

DE SE KNOWLEDGE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AN OMNISCIENT BEING

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In this paper I examine an argument that has been made by Patrick Grim for the claim that *de se* knowledge is incompatible with the existence of an omniscient being. I claim that the success of the argument depends upon whether it is possible for someone else to know what I know in knowing (F), where (F) is a claim involving *de se* knowledge. I discuss one reply to this argument, proposed by Edward Wierenga, that appeals to first-person propositions and argue that this response is unsuccessful. I then consider David Lewis's theory of *de se* attitudes involving the self-ascription of properties. I claim that, according to this theory, there are two senses in which someone else can know what I know in knowing (F). I then argue that the second sense allows for the compatibility of *de se* knowledge with the existence of an omniscient being.

Consider the following case:¹ I am at a pool party and around the pool are several burning torches. At some point, I smell the distinct smell of burning hair and I come to know that someone's hair is on fire. I then see a reflection in the water of an individual whose hair is on fire and I come to know of this individual that his hair is on fire. Next I realize that everyone is pointing and shouting at me. I suddenly realize:

(F) My hair is on fire!

When I come to realize (F), my behavior changes drastically; I jump into the pool in order to extinguish the flames. The fact that my behavior changes drastically when I go from knowing that someone's hair is on fire (or knowing *de re* of some person that his hair is on fire) to knowing that my hair is on fire suggests that a change in knowledge has occurred. What I know in knowing (F) is not the *de dicto* knowledge that someone's hair is on fire or the *de re* knowledge of some person that his hair is on fire, since I knew each of these things without jumping into the pool. It isn't even the *de dicto* knowledge that Stephan's hair is on fire since I could know that without jumping into the pool (perhaps if I'd had so much to drink that I no longer knew that I was Stephan). Examples such as this one suggest that there is a type of knowledge that is neither *de re* nor *de dicto* knowledge. This type of knowledge has been termed '*de se*' knowledge.

I. De Se Knowledge and Omniscience

The existence of *de se* knowledge poses a *prima facie* difficulty for the possibility of an omniscient being, and more generally, for the possibility that



some other individual can know what I know when I come to have *de se* knowledge. Patrick Grim presents the difficulty that *de se* knowledge raises for omniscience as follows:

In order to qualify as omniscient or all-knowing, a being must know at least all that is known. Such a being must, then, know what I know in knowing [(F)]. . . . But what I know in such a case, it appears, is known by no omniscient being. The indexical 'I' . . . is *essential* to what I know in knowing [(F)]. But only I can use that 'I' to index me—no being distinct from me can do so. I am not omniscient. But there is something that I know that no being distinct from me can know. Neither I nor any being distinct from me, then, is omniscient: there is no omniscient being.²

Grim's argument can be restated as follows:

- (1) I come to know something, namely (F), when I realize that my hair is on fire.
- (2) No one else can know what I know in knowing (F).
- (3) I am not omniscient.
- (4) If I know something that no one else can know and I am not omniscient then no being is omniscient.
- (5) Therefore, no being is omniscient.

Given the validity of Grim's argument, the defender of the possibility of an omniscient being must reject one of the premises. The 'hair-on-fire' example above and others like it successfully demonstrate that premise (1) is true: there is something I come to know when I realize that my hair is on fire.³ Premise (3) is obvious enough. Premise (4) follows from the definition of omniscience and logic. The only premise that seems up for dispute is premise (2).⁴ In this paper, I will explore whether it is possible for some individual distinct from myself to know what I know in knowing (F). I will consider two accounts of *de se* knowledge, one involving first-person propositions and another involving properties. I will conclude that a theory of first-person propositions that allows for the falsity of premise (2) has unacceptable consequences. I will claim that on the properties account, there are two senses in which someone else can know what I know in knowing (F): the first sense does not offer much hope for the possibility of an omniscient being, but the second one does.

II. The First-person Propositions Account

One way of undermining premise (2) is to claim that *de se* knowledge is in fact reducible to *de dicto* knowledge and that this *de dicto* knowledge is knowable by beings distinct from me. Such an approach is adopted by Edward Wierenga in *The Nature of God*.⁵ Wierenga takes as his starting point Roderick Chisholm's account of *de se* knowledge as presented in *Person and Object*.⁶ Chisholm introduces a special notion of entailment (I will follow Wierenga in referring to this special sense as 'entail') according to which

a proposition p entails the property of being Q just in case p is necessarily such that (i) if it obtains then something has the property of being Q and (ii) whoever accepts p believes that something is Q .⁷ Chisholm claims that in using a sentence involving a first-person pronoun an individual grasps a first-person proposition. A first-person proposition is one that entails the individual's individual essence or haecceity. Chisholm provides the following definition for 'individual essence' or 'haecceity':

G is an individual essence (or haecceity) =Df. G is a property which is such that, for every x , x has G if and only if x is necessarily such that it has G , and it is impossible that there is a y other than x such that y has G .⁸

On Chisholm's proposal, in believing (F) I believe a first-person proposition that entails the conjunction of my individual essence and the property of having hair that is on fire. Chisholm goes on to state the following "corollary" to his view: "whereas each person knows directly and immediately certain propositions implying his own individual essence, no one knows any propositions implying the individual essence of anyone else."⁹ I will refer to this claim in what follows as 'Chisholm's Corollary'.¹⁰

Clearly, Chisholm's account of *de se* knowledge entails the truth of premise (2) of Grim's argument. In particular, Chisholm's Corollary states that no one but me can grasp propositions that entail my haecceity. If this is the case, then no one can know what I know in knowing (F) since (F) is a first-person proposition that entails my haecceity. Wierenga has argued that we can accept Chisholm's account of *de se* knowledge without accepting Chisholm's Corollary. He claims that the thesis that only I can know my first-person propositions:

is not an essential requirement of the reduction of *de se* belief to *de dicto*; it is not [as Chisholm claims] a corollary of it. What is crucial to the reduction is that it should provide as an object of my *de se* belief something that I cannot believe without believing something about myself; it is immaterial whether someone else can believe it, as long as whoever else believes it does not end up with a belief about himself or herself.¹¹

Wierenga accepts the part of Chisholm's account according to which S 's having a *de se* belief that he himself or she herself is F involves believing a first-person proposition p that entails the conjunction of S 's haecceity and the property F . However, he rejects the claim that p can only be known by S . He provides the following formulation of belief *de se*:

(W) A person, S , believes *de se* that he himself or she herself is F just in case there is a haecceity E such that S has E and S believes a proposition entailing the conjunction of E and F .¹²

It is consistent with (W) that someone else, S , believes the same first-person proposition that I believe in believing (F) without S having a *de se* belief,

since the haecceity entailed by the first-person proposition is mine, not S's. This allows Wierenga to reject premise (2) of Grim's argument since someone else can know what I know in knowing (F).

It is true that if the proponent of first-person propositions rejects Chisholm's Corollary, he thereby avoids Grim's objection to omniscience. However, in rejecting the Corollary he also introduces substantial difficulties for his theory. Recall that one of the main reasons for positing *de se* belief in the first place was to explain differences in behavior. It is only when I realize that *my* hair is on fire that I jump into the pool. If we reject Chisholm's Corollary, we lose the ability to explain differences in behavior in terms of differences in content.¹³ According to the view under consideration, when I know (F) I know some first-person proposition that entails the conjunction of my haecceity and the property of having hair that is on fire. Suppose that someone else at the party, Susan, is also able to grasp this first-person proposition. She will grasp a proposition that entails my haecceity and the property of having hair that is on fire. Knowing this proposition will not lead her to jump in the pool. The content of her knowledge will be the same as the content of my knowledge, but her behavior will be different from my behavior.¹⁴ Therefore, rejecting Chisholm's Corollary means rejecting the plausible supposition that differences in behavior are explainable in terms of differences in content.

Secondly, an example from David Lewis shows that (W) is an unacceptable reduction of *de se* knowledge to *de dicto* knowledge. Lewis writes:

Consider the case of two gods. They inhabit a certain possible world, and they know exactly which world it is. Therefore they know every proposition that is true at their world. Insofar as knowledge is a propositional attitude, they are omniscient. Still I can imagine them to suffer ignorance: neither one knows which of the two he is. They are not exactly alike. One lives on top of the tallest mountain and throws down manna; the other lives on top of the coldest mountain and throws down thunderbolts. Neither one knows whether he lives on the tallest mountain or on the coldest mountain; nor whether he throws manna or thunderbolts.¹⁵

Since both gods know every proposition, they both know every first-person proposition. Let us refer to the haecceity of the god on the tallest mountain as 'H.' Call the proposition that entails the conjunction of H and the property of being on the tallest mountain 'p.' Both gods know p. By (W), the god on the tallest mountain's knowledge of p is *de se* knowledge, whereas the god on the coldest mountain's knowledge of p is not *de se*, since p entails the former god's haecceity and not the latter's. But even though the god on the tallest mountain's knowledge of p amounts to *de se* knowledge according to (W), he still doesn't know where he is by knowing only propositions. In order to know where he is, he would have to know that H is *his* haecceity. The fact that (W) entails that the god has *de se* knowledge, even though he still doesn't know where he is, demonstrates that the proposed reduction of *de se* to *de dicto* fails.¹⁶

Although rejecting Chisholm's Corollary does allow the proponent of first-person propositions to reject premise (2) of Grim's argument, it introduces new difficulties for the theory. First, it requires one to abandon the supposition that differences in behavior are explainable in terms of differences in content. Secondly, if others are permitted to grasp my first-person propositions, the additional difficulty arises as to how I can know that my first-person propositions are mine rather than someone else's.¹⁷ Knowing this seems to require knowing what *my* haecceity is, and this is knowledge that cannot be given in terms of propositions, first-person or otherwise.

III. The Properties Account

David Lewis provides an alternative theory of *de se* knowledge according to which the objects of *de se* attitudes are properties.¹⁸ In what follows I will discuss what implications this theory has for premise (2) of Grim's argument. I will argue that, given Lewis's theory, there are two different senses in which someone else can know what I know in knowing (F). Although both senses are sufficient for the rejection of premise (2) of Grim's argument, the proponent of the possibility of an omniscient God should claim that God is capable of knowing what I know in knowing (F) in the second sense.

Lewis takes the objects of *de se* beliefs to be properties. He claims that while propositions are sufficient for characterizing the content of the beliefs one might have about what kind of world one inhabits, they fail to characterize the content of the beliefs one might have about who or where one is within a world. In order to characterize the content of beliefs concerning who or where one is within a world, we must adopt properties rather than propositions as the objects of belief. To have a *de se* belief is to self-ascribe a property. For example, in believing (F) I self-ascribe the property of having hair that is on fire (I will refer to this property henceforth as 'F*').

Given this account of knowledge *de se*, is it true that no one can know what I know in knowing (F)? Lewis considers a case in which two individuals have the same belief. Madman Heimson believes himself to be Hume. Hume also believes himself to be Hume. There seems to be a sense in which Hume and Heimson believe the same thing; however what Heimson believes is false and what Hume believes is true. Lewis states, "There are two ways out. (1) Heimson does not, after all, believe what Hume did. Or (2) Heimson does believe what Hume did, but Heimson believes falsely what Hume believed truly."¹⁹ In defense of the second way out, Lewis states, "But there had better also be a central and important sense in which Heimson and Hume believe alike. For one thing, the predicate 'believes he is Hume' applies to both."²⁰ Lewis concludes, "If we can agree that beliefs are in the head, so that Heimson and Hume may indeed believe alike, then the first way out is shut. We must take the second. Heimson's belief and Hume's have the same object."²¹ Heimson and Hume both have the same property as the object of their belief; they both self-ascribe the property of being Hume.

The example involving Heimson and Hume suggests a way in which someone else can know what I know in knowing (F). If the object of someone else's *de se* knowledge is the same as the object of my *de se* knowledge in knowing (F) then she counts as knowing what I know in knowing (F). This claim can be stated as follows (where 'F*' denotes the property of having hair that is on fire):

(L1) Someone else, S, knows what I know in knowing (F) if i) I know that I myself have F* and ii) S knows that she herself has F*.²²

In knowing (F), I self-ascribe the property F*. Suppose there is someone at the party, Susan, who is out of sight from me and her hair also catches on fire. Suppose that Susan comes to know (F). In doing so, Susan self-ascribes F*. Susan has the same property as the object of her *de se* knowledge as I do, and, according to (L1), she knows what I know in knowing (F).

Is (L1) satisfactory as an account of what it is for someone else to know what I know in knowing (F)? Does Susan know what I know? I think there is a sense in which she does and a sense in which she does not. She does know what I know in that she has the same object of knowledge as I do; we both have F* as the object of our knowledge. Similarly, sameness of object of knowledge explains sameness of behavior; we both take ourselves to have the property of having hair that is on fire and we will both try to extinguish our hair. But there is another sense in which Susan doesn't know what I know. After all, I know that *my* hair is on fire and Susan knows that *her* hair is on fire. Susan, being out of sight, is completely ignorant of the fact that *my* hair is on fire. This suggests that although there is a clear sense in which Susan does know what I know, there is another sense in which she does not.

Susan's ignorance suggests that there is another sense in which someone distinct from me knows what I know in knowing (F). Lewis considers the analogous case of belief:

Suppose Heimson manages to convince his psychiatrist that he is right, so that the psychiatrist also ascribes to Heimson the property of being Hume. Then Heimson and his psychiatrist share a common belief. Not in the sense in which Heimson and Hume do—the psychiatrist doesn't believe that he himself is Hume—but in another, equally legitimate sense.²³

Suppose that Sam is at the party and he sees my hair catch on fire. Just as there is a sense in which Heimson's psychologist believes what Heimson believes in believing that he is Hume, there is a sense in which Sam knows what I know in knowing (F). Sam ascribes to me the same property that I ascribe to myself. In order for knowledge of this type to be possible, it must be possible to ascribe properties to other individuals. The ascription of properties to individuals involves belief *de re* and on Lewis's account *de re* belief is also understood in terms of the self-ascription of properties: For S to ascribe a property, X, to an individual Y, he i) self-ascribes the property of standing in a suitable relation of acquaintance, A, uniquely to something that has the property X and ii) S stands in A to Y.²⁴ Given

this account of what it is to ascribe properties to an individual, we can formulate a second sense in which someone can know what I know in knowing (F):

(L2) Someone else, S, knows what I know in knowing (F) if i) I know that I myself have F* and ii) S knows that he himself has the property of standing in a suitable relation of acquaintance, A, uniquely to something that has F* and iii) S stands in A to me.

Sam knows what I know in knowing (F) in the sense given by (L2) since he knows that he has the property of standing in a suitable relation of acquaintance to something (and nothing else) that has F* and Sam does, in fact, stand in that relation to me.

Note that according to the sense of 'knowing what I know' given in (L2), having the same knowledge as me does not require having the same object of *de se* knowledge as me. The object of my *de se* knowledge is F*; whereas the object of Sam's *de se* knowledge is the property of bearing a relation of acquaintance uniquely to an individual that has F*. This time the difference in our respective objects of knowledge explains the differences in our behavior (I jump in the pool, Sam runs over to help).

I have claimed that, given Lewis's theory, there are two distinct senses in which someone else can be said to know what I know in knowing (F). It might be objected that (L1) and (L2) both fail to give a proper account of what it is for someone else to know what I know in knowing (F). After all, as argued above, Susan can have the same object of knowledge as me without knowing that *my* hair is on fire. So there seems to be a sense in which Susan does not know what I know in knowing (F). Similarly, Sam can ascribe the same property to me that I ascribe to myself, but in doing so, the object of his knowledge is not the same as the object of my knowledge. So there is a sense in which Sam does not know what I know in knowing (F) since the object of our knowledge differs. One might argue that to *truly* count as knowing what I know in knowing (F), someone else must (i) have the same property as me as the object of one's knowledge and (ii) must ascribe that property to me.

However, it is a consequence of the properties account that it is logically impossible for someone distinct from me to satisfy both (i) and (ii). This can be seen by noting that on this theory, *de se* knowledge is a special case of *de re* knowledge; *de se* knowledge involves the ascription of a property to an object (*viz.* oneself). Lewis states, "Self-ascription of properties is ascription of properties to oneself under the relation of identity. Certainly, identity is a relation of acquaintance *par excellence*. So belief *de se* falls under belief *de re*."²⁵ When I know (F), I ascribe F* to myself under the relation of identity. No one else can do that for the mundane reason that no one else is identical to me. Someone distinct from me can either ascribe F* to me under some non-identity acquaintance relation, by having some property other than F* as the object of his knowledge (such as in the case of Sam), or one can have F* as the object of her knowledge without ascribing F* to me (such as in the case of Susan). What is impossible, on the properties account, is for anyone distinct from me to have F* as the object of her knowledge while, at the same time, ascribing it to me.

IV. *The Properties Account and the Possibility of Omniscience*

Let us now return to Grim's argument against omniscience. I have claimed that on Lewis's theory there are two senses in which someone else can know what I know in knowing (F), so adopting Lewis's theory allows one to reject premise (2). Grim recognizes that Lewis's theory allows for someone else to know what I know in knowing (F), however he claims that although the theory "might seem to offer an escape for omniscience from indexical difficulties," it, in fact, leaves omniscience "in worse shape than before."²⁶ He claims, "In order for God to know what I know, on Lewis's account, he must self-attribute truly the properties of making a mess and of having made some terrible mistakes. But God *cannot* self-attribute such properties truly, for God makes neither messes nor mistakes. God does not, then, know what I know. God is not omniscient."²⁷ The sense of 'knowing what I know' that Grim adopts in this passage is clearly the sense given by (L1). Grim presupposes that in order for God to know what I know in knowing (F), God, like Susan, must truly self-ascribe F*. Truly self-ascribing various properties like having hair that is on fire, or making a mess, Grim argues, would run contrary to God's nature.²⁸ However, the proponent of the possibility of an omniscient being should not claim that God knows what I know in knowing (F) in the sense given by (L1). After all, recall that Susan can know what I know in the sense of (L1) while being completely ignorant of the fact that *my* hair is on fire. Similarly, God might know everything that I know in the sense of (L1) without knowing any of the properties that I have. I agree with Grim that if the proponent of the possibility of omniscience claims that God knows what I know in the sense given by (L1) then omniscience is in worse shape than before. However, I think the proponent of the possibility of omniscience would be foolish to claim that God knows what I know in knowing (F) in the sense of (L1). Instead she should claim that God knows what I know in knowing (F) in the sense given by (L2): God knows what I know in virtue of being able to truly ascribe to me all those properties that I know myself to have.

It might be objected that even though God knows what I know in knowing (F) in the sense given by (L2), there is still a sense in which God does not know what I know in knowing (F), since God does not have the same object of *de se* knowledge as me. God fails to know what I know in the (L1) sense. An objector might argue that God's lack of knowledge in this sense is sufficient for denying his omniscience. However, as noted above, given the properties account, it is logically impossible for a being distinct from me to know what I know in both the (L1) and the (L2) sense. Therefore, knowing what I know in both of these senses cannot be a requirement for omniscience. Since the (L2) sense is the sense of 'knowing what I know' that is relevant to omniscience, only this sense is necessary for omniscience. The defender of Grim's argument had better not demand that God truly ascribes F* to me under the same relation that I ascribe F* to myself, because I ascribe F* to myself under the relation of identity, and not even God is capable of doing that.²⁹

NOTES

1. The example I present is a variation on David Kaplan's 'pants-on-fire' example in David Kaplan, "Demonstratives," in *Themes From Kaplan*, ed. Almog, Perry, and Wettstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 481–563. Other examples involving *de se* beliefs may be found in John Perry, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Noûs* 13 (1979): 3–21 and in Hector-Neri Castañeda, "'He': A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness," *Ratio* 8 (1966): 130–57.

2. In Patrick Grim, "Against Omniscience: The Case from Essential Indexicals," *Noûs* 19 (1985): 151–80. Grim uses Perry's 'messy shopper' example to motivate his argument. In the original quote he refers not to (F) but to the claim: I am making a mess. A similar argument is given by Norman Kretzmann in "Omniscience and Immutability," *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966): 409–21.

3. I am assuming here that when I go from knowing *de re* of Stephan that his hair is on fire to knowing *de se* that my hair is on fire, there is something new that I come to know; the content of my knowledge changes. This overlooks the account presented by Perry in "The Problem of the Essential Indexical." Perry holds that when I go from having *de re* knowledge to having *de se* knowledge, there is no change in content. He claims that what I know in both cases is a singular proposition consisting of me and the property of having hair that is on fire. According to Perry, what changes in going from the *de re* case to the *de se* case is the way in which I believe this singular proposition. I find this account unpersuasive. It seems clear that in the hair-on-fire example, and others like it, when I go from having *de re* knowledge to having *de se* knowledge, there is something that I come to learn; there is a change in *what* I know, not just in *how* I know something. This change in what I know seems best characterized in terms of a change in the content of my knowledge.

4. Some disagree. It has been suggested to me by Phil Bricker and by an anonymous referee that the defender of the possibility of an omniscient being should deny premise (4) of Grim's argument. This would mean denying that an omniscient being must know all that is known. On such an account it is possible that I know something that is not known by an omniscient being. Although rejecting premise (4) does avoid Grim's conclusion, it means adopting a substantially weakened account of omniscience. An account of omniscience that succeeds in rejecting premise (2) and upholds (4) is, I think, preferable to one that rejects (4) and thereby admits that an omniscient being fails to know all that is known.

5. Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

6. Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1976). Chisholm rejects this account of *de se* belief later in *The First Person* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981). In this later work, Chisholm adopts a property account of *de se* belief similar to the one I consider below.

7. Chisholm, 28.

8. *Ibid.*, 29. I follow Chisholm in using 'individual essence' and 'haecceity' interchangeably. I realize this overlooks some important issues.

9. *Ibid.*, 36.

10. As Wierenga I think correctly points out, 'corollary' turns out to be a misnomer.

11. Wierenga, 51.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Jonathan Kvanvig also raises this point in discussing Chisholm's theory in *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 65.

14. One might object that even though Susan and I both have the same first-person proposition as the content of our knowledge, there are differences in our other beliefs that account for our differences in behavior. In response we can suppose that Susan and I are alike with respect to our entire system of beliefs. It will still be the case that we will behave differently.

15. David Lewis, "Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*," *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 139.

16. Wierenga (54–56) considers Lewis's example. When Lewis discusses the example of the gods as an objection to a haecceitist account of *de se*, he claims that the god on the tallest mountain knows the proposition expressed by his utterance 'I am on the tallest mountain' without knowing that he himself is on the tallest mountain. Wierenga takes Lewis to be making the point that the god doesn't know the utterance is his utterance. Wierenga points out, correctly I think, that this knowledge not necessary for knowledge *de se*. I take Lewis to be making a different point. The god doesn't know that the proposition expressed by the utterance is *his* proposition (that it entails *his* essence) even though, according to (W), his knowledge of the proposition counts as *de se* knowledge.

17. Note that both of these difficulties never arise if the proponent of first-person propositions keeps Chisholm's Corollary. However, the trouble with Chisholm's Corollary is that it lacks independent motivation: why can't someone distinct from me know the same first-person propositions as me? Perhaps it is exactly this lack of independent motivation that leads Wierenga to jettison it.

18. Lewis (1986). A similar account is presented in Chisholm (1981).

19. Lewis, 142.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 143.

22. As noted above, Lewis takes *de se* belief to involve the self-ascription of a property. For me to believe that my hair is on fire is to self-ascribe the property of having hair that is on fire. For me to know that my hair is on fire, it cannot be the case that I merely self-ascribe F^* since self-ascription is not sufficient for knowledge. I take the locution 'S knows that she herself has property P' to express the knowledge analogue of 'S self-ascribes property P' for the belief case.

23. Lewis, 151.

24. See Lewis, 155–57 for what counts as a suitable relation of acquaintance. In my example I assume that seeing counts as such a relation.

25. Lewis, 156.

26. Grim, 171.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Grim also points out that the difficulty does not just lie in the fact that God would need to truly self-ascribe properties that are contrary to his nature. If knowing what I know in the sense of (L1) were required for omniscience, God would also have to truly ascribe contradictory properties to himself. See Grim, 172.

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