

# The Power of Relational Responsibility

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## Abstract

Responsibility is elaborated here as an ethic which reaches beyond codified and individualized norms of duty. As a relational ethic responsibility is considered for its power to address the planetary, ecological and human challenges of our time. We draw on philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's work on relational responsibility, and, as is fitting from our context, on indigenous knowledge. These diverse cultural knowledge systems are both premised on putting the Other before self interest and are remarkable for their shared priorities of responsibility, obligation and relationality as pre-eminent values. Responsibility is built on a powerful critique of the tenets of classical liberalism and associated economic theory. Sustainability espouses the importance of collaboration, which is necessarily relational. While relational responsibility cannot be confined to rules, this quality of human commitment can invest decision-making for sustainability. Could it be that ethical relationality is a key to moving beyond self interest (individual and corporate) and commercial goals to put responsibility for the viability of earth's ecosystems as a priority across professional fields such as management, education, ethics and business?

## Keywords

Relationality, planet, responsibility, collaboration, Levinas, indigenous

## Introduction

This paper suggests that to achieve shifts in social and economic practices beneficial for planetary systems, new frameworks of meaning are required. Climate Change is compelling theorists and practitioners in many fields to consider conceptual orientations that can address the complex intersections of social, economic and environmental forces. Our contribution is to the development of a discourse of responsibility and relationality that challenges the dominant paradigm of rights and self interest that we argue has permitted near planetary collapse in a mere three hundred years. Our input to such a project is the idea of ethical responsibility for the Other<sup>1</sup>, at the heart of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (2004, 2006, 1981, 1986). Levinas's work can be read as a radical inversion of dominant ideas about the autonomous and self-sufficient individual. This inversion is achieved through a formulation of subjectivity that proposes that we are constituted firstly in relation to the Other. We come into being as an 'individual', in any sense, through a prior relationship to the Other. As such we are always, already tied to the Other in a relationship of responsibility.

Though not his primary intention, Levinas's work offers a radical rethinking of liberal rights based discourse that sees the individual, from the outset as sovereign, and the pursuit of self-interest as a primary human value and endeavor. In such an economy responsibility for others and the environment is secondary - it is the price we must pay for the unfettered pursuit of self-interest (Chinnery & Bai, 2008). A further, source of inspiration for this paper, and one that shares some resonances with Levinas, is Indigenous-Maori thought. While both privilege the face-to-face relation, Levinas sees responsibility as emerging from the face-to-face relationship with the human Other,

whereas Indigenous traditions make no such distinction. For Indigenous-Maori the 'Other' references all species beings to who I am related in a vast genealogy of relationships and interactions. Indigenous thought thereby expands the relation of responsibility found in Levinas to the biosphere and beyond.

This paper proposes that in the context of planetary systems collapse a discourse of responsibility must take precedence if there is any hope of sustaining viable life on earth. If responsibility emerges firstly through remembering the face-to-face ethical relation (as Levinas proposes), then relationships are critical sites through which decisions based in responsibility can occur.

Collaboration is one of the core principles of sustainability<sup>2</sup> (Iser and Stein, 2009; Berkes, Colding and Folke 2003; Berkes and Folke 1998; Williams and Martin, 2010; Adger 2004). To achieve sustainable and integrated environmental governance and management contesting interests and parties must collaborate. Though collaboration is no a guarantee of beneficial outcomes for the environment, we suggest that contesting motivations in sustained face-to-face relationships provides opportunities to learn from others that may be productive for environmental outcomes.

We consider that our focus on relationality and responsibility provides a meaningful contribution to the Principles of Responsible Management Education alongside others who are working with ethics in this area (see for example Reason, 2007; Marshall, Coleman & Reason, 2011; Fitzgibbons & Humphries, 2011). The values of social responsibility, the principle of partnership and the call to dialogue for sustainable management across a broad range of actors is timely and powerful. We also believe that our paper strongly connects to the journal theme of 'the power of responsibility'. Levinas proposes an ethics that is impos-

<sup>1</sup> Following Sharon Todd's (2003) convention we denote the Other of Levinas's thought with a capital 'O'; whereas the lower case other is used as a general descriptor for other persons. Levinas's concept of the Other is not to be confused with social theory definitions, where 'the other' refers to the effects of discriminatory practices that categorize certain groups as outside desirable norms (see Todd, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Sustainability can be defined as "maintaining the capacity of ecological systems to support social and economic systems" (Berkes et al 2003, p.2).

sibly demanding, exceeding any moral code. It is in its impossibility that the 'power' of Levinas's ethical responsibility lies. Ethical responsibility can inspire us to political decisions taken not for self-interest, but in the interests of justice for others, and by extension, for the planet.

### Liberalism and Sustainability

Any attempt to vision an alternative paradigm for a sustainable life on earth must be cognizant of the history, forces and theories that have given rise to the clearly unsustainable paradigm of the recent centuries of industrial development. Levinas offers a fundamental critique of liberalism important for such a task. For Levinas, liberalism represents an 'ontology of being' concerned with rational freedom where the human is liberated as a free spirit "infinite with regard to any attachment" (Levinas, 2006, p.5). This is a freedom from any obligation that for Levinas is always already rooted in the prior ethical relation (Horowitz & Horowitz, 2006). A Hobbesian view suggests that humans are sovereign individuals that enter society and agree to assume some responsibilities in order to better pursue self-interest (Hobbes, 1998). In this view responsibilities are tolerated only insofar as they furnish the conditions for autonomy, private interest and freedom. Far from being ethically questionable, the pursuit of self-interest has been regarded as central tenet of the good life.

Early scientific and Enlightenment ideas granted Man a super ordinate position over the earth and its species (Shepherd, 1993). Francis Bacon advocated science as a new experimental philosophy able to "...lead men to nature with all her children, to bind her to your service and make her your slave...to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations" (Bacon, 1963 cited in Shepherd, 1993). Such views opened the way to forms of scientific inquiry that objectified nature, and to knowledge formation and technological development that has removed human accountability to nature.

The anchor points within the wide-ranging tenets of liberalism include the sovereign rights of the individual, private property, competition and the individual accumulation of wealth. (Hall 1986; Oddie & Perrett, 1992). These tenets are the enduring foundations of contemporary political and economic systems, often identified as western, which have an increasingly global reach. The post 1960's rise of neo-liberalism, exemplified in the theory of Milton Friedman, is a contemporary application the economic inventions of free trade initiated in the eighteenth century to support European expansionists ideals. Today these ideas manifest in the intensification of globalized markets, the removal of regulation, privatization, and the replacement of concepts of public good with individualized 'responsibility'.

From a Levinasian perspective an orientation to the world that forgets the anterior relation to the Other (the Other person as well as the natural world, or earth as Other), at the same time forgets the radical alterity or difference of the Other. For Levinas, the Other, for whom we are infinitely responsible, cannot be reduced to objective knowledge, to our horizons of knowing. A key problem with Enlightenment rationality is the view that everything is potentially knowable and therefore we can arrive at universal and totalizing truths. For Levinas (2006) fascism and liberalism are both forms of will to power and expansion operating through a commitment to the universalization of a truth. In fascism this is the expansion of the 'particular' (the German people) through force. Liberalism on the other hand represents the non-coercive ideological expansion of a universality, but which nonetheless according to Levinas has brought

forth new forms of violence:

This history of peace, freedom and well-being promised on the basis of a light projected by a universal knowledge on the world and human society...this history does not recognize itself in its millennia of fratricidal, political and bloody struggles, of imperialism, human hatred and exploitation...(Levinas, 1996, p. 163)

For Levinas attempts to reduce the difference of Others – and we can extend that to bringing the natural world within the bounds of human knowledge, control and exploitation - requires violence. Violence has underpinned liberalism's belief that it is capable of discerning a universal and uniform constitutional and economic order. Such an order has required the reduction of diversity to sameness in both the social and biotic worlds. An ethics of responsibility for our purposes, supports a sociality where we are different trumps a sociality based on sameness.

Indigenous peoples, continue to remember and articulate a discourse of responsibility and obligation to others and to natural environments. The persistence of this orientation emerges from the knowledge that people arise or are constituted in relation to the world. Maori for example see themselves as part of a familial web in which humans are junior siblings to other species beings and forms of life. People therefore don't understand themselves as exercising knowledge over the natural world but as existing always already inside or as relationships (Hoskins, 2010). A preference for diversity in the social and biotic spheres is also upheld in Indigenous thought. Indigenous cultures are 'poly-centric' and 'poly-cultural' – no singularity becomes hegemonic whether in the environment (agricultural techniques such as mono-cropping), or culturally (in the assertion of meta-narratives or centralized political authority) (Royal, 2003; Varese, 2000).

The problem then for the discourse of sustainability is that it is produced in the context of liberalism and in its current iterations does not significantly challenge the underlying premises of its production. As Audre Lorde (1984) famously wrote: 'the master's tools can never dismantle the master's house'.

Despite some traction in developments in 'Triple Bottom Line Accounting', and numerous amplified calls to consider 'sustainability' of industries and economies, the imperatives of economic development for commercial interests have few robust forms of accountability for environmental impacts. In their introduction to *Navigating Social-Ecological Systems* (2006), Filkret Berkes, Johan Colding and Carl Folke assert a failure in problem solving capacities in environmental and resource management, despite the growing scientific understanding of ecosystems and "our bag of increasingly sophisticated tools and technologies, and the application of market mechanisms to problems such as air pollution and fisheries management" (p.1). These theorists argue that building resilience for complexity and change requires conceptual change to meet the challenges of sustainability:

There is an emerging consensus regarding the need to look for broader approaches and solutions, not only with resource and environmental issues but also along a wide front of societal problems. ... When asked about the most urgent problems facing science and society, scientists [from the American Association for the Advancement of Science] identified many items, but a common thread was that each issue seemed to have radically outgrown its previously accepted conceptual framing. (Berkes, Colding & Folke, 2006, p.1)

Sustainability has come under attack from other researchers including stakeholder theorist Andrew Weiss (1995), socio-lin-

guistic theorist Edith Sizoo (2010) and sociologist Ina Ranson (2010). Ranson argues (as we do) that sustainability is embedded in a persisting objectification of nature, which will stand in the way of achieving its goals Ranson suggests an orientation to living with nature is a relational way of engaging in respectful and more responsive forms of environmental management (Ranson, 2010). Edith Sizoo (2010) points to the common practice of companies attaching themselves to the discourse of sustainability through charitable donations to environmental causes while engaging in blatant environmental abuses. Shell's forging of a partnership agreement with the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) is a case in point (Steiner, 2011).

Rather than piecemeal tinkering these critiques point to the need for a radical rethinking of the underpinnings of enlightenment and liberal thought and our economic motivations and systems. We suggest that a relational ethics of responsibility for social, economic and environmental justice is required to respond to the pressing issues facing humanity. The beginnings of such a discourse is observable in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the Global from which the PRME are generated. With further development and application such goals and principles can support the paradigm shift required for truly sustainable human and environmental systems (Fitzgibbons & Humphries 2011; Verbos & Humphries 2011).

## Ethical Responsibility

We turn now to Levinas's account of ethical responsibility. Our premise for offering such an account is that standard accounts of responsibility are limited so as to be almost useless for current problems. Levinas invests responsibility with a radically demanding ethicality we suggest is crucial for the challenges that face the planet and ourselves. Diane Perpich's (2008) book *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* offers an insightful discussion that contrasts standard accounts of responsibility with the very different and impossibly demanding responsibility proposed by Levinas. Most accounts of responsibility in moral philosophy are limited by being restricted to voluntary action and apply to everyone in more or less similar ways. In terms of the limits of our responsibility, we are generally held responsible to do something only if it is possible for us to do it. Our responsibility is also limited to our own actions and the fairly immediate and expected consequences of those actions. I cannot be held accountable for something I have not done, or a state of affairs I have had no part in bringing about. The limit of my responsibility is generally determined by the proximity of my actions to the matter in question, and the more distant one's actions are the more socially acceptable the favouring of one's own interests becomes (Perpich, 2008).

Responsibility for Levinas is beyond such accounts. Levinas effects a knowing inversion of these standard accounts of responsibility. Levinas's account pushes responsibility to the extreme in ways that make everyday notions vulnerable and permits a new orientation to be glimpsed. His claim is that responsibility is beyond what it is possible to do, beyond my actions and their consequences and beyond the distinction between voluntary and involuntary. Responsibility to the singular Other of the face-to-face relationship is unlimited and infinite, it is not universal or reciprocal, but applies only to me. This is a responsibility that cannot be declined, discharged or filled. It is an impossible demand. For Levinas ethical responsibility in the human world must be demanding if its moral force is not simply to be reduced to norms and checklists. What is powerful

in Levinas's formulation of responsibility is that we are urged always beyond what can and must be codified in legislation and policy frameworks. Though responsibility and accountabilities will require codification, the existence of codes does not exhaust the ethical demand of responsibility. Ethical responsibility must always transcend or exceed what is possible to legislate.

Thinking about responsibility as a discourse for a sustainable future is being generated. Hans Jonas (1995) for example, encourages responsibility as a concept not simply for past actions or in the mitigation of environmental damage, but for the future of life on earth. We are challenged to act in ways "compatible with the permanence of genuine human life on Earth" (Jonas, 1995:11). Thinking responsibility into the future requires a cautionary approach that recognizes that we cannot know all the unintended and unforeseen consequences of technological innovation and planetary interventions. The impetus of initiatives such as *The Charter for Human Responsibility*, *The Earth Charter*, and *The Rights Of Mother Earth* proposed by Bolivia, are examples of reaching towards responsibility as a discourse for the viability of life on the planet:

Responsibilities are related to the present and the future, as well as to past actions. The burden of collectively caused damage must be morally acknowledged by the group concerned, and put right in practical terms as far as possible. Since we can only partially understand the consequences of our actions now and in the future, our responsibility demands that we must act with great humility and demonstrate caution (*Charter for Human Responsibility*, Preamble).

Such an approach connects with the Levinasian view that the Other is not fully knowable or containable. We cannot predict the outcome of social encounters. In a similar sense the complexity and non-linearity of planetary and atmospheric systems and human induced effects on ecosystems and the climate, cannot either be fully known or contained. An approach that takes robust responsibility for human activity; institutes an immediate cautionary principle for future responsibility (this will involve reduction of production and consumption); and recognises the limits of our capacity to know and manage effects is imperative.

## Relationality

For Levinas face-to-face ethical responsibility occurs at the inter-subjective level and is not an idea that can simply be mapped onto political relationships. In the face-to-face relationship responsibility to the Other is infinite. But in society, and in the sphere of the political, decisions that must be taken for social life necessarily limit the responsibility demanded by the Other. Levinas's ethics does not give rise to 'a politics'; it does not suggest a set of principles, codes or norms that would constitute a particular rationality. Rather Levinas's interest is how we might make space for ethical responsibility in the sphere of the political and how a commitment to ethical responsibility can invest of political decisions.

Because the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas is undetermined, politics is seen as capable of both violence and of justice. Yet ethics is also the condition of the sphere of the political because (as noted), our constitution in responsibility to the Other is the means through which we become self-reflective decision-makers in the social and political world. Relational responsibility precedes agency (Levinas, 1996). This prior constitution in responsibility means that even as ethics does not direct politics, and the political can close against others, we can never be completely indifferent to the ethical demands of the Other



(Perpich, 2008).

The ethical for Levinas then is a condition for the existence of the political sphere and makes appearances or circulates there (Horowitz & Horowitz, 2006). Yet the ethical cannot be completely contained here and always operates beyond or in excess of the political. Our task for the political sphere is to make space for ethical. Making space for the ethical requires what Simon Critchley terms conscience (Critchley, 2004). It requires an un-forgetting of, and committing to, the ethical in ways that disturb and interrupt the tendency of the political to totality, to a single rationality or consensus (Horowitz and Horowitz, 2006).

Jacques Derrida suggests, following Levinas, that the relation between ethics and politics is captured through the idea of the Others decision in me (Derrida, 1997). The Others decision in me is a decision taken but with regard to which I am passive because the decision is demanded by, or is in the service of, the Other—it is a demand I cannot ignore. For Critchley (2004) the Other's decision in me is an experience of conscience of the Others demand, to which I am responsible, and which reminds me to act in a particular situation of injustice. When making a political, policy or management decision, in the face of ethical responsibility, we face according to Derrida (1996), an experience of 'undecidability'. The experience of undecidability is recognition that political decisions, which are made for the many, represent a limitation of ethical responsibility to the singular Other. This experience can however provoke our conscience in a way that can open the possibility for judgments and decisions to made in responsibility for Others (Derrida, 1996; Critchley, 1999). For Derrida (1997) taking political decisions in such a way gives rise not to a set of normative principles, but (citing Levinas) to 'political inventions' that are called forth in response to the singularity of a particular ethical demand and context.

The political can become much more processual, contextual and open to creative interpretation and invention as Simon Critchley points out:

Politics can therefore be thought of as the art of response to the singular demand of the Other, a demand that arises in a particular context – although the infinite demand cannot simply be reduced to its context – and calls for political invention, for creation (Critchley, 1999, p. 276).

This Levinasian and Derridean orientation to the political connects well with the non-foundational political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe (2005) in *The democratic paradox*. Mouffe suggests that foundational politics that seek full inclusion evacuate critique and deny the necessary exclusions they make. Mouffe argues that it is impossible to contain social difference or represent all interests in any singular political consensus (such as liberalism), and that ongoing engagement and contestation are crucial conditions for the possibility of democratic justice. Mouffe accepts that society needs a certain consensus, but argues these should not awarded an overarching natural status, but rather must be contingent and retain an openness to that which they exclude.

Indigenous approaches to governing the social are multiform and constitutionally dynamic. Indigenous government can be regarded as forms of direct democracy because authority was not alienated to a super ordinate authority or rationality (such as a sovereign or Hobbesian Leviathan) but negotiated and lived in the day to day of community life (Durie, 1994, 1996). Maori 'law' was recognized as local, contextual, responsive, flexible, and resistant to uniformity. Such an orientation opens the possibility for localized responses, agreements, protocols and structures to be negotiated and for greater community engage-

ment in their own governance. Critchley (2007) supports such an orientation to the political suggesting that politics most usefully operates at an interstitial distance from the state, within the state: "working independently of the state, working in situation" (p.113). Here possibilities exist for social dissent, consent and forms of governance to be negotiated through face-to-face encounters. Here also, responsibility for decisions, for inclusions and exclusions cannot be so easily passed off, nor difference so easily closed against. Though we are suggesting here that local contexts provide possibilities for responsible decision-making, we also suggest that investing our decisions with the ethical, with responsibility for Others, can be remembered and committed to at any level of decision-making.

## Relationality and Collaboration for sustainability

In the context of the discussion above we further engage with the notion of collaboration as a principle of sustainability and consider what Levinas might bring to such an engagement. We focus the example of The New Zealand Land and Water Forum as an example of collaboration. Aotearoa New Zealand is a small and relatively isolated geographic landmass in the Pacific. It has abundant water resources, yet the waterways, ground water and wetlands are in a poor state and current water management practices are not working to achieve their stated purposes. The New Zealand Land and Water Forum was convened in 2010 to advance stakeholder engagement for sustainable management of water allocation and quality and their report, *A Fresh Start to Water* (2010) identifies stakeholder engagement and collaboration as a central means to achieving enduring decisions in the interests of sustainable water management.

Increasingly access to the use of water is a source of conflict as is the seeming incompatibility of farming, industrial, conservation and Indigenous- Maori rights interests. Development interests compound the complexities of water infrastructure and governance, with additional growing pressure on sewage management, wastewater and industrial discharge. Water allocation is currently managed on a 'first-in-first-served' basis that leads to inequities and conflict. The New Zealand Land and Water Forum therefore regards a new framework water allocation as a top priority. The Forum involves a range of sectors and stakeholders including M ori tribal representatives, primary industry, the electricity sector, environmental and recreational interest groups, tourism and involvement from central and local government. Sustainable water management is integrally related to land use and includes ensuring adequate water flows in rivers; managing water allocation so that farmers interests in irrigation are balanced against the viability of river ecosystems; managing land use and discharge of nitrates, effluent and pollution to safeguard water quality.

Berkes, Colding and Folke (2003) views on sustainability correspond with the Forum's assertion that stakeholder engagement and collaboration is crucial to achieving sustainability. The Chair of The Land and Water Forum has reported that the building of relationships during the forum process became the basis for trust and for the capacity to listen and hear different points of view (Alastair Bisley. Seminar at Victoria University of Wellington. June 2010 ). Those with opposing interests, such as business polarized from environmental interests, came to respect the different concerns and views and supported reaching agreement. The Forum was also crucible for engagement with Iwi (Maori tribal groups) and some steps towards respect for M ori interests is evident in the recommendation that a National Policy Statement on Water must be developed

to the satisfaction of Maori tribal interests.

We do not suggest that collaborative approaches are a panacea, or that in every situation will be successful. Indeed there are many stakeholders and observers critical of its process orientation and ability to deliver meaningful outcomes. What we do suggest is that collaborative approaches provide a context where different actors and divergent interests are brought into face-to-face relationships. Stakeholders who might otherwise never meet come face to face and as we have argued it is through the experience of the ethical demand in the face-to-face relationship that responsible decisions are made possible.

For Levinas teaching and learning are the communicative modes of the ethical relation where the 'alterity' or distinctiveness of the Other can be preserved. The enlightenment approach is one where "the Other becomes an object of my comprehension, my world, my narrative, reducing the Other to me". The ethical relation is one in which I am willing to be taught, I am willing to learn from the other: "I can learn from the Other as one who is absolutely different from myself" (Todd, 2003, p.15). In my exposure to the Other I can listen, attend, be surprised, susceptible and open to the Other. Commitment to a learning relationship opens us to communicative ambiguity, and to being altered – to rupturing our self, cultural and political certainties. Rather than attempts to arrive a single account, it is in the tensions of difference that productive and less dominating relationships can emerge and where we might respond to the ethical demands to responsibility (Bell, 2008; Jones & Jenkins, 2008).

Committing to relationships is not then about achieving a cosy togetherness with 'mutual understandings' and 'shared perspectives'. Such impulses need to be interrogated for their desire for universal norms and their assimilative effects (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). A commitment to relationship is a commitment to remaining engaged even where the relationship involves ongoing tension and contestation. As Mouffe (2005) argues it is through relationships as 'friendly enemies' - those with whom we share social space but who want to organize social space differently – that contestation can be worked towards responsible democratic ends. Even as there are no guarantees of ethical responsibility, an openness to being altered in relationships is a powerful ethical challenge that can be committed to in the context of attempts to collaborate for sustainable outcomes across diverse interests and positions.

The Other in Levinas's formulation references both an unknowable dimension that cannot be adequately represented,

but also inhabits social and cultural identities and locations that require political representation, if justice is to be achieved (Perpich, 2008). We can extend this idea to the natural world. Planetary systems are not completely knowable, yet the planet needs justice also. Earth needs institutionalized protections and regulatory regimes if it is to survive. We can also learn from earth and in so doing expropriate ourselves from the centre of the universe. To do so would be to:

...worry about the way in which one's own use of natural resources depletes what is then available for Others, whether they be plant or animal or human Others, whether they be currently living or future generations. The question, Levinas wants to say, is the meaning of what it means to be in society, so enter into social relationship. It is in the political realm that there is justice for [the animal and environmental worlds...] and for humans tout court. (Perpich 2008, p.176). (Abridged).

The face-to-face ethical structure of responsibility is in the end the core of a demand for a just polity. As Critchley (1999) notes, ethics is ethical for the sake of politics, for the sake of a more just society. We extend this view to suggest that ethics is also ethical for the sake of earth. As planetary systems collapse is clearly a human created situation, it is human ethical responsibility that must provide justice for the earth.

## Conclusion

Perhaps those reading this paper might ask what we have contributed in practical perhaps instrumental terms to the urgent question of achieving truly sustainable governance. It is true, we do not in this paper propose any global structural arrangements or suggest how sustainable goals can be practically achieved. Others might wonder what is the point of contributing an impossibly demanding ethics into an already complex and demanding set of problems. The power of the relational responsibility we have outlined does not suggest a particular set of political arrangements. Its power rather is to invert the dominant paradigms of autonomous self-interest and standard accounts of responsibility, and to remind us of our founding possibility. Our founding possibility as social beings is our prior constitution in relation to the Other and the ethical responsibility that attends that relationship. Remembering and committing to the ethical - through everyday acts of conscience - has the power to invest the political decisions we make for sustainability, that much more responsible.

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