlled by laws and rules. "Gjør din plikt, krev din rett" / "Do your duty, demand you right". With this slogan the government introduced the principles for a reform of the higher education in Norway in 2003 (St. meld. nr. 27, 2000-2001). To lead our actions today, there is a tendency to focus on explicit rules and objectives, precise control of quality and external rewards. But specific rules and control can only secure a low quality of the actions. Rules can't replace good person's sound judgement. Duty can't replace engagement. We need warm hearts and cool heads, in that order. We need both *agape* and *phronesis*. But is it possible to argue that all should be guided by *agape*?

## ***Is agape a secular virtue?***

*Agape* is explicitly related to Biblical tradition, and the most provoking interpretation of the virtue is to exemplify it with the story about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Paul's words:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is

Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2, 5-11)

Eternal power and glory through secular weakness, suffering and death – "the preaching of the cross" was and is "foolishness" to the wise and prudent (1 Cor. 1,18-19). Should we imitate the thinking, feeling, judgement (mind) of Jesus?

Robert J. Nash (1997, p. 165-166) discusses charity as a possible virtue in conversations with others. He refers to a definition by Mark R. Schwehn: Charity is "a disposition to find a way to understand other points of view, especially when the initial temptation is strong for us to ridicule or to dismiss views we consider inferior". Nash seems to accept the definition, but tells that his students react with indignation to Schwehn's presentation of this virtue as a "distinctively Christian" virtue. For most of the students, virtues like charity, "if they are to be worthwhile, must be valid in their own right – because they are good, or useful or uplifting." Nash follows this thinking: "the virtues of humility, faith, self-denial, and charity ... have to be 'decoupled' from their religious roots and secularized." These virtues "can stand on their own"(p. 166).

Perhaps the story about the Samaritan may illustrate his point. The story contains a critique of religious people, and does not focus on the religion of its hero. The Levite and the priest belong to the religious elite of Israel. The Samaritan is a foreigner, and is neither presented as a religious man, nor as a disciple of Jesus. How he had acquired his virtues, Jesus doesn't tell. Perhaps there are ways to learn charity also outside the Biblical tradition? I wonder, however, if *agape* decoupled from religion will be too bleak to defend a place as a virtue transcending *phronesis*. To show openness for and sympathy with nasty opponents is not the same as to give your life for them. The definition of charity given above does not seem to differ significantly from the understanding of *phronesis* in *Antigone*. Nash (1997, p. 175, 179-180) is inspired by Gadamer, who explicitly creates his hermeneutic with *phronesis* as a model (Gadamer, 1965, Zweiter Teil, II.2,b). If *agape* is reduced to *phronesis*, the concept of *agape* becomes insignificant.

Could anyone be driven by *agape* only because an argumentation had convinced him or her that *agape* is "good, or useful or uplifting"? More likely it is examples that give us impulses to act. The most powerful examples are near to us. But examples may also be persons we read about, like the Great Inquisitor, Zossima, Alyosha and the twelve boys (Dostoevsky, 1879, VI, V.4, X and Epilogue), or persons we experience in a film, like the foreigner Malthe in *Skyggen av Emma* (Kragh-Jacobsen, 1988), a Danish movie. Persons do not always reveal their specific convictions. But is it possible to abstract or "decouple" a person from her or his basic conviction? The more we get acquainted with a person, the more the whole person will challenge and encourage us.

### ***Application in pedagogical situations***

Education cannot be a business of selling people what they want "because education, real education, transforms what people want" (Ventimiglia, 2002, p. 8). Education transforms our convictions, our deepest sentiments and active conditions for action. Michael Ventimiglia represents ideas from Charles Peirce's essay *Evolutionary love*, 1893, and adumbrates what it means to teach "agapeistically". God's *agape* "is not merited and cannot be earned ... it does not threaten to withdraw if the beloved changes. The beloved is free, free to accept this love or even to choose ends that are hostile to it.... God's love – experienced in the Christian tradition as grace – has a tendency to transform the sinner into someone who is herself capable of loving others" (Ventimiglia, 2002, p. 10). If we transfer this relation between God and man to the relation between parent and child or teacher and student, the child or student

would be free to leave the situation, free to choose doctrines and lifestyle against the will of the educator, free to commit themselves "to what they think and feel to be the good" (p.11). This is risky, but without risk there is no fundamental growth. The educator's *agape* gives the young the necessary courage to risk failure. "It [*agape*] is not granted because of merit and it will not be taken away because of a lack of merit" (p. 14). The support of the educator is given without conditions. The educator inspires through his or her good example, showing in practice how the freedom should be used following a "leading star" for the life as a whole. The educator wishes, but does not demand, that the young should be guided by the same *telos*.

Can *phronesis* function as a security net? Ventimiglia contends: "it is a matter of educational *phronesis* to determine what ratio of structure to freedom is appropriate for any given context or even for any given student" (p. 12). It is not said more about *phronesis* here, but Ventimiglia presents *agape* as the primary virtue. If so, the educator's calculation of an appropriate ratio of structure in the situation should not limit the basic freedom of the student to choose against the will of the educator. If *phronesis* should define the limits of *agape*, then *phronesis* would be the leading virtue.

Otto Friedrich Bollnow is not explicitly discussing the relation between these virtues, but argues for an understanding of education that implies a combination of calculation and non-calculation. Certain aspects of education can be understood as steady processes of growth and instruction, which may be calculated – as other organic and mechanic processes. Basically, however, education is "Wagnis" (venture), and the outcomes cannot and should not be calculated. The models of education as organic and mechanic processes / "verkennen schon in ihrem ersten Ansatz den eigentlichen Kern der Erziehung, der darauf beruht, daß hier ein freies Wesen einem andern freien Wesen fordernd entgegentritt" / "mistake already in their premises the real core of education, because in education a free being is approaching another free being in a challenging way" (Bollnow, 1984, p. 133, 134). He gives three illuminating examples, the venture of authority, of trust and of openness.

If you give a command in a situation without external power to force the other, you put your personal authority at risk and appeal to a freely chosen obedience. If you are a real authority, your command will be founded on sound judgement, and lack of obedience will imply a failure both in the education of the child and in the relation between you and the child (Bollnow, 1984, p. 142). Trust is basic in human relationship. If someone trusts us and have faith in us, we become better human beings (p. 143). An educator trusting a child who has failed and will try again, needs / "sein ganzes skeptisch-realistisches Wissen" / "all his prudence" (p. 146), and when he decides to trust in spite of all this, he has to risk also a personal failure. If you share with the children your dearest ideas and a content that is "holy" to you, the venture of openness makes you vulnerable to irony and laughter (147).

So far, *agape* and *phronesis* seems to me to be central pedagogical virtues – interrelated virtues, with *agape* as the leading virtue. I search for literature that may help me to a more profound and nuanced understanding.

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