

Existential Nihilism and the Crisis of Meaning in Late Modernity: A Comparative Study of the Bhagavad Gita, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus

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Abstract

The condition of late modernity has been widely theorized as a crisis of meaning characterized by existential anxiety, moral indeterminacy, and the progressive dissolution of shared normative frameworks. Twentieth-century existential philosophy, particularly in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, offers a penetrating diagnosis of this condition through formulations such as the death of God, radical ontological freedom, and the logic of the absurd. Although these philosophical interventions compellingly illuminate the structure of modern subjectivity, they simultaneously disclose an unresolved tension regarding the normative grounding of ethical agency within a metaphysically destabilized horizon. In the absence of transcendent guarantees, the coherence of responsibility and moral action remains philosophically precarious. This paper advances a comparative philosophical investigation of existential nihilism by placing the Bhagavad Gita in systematic relation to Nietzschean, Sartrean, and Camusian thought. Through rigorous textual analysis of Arjuna's crisis and sustained conceptual comparison, the study examines how each framework conceptualizes freedom, responsibility, and ethical action under conditions of value fragmentation. It contends that whereas modern existentialism frequently situates ethical possibility in autonomous self-constitution or revolt against meaninglessness, the Gita articulates a distinct modality of existential agency that reconfigures action without succumbing to nihilism. By repositioning the Gita within contemporary philosophical debates on meaning and ethical responsibility, this study seeks to expand the comparative scope of existential discourse and reassess the conceptual resources available for confronting the enduring crisis of meaning in late modernity.

Keywords: Existential Nihilism; Ethical Agency; Life Affirmation; Value Fragmentation; Late Modernity

Introduction

The question of meaning has become urgent in what sociologists describe as late modernity. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that contemporary moral discourse survives only in fragmented form, detached from the traditions that once sustained its coherence (MacIntyre 6–8). Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman characterizes modern life as “liquid,” marked by instability and the erosion of durable structures of belonging and obligation. Within such conditions, moral claims persist, yet their justification appears increasingly uncertain. Existential nihilism therefore emerges not as a dramatic rejection of morality, but as anxiety about the grounding of responsibility once transcendent guarantees lose credibility.

Twentieth-century existential philosophy confronts this instability directly. Friedrich Nietzsche diagnoses the collapse of the Western moral horizon through the “death of God.” Jean-Paul Sartre relocates responsibility in radical freedom, while Albert Camus frames the crisis as the tension between human longing and an indifferent universe. Each seeks to preserve ethical agency without restoring metaphysical certainty. Yet a central question remains: can freedom alone sustain normative authority without becoming circular?

This study addresses that question through a comparative analysis of Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and the Bhagavad Gita. Unlike modern existentialism, the Gita situates crisis within a structured ontological framework defined by dharma. Arjuna's paralysis reflects ethical disorientation, but its resolution emerges through alignment rather than value creation.

The paper argues that the crisis of nihilism reveals a structural tension between autonomy and transcendence. Existentialism secures agency but risks fragility; the Gita secures stability through ontological commitment. The comparison clarifies the philosophical stakes involved in sustaining ethical responsibility within a fragmented moral landscape.

Research Questions

- How does late modernity generate a crisis of meaning, and why is this crisis interpreted as existential nihilism ?
- To what extent do Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus successfully ground ethical responsibility after the collapse of transcendent moral certainty ?
- How does the Bhagavad Gita conceptualize existential crisis and moral action in comparison with modern existential thought ?
- To what extent does the Gita's ontological continuity resolve the circularity inherent in Sartrean freedom ?

Research Objectives

- To examine how the crisis of meaning in late modernity gives rise to existential nihilism and ethical uncertainty.
- To critically analyze how Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus respond to the collapse of religious and moral certainty through concepts such as freedom, revolt, and life affirmation.
- To interpret Arjuna's crisis in the Bhagavad Gita as a philosophical moment of existential conflict and moral paralysis.
- To compare these frameworks in order to evaluate whether the Gita offers a distinct and coherent account of ethical agency under conditions of value fragmentation.

Hypotheses

This study hypothesizes that the crisis of meaning in late modernity arises from the decline of transcendent moral foundations, creating conditions for existential nihilism. It further argues that although Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus attempt to reconstruct meaning through freedom and revolt, their frameworks leave tensions in the grounding of ethical responsibility. The study proposes that the Bhagavad Gita presents a distinct account of existential crisis and moral action, offering a model of ethical agency that seeks to address nihilism without reverting to either moral relativism or rigid metaphysical certainty.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative philosophical methodology grounded in close textual analysis. It examines primary texts by Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and the Bhagavad Gita in order to analyze how each framework conceptualizes existential nihilism, freedom, responsibility, and ethical action within the broader crisis of meaning in late modernity. The approach is analytical rather than historical, focusing on conceptual structures rather than tracing lines of influence. Through systematic comparison, the study evaluates how these traditions respond to the destabilization of transcendent moral foundations and the resulting problem of ethical grounding. Particular attention is given to Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, Sartre's account of radical freedom, Camus's formulation of revolt, and Arjuna's crisis in the Gita. The objective is not to privilege one tradition over another, but to critically assess their respective strengths and tensions in addressing the precarious status of responsibility and moral action in a fragmented value landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Existential Nihilism and Ethical Grounding

Crisis of Meaning in Late Modernity

Existential nihilism arises from the broader crisis of meaning that defines late modernity. This crisis reflects not merely emotional anxiety but a structural weakening of the foundations that once grounded moral obligation. As religious authority declines and teleological worldviews lose credibility, ethical claims persist but lack stable justification. The issue is therefore not immediate moral collapse, but uncertainty about why action should be binding once transcendent guarantees dissolve. Existential nihilism concerns instability in ethical grounding rather than the outright denial of morality.

Passive, Active, and Affective Nihilism

Nietzsche provides the most influential diagnosis of this condition. His declaration that “God is dead” signals the collapse of a shared moral horizon (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 125). He describes humanity as having “unchained this earth from its sun,” a metaphor for cultural disorientation (125). Values remain operative, yet their metaphysical foundation appears fractured. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that moral ideals persist even after their theological basis has eroded (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 27). This produces a tension between inherited norms and weakened justification.

Within this diagnosis, it is important to distinguish forms of nihilism. Passive nihilism manifests as resignation, paralysis, or exhaustion in the face of value collapse. Active nihilism attempts to overcome collapse through reevaluation and value creation. Beyond these structural forms lies what may be termed affective nihilism: the lived, psychological experience of groundlessness. Ken Gemes emphasizes that nihilism is not only doctrinal but experiential, a condition in which life turns against itself through repression and resentment (Gemes 192–95). Nihilism is therefore felt before it is theorized.

This affective dimension creates a conceptual bridge to the *Bhagavad-Gita* (trans. Miller). Arjuna’s crisis in Chapter 1 is marked by embodied symptoms: his limbs tremble, his mouth dries, and his bow slips from his hand (Miller 1.28–30). His paralysis is not abstract skepticism but experiential disorientation. In this sense, Arjuna exemplifies passive nihilism at the level of affect. The crisis of meaning manifests somatically before it becomes doctrinal.

Modern psychology confirms this linkage between meaning and psychological stability. Viktor Frankl describes “noogenic neurosis” as a disorder rooted not in instinctual repression but in the loss of meaning (Frankl 105–07). His notion of the “existential vacuum” parallels the affective dimension of nihilism: a lived experience of emptiness that precedes philosophical articulation. Arjuna’s symptoms may thus be read as a pre-modern depiction of what modern psychology identifies as crisis-induced paralysis.

Freedom, Revolt, and Ethical Tension

Sartre responds to the collapse of transcendence by grounding meaning in radical freedom. “Existence precedes essence,” he argues, placing responsibility entirely upon human choice (Sartre 22). Camus frames the crisis as the confrontation between human longing and “the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 28), advocating revolt rather than resignation. Both responses shift value from transcendence to human agency.

Yet this relocation intensifies a central tension: if values are created rather than grounded, what secures their authority? Existential nihilism thus exposes not only the collapse of metaphysical certainty, but the fragility of self-grounded ethical agency.

Conceptual Stakes

The crisis of meaning is therefore structural, psychological, and normative. It destabilizes inherited moral frameworks, produces affective disorientation, and forces reconsideration of ethical grounding. Any comparative inquiry must examine not only how nihilism is diagnosed, but how action becomes possible after paralysis. It is within this framework that the analysis of Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* proceeds.

Nietzsche: Perspectivism and the Problem of Ethical Universality

Perspectivism and the Destabilization of Truth

Nietzsche’s most radical contribution to the crisis of value lies not simply in the proclamation of the “death of God,” but in his doctrine of perspectivism. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he argues that there are no moral facts independent of interpretation, only “interpretations” shaped by particular forces and interests (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 12). Truth itself is not a neutral correspondence to reality but a product of historically situated perspectives.

This position destabilizes the possibility of universal grounding. If all knowledge is perspectival, then moral claims cannot appeal to an objective, standpoint-free authority. Ethical norms become expressions of particular configurations of power, culture, and psychological orientation. Perspectivism therefore deepens the crisis of nihilism: it undermines not only theological foundations, but epistemic certainty itself.

Reevaluation and Creative Agency

Nietzsche's response to this destabilization is not resignation but revaluation. In the absence of universal foundations, values must be created rather than discovered. The "revaluation of all values" (Genealogy I.10) demands that individuals assume responsibility for the interpretive frameworks through which life is affirmed. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche declares that "man is something that shall be overcome" (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra Prologue* 3). Ethical agency becomes self-legislation through creative transformation.

The thought experiment of eternal recurrence intensifies this demand. Nietzsche asks whether one could will one's life "again and again" (*Gay Science* 341). Affirmation becomes the criterion of strength: the capacity to endorse existence without appeal to external justification.

The Problem of Universality

Yet perspectivism generates a decisive tension. If all values arise from particular perspectives, can ethical agencies claim universality? Nietzsche rejects metaphysical grounding, but he still distinguishes between stronger and weaker forms of life. His appeal to vitality, affirmation, and self-overcoming appears normatively charged, yet these criteria themselves remain perspectival.

This creates a structural problem: how can ethical agencies retain coherence beyond individual or cultural perspective? If values are interpretive constructions, their authority depends upon the force that sustains them. Nietzsche preserves agency through creation, but he does not restore universal obligation.

Perspectivism therefore both empowers and destabilizes ethical life. It frees agency from transcendence, yet it renders universal grounding philosophically fragile. The burden of meaning shifts entirely onto interpretive strength. Whether such strength can generate durable ethical authority remains unresolved.

Nietzsche thus radicalizes the crisis of nihilism at the level of epistemology and value. By dissolving claims to objective moral truth, he inaugurates a post-foundational landscape in which ethical agency must justify itself without recourse to universality. It is precisely this tension that later existentialism inherits—and that the *Bhagavad-Gita* addresses through a radically different ontological strategy.

Sartre: Radical Freedom and the Circularity of Ethical Grounding

Existence Without Essence

Jean-Paul Sartre radicalizes the crisis identified by Nietzsche by rejecting any predetermined human nature. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, he famously declares that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). Human beings are not defined by divine design or metaphysical structure; rather, they define themselves through action. With the collapse of transcendent foundations, freedom becomes unavoidable. Sartre describes humanity as "condemned to be free" (29), emphasizing that there is no external authority to determine values. Every choice, Sartre argues, commits not only the individual but humanity as a whole, since "in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" (24). Ethical responsibility is therefore universal in scope, even though it originates in individual decisions.

Freedom as the Sole Ground of Value

Sartre does not attempt to restore lost metaphysical certainty. Instead, he relocates the source of value within freedom itself. Meaning is not discovered but created through commitment. In *Being and Nothingness*, consciousness is described as transcendence, perpetually projecting itself beyond what is given (Sartre 78–80). Because there is no fixed essence, individuals are wholly responsible for the values they affirm. Freedom thus becomes both the condition and the ground of ethical obligation. Value is valid because it is freely chosen. There is no appeal beyond this act of commitment.

The Problem of Circularity

Yet this structure generates a fundamental difficulty. If values are justified by freedom, and freedom has authority only because it is the condition of choice, then ethical grounding appears circular. Values are binding because I choose them; they are justified because freedom is ultimate; but freedom is affirmed because it is the condition through which values are chosen. The argument risks becoming a closed justificatory loop. Sartre attempts to prevent arbitrariness by insisting that authentic choice recognizes responsibility for humanity (24). However, this appeal presupposes acceptance of freedom as a normative principle. Those who deny freedom as ultimate are not compelled by it. The authority of ethical obligation therefore rests entirely within the system it generates.

Ethical Fragility

Sartre's framework successfully prevents passive nihilism. It transforms the absence of God into intensified responsibility. However, by grounding value solely in autonomous choice, it produces ethical fragility. Normativity depends upon sustained commitment rather than external warrant. If commitment falters, grounding weakens. Sartre preserves agency without transcendence, but he does not eliminate instability. Ethical authority remains internally sustained and therefore contingent. The crisis of meaning is redirected rather than resolved. Freedom secures responsibility, yet it cannot escape the circular structure that underwrites its claim to universality.

Camus: The Silence of the World and the Ethics of Revolt

The Absurd and Divine Silence

Albert Camus defines the absurd as the tension between human longing for clarity and "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28). Unlike Nietzsche, who destabilizes metaphysical truth, or Sartre, who replaces it with freedom, Camus emphasizes the experience of abandonment. The universe offers no reply. There is no divine voice, no transcendent reassurance, no ontological dialogue. Meaning is sought, but the world remains mute.

This silence generates the central philosophical problem: "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Myth of Sisyphus 3). When the world does not answer, the question becomes whether life is worth continuing. The absurd is not merely intellectual doubt but confrontation with a silent horizon.

Revolt Against Silence

Camus refuses both resignation and metaphysical consolation. His answer is revolt—an ongoing refusal to surrender to meaninglessness. Revolt does not overcome silence; it persists within it. As he writes, "the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart" (Myth of Sisyphus 123). Meaning is not discovered; it is sustained through defiant engagement.

In *The Rebel*, Camus further argues that revolt affirms limits and solidarity (Camus 22–25). The rebel says "no" to injustice, but also implicitly says "yes" to a shared human dignity. Ethical responsibility arises not from divine command, but from shared vulnerability within an indifferent world. Revolt becomes a disciplined response to silence.

Ethical Fragility and the Absence of Dialogue

Yet Camus's framework retains structural fragility. If the world remains silent, what ultimately secures the authority of revolt? Solidarity and moderation are affirmed, but they are not grounded beyond human commitment. Revolt resists nihilism, yet it cannot escape contingency.

This is where the contrast with the *Bhagavad-Gita* becomes decisive. Camus's hero confronts a silent universe; Arjuna confronts a speaking divine presence. In the *Gita* (trans. Miller), the crisis unfolds as dialogue. Krishna answers Arjuna's confusion directly (Miller 2.11). The world is not mute but interpretively structured. Where Camus insists on dignity in the face of silence, the *Gita* states action within an ontological conversation.

The difference is structural. Camus's ethics emerges from defiance within absence. The *Gita*'s ethics emerges from alignment within articulated order. Revolt preserves agency without transcendence; the *Gita* preserves agency through transcendence that speaks.

Camus thus refines existential resistance to nihilism, but he does so under conditions of divine silence. His framework sustains meaning experientially, yet it cannot provide grounding beyond human resolve. The struggle may fill the heart, but it does not dissolve the silence that provoked it.

The Bhagavad-Gita: Ontological Grounding and Disinterested Action

Arjuna's Crisis as Affective Nihilism

The *Bhagavad-Gita* (trans. Miller) begins not with doctrine but with crisis. Arjuna stands on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and experiences paralysis. His limbs tremble, his mouth dries, and his bow slips from his hand (Miller 1.28–30). He questions the value of action when such action entails destruction and moral guilt (1.31–36). This is not cowardice but existential disorientation. His inherited framework of duty no longer provides stable justification. Action appears morally compromised; withdrawal appears equally untenable.

In this sense, Arjuna exemplifies affective nihilism. The crisis is embodied before it is resolved. Like the existential subject confronting a collapse of meaning, Arjuna confronts a breakdown in ethical grounding.

Dharma and Ontological Grounding

Krishna's response does not dismiss the crisis but reframes it. He situates action within dharma, a structured form of responsibility grounded not merely in social convention but in ontological order. Krishna insists that inaction is impossible: "No one can remain even for a moment without performing action" (Miller 3.5). Action is therefore unavoidable; the question concerns its alignment.

Central to this alignment is nishkāma karma—action without attachment to results. Krishna instructs Arjuna: "You have a right to your action, but not to its fruits" (Miller 2.47). Ethical agency becomes disinterested participation rather than emotional withdrawal. Unlike Sartrean self-legislation or Camusian defiance, Arjuna's action is not grounded in autonomous creation but in ontological continuity.

This grounding is explicitly metaphysical. Krishna affirms that the self (ātman) "is not born, nor does it die" (Miller 2.20). Responsibility is not merely social duty; it is metaphysical necessity. Because the self participates in an enduring ontological structure, action cannot ultimately destroy being. Ontological grounding stabilizes agency by situating it within cosmic continuity rather than individual affirmation.

Nishkāma Karma as Structured Revolt

If Camus's revolt is a refusal to yield to a silent world, nishkāma karma may be read as the Gita's alternative form of revolt. Yet the direction differs fundamentally. Camus revolts against absurdity in the absence of divine speech. Arjuna acts within a cosmos that speaks. The Gita is dialogical; Krishna addresses Arjuna directly (Miller 2.11). The world is not mute but interpretively structured.

Thus, the Gita's "revolt" is not defiance against meaninglessness but disciplined action within meaning. Arjuna resists paralysis not by inventing value but by realigning himself with ontological order. The struggle remains real, but it is not against silence; it is toward coherence.

Ethical Stability and Philosophical Cost

Through ontological grounding, the Gita resolves the paralysis that existentialism leaves structurally fragile. Ethical obligation does not depend upon continued subjective commitment; it derives from participation in an enduring order. This reduces the circularity evident in Sartrean freedom and the contingency present in Camusian revolt.

Yet this stability carries a philosophical cost. It presupposes acceptance of metaphysical continuity, the indestructibility of the self and the coherence of cosmic order. For a post-metaphysical framework, such ontological grounding may appear as premise rather than conclusion. Nevertheless, the Gita offers a structurally distinct response to nihilism. Where Nietzsche dissolves universality into perspective, Sartre grounds value in freedom, and Camus affirms dignity within silence, the Gita secures ethical agency through ontological continuity. Responsibility becomes neither arbitrary creation nor defiant endurance, but metaphysically situated action.

Comparative Analysis: Structures of Agency and the Crisis of Grounding

Autonomy vs Ontological Grounding

The central divergence concerns the locus of ethical authority. Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus relocate value within human agency. Meaning is created, affirmed, or sustained through perspective, freedom, or revolt. Nietzsche's perspectivism destabilizes universal truth; Sartre grounds obligation in radical freedom (Sartre 22); Camus affirms dignity through revolt within "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28). In each case, ethical authority arises from human response rather than metaphysical structure.

The Bhagavad-Gita (trans. Miller), by contrast, situates agency within ontological grounding. Arjuna's crisis is resolved not by inventing value but by aligning with dharma (Miller 2.47). Responsibility is a metaphysical necessity because the self (ātman) participates in an enduring order (2.20). Ethical legitimacy derives from ontological continuity rather than autonomous affirmation. The difference is structural: existentialism intensifies autonomy; the Gita stabilizes agency through ontological grounding.

Solidarity vs Solitude: The Problem of the Other

A second divergence concerns the status of "the Other."

In existentialism, ethical responsibility often remains structurally solitary. Sartre's famous claim that "hell is other people" (No Exit) reflects the tension between freedom and alterity. The Other threatens autonomy because each consciousness seeks to objectify the other. Ethical universality is asserted, yet grounding remains internal to the choosing subject. Solidarity must be chosen; it is not

ontologically secured. Camus attempts to correct this solitude through shared revolt. In *The Rebel*, solidarity emerges from common vulnerability (Camus 22–25). Yet this solidarity remains contingent. It depends on continued commitment in the face of silence. Nietzsche, meanwhile, often privileges exceptional individuals. His revaluation risks elitism, leaving little stable foundation for universal moral equality.

The Gita presents a fundamentally different structure. The Other is not merely another perspective or rival freedom. Krishna affirms the indestructibility of the self (Miller 2.20), and later the text affirms recognition of the same divine presence in all beings. Ethical responsibility thus arises from ontological continuity, not from negotiated coexistence. The Other is not an adversary or a projection but a manifestation of the same underlying reality. This provides a stable ground for social ethics that perspectivism and radical freedom struggle to secure.

Choice vs Offering: The Logic of Ethical Action

A further contrast appears in the logic of agency itself.

For Sartre, ethical action is grounded in choice. Value exists because it is chosen. Commitment generates meaning. However, as argued earlier, this structure risks circularity: values are binding because they are chosen, and they are justified because freedom is ultimate.

In the Gita, action is not primarily choice but offering. Nishkāma karma reframes action as disciplined participation rather than self-legislation. Krishna instructs Arjuna to act without attachment to outcomes (Miller 2.47). Action becomes an offering within ontological order rather than an assertion of autonomous will. The difference is subtle but decisive. Sartrean choice generates value from within the subject. Gita-inspired offering situates action within a prior metaphysical structure. One produces meaning; the other participates in it.

Synthesis: Structural Comparison

The comparison may be summarized conceptually:

- **Nietzsche:** Perspectivism → value creation → instability of universality
- **Sartre:** Radical freedom → circular grounding → ethical fragility
- **Camus:** Revolt within silence → experiential dignity → contingent solidarity
- **Gita:** Ontological grounding → disinterested offering → metaphysical stability

Existentialism preserves autonomy but risks solitude and fragility. The Gita preserves continuity and solidarity but requires metaphysical assent.

Structural Dilemma

The comparison does not declare a victor. Instead, it clarifies the structural dilemma at the heart of late modernity:

- Autonomy without transcendence risks contingency.
- Transcendence without autonomy risks dependence.

Existentialism chooses immanence and accepts instability. The Gita chooses ontological grounding and accepts metaphysical commitment. Both confront nihilism; neither eliminates tension entirely. The deeper question that emerges is whether durable ethical agency requires ontological grounding, or whether self-grounded commitment can suffice in a post-metaphysical age.

Conclusion

This study examined whether the crisis of meaning in late modernity inevitably leads to existential nihilism and whether ethical agency can remain coherent after the collapse of transcendent moral certainty. The analysis confirms that nihilism arises from instability in the grounding of value. When inherited frameworks lose authority, responsibility becomes structurally precarious.

Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus preserve agency by intensifying autonomy. Perspectivism, radical freedom, and revolt prevent passive nihilism, yet they do not resolve fragility. Nietzsche lacks stable universality, Sartre risks circularity, and Camus sustains dignity within a silent world. Ethical agency survives, but its grounding remains internally sustained and therefore contingent. The Bhagavad-Gita (trans. Miller) offers a structurally different response. Arjuna's crisis acknowledges existential disorientation, yet action is re-situated within ontological grounding through nishkāma karma and the affirmation of the indestructible self (Miller 2.20). Responsibility becomes metaphysically situated rather than self-generated. In this sense, the Gita resolves the circularity of Sartrean freedom and the contingency of Camusian revolt.

The study therefore takes a clear position: the Gita offers a more coherent solution to the grounding problem, though at the cost of metaphysical commitment. It proposes a third way neither autonomous invention nor defiant silence, but meaning discovered within articulated transcendence. The crisis of meaning is not erased, but reconfigured. Ethical agency remains possible only where its ground is addressed.

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