



From Relational Egalitarianism to Self-Respect: A Contextualization of Normative Foundations of Societal Justice.

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Abstract

Self-respect is considered in some theories of social justice as one of the most important social good. While contemporary social research attest that individuals' sense of self-respect is causally linked with individuals' socio-economic situation in which they live, little scholarly investigation has been oriented to exploring the nature of social conditions which can contribute to promoting individuals' sense of self-respect and how societal structures may positively or negatively influence people's sense of self-respect. The author departs from Rawls's concept of democratic equality to discuss how and in which ways relational equality can contribute to promoting individuals' sense of self-respect. To give concrete a case to the discussion, the author examines whether low leveling equalization would be necessary and/or sufficient to create social conditions for promoting individuals' self-respect in society.

Key words: relational equality, self-respect, justice, relative deprivation.

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1. Introduction

Social inequalities are usually considered as the central concerns of distributive justice. Besides the fact that morally unjustified social inequalities are indicators of social injustice, research findings in social sciences attest that inequalities, in their different forms, have negative effects to people with the lowest socio-economic statuses. Consequences of social inequalities are manifested through reduced sense of self-worth (self-respect) and an undermined capacity for people with the lowest socio-economic statuses to value the capabilities they have to pursue their own life plans².

Given the nature of effects that social inequalities have to people's lives, particularly those who end up in the lowest positions in socially and economically unequal society, one may wonder how and in which ways can egalitarianism help to build up appropriate socio-economic conditions for promoting individuals' self-respect. Departing from the basic understanding of the value of relational equality in Rawls's theory of justice, this paper explores and discusses the influence of socio-economic egalitarianism to individuals' sense of self-respect. The investigation of the paper is grounded on the normative assumption that socio-economic situatedness of people in society has influence to their sense of self-worth. Such influence can either be positive or negative depending on the socio-economic position one occupies in a given socio-economic set up. It would therefore be possible to promote people's self-respect by favoring some forms of socio-economic set up which would in turn help to build up appropriate supporting social conditions for people to develop their sense of self-respect. As a way of exploring the relevance of this hypothesis, I will examine whether low leveling equalization of individuals' socio-economic positions in society would offer necessary and/or sufficient conditions for promoting individuals' self-respect.

² See Santoro, Daniele and Kollar, Eszter. Not by Bread Alone: Inequality, Relative Deprivation, and Self-Respect. *Philosophical Topics*. Vol.40, no 4, (spring 2012). P.89

The analysis and discussions of the paper proceed in free stages. The first part explores and discusses the value of equality (democratic equality) on the basis of Rawls's theory of Justice. The same part examines how democratic equality relates to people's self-worth, by looking at relational equality as a normative foundation for social cooperation among people. The second part explores in depth the notion of self-respect by examining how the phenomenon of self-respect relates to self-perception and individuals' socio-economic situatedness. The third part critically examines the nature of social conditions which can support and promote the construction of self-respect, and discusses whether low level equalization can offer appropriate social conditions for the promotion of individuals' self-respect. On the basis of the analysis and discussions of the paper, I will take position on how self-respect should be promoted in society.

2. Rawls's democratic equality

To begin with, in Rawls's theory of justice, relational equality is regarded as the normative foundation for social cooperation among citizens. According to Rawls's egalitarian theory of justice, a contract among free and equal citizens must establish equality as a justificatory foundation and a guideline for the distribution of primary social goods³. Rawls embodies the idea of equality as the foundation for distributive justice from the initial conditions of the choice process (*the original position*) by imposing a constraint (the veil of ignorance) to the knowledge and motivation of contractors who are to choose principles of justice. Contractors behind the veil of ignorance are put under modeled motivational conditions for justice, hence can rationally pursue arrangements that are in the best interests of everyone concerned⁴. In other words, from the initial conditions of the choice contract, Rawls underlines the idea of equality in people's

³ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Original Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971. P.66.

⁴ Rawls, *ibid.* pp.146-42

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relationships as citizens, and equality becomes the recognitional component of both the contract and its outcome.

Enduring cooperation among citizens in Rawls's theory is sustained with the guarantees of democratic equality. In Rawls's theory, democratic equality guarantees citizens basic liberties (Rawls' first principle), and the benefit of social cooperation must be open to all and work to everyone's advantage under fair equality of opportunities (Second principle, first part). Any unequal share of social advantages or any allowance of social inequality must be restricted only to case of maximizing the share of the least advantaged (difference principle)⁵. Therefore, democratic equality in Rawls's theory is, not only a sustaining component for enduring cooperation among citizens, but it is also an organizing motif which guarantees the social conditions of distributive justice. In other words, relational equality in Rawls's theory of justice is both instrumental (modeling social conditions of justice) and substantive (as a value which guarantees social cooperation among people in society).

Rawls's prioritization of equality as the essential component of distributive justice is associated with his moral understanding of the human person. For Rawls, people have two fundamental capacities or powers by virtue of which they are reasonable and rational (TJ, 1999, p.19). People's rationality is substantiated in their capacity to reflect on, to choose and to revise their ends and goals of life, and also in their capacity to decide and to pursue appropriate means to attend those ends. People are reasonable as they have a sense of justice. People's reasonable power is exercised when, under normal social conditions they develop skills of judging state of affairs to be just or unjust, and have a desire to act accordingly and to have others to do the same (TJ, 1999, 46). For Rawls, meeting people's needs as free and equal citizens allows them to have the capacity to exercise and to fully develop these two moral powers.

⁵ Rawls, *ibid.*p.60-64.

The lack of relational equality among citizens can have many consequences. When people fail to recognize each other as equals in society, social cooperation is undermined and the phenomenon leads to some people being regarded as inferior, hence the prevailing of social inequalities. Yet, social inequalities are the cause of many social ills that people can suffer in society. One among the consequences of social inequalities, which is the main concern in the analysis below, is their capacity to undermine individuals' self-respect. Research in the domain of social science have proven that social inequalities undermine individuals' capacity to develop a sense of self-respect particularly for people who occupy the lowest positions in a socially and economically unequal society⁶. Social inequalities are harmful to people with the lowest social statuses or positions because the social conditions of inequality prevent the least privileged people from conceiving themselves and being regarded as equally worth members of the society and full participants into social cooperation (See Rawls's, 1999, p.155).

Yet, self-respect is an important component in people's lives. Self-respect is a moralizing force for people to pursue their life plans. Rawls argues that without self-respect, "nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them. All desire and activity becomes empty and vain, and we sink into apathy and cynicism" (Rawls, 1971, 400). This is the reason why Rawls suggests that parties in original position would avoid at all cost social conditions which would undermine self-respect (ibid).

In Rawls's theory of justice, when contractors choose principles of justice, they must ensure that the terms of social cooperation sustain the sense of self-respect for all citizens. Self-respect is sustained when social conditions allow each citizen to recognize and respond to others as equal citizens. In other words, recognitional and relational equality is regarded in Rawls's theory

⁶ Panning, H. William. 'Inequality, Social Comparison, and Relative Deprivation'. American Political Science Association. Vol. 77. No 2. (Jun. 1983). pp. 323-329

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as a normative foundation of justice and the basis of for individuals' self-respect. Appropriate conditions of social cooperation under the Rawlsian approach are when relational and recognitional equality is ensured in society, hence allowing people to regard each other as equally free and worth members of the same society, with equal rights to share available social benefits⁷.

3. Contextualizing the foundations of self-respect.

Having explored the role of relational equality in Rawls's theory of justice and how it is linked with self-respect, we might now closely analyze the notion of self-respect before contextualizing its interconnections with individuals' socio-economic situatedness. What does the phenomenon of self-respect involve? According to Robin .S. Dillon, the phenomena of self-respect connotes "a way of being in the world; a way of being, whose core is a deep appreciation of one morally significant worth"⁸. In more specific terms, self-respect is understood as "comprising all those aspects of cognition, valuation, affect, expectation, motivation, action, reaction and interaction that together constitute what we might call *an appreciative mode of being towards and with oneself and the world with regard to one's worth*"⁹.

Robbin distinguishes two types of worth which lead to two forms of self-respect. The first is *status worth*. This form of worth derives from such things as one's essential nature as a person; membership in a certain class, group or people; social role, or a place in social hierarchy. Such a status worth leads to *recognition self-respect*¹⁰. The second form of worth takes merit as the measure of the quality of character and conduct which one can

⁷ Rawls. Ibid.79.

⁸ From Robin S. Dillon. 'Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political'. In *Ethics* Vol.107. No2 (Jan. 1997) p. 228.

⁹ibid. P. 228.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.228-29.

lose or earn through what one does or becomes. Merit as status worth leads to *evaluative self-respect*¹¹.

With regard to recognition self-respect, the most common and morally relevant status worth which grounds recognition self-respect is human dignity. Indeed, human dignity is the status worth all persons have in their virtue of being persons. For Robbin, “recognition of oneself as a person involves recognizing and valuing oneself as being with dignity, appreciating the moral constraints to which the dignity of persons give rise, and living in the light of this normative self-understanding”¹². Owing to the philosophical conception of personhood (in western tradition) which grounds dignity in three things, namely, equality, agency and individuality, human dignity as a status worth gives rise to three correlative forms of recognition self-respect.

First, on the basis of the consideration that all persons have equal fundamental moral worth and standing in the moral community, which entitles each respect from all, recognition respect for oneself involves living in accordance with a conception and an understanding of oneself as an equal person among persons. Second, recognition self-respect leads one to understand oneself as an agent. This aspect of self-respect urge people to seriously take the responsibilities they have as persons, especially the responsibility to preserve and manifest their dignity by regarding some acts as befitting and others as degrading according to the standards of their moral agency. Third, recognition self-respect involves appreciating the moral significance of being one’s own person by striving to live in accordance with a conception of a life that gives expression to one’s ideals and commitments. Recognition self-respect is also expressed through the pursuit of and realization of projects which define and benefit one as the particular person one is. This aspect of recognition self-respect justifies people holding certain standards

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p.229.

From relational egalitarianism to self-respect: A Contextualization of Normative Foundations of Societal Justice and expectations the disappointment of which is regarded as degrading with regard to one's social and moral status¹³.

Evaluative self-respect is based on one's merit as a person. Such merit rests on normative self-conception, which is the view one has of the sort of person one ought to be, and the kind of life such a person should live¹⁴. When one's evaluative scanning of one's socio-economic status attests that one's worth is confirmed or enhanced by one's achievements, characteristics, or possessions, one feels self-satisfaction and pride. There is confirmation that the conditions for self-respect are fulfilled. On the contrary, when self-evaluation proves that one is not living to the standards of his own election, the feeling of self-satisfaction or pride is replaced by shame, and this leads to a diminished evaluative self-respect¹⁵.

In the light of the above extended understanding of self-respect, it is possible to realize the reason why some theorists of social justice, such as Rawls, take self-respect as the most important primary good. Self-respect in Rawls's theory of justice comprises two essential aspects. (1) "It includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life is worth carrying out", and (2) "the confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions" (Rawls, 1971, 440). The lack of self-respect, on the contrary, leads to casting doubt over one's goals in life and to a reduced sense of self-worth. As a life component which gives to its holder the sense that his or her plan of life is worthwhile and its fulfillment is of value, self-respect becomes the most important primary good.

While individuals' sense of self-worth or self-respect may be positively or negatively influenced by other phenomena beyond existing socio-political conditions (e.g. an unrepaired damage to

¹³ Robbin. P.229-230.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.231.

¹⁵ Ibid.pp.231-32.

one's conception of self-worth during early childhood¹⁶), it is evident that self-respect is a central feature picturing individuals' socio-political situatedness. As already argued, social inequalities are undermining factors for individuals' self-respect for people who occupy the lowest socio-economic positions in an unequal society. Nevertheless, while self-respect has been defined as essentially connoting a mode of normative interpretive perception of self and worth, it might be wrong to interpret damages to self-respect solely as individuals' failure to have appropriate thoughts or emotions towards themselves. More importantly, damage to self-respect is also caused by the failure to have appropriate socio-political conditions which would support the construction of self-worth. Any condition which undermines fundamental human equality in society can be a contributing factor for reduced sense of self-respect for individuals who end up in the lowest socioeconomic positions.

On considering self-respect as one of the most important primary goods that every individual should have in society, one may wonder what would be the nature of equality which would be relevant for the promotion of individuals' self-respect. The following section will focus on scrutinizing the interconnections between self-respect and relational egalitarianism in order to explore the nature of individuals' socio-political situatedness which can enhance their sense of self-respect.

4. The relation between self-respect and relative deprivation.

One among the approaches which is considered as both normatively and empirically relevant for examining the social conditions which enhance or undermine individuals' self-respect is the notion of relative deprivation. The phenomenon of relative deprivation can be generally understood as "*individual perception of a disadvantage with respect to a reference group over a set of*

¹⁶ The discussion on self-respect in this paper does not extend to these complicated psychological cases of unrecoverable damage to self-respect; but the focus of the analysis is the socio-political influence and interconnections to self-respect.

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goods or a social position one deems to be entitled to according to a standard of justice or fair treatment"¹⁷. Relative deprivation is experienced when people make evaluative comparisons of their own social positions or statuses with the positions and statuses of other people within the same group. Any observation of discrepancies between legitimate expectations one has and the present actualities of one's social status or positions in comparison with the social statuses and positions of other people in the same group create a feeling of envy or grief for people with the lowest socio-economic statuses or positions. This phenomenon is what is generally known under the terminology of *relative deprivation*¹⁸. Individuals' deprivation in this phenomenon is regarded as relative because existing differences among people is judged on the basis of a value which is held on different levels among the considered group of people.

Runciman formalizes the definition of relative deprivation as a phenomenon which comprises the following four conditions: *a person A is relatively deprived when (1) he does not have X; (2) he sees other person(s), which may include himself at some previous and expected time, as having X; (3) he want X; (4) he sees it as feasible that he should have X*¹⁹. In other words, relative deprivation is judged by comparing one's own social state or social position with the social states or positions of other people in the same group. The discrepancy between 'what is' and 'what should be' in the relational comparisons of one's social status or position and other parties' social statuses expresses the level of deprivation. In other words, relative deprivation is experienced under the conditions of relational socioeconomic inequalities.

¹⁷ Santoro, Daniele and Kollar, Eszter. Not by Bread Alone: Inequality, Relative Deprivation, and Self-Respect. *Philosophical Topics*. Vol.40, no 4, (spring 2012). P.89.

¹⁸ Crosby, Faye. Relative Deprivation Revised: A Response to Miller, Bolce and Halligan. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73. No.1 (Mars, 1979). Pp. 103-12.

¹⁹ Runciman. W.G. *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. London: Routledge, 1966, p. 28.

Nevertheless, though people may feel grievance for having the lowest socioeconomic statuses in comparison with the statuses and positions other people hold in the same society, existing inequalities may not necessarily be the result of social injustice. For instance, a society can offer equal opportunities to the people. Yet, equal opportunities do not necessarily produce equal outcome. This means that people in similar conditions and similar opportunities may end up in different socioeconomic positions depending on individuals' effort and ingenuity to transform the offered opportunities into valuable functionings (states of being). In other words, in order to judge whether a given case of a person's deprivation is or is not a matter of distributive justice, one may need to add the following two conditions to Runciman's four conditions above, that (1) the deprived person is not responsible for the failure to possess X, and (2) the existing discrepancy in social positions or social states is a result of unfair social conditions or unfitting distributive pattern of existing social goods.

There is a correlation between social conditions which favor relative deprivation and social conditions which favor individuals' reduced sense of self-respect. As it has been argued, relative deprivation affects people with the lowest socioeconomic statuses or positions in an unequal society. Economically deprived people are also vulnerable to having an eroded capacity of self-respect. Yet, in both cases, social inequalities are necessary conditions for both relative deprivation and reduced sense of self-respect. One may therefore argue that, an egalitarian socio-economic set up should be regarded as providing ideal conditions for individuals' situatedness, where relative deprivation would be minimized²⁰. This hypothesis, however, raises an important normative question: would the minimization of relative deprivation through any form of

²⁰ Under the conditions of socio-economic egalitarianism, relative deprivation would be minimized because inequalities which are the key ingredients and references for relative deprivation would be absent or sensibly reduced.

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equalization of individuals' socio-economic positions be relevant for the promotion of people's self-respect?

To answer this question, let us suppose a hypothetical situation in which a political society would try to minimize relative deprivation via a low leveling equalization of individuals' socio-economic positions. Such a strategy would be applied by imposing a socioeconomic policies which would progressively reduce the amount of wealth of people with high economic statuses (without redistributing the cut off amount) so that there is, at a given time, a socioeconomic equilibrium in individuals' held socioeconomic positions²¹, with a comparable level of material goods among people (same level of deprivation). Given the fact that relative deprivation has a psychological dimension (as it is experienced as grief people have when they compare their own social statuses with the positions other people hold within the same group), it would be possible to manipulate that psychological component of relative deprivation by minimizing inequalities and by creating conditions of relational egalitarianism where everyone would approximately have similar amount of material goods. Would then these particular socioeconomic conditions be necessary and/or sufficient to promote individuals' self-respect?

Establishing relational egalitarianism by depriving everyone at the same level would allow making a move from relative deprivation to absolute deprivation in which relational inequalities would be minimized. Yet, deprivation can be experienced or felt even in the total absence of the relational evaluative dimension added to people's life conditions. For instance, a person can feel deprived whenever he has a need for something, but finds himself into conditions in which he cannot satisfy that need due to forces beyond his control. In this regard, affording relational equality for people in society might only

²¹ Reducing the economic wealth from people in this example is regarded as a manipulative approach which aims only at reducing inequalities. It does not appeal at redistributing wealth from the most wealthy to the needy; but depriving the wealthy just for the sake of seeking an economic equilibrium among people's held economic statuses to reduce relative deprivation.

reduce the level of relative deprivation, particularly the feeling of grief and envy among individuals who would otherwise occupy the lowest socio-economic positions in conditions of high social inequalities. However, relational egalitarianism, as portrayed in the above hypothetical situation, would not be a sufficient condition to promote individual's self-respect.

According to Robbin Dillon, self-respect is as a matter of self-perception in a given socioeconomic situatedness of a person. It is the result of self-evaluation which looks at one's own socio-economic conditions and status in normative way. Self-respect emerges with the satisfaction of one's socio-economic status in the actual socioeconomic conditions. Hence, self-respect can be undermined whenever one's normative self-evaluation disconfirms the quality of one's life and position in actual socioeconomic situation, or whenever one believes that one's dignity has been assaulted through wrongful and unfair treatment²². In the light of this understanding of self-respect, it can be argued that low leveling equalization, which would appeal to depriving people with high socio-economic positions to establish positional equality, would only bring some people (the wealthy) to less acceptable social positions if one considers a certain standard of justice. In other words, low leveling equalization would undermine the basis of self-respect for people with high socio-economic positions, hence would have a damaging effect to their own sense of self-respect.

In the Rawlsian understanding, self-respect develops under social-economic conditions which allow people to pursue their own life plans with hope of success. The socioeconomic conditions imposed in the hypothetical case above appeals to reducing people's amount of freedom to pursue their life plans. The social conditions imposed would not be favorable to the development of self-respect because people would be deprived of the most important social goods ('liberty') to pursue their life goals as they would wish. The damaging effects of this non-

²² Robin S. Dillon. 'Self-Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political'. In *Ethics* Vol.107. No2 (Jan. 1997) p. 234.

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relational deprivation to people's self-respect can be better understood and interpreted on the basis of Gurr's notion of value. In his elaboration of the patterns of deprivation, he distinguishes two values. First, *value expectations* which are "the goods and opportunities which people want and to which they feel entitled"; *value capabilities* which are "the goods and opportunities which they have or think it is feasible to attain"²³. Social conditions which undermine any of these two values lead to deprivation and damage to self-respect. By borrowing Gurr's terminology, the conditions of relational egalitarianism which would be applied in the aforementioned hypothetical case would lead to *progressive aspirational deprivation* by which the value capabilities would remain constant over time while the value expectations decrease²⁴. Consequently, these conditions would undermine individuals' sense of self-respect by pushing people into socio-economic conditions which undermine their hopes to successfully pursue their own life plans.

In other words, relative deprivation cannot be reduced to a sole psychological phenomenon which can be manipulated to afford people's self-content by simply creating envy free social conditions through low leveling equalization of individuals' socioeconomic positions. The nature of socio-economic egalitarianism which would be relevant for promoting individuals' self-respect would be one which is able to ensure appropriate conditions for people to pursue their life goals with hopes of success. One of the necessary conditions for promoting individuals' self-respect is affording them appropriate amount of individual liberties to pursue their life goals without interference. Socioeconomic egalitarianism can only be interpreted as a necessary condition for reducing relative deprivation, but it is not necessarily a sufficient condition for the promotion of individuals' self-respect. There are other elements which are

²³ See Gurr, Ted Robert, 'Causal Model of Civil Strife: A comparative analysis Using New Indices. *The American Political Science Review*, 1968. No 62. Pp. 1104-24.

²⁴ Gurr. *Ibid.*

needed for egalitarian social conditions to promote individuals' self-respect.

An appropriate form of socio-economic egalitarianism which would be relevant for the promotion of people self-respect would be one which marches people's normative self-conception. By taking self-respect as a mode of normative and interpretive perception of self and worth, and by considering one's status or position in social set up as the object of valuation, it is arguable that someone's satisfaction of his actual socioeconomic status derives from a perceived quality of one's actual life. By quality of life, I mean a reasonable level of well-being, which is defined in terms of one's social and material comfort in one's actual socioeconomic situatedness. Under this approach, socioeconomic egalitarianism which would be relevant for people's development of self-respect would be one in which people's social states would be materialized by a reasonable level of well-being (defined on the basis of both social and material comfort); and, people's held socioeconomic positions or statuses would march their normative self-conception judged under a certain standard of justice.

Consequently, low leveling equalization is neither necessary nor sufficient to promote individuals' self-respect. Though this form of equalization of individuals' socioeconomic positions might reduce the feeling of envy and grief among people owing to its capacity to minimize socioeconomic inequalities, this approach would not be appropriate for the promotion of individuals' self-respect. Self-respect is the outcome of individuals' self-content which is experienced as the result of the quality of their lives which is evaluated under the guidance of their normative self-conception. Deprivation would therefore be an undermining factor for self-respect; and, relational equality under the conditions of destitution would not be a relevant foundation for the promotion of individuals' self-respect. Therefore, what can positively influence individuals' self-respect is not egalitarianism per se, but socio-economic situatedness of relational equality which is achieved as the result of a certain standard of justice, which in turn would create appropriate socio-

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political conditions which support the construction of individuals' self-worth.

5. Conclusion

In the light of this analysis, an upper leveling equalization of individuals' socio-economic positions which follows Rawls's difference principle would rather be a more fitting form of equalization which would promote self-respect. Indeed, under conditions of socio-economic inequalities, self-respect is only undermined for people with the lowest socio-economic positions. By improving the socio-economic conditions of the least advantaged (those with the lowest social statuses), under the guidance of Rawls's difference principle, the approach would not only boost their confidence in their self-worth and self-respect, but it would also march their own normative self-conception. Normative self-conception, which is an evaluative tool for individuals' socio-economic standing in relation to their fellow members in the same society, aims to that which is better than the actual state of affairs. In other words, normative self-conception is positive and forward looking. If then the relevant equalitarian equilibrium in individuals' socio-economic positions is to march individuals' normative self-conception, it must follow an upper leveling equalization. Ultimately, owing to the fact that appropriate socio-political adjustments for promoting self-respect would need to follow a certain standard of justice, an upper leveling equalization which follows Rawls's difference principle would be more fitting to achieve this goal.

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