“How Does Pantheism View Good and Evil?”

I found your website very helpful in offering information on yoga and Christianity, especially Michael Gleghorn’s article.

I came across a quote for a guru:

> *Life has a bright side and a dark side, for the world of relativity is composed of light and shadows. If you permit your thoughts to dwell on evil, you yourself will become ugly. Look only for the good in everything so you absorb the quality of beauty.*

Can you comment on how pantheism views evil and good? If you can shed some light on this quote, it would be helpful for me to understand how to address this with someone with this belief system.

Hello _____,

Thanks for your letter. Pantheism ultimately makes no distinction between good and evil. If all is one, and all is “God” (or Brahman), then the distinction between good and evil must ultimately be illusory. If not, then evil infects the very being of “God” itself. Thus, pantheism has a real problem with evil.

Of course, there is much truth in the guru’s quote (although it’s not terribly consistent with pantheism). However, one can find preferable advice (in my opinion) in the Bible. As Paul told the Philippians, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirableif anything is excellent or praiseworthythink about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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Exploring God's Relationship to Time

Written by David Pattillo and Michael Gleghorn

Introduction

Why does time flow the way it does? Can we alter time, or is it beyond our grasp? Is time travel possible? Is God inside or outside of time? Does everyone experience time the same way we do? When faced with the question, What is time? we encounter one of the most fundamental human inquiries, as well as one of the most difficult philosophical questions. Every person seems to experience the flow of time every single day, yet when asked to define it, we are often at a loss for words. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we shall define time as a relation of events involving earlier than and later than.

Two views of time

When it comes to the philosophy of the nature of time, there are essentially two views: the *dynamic, tensed,* or *A Theory;* and the *static, tenseless,* or *B Theory*. It is traditionally said that on the *A Theory*, the present is ontologically privileged. That is to say, the present is the only thing that is really real; the past has happened and the future will happen. It is much easier to see what distinguishes the *A*

Theory when it is compared with the *B Theory*, which holds that all moments are equally real. That is (according to the *B Theory*), from our perspective it is 2007, 1950 is in the past and 2050 is in the future. But for the people in 1950 (who also exist at *that* time), both 2007 and 2050 are in the future. Likewise, for the people in 2050 both 1950 and 2007 are in the past. The *B Theory* holds that it is ignorant to think of our moment of the world as the real moment, or the moment occupying some privileged position. According to the *B Theory*, any tensed idea, or sentence whose verb has tense (i.e., past/present/or future), would actually be more accurate if it were translated into a tenseless idea or sentence (i.e., one that has a tenseless verb and time stamp to say when something happened, rather than a tensed verb) since tensed ideas imply that the present moment of time is superior to, or more real than, all other moments. For instance, according to the *B Theory*, the tensed sentence, JFK was assassinated, would misconstrue reality as if the year 2007 (or any year after 1963) is more real or significant than the years 1907 or 1963, because it has a verb in the past tense. This theory holds that the sentence would be better put On November 22, 1963, at 12:30 P.M. CST JFK *is* assassinated.{2} This tenseless sentence is preferred on the *B Theory* because there is no moment that can claim to be the true present moment; rather, there are just equally real moments. Advocates of the *B Theory* say that reality is one long 4-dimensional block, and we are just experiencing one moment of that block, but all the moments are equally real or existent. The *A Theory*, on the other hand, would say that *tensed verbs* (verbs in the past/present/future tense) do reflect reality; there really is a past, present, and future, and they are always changing as time flows and the future becomes present and then past.

Which one of these views is correct has vast implications for the way we interpret reality. For example, it will have an effect on the way we understand God and His relation to the

world. One might think that this would be the proper time to turn to Scripture to see whether it supports an *A* or *B Theory*. However, its important to recognize the fact that Scripture is not entirely clear with respect to this issue. Therefore, we will postpone looking at the Bible until our discussion of Gods relation to time. For the present, we need to discuss which of the two theories is superior and why.

A vs. B

The most powerful argument for the *A Theory* is its intuitiveness. That is, we experience the flow of time in just as real a way as any other experience in our lives. We very directly experience the present. To say that event e is occurring now is no different than saying that event e is occurring.{3} When we look forward to the future or regret the past, we are experiencing the *A Theory* because, if you think about it, on the *B Theory* there is no difference between past, present, and future.{4} Lastly, when a kid says: I wish it were Christmas morning, or I wish I were already done with this test, he is expressing the *A Theory*. That is, he wishes that the present moment, say t_1, were replaced by some other moment, say t_2. This expresses the idea of *temporal becoming* (the idea that the present moment changes as we pass through time), which is an experience of the *A Theory*. As William Lane Craig puts it, We thereby presuppose the reality of temporal becoming, since our wish expresses our belief in a changing and objective present.{5} Thus the *A Theory* very comfortably coheres with what we experience in everyday life.

Now, the B theorist may ask, Why accept this experience as anything more than an illusion? To answer this we must briefly digress with a discussion of Alvin Plantingas *epistemology*, or theory of knowledge. When evaluating beliefs, many skeptics want to reject anything that is not certain. This was especially prominent in the philosophy of Ren Descartes, who rejected all his sense experience because it could have been

wrong. After all, when you think about it, we could be in the *Matrix*.{6} It could be that everything you think is real is just electrical impulses interpreted by your brain. Or it could be that the world was created five minutes ago, and you were created with all the memories you currently have. Or maybe you are the only mind in the universe, and everyone else is just a robot, cleverly designed to give the appearance of having a human mind. And the list of possibilities goes on and on. None of these can be disproven, but should we conclude that we really dont know whether anyone else actually exists? Plantinga doesnt think so. He has developed a theory that labels these and other similar beliefs as *properly basic beliefs*.

Think about it this way. If you are reading this online, the belief that there is a computer in front of you is properly basic; that is, it is a foundational belief formed in correct circumstances. Therefore, you are warranted in believing it until presented with some *defeater* of your belief. In this case, a *defeater* would have to be some good reason to believe that your senses are deceiving you. In other words, according to Plantinga, common sense beliefs about sensory experience, memory, the existence of other minds or other similar beliefs should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty (i.e., judged reliable until proven otherwise). Likewise, our experience of real temporal passing and an objective past, present, and future warrants belief in the *A Theory* until a strong counterargument is offeredstrong enough to cause us to doubt this experience.

Another major argument for the *A Theory* is what is known as the *ineliminability of tense*.{7} Simply put, this is the idea that tensed statements imply tensed facts which further imply a tensed reality. B theorists have made numerous attempts to show that tensed sentences can be translated into tenseless sentences that do not imply a tensed reality. However, all these attempts have failed. Craig illustrates:

> *This point is underlined by the ineptness of some of the supposed tenseless translations of tensed sentences. Take, for example, the tensed sentence It is now 4:30. We can imagine situations in which a persons life would depend on his holding such a belief. But the tenseless counterpart of this sentence is either It is 4:30 at 4:30, which is a mere tautology, or It is 4:30 simultaneous with this utterance, which is useless unless we also know that This utterance is occurring now, which is a tensed belief. In both cases the tenseless versions are insufficient to motivate timely action because they do not inform us whether or not it actually is 4:30.{8}*

If tensed sentences lose some meaning when translated into tenseless sentences, then there is some important meaning in tense, namely, that reality is reflected by tense. Therefore, if tenseless sentences cannot capture the facts expressed by tensed sentences, then there must be tensed facts. And thus we have a strong argument for temporal reality.

Next we turn our attention to some problems with the *B Theory* of time. While there are numerous problems, we will discuss just two of them.{9} First, the *B Theory* of time greatly misconstrues some biblical ideas, one example being the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For the B theorist, the universe beginning to exist simply means that it has a starting point, just like a yard stick has a first inch.{10} The problem is that on this view There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him.{11} So while the universe depends on God, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is severely stripped of meaning since the universe always timelessly exists with God. That is, in some sense, God and space-time seem to be equally necessary in their existence.

The other major biblical problem is that evil is never really vanquished.{12} On the static theory of time [*B Theory*], evil is never really vanquished from the world: It exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time, even if those locations are all earlier than some point in cosmic time (for example, Judgment Day).{13}

Furthermore, events like the crucifixion are never past or done away with. They simply remain timelessly forever, which seems hard to reconcile with Christs victory over death.

A second argument against the *B Theory* has to do with the impossibility of the existence of *actual infinites*. It has now been almost universally agreed upon by mathematicians and philosophers that an actually infinite number of things cannot be actualized in the space-time universe. The idea of *actual infinites* creates many paradoxes. For instance, what is infinity minus infinity? Well mathematically one gets contradictory answers. For example, one could say that the answer is infinity. But the answer could also be 4, or 0, or any other number you want. This led the great mathematician David Hilbert to say, The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought…the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.{14}

Thus, what we have in the space-time universe are not *actual infinites*, but *potential infinites*. For example, you can start counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and continue this process for a potentially infinite time (i.e., you can keep going as long as you want). But you will never reach a moment when you can stand up and exclaim, Im done! Ive counted to infinity! In the same way a line three inches in length can be divided in half, and then in half again, and then in half again, ad infinitum. But it can never actually be divided an infinite number of times. For this reason, in addition to compelling scientific and theological evidence, essentially all philosophers and scientists have now come to believe that time is finite in the

past.

However, the future is different. We know that the future is not finite but infinite. We know this both philosophically and biblically by the promise of *everlasting* or *eternal* life. Therefore, most scholars have concluded that the future, like numbers, is potentially infinite. We can keep adding years forever, but we will never reach an end. But this is inconsistent with the *B Theory*. Since every moment of time in fact exists at once, and the future has no end, there is an actually infinite number of years in the future. But since we know that there are no actualized infinites in the real world, we can safely conclude that the *B Theory* is wrong in its description of the future.

So we have seen two strong arguments for the *A Theory*, from our experience of temporal reality and the ineliminability of tense in language, and two ways that the *B Theory* seems clearly implausible, from *creation ex nihilo* and the impossibility of *actual infinites*. Other attempts have been made to revive the *B Theory*, but suffice it to say that they have been answered thoroughly.{15}

Gods Relation to Time

We now turn to how an infinite God relates to our passage of time. There are some things of which we are certain. First, time began a finite time ago. We know this from the Bible,{16} philosophy,{17} and science.{18} Second, we know God neither began to exist, nor will He ever cease to exist.{19} We can further conclude that God existed before time.{20} This is best exemplified in Jude 25: …To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen.{21}

Since we know that God existed before time,{22} we can conclude that without the universe, God existed timelessly.{23}

We then must ask ourselves, how does God relate to the

universe since it began? Here again we find two common positions. One is that God is timeless. By this it is meant that God, while the creator and sustainer of the world, was not affected by the creation of the world and remains constant outside the universe, just as He was before the act of creation. The other common position is that God is *temporal*. That does not mean that God is limited by time, but rather that He is intimately related to temporal things. He thus has a past, present, and future, just like other temporal things. Since there is no beginning or end to His existence, this position is also sometimes called *omnitemporality*.

There are two main arguments in favor of Gods *omnitemporality*. First, there is the argument from Gods relation to the universe. When God brought the universe into being, He stood in new relationships that He did not have before. Once the universe exists, He now is the sustainer of and is co-existent with the universe.{24} He could have remained timeless, but since He created the universe He went through an *extrinsic change*.{25} If God undergoes this change, then surely He must be temporal. That is, we can speak of a past, present and future for God. In the past He had one relation and in the present He has another relation. This provides a way to associate God with time, and that is all the omnitemporal view of God requires.

The second major argument for Gods *omnitemporality* comes from His omnisciencespecifically, His knowledge of tensed facts.{26} That is, as the present is constantly changing, true sentences are constantly changing. For instance, there are tenseless truths that are always true such as: The World Trade Centers *are* attacked on September 11, 2001. However, on September 10, 2001, the sentence The World Trade Centers will be attacked tomorrow was true, but this statement is not true on September 11th. What is true on September 11th is the statement, The World Trade Centers are being attacked today. Finally, any time since then, the true statement has been, The

World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th. All of these statements can be true or false depending on when they are made. That is because the verbs relate the sentence to the present. Thus, a God who knows only tenseless truths (as the *tenseless view* of God proposes) would seem to be very ignorant indeed, for there are seemingly limitless things He would not know. However, if God does possess knowledge of the truth of tensed sentences, this would seem to make Him temporal. As Dr. Craig puts it, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change.{27} Thus we have a second powerful argument for God being temporal .

On the other hand, the major argument for Gods timelessness is what is known as the *incompleteness of temporal life*.{28} This is the idea that temporal life is so limited that a perfect God would not experience it. Certainly the fleetingness of our own lives has led to many existential questions of the meaning of life given that it will all end relatively shortly. Surely God would not be limited in this way. Well, this is a plausible argument and does carry some weight, but I am not sure how much. For one thing, because of Gods complete omniscience and ability to experience whatever He wants, the past is never really lost to God, which makes temporality far less of a limitation. Secondly, since He never ends, and we His children never cease to be in company with Him (assuming we have received His free gift of eternal life), there really is no need for Him to try to grasp onto fleeting moments as we so often do. So, while this argument seems plausible, it does not seem to me to be remotely powerful enough to call into question the powerful arguments we have for the *omnitemporality* of God.

Thus, it seems we have good reason to think that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.{29} But it is important to remember that He did not have to create. Rather, His free decision to create a temporal world also

constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.{30} Many would now ask how it makes sense for God to exist timelessly and then temporally. It seems plausible to say that time is a relation of events. That is, Gods existence without creation was just simple, unchanging Trinitarian perfection, and it does not make sense to talk about before and after when there was no change. However, at the moment of the creation, we now have an event, and we can start relating events by temporal distance from the creation. Thus we conclude that God existed timelessly, and then created time and space, giving us the first mark of time, and time has been flowing ever since.

So then, we have seen that there is a real past, present, and future. God, though timeless, created, thus giving us temporal relations. We can speak of past, present, and future for God since He is intimately related to temporal things and has temporal knowledge. Since the first event, we now have a flow of time that will never end as we live on into eternity with or without God.

Notes

1. I owe a great credit to both Dr. William Lane Craig for most of the ideas of this paper, and to Michael Gleghorn for help in developing these ideas.
2. I have picked up Dr. William Lane Craig's use of italics to symbolize a tenseless verb.
3. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity, Exploring God's Relationship to Time.* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 133.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Ibid., 140.
6. Reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which a complex computer program used unconscious humans to power, and thus perpetuate itself. Human brains were meanwhile tied to an imaginary world, the matrix.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 118.

9. Ibid., 188-215 for a more comprehensive list of the problems.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Ibid., 213.
12. Ibid., 214.
13. Ibid.
14. *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Intro. by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 151.
15. Ibid., 143-188.
16. Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; I Cor 2:7; Jude 25.
17. This is supported by arguments and illustrations about the impossibility of the existence of actual infinites (e.g. Hilbert's hotel, etc.). Also, it has been noted that if time never began, we could never reach our current moment. You cannot count up to infinity by adding one number at a time. If the past was infinite, and we only complete one year at a time, we would never reach 2007.
18. This is supported by the second law of thermodynamics, as well as by arguments for the Big Bang (e.g., the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the cosmic microwave background radiation). For more information see *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* by William Lane Craig.
19. name="text19″>That God is the beginningless cause of the universe is the conclusion of the Kalam Cosmological argument. Also see Gen 1:1, Ps 90:2, Is 41:4, Is 57:15, John 1:1-3, II Tim 1:9, Rev 4:8.
20. name="text20″>I Cor 2:7, Jn 17:24, Jude 25. See also the conclusions from the Kalam Cosmological argument.
21. name="text21″>The Bible, New American Standard Version (Zondervan, Grand Rapids) 2000, emphasis added.
22. name="text22″>I say before here to mean God's existing without time, even though it is actually impossible to speak of before time since before is a temporal relation.
23. Some, like Newton, have proposed that God existed in His own infinite past separate from the creation of physical time. However, I feel that this fails to cohere with the biblical and philosophical evidence.

24. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity*, Exploring God's Relationship to Time. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 87.
25. Ibid., 87. When a being goes through an extrinsic change, the change does not effect the being's nature. The idea of an extrinsic change is the idea of a change apart from you. For instance, I can be behind you in line and then cut in front of you. You never changed, but you went through extrinsic relational changes in that you were related to me by the in front of relation and now you are related to me by the behind relation.
26. Ibid., 98.
27. Ibid., 99.
28. Ibid., 67.
29. Ibid., 241.
30. Ibid., 87.

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Confessions of a Cellphone-Challenged Journalist

I have a confession.

Not one of those tawdry confessions, but it is a little embarrassing. You see, I am cellphone challenged.

I used a cellphone once – about ten years ago when volunteering to help rebuild Miami after Hurricane Andrew. The BellSouth loaner, a real clunker, helped me navigate the storm-ravaged county amidst downed street signs and landmarks.

But I've never owned one. Voicemail takes my messages and I've seldom wanted to be more accessible. Some of my friends swear

by cellphones. Others swear at them. Ever been in a movie theater when a filmgoer gets a call and decides to talk?

My wife attended a conference presentation during which a woman asked the speaker a question from the audience. In the middle of her question, with all eyes on her, her cellphone rang. She not only answered it, but also conducted a brief conversation while everyone watched aghast.

Airline travelers talk before takeoff until the flight attendant tells them to stop. They resume talking when the plane lands. They talk walking through the airport, on the inter-terminal shuttle, entering the restroom. They talk while using the toilet or washing their hands. Some restrooms sound like offices.

Drivers talk. Beachgoers talk. Students talk between classes. Shoppers talk while cruising the aisles. (“What kind of cheese did you want me to get?”)

Some restaurants ask diners not to use cellphones. Some summer camps have banned them because they distract kids from social and recreational activities.

My doctor’s office has a sign asking patients to please not talk on cellphones while the doctor or nurse is examining them. (Let your mind wander on that theme for a moment.)

One of my favorite signs is inside a nearby church: “Please turn off cellphones during service. (Let God call you.)”

The hit movie, “Bruce Almighty,” depicts God’s attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the number is valid in many area codes. After the film’s release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after 20 calls per hour clogged her cellphone. A Denver radio station

built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they'd really discovered a direct line to God. One left a message confessing her adultery.

Another number holder decided to offer some friendly advice. She changed her voice message to say, "Looking for God? Well, I'm not Him, but I do know Him. And knowing Him has changed my life. You can know Him too. In fact, it's a local call."

Come to think of it, that may not be a bad idea. Jeremiah (the Jewish prophet, not the bullfrog) said God told him, "Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know." It doesn't even require a cellphone.

I guess I can live with cellphones if people can realize that they're not for everyone. If you have one, I certainly don't fault you. But please, do turn it off when you go to see the doctor.

M.I.T. Dean's Pants on Fire

George Washington, call your agent. America needs your "I cannot tell a lie" message. A national lecture circuit slot just became available.

A popular dean at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has resigned after admitting resume padding and living a 28-year lie. Ouch. Her sad story is filled with irony—lots of fresh material for your speeches.

Marilee Jones says, "I have resigned as MIT's Dean of Admissions because very regrettably, I misled the Institute about my academic credentials. I misrepresented my academic degrees when I first applied to MIT 28 years ago and did not

have the courage to correct my resume when I applied for my current job or at any time since.

“I am deeply sorry for this,” she continues, “and for disappointing so many in the MIT community and beyond who supported me, believed in me, and who have given me extraordinary opportunities.” {1}

The Boston Globe reports that her resume claimed degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and two other New York institutions, but that she has degrees from none of them. RPI says she attended as a part-time student for about nine months but earned no degree. The other two say they have no record of her attending.{2}

Ironically, as *The New York Times* notes, Jones was widely admired, almost revered, for her humor, outspokenness and common sense. {3} She had won prestigious MIT awards{4} and earned a national reputation as a champion for reducing college admissions pressure on students and parents.

It gets worse. She coauthored the book, *Less Stress, More Success: A New Approach to Guiding Your Teen Through College Admissions and Beyond*. On integrity, it says, “Holding integrity is sometimes very hard to do because the temptation may be to cheat or cut corners. But just remember that what goes around comes around, meaning that life has a funny way of giving back what you put out.” {5}

Doesn’t it.

Lots of people lie. Some get caught. The US military reportedly distorted Pat Tillman’s and Jessica Lynch’s stories, allegedly to boost war efforts. Enron executives cooked books for personal gain.

Employees falsify expense accounts or call in sick. Kids disavow breaking windows. Adults tell fish stories. Wandering spouses work late at the office.

Distorting the truth can bring esteem, opportunity, money, thrills. One innocent lie can require cover-ups. Soon the web becomes complex.

We've all made mistakes. As a teen, I valued my reputation for honesty but made some poor choices, lied about them, and nearly was expelled from school. My confronters forgave me and offered me another chance. The episode helped point me to personal faith. I learned that Moses, the great Jewish liberator, warned his compatriots against violating divine prescription: "Be sure your sin will find you out."{6}

Mine found me out. Marilee Jones deceit found her out, as readers from *The Times* of London to *The Times of India* now know.

Jones likely needs privacy—as she has requested—plus good friends, close counsel, and lots of prayers. Perhaps, after recovery, she can help others resist similar temptations.

So, President Washington, what lessons from this episode will your lecture tour emphasize? How about these: Tell the truth. It may be painful but it's the right thing to do. It's easier to remember. You'll sleep better and enhance society.

Pack your saddle bags, Mr. President. Crank up the PowerPoint. Be sure to include a Pinocchio cartoon and some slides of cherry trees.

Oh, but sir, we understand that the cherry tree story might be mere legend. We suggest you explain that to your audiences and give plenty of real-life illustrations.

Notes

1. Statement by Marilee Jones, MIT News, April 26, 2007, web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2007/admissions-jones.html, accessed April 27, 2007.
2. Marcella Bombardieri and Tracy Jan, MIT dean quits over

fabricated credentials, *The Boston Globe*, April 27, 2007, tinyurl.com/3ynyhv, accessed April 27, 2007.
3. Tamar Lewin, "Dean at M.I.T. Resigns, Ending a 28-Year Lie," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/us/27mit.html?hp, accessed April 27, 2007.
4. MIT Admissions Web site profile, www.mitadmissions.org/Marilee.shtml, accessed April 27, 2007.
5. Lewin, loc. cit.
6. Numbers 32:23 NASB.

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Amazing Grace in John Newton – A Christian Witness Lived and Sung

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.{2} My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and

habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic, *On the Imitation of Christ*. He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." {12} Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."{14}

In coming days, the New Testament story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) particularly impressed him. He became convinced of the truth of Jesus' message and his own need for it. "I was no

longer an atheist," he writes. "I was sincerely touched with a sense of undeserved mercy in being brought safe through so many dangers. . . . I was a new man."{15}

Newton discovered that the "new man" would not become perfect. Maturation would be a process, as we'll see.

From Slave-Ship Captain to Pastor

After his dramatic experience at sea, Newton saw changes in his life. He attended church, read spiritual books, prayed, and spoke outwardly of his commitment. But his faith and behavior would take many twists on the road toward maturity.{16}

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Church services on a slave ship? This seems absolutely disgusting today. How could a dedicated Christian participate in slave trading? Newton, like many of his contemporaries, was still a work-in-progress. Slavery was generally accepted in his world as a pillar of British economy; few yet spoke against it. As Aitken points out, this cultural disconnect doesn't excuse Christian slave trading, but it does help explain it.

During my youth in the US south, I was appalled by racism I observed, more so when church members practiced it. I concluded that some merely masqueraded as followers of Jesus. Others had genuine faith but—by choice or confusion—did not faithfully follow God. It takes years for some to change. Others never do. Aitken observes that in 1751, Newton's spiritual conscience "was at least twenty years away from waking up to the realization that the Christian gospel and human slavery were irreconcilable."{18}

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Out of the slave trade, Newton became a prominent public official in Liverpool. He attended Christian meetings and grew in his faith. The prominent speaker George Whitfield encouraged him.{20} Life still brought temptations. Newton engaged in the common practice of accepting kickbacks until a business ethics pamphlet by Methodism founder John Wesley prompted him to stop, at significant loss of income.{21}

Eventually, Newton sought to become an ordained minister, but opposing church leaders prevented this for six years. Intervention by the Earl of Dartmouth—benefactor of Dartmouth College in the US—helped launch his formal ministry.{22} Newton was to significantly impact a young Member of Parliament who would help rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Newton and Wilberforce: Faith in Action

William Wilberforce was a rising star in Parliament and seemed destined for political greatness. As a child he had often heard John Newton speak but later rejected the faith. As an adult, conversations with a Cambridge professor had helped lead him to God. He considered leaving Parliament and entering the ministry. In 1785, he sought the advice of his old pastor, Newton.

Newton advised Wilberforce not to leave politics. "I hope the Lord will make him a blessing, both as a Christian and as a statesman," Newton later explained.{23} His advice proved pivotal. Wilberforce began attending Newton's church and spending time with him privately. Newton became his

mentor.{24}

Perhaps you've seen the motion picture *Amazing Grace* that portrays Wilberforce's twenty-year parliamentary struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. If you missed it in theaters, I encourage you see it on DVD. It was after spending a day with Newton that Wilberforce recorded in his diary his decision to focus on abolishing the slave trade.{25} During the arduous abolition campaign, Wilberforce sometimes considered giving up and quitting Parliament. Newton encouraged him to persist, reminding him of another public figure, the biblical Daniel, who, Newton said, "trusted in the Lord, was faithful . . . and . . . though he had enemies they could not prevail against him."{26}

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Abolitionists sent a copy to every member of both Houses of Parliament. Newton testified before important parliamentary committees. He described chains, overcrowded quarters, separated families, sexual exploitation, flogging, beating, butchering. The Christian slave-ship captain who once was blind to his own moral hypocrisy now could see.{28} Jonathan Aitken says, "Newton's testimony was of vital importance in converting public opinion to the abolitionist cause."{29}

Wilberforce and his colleagues finally prevailed. In early 1807 Britain outlawed the slave trade. On December 21 of that year, grace finally led John Newton home to his Maker.

Lessons from a Life of Amazing Grace

John Newton encountered "many dangers, toils, and snares" on his life's voyage from slaver to pastor, hymn writer, mentor, and abolitionist. What lessons does his life hold? Here are a few.

Moral maturation can take time. Newton the morally corrupt slave trader embraced faith in Jesus, then continued slave trading. Only years later did his moral and spiritual conscience catch up on this issue with the high principles of the One he followed. We should hold hypocrites accountable, but realize that blinders don't always come off quickly. One bumper sticker I like reads, "Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet."

Humility became a hallmark of Newton's approach to life. He learned to recognize his shortcomings. While revising some of his letters for publication, he noted in his diary his failures to follow his own advice: "What cause have I for humiliation!" he exclaimed. "Alas! . . . How defective [I am] in observing myself the rules and cautions I propose to others!"{30} Near the end of his life, Newton told a visitor, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."{31}

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Newton was grateful for what he saw as God's providence. Surviving the storm at sea that helped point him to faith was a prime example, but there were many others. As a child, he

was nearly impaled in a riding accident.{33} Several times he narrowly missed possible drowning.{34} A shooting accident that could have killed him merely burned part of his hat.{35} He often expressed gratitude to God.

Have you ever considered writing your own epitaph? What will it say? Here's part of what Newton wrote for his epitaph. It's inscribed on his tomb: "John Newton. Once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."{36}

Notes

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2. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 233.

3. Aitken, op. cit.

4. Newton, op. cit., 24.

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23. Ibid., 304.

24. Ibid., 299-308.

25. Ibid., 310 ff.

26. Ibid., 315 for the quote about Daniel; 312-316 for background on Wilberforce’s thoughts about quitting.

27. Ibid., 319.

28. Ibid., 319-328.

29. Ibid., 319.

30. Ibid., 243.

31. Ibid., 347.

32. Ibid., 293-296. See also Newton, op. cit., 154.

33. Newton, op. cit., 23.

34. Ibid., 23, 66-67, 94-95.

35. Ibid., 85.

36. Aitken, op. cit., 350, 356.

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A Doctor's Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a

swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and youll see what I mean.

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"God DISPATCHES Evil Instead of Sending It"

Why don't you teach that Isaiah 45:7 is the simple mistranslation it is? Otherwise, without untangling this one verse, one is left with a god of darkness and evil rather than the God of light and peace.

Isaiah 45:7 I form the light, and DISPATCH darkness: I make peace, and DISPATCH ADVERSITY: I the LORD do all these things.

Thanks for your letter. I'm assuming you are referring to a previous email response of mine, "Is God the Creator of

Evil?”. I did, of course, refer the person to what I consider to be a better translation of this verse.

However, the difficulty with the version you have cited is, quite simply, that it offers a rather unlikely translation. The Hebrew term in this verse primarily means “create.” It is the same term used in Genesis 1:1 to describe God’s creation of the heavens and the earth.

According to the Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, there are 54 occurrences of this term in the Old Testament. The AV translates as “create” 42 times, “creator” three times, “choose” twice, “make” twice, “cut down” twice, “dispatch” once, “done” once, and “make fat” once. But its primary meaning, as any good lexicon will note is to create, shape, form.

Thus, I still think it’s better to point out that, in its original context, the passage is an affirmation of the sovereignty of God over whatever happens in the world. Nothing happens apart from His will or permission. That includes whatever calamities or natural disasters occur. And while I would agree with you that God is not the cause of any moral evil in the world, the Bible still affirms that He is sovereign over whatever moral evil occurs. So you can prefer the version you cite if you want, but it takes a minority view on how this passage should be translated (as a simple comparison of different versions will quickly reveal).

Shalom in Him,

Michael Gleghorn

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Castro’s Staying Power

“I threw a rock at Castro!” my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain’s queen and Thailand’s king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. {1} Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching JFK demand the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel…and humanity…survived.

Several years later my parents’ airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots

who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of 'Reflections by comrade Fidel.' It will be just another weapon you can count on." {2}

What reflections are in Castro's future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life's finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one's thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, "I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ)." {3}

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it's hard to envision the one who said "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"{4} jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

> *Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably…. This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.{5}*

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.” {6}

Fidel Castro’s physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

Notes

1. Reuters, Weird and wonderful: the facts about Fidel Castro, The Independent tinyurl.com/24yqvn, accessed February 19, 2008.
2. Reuters, Text of Fidel Castro’s Announcement, New York Times, February 19, 2008; at www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-cuba-castro-text.html, accessed February 19, 2008.
3. Reuters, FACTBOX-Quotes from Cuba’s Fidel Castro, February 19, 2008; at in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-32028720080219, accessed February 19, 2008.
4. John 8:32 NIV.
5. Andrew Buncombe, When Castro believed in God: letters from prison reveal atheist leader’s spiritual side, The Independent, 26 February 2007; at tinyurl.com/36xnrs, accessed February 20, 2008.
6. John 11:25-26 NLT.

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Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians

"How Sweet the Sound"

Are you familiar with the classic song *Amazing Grace*? You probably are. Do you know the inspiring story behind its songwriter? Maybe like I did, you *think* you know the real story, but you don't.

John Newton was an eighteenth century British slave trader who had a dramatic faith experience during a storm at sea. He gave his life to God, left the slave trade, became a pastor, and wrote hymns. "Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)," Newton wrote, "That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."{1} He played a significant role in the movement to abolish the slave trade.

Newton's song and story have inspired millions. *Amazing Grace* has been played at countless funerals and memorial services, sung at civil rights events and in churches, and even hit pop music charts when Judy Collins recorded it. It's loved the world over. In South Korea, a local audience asked a coworker and me to sing them the English version; they responded by singing it back to us in Korean.

Newton wrote the lyrics, but the tune we know today did not become linked with them until about 1835, after his death.{2} My university roommate and I used to try to see how many different tunes would fit the *Amazing Grace* lyrics. My favorites were *Joy to the World* (the Christmas carol), *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, and *House of the Rising Sun*. Try them sometime. They work!

Jonathan Aitken has written a biography titled *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*.{3} Aitken sees some parallels

between his own life and his subject's. Aitken was once a prominent British parliamentarian and Cabinet member, but perjury landed him in prison where his life took a spiritual turn. He's now active in prison ministry and Christian outreach.

John Newton's journey from slave trader to pastor and hymn writer is stirring. But it has some surprising twists. You see, Newton only became a slave-ship captain *after* he placed his faith in Christ. And he left the slave trade not because of his spiritual convictions, but for health reasons.

Lost and Found

Newton was the prototypical "bad boy." His devout Christian mother, who hoped he would become a minister, died when he was six. He says that through much of his youth and life at sea, "I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it."{4} At times, "I pretended to talk of virtue," he wrote, "yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness."{5} He espoused a "freethinking" rationalist philosophy and renounced the Christian faith.{6}

Flogged and demoted by the Navy for desertion, he became depressed, considered suicide, and thought of murdering his captain.{7} Traded to work on a slave ship, Newton says, "I was exceedingly wretched. . . . I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion."{8}

In West Africa he partnered with a slave trader and negotiated with African chiefs to obtain slaves.{9} Life was good, he recalled. "We lived as we pleased, business flourished, and our employer was satisfied."{10} Aitken, the biographer, says Newton engaged in sexual relations with female slaves.{11}

One day on another ship, Newton was reading—casually, "to pass away the time"—an edition of Thomas à Kempis' classic, *On the*

Imitation of Christ. He wondered, "What if these things were true?" Dismayed, he "shut the book quickly." {12} Newton called himself a terrible "blasphemer" who had rejected God completely.{13} But then, as Forrest Gump might say, God showed up.

That night, a violent storm flooded the ship with water. Fearing for his life, Newton surprised himself by saying, "The Lord have mercy on us!" Spending long hours at the ship's helm, he reflected on his life and rejection of God. At first, he thought his shortcomings too great to be forgiven. Then, he says, "I . . . began to think of . . . Jesus whom I had so often derided . . . of His life and of His death . . . for sins not His own, but for those who in their distress should put their trust in Him."{14}

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35. Ibid., 85.
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“Will I Go To Hell For My Doubts?”

I have been a Christian my whole life. I have been struggling with faith lately. I am mostly intellectually convinced in Christianity, however I have a lingering doubt based on a few intellectual things. One is the battle between old earth and [young] earth [creation] and the other is the age of the book of Daniel—which online resources I have read seem to prove that it was written after the fact. (I have seen the Christian responses and they do not deal with all of the facts.) Anyway, none of these doubts would bother me except that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 imply that any doubt might be cause for exclusion of me from heaven. I can’t even sleep at night because I am so afraid of going to hell. Is there any hope for me?

I would suggest that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 do not imply that at all. In fact, doubt isn’t even mentioned. Hebrews is about the nature of faith, and James simply says that the double-minded person—one who continually wavers back and forth between trusting and not trusting—is inherently unstable in his thinking.

See, the Lord understands that we see through a glass darkly,

as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians. He understands that we are trying to make sense of a fallen world through a fallen intellect, and we don't have all the puzzle pieces. He gives much more grace than you know, I think. The issue is not about having doubts, which usually just means we haven't figured things out. God's indictment is on those who refuse to trust. They are not the same thing. The Lord Jesus said to love God with our minds, and wrestling through the hard, meaty issues of apparent contradictions and complications is one way we do that. The very act of pursuing truth to attack our doubts and questions is a kind of worship!

Let me encourage you that there are answers, even if you haven't found them. For instance, Probe's position on the age of the earth question has brought great peace to my husband, Dr. Ray Bohlin's spirit; he's been diligently studying this issue for 30+ years. He has looked at the evidence for a young earth and universe, and an old earth and universe, and found compelling evidence for both. They clearly cannot both be true. So he says he is an agnostic on the age issue. He doesn't know. And can live with that, especially since: 1) the issue is not WHEN but WHO created, and 2) the Bible doesn't tell us, which means it doesn't matter enough to get caught up in it. How long ago God created the heavens and the earth has nothing to do with whether Christianity is true or not.

I just read my answer to him to get his approval, and he added that he would be VERY careful about trusting online resources on the book of Daniel. Why should you believe them? The nature of the web is that anyone can publish anything, whether they have any expertise or not. Are they qualified? Biased? Especially sources like Wikipedia, which are going to reflect the anti-Christian bias of the culture, since the entries come from people whose thinking is pickled in the brine of secularism. I invite you to read another answer to email at Probe.org about the book of Daniel.

I would also spend some time shoring up your understanding of

your security in Christ if you have placed your trust in Him. If you became a Christian years ago, you became a new creature, a forever child of God. You cannot lose your relationship with your heavenly Father, no matter how many doubts plague you, any more than you can become unborn from your mother. Our founder, Jimmy Williams, wrote an article "How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?" here: www.probe.org/how-can-i-know-im-going-to-heaven/

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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