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Natural or Supernatural? Two Perspectives on Acquiring Christian Faith

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Abstract: This paper explores a conflict between two accounts of the origins of Christian faith and outlines a solution to this conflict. The first account, rooted in Christian theological tradition, sees faith as a supernatural gift

from God. The second, based on the Cognitive Science of Religion, explains how people acquire religious beliefs through purely natural processes. After sketching both accounts, I identify the key area in which they conflict: accepting that faith is supernatural seems to preclude a fully naturalistic explanation of the origins of faith, seemingly forcing one to choose between the theological and the scientific account. To resolve this conflict, I draw on an Augustine-inspired conception of miracles and Denis Edwards' theology of divine action.

Keywords: grace, nature, faith, Cognitive Science of Religion, naturalism

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline a conflict between two accounts of the aetiology of Christian faith and to offer a possible solution to this conflict[1]. The first account is rooted in the way Christians have traditionally understood their own faith: as a supernatural gift from God. According to this account, to acquire beliefs that form the cognitive core of Christian faith, such as the belief that Jesus is divine or that God is triune, one needs special supernatural help from God (grace)[2]. The second account draws on naturalistic theories of religion developed in the burgeoning field of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). According to this account, the formation of the beliefs that form the core of Christian faith can be explained in terms of naturally evolved cognitive mechanisms, without any recourse to special divine activity.

In what follows, I will sketch the contours of these two accounts of the origins of Christian faith. This will then allow me to identify a precise area where they come into conflict. It seems that once we accept the supernatural character

[1] For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see my papers: Ruczaj, 2022; 2024.

[2] My focus in this paper will be on the cognitive aspect of Christian faith, that is, Christian religious beliefs. I am well aware that there is more to faith than its cognitive aspect. However, as Alvin Plantinga (2000, p. 247) has aptly pointed out, "even if faith is more than cognitive, it is also and at least a cognitive activity. It is a matter of believing ("knowledge", Calvin says) something or other".

of Christian faith, we must reject the possibility that there will ever be a fully naturalistic explanation of how people come to believe; this implies that one has to choose between the theological and the scientific accounts. My solution to this conflict, which I will formulate in the final part of the paper, exemplifies an increasingly common theological trend in thinking about the relationship between science and religion, which presents God's action in the world as perfectly compatible with the operation of natural mechanisms described by the sciences (see Ritchie, 2019 for an overview). It draws on an Augustinian--inspired conception of miracles and Denis Edwards' theology of divine action in the created world.

The Supernaturality of Christian Faith

The notion that Christian faith is a gift of God has been prominent in Christian theological thought since the letters of Paul. Given the close connection between faith and salvation, the fact that faith is a divine gift means that salvation is also gratuitous (Eph 2:8-9); human beings cannot save themselves, so to speak, out of their own capacities. Accordingly, many theologians have ascribed to faith the property of *supernaturality*. In the words of the Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles,

> In calling faith supernatural they [Christians] do not mean simply that the revelation to which it responds discloses things that lie beyond the investigative powers of human reason. The virtue of faith is supernatural, more proximately, because the response itself is a gift from God. The act of faith is impossible unless the mind and heart of the believer are interiorly moved by divine grace (Dulles, 1994, p. 224).

The point, then, is not just that the core claims of the Christian faith, such as the divinity of Jesus or the Trinity, cannot be verified by human reason. The point is that the very acceptance of these claims as true ("the act of faith") requires special divine assistance in the form of grace. To better understand this latter

idea, consider a well-known passage from *Summa theologiae* in which Aquinas discusses the causes of faith.

> As regards … a man's assent to what belongs to the Faith, two causes can be considered: One is a cause that induces exteriorly, e.g., a miracle that is seen, or persuasion by a man (persuasio hominis) who is inducing one toward faith. Neither of these is a sufficient cause. For among those who see one and the same miracle or hear the same preaching, some believe and some do not believe. And so one must posit another, interior, cause that moves a man interiorly to assent to what belongs to the Faith (*S. T.*, 2-2.6.1).

On this account, what is required for someone to accept the core claims of the Christian doctrine as true is—firstly—some sort of external trigger that draws one's attention to these claims. This may be a conversation with a Christian friend in which they offer arguments for the truth of Christianity, or the witnessing of an extraordinary event that could be interpreted as a miracle. But such external stimuli alone are not enough. After all, Christianity is beyond the reach of human reason, which means that its truth cannot be proved by historical or philosophical arguments; no matter how convincing your Christian friend might be, his arguments would never be sufficient to make you believe. And one may respond to a most extraordinary event simply by shrugging one's shoulders. This is where grace comes in. Its role is to prompt one to accept as true the core claims of Christianity, which have already been brought to one's attention by an external trigger. According to Aquinas, grace accomplishes this by causing the individual to love what Christianity proclaims. It is love that leads them to recognise that Christianity is true. As the eminent commentator on Thomas's thought, Brian Davies, observes:

> Christians are what they are because they love God and he loves them. He [Aquinas] thinks that those with faith are attracted to God as Christian preaching proclaims him to be. And he thinks that they are attracted in this way because God makes them so (Davies, 1993, p. 280).

Importantly, for Aquinas, the way in which grace works in bringing a person to faith is by raising or perfecting the nature of the individual (in Aquinas's words, "in assenting to what belongs to the Faith, a man is elevated above his nature"—*S. T.*, II-II.6.1) so that they can accept as true something that they would otherwise be unable to accept. Indeed, on this view, faith is something miraculous in the sense in which miracles "exceed the productive power of nature" (McGrew, 2019, §1.1). In miracles, God's creative activity produces effects either by bypassing the created order or by transforming it so that creatures can transcend their natural capacities. What is crucial for my present purposes is that a miracle in this sense does not succumb to scientific explanation in terms of natural causes, not only *de facto* (as in: given our present state of knowledge, we don't know how to explain scientifically how this event occurred), but also *de iure* (as in: we would never be able to offer a scientific explanation for this event). By definition, natural causes are not sufficient to explain why a miraculous event has occurred. This has a direct bearing on how one should view the aetiology of faith, insofar as one accepts its supernaturality. For if faith is a miracle in the above sense, then it has no natural explanation, and cannot have one[3]. Any account of a person's coming to faith that does not invoke supernatural divine activity must be incomplete.

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[3] One important Christian author who directly emphasised the miraculous nature of faith was Søren Kierkegaard. In *Philosophical Crumbs* (2009, p. 134) he calls coming to faith in the divinity of Jesus "a wonder"—a word he uses interchangeably with "miracle" (Piety, 2007). Faith arises neither because human beings simply *want* to believe in Christ ("faith is not an act of will" [Kierkegaard 2009, p. 132]), nor because it is entailed by some persuasive philosophical or historical reasoning ("belief is not a kind of knowledge" [p. 131]); it is unexplainable save as the result of the action of God, who transforms the individual by giving him "the Condition", that is, the transformative gift of grace (Wisdo, 1987, p. 109). As prominent Kierkegaardian scholar M. Westphal has explained, for Kierkegaard faith is not "a natural human capacity … the very faith by which this gift [salvation] is received is itself a gift, something we could not produce out of our own resources" (Westphal, 2014, p. 37).

In citing such diverse thinkers as Aquinas and Kierkegaard as advocates of the supernaturality of faith, one should bear in mind some important aspects that distinguish Roman Catholic and Protestant thinking about grace and nature—see, for example, Dulles, 1994, p. 225 and Horton, 2018, p. 218).

Thus, according to the doctrine of the supernaturality of Christian faith, there is indeed something unique about the way in which Christian faith comes about—something that distinguishes it from beliefs about other, more mundane aspects of reality. Human beings cannot accept the claims of Christianity by their own powers, but must receive a transforming gift of grace that makes coming to faith something akin to a miracle. Another way of expressing this supernatural quality of faith would be to invoke the category of special divine action, which is prominent in contemporary science and religion debates (De Cruz, 2022, §3.1). According to Nicholas Saunders (2002, p. 21), special divine action refers to "[t]hose actions of God that pertain to a particular time and place in creation as distinct from another". Examples include God performing miracles or answering prayers. It also includes the operation of God's grace. This kind of divine action is to be distinguished from general divine action, which is pertains "to the whole of creation universally and simultaneously". Examples of general divine action include God creating the universe and sustaining it in being. To say that faith is supernatural in the sense outlined above is to say, in other words, that it was caused by special divine action that goes beyond God's creative and sustaining activity in the universe. Special divine action in the form of grace explains why, to return to Aquinas, "among those who see one and the same miracle or hear the same preaching, some believe and some do not believe".

Let me take stock. According to some Christian theologians, faith is supernatural; it can only be explained by recourse to a special divine activity that transforms human nature and enables a would-be believer to accept the Christian message. This makes conversion to Christianity a miraculous event. In the next section I will sketch a competing, naturalistic account of coming to faith that does not invoke any kind of divine activity. I will then argue that there is a tension between the two accounts.

Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

In *The Natural History of Religion*, David Hume famously distinguished two questions about religion: "its foundation in reason" (i.e., whether religion is

rational) and "its origin in human nature" (i.e., whether religion is natural to human beings) (2007, p. 124). The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) can be interpreted as an attempt to answer the latter question. It aims to explain the cross-cultural "presence, prevalence and persistence of religion" (White, 2018, p. 40) by incorporating insights from cognitive and developmental psychology and evolutionary anthropology. CSR scholars tend to see various religious phenomena as natural. In Justin Barrett's words,

> CSR has converged on the claim that religion is so common within and across cultures because of its "cognitive naturalness", its relative ease, and automaticity owing to strong undergirding in normally developing cognitive systems … Normal human cognitive systems operating in normal human environments generate converging intuitions that find satisfaction in some core religious ideas (and subsequent practices). From early childhood people easily acquire ideas about gods, a non-physical aspect of humans, and some kind of afterlife (Barrett, 2012, p. 321).

Barrett goes on to list several religious ideas to which our minds are predisposed and which make up what he calls "Natural Religion" (2012, p. 322). These include the belief in mind-endowed invisible agents interacting with the physical world, the belief that some powerful being(s) have intentionally and purposefully designed elements of the natural world, the dualism of body and soul and the belief in an afterlife, or the belief that God(s) have superpowers such as super-knowledge or super-perception. To this list one could add the tendency to read significant life events as messages from a higher power (Bering, 2002), and the tendency to see God as the "ultimate moral agent": the entity responsible for anomalous harm and help (Gray & Wegner, 2010).

CSR scholars also emphasise the role of the cultural environment in shaping specific religious beliefs (as White [2021, p. 28] puts it, "CSR scholars accept that religion is a product of the mind situated in its cultural environment"). For example, the cultural context is needed to explain why a given individual acquires the particular religious beliefs that they do, for example, why they become a Christian rather than a follower of Zeus (Gervais & Henrich, 2010).

Studies have shown that people are more likely to adopt beliefs that are endorsed by the majority (conformist learning bias) or by prestigious figures (prestige bias) (Gervais et al., 2011). The concept of Credibility Enhancing Displays (CREDs) highlights the role of religious behaviours—such as prayer, ritual participation, adherence to religious norms, and emotional expression in religious contexts—in reinforcing belief. Research indicates that individuals who are exposed to CREDs in childhood are more likely to develop strong religious beliefs later in life (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017). In particular, rituals help to internalise especially complex or counterintuitive doctrines, such as the Christian notion of the Trinity (De Cruz, 2014, p. 491).

There is no need for a detailed account of the various theories proposed by CSR scholars to explain religion (for such an account, see, e.g., Tremlin, 2006; White, 2021; Barrett, 2004). Crucial to the issue discussed in this paper is that CSR scholars espouse methodological naturalism—a commitment to explaining religious phenomena without recourse to any supernatural being (Leech & Visala, 2011, p. 553). From the CSR perspective, that people acquire religious beliefs—including the core beliefs of the Christian faith—is explained by the interaction between their cognitive predispositions and specific cultural influences. This, of course, raises the spectre of a wholly naturalistic account of Christian faith that could undermine its supernatural character. In the next section, I will attempt to show how the naturalistic approach to religion represented by CSR conflicts with the theological account that emphasises the supernaturality of Christian faith.

Where the Conflict Really Lies

Lari Launonen (2021) has helpfully identified three general areas in which CSR may be relevant to philosophy of religion and theology. First, some scholars have argued that CSR theories of how religious beliefs arise have implications for how we should view the rationality of those beliefs. Another area is the compatibility of CSR theories with certain tenets of theism or Christianity, such as the existence of sensus divinitatis (sense of divinity) or the traditional Augustinian notion of

original sin. Third, CSR can potentially offer new empirically grounded insights into theological and philosophical debates, such as the debate about the natural knowledge of God or the debate about the divine hiddenness. The problem I want to address in this section falls into the second of these general areas: it concerns the compatibility of the doctrine of the supernaturality of faith with the CSR explanation of how Christian faith arises.

In a nutshell, the problem is this: drawing on CSR, one could argue that a satisfactory naturalistic account of how religious beliefs arise can be offered—an account that includes Christian religious beliefs, which constitute the cognitive aspect of Christian faith. Elsewhere, I have suggested in greater detail what such an account might look like (see: Ruczaj, 2022; 2024). Its most important aspect for the present discussion is that it explains the phenomenon of Christian religious beliefs without recourse to any special divine activity—or, to use Robert Nola's phrase (2018), that it 'demystifies' the origins of Christian belief by revealing its purely natural origins. Gijsbert van den Brink has recently addressed the strategy of some theists who have responded to the charge that CSR, by explaining religion in terms of natural factors, leaves no room for divine activity. These authors have argued that even if natural factors are involved in the production of religion, this does not imply that God cannot be involved in this process. Van den Brink, however, finds this strategy seriously lacking:

> … But what explanatory work is left to do for such factors? Why should we appeal to them if there is no need to do so from an empirical point of view, since natural factors suffice to explain the phenomenon? Presumably, this is the reason why we no longer attribute mental diseases to demonic possession next to invoking natural (including social) factors, or attribute thunder to Zeus or Thor next to electrostatic discharge. In other words: aren't explanations that appeal to divine agency—or let us say, for short, theological explanations—entirely superfluous? (Van den Brink, 2023, p. 219)

Occam's razor, in both its ontological and syntactic formulations, seems to obviate the need to postulate divine activity as an explanans for phenomena once we arrive at a satisfactory naturalistic account of those phenomena (pp. 219–220).

While Van den Brink ultimately does not agree that theistic concepts are superfluous or explanatorily idle (pp. 224–228), I want to emphasise here that the argument he presents above also works when applied to the question of how Christian faith arises. If we agree that the natural factors identified by CSR are sufficient to explain how people become Christian believers, then there is no longer any reason to regard this process as miraculous. In other words, once a satisfactory scientific account of the phenomenon of coming to faith has been offered, there is no need to regard God's involvement in the production of Christian faith as special in any way—that is, as different from His general activity as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. That people accept the core claims of the Christian gospel can be explained by their natural inclination toward religiosity functioning within a particular cultural context; postulating that God transforms their human nature by grace is unnecessary. If this is the case, then there seems to be a clear conflict between the two accounts of coming to faith discussed above. On the one hand, we have great Christian thinkers such as Aquinas and Kierkegaard arguing for the miraculous nature of the process of conversion; on the other, we have a naturalistic CSR account that effectively removes the basis for seeing this process as in any way miraculous or extraordinary.

Before presenting my solution to this conflict between theological and CSR accounts of the emergence of Christian faith, I would like to consider a potential objection. Some authors argue that the cognitive mechanisms studied by CSR produce beliefs in anthropomorphic, human-like deities that bear little resemblance to the God of the Abrahamic faiths or, in philosophical terms, the God of classical theism. As Jong, Kavanagh and Visala point out, "the cognitive science of religion could equally be dubbed the cognitive science of idolatry" (2015, p. 246). Drawing on their work, Neil Messer argues that the relevance of CSR for Christian theology is only indirect: it helps to understand our tendency to create distorted, theologically incorrect representations of God (2023, p. 513). He links this tendency to what Karl Barth called "religion", that is, man's attempt to know God and to justify himself before Him (2023, p. 511). The implication for the present discussion is that if CSR explains religious belief, then it is not belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But this means that the whole

CSR account seems irrelevant to our discussion, since it is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that Christians believe in.

Two points should be made in response to this criticism. Firstly, it is unclear whether the concept of God which CSR regards as cognitively natural differs significantly from the God of the Abrahamic religions. Barrett (2012, p. 322) points out that "many components of Christianity consist of only small elaborations on Natural Religion". As Braddock (2022, p. 167) puts it, according to CSR, humans are predisposed to believe in supernatural agents that possess a set of attributes that make them "theistic-like". Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, even if this criticism were correct, it would only mean that—for the time being—the particular CSR-based naturalistic account of the emergence of Christian religious beliefs is insufficient. What it would not mean, however, is that such a naturalistic account is impossible, and it is this latter, stronger claim that the doctrine of the supernaturality of faith implies. Consider this: if one believes that faith arises from a special divine action that transforms human nature, that it is a miracle—then not only does faith not have a satisfactory naturalistic explanation, it cannot have one. To accept this view, however, would leave a Christian in the unenviable position of hoping that no satisfactory account of their faith will ever be proposed, something which may very well be disproved by the progress of science. Immanuel Kant is a case in point. Writing only a several decades before Darwin's theory, Kant maintained that "it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them" (Kant, 2002, pp. 270–271). And who is to say that such an explanation would not be offered for Christian religious beliefs? It seems to me, then, that Christian believers would be wise to prepare for such a scenario in advance, and to try to find ways of squaring their theology with whatever naturalistic explanation of faith that would stand the test of time.

Faith as an Augustinian Miracle

My proposal for resolving the conflict outlined above is to reject the supernaturality of faith. In this way, a Christian would not be forced to reject the possibility of

a naturalistic explanation of the aetiology of Christian faith. Importantly, this would not amount to denying that God is active in producing one's faith. One could adopt a view of divine action in the created world in which God always acts through created beings, never bypassing or modifying their natures. Such a perspective could be further developed with reference to the work of Denis Edwards, a Roman Catholic theologian who presented his views on divine action in the 2010 monograph *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action*. In it, Edwards upholds the traditional Thomistic belief in double agency—the doctrine that every effect produced by created beings (secondary causes) is also wholly produced by God (the first cause). In this view, the causal efficacy of creatures "relies on God's working in and through them" (Kittle, 2022, p. 249). However, Edwards' reflections on the nature of divine creative love led him to depart from Aquinas in denying that God ever acts without the mediation of secondary causes, and in maintaining that God always acts in a way that respects the natural limitations of His creatures. The act of divine creation, Edwards argues, is "an act of love, of risk-taking love, that enables the universe to run itself by its own laws, with its own integrity, so things behave in accordance with their own natures" (Edwards, 2010, p. 49). This has a direct bearing on how Edwards views grace and miracles:

> The natural world with its laws is the means of God's self-revelation. God can give marvelous signs of grace to God's people without violating natural laws. … God's grace can be understood as taking effect in a way that fully respects the integrity of nature at the physical and biological level as well as at the level of human freedom (Edwards, 2010, p. 89).

Unlike Aquinas, then, Edwards denies that grace supernaturally transforms human nature. When God acts, it is always through creatures, respecting their natures which He has circumscribed in the first place. What does this entail for the question of how Christian faith arises? Crucially, it means that a Christian who accepts a naturalistic account of how his beliefs came about is not obliged to deny that those beliefs were caused by God's grace. Theological and scientific accounts are ultimately compatible.

But there is a price to pay. For one might naturally be led to question whether the words "grace" and "miracle" retain any distinctive meaning in this solution. If grace does not transform human nature, then what does it do? If God never acts in such a way as to alter or circumvent the natural order, then what are miracles? My general suggestion would be to emphasise the subjective nature of grace and the miraculous: to say that something is a miracle, or a work of grace, is to express in theological language how one experiences—or *sees as*—certain phenomena. Here it may be instructive to invoke Espen Dahl's (2018) comparison between two views of the miraculous: that of Augustine and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In one of his early works, Augustine defined miracles as "something strange and difficult which exceeds the expectation and capacity of him who marvels at it" (Augustine, 2014, p. 320). In this definition, the quality of miraculousness is relative to one's understanding of the phenomenon and the way one experiences it, rather than to the event being caused without the mediation of natural causes. Interestingly, as Dahl notes, Augustine's thinking on miracles evolved over the course of his career. This was a result of his thinking through the implications of the Incarnation (Dahl, 2018, pp. 98–100). Augustine came to the position that recurring, ordinary events that are not necessarily beyond our understanding can also be experienced as miracles, that is, that they can evoke marvel, wonder, and awe:

> A dead man has risen again; men marvel: so many are born daily, and none marvels. If we reflect more considerately, it is a matter of greater wonder for one to be who was not before, than for one who was to come to life again (Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* VIII.1, as quoted by Dahl, 2018, p. 101).

The reason that we do not usually experience such events as miraculous is that, because of their repeated occurrence, we become accustomed to them and begin to take them for granted. As a result, the "wonder at the recurring evaporates in favor of the spectacular" (Dahl, 2018, p. 104). For Augustine, the miraculousness of an event is revealed when we see it not only with "the eyes of the body" but also with "the eyes of the mind" (i.e. spiritual eyes) (p. 101), as

imbued with "divine strangeness" (p. 109). Seeing an event in this way involves a shift in human perception. Dahl, drawing on Wittgenstein's analyses of aspect-seeing, compares this to the experience of the dawning of an aspect (pp. 105–107). In such an experience, what is familiar and taken for granted is seen in a new way, even though our knowledge of the object has not changed. A classic example is when you begin to see the duck-rabbit figure as a picture of a duck (even though you had previously only seen it as a picture of a rabbit). In a similar way, Dahl suggests, we can begin to see as miraculous some events that we previously found unremarkable and mundane:

> … that miracles or wonders tend to "light up", presupposes that there is a habitual way of seeing things that is already established. This is part of the point of Augustine's speaking of the eyes of the body, in so far as we usually take the world as predictable and with habits at our disposal that make it familiar to us (Dahl, 2018, p. 107).

Let us now apply these observations to the subject of Christian faith. Coming to faith can be *seen as* miraculous (i.e., eliciting wonder and marvel) or as a work of grace (i.e., as a divine gift). It is rather easy to understand how this might happen in cases of sudden, unexpected religious conversions such as the ones described by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> … how real, definite, and memorable an event a sudden conversion may be to him who has the experience. Throughout the height of it he undoubtedly seems to himself a passive spectator or undergoer of an astounding process performed upon him from above. … Theology, combining this fact with the doctrines of election and grace, has concluded that the spirit of God is with us at these dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way, unlike what happens at any other juncture of our lives (James, 2004, p. 178).

But there are other examples of becoming a Christian where the process is gradual and much less spectacular. And many believers wouldn't even admit that they have gone through such a process at all; insofar as they know, their

faith has always been there, as something straightforward and taken for granted. For such believers, it may take more effort to see their faith as miraculous or as a work of grace. But such a change in perception is possible for them too. One could hypothesise that, in their case, to see their faith as a miracle or a divine gift would be to see the contingency of the whole scenario in which they became Christians. It is, after all, a contingent fact that they were born into a Christian family, were exposed to credibility enhancing displays when growing up, or encountered convicing arguments streghtening their Christian belief. Nothing was necessary in such a scenario; and to see it as contingent can give rise to marvel and wonder, as well as gratitude to God, who set the whole scenario up in this way.

On my proposed approach, then, to say that Christian faith is miraculous or that it is a work of grace is to express a particular way in which it may be seen as by a believer. One great virtue of such a subjectivist account of theological categories is that it does not lead to a conflict with scientific accounts of faith. One can maintain that there are good naturalistic explanations of how one becomes a Christian, but deny that these explanations are ultimately irreconcilable with theological accounts. At the same time, there remains a robust sense in which God is active in the production of faith, so that faith remains a gift from God. However, this does not imply that faith results from special divine action or that it is miraculous in some objective sense involving God's transformation of human nature.

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