

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October 13, 2020

Morality! Are humanists morally obligated to choke back their laughter when a morally bankrupt, intellectually flatulent 74-year-old science denier – who is responsible for most of the 210,000 covid-19 deaths in America – chokes on the virus himself? Your opinion is solicited. Meanwhile herein, we also wonder how stupid we are, salute a medical journal, consider humanist values and SCOTUS (and time-wasting idiocy in the Senate), wonder if we'll ever have an atheist president (we'd settle for France's guy), preview the *next* big crisis, and reveal the provenance of Mike Pence's fly. — JR

TRUMP AND HUMANIST SCHADENFREUDE

Jonathan Engel

Schadenfreude", of course, is a German word that roughly translates to "taking pleasure in the misfortune of others". And there was a whole lot of it flying around when the world first learned that Donald Trump had tested positive for Covid-19. How could there not be? Just two days before his diagnosis became public, there was Trump on the presidential debate stage mocking Joe Biden for "always wearing a mask". Trump's administration has presided over a Covid-19 response (more like a non-response) that has resulted in over 210,000 dead Americans and counting. Some of these people were true heroes, medical personnel who risked and gave their lives trying to save others. All of them were human beings, special in their own unique ways. Yet Trump has not shed a tear for one of them, caring only about how the crisis has affected his chances for re-election. It's hard not to take satisfaction from Trump being hoist by his own petard.

But we're humanists. We believe in enhancing human happiness and minimizing human suffering. Shouldn't this apply to everyone, even Trump, despite the fact that he exhibits very few human traits himself? After all, we do know that Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden are praying for Trump, because they told us so themselves. In Sunday's *New York Times* Review section, no fewer than three liberal-ish pundits (Kristof, Dowd and Bruni) admonished liberals to restrain themselves from taking any pleasure in Trump's illness. So that's what we should do, right?

Not necessarily. I see no problem with getting a kick out of Trump's predicament, for reasons both practical and philosophical. On the practical side, it's reasonable to believe that the sicker Trump gets, the more people will realize that Covid-19 needs to be taken seriously, which would save

lives. That's a good thing for the people of this country, so why shouldn't we want it to happen? But from a humanist standpoint, is it simply wrong to wish someone ill health, even someone as odious and harmful to the body politic as Trump?

To answer that question, I think we have to keep in mind the fact that what anybody wishes for, or hopes for, or prays for, will have no bearing on the progression of Trump's illness. While words and actions can have significant consequences, for the most part thoughts and feelings do not. I felt schadenfreude when I heard that Trump had been infected. I can pretend that I didn't feel that way, but the truth is, I did. And it's okay. It may even be a bit cathartic to smile at this news after four years of watching Trump's narcissism and cruelty cause damage to millions of people. So go ahead and grin under your facemasks and high-five your friends (with elbows only, of course) if Trump's falling ill floats your boat. Not that you need it, but you have my permission.

THEY HEARD YOU AT

"SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE", JON

"President Trump's in hospital with covid. And I want to say, my heart goes out to covid." — *Chris Rock*

"I wish him a very lengthy recovery." — *Michael Che*

WHAT MORAL PHILOSOPHY TELLS US ABOUT OUR REACTIONS TO TRUMP'S ILLNESS

Sasha Mudd

(Reprinted from *The New York Times*, 10/9/2020)

The other day, my 7-year-old, having gotten wind of President Trump's Covid-19 diagnosis, asked me point blank, "Mommy, are you glad that Trump got the coronavirus?"

I am a moral philosopher, and yet I had a hard time

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coming up with an answer. The question demands we grapple not only with the moral meaning of the president's illness but also with our complex and contested reactions to it. To be clear, I am not debating whether it is morally wrong to wish for the president's death. It is wrong. Full stop.

Nevertheless, now that Mr. Trump has been declared healthy enough to return to work, I think it is important that we assess the moral significance of the positive reactions his run-in with Covid-19 has produced.

Mr. Trump's diagnosis generated an immediate torrent of glee, gloating and schadenfreude on social media. It was followed by an equally quick and ferocious attempt to tamp it down. Joe Biden and Barack Obama, among other Democratic politicians, offered well wishes for the president and his wife, while left-leaning columnists rushed to wish them a speedy recovery. Many went on to admonish those rejoicing in the president's misfortune, suggesting that such apparent meanspiritedness is but one more symptom of the moral rot that has come to consume our political culture.

While I agree that the gloating over Mr. Trump's illness is morally concerning, I also find it fair to ask whether certain less celebratory but still positive reactions to his disease are entirely blameworthy and without moral merit.

It is generally accepted that Mr. Trump's mendacious and reckless attitude toward the coronavirus, including his contempt for his government's own public health guidelines, has helped lead indirectly but predictably to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans. This is not to mention the individuals he directly and perhaps knowingly endangered once he had learned of his own diagnosis. In light of these catastrophic misdeeds, was it morally wrong to want Mr. Trump to suffer the consequences of his own callous incaution?

Ambivalent reactions to President Trump's medical condition become more understandable when we appreciate that valid moral principles are often in tension with one another and can pull us in different directions. Condemning the pleasure that his misfortune has produced is certainly correct from one moral perspective, but there are also valid moral reasons to regard his illness as a potentially positive thing. Judging the meaning of Mr. Trump's bout with Covid-19—and our reactions to it—is no easy task.

The same bedrock moral principles — that life is sacred, that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect — make it wrong *both* to wantonly endanger others *and* to wish suffering and death upon any individual. We appeal to these principles in objecting to the glee and schadenfreude that engulfed Twitter in the wake of Mr. Trump's diagnosis. From this perspective, it does not matter how morally corrupt he may be, nor the harms he has inflicted on others, wittingly or unwittingly, directly or indirectly. This is all beside the point when we consider that the president is a person with dignity or, as columnists more often put it, "a man with a family". According to this line of thought, we should not wish to see Mr. Trump fighting for his life on a ventilator, no matter what he has done, and we are right to be concerned by attitudes that seem to contravene this

principle.

But while it is true that life is sacred, and we must honor the dignity of all persons, including Mr. Trump, society also has a legitimate moral interest in seeing wrong-doers face consequences for their actions. The sense that justice requires punishment for wrongs runs deep and is not the same as a mere thirst for revenge or a desire to get even.

On the contrary, punishment plays an important role in any healthy moral ecosystem. When the moral order has been ruptured, punishment for wrongs helps to repair tears to the social fabric and to reinforce the validity of the moral expectations that were violated. Imagining Mr. Trump's illness as a metaphorical punishment for his misdeeds helps to satisfy at the level of fantasy a legitimate need to see justice done. Because Mr. Trump contributed to the illness and death of so many Americans, it is understandable that many feel satisfied in seeing him forced to contend with a harm to which he has exposed so many others.

The moral complexity becomes greater still when we consider that from a purely consequentialist point of view, there are reasons to view Mr. Trump's potential incapacity as the best moral outcome. Most famously associated with the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, consequentialism is the philosophical position that affirms that what is morally right is whatever makes the world best in the future. If one believes that Mr. Trump has unleashed a tremendous amount of suffering and death through his mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic and that he is likely to continue causing harm on this scale, a consequentialist argument can be made that his speedy recovery from Covid-19 would not be the best moral outcome.

The consequentialist argument, while repugnant from the perspective of human dignity, tells us that a world in which Mr. Trump is unable to commit harm would be morally better than a world in which he continues to harm freely. This philosophical approach to weighing moral outcomes conflicts with the principle of individual human dignity and offers no easy guideline for reconciling these powerful yet opposing ways of thinking about what is best.

So where does this leave us?

Can those who rejoice in Mr. Trump's misfortune claim the moral high ground? Not so fast. Those who regard Mr. Trump as the enemy may simply wish to see him suffer. Such a wish may be entirely untethered from concerns about justice or the consequentialist moral appeal of a world where he is too ill to campaign effectively.

For these reasons we are right to be skeptical of their reaction. The principle of human dignity tells us that even the president, for all the wrong he has done, deserves our good will.

Here's how I explained the moral quandary to my 7-year-old: I am sad that Mr. Trump got sick because in general suffering is bad, and I don't want anyone to suffer, but on the other hand I think he should suffer consequences for the harm he has done. This answer seemed satisfying enough at the time, but it left out an important distinction.

What I did not try to explain is that the punishment that Mr. Trump's bout of Covid-19 represents is merely symbolic, a stand-in for the real punishment he deserves, which is necessarily social in character. Mr. Trump deserves to be punished at the ballot box and to be held accountable for any possible criminal wrongdoing in a court of law.

I hope that after experiencing firsthand the illness that has killed so many people and devastated the lives of so many others, the president will think better of his cavalier attitude. It seems, so far, that he hasn't. I hope Mr. Trump returns to good health. I hope this both because Donald Trump is a human being with dignity, and also because the world needs this president to get his *real* just deserts.

Sasha Mudd is an assistant professor of philosophy at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

"A CRISIS TURNED INTO A TRAGEDY"

Gina Kolata

(Excerpted from The New York Times, 10/7/2020)

Throughout its 208-year history, *The New England Journal of Medicine* has remained staunchly nonpartisan. The world's most prestigious medical journal has never supported or condemned a political candidate.

Until now.

In an editorial signed by 34 editors who are United States citizens (one editor is not) and published on Wednesday, the journal said the Trump administration had responded so poorly to the coronavirus pandemic that they "have taken a crisis and turned it into a tragedy".

The journal did not explicitly endorse Joseph R. Biden Jr., the Democratic nominee, but that was the only possible inference, other scientists noted.

The editor in chief, Dr. Eric Rubin, said the scathing editorial was one of only four in the journal's history that were signed by all of the editors. The N.E.J.M.'s editors join those of another influential journal, *Scientific American*, who last month endorsed Mr. Biden, the former vice president. ...

The uncharacteristically pungent editorial called for change: "When it comes to the response to the largest public health crisis of our time, our current political leaders have demonstrated that they are dangerously incompetent. We should not abet them and enable the deaths of thousands more Americans by allowing them to keep their jobs."

AND A "DANGEROUSLY INCOMPETENT" SENATE

John Rafferty

(Excerpted and reworked from a Hemant Mehta essay at Friendly Atheist on patheos.com, 9/28/2020.)

On Friday, September 25, Senate Republicans, completely ignoring a COVID relief bill currently sitting on Mitch McConnell's desk, took the time to pass a useless resolution celebrating the Pledge of Allegiance.

No debate. No discussion. Just Christian Nationalism at work. Every Republican who sponsored this bill is in lockstep with Donald Trump as he dismantles as much of our democracy as he can. They don't give a damn about this country; they just want power. Treating a blatantly religious

"pledge" as some sort of mark of patriotism is what they do in theocracies.

While the nation agonizes over a raging pandemic (210,000 dead, and counting), a crushed economy, and the coming, inevitable disaster of climate change, what a useless resolution to waste time on.

BEYOND AMY CONEY BARRETT: HUMANIST VALUES AND SCOTUS: RIGHT NOW!

Pamela Manson

(Excerpted from "Supreme Court to take up religious liberty cases" at upi.com, 10/5/2020)

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2020 term, which [has begun], could produce decisions that have a major impact on religious liberty.

The cases to be argued include a request for a faith-based exemption from antidiscrimination laws by a private foster care agency, a lawsuit filed by three Muslim men seeking damages from FBI agents who placed them on the no-fly list, and a student's challenge of college speech rules that he says violated his First Amendment rights.

In addition, the justices have been asked to hear appeals involving employer accommodation of workers' religious practices; buffer zones for anti-abortion counseling at medical facilities; and an effort to compel a religiously affiliated hospital to allow medical procedures that violate its religious beliefs.

And the American Medical Association led a petition to the U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday to review a Trump administration revised rule banning federally funded family planning clinics from referring women for abortions.

The petition, filed alongside the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood and the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, calls on the court to weigh conflicting decisions in a pair of appeals courts regarding the so-called "gag rule" earlier this year.

(Comment: So ... assuming we have the White House and the Senate in January (and that the Republicans have hypocritically forced a 6-3 majority on us), should we pack the court? - JR)

ARE AMERICANS JUST STUPID?

David Niose

(From psychologytoday.com, 10/4/2020)

Be honest. As an observer of American society, the thought may have crossed your mind at one time or another that the nation's dysfunctional state of affairs is the result of widespread stupidity. The people, too often misinformed and poorly educated, are getting exactly the democracy they deserve.

Perhaps that thought arose last week as you watched the cringe-worthy presidential debate, which pundits have called "a disgrace" and "an embarrassment for the ages". Our public discourse has been in decline for so long that it was bound to come to this, right? Effective self-government requires an intelligent and engaged public, and it seems the American electorate falls woefully short. With large

segments of the population brazenly rejecting facts and science – whether the issue is climate change, evolution, the coronavirus, or the latest conspiracy theory – it’s no surprise that social and political dysfunction are rampant.

Seen this way, it’s tempting to chalk up the clown car of American democracy to the collective intellectual deficit of its population. In truth, however, there is little evidence to support the notion that the American people are stupid. Objective measurements of intelligence can be controversial, raising questions of true objectivity and cultural bias, but it is difficult to find any that suggest Americans are lacking in IQ compared to those in other countries.

So it becomes all the more baffling that Americans have higher rates of belief in young-Earth creationism than most other industrialized countries. Four in ten Americans believe that humans were created in their present form about 10,000 years ago. Evolution by natural selection is a cornerstone of modern biology, but it is “controversial” in American schools. Similarly, large segments of the population still refuse to accept that human activity contributes significantly to climate change, even though there is no serious debate on the issue in the scientific community.

Nevertheless, if we examine the rejection of science closely, we find that it is not rooted in stupidity. The dad who brings his family to the Creation Museum to see cavemen mingling with dinosaurs might surprise you with his intellectual abilities, whether by reciting obscure sports statistics from memory, analyzing complex problems or ideas on the job, or building an impressive addition onto his home in his spare time. And that mother who fights administrators to establish a religious club in her child’s public school, propagating fundamentalist beliefs that reject science into the next generation, may have been at the top of her class back in high school.

To understand American anti-intellectualism, it’s important to realize that smart people can embrace dumb ideas. On an individual or social level, this happens when the right mix of factors come together. The first factor is our own makeup – all humans are to some degree biologically prone to intellectual laziness, emotional decision-making, confirmation bias, and other natural impulses that often obstruct critical thinking.

But beyond the biological elements, there are also numerous environmental factors that can reinforce or weaken anti-intellectual tendencies. The extent to which one’s family embraces education and critical thinking, for example, will be a major factor for many. Also, and importantly, the existence of influential cultural institutions that promote anti-intellectualism may result in a population that, regardless of its raw intellectual abilities, will seem in many ways ignorant.

To this last point, as Richard Hofstadter pointed out long ago in his Pulitzer-prize winning book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, the correlation between fundamentalist religion and anti-intellectualism cannot be ignored. If strong religious beliefs reject well-established scientific facts that conflict with theological doctrine, intelligent

scientific inquiry will not be valued. As Hofstadter argued half a century ago, this alone helps to explain much about American anti-intellectualism. Today, while religion is generally in decline in America, the country is still the most religious in the developed world, and its fundamentalist Christian institutions are particularly powerful.

Other cultural factors can also contribute to making a society of intelligent people appear surprisingly unintelligent. The quality and reliability of journalism and other news media, for example, will be a factor in how the population thinks. And the economic security (or lack thereof) of the population is also a factor to consider. Intellectual priorities are more likely to take a back seat if one is living in constant stress, in fear of poverty, without health care, or working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. And of course evolving technology is a factor as well – consider how social media and smartphones have influenced the public dialogue in just a generation.

All of these factors and many others shape our values, as individuals and a society, with respect to critical thinking. If we begin to assess the United States in the context of some of them, leaving aside the conservative religion factor already discussed, we find a nation today that, unlike previous generations, increasingly informs itself via cable news, talk radio, and social media of dubious quality. Perhaps more importantly, we find a nation where economic insecurity and inequality are growing in prevalence, resulting in more fear and anxiety.

These phenomena and others can work together to create an atmosphere that devalues critical thinking and rational discourse. When this happens, the result is anti-intellectualism as a defining character trait, and this occurs regardless of the underlying intelligence of the person or society involved.

As such, if the next political debate you watch lacks thoughtful discourse but instead resembles a Jerry Springer episode, don’t blame it on the public’s intelligence. Stupidity is not what has degenerated the American social and political landscape. The failure of our institutions to generate an honest appreciation of intelligence as a cultural value has left us looking stupid.

WILL WE EVER HAVE AN ATHEIST PRESIDENT?

Rosa Heyman

Excerpted from Cosmopolitan.com, 10/8/2020)

At [the Vice Presidential] debate, Senator and Democratic vice presidential nominee Kamala Harris turned to Vice President Mike Pence, outrage simmering behind her (impeccably painted, not that it matters-matters) eyes, and said: “Joe Biden and I are both people of faith and it’s insulting to suggest that we would knock anyone for their faith.” The issue at hand was Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett’s religiosity, and the Senator’s alleged “attacks” on Barrett’s beliefs. It’s been reported that the conservative judicial nominee belonged to a religious group called People of Praise, a

Christian community in which women were referred to as “handmaids” up until pretty recently. Yeah, so, um.

I don’t believe in God. And I don’t mind, really, that all the Presidents in our country’s history, and certainly in my lifetime, have been openly religious (and entirely Christian), and that “God bless America” is a phrase constantly invoked at the end of most political speeches. But I do mind (and I’m pretty tired of) the fact that faith is a prerequisite for a viable political career in 2020 America. ...

Religion is a comfort, and if you need it, have at it. Believe in whatever you’d like! It’s a free country, right? But it’s also a country in which the separation of church and state, that ol’ chestnut, is law. And yet, in the year 2020, politicians still pay lip service to the concept while also taking great pains to reassure voters that they are decent, God-fearing people just like them. I don’t get it.

I mean, I do get it, intellectually. To some, being a person of faith means you’re humble, it means you recognize that there are powers greater than you; if you attend church, it means you value community. It’s a shorthand, a quick way to say “I have morals, thank you for asking.” At least, that’s what we’ve all decided.

Forget that the percentage of Americans who say they are absolutely certain in their belief in God has gradually decreased in recent years, or that in 2018, church membership in the United States reached 50 percent, an all-time low.

Personally, I’m just ready for something new. I want the next presidential candidate to convince me that their moral code is up to snuff not by placing their hand on a Bible, but by showing me a long track record of fighting for racial justice, working to combat climate change, fixing the ever-increasing wealthy disparity in our country—hell, maybe even being a lil bit pacifist? (Naïve? Maybe, but a girl can dream.)

The thing that really drives me up the wall and makes my brain ooze like lava is the hypocrisy of it all. Donald “the Bible means a lot to me” Trump can’t name a single verse. Mike “with God’s help, we will restore the sanctity of life to the center of American law” Pence all but forgets his commitment to heartbeats while ripping children away from their parents at the border, or letting over 200,000 people die from the coronavirus. The shallowness of “thoughts and prayers” during moments of national tragedy from the men and women elected, the people who actually have the power to make change and kickstart healing. It’s offensive.

We may think of ourselves as “one nation, under god” (that lil phrase was only added to our pledge of allegiance in 1954, btw) but, right now, nothing about our nation is feeling whole, one. Our insistence on religion as a unifying American principle feels just as outdated and illusory as the notion of civility in the White House. And when politicians wield their faith as a means to convince voters that they’re “good”, it strikes me as downright condescending.

CAN WE TRADE PRESIDENTS, PLEASE?

French president Emmanuel Macron: “Secularism is the cement of a united France.”

ARE YOU READY FOR THE NEXT CRISIS?

Elizabeth Kolbert

(Excerpted from *newyorker.com*, 10/5/2020)

(In an essay on the Cuban Missile Crisis, focused on Martin J. Sherwin’s new book, *Gambling with Armageddon*, itself focused on the part sheer dumb luck played in the US/USSR confrontation, Kolbert concludes with this heads-up. – JR)

Unanticipated events can happen no matter how carefully actions are planned,” Sherwin writes. “Avoiding their terrible consequences is often as much a matter of luck as it is of careful management.” This would be a discomfiting message in the best of times. It seems especially so right now. Just two weeks after Inauguration Day, the last remaining nuclear-arms treaty between the U.S. and Russia—the so-called New start—is set to expire. The Trump Administration has already scuttled the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—it withdrew from the accord last year—and its efforts on behalf of New start have been so halfhearted it seems likely to lapse, too. As the journal *Arms Control Today* noted, were this to happen there would “be no legally binding limits on the world’s two largest nuclear arsenals for the first time in nearly five decades.”

In case you need another reason to lie awake at night, there’s that.

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. – Woody Allen



SHSNY CALENDAR: OCTOBER 2020 – JANUARY 2021

FICTION BOOK CLUB ONLINE

The SHSNY Fiction Book Club meets online via Zoom for the duration of our enforced isolation.

To be included and notified of each meeting's link and password, email your address to Sharon Krutzel at sharonkrutzel@rcn.com

TUESDAY, OCT 13, 7:00 pm **AMERICAN DIRT** Jeanine Cummins

Stephen King calls it "extraordinary", and this *NYTimes* best-selling story of a comfortable, middle-class Mexican family caught up in the flight to *el Norte* and away from drug violence has been called "the international story of our times". *Hardcover, Kindle.*

TUESDAY, NOV 10, 7:00 pm **THE THIRST** Jo Nesbo

Harry Hole is one of crime fiction's greatest cops ever, but after promising the woman he loves he's through, something about the killer who targets his victims on Tinder pulls Harry back to the chase in this eleventh novel in the series. *Paperback, Kindle.*

TUESDAY, DEC 8, 7:00 pm **THE VANISHING HALF** Brit Bennett

From the bestselling author of *The Mothers*, a stunning new novel about twin sisters, inseparable as children, who ultimately choose to live in two very different worlds, one black and one white.

TUESDAY, JAN 12, 7:00 pm **THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS** Elena Ferrante Start reading.

HUMANIST BOOK CLUB ONLINE

We continue online for the duration of our social distancing. Harry French will send the linking codes for the Zoom meetings. Send your address to: htfrench46@gmail.com
Meanwhile, do the reading ...

THURS, NOV 5, 7:00 pm **HOW INNOVATION WORKS: And Why It Flourishes in Freedom** Matt Ridley

Author of *The Rational Optimist*, Ridley chronicles the history of innovation—the reason we experience both dramatic improvements in our living standards and unsettling changes in our society—and how we need to change our thinking on the subject.

THURS, DEC 3, 7:00 pm **THE HOOLIGAN'S RETURN: A Memoir** Norman Manea

At the center of this internationally acclaimed memoir/novel is the author himself, always an outcast, on a lifelong journey through Nazism and communism to exile in America.

THURS, JAN 7, 7:00 pm To Be Announced

HUMANIST HAPPY HOUR ONLINE

SUNDAY, OCT 11, 5:00 pm

Pour something, grab a snack, and join 15 or more humanists and rationalists for lively conversation in our SHSNY Happy Hour!

Zoom in at
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9806344432?pwd=c0NrNUoweDVGWWho2ditvYmJlVjVGdz09>
Meeting ID: 980 634 4432
Passcode: SHSNy
Join by Skype for Business
<https://us02web.zoom.us/skype/9806344432>

MONDAY MOVIES

MONDAY, OCT 12, 8:00 pm

We'll discuss *Bong Joon Ho's
PARASITE*

Here's the 2019 South Korean black comedy thriller — about class, caste, and a poor family at war with the rich — that won four Oscars, including Best Picture. Rent it on Amazon (\$3.99), watch, and then Zoom in Oct 12, 8:00, at:
<https://zoom.us/j/93936555482?pwd=c1B0U2NrSW5lQzFYVfK2L1RoT3Nndz09>

Meeting ID: 939 3655 5482
Passcode: 924490

MORAL MISFITS IS UP

Check out conversations with Rich Sander, John Rafferty, Jon ("We're Out There") Engel, Tony David, and Anne ("It's a Good Life") Klaeyesen. Browse YouTube and Moral Misfits.

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