

“Exactly as you see me” (*Charmides* 153b8)  
The Function of Narration in Plato’s *Charmides*

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Plato’s *Charmides* is a narrated dialogue. In this paper, I will argue that the literary device of narration plays an interesting and resourceful role in advancing the philosophical aims and ideas presented in the text. In particular, it exposes the inner workings of the souls of the dialogue’s characters, thus enabling us, the readers, to judge whether the inner and outer projections of each character cohere. One of the most important definitions of *sophrosune* suggested in the *Charmides* is that moderation is self-knowledge, which is expressed in a strong correlation between what one feels and thinks and their actions. I will argue that the narration of the dialogue aids and exemplifies the philosophical lesson it teaches about *sophrosune*, even if the suggested definition of the virtue is formally rejected.

The drama of Plato’s *Charmides*<sup>1</sup> is extraordinary: from its choice of characters, through depiction of the complex emotions of its interlocutors, and up to its chilling final words. The effects of these aspects of the text are emphasized and enabled by the fact that this is a narrated dialogue. The narration of the *Charmides* allows Plato to create an intimacy between the reader and the characters which makes it seem as if we can understand or see what goes on inside them. This transparency or clear-sightedness of the self figures in Socrates’ abandoned definition of *sophrosune*, or moderation, suggested in the course of the discussion: To be *sophron* is to know oneself.

The narration of the dialogue is most prominently felt in several key passages, in which we get a long stretch of text with no reported conversation. These passages are peppered throughout the dialogue: three passages in the astonishingly long and dense prologue (153a-b; 154b8-c8; 155c-d) and two key descriptions of Critias (when he takes Charmides’ place in the examination, 162c-d; and later on in the discussion, 169c4-d3). In this paper I will discuss the possible function of narration in the *Charmides*, based on an analysis of the passages mentioned. Each passage can be shown to reveal and

<sup>1</sup> Plato’s *Charmides*: all translations by Rosamond Kent Sprague.

dramatize important ideas that pertain to the dialogue as a whole, and thus to sustain a profound consistency between the drama and the abstractly philosophical content of the text.

Whether in first-person or from an omniscient point of view, narration can serve a variety of purposes for any written text. Essentially, it enables the author to expose both the "inside" and the "outside" of the characters. Thus, it is informative while offering ample opportunities for irony; the contrast between words and actions, or feelings and their expression, can be vividly portrayed. Narration does not dissolve the barrier between the inner world and outer appearance of the characters—it makes the barrier transparent. I wish to argue that this transparency is crucial in the attempt to understand the complex statement Plato is making in the *Charmides* regarding the body and the soul; the individual and society; and eros and shame. These dyads have several things in common. Most importantly, they all indicate where *sophrosune* is to be found, namely, in the relation between the self and the other and simultaneously in the reflective relation of the self to itself. By describing the inner workings of the self (such as the bodily sensations, the surge of eros, or the generation of logos and virtue) alongside the outward projection of words and deeds, we get an idea of how difficult it is for one to know oneself, and how someone who does know themselves might actually be.

– I –

The dialogue begins with a passage in which Socrates gives a detailed account of the date and location of the events. Perhaps more importantly, he gives an account of his reasons for going where he went and the sensation that accompanied his choice: "... since I was arriving after such a long absence I sought out my accustomed haunts with special pleasure" (153a2-3). Socrates has returned from battle the night before (and not alone, according to the first word of the dialogue, which is in plural form), but it seems that his decision to go to the public palaestra is somewhat uncommon. This is apparent by the fact that he is hailed as the first person to be seen returning from the front. The interplay between group and individual is already manifesting itself. Socrates has returned from the campaign (a quintessential political activity), and promptly detaches himself from the group to which he had "belonged" while fighting, making a unique choice that genuinely pleased him. Before he is spotted at the palaestra, he tries to make some sense of the

individuals who make up the group there ("most of whom were familiar, though there were some, too, whom I didn't know", 153b1). Once he is spotted a surge of people overwhelm him; but again, he addresses an individual, Chaerephon, who emerges from a group, grabs his hand, and asks him a very straightforward question: "Socrates! How did you come off in the battle?".

Socrates' reply is remarkable in its simplicity and profundity. He has just returned from a difficult battle (in which we know he proved extraordinary resilience and bravery).<sup>2</sup> Although he can surely report an "objective" story about the proceedings, or else brag about his own doings, he sees no point in either (especially given Chaerephon's choice of words). Giving an account of what happened to the group makes no sense, because he is not the group and he does not identify with it—he is Socrates, and was addressed thus. Recounting his own deeds is also unwarranted, because he has no interest in manipulating an image of himself.<sup>3</sup> So he answers in a way that puts a full focus on the narrative function mentioned above, namely, transparency: "Exactly as you see me" (153b7). Socrates' inner and outer selves are perfectly harmonized; the barrier between them is already transparent. Plato is presenting Socrates as a paragon of the virtue to be discussed, albeit in a form to be suggested later on by Critias and improperly defended. How will this *sophron* ideal hold up for the rest of the prologue and forthcoming conversation?

– II –

Critias and Charmides, Socrates' main interlocutors in this dialogue, are quite notorious. Critias was the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, and young Charmides his ally and henchman. The Thirty's reign of terror over Athens exemplified lack of moderation, indulgence and greed. Plato's dialogue introduces us to an adolescent Charmides:

<sup>2</sup> This is reported by Alcibiades in the *Symposium* 219e-220e.

<sup>3</sup> Besides love of honor, a major phenomenon that modifies the relation between the inner and outer persona is shame. Shame is the force which makes people wish to hide who they are, fear exposure of their true self, and control the image they project. Shame is also closely tied with eros; as we learned in the *Symposium*, eros uncovers our lack—and the quality and essence of the object we desire is a tell with regard to our own soul's constitution and virtue (*Sym.* 208-9). Desiring something "unseemly" is the surest road to disgrace.

beautiful, admired, and impressionable (appropriately for his age). Critias, his guardian, is portrayed in a less flattering way; his negative attributes will be discussed below.

The next descriptive passage of the prologue appears after Charmides has been singled out to Socrates. The first and obvious connotation of his statement "I'm a broken yardstick as far as handsome people are concerned" (154b8-9) invites us to reflect on the fact that he is *sophron* exactly in the sense that will be explored later with Critias—Socrates knows what he does not know.<sup>4</sup> He is familiar with himself, and he knows his weakness; in this case, it's his inability to see a boy of that age as not beautiful. Knowing his own traits, even if they are presented as necessarily lacking ("broken yardstick"), does not cause Socrates to inhibit or suppress his natural eros. This is perhaps what a man prone to shame would do. Socrates, on the other hand, is aware of both his drive and constitution.<sup>5</sup> Their harmony, facilitated by this awareness, ensures that all of his actions are ultimately good.

It seems that the purpose of this passage is a foreshadowing of the extreme trends that we will encounter later on—Charmides is apparently a real phenomenon. As an individual, he elicits a massive erotic response from the public. He is so beautiful, that he even draws out erotic behavior from a group which shouldn't normally be erotically disposed (the small boys, 154c7). Unfortunately for Charmides, this weird state of affairs makes him far more likely to lose his way; not only is he surrounded by intemperate eros-infused men (which might in some way contribute to the morning headaches he complains of (155b4-5); could they be hangovers?), but he is also far more susceptible to the two types of shame that can prove detrimental to Socratic therapy (public shame and lover's shame, which both cause the individual to hide their flaws and not to deal with them).<sup>6</sup> Last but not least, his guardian is a tyrannical man.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent interpretation that argues that this is not the case is found in Richard McKim, "Socratic Self-Knowledge and 'Knowledge of Knowledge' in Plato's *Charmides*", *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985): 59-77. I agree with a great deal of his analysis, as with his method of reading; but perhaps a heightened sensitivity to irony can better reconcile all remarks regarding Socrates' self-knowledge, as I will try to show below.

<sup>5</sup> Note the story of Zopyrus and his characterization of Socrates. This is raised by Mark L. McPherran, "Socrates and Zalmoxis on Drugs, Charms, and Purification", *Apeiron* 37 issue 1 (2004): 11-34, where Socrates' self-knowledge and "self-restraint" are analyzed in a different way (pp.13-14).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Woodruff "Socrates and the Irrational", *Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy*, ed. by Nicholas D. Smith and Paul B. Woodruff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 143-6.

Here we've gotten a glimpse of the way in which Charmides is situated with regard to others in society. He is radically idolized, and causes commotion and intemperance wherever he goes (this will be even more comically clear in the next descriptive passage). This intensely unbalanced position is exacerbated by the fact that he seems to be regarded thus *only* on account of his looks. This is the first thing Socrates takes note of, when he remarks that stripping him of his bodily clothing isn't as interesting as stripping his soul (154d).

This attention to the soul over the body will be emphasized even more clearly in the story about the healing drug and chant (155e1-3, 156b1-c6, 156d3-157b6, esp. 156e7-8: "the soul is the source both of bodily health and bodily disease for the whole man"). Critias proves his complete disregard to Charmides' inner qualities when he ridiculously claims that Charmides possesses all virtues of character. Not only is he both a poet and a philosopher (a combination that sounds fishy, especially in Plato), but he definitely has "this very thing for which you say you have the charm; it was temperance, wasn't it?" (157d3). Critias obviously has no real acquaintance with Charmides' soul, his "inside"; nevertheless, he pushes him, with a ruse, to talk with Socrates—the sharpest mind around. Critias' insincerity and selfish boastfulness become fully transparent when he says that talking to Socrates may be good for the boy, because actually he could use an improvement with regard to his wits (157d1).

Thus far the two descriptive passages discussed have mainly called attention to the complex relation between an individual and society and in each individual, the often neglected relation between body and soul. It is suggested that the abnormal attitude society may harbor for an individual because of his outward appearance and its consequential neglect or disregard of his soul will make it impossible for that individual to develop correct knowledge of himself.

– III –

The third descriptive passage is the uncomfortably hilarious scene in which all the men on the bench go crazy, trying to get Charmides to sit next to them. Socrates is just a part of the riot as anyone else. He is completely aligned with the public in his actions, and his narration of the experience reveals the different aspects of his behavior, his feelings and his thoughts. It remains to be seen if all of these sit well together, or if there's some irony to be found in his demeanor.

The picture described is of Socrates scrambling furiously, while helping tip over the men standing or sitting at the edges of the bench, in order to clear a spot for Charmides and get him to sit next to Socrates himself. The scene seems a little exaggerated, if only because Critias called Charmides over so that he could talk to Socrates; it only makes sense that Charmides would have ended up sitting next to Socrates and Critias. Why all the fuss? I think the purpose of this episode goes beyond showing the radical intemperance surrounding Charmides (this is already apparent from the passage depicting him entering the palaestra). Plato is intent on showing us here that Socrates is acting just as badly as the rest. He is a full participant of the intemperate scene. Does this mean that he is intemperate himself?

Before this question can be answered, we should take full advantage of the narrative device. Socrates tells us that once the boy came over, he "really was in difficulties...I found my previous brash confidence quite gone [...] I saw inside his cloak and caught on fire and was quite beside myself" (155c8-d5). Socrates is undeniably experiencing eros. Nevertheless, it doesn't seem he is "overcome" by it. Unlike traditional conceptions of *sophrosune* and self-control, eros isn't portrayed in the *Charmides* as something to be overcome (in contrast to public shame, which ought to be overcome in order to truly better oneself through honest conversation).

The single evidence of actually being overpowered or suffering an adverse reaction to the erotic affect is at the very end of the passage, with Socrates' reference to the fact that he "managed somehow" (155d10) to reply to Charmides' question. I suggest that this is said in irony; we know that although he felt a very strong erotic emotion, he was perfectly able to reflect on the situation<sup>7</sup> and even recalled a specific quote by a love-poet, Cydias. He noted that the quote is relevant to his current state, and judged Cydias "wisest". The irony of Socrates' loss of control is also strengthened by the following statement in 156d, in which Socrates claims to have his confidence suddenly and miraculously revived. Moreover, it doesn't seem that there was any real effect of his alleged befuddlement—he immediately came up with an elaborate and sophisticated story to tell the boy. This story enabled him to bring Charmides exactly to the place he wanted him: willing to answer questions regarding his soul, with a clear idea of the therapeutic goal of the conversation. Socrates is showcasing a channeling of eros from physical arousal into

<sup>7</sup> The reflective act, even under the influence of the strongest of emotions (namely, *eros*), will be discussed later with Critias. There is no space to discuss the upshot of this connection here.

conversation about virtue. This is a reasonable move on Plato's part, since he is a philosopher who sees eros as the true force behind all philosophical enterprises. A virtuous, *sophron* man could never be someone who "overcomes" or suppresses his eros. On the contrary—he is meant to channel it correctly, through an intimate understanding of his own self. This is what is being portrayed in this passage. The exposure of Socrates' internal state and the continuity between his body and soul prove that the ideal of *sophrosune* described piecemeal throughout the dialogue is actually attainable.<sup>8</sup> This would never have been possible without narration.

During Socrates' conversation with Charmides the issue of transparency and self-understanding is raised several times. The method of investigation Socrates suggests in order to discover what moderation is is described by him in the following way: "... it is clear that if temperance is present in you, you have some opinion about it. Because it is necessary, I suppose, that if it really resides in you, it provides a sense of its presence, by means of which you would form an opinion not only that you have it but of what sort it is." (159a1-4). Socrates demands self-knowledge of his interlocutor, as a methodological necessity. Later on, with Critias, this transparency will be presented as a virtue in its own right, manifested, in the present context, as the virtue of moderation.

After Charmides' suggestion that moderation is slowness or quietness is refuted (159c-160c), Socrates asks the young man to start afresh with the following words: "look into yourself with greater concentration... and tell me clearly and bravely, what does it appear to you to be?" (160d5-e1). Socrates then reports that Charmides "paused and, looking into himself very manfully" (160e3) suggested that moderation is modesty, since it makes people bashful and ashamed.

As long as Charmides is virtuous with regard to the examination, that is, insofar as he is willing to expose himself in a way which registers with Socrates as authentic, he is admired by Socrates. But when Charmides' second suggestion is swiftly refuted, he shows a change of heart. Perhaps the reason is shame, being refuted (in a sort of public judgment of character) in front of his guardian and many admirers; perhaps it is because he does not have the natural strength of character to examine himself thoroughly regardless of audience. In any case, Charmides does the one thing that is inexcusable to Socrates—he opts out of the authentic, personal examination and asks Socrates to give his

<sup>8</sup> I think it's very important here to distinguish between the virtue of Socrates as an individual, portrayed by Plato, and his capabilities as educator or therapist. The fact that he is a famous pedagogical failure shouldn't necessarily hold sway over the conception of his own virtue.

own opinion of a definition of moderation he heard from someone else. Socrates immediately revokes his previous opinion, calling Charmides to his face “you wretch”. Charmides shuns transparency, so Socrates can no longer perceive him as virtuous.

– IV –

The fourth passage to be discussed illustrates the end of the conversation with Charmides and Critias' take-over (162c-d). The main purpose of this episode is an analysis of the situation by Socrates, so that his listeners will come to know the actual happenings that have brought about the change in the conversation. Plato as writer is using this portion of narration to show us, readers, how knowledgeable Socrates is regarding the relations between what the interlocutors do, why they do it, and how public shame (and lack of moderation) figures into their choices.<sup>9</sup>

Socrates had noticed Critias' agitation quite some time before the interception. He gives an explanation for Critias' behavior: "he was eager to impress Charmides and the rest" (162c2). At the same time, Socrates thinks Critias is "angry with Charmides just the way a poet is when his verse is mangled by the actors. So he gave him a look..."(162d3-4). Charmides himself is thought to be looking for a way out of the conversation, but not having the courage simply to admit to his helplessness or cope with the stress of losing face. So he provokes Critias into the conversation, taking a jab at him. The full depravity of this duo's situation is very apparent in this passage: The misappropriation of their roles in their own relationship, the immense pressure they feel to maintain an obviously false image, and the disharmony between their actions and their state of mind. Socrates is aware of all of this, and he pointedly reports it, in addition his depiction of the conversation itself.

Note that Critias is supposed to be Charmides' guardian, to nurture him through the trying age he's in. Instead of seeing the boy for what he is, complete with a fair share of untapped potential (which is probably what Socrates sees as beautiful in all boys of his age), Critias is trying to mold him by force (tyrannically) into a picture-perfect model of

<sup>9</sup> On moral choices and autonomy in the *Charmides*, see W. Thomas Schmid, "Socratic Dialectic in the *Charmides*", in *Does Socrates have a Method?*, ed. By Gary Alan Scott (Pennsylvania State Press, 2002). On the separation of Plato as writer and Socrates as narrator, and the far-reaching results that can ensue, see again McKim, (1985). On the educational aim of the dialogue, see Charles Kahn, "Plato's *Charmides* and the proleptic reading of Socratic dialogues", *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (10), (1988).

aristocracy. It seems reasonable to take Socrates' positive reaction to Charmides' first definition at face value—it certainly was a respectable first try for a boy of his age, and it doesn't at all show that Charmides is ignorant of *sophrosune*, or that he shouldn't give it another try (159b; 160d5-e4; 162e1-3). But it seems as though Critias is so pressured by the social situation and so determined to hide any "imperfection" or ignorance Charmides may have, that he just can't let the boy try, fail and improve on his own. Critias is completely unable to allow for transparency between Charmides' inner and outer self (let alone his own, as we shall see in the next passage).<sup>10</sup> In addition to Critias' failure as guardian, he is manifestly intemperate ("He had held himself with difficulty earlier, but now he could do so no longer", 162c2-3).

As for Charmides, he reacts in a way that could be expected—giving Critias a taste of what it's like in his position (thus showing resentment for his guardian). If Critias is so displeased with what Charmides is doing, he can do it himself. At this point, the puppet-puppeteer (later to be tyrant-henchman) relationship between the boy and his guardian is being unveiled (referenced clearly by the poet-actor simile). At this stage of the dialogue, it might seem that there can be hope for Charmides; he appears defiant. Unfortunately, this will not be the case by the time the dialogue is over.

Critias takes over the argument (162e7). After claiming that moderation is “doing good things” (163e10-11), Socrates objects with an argument from the importance of self-knowledge, or in the words of our current interest--transparency: “...it certainly does surprise me... if you believe that temperate men are ignorant of their temperance” (164a2-3). Critias rejects this claim. He goes so far as to assert the exact opposite; and by doing so, he tries to tap into what he thinks would please Socrates the most (according to the image of him that he understands), and perhaps gain a favorable result in the public show of wits he thinks he is participating in. Critias declares that moderation is nothing else than knowledge of oneself, in accordance with the famous inscription at Delphi (situated at the sanctuary of the oracle consulted by Chaerephon, our friend from the prologue, who is quoted in the *Apology* as reporting that Socrates is wisest among men). The message of self-knowledge is obviously so famously related to Socrates and his activity, that

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, the question governing the entire conversation wasn't simply “What is *sophrosune*?” but was phrased in a way that already pulls the examination toward self-knowledge and a measure of transparency: “...if temperance is present in you, you have some opinion about it [...] I suppose you could express this impression of yours in just the way it strikes you?” (159a1-7).

Critias ends his suggestion of a definition with “I wish to give you an explanation of this definition, unless of course you already agree that temperance is to know oneself” (165b3-5). To which Socrates replies to the effect that Critias seems confused--Socrates never claimed to know the answers to the questions he asks; his only desire is the honest continuance of investigation.

It is interesting to compare Socrates' version of Critias' definition of temperance with his own self-description in the *Apology* (which is alluded to here through Chaerephon's cameo appearance and the mention of the Delphic inscription, as noted above). The *Charmides* deals with a definition of temperance which is summed up as knowing oneself, that is, knowing what one knows and does not know (167a1-7). The *Apology* presents Socrates as stating in his defence speech exactly this very knowledge: He knows what he does not know (*Apology* 21a1-e2). This self-understanding of his own ignorance, which propelled his lifelong mission as self-examiner and examiner of others, originated from Chaerephon's trip to Delphi and the Pythian's reply to his question about Socrates. And this famous Socratic paradox, knowing that one doesn't know, is precisely the puzzle being dealt with in Critias' refutation. The image of the temperate man as one who is able to question himself and others, and examine what he does and does not know (167a1-2), is quite a familiar picture of Socrates. His rare claims to knowledge, as in the *Symposium* 177e1 and *Phaedrus* 257a6-7, all have to do with the erotic art--and the Greek terms for love and questioning are one and the same (*ta erotica*).

So although there are some insinuations that Socrates himself could be the temperate man Critias and he are searching for, the *aporia* with which the dialogue ends and the clear-cut dismissal of the proposed definitions of moderation don't allow the readers to reach this conclusion. However, the use of narration in the dialogue gives a literary framework to the philosophical arguments that strengthens the suggestion that Socrates is indeed temperate, and that temperance has a strong connection to self-knowledge and transparency. Perhaps the problem with the definition brought forth in the *Charmides* have much more to do with the tyrannical individuals who gave them than Socrates is willing to openly admit (165b6-c3 and 161c4-6). And his clear understanding of them and of himself, exhibited via the descriptive narrative, might attest to this fact.

The next (and final) descriptive passage of the *Charmides* appears right after a complex display of modesty from Socrates, who has just concluded that perhaps there could be a science of science—but he is not in a position to give an account of its nature ("what we need, my friend, is some great man to give an adequate interpretation of this

point in every detail... ", 169a1-3). Socrates sees that Critias is affected by his own *aporia* (which is, of course, a testament of *sophrosune* as it is constructed in this dialogue, namely, self-knowledge). But Critias will not show external consistency with his inner state. He is perhaps transparent to Socrates, but not to the crowd; and he wishes to keep it that way ("...since his consistently high reputation made him feel ashamed in the eyes of the company and he did not wish to admit to me that he was incapable of dealing with the question I had asked him, he said nothing clear but concealed his predicament", 169c7-d2). Socrates chooses not to address his state directly and goes on with the questioning, viewing the dialectic as paramount to all else. This choice will ultimately lead to something that is perhaps much worse than *aporia*. At the end of this dialogue we don't encounter an evasion and empty promise (such as Lysimachus' in the *Laches*) or straightforward fleeing (of the *Euthyphro*), or promise to continue the discussion (like in the *Meno*) or heartwarming words of hope (such as the *Theaetetus*'). In the *Charmides* we have a clear, unequivocal wrong choice. It has loomed over the entire conversation from the very beginning, with the choice of characters. The promise is fulfilled with the vision of Critias and Charmides plotting together to coerce Socrates.

Socrates' consciousness of the situation, made perfectly clear by narration, adds another dimension to the uneasiness and disappointment of the readers. Plato has secured our access to the most important twists and turns of the drama, namely, those that occur on the border between the inner and outer self. This creation of borders and their crossing confuses the scholarly division between Plato's Socrates and the Platonic Socrates. Usually, we find it easy to distance the dialoguing Socrates from Plato's "doctrines". Socrates of the direct dialogues (especially the "early", shorter, definition-themed dialogues) is generally regarded as a character more closely related to the historic Socrates, hence, Plato's Socrates. But in narrated dialogues such as the *Republic*, where elaborate doctrines are presented with relatively minimal interruption and the *aporia* is highly suggestive, we see the main character as the Platonic Socrates. Could the *Charmides*, with its unique use of narration, make this conceptual differentiation between type of characters fuzzier? Does Plato stand more firmly behind the narrated passages than he does behind the conversing Socrates? Or does the device of narration as it is explained above show that there is no real difference between the two? This is an issue that may be explored in future studies.

## *Conclusion*

Based on a confined reading of five paragraphs in the *Charmides*, I suggest that the narrative style of the dialogue contributes significantly to the philosophical work as a whole. The key passages of narration shed light on the most important question of the dialogue: What is *sophrosune*? By discussing these passages, I have had very limited access to the rich and complicated philosophical treatment of moderation, which is located almost entirely in the reported conversation. The result is a very tentative interpretation. Most importantly, it fails to deal with the complexities of the dialectical discussion and the possibility of a “science of sciences”.

Nevertheless, the focus on the function of narration in the *Charmides* allows us to look at the problem of moderation from a different angle, and connect the literary manner in which the story is told with its philosophical implications and ideas. Moderation has something to do with self-knowledge, as perhaps all of Socratic virtue has. And self-knowledge is experienced and manifested in a transparency of the self, making the border between the outer projection and inner happenings of the soul inconceivable. This transparency may enable the individual to work toward a harmony between the self’s projection and its inner workings, and simultaneously a harmony between the body and the soul, which will lead to health in the individual.

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