

POPE JOHN PAUL II AND THE LEGACY OF DECOLONIZATION

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Abstract

Generally, decolonization is about cultural, psychological and economic freedom for indigenous people with the goal of achieving indigenous sovereignty, that is, the right and ability of indigenous peoples to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, political and economic systems. On the other hand, there is the possibility of seeing decolonization as a reversal of the process of European imperial expansion with all its political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic consequences. There is yet the third approach which could be regarded as a consequence of the second. It is expressed by the term, 'decolonize your mind'. That is thinking and knowledge, the way you understand reality and relate with your fellows. It is more difficult both to understand and practice. Karol Wojtyla followed this approach but in a refined manner thereby uplifting it to universal relevance. His development of the approach applies to both the colonized and the colonizers. It is a global approach aimed at proper and correct understanding of man either as colonized or colonizer. The aim is to inculcate authentic peace and love into peoples of all nations and cultural groups. That is, to correct the conceptual mistakes that led to colonialism. The foundation for this is his philosophy of personalism. This position of this paper is that Wojtyla's development of an ethical personalism was to be of great consequence, as it became fundamental to his work as Pope, thereby forming the philosophical basis for several decades of the Catholic Church's influence on the world and on millions of people. This is his legacy.

Keywords: *Decolonization, culture, freedom, legacy*

Introduction

The word decolonization was first coined by the German Economist, Moritz Julius Bonn in the 1930s to describe former colonies that achieved self-governance. There are others who hold that it was coined by Franz Fanon in his seminal work, *The*

Wretched of the Earth. He describes it as the replacement of “one species of men” with another and there must, therefore, be a change in the entire *tabula rasa* and structure of the society.¹ He was influenced by his experience of the Algerian war. For him, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.

Generally, decolonization is about cultural, psychological and economic freedom for indigenous people with the goal of achieving indigenous sovereignty, that is, the right and ability of indigenous peoples to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, political and economic systems.

We identify three approaches for a correct understanding of the term. On the one hand, there is the traditionalist definition of decolonization as a process by which legally dependent territories obtained their constitutional independence and entered the world stage of international relations as sovereign states. The legal transition was symbolized for the nations by the raising of their own flags, the composition of new national anthems and their joining the United Nations as full and equal members. This is the popular notion. Although it looks lucid and useful in its pragmatism, it is clearly narrow. On the other hand, there is the possibility of seeing decolonization as a reversal of the process of European imperial expansion with all its political, economic, social, cultural and linguistic consequences. The approach is methodologically advantageous because it allows for the analysis of both territories and developments that the strictly constitutional view neglects. There is yet the third approach which could be regarded as a consequence of the second. It is expressed by the term, ‘decolonize your mind’. That is thinking and knowledge, the way you understand reality and relate with your fellows. It is more difficult both to understand and practice. Generally, people apply this to the populace of the new independent states. Applied to the second approach, it leads to a successful reversal of the process.

Karol Wojtyla followed this approach but in a refined manner thereby uplifting it to universal relevance. His development of the approach applies to both the colonized and the colonizers. It is a global approach aimed at proper and correct understanding of man either as colonized or colonizer. The aim is to inculcate authentic peace and love into peoples of all nations and cultural groups. That is, to correct the conceptual mistakes that led to colonialism.

How did World War II Lead to Decolonization?

The Second World War helped to liberate Africa from an old colonialism. It prepared the way for Africa's political decolonization through a number of side-effects and after effects. Of prominence here is that the war weakened Britain's capacity to retain a world-wide empire. As the war came to an end, Britain was impoverished and exhausted. This led to the break-up of the British empire in Asia. This act helped the cause of decolonization in other parts of the world. In 1947, India and Pakistan led the way to liberation. Meanwhile the myth of imperial invincibility was destroyed by the initial defeat of France by Germany in 1940. Similar effects were created by Britain's defeat by Japan in south-east Asia in 1941-42.

The horizons of Africans who took part in the war and those who stayed at home were widened and made international. Those who took part in the war saw the world and acquired new expectations. According to Mazrui, "The white man was dehumanized by being demoted from the mythology of the demi-god. A frightened white man next to an African in battle was a new experience, especially in the jungles of Burma where African and Japanese soldiers both adjusted more easily to the difficult conditions than did white soldiers."² There was the emergence of the principle of self-determination in the colonies. The way for this was prepared by the moral cause for the war which can be summed up as opposition to tyranny and to foreign invasion in Europe.

Then came the Atlantic Charter between Roosevelt and Churchill. It was a declaration of new values. In the midst of defending Europe's own liberties, Imperial Britain and imperial Europe resisted these forces of decolonization. No wartime European figure symbolized this paradox more eloquently than Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime premier. While Churchill succeeded in helping to defeat German Nazism, he failed to vanquish Afro-Asian nationalism.

This is the first context of Wojtyla's legacy of decolonization. It was a reaction to the tragic experiences of the second world war that triggered off decolonization. The second is the rise of personalism.

Wojtyla and Personalism

An important milestone of 20th Century philosophy was the rise of personalism. After the crimes and atrocities against millions of human beings in two World Wars, especially the Second, some philosophers and other thinkers began to seek arguments showing the value of each human being, to expose and denounce the folly of political structures that violate the inalienable rights of the individual person.

Karol Wojtyla is prominent among them. During his time as priest and teacher at the university of Lublin, Karol Wojtyla (1920-2005; later became Pope John Paul II) developed his own personalism. He was influenced by the ancient and medieval philosophers especially Thomas; phenomenology especially Max Scheler as well as by the French personalist, Mounier. In 1954, he wrote a doctoral dissertation on Scheler. His initial thesis: individualism is and remains egocentric and selfish. Personalist ethics on the other hand are altruistic. They inspire a person to be a gift to others, to discover the joy of giving away oneself. He appeals to the ancient concept of

'person' to emphasize the particular value of each human being. Persons are unique because of their subjectivity by which they possess an unrepeatable interior world in the history of humanity. Their rational nature grants them a special character among living beings, among which is the transcendence to the infinite. Wojtyla magisterially shows how each human being's personhood is rooted in a conscious and free subjectivity, which is marked also by personal and social responsibility. Wojtyla's original philosophical analysis takes for its starting point the human act, in which consciousness and experience consolidate voluntary choices, which are objectively efficacious. By their acts, the person determines their own personhood. This self-dominion manifests the person and enables him to live together in a community in which one's neighbor can be a companion on the voyage of life. His rigorous articulation is found in his principal philosophical work, *The Acting Person*. To this work we now turn.

The Acting Person

The fundamental question that Wojtyla attempts to answer in this work is; what is a human being? A basic theme for Wojtyla is the unity of the human person. He rejects Descartes dichotomy of body and soul. He insists that body and soul are inseparable – in the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act. The stand or fall together.

In this work, straddles two distinct philosophical world traditions – Aristotelian-Thomistic thought and Schelerian phenomenology. Wojtyla insists that his philosophy is consistent with the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition; nevertheless, he makes the claim that he is doing something completely new in relation to the said traditions. He thereby, appeals to the ancient concept of 'person' to emphasize the particular value of each human being. Wojtyla's legacy begins

with how his personalist philosophy makes use of and develops the traditional definition of the *persona individua substantia* of a rational nature. (Boethius).

In *Acting Person*, there is an attempt to harmonize the Boethian-Thomistic definition of man as an individual substance of a rational nature with the modern phenomenological view of man as an incommunicable subject. Many refer to Wojtyla as a Thomist and a phenomenologist. For us, he is simply a personalist. The touchstone of Wojtyla's thought is the person. It is the only basis upon which the integration of the objective philosophy of being and the subjective philosophy of consciousness can occur.

Wojtyla accepts that the medieval conception of *actus humanus* is derived from the Aristotelian definition of man as a rational animal (*homo est animal rationale*) together with Boethius revision of this definition – *persona est rationalis naturae individua*. The concept of the "person" is broader and more comprehensive than the concept of the "individual," just as the person is more than individualized nature. The person [is] an individual whose nature is rational - according to Boethius' full definition *persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*. Nevertheless, in our perspective it seems clear that neither the concept of the "rational nature" nor that of its individualization seems to express fully the specific completeness expressed by the concept of the person.

It is not surprising that Wojtyla accepts Boethius contention that the person possesses a rational nature. Nevertheless, Wojtyla insists on his originality, that is, that he is using Boethius definition in a new way.

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As we shall see, for Wojtyla, a person is not simply a subjective conscious being; there is also the personal aspect.

Scheler

Wojtyla acknowledges that he 'owes everything' not only to Aristotle and Thomas; also, to Scheler. What Scheler's phenomenological definition of the person reveals to Wojtyla is that the traditional definition of the person as articulated by Boethius is inadequate. Scheler thus defines person :

The person is the concrete and essential unity of being of acts of different essences which in itself . . . precedes all essential act differences (especially the difference between inner and outer perception, inner and outer willing, inner and outer feeling, loving and hating, etc.). *The being of the person is therefore the 'foundation' of all essentially different acts.*⁴

It follows that for Scheler, person is a unity of diverse acts. It means that contrary to Boethius and Thomas, a person is neither a substance nor specifically rational being. Basically, a person is an actor or a 'pure act-center' that gives unified meaning to diverse acts. Scheler's view of person is not a being but solely and exclusively a consciousness. Personhood cannot be reduced to a

single activity even when it is rational activity. The identity of the person as unifier of acts is revealed against the backdrop of diverse acts. This is one of the most important elements of his philosophy. The influence this principle has on Wojtyla is the recognition that the person is a synthesis of different activities – thought and action (experience). This insight enables Wojtyla to hold that although man always acts “within a rational framework of reference”, the person is essentially a being whose essence is revealed not only “in thinking” but “in the actual enacting of his existence.” Two facts are clear at this stage: on the one hand, that Scheler and Wojtyla agree that personhood is not exhausted by rational activity. On the other hand, both extend the concept of personhood to include special activity. For Wojtyla, however, it is always rational in some sense. We must add that Wojtyla corrects Scheler’s phenomenology by focusing more closely on the phenomenon of action. He discovers that Scheler completely disregards the “moment of efficacy” in which the person experiences himself as the cause of his action. It is in this moment that the person’s unity as substance, subject and agent most clearly comes into view.

Subject – Object

It is with the aid of phenomenology that the person comes to light as not only an object or a ‘something’ but more basically as a ‘subject’ or a ‘somebody’. Man is both subject and object and experiences his objecthood in a unique way. Precisely, man experiences himself as part of a class of objects, that is, a member of a species or more precisely part of a class of somebodies. Wojtyla strongly holds that it is not enough to define man as an individual of the species of homo.⁵ The term ‘person’ has more signification than just the concept of individual person of a species. There is something more to him which is brought out wherever the term ‘person’ is used – man does not experience himself as a member of a species but as unique unrepeatable being. Only

persons are really subjects because only persons can perceive themselves as ‘myself’.

It is now ripe to state Wojtyla’s definition of the person: “the ego subjectively constituted by consciousness (self-consciousness)” ego being understood here as “the subject having the experience of his subjectiveness.⁶ It is consciousness that makes subjective experience possible. On account of the fact that it enables man to subjectively cognize himself, “it makes self-knowledge possible as well.⁷ To be clearly noted is that the primary function of consciousness is to enable the person to reflect on the impact of his actions have on his development as a person. Consciousness is thus necessary for man to develop himself through action.

Though influenced by Boethius, nevertheless, he disagreed with him. Boethius places accent on the individuality of the substantial being of man as possessor of rational nature rather than the whole specificity of the subjectivity essential to man as a person. The person himself is secondary or even absent in the definition. The tradition that focuses on the objective aspect of man confused the condition of being a person with the reality of personhood itself.

Wojtyla faults much of modern philosophy for narrowing much of man’s experience of himself to the purely subjective. Against Scheler, Wojtyla affirms that man’s experience of himself permits him to infer himself as a suppositum. What Scheler overlooks is the experience of action, the “moment of efficacy”. It is precisely this that confirms man as both a subject and an object. Wojtyla makes this clearer in a 1976 follow-up essay to the *Acting Person*. Phenomenological experience also reveals that existence (suppositum) and activity are integrated in the acting person such that the person’s manner of being informs his action and vice versa. By reflecting on his experience while engaging in deliberate action (*actus humanus*) the person comes to see the truth of the philosophical principle: *operari sequitur esse* – that ‘for something

to act, it must first exist'. The term means in effect not only that every *operari* stems from *esse*, but that *operari* is the most proper avenue to the knowledge of the *esse*.

Wojtyla clearly indicates how his personalist philosophy differs from the views of Scholastics and the phenomenologists. Whereas the scholastics paid inadequate attention to consciousness, the modern absolutized it. He rejected Husserl's view that being itself 'is constituted through consciousness. Let us not forget the primary reason Wojtyla abandons Scheler's phenomenology is because he reduces man to passive subject of experience. For him, Husserl's *epoche* does the same. Wojtyla's novelty is his discovery that the person is not simply an object of knowledge or subject of experience but an 'agent of action' – an actor. He thereby overcomes the limitations of metaphysics and phenomenology thus reestablishing the analysis of the person on a new plane. Wojtyla's persistent emphasis on consciousness enables him to point to the rational and free action as opposed to purely intellectual as the distinguishing mark of personhood. Consciousness is an important property of the person because the person is essentially a moral actor.

We can now state one of the most distinguishing elements of Wojtyla's maximalist interpretation of rationale. The person's mind (rationale) is ordered not just towards the acquisition of intellectual knowledge or self-knowledge but towards personal relation to the truth. In this light, truth is not understood as an intellectually cognized abstract concept but a dynamic reality that demands personal surrender.⁸ Wojtyla insists that the true and the good are convertible. The truth can only be experienced under the aspect of the good. Precisely, it is this experience of the true as good that obligates the person to act. On account of the fact that man is an actor and not just a thinker, the experience of the true as good is primary for the person.⁹ Wojtyla holds that it is this experience that

compels the person to act according to moral truth so as to attain self-fulfillment.

So far, we have with Wojtyla delineated the three aspects of the person as actor, subject and suppositum. Next, we look at nature (human). Following Scheler, Wojtyla recognizes the clear distinction between world of persons and the realm of nature. He goes higher than Scheler by arguing that human nature is an integral part of personhood. He admits that the metaphysical analysis of human nature is insufficient. Phenomenology recognized nature as a certain mode of acting. It is by creating a middle ground where traditional philosophy and phenomenology can enter into dialogue with one another. "However, the person and with [him his ontic support] have here been conceived not only as the metaphysical subject of the existence and the dynamism of the human being, but also as, in a way, a phenomenological synthesis of efficacy and subjectiveness. Thus nature has to assume to some extent a double sense."¹⁰ We see that Wojtyla uses the term nature in different ways sometimes adopting a metaphysical view.¹¹ The integrity of nature because it is itself in need of integration (to the intellect and reason) is in reality only a partial or limited integrity.

With regard to the person, the absolute status the natural order possesses in ancient philosophy is relativized. Wojtyla clearly states in the 1979 Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* that there is a transformation and that this transformation is as a result of the incarnation of Christ. He has brought about recreation of man.¹² Just like Scheler before him, Wojtyla insists that the Incarnation has established a new and fundamental relation between God and man." That is by entering into human nature and human history. Christ has disclosed the existence of a new realm of values. More concretely, Christ's salvific work has opened for man "a new dimension, a new order, the order of love."¹³ For clarity, Wojtyla maintains that he is neither abolishing nor supplanting the traditional view of nature. He is rather supplementing it with a new

“synthesis” and a “more mature” expression of human nature. In a pleasantly formulated phrase, Wojtyla holds that “the integration of the humanness by the person” is equally “the integration of the person by humanness”. He accepts that the person transcends the natural order.

The epic of his presentation declares love the fulfilment of the human nature. Self-transcendence is possible by entering into communion with the good. Communion with the good takes place through the act of love. It is the highest form of personal action. The development and expansion of nature is made possible through love – this is the reason for the reinterpretation of the traditional definition of person – the need to act for the act of love. Wojtyla, however, grounds it in tradition as the concept of *epektasis* – a state of constant progress towards a final perfect end. By loving the other person, man is raised to a new level and challenged to more fully realize his natural potentialities. Love alone fulfils the person because love is what brings about the integration of man’s subjective/objective existence.

Finally, we reiterate that although Wojtyla’s understanding of person goes beyond the Boethian Thomistic definition, yet, he does not reject the traditional way. He holds upon it in a complementary fashion. He reminds us that personhood is not simply a genus or a perspective, but an absolute expression that informs all human experience. It is an ongoing challenge and research.

Legacy

His legacy is already clear from the preceding pages. We look at his legacy from two perspectives: thought and action. Thought here represents Wojtyla; that is, the preparatory stage for action. Action represents Pope John Paul II – the implementation of thought. Thought is a preparatory stage for action. As we saw earlier, thought and action are key aspects of his concept of person. The

question: with respect to the topic under discussion, how does personalism influence his papacy? It is through action which stands for his speeches, travels, encyclicals, appointments etc. We give few examples.

Closeness to Africa in general and the Church of Africa in particular was a distinguishing mark of his papacy. It was his conviction that with a stabilized Church in Africa, which includes a good formation of the laity, the socio-political problems facing the continent would reduce to its barest minimum. On April 10, 1994, Pope John Paul II with a Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, inaugurated the Synod of Bishops for Africa. There was much emphasis from the saintly Pope on the need for the Synod to be African in its discourse and method, however, with the consciousness that the Church in Africa remains a part of the universal church. It was for this reason that the Synod took place in Rome. The Pope's call for an "African" Synod was adhered to and is evident in the fact that the Lineamenta for the Synod was translated into African languages such as Swahili and Malagasy. Another is the fact that the Eucharistic liturgies at the opening and closing of the Synod had a distinctly African character. The fruits and resolutions of this Synod were taken into account by Pope John Paul II in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*. In this document, we find a decry of the African bishops on some of the challenges confronting Africa, two of which were consequences of imperial colonization: First, tribal oppositions as a result of the unification of ethnic groups of different traditions, languages and religions.¹⁴ Secondly, and more particular to this discourse is the fact of Africa being controlled by rich and powerful nations and for which reason "Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected."¹⁵ Emphasis on inculturation cannot be forgotten. In a sense, inculturation is related to decolonization since it assumes that everything must not be taken hook, line and sinker. There should be some level of assimilation and the culture of a people must not be neglected, underplayed or

rejected. In fact, the movement for inculturation by Pope John Paul II and the Synod is an outstanding legacy of decolonization. The indisputable advantage is that it could bring the economic, linguistic, mental and ideological forms of colonization to an end. There is also the perspective of a Universal Humanism. Ordained in 1946 soon after the Second World War, and under the communist rule of the then Soviet Union, he highly committed himself to the advocacy of human freedom and dignity. He correctly realized that an indubitably wonderful intellectual instrument for the pursuance and realization of this was philosophy in which discipline he obtained his PhD. To talk of him and to remember his years in the papacy tantamount to recalling his indefatigable and uncompromising engagement for a world in which people do matter – as individuals and as well as groups, especially when they are minorities. Nobody was in doubt as to his unshakable belief in the One Humanity, irrespective of race, religion or culture. Any form of materialistic capitalism was his avowed enemy, because he saw in this a dehumanising reductionism.

There is also the perspective of Freedom based on Truth. His authenticity was both astonishing and magnetic. Evidence of this was always the multitude of visitors from all over the globe at the Peter's Square during the weekly audiences. His funeral was attended by Christians and non-Christians (especially the youth) from all over the globe. Speaking to many already wounded and vulnerable hearts and souls, he was deeply convinced – as was Jesus – that the true liberation of humanity lies in harkening to the Truth (cf. Joh 8:32). In a world consistently characterized by what his successor Pope Benedict XVI referred to as the “dictatorship of relativism”, Pope John Paul II held on to his deepest conviction arising from a personal intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, we emphasize the importance of the perspective of Political Actor for Peace and Justice. If colonisation was a system

of subjugation of other peoples and nations, denying them thereby the power of self-determination and exploiting their resources, it becomes obvious that one cannot reasonably talk of the Legacy of Pope John Paul II without calling into play the ever-present awareness of Justice and Peace he created on the world political stage. He was permanently actively involved – in words and deeds – in the project of Deconstructing the false construction of reality with the excruciating influence on people. The ultimate exemplification would be his active role in dismantling the Communist Imperialism of the former Soviet Socialist Republic, with the Green Revolution in Poland and the German Democratic Republic (DDR) thereby helping to forge a relatively New World Order. Summarising therefore, one can rightly say that the most important legacy of Pope John Paul II was his concerted efforts in fighting for a Universal Humanism based on the three Aristotelian principles of *pathos*, *logos* and *ethos*, engrained in Justice and Peace for all.

Conclusion

We cannot ever emphasize the fact that Wojtyla's personalism influenced his teachings as Pope John Paul II. His first Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* {Redeemer of Man} testifies to this fact. It was promulgated on 4 March 1979 less than five months into his installation as Pope. It lays a blueprint for his pontificate in its exploration of contemporary human problems and especially their proposed solutions found in a deeper understanding of the human person. "The Declaration on Religious Freedom shows us convincingly that, when Christ and, after him, his Apostles proclaimed the truth that comes not from men but from God 'my teaching is not mine, but his who sent me',... they preserved, while acting with their full force of spirit, a deep esteem for man, for his intellect, his will, his conscience and his freedom"¹⁶. It has been referenced that the truth has the ability to set one free, "Jesus Christ meets the man of every age, including our own, with the same words: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you

free"¹⁷. True freedom is the ability to be authentically free. Authentic freedom entails a relationship with God. However, there is also a negative aspect involved with being truly free. One must refrain from superficial freedom. Superficial freedom cannot set one free because freedom can only be achieved through truth, and the truth is something only God can offer.

Also in his Social Teachings especially as represented in Encyclicals, the social concern of the Church is directed towards authentic development of man and society which respects and promotes all dimensions of the human person. We find this theme especially in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern) which he promulgated on 30 December 1987 on the 20th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*. The Pope points out that despite some progress in the two decades since *Populorum Progressio*'s publication, the gap between the developed and developing countries continued to widen in a variety of areas, including: the production and distribution of goods, hygiene, health and housing, availability of drinking water, and working conditions (especially for women). Lack of adequate housing, unemployment and international debt all threaten humanity. These three phenomena were characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s when despite praiseworthy efforts, the conditions for many became notably worse. Although the present danger has lessened, the cold war hampered the development of many nations in the southern hemisphere. Instead of becoming autonomous nations concerned with their own progress, developing nations should receive aid from all of the richer and more developed countries.

We can summarize as follows: Human beings are for Wojtyła an integral whole that includes both soul and body and comes into existence within community and through intentional action. Humans, therefore, become alienated if they lose their relationship and engagement with others. The dynamics of humans coming into

being through action, thereby entering an ethical life that flourishes under freedom and becomes impossible if the human person is employed as a means by impersonal factors. He lived out his philosophy: visited many countries. Many can think of having personal contact with him. The writer for instance received the grace of the dignity of the priesthood through the imposition of hands by him in Kaduna, Nigeria. We need not forget the restructuring the College of Cardinals.

Finally, the fact that Wojtyla developed an ethical personalism was to be of great consequence, as it became fundamental to his work as Pope, thereby forming the philosophical basis for several decades of the Cath Church's influence on the world and on millions of people. For instance, recently The Vatican has formally repudiated the "doctrine of discovery," which was used by colonial powers starting in the 15th century to justify the seizure of native lands in the New World. In a joint statement issued on March 30 by the Dicastery for Culture and the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, the Vatican rejected "those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political 'doctrine of discovery.'" During his visit to Canada last year, Pope Francis had apologized for the injustices of colonial exploitation, and promised that the Vatican would issue a more formal document reaffirming the rights of native peoples.

It the position of this paper Wojtyla's personalism can also help to find solutions to the hydra-headed problems facing a number of African nations. Particularly, to decolonize the internal colonization today in Africa. We are precisely referring to the 'colonization' of Africa by corrupt political leaders.

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