

The Metaphysical Status of Embryos in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS): A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract: The metaphysical status of the embryo has long been debated in philosophy, theology, and bioethics. In contemporary discourse on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, and preimplantation genetic diagnosis, the embryo often becomes the focal point of ethical controversy. Western debates emphasize concepts of potentiality, individuality, and personhood, yet frequently treat the embryo as either a pre-personal biological entity or as a rights-bearing subject from conception. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), however, offers a markedly different approach. Rooted in Vedic and Upanishadic metaphysics, Ayurvedic medical traditions, and epic narratives by situating the embryo within a continuum of existence rather than a binary of “potential” or “actual” life, IKS contributes a holistic vision that integrates metaphysical, ethical, and social dimensions. This paper argues that the IKS framework centred on dharma, karma, and relational ethics can enrich modern ART debates by offering a culturally grounded bioethics that balances technological possibilities with spiritual responsibility and care.

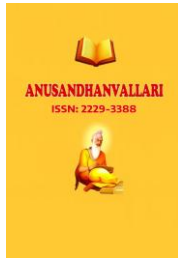
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Introduction:

The question of the metaphysical status of the embryo lies at the heart of contemporary debates on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs). Whether in-vitro fertilization (IVF), embryo freezing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), or surrogacy, the embryo is not only a biological entity but also a bearer of profound ethical and philosophical questions. Is the embryo a person from the moment of conception, a “potential” person, or merely a cluster of cells? Should embryos be granted rights, and if so, at what stage of development? How should we ethically navigate practices such as the creation of surplus embryos, their freezing, or their selective disposal? These questions dominate the bioethical discourse in Western thought, often framed within the language of rights, autonomy, and potentiality.

Yet, such debates tend to reflect particular philosophical assumptions rooted in post-Enlightenment rationalism, secular individualism, and biomedical reductionism. They privilege definitions of personhood grounded in individuality, rationality, or viability, and often create polarized positions between “pro-life” and “pro-choice” perspectives. In this framework, the embryo becomes the site of conflict between biological determinism and ethical abstraction, leading to legal, medical, and theological disputes.

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) provides a strikingly different approach to the embryo. Rooted in Vedic cosmology, Upanishadic metaphysics, Ayurvedic medical science, and the ethical frameworks of *dharma* and *karma*, IKS does not isolate the embryo as a purely biological or legal entity. Instead, the embryo is conceived



as part of a continuum of existence, linked to past lives through karma, shaped by the ethical responsibilities of parents and society through dharma, and oriented toward future rebirths and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). The embryo is thus situated in a relational and cosmic framework that transcends the binary of “potential life” versus “actual life.”

In the context of ARTs, such a perspective offers crucial insights. The freezing of embryos, for example, is not simply a technological procedure but raises questions about interrupting the karmic flow of life. Surrogacy, while legitimized through mythological precedents like Balarāma’s transfer, also raises concerns of commodification, as seen in the story of Mādhavī in the *Mahābhārata*. Preimplantation genetic diagnosis resonates with Gandhārī’s attempt to manipulate her pregnancy, which ended with tragic consequences. These narratives reveal that ancient Indian thought grappled with the ethical implications of reproductive intervention long before modern technologies emerged.

Therefore, the central aim of this paper is to explore the metaphysical status of embryos through the lens of the Indian Knowledge System and to demonstrate how such insights can enrich current debates on ARTs. By situating the embryo within a relational framework of *dharma*, *karma*, and cosmic continuity, the IKS perspective challenges reductionist biomedical models and offers a holistic bioethical paradigm. In doing so, the paper contributes not only to comparative bioethics but also to a deeper appreciation of how indigenous knowledge systems can inform global debates on life, personhood, and technology.

Objectives of the Study:

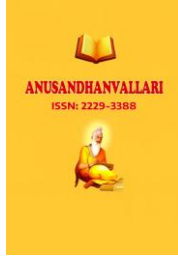
This research aims to analyse the metaphysical status of embryos in the context of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and its relevance to contemporary debates on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs). Specifically, the objectives are:

- To examine the conceptualization of the embryo in IKS through Vedic, Upanishadic, Ayurvedic, and epic traditions.
- To analyse the metaphysical dimensions of embryonic life with reference to *ātman*, *karma*, *dharma*, and rebirth.
- To identify parallels between ancient narratives and modern reproductive technologies, including IVF, embryo freezing, and surrogacy.
- To evaluate the ethical implications of ARTs through an IKS lens, emphasizing relational and contextual ethics.
- To propose a culturally grounded bioethical framework that integrates technological possibilities with spiritual and moral responsibility.
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Classical concept on the embryos in IKS:

Vedic and Upanishadic Perspectives-

The earliest reflections on reproduction and embryonic development in the Indian Knowledge System are found in the Vedas and Upanishads, which present a deeply metaphysical vision of life’s origins. Unlike purely biological accounts, these texts regard conception and embryonic growth as sacred processes that intertwine physical, spiritual, and cosmic dimensions. The Rg Veda contains hymns that describe the embryo (*garbha*) as both a physical reality and a divine manifestation. For instance, the Rg Veda (10.184.1) refers to the embryo as residing in the womb “under the protection of the gods,” highlighting its sanctity and connection to cosmic order



(*ṛta*). Here, the embryo is not seen as inert matter but as a being safeguarded by divine forces, a view that situates human reproduction within the larger framework of universal harmony.

The Upaniṣads expand this view by providing metaphysical detail on the stages of embryonic life. The Garbha Upaniṣad is one of the earliest known treatises on embryology. It describes conception as occurring when the *ātman* (self or soul), guided by karma, enters the union of parental contributions the father's seed (*śukra*) and the mother's blood (*śoṇita*). The embryo develops week by week, with consciousness gradually awakening as the senses form. At one month, the embryo is said to be a "lump" (*piṇḍa*), by the second month it takes shape, and by the third month organs appear. By the seventh month, the embryo is conscious of past karmic deeds and prays for liberation even before birth (Olivelle, 1992, p. 145). This account demonstrates three key metaphysical ideas: Ensoulment at conception, Karmic continuity, Spiritual consciousness in utero. The ritual of *Garbhādhāna Saṁskāra* further sanctified conception as an act aligned *it with dharma*. Collectively these perspectives establish the embryos as a bearer of *atman, karma and dharma*.

Ayurvedic Perspectives on the Embryo-

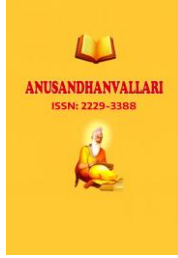
The Ayurvedic medical tradition represents one of the most systematic approaches to reproduction and embryology in the Indian Knowledge System. Far from separating physiology from metaphysics, Ayurveda (Sharma & Dash, 2001, p. 54) treats the embryo as a living entity formed through the harmonious interaction of biological, environmental, and spiritual factors. The *Charaka Saṁhitā* identifies four conditions necessary for conception: *bīja* (seed), *kṣetra* (field), *ṛtu* (season), and *ambuja* (nourishing medium) (Sharma & Dash, 2001, p. 54). Conception occurs when these align under *karmic* influence, and the *ātman* enters, determining the embryo's constitution (*prakṛti*). The *Suśruta Saṁhitā* presents monthly stages of development, paralleling the *Garbha Upaniṣad*. Ayurveda also emphasizes balance of the *doṣas*—*vāta*, *pitta*, *kapha*—for healthy development. Texts acknowledge infertility treatments and even procedures akin to embryo transfer, reflecting openness to interventionist approaches. Thus, Ayurveda conceives the embryo not as inert matter but as a microcosm embodying *prakṛti*, *ātman*, and *karma*, and links reproduction to the ethical responsibilities of parents, physicians, and society.

Epic and Mythological Narratives-

The Indian epics and Purāṇas provide some of the richest cultural reflections on the embryo, often using narrative and allegory to explore metaphysical and ethical dimensions of reproduction. These stories reveal that concerns about the manipulation of reproduction, surrogate motherhood, and embryo transfer were not unfamiliar to ancient Indian thought. They also provide striking parallels with modern debates on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs).

Balarāma's Embryo Transfer – A Proto-Surrogacy Narrative: One of the most frequently cited examples is the transfer of Balarāma's embryo. According to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata, the tyrant Kamsa sought to kill all the offspring of his sister Devakī. To protect the unborn child Balarāma, the god Vishnu transferred the embryo from Devakī's womb into that of Rohiṇī, another wife of Vasudeva. Rohiṇī then gave birth to Balarāma in secrecy (Dimmitt & van Buitenen, 1978). This account resonates strongly with modern gestational surrogacy. It suggests that the idea of transferring an embryo for the sake of protection and lineage preservation was already part of cultural imagination. Importantly, this was framed not as an act of manipulation but as an ethically justified intervention aligned with *dharma*.

Gandhārī's Hundred Sons – Artificial Embryology: The story of Gandhārī, wife of Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the Mahābhārata, provides another striking example. After two years of pregnancy, Gandhārī delivered a lifeless mass



of flesh. The sage Vyāsa divided this mass into one hundred and one parts, placing each in a pot of ghee for incubation. These eventually developed into her one hundred sons—the Kauravas—and one daughter, Duḥśalā (Ganguli, 1883–1896). This tale resembles a mythological reflection on artificial incubation and embryology. The mass of flesh divided into multiple embryos parallels contemporary practices of in-vitro fertilization and embryo splitting.

Karna's Birth – Parthenogenesis: The story of Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145)'s birth illustrates the concept of parthenogenesis or non-coital conception. Blessed with a mantra by the sage Durvāsā, Princess Kuntī invoked the Sun God Sūrya and conceived Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145) while still unmarried. Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145) was born with divine armor and earrings, without sexual union (Buitenen, 1973). This narrative mirrors the idea of conception without natural fertilization, echoing debates on virgin birth and reproductive autonomy. Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145)'s lifelong struggle with identity also highlights the psychological and ethical complexities associated with concealed parentage, an issue that resonates with donor-conceived children today.

Mādhavī – Commodification of Womb and Surrogacy: The tale of Mādhavī in the Udyoga Parva of the Mahābhārata further reflects ancient concerns about reproductive exploitation. Gifted with the ability to regain her virginity after childbirth, Mādhavī was “given” to several kings by her father and by the sage Viśvāmitra to bear heirs in exchange for wealth and horses (Sahni, 2002). This story anticipates the ethical problems of commercial surrogacy the repeated use of a woman's reproductive capacity as a transaction.

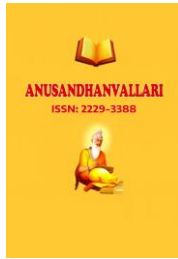
Ethical and Metaphysical Significance-

These epic narratives collectively underscore several insights: The embryo was not treated as mere object but as a bearer of destiny (*karma*) and social continuity (*dharma*). Reproductive interventions—embryo transfer, incubation, parthenogenesis were culturally imaginable and ethically permissible if aligned with *dharma*.

Samskāras and Conception Rituals: Within the Indian Knowledge System, reproduction was not merely a physiological act but a process sanctified and guided through ritual. The *samskāras*—the sixteen life-cycle rituals (*ṣoḍaśa samskāras*)—were designed to align human life with *dharma* and *ṛta* (cosmic order). Among these, the *Garbhādhāna Samskāra*, or the rite of conception, directly addressed the metaphysical and ethical significance of the embryo.

The *Garbhādhāna* ritual, performed soon after marriage, was intended to ensure that conception took place in a spiritually auspicious and ethically regulated manner. It included prayers, mantras, and purification rites that invoked divine blessings for the future child. The ritual emphasized intention (*samkalpa*), underscoring that reproduction was not merely a biological necessity but a moral and spiritual responsibility. By sanctifying conception, *Garbhādhāna* recognized the embryo as more than a potential human—it was the embodiment of cosmic order, ancestral continuity, and spiritual destiny. This is a profound departure from secular biomedical views, where conception is often reduced to genetic or physiological processes.

In addition to *Garbhādhāna*, several other *samskāras* were directed toward the embryo and the pregnant mother: *Puṁsavana Samskāra* – performed in the third month of pregnancy, intended to ensure the health of the fetus and sometimes interpreted as influencing the gender of the child. *Sīmantonayana Samskāra* – performed in the later months, aimed at the well-being of both mother and embryo, protecting them from negative influences and ensuring safe delivery. These rituals reveal that the embryo was regarded as a participant in the moral and spiritual life of the community even before birth. Through ritual, society acknowledged its sacred status and sought to nurture its well-being.



These rituals resonate with contemporary ART debates. For example, IVF procedures today often raise questions about whether conception outside the womb lacks “natural” or “moral” sanction. The *saṃskāra* tradition suggests that what truly matters are not the biological location of conception but the ethical intentionality behind it. If ARTs are employed to fulfil *dharma* preserving lineage, alleviating suffering of infertility, or fulfilling social responsibility they can be viewed as ethically legitimate within an IKS framework.

Metaphysical Dimensions of the Embryo in IKS:

The Indian Knowledge System does not isolate the embryo as a purely physiological entity; instead, it embeds embryonic life within a larger metaphysical framework. This framework draws on the concepts of *ātman* (self), *karma* (moral causality), *dharma* (ethical duty), and *saṃsāra* (cycle of rebirth). By integrating these principles, IKS conceptualizes the embryo as a continuum of existence, rather than a “potential life” awaiting personhood.

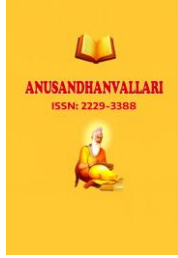
Ensoulement (*Ātman* and Conception): In much of Western philosophy and theology, debates about the embryo’s moral status hinge on the timing of ensoulment—whether the soul enters at conception, implantation, or later development. IKS, however, presumes ensoulment at conception. According to the *Garbha Upaniṣad*, conception occurs when the *ātman*, driven by its karmic residue, enters the union of paternal seed (*śukra*) and maternal blood (*śoṇita*). The embryo thus becomes a living embodiment of *karmic* destiny, not a morally neutral cluster of cells. (Olivelle, 1992, p. 145). This perspective positions the embryo not only as biologically alive but also as spiritually self-aware.

Karma and the Continuity of Life: The principle of *karma* plays a crucial role in determining the embryo’s metaphysical status. Every embryo is understood as the reincarnation of a soul whose present embodiment is shaped by past actions. The embryo is thus not a “new creation” ex nihilo, but a link in an eternal chain of existence. The embryo is not “potential life,” but life in process, already inscribed with *karmic* history. Its existence is purposeful, fulfilling both the embryo’s karmic trajectory and the *dharmic* responsibilities of its parents. Destruction of embryos (for instance, in ARTs where surplus embryos are discarded) could be seen as disrupting *karmic* continuity.

Dharma and Reproductive Duty: Reproduction in IKS is closely tied to *dharma*, which extends beyond personal desire to include family, community, and cosmic order. The embryo is a bearer of lineage (*vaṃśa*), ensuring the continuity of both ancestral obligations and social harmony. Practices such as *niyoga* in the *Mahābhārata*. From this perspective, the embryo’s significance is relational rather than individualistic. Its moral worth derives not only from its possession of life but also from its role in sustaining *dharma*.

The Embryo as a Continuum of Life (*Saṃsāra*): Unlike Western frameworks that debate when personhood “begins,” IKS situates the embryo within the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Birth is simply one stage in an ongoing journey of the soul, which continues through countless lives until liberation (*mokṣa*). Thus, the embryo is not defined in binary terms alive or not, person or non-person but as a phase of life within the cosmic continuum. This view dissolves the sharp boundary between “potential person” and “actual person,” emphasizing instead the processual nature of existence.

Ethical Intentionality (*Samkalpa*): The embryo’s metaphysical status is also shaped by the intentions of the parents and society. Conception through the *Garbhādhāna Saṃskāra* emphasized the importance of right intention (*saṃkalpa*) in bringing life into the world. The moral status of an embryo was not just intrinsic but contextual defined by whether the act of conception aligned with *dharma*. For example, conception through *dharmic* intent (to preserve lineage, fulfil obligations, or serve compassion) was ethically laudable, while conception driven by



pride, lust, or manipulation was morally questionable. This nuanced view anticipates modern concerns about reproductive technologies being guided by altruism versus commodification.

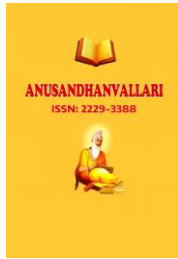
Ethical Implications for Modern Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs):

Contemporary Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) including in-vitro fertilization (IVF), embryo freezing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), and surrogacy, raise profound ethical questions about the moral status of embryos, parenthood, and reproductive responsibility. Within Western bioethics, debates often polarize into two camps: one that regards embryos as full persons with rights from conception, and another that treats them as pre-personal biological material subject to parental autonomy (Davis, 2010, p. 240). The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), however, frames these issues through its metaphysical principles of *ātmān*, *karma*, *dharma*, and relational ethics, offering nuanced insights for navigating the dilemmas of ARTs (Sharma, 1999, p. 112). In the context of IVF, the creation of multiple embryos, some implanted while others are discarded or frozen, raises questions about whether such practices disrupt karmic continuity or deny a soul its destined embodiment (Olivelle, 1992, p. 145). While IVF may be justified within the *dharmic* framework of alleviating the suffering of infertility, ethical responsibility demands minimizing embryo wastage and respecting each embryo as a *karmic* being (Charaka, 2001, p. 212). Similarly, cryopreservation, though practical, detaches conception from gestation and risks suspending karmic embodiment. Freezing may be permissible when undertaken to protect life—comparable to the transfer of Balarāma’s embryo to Rohiṇī (Buitenen, 1973, p. 105)—but becomes problematic if motivated by commodification rather than compassion. The use of PGD to prevent suffering aligns with *dharmic* compassion (*karuṇā*), yet its application for cosmetic or perfectionist purposes reflects pride and ambition, paralleling Gandhārī’s attempt at manipulating her pregnancy, which ended in the destructive birth of the Kauravas (Ganguli, 1883–1896, p. 200). Surrogacy, too, reveals this ethical duality: the transfer of Balarāma’s embryo into Rohiṇī demonstrates cultural acceptance of gestational surrogacy in the service of protection and lineage (Rocher, 1986, p. 76), while the story of Mādhavī illustrates the dangers of reducing women’s reproductive capacity to commercial exchange (Sahni, 2002, p. 76). In the case of donor conception, the anguish of Karna in the Mahābhārata illustrates the psychological toll of concealed parentage (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145), underscoring the need for transparency and recognition in defining identity. These reflections suggest that the embryo, within IKS, is never merely potential or biological but always life-in-process—a soul on its *karmic* journey—whose ethical significance is relational, shaped by parental intention (*saṃkalpa*), social duty (*dharma*), and *karmic* continuity (Kane, 1941, p. 120).

Consequently, IKS reframes ART ethics not as abstract rights or binary personhood debates but as contextual responsibilities grounded in care, compassion, and responsibility. the embryo in IKS is understood as karmic life in progress, demanding an ethical approach that integrates metaphysical continuity with relational care (Zimmer, 1951, p. 88).

Philosophical Comparison: IKS and Western Bioethics:

The comparison between the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and Western bioethics reveals two distinct paradigms in addressing the metaphysical and moral status of the embryo. Western approaches tend to ground ethical debates in notions of autonomy, rights, and potential personhood. For instance, liberal bioethics often emphasizes the individual’s right to choose, while utilitarian reasoning evaluates embryos in terms of benefits and harms. In contrast, IKS approaches are rooted in relational categories such as *dharma*, *karma*, and *ātmān*, situating the embryo not as a potential being but as life already in process, embedded in a continuum of moral and spiritual existence. A key difference lies in orientation, Western bioethics strive for universality, seeking abstract principles that apply across all cases. IKS, however, emphasizes contextual ethics, where intention (*saṃkalpa*) and duty (*dharma*) shape moral evaluation. In practice, this means that while Western debates focus on the embryo’s



intrinsic status (whether it counts as a person), IKS asks how the embryo's existence participates in a larger network of responsibilities towards family, society, and cosmic order. But both traditions engage with ethical dilemmas in reproductive technologies, but they differ in interpretive frameworks. For example, cases like embryo transfer or genetic selection are discussed in IKS through *dharmic* responsibility and karmic continuity, whereas Western discourse often frames them in terms of individual autonomy and reproductive rights. While mythological narratives such as those of Balarāma or Gandhārī illustrate possibilities of embryo transfer or selective conception, in this section they serve only as symbolic markers of how IKS embeds reproduction in cosmic and moral order.

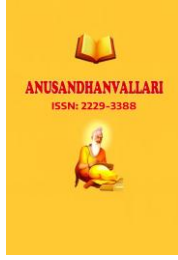
Ultimately, IKS offers a holistic, relational ethic that resists the reduction of embryos to mere biological entities or property, while Western bioethics provides clarity in legal and rights-based reasoning. Read together, they reveal complementary strengths: IKS foregrounds moral intention and interconnectedness, while Western thought provides frameworks for rights and autonomy. This dialogue enriches global bioethics by showing how diverse traditions can converge on the importance of compassion, responsibility, and the careful regulation of reproductive technologies

Conclusion:

The metaphysical status of embryos has emerged as one of the most contested issues in contemporary bioethics, particularly in the age of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF), embryo freezing, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), and surrogacy. In Western debates, the embryo is often caught in a binary opposition: either as a person with full rights from conception, or as a mere cluster of cells with no intrinsic moral status until later development. This framing generates polarized positions, pro-life versus pro-choice, that often obscure the complex relational, social, and spiritual dimensions of human reproduction. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers an alternative vision, one that is at once metaphysical, ethical, and holistic. By situating the embryo within the continuum of *samsāra* (rebirth), *karma* (moral causality), and *dharma* (ethical responsibility), IKS reframes embryonic life not as “potential” but as life-in-process. From the hymns of the Vedas to the embryological detail of the Garbha Upaniṣad and the medical insights of Ayurveda (Sharma & Dash, 2001, p. 54), Indian thought consistently affirms that the embryo is imbued with *ātman* from conception, carries *karmic* history, and deserves protection and care. Epic narratives such as Balarāma's embryo transfer, Gandhārī's artificial incubation, Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145)'s parthenogenetic birth, and Mādhavī's surrogacy highlight both the ethical flexibility and the moral cautions of reproductive intervention.

The metaphysical framework of IKS suggests several crucial insights for modern ART debates: IVF is ethically valid when motivated by compassion and *dharma*, but reckless creation and destruction of embryos disrupt *karmic* continuity. Embryo freezing is acceptable as protection, yet commodification of stored embryos undermines their sacred status. PGD and genetic selection may be permissible to alleviate suffering but become ethically problematic when driven by pride or eugenics. Surrogacy is valid when voluntary and compassionate but unjust when exploitative or transactional. Donor conception requires honesty and care, as secrecy can cause existential suffering, as illustrated in Karna (Buitenen, 1973, p. 145)'s narrative. IKS emphasis on relational and contextual ethics. Rather than grounding morality in abstract rights or rigid rules, IKS evaluates reproductive practices through intention (*samkalpa*), responsibility (*kartavya*), and harmony with cosmic order (*ṛta*). This resonates with contemporary care ethics, which privileges empathy, responsibility, and relationships over universalist absolutes.

In conclusion, the Indian Knowledge System presents the embryo not as an object of scientific manipulation or a battlefield for legal rights but as a sacred node in the web of life, linking past, present, and future. By embracing this vision, global bioethics can move beyond sterile dichotomies and cultivate a richer,



more compassionate framework for ARTs one that honours technological progress while remaining rooted in metaphysical depth and ethical responsibility.

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