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# Representing Tropes A New Defense of Trope Content View of Experience -- Manuscript Draft--

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# A New Defense of Trope Content View of Experience

**Abstract**. The idea that what we perceive are tropes (abstract particulars) is anything but new. In fact, it was one of the reasons why the ontology of tropes was postulated in the first place. Still, the claim that we perceive tropes is invariably and purely based on pre-philosophical intuitions or, indirectly, as a supporting argument for the advantages of content view when compared to the relational view of experience. In this paper, I take the content view for granted and argue in favor of what is herein referred to as the trope-content view of experience. My defense is a case of inference to the best explanation. The trope-content view can meet all reasonable *desiderata* on the experience and its content without assuming gaps or making the *ad hoc* assumption that there are different layers of content, or so shall I argue.

## Setting the Stage

Any satisfactory account on the content view of experience must meet three reasonable *desiderata*. The first *desideratum* is the view that we experience particulars. Intuitively, what I experience is not *something* that meets a certain identifying condition, such as, the condition of being the

<sup>1</sup>There are two fundamentally different ways of conceiving perceptual experience. The first one is this: experience has content. When I see a yellow cube straight ahead, I represent the world as being a certain way, that is, my perceptual states have *conditions of satisfactions* (see Searle 1983). When there is a match between how the world is and the way that our experiences reflect it, the content is veridical; on the other hand, when there is a mismatch, the content is falsidical. According to Campbell, we may call this "the content view" of perceptual experience (See Campbell 2002). Different versions of the "content view" have become popular since the seminal works of Anscombe 1965, Armstrong 1968, Dretske 1969, and Pitcher 1970.

The second view is the following: experience is a matter of putting the agent in contact with particulars. In accordance with Campbell, we may label this the "relational view" (See Campbell 2002). Versions of this view were popular amongst the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Oxford Realists, such as Russell (See Russell 1912), but the recent work of Campbell, Travis, Johnston, Brewer, Fish, and Martin have brought the proposal back into discussion (See Campbell 2004, Johnston 2004, 2006, Brewer 2006, Fish 2009, Martin 2002; 2004). Martin calls his position "naïve realism" (See Martin 2002, 2004); while Brewer calls his the "object view" (See Brewer 2006). However, I prefer Campbell's label: the "relational view" (See Campbell 2002). In this paper, I take the content view for granted, without assuming the onus of arguing for it.

particular that under normal circumstances is causally responsible for the relevant token experience. Instead, what I perceive or misperceive is *that* thing straight ahead of me, regardless of whether it meets any identifying condition or not. Searle was the first to recognize this intuition.<sup>2</sup> Following Schellenberg, let us call this *the particularity desideratum*.<sup>3</sup>

Now, let us assume that I undergo a sequence of visual experiences, as follows. First, at the moment t1, I see the yellow cube right in front of me. Let us call it cube1. Second, unbeknownst to me, at t2, there is another one, cube2, quite similar to the first down to the minimal details, replacing the first. Even though my visual experiences are token-different, they remain phenomenally indistinguishable to me. Following Schellenberg, let us call the second constraint the *phenomenological indistinguishability desideratum*.<sup>4</sup>

Now, these two *desiderata* pull towards opposite directions. *Prima facie*, the singular or object-involving content view is the one that best matches the particular *desideratum*. The model for the representational content of experience is a structured proposition consisting of concrete particulars, universal properties and relations. For one thing, if we assume that we do not experience particulars, or that they possess a general content (one assumes that the best model for the content of experience is an existential proposition), it is hard to understand how *the particularity desideratum* could be met.<sup>5</sup> If the content is general and does not involve concrete particulars, it is hard to see how the conditions that satisfy my experience of a yellow cube requires *that concrete particular* rather than any other particular that meets specific identifying conditions (for example, the particular that normally causes tokens of that type of experience).

In contrast, *prima facie*, the general content view (one assumes that the best model for the content of experience is an existential proposition) is the one that best meets the *phenomenological indistinguishability desideratum*.

<sup>3</sup>See Schellenberg 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>See Searle 1983: 63.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>See Schellenberg 2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>See Tye 2009: pp. 78-80.

For one thing, if we assume that the content is object-involving, it is hard to see how the phenomenological indistinguishability desideratum could be met. If what we perceive or misperceive is that thing rather than a particular that meets a specific identifying condition (again, of being the particular that normally causes the token of that type of experience),<sup>6</sup> it is hard to understand how the subject is unable to detect any phenomenological difference when cube2 replaces cube1 without the subject's knowing of it.

Now, a third *desideratum* makes it even more difficult to meet the first two. Let us suppose that at *t3*, I stop seeing everything and start hallucinating that another quite similar cube is right in front of me. Nonetheless, while I am having this hallucination of the presence of a yellow cube straight ahead of me, there is, in fact, a yellow cube straight ahead of me. In this case, while my experience is a hallucinatory, its content seems to be veridical. When that happens, something has gone wrong in the account of the content of experience. That is what a reasonable account of experience must rule out: a mismatch between the experience and its content. Let us refer to this as the *content-experience match desideratum*.<sup>7</sup>

The usual attempt of meeting both *desiderata* at the same time is to assume that the common content of experience of different particulars is a gappy singular content. Thus, for example, in order to account for the content of hallucinatory experience, Tye suggests a gappy singular content, modelled as a Russellian proposition, but with holes instead of particulars.8 In a similar vein, Schellenberg suggests Fregean gappy contents.9 Therefore, according to the gap theory, experiences that qualitatively contain identical particulars and hallucinations share a schema in their content. Whether this schema contains a particular or a gap does not change the fact that experiences have the same fundamental structure.

However, it is not clear whether or not we can make sense out of a gappy

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>As Tye puts it: "intuitively, I misperceive *that* cube. My experience misrepresents *it*" (2009: 80. Original emphasis).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>That is what Lewis has call "veridical hallucinations". See Lewis 1980.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>See Tye 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>See Schellenberg 2010.

content (either Russellian or Fregean). Is that supposed to be a propositional function, true of false of some objects; or a centered property which has extension not in the set of all possible worlds, but only in the so-called centered words with a subject, a time and may be other parameters designated at the center? The representational content of a perceptual experience is supposed to grant conditions of satisfaction to the world, but a gappy content places no such conditions. Moreover, a content schema that has holes instead of particulars cannot meet the particularity *desideratum*: it is true of false not of that thing, but of whatever fills the gaps.

In this paper, I take the content view for granted and argue in favor of what is herein referred to as the trope-content view. The idea that what we perceive are tropes is anything but new. In fact, it was one of the reasons why the ontology of tropes was postulated in the first place. Still, the claim that we perceive tropes is invariably and purely based on pre-philosophical intuitions<sup>11</sup> or, indirectly, as a supporting argument for the advantages of content view when compared to its counterpoint – the relational view.<sup>12</sup> The major aim of this paper is to add new supporting arguments to consubstantiate those pre-philosophical intuitions. My defense is a further case of the inference to the best explanation. I argue that the trope-content view can meet all reasonable *desiderata* without assuming gappy contents or making the *ad hoc* assumption that there are different layers of content.

I proceed as follows. In the next section, I will demonstrate that the two main versions of content view, namely the general content view and the singular content view, fail to meet the two *desiderata* – the particularity *desideratum* and the phenomenological indistinguishability *desideratum*, respectively. My argument is quite simple: in Grice-like scenarios, they both fail to meet the content-experience *desideratum*. The second section is devoted to outline the general features of the trope theory and of the trope content. In this same section, I also illustrate the intuitive appeal of the

<sup>11</sup>See Mulligan 1984, Lowe 1997.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>See Tye 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>See Nanay 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>See Grice 1961.

assumption that tropes are the object of our perception. The last two sections are devoted to add new supporting arguments to the intuitions that are behind the assumption that the content of our experience is composed of tropes.

#### The Two Desiderata

According to the general content view, the best model for the representational content of experience is the existential quantified proposition: there is an object, x, that has a certain property,  $P.^{14}$  Irrespective of whether I experience the yellow cube a at the place L at the time H, or whether I experience another yellow cube a' at the place L' and at the time H', or even whether my experience is hallucinatory, what my visual experience does represent is that *something* at *some* place and at *some* time is a yellow cube. The content of experience does not uniquely identify a particular object, since there are, or at least could be, many yellow cubes in the world which equally "fit" into the content of my visual experience. The experience represents only that there is something instantiating the property P in the world. In this way, a perceptual state is complete, irrespective of which particular object instantiates the first-order properties or even whether something instantiates them at all.

Naturally, the general content view cannot handle the particularity desideratum. Let us suppose that I am looking straight ahead and that there is a mirror in front of me placed at a 45° angle, even though I am not aware of it, behind which there is a yellow cube. At the right and reflected on the mirror there is a white cube. Due to specific lighting conditions, this cube appears to be yellow to me. 16 Assuming that the content of experience is best presented as an existential proposition (general content view of experience), the content, in this case, must be veridical; after all, there is, in fact, a yellow cube straight ahead of me, just as my experience seems to be.

<sup>14</sup>See Davies, 1992: 26.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>See McGinn 1982.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup>This experiment was proposed by Tye 2009: 79. Recently Schellenberg has presented the same experiment a little modified. See Schellenberg 2016.

Still, my experience is illusory, for I do not see the yellow cube that is straight ahead of me, as my experience represents. Rather, what I see is the image of another white cube reflected on the mirror and placed at a 45° angle, which appears to be yellow because of the lighting conditions. Thus, while the experience is illusory, the general content is veridical. The third content-experience *desideratum* is violated. Thus, the general content view When such yields result of veridicality when this is not warranted.<sup>17</sup>

However, by far the most popular view on the content of experience is one that is based on a singular proposition. It consists of a structured sequence containing a concrete particular that instantiates several universal properties, which, in turn, may be instantiated by several other concrete particulars at different times and spaces. For example, suppose I am experiencing a yellow cube straight ahead of me. The content of such experience is veridical if there is a match between the content of my experience and the way the world is; in other words, *if* the concrete particular simultaneously instantiates the universal properties of being yellow, cubic and the relation of being straight ahead of me.

Now, with a few minor changes, we can also show that the singular content view cannot handle the phenomenological indistinguishability *desideratum*. As before, let us assume that I am contemplating a yellow cube that is straight ahead of me. Now, unbeknown to me, a mirror is placed at a 45° angle, blocking the view of the yellow cube. At the same time, to the right of the mirror and reflected on it, there is another qualitatively undistinguishable yellow cube. My visual experience is illusory, since I have mistaken the reflected object for the object that is straight ahead of me (which I was previously seeing). Still, regardless of whether I have mistaken one object for another, *if* the content of my experience is best modeled as an object-involving proposition, it must be veridical; after all, *that* specific concrete particular located straight ahead of me, but that is behind the mirror and, therefore blocked from view, is a yellow cube.

Interestingly, the only way to show that the content of my experience is falsidical is by re-introducing the identifying condition, namely *the object that* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>See Tye 2009: 79-80.

under normal conditions is causally responsible for the relevant token experience into the content of experience: my experience misrepresents the yellow cube, because that concrete particular behind the mirror fails to meet the condition of being the object that is causally responsible for that which causes my experience under normal circumstances. Yet, in doing so, we render what is meant to be a singular content into a general content. Once again, even though my experience is illusory, the singular content is veridical. Now, assuming that, in both cases, the experiences are illusory, what we need is an account that also renders the representational content experience falsidical.

### Trope Content

On one side, tropes contrast with universal properties and, on another, with concrete particulars. Compared to universal properties, tropes are logically incapable of being present in two (or more) distinct individuals at the same time. As Ehring nicely puts it, "tropes are particularized properties" (1997: 11) rather than "exemplifications of universals" (1997: 11). The yellowness trope of the cube straight ahead of me is different from the yellowness trope of another qualitatively indistinguishable concrete particular. Therefore, the trope theory rejects the notion that perceptual predication involves the attribution of universal properties to concrete particulars. When I see a yellow cube straight ahead of me, I do not attribute the same universal properties of its yellow color or its cubic shape to all qualitatively indistinguishable particular.

What about concrete particulars? Tropes are very different from concrete particulars. For one thing, tropes can and usually overlap other tropes. For example, the yellow color occupies the same space as the cubic shape (straight ahead of me). In contrast, concrete particulars are not conceived to overlap with any other concrete particulars. In Campbell's words, the yellowness trope of the cube occupies the same location as the shape trope of the cube, whereas the concrete particular "monopolizes" its location,

<sup>18</sup>That is Searle's main mistake in 1983. See Bach 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup>See Williams 1953, Campbell 1990, Bacon 1995, Schaffer 2001.

excluding any other concrete particulars. The possibility of co-occupation transforms tropes into nonconcrete particulars.<sup>20</sup>

There are one-place or many-places tropes; the formers are sometimes called *Qualitons*, and the latter, *Relatons*.<sup>21</sup> According to the "standard" view, which is endorsed by most of the trope theorists, concrete particulars are bundles of tropes.<sup>22</sup> This is what Kriegel calls *Trope Fundamentalism*, namely "the thesis that the category of abstract particulars is the fundamental one, and all other three can be analyzed in terms of tropes" (2004: 8). Abstract particulars are bound together by *relatons* that form objects, that is, concrete particulars. For example, the trope of the yellow color and the trope of the cubic shape can be bound together by the co-existing *relaton* of being straight ahead of me, which forms a concrete particular. Therefore, the trope ontology typically involves relations of co-presence and relations of similarity in order to provide truth-makers to trope predications.

However, ontological issues surrounding the metaphysics of tropes are not my concern here. Rather, the issue here is the idea that what we perceive are tropes. I must reaffirm that this idea is anything but new. Indeed, it was one of the main reasons why the ontology of tropes was postulated in the first place.<sup>23</sup> But what does this claim really mean – that what we perceive are tropes??

To start with, what my visual experience of the yellow cube straight ahead of me represents is something *particular* (something that occupies a spatiotemporal position) but not *concrete* as an object (something that "monopolizes" its location); something *abstract*, but not *universal* (something that cannot be instantiated by another particular). Lowe and Mulligan provide us strong intuitions for the claim that we perceive tropes, rather than instantiations of universal properties. According to Mulligan:

But whoever wishes to reject moments (that is, tropes) must of course give an account of those cases where we seem to see and hear them, cases we report using definite

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup>See Campbell 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>See Bacon 2008.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup>See Campbell 1990.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup>See Campbell 1981: 481

descriptions such as 'the smile that just appeared on Rupert's face'. This means that he must claim that in such circumstances we see not just independent things per se, but also things as falling under certain concepts or as exemplifying certain universals. On some accounts (Bergmann, Grossman) it is even claimed that we see the universal in the thing. But the friend of moments finds this counterintuitive. When we see Rupert's smile, we see something just as spatiotemporal as Rupert himself, and not something as absurd as a spatiotemporal entity that somehow contains a concept or a universal. The friend of moments may simply take the everyday descriptions at face value, which means that his account has a head-start in terms of naturalness. (1984: 300, emphasis added)

#### And more recently, Lowe adds the following:

[W]hen I see the leaf *change* in colour—perhaps as it is turned brown by a flame—I seem to see something *cease to exist* in the location of the leaf, namely, its greenness. But it could not be the *universal* greenness which ceases to exist, at least so long as other green things continue to exist. My opponent must say that really what I see is not something ceasing to exist, but merely the leaf's ceasing to instantiate greenness, or greenness ceasing to be 'wholly present' just here. I can only say that that suggestion strikes me as being quite false to the phenomenology of perception. (1997: 205)

What we find in both passages are strong appeals to pre-philosophical intuitions. According to Mulligan, perceiving the instantiation of universal properties under concepts is counterintuitive, because it over-intellectualizes perception by taking the content of a perceptual belief as the model for the content of perception.<sup>24</sup> In the same vein, Lowe believes that the suggestion that what we perceive prevents the universal properties from being green does not fit the phenomenology of perception. Even though I agree with both of them entirely, I believe we need to support such claims with reasonable arguments.

As previously stated, I argue that in Grice-like scenarios, the experience-content matches the *desideratum*, which leads me back to the scenarios presented in the last section. I shall reassess the scenarios in light of the trope-content view. According to the trope-content view, the content cannot be veridical in the first scenario. Yet, according to the trope-content view, the content is falsidical, but not because of an object-misidentification (as if the universal property of being yellow was true when regarding the object to right of the mirror, but untrue when regarding the object behind the mirror). As the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup>Mulligan et al 1984: 300.

yellow color is not a universal property, but rather an abstract particular, it cannot be untrue when referring to the wrong object. The content is falsidical because the yellow trope coming from behind the mirror is not the same yellow trope coming from the right side of the mirror. Thus, the trope-content view meets the experience-content match *desideratum*.

Now, the second scenario: let us assume that instead of a concrete particular, my experience involves an abstract particular. Therefore, the same concrete particular that stands behind the mirror is not part of the content, but rather the yellow cube trope. Does this trope make the content veridical? No. Once again, tropes are not universal properties. Thus, the yellow trope and the cubic trope that are being projected onto the mirror are not the same yellow trope and cubic trope behind the mirror. As I cannot detect any difference, in the moment my vision of the yellow-cube trope straight ahead of me is blocked, I start to misrepresent the yellow cube trope that is on the right side of the mirror, as if it were the yellow cube trope straight ahead of me. Thus, if my experience is illusory, its content is also falsidical as we should expect.

The partial conclusion is this: the trope-content view of experience can satisfactorily meet the three reasonable *desiderata*: the particularity, the phenomenal indistinguishable and the content-experience *desiderata*. The Grice-like experiments show that both the general and the singular content views fail.

# Particularized Properties

However, considering that we seek the best explanation for this, we must address the relevant objection that was made by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra against Mulligan's claim.<sup>25</sup> He points out that perceiving x as F does not imply that I perceive the cause for this; that is, why does x seem like F (the so-called truth-makers). We can perceive something as being made of ice, without seeing it as being made of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules with a specific kinetic energy. Likewise, we can see the yellow trope, the cube trope, and the

<sup>25</sup>See Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002: 93-95. Susanna Siegel gives a very similar argument in Siegel 2005 and Siegel 2009. See also Bency Nanay 2016.

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relational trope of being straight ahead without realizing what makes this all true (namely, that it instantiates the universal property of yellowness, the universal property of being cubic and the universal relation of being in front of me).

Again, my reply relies on Grice-like scenarios. Let us imagine that I am looking directly at a yellow cube. Yet, this time, unbeknownst to me, someone has projected a hologram of a yellow cube in front of me, covering up the concrete particular. If Pereyra, Siegel and Nany and *et alia* are right, we should be able to consider the singular or object-involving proposition as a model for the content of my experience. Under the singular content view, my visual experience is clearly illusory because I do not see the particular instantiations of the properties being yellow and being cubic. What I see is the instantiation of the same properties through the hologram. Yet, under the singular content view, there is no way of denying that the putative singular is veridical; after all, the object (that is, the concrete particular) covered up by the hologram instantiates the universal properties of the yellow color and the cubic shape. Something went wrong.

Now, imagine a case of suppose a case of veridical hallucination. There is a yellow cube in front of *me*. However, unbeknownst to *me*, this information is reflected by the light of the cube and reaches *my* retina, but is processed no further. An evil neuroscientist has blocked the signals of *my* retina from reaching the optic nerve, while simultaneously activating the visual cortex by means of electrical probes that work in the same way as neurological signals.<sup>26</sup> Under the singular content view, it would be adequate to say that the content of my experience is veridical; after all, the concrete particular straight ahead of me is, in fact, instantiating the universal properties of having a yellow color and being shaped as a cube. However, the experience is a hallucination. It is intuitively seen that something went wrong once again.

But what went wrong? Intuitively, the yellowness that I see is different from the yellowness of the cube straight ahead of me. The truth-makers of the content of my experience are not the universal properties of being yellow and of being cubic, but rather, the yellowness trope and the cube-shape trope.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup>See Tye 2009: 83.

Now, if we assume that the abstract particulars figuring in the content of the experience is a trope, the problem is solved: the experience is, indeed, illusory, but the content is also falsidical; after all, what I am seeing is the yellowness of a hologram, rather than the yellowness of the cube straight ahead of me.

#### Abstract Particulars

Let us consider our thought experiment again. Supposing that I am looking directly at a yellow cube in front of me, again, unbeknownst to me, someone has projected a hologram of a yellow cube, which covers up the concrete particular. According to the singular content view, my visual experience is clearly illusory, because I do not see the concrete particular straight ahead of me. What I see is the hologram, that is, a non-concrete particular, because it overlaps anything that is in the same place. Yet, there is no way of denying that the putative singular is veridical; after all, the universal properties of having a yellow color and a cubic shape are instantiated by the concrete particular which is covered up by the hologram.

Now, let us reconsider the case of a veridical hallucination once again. There is a yellow cube in front of *me*. However, unbeknownst to *me*, this information is reflected by the light of the cube and reaches *my* retina, but is processed no further. An evil neuroscientist has blocked the signals of *my* retina from reaching the optic nerve, while simultaneously activating the visual cortex by means of electrical probes that work in the same way as neurological signals.<sup>27</sup> Under the singular content view, it would be appropriate to say that the content of my experience is veridical; after all, a concrete particular straight ahead of me is instantiating the universal properties of being yellow and of being cubic. However, the experience is hallucinatory. Intuitively, it is possible to sense that something went wrong again. The singular content view also yields a result of content-veridicality even though the experience is clearly illusory.

The question is: what went wrong? Neither concrete particulars nor universal properties are the real truth-makers of the representational content

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup>See Tye 2009: 83.

of my experience. Under the trope-content view, we can easily explain why both of my experiences are illusory and their trope-contents are falsidical. In the first case, my experiences are illusory, because the two yellow-cube tropes appear to me as if they were one and the same during the entire time. I have been deluded. However, under the trope content view, the content is also falsidical, because I misrepresented the two yellow-cube tropes as if they were the same thing. In the second case, under the trope content view, the content of my hallucinatory experience is also falsidical, because the yellow cube straight ahead of me, which I represent as being the representational content of my experience, is not the same yellow cube that is outside of my mind, placed in front of me.

### Further Advantages of the Trope-content View

The major problem of the singular content view is the fact that the concrete particular behind the mirror or seen through the hologram is not the particular that is causally responsible for the relevant token experience under normal circumstances. This, in turn, is the reason why there is a false diagnostic of veridicality when this result is not warranted. Usually, the solution for this problem is to incorporate the token-reflexive causal relation into the content.<sup>28</sup> Two problems arise from this: first of all, such incorporation renders the singular content into a general one. Second, this entails an over-intellectualization of the content, in the sense that no one is able to perceive a yellow cube straight ahead and, at the same time, perceive that such particular is (or not) causally responsible for the relevant token experience. The trope-singular view has an elegant solution to this problem: since the yellow trope of a covered cube is not the same yellow trope that is seen through the hologram, it follows without saying that the first is not causally responsible for the second.

Normally, in order to meet both the particularity and the phenomenal indistinguishable *desiderata*, defenders of the content view artificially

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup>See Searle 1983, Recanati 2007, Chalmers 2010.

postulate different layers of content.<sup>29</sup> That sounds to me as an acceptable *ad hoc* maneuver. In contrast, the trope-content view tacitly assumes that there is a single content of experience and that this content can meet all *desiderata* at the same time.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>See Tye 2009, Schellenberg 2010, Chalmers 2010, Recanati 2007.

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