

# How to Act as if One Were Not Free. A Contemporary Defense of Fatalism

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## ABSTRACT:

The article draws on the thought of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx to offer a critical account of a predominant subjective state today: indifference. It systematically elaborates its conceptual coordinates and shows in which sense it ultimately implies a problematic, misperceived conception of freedom. Against the background of this analysis, the article defends fatalism as a possible means to counter states of indifference and thereby attempts to move from critical analysis to the affirmative formulation of a principle of orientation: act as if you are not free.

## Keywords:

Badiou, Descartes, Fatalism, Freedom, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Provisional Moral

“Man is the being from whose appearance results the existence of a world.” (J.P. Sartre)

“Kill your middle class indecisions, now is not the time for liberal thought.” (Bloc Party)

## Critique and Provisional Moral

Many contemporary thinkers have insisted that in the contemporary world there is indifference, irresolution, undecidedness everywhere. Alain Badiou has even argued several times that today's political system rely not only on the production, but also on the administration and organisation of these indifferences. Therefore, it seems to be high times for offering an account of indifference, and providing the means of how to counter it. The following reflections should, therefore, not simply be read as a conceptual exercise drawing on the history of philosophy. Rather, they also claim a contemporary validity. The analysis of indifference provided subsequently should be read as an attempt to offer a conceptual assessment of a mode of subjectivity and subjectivisation that can be said to be dominant today. In this sense, the analysis is critical. Yet, the subsequent investigations do not limit themselves to a purely negative and critical account of the present status of indifference, they also propose a means to counter it, namely fatalism. But, one needs to be precise here: Fatalism is not, in itself,

already a new kind of subjective attitude; it is not already the emergence of a new kind of subject. Rather, I take fatalism to be one of the most crucial and most important strategic means – in the sense of a Cartesian provisory moral<sup>1</sup> – of a subjective preparation of real change to occur. The following remarks, therefore, do not propose an ethics, but first a critical analysis of a phenomenon governing the contemporary non-world, and ultimately propose one guideline for the struggle; a guideline that seeks to overcome the frustration, nostalgia, and melancholia omnipresent today in the regime of circulating bodies and exchangeable languages.

### Indifference and Fatalism

There is a remarkable passage in the last, and maybe, at least today, the most obscure book of the first modern philosopher of the subject, namely in René Descartes' "Passions of the Soul". In this passage, Descartes remarks that in a situation, in which one does not know how to act or how to judge, because things are just not clear enough and one has not yet gained sufficient knowledge to evaluate them, a certain dosage of indifference or irresolution might help. It might help to distance oneself from the situation and reflect – it "thus... gives time to make a choice before committing oneself. In this respect, indeed, it has a beneficial function."<sup>2</sup> But, and this is what makes this consideration remarkable, Descartes continues this thought by claiming that to remain within such a status of indifference, in a status that refrains from action "when it lasts longer than it ought, making us spend in deliberation the time required for action... is extremely bad."<sup>3</sup> So, the initially instructive and helpful mode of indifference, or irresolution, can quite easily become a problem for the subject when it does not get out of it anymore. And irresolution in judgment and action, indecision (Descartes uses the two terms nearly synonymously) is a result of a becoming-indifferent of the very agent that was supposed to act. With regard to this diagnosis, Descartes in his "Passions of the Soul" also offers an account of how to counter, overcome and fight irresolution – and irresolution, as should

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes introduces this concept in his *Discourse on Method* by stating: "lest I should remain indecisive [*irrésolu*]... I formed myself a provisional moral..." Descartes 1985b, 122.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes 1985a, 390.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

be added, is "a kind of anxiety."<sup>4</sup> The very means of countering this kind of anxiety – and, one should recall, that anxiety always has this effect of subjective destitution – and for overcoming the initially helpful indifference goes under the name of fatalism.<sup>5</sup>

What I will investigate subsequently is twofold: Firstly, in a sort of tour de force through some positions from the history of philosophy, I will attempt to give an account of what one might call the problem of indifference that I take to be, following Descartes, closely linked, maybe even to be synonymous with the problem of irresolution. I assume that this characterisation can also be instructive for a critical comprehension of our contemporary situation. In this first part, I will thus draw upon certain sources to outline the contours of a criticism of the state indifference. In the second part, I will formulate a defense of the Cartesian solution, a defense of fatalism as a means to counter the stagnating status of indifference. This will entail an outline of one crucial pre-condition of the concept of freedom.

### Indifference and Animal Behavior: Kant

In Kant's 1793 work, *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*, Kant notes: "It is, however, of great consequence to ethics in general, however, to preclude, so far as it is possible, anything morally intermediate, either in actions (adiaphora [morally indifferent]) or in human characters; for with such ambiguity all maxims run the risk of losing their determination and stability."<sup>6</sup> Maxims become indeterminate, imprecise and unstable if there is something like intermediacy, indifference, adiaphora.<sup>7</sup> And Kant, in the same book, depicts what he means by this sort of imprecision and instability. "A morally indifferent action (adiaphora morale) would be one that merely follows upon the laws of nature, and hence stands in no relation at all to the moral law as law of freedom – for such action is not a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. The French term Descartes uses here is not "angoisse" but "crainte".

<sup>5</sup> To be more precise Descartes does propose "courage and boldness" as direct means of countering irresolution, insofar they are "a passion and not a habit..." Descartes 1985a, 391. Yet, when he early in his book speaks about a specific obstacle arising from "things that do not depend on us" (Ibid., 379) Descartes first argues that "they prevent our forming a liking for other things whose acquisition depends on us" (Ibid. 380) and can be combatted by the assumption of "divine Providence... a fate [*une fatalité* in the original] or immutable necessity..." (Ibid.) I will elaborate in which sense I assume that the situation Descartes depicts with respect to indifference can also be overcome by this kind of fatalism – which also constitutively needs courage.

<sup>6</sup> Kant 1996, 71-2.

<sup>7</sup> For a long systematic treatment of the problem of indifference from one of the first popularisers of Kant's thought, who taught Kant to inter alia, Novalis and Schiller, cf. Schmid 1809.

factum [“deed” in the sense of “something done”]....”<sup>8</sup> What Kant states here is something that is far reaching, and of huge importance. To put this in simple terms, he diagnoses that, as soon as human beings act in a manner that is indifferent, that is to say as soon as human beings simply do not care,<sup>9</sup> they do not act as if they were free. Acting in a manner that Kant calls indifferent, defines actions that can be described by recourse to mere natural laws.<sup>10</sup> This means that as soon as someone acts indifferently, i.e. in such a way that his actions relate to something, one may say to their aim or end in an indifferent way – simply not caring what the outcome of an action is, for example – this makes it possible to conceive of these actions as being derivable, and deducible from mere laws of nature. And the laws of nature, as is clear for Kant, are the very converse of the concept and law of freedom.

Rendered in yet another way one can state: As soon as actions are, or become indifferent, with regard to what they aim at, these actions cannot be considered to be actions (in Kant’s words: deeds) in a proper sense any longer. Since, for Kant, the very concept of actions implies a conceptual reference to freedom. Indifferent actions are actions that lack – to remain within Kant’s terminology – the spontaneity of freedom. This is why they can be reduced to and derived from a natural, lawful kind of causality. Indifferent actions, thereby, function like the effect within or of a chain of causalities, and are therefore, actions that have the same status as mere causal mechanisms: Actions that are not actions any more. So, Kant states there is a danger of indifferent actions taking place within the domain of freedom, and the domain of freedom is, again this is evident for Kant, precisely the domain of human beings. This implies a far-reaching claim, namely that human beings can act as if they are not free, they can act as if they do not act. They can act as if they were akin to automats, to machines, determined by natural causality – and this also means, as one can argue with Kant, that human beings can behave like animals do, for the behavior of animals can be described in comparable terms. Machines and animals cannot be said to act freely and out of freedom, because their actions are determined heteronomously – their actions are determined by something else, not

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8 Ibid., 72.

9 Here, of course, the question arises is: what does it means not to care?

10 Indifference, here, translates the Greek (and Stoics’) term: *adiaphora*, which designated intermediary things, that are neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, etc. For an account of Stoic indifference cf. Geier 1997.

by their freedom, not by their free will. Say animals act out of instinct, which is part of their nature, that is to say: bodily constitution and when investigating how and why animals act – and this is what a certain type of the biological discipline does – it is not their free will, which stands in the main focus of scientific investigation.<sup>11</sup> It is rather their bodily needs, needs of reproduction, food, etc. that determines them. Animals cannot themselves determine (or reflect on) their (bodily) nature, it is rather that their nature determines them, and their actions.

What one can derive from Kant’s diagnosis is the following: As soon as human beings act in a manner that can be defined as indifferent, they act structurally in an similar way than animals do. They act in a way that relies on a heteronomous determination, and they do not determine how they act. Something is determining them, and this “something” can – at least for, and according to Kant – be described in terms of the laws of nature. This is the thesis that my subsequent elaboration will seek to unfold. How can it be that human beings, human animals, can act in a manner that is not properly human (whatever this is to say and however one can account for it) and in what sense can indifference be taken as a categorical presentation, which is able to explain this type of actions. What should be stated here is, that Kant uses this very term indifference in a rather modern sense, since in medieval philosophy (in William of Ockham for example) it still understood as name for a non-causal (i.e. contingent) and two-way (i.e. undetermined) power of the will<sup>12</sup> – as power for example to choose x or non-x ‘indifferently’ and that is to say: without any causal necessitation. Kant’s use of the term indicates that becoming indifferent in one’s actions and judgment is the very opposite of the medieval definition of the term. Indifference now precisely leads to, and even implies, causal or heteronomous determination of an action. The question is therefore: What does it mean to act indifferently? More precisely: Indifferent with regard to what? Here it is helpful to turn to Descartes.

### Indifference and Error: Descartes

A quite famous passage from the fourth of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* proves to be instructive here. Before this passage, in

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11 For an instructive, brief overview of the philosophical account of animal behavior, cf. Simondon 2012.

12 This is quite explicit in Ockham. Cf. Ockham 1967, 501. Therein, he argues that indifference and contingency are the two preconditions of free and voluntary action.

the course of his argument, to briefly recall it, Descartes begun his investigation by stating that anyone – and this is to say: any thinking, and this again is to say: any human being – can be deceived. Anyone can commit errors first of all in judgments but also in actions, anyone can fail and err. So, human beings can make fallacious judgments, make a blunder, and they can be deceived. This is the first characteristic that Descartes comes up with, at least in his *Meditations*. And they can first and foremost be deceived with regard to what they consider to be certain and true. So, they take something to be true, and to be certain, which is neither one nor the other. After stating this, he specifies the different media in which human beings can hold something to be true which actually is not true. The media of deception are multifold, since human beings encounter deceptions in rhetorical speeches, but also in language as such, in theological justifications of one's beliefs, in philosophical arguments, in scientific explanations, in our opinions or in those of our parents, teachers or friends that we have adopted a long time ago, in our habits, in our senses and ultimately even in any concrete thought (as we might be dreaming while assuming that we are awake). This enumeration of all the media of deception, famously led Descartes in the first three meditations to doubt everything that might be considered to be a source of error in judgment; any source of deception had to be suspended. And the outcome was the famous cogito-proof. But, in the fourth meditation he continues to ask why it is that we can err, that we can blunder at all. He claims:

“So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.”<sup>13</sup> My will is so free, so unrestricted and unlimited that I can will something that I do not understand or might even misunderstand. The will thereby becomes indifferent. The bottom line of this is clear: I can be mistaken and deceived because I am free. Mistakes, therefore, seem to be the very proof of my freedom; since it is precisely through the freedom of my will that I am the most like God. Its infinity is the thing that makes me truly resemble him. As Descartes puts it: “God's will... does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the

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13 Descartes 1984, 40-1.

essential and strict sense.”<sup>14</sup> My will is infinite in its freedom, and this very infinity is the source of my mistakes. How can this be? It is because it makes it possible for me to will even two radically incompatible, incommensurable, things at the same time. This means, systematically, that my will is so free that I can will X and non-X *at the same time*. This seems to be the very medieval definition of indifference – a will that has the capacity for both: affirmation and negation of an option. But, Descartes is more radical than this. Let me quote another passage in which this becomes apparent: “In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction — either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts — the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it. But the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom...”<sup>15</sup>

Indifference is a feeling that it does not matter which choice I take. Therefore, indifference is for Descartes the poorest and lowest grade of freedom. This is because I neither have any inclination to one of the two options of my choice, neither due to knowledge nor due to a contingent commitment. Knowledge increases my freedom as it pushes me into one of the two possible directions. Belief or commitment does so also, for Descartes. But indifference is that which results – as an affect – when I neither tend in one of two directions at hand, but when both options have the same validity to me. This implies that I have the feeling of indifference when freedom became the mere existence of a choice. Not a choice that is to be taken, not a choice that is becoming or has to become actual or realised by actually choosing one of the two sides. Freedom of choice, the possibility of choosing without actually choosing (as it does not matter to me which side to choose) is what produces indifference. A will that wills X and Non-X *at the same time* is an indifferent will. This is why irresolution for Descartes is structurally analogous to indifference. And one should not forget: it is therefore indifference that is the source of my erring and my making mistakes. Why is that? Because, when I become indifferent, I have *already* made a

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14 Ibid., 40.

15 Ibid., 40.

mistake. I assumed that freedom was already realised in the possibility of having a choice and not the actuality of choosing. Indifference is the result of a misperception with regard to the very notion, to the very concept freedom. I make fallacious judgments, because, I already made a fallacious judgment understanding freedom in this way. Such a mistaken concept of freedom lays the groundwork for all the future mistakes that I will make. It is something like the fallacious condition of possibility, the *fallacious transcendental of all my future errors*.

Kant demonstrated that, as soon as I become indifferent in my actions, they can be described in terms of natural and deterministic causal relations. What one can derive from Descartes is what it means to be indifferent, not towards some concrete object of the world, but more fundamentally within one's actions in general: to be indifferent towards one own constitution, essence or nature. Human beings are the most God-like, because of the freedom of their will, but as soon as they misperceive what freedom is, they misperceive what their nature is. They misperceive it, by interpreting it as realised in the mere possibility of a choice, and, hence, they become indifferent. But they become indifferent not only, to be precise here, towards the two sides of the choice, but essentially toward themselves. Indifference is the lowest, the poorest degree of freedom, and this is because it is freedom in an unrealised form. Freedom as possibility of a choice is freedom as mere possibility of freedom, and therefore not as freedom. Freedom of choice implies for Descartes a conception of freedom that emphasises solely the possibility of freedom, not its actuality or reality. One may here recall that, in his discussion of Greek Stoicism, Alexandre Kojève once referred to Stoicism as the first ideology.<sup>16</sup> Why? Because it implies a peculiar gesture of sovereign self-reliance that functions a justification of the slave's own practical inaction, and at its ground lays the following ideological claim: I am free as long as I know myself to be so. A claim, as Hegel also argued, that serves as the perfect justification of slavery. Such a stance is not only attacked by Kojève, and Hegel before him, but also by Descartes. And, from what has already been said, it should be clear why that is. It is because it results in indifference and irresolution, and not in proper action. And it is precisely this state of indifference or irresolution that is defined by the first ideological, maybe spontaneous ideological, mentality of the slave, that thinks it is enough to stick to the mere possibility of having a choice without actually choosing and acting

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<sup>16</sup> Kojève 1980, 53. See also the commentary of this claim in: Comay 2011, 92f.

on its ground.

To resume, the result of the present investigation thus far is: indifference in actions leads, as Kant claimed, to heteronomous determinations of my will that turn me into a machine following natural causations, or, in short: turn me into an animal. Descartes supplemented this claim by offering an account of why I act as if I were an animal. It is because I have a misconception of what freedom is; yet, it is precisely freedom that marks my essence. Therefore, I act as if I were an animal, when I act in a way that relies on a misunderstanding of myself, of my own freedom. *I act in an animal-like manner if I act as if I were free, and am relying on a mistaken notion of freedom*. This is what the category of indifference indicates. But, why, as Kant claimed, does a misconception of freedom lead me into heteronomous determinations that, again, lead me to act as if I were free although I am not, when I am acting like an animal?

### **Indifference and Indeterminacy: Hegel**

It is here, as always, that Hegel can help. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>17</sup> as well as in his *Philosophy of Right*,<sup>18</sup> he offers a complex analysis of a will withdrawing from any concrete determination – not feeling itself inclined into any direction whatsoever. Hegel argues that, as soon as a free will refuses to determine itself, and assumes that the mere possibility of determination already is the realisation of its freedom, this will is driven into hugely problematic contradictions. By insisting that freedom of choice – without taking any concrete option– is the paradigm of freedom, the free will hypostatizes indeterminacy against any concrete determination. Thereby, it seeks to have the cake, and eat it, too. This is because it sees freedom only as freedom from determination, and, thereby, identifies it with indeterminacy – as the possibility of determination without actual determination. It takes this identification to delineate a universal notion of freedom. Yet, against its own will, the free will hypostatizing indeterminacy does not attain a universal claim, but merely a particular one. Against its own will – against the free will of the free will – this identification of indeterminacy and freedom simply turns out to be nothing but a particular determination of freedom. Thereby, although the free will

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<sup>17</sup> See Hegel 1977, 355–409.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hegel 2008, 28–52. For an account of the notion of the will in Hegel see: Ruda 2011, 136–148.

seeks to flee any determination, it is, against its own will, determined by its claim to indeterminacy. Being indifferent toward determination by identifying indeterminacy and freedom, as one can derive from Hegel, does not lead to universality, but into the midst of mere particularity, since indeterminacy is precisely not a universal concept, but is attained as the abstract negation of every concrete determination, and thus is nothing but one of two sides of the same coin. On one side there is determination pure and simple, and on the other there is (abstract and thereby particularised) indeterminacy. Yet, if the definition of a concept is derived from nothing else but only an abstract negation of its abstract opposite, it is not a universal but a merely particular concept. In a cunning-of-reason-manner – against the will of the free will willing indeterminacy as freedom – this consequence cannot be avoided.

Thereby, the insistence on freedom as indeterminacy flips over, literally against its will, and determines the free will. The free will seeking to flee determination, thereby, becomes in his very flight, determined by the act of fleeing. This determination (of insisting on indeterminacy) is therefore not a result of an act of free self-determination: the free will wanted to avoid determination and nonetheless ended up within it. This is why this involuntary determination of the will turns out to be a heteronomous determination of the will. For, it is not self-posed. It relies on a misunderstanding of freedom, for freedom is precisely not identifiable with indeterminacy. One cannot simply get rid of determination. So, what happens when I refrain from any concrete determination, become indifferent towards them and simply insist on the possibility of determination, of choice, my misunderstanding of what freedom is turns against myself and thereby I myself do violence against myself.<sup>19</sup> This is because I reduce my own appeal to universality, and to freedom, to a merely particularly determined claim; to a one-sided notion of freedom as indeterminacy. This is the result of an attitude of indifference against any concrete determination. Hegel states, in his *Philosophy of Right*, that such a disposition of mind ultimately can be defined as follows: “A will which resolves on nothing is no actual will; a characterless human being never reaches a decision. The reason

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 19 This is why Hegel argues that, after the first instance of identifying freedom and indeterminacy, namely the French Revolution, after it first spirited away all determinations in the world, then the world itself had to turn at one point against its own protagonists that embodied the determination of indeterminacy. The identification of freedom and indeterminacy, which I also see at work in identifying freedom and the freedom of choice, ends up in self-induced violence. It would be interesting, although I cannot do this here, to relate this systematically to the argument about the tyranny of choice as developed in: Salecl 2011.

for indecision may also lie in a tenderness of feeling which knows that, in willing something determinate, it is engaging with finitude... However ‘beautiful’ such a disposition may be, it is nevertheless dead... possibility is not yet actuality.”<sup>20</sup> One can claim that for the free will abstracting from all concrete determinations, and assuming that it is the most free in and through this very act, another of Hegel’s claims is also quite fitting, namely that when it is the “most dead, its favorite words are ‘life’ and ‘enliven’” *When it is the most unfree, its favorite word is freedom.*<sup>21</sup> The free will becoming unfree, through willing indeterminacy, is a dead entity, because, through its act of willing, it becomes heteronomously determined, and this determination has a mortifying effect on the very universal core of the human animal.

Without knowing it, and even while believing the absolute converse, I act as if I were free although I am not.<sup>22</sup> By believing I am acting freely, but at the same time being unable to act freely under the conditions I set for myself, I end up acting precisely like animals do. Why is that? Because, for Hegel, the animal is that which can most basically be defined by stating that it does not know its limits as its limits. As Hegel claims: “If what has a defect [*Mangel*]<sup>23</sup> does not at the same time stand above its defect, the defect is not for it a defect. An animal is deficient from our point of view, not from its own.”<sup>24</sup> The animal which is deficient, and lacking something from our point of view, does not have the consciousness of its own lack. This is why Hegel can claim in a wonderful passage his *Lectures on the Fine Arts* that: “man is an animal, but even in his animal functions he does not remain within the in-itself as the animal does, but becomes conscious of the in-itself... and raises it... into self-conscious science... because he knows that he is an

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 20 Hegel 2008, 37. It would be important to demonstrate why Hegel assumes that in the next paragraph he can extend this analysis and develop a criticism of arbitrariness from it. I leave this demonstration for another occasion.

21 Could one not also assume that this very diagnosis is very adequate for the world we live in? Surrounded by enthusiasts, defenders, proponents, advocates and apologists of freedom, when political life is the most dead its favorite words remains to be freedom.

22 This is clearly one of the most apparent ideological slogans today because it disguises itself as a completely neutral and objective statement about the subjective conditions of actions: Act as if you are free! This imperative even prepares the logical ground for all the injunctions to enjoy, consume and be flexible, creative, and so on.

23 Although this would have sounded odd in English, one could have also translated „Mangel“ with „lack“.

24 Hegel 2008, 33.

animal, he ceases to be an animal....”<sup>25</sup> Yet, insisting on an indeterminate concept of freedom, i.e. freedom of choice, I do not experience my (own self-positing) limits as limits. This is because I act as if I was free, yet I am not; and, therefore, I bring myself into a position of acting as if I were an animal. This directly results from my misunderstanding of my own essence, i.e. of freedom.

The misunderstanding of my own nature generates the effect that I do not will my own freedom as realised, but that I will my freedom as possible, as possibility. Thereby, I fall into a position of willing against my explicit will my very unfreedom. This is what being indifferent – indifferent to determinations – ultimately comes down to. This result can also be articulated in the following manner: indifference toward determinations does not only lead to a misunderstanding of freedom, in the sense that I am determined against my own will, but it also leads to the effect that actions (in the proper sense of the term) become indistinguishable from non-or pseudo-actions. For, I assume, I am acting without taking sides, but I am taking sides *against* taking sides. I think I am irresolute, yet I am not. The very act that makes me indifferent, is also forcing me to be determined *without* and *against* my will. I act as if I was acting, yet because true action implies freedom, I only have the illusion that I am acting freely.<sup>26</sup> Indifference, therefore, also means that there is a wrong comprehension of what an action is – this is as one might say one of the mistakes, one of the first fallacious inferences that arise from the fallacious transcendental I established.

The diagnosis one can develop with regard to (the result of) indifference, aligning Descartes, Kant and Hegel is thus: human beings can act in a purely animal-like, and that is to say unfree, manner when: 1. they are heteronomically determined. This happens when 2. there is a misunderstanding of their own nature, i.e. of freedom. 3. What originates in this misunderstanding, consequentially, turns against the human being by hypostatizing, and producing an animal-like way of behaviour. It, thus, turns against the human by imposing a heterogeneous determination.

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25 Hegel 1988, 80.

26 Here one may of course recall the famous analysis Slavoj Žižek elaborated of how in contemporary societies the act of consumption comes with an ideological surplus, which makes me believe I am also acting politically, say when I buy a coffee at Starbucks and pay more for it to support suffering children somewhere in Africa. I actually do what I always do – consuming – yet without feeling any guilt or without having any bad conscious, because I assume that my act of consumption also implies a moment of social-political engagement.

### Producing Indifference: Marx

Against systematical background, one can comprehend one claim that one can find in Marx's early writing. The early Marx formulated, over and over again, the idea that the worker who hopes to partake in the accumulation-process of capital, or who actually participates in it, is reduced to the pure functioning of his organic, i.e. bodily constitution.<sup>27</sup> His speaks of him as being part of a cattle, reduced to the mere function of his stomach,<sup>28</sup> etc. Yet Marx, even in his early years, was smart enough to not simply blame the worker for this effect. He saw clearly this as an effect brought about by the very functioning of capitalist dynamic, and its political economy. His basic claim was: capitalism reduces the worker to its animal like behaviour (and the whole question is if reduction is the correct term here<sup>29</sup>) because it relies on a fake, problematic concept of freedom, and thereby seeks to impose a misunderstanding of it on everyone. This is why capitalism produces indifference. This is not only to say, as Georg Simmel put it, with regard to money, that capital “not merely reveals the indifference of purely economic significance but rather is, as it were, indifference itself”<sup>30</sup>; moreover it produces an indifference – a perpetuated misunderstanding of freedom – that afterwards can be, and is, administered and organised. In *Capital*, Marx has shown that money is an abstract and indifferent medium, not only because it makes it possible to exchange whatever with whatever, and also not only because it makes the processes of production that stands behind each and every product, (as condensation of labor time and force) disappear; rather money is an indifferent medium, because, to own money does not generate concrete, but merely abstract options for actions.<sup>31</sup>

Capital makes it possible that one is able to do (buy, sell, accumulate, consume, etc.) things. But when one asks the question, what is the best thing to do with money, the answer is clear. The best thing to do with money is to save it, and accumulate more, or invest it,

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27 The early Marx speaks of the worker for example as political economy's “beast of burden, as an animal reduced to the minimum bodily needs [auf die striktesten Leibdesbedürfnisse reduziertes Vieh].” Cf. Marx 1992, 290.

28 Ibid., 285.

29 For an extensive analysis of this diagnosis in Marx and the whole question of how production and reduction are linked through procedures of abstraction, see: Ruda 2014.

30 Simmel 2005, 53.

31 For this also see: Lohmann 1992, 81-129.

and 'make it work for you'. But what this ultimately means is that one owns money, but one does not, or is not supposed to spend it, although one obviously could. But, since it is much wiser to invest it to acquire more money, one abjures from direct action (i.e. spending money). So, not only the worker is reduced to a status that is designated by the category of indifference, Marx, is very explicit about the fact that for him the very exchange procedure and the very logic of capital produces only abstract options for actions. This is to say: actions that you could realise but that suit you better if they are not realized. This very dynamic also generates what Marx, in *Capital*, calls the "woeful countenance" of the "abstaining' capitalist."<sup>32</sup> This means that even when you are a capitalist, and own quite a bit of money, you are in a status of indifference, because you could spend all of it, but the very logic of capital makes it much wiser to remain within the possibility of spending it than to actually spend it<sup>33</sup> (of course one might ask if this is still adequate for describing the logic of contemporary markets). But, Marx diagnosed within capitalism a constant reduction of human beings to a heteronomous determination which makes them function like things, i.e. automats, machines, or like mere bodies, animals describable in mere mechanical terms.<sup>34</sup> The true problem is that they still perceive their abstract non-actions as way of actualising their freedom. This overall dynamic, "the essence of capitalist production, or if you like, of wage-labour" was once framed by Marx, as logic, in which the human being experiences a constant "enrichment as its own impoverishment."<sup>35</sup> One may say: its own unfreedom as freedom. What this formula articulates is one very precise way of rendering the socio-political aspect of what I referred to with the category of "indifference". This is to say that, enrichment as its own impoverishment also implies a misunderstanding of one's own freedom and it leads into a disqualification of voluntary self-determination, which brings about a heteronomous determination and reduces man to this very determination.

Yet, it should be kept in mind that obviously capitalism is not

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32 Marx 1982, 746. This obviously mirrors what already early Marx remarked when he claimed: "the less you give expression to your life, the more you *have*..." Marx 1992, 361.

33 One may of course ask if this is still an adequate description of the contemporary market dynamic. Yet, I assume it is, if one adds that there is also a peculiar logic of spending money that one does not have to save the status quo, in which, again, one does not spend what one has.

34 It reduces the worker's "activity to the most abstract mechanical movement." Marx 1992, 360.

35 Marx 2000, 1287.

nature, not natural and, hence, the animality to which it reduces the human being is not a first nature. Within culture, any form of nature is already mediated, i.e. second nature and in this sense the animality to which human beings are reduced is already processed, already adapted and produced second animality. In other words: it is produced indifference. Capitalism extrapolates and hypostatizes an animal aspect of the human animals that it itself produces. And this is also why this very animality is open for modification, for (ex-)change, for commodification – as already bodies, things and also animals can quite easily function as objects do, they can be bought and sold. The consequence of this is that people do not know that they are indifferent, and this is precisely one of the reasons that make them indifferent. They perceive their own unfreedom as their freedom – due to the misconception of freedom, on which they rely. Maybe, it is even more precise to say that they know it, but they do not believe what they know. They do not know, or do not believe that they know, that they are not in an adequate relation to their own essence, and nature but they act as if they were. In Hegel's terms one can reformulate this, by saying that there is a contradiction with regard to the relation between concept and reality, yet having a misconstrue concept makes this contradiction disappear. This is why from this, again, further fallacies follow.

One might here supplement this diagnosis by recalling Heidegger's claim about the distinctive character of the humans and animals, namely that human beings are those beings that have (and relate to, project into) a world, whereas animals live in an environment (where there is no such thing as projection possible).<sup>36</sup> What therefore happens if there is indifference, is that people lose their world (and also any kind of projection) – and, according to a well-known diagnostic claim of Alain Badiou, today's world is not a world anymore and the name for this non-world, the absence of a world is for him: market.<sup>37</sup> What is a world that is no world anymore? It is an environment, an environment of and for predators and other animals "individually weak and constantly hunted down."<sup>38</sup> This is due to the fact that the very concept of a world

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36 Cf. Heidegger 2001, 186-273.

37 In the most recent version of this diagnosis it reads as follows: „Today, there is no real world constituted by the men and women who live on this planet... Because the world that does not exist, the world of globalization, is only a world of commodities and financial exchange. It is exactly what Marx predicted a hundred and fifty years ago: the world of the world market." Badiou 2014.

38 Marx 1982, 797.

implies that it can be created and changed. A world is a product – at least of projections and collective endeavors – whereas an environment is how it is; no transformation of it can be envisaged from within it. Environments are how they are, and will at least up to a very fundamental degree, remain as they were, unless something from the outset changes them – like the comet that is supposed to have killed the dinosaurs. Environments are natural and if the world, by not being a world, becomes an environment is also becomes a de-historicised entity – and entity without (and possibility) of history. Worlds are products of actions, interactions, projections, struggles and of events. Struggles within an environment do not change anything, they simply display that there is the principle of the survival of the fittest at work, i.e. that there is some kind of natural(ised) competition. Within worlds, struggles may turn out to be what induces a world to change, events what even transforms what one assumes to be capable of, within the natural environment of the market – which is, as should be clear, a produced environment – there is no struggle and no transformation imaginable as even freedom is naturalised and turned into a given capacity of the body (say to desire or freely express itself). So, what is to be done with this? How to return to the impossible possibility of a struggle, even if it is one against one's own misconception of freedom? How to fight one's own spontaneous ideology of everyday life to naturalise one's own freedom?

### Body and Soul: Descartes I

Against the delineated background, one can again draw nearer to Descartes' last published work, which maybe remains his strangest one, largely considered to be radically outdated in the majority of today's scholarship: his *Passions of the Soul*. Therein, as referred to in the beginning, Descartes proposes a solution to a state of indifference that might not only seem genuinely surprising, it is moreover, as I will argue, completely worth of being resurrected and defended: Fatalism. But, why can fatalism help against the state of indifference? Before one can answer this question, one needs to recap certain elements of the *Passions of the Soul*. The title already indicates that there is something bodily to the soul; there are passions it experiences.<sup>39</sup> Against a simple dualism between the body and the soul – although this reading is still dominant today –, Descartes insists that the free will, which defines my essence, cannot be what it is; namely, a will without any bodily, and

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<sup>39</sup> An instructive comment on this general topic in Descartes can be found in: Nancy 2004.

this is to say, any objective manifestations. The will is no will if it has no effects that appear within the world. This is to say that there can be pure logical arguments (pure thoughts), then there are pure perceptions (pure bodily effects), and then there are some things that are *at the same time* related to thought or to perceptions, i.e. to the soul and to the body. There are things for which the body is not the cause, but that are also not merely intellectual, rather they move the body.<sup>40</sup>

The will is defined, in this book, as something that is not a bodily capacity, but as an instance that has effects on the body. One, thereby, can retroactively deduce its existence from the effects it has. Yet, the body can also have effects on that by which it is moved, it can have effects on that which has effects on it. It may present bodily restrictions to the effects that the will can have, by delineating a specific realm of the bodily possible, of what the body can do. There is thus a peculiar relation between something that is all about finitude (body) and something that is all about infinity (will). But this relation is two-sided.<sup>41</sup> Not only because it has two poles, but, moreover, because the effects that one pole has on the other are radically different – a relation that looks different from each of the two sides involved. The will, the expression of the soul, can make possible what is not as such possible for and thus cannot be considered to be a capacity of the body. The body, on the other hand, limits the effects of the will, and is able to introduce (thoughts of) limitations into the soul such that it that block the infinity of the will. The link between soul and body is, thus, not a simple relation, as it takes quite different shapes depending from where one perceives it.

This relation, which cannot really be called a relation proper, introduces what Descartes calls “conflicts” into the soul<sup>42</sup> – the soul struggles with the effects the body has on it, its passions, and how to sustain an adequate understanding of its own freedom and independence. And Descartes infers from this: “This make the soul feel itself impelled, almost at one and the same time, to desire and not to desire one and the same thing; and this is why it has been thought

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<sup>40</sup> To be more precise: Descartes distinguishes between activities of the soul that determine either the soul itself or the body, and between perceptions that either are caused by the soul or by the body. Therefore, there can also be bodily perceptions that move the soul – something that allows accounting for what I refer to as indifference. Cf. Descartes 1985a, 335-6. I leave the complete elaboration of this distinction for another time and place

<sup>41</sup> A more precise rendering is: there *is* no relation between the body and the soul.

<sup>42</sup> Descartes 1985, 345-6.

that the soul has within it two conflicting powers.<sup>43</sup> This, is what may happen when the soul takes over the perspective of the body – a state of indifference may arise, in which the soul desires at the same time as well its freedom as its unfreedom – and the reason for this is a conflation of determination, that originates in the soul and those which emerge from the body. To deal with these sorts of conflicts, Descartes argues one needs a different definition of free self-determination. It can neither be purely intellectual and conceptual, nor purely bodily. For this purpose, one need to be “equip it [the soul] to fight with its proper weapons... firm and determinate judgments....”<sup>44</sup> The firmer the will’s judgments (manifesting the freedom of the soul), the firmer the realisation of its freedom. Its fortitude can only be measured by its effects, by its actions.<sup>45</sup> Actions that I take to be free, self-determined actions, but that are heteronomously determined actions, demonstrate the lack of this sort of steadfastness. Yet, how can one gain the certainty that one is firm and determinate in one’s will and actions? On one side this clearly has to do with knowledge<sup>46</sup> – knowledge of the situation one is in and knowledge of what is good and evil. However, on the other the firm character of the will’s judgments cannot completely be derived from knowledge. The reason for this lies precisely in the Cartesian notion of freedom, since it presents a limit-point of knowledge. It is, thus, crucial to briefly elaborate this concept of freedom.

### Freedom Unthinkable: Descartes II

Descartes gives a clear, yet difficult account of freedom in his *Discourse on Method*. He begins with a simple consideration: I am able to doubt because I know I can err. From this, I can infer that I am able to doubt, because I made the experience of failure. I am able to doubt, because I know that I am not perfect. This is what makes it possible to negatively gain the concept of perfection, because I have the concept of lack

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43 Ibid., 346.

44Ibid., 347.

45 If the soul loses the conflict with the bodily solicitations, this loss appears in the guise of the passion of fear (recall that indifference is, as quoted in the beginning a kind of fear), which “represents death as an extreme evil which can only avoided by flight...” Ibid. This is crucial: if the body starts to determine the soul and its means of determining itself, namely the will, the effect is a fundamental fear of death which weighs sit down into the realm of finitude. The disastrous consequences of any hypostatization of finitude have been analysed by Badiou in: Badiou 2013-2014.

46 Descartes sums this up under the slogan: “The strength of the soul is inadequate without knowledge of truth.” Descartes 1985a, 347.

(erring, failure) and its proper understanding implies it’s opposite. The experience of “something” negative implies, in a negative manner, its own negation. Perfection is the negatively implied negation of the lack (I experienced), which is contained within the concept of lack itself. Because lack is the experience of an absence, one can apply the concept of absence onto itself. This is, as with Hegel, what it means to understand one’s limits as one’s limits. Lack becomes reflexive, and leads to its logical converse. One, thereby, gains the idea that there has to be something which is lacking the lack and this is precisely what perfection means: the lack of lack.<sup>47</sup> After the experience of failure, I can find negatively implied within me the idea of perfection – a Cartesian version of Plato’s anamnesis doctrine. And, as Descartes argues that my own imperfection results from my constitution, I am a composition of two different substances, i.e. body and soul. Therefore, that which is perfect, necessarily, has to suspend the source of my imperfection.<sup>48</sup> This is why he can deduce that something perfect – whose classical name is, of course, “God” – has to exist, better: has to have being. For, that which is perfect would not be perfect if it were not. Perfection is that which has to be, as lack of lack, and since lack includes the idea of limitation, what is perfect has to be unlimited, infinite. As soon as I make an error, I am forced to think something that logically precedes my constitution, I cannot but think – if I think – the lack of lack.

Descartes’ argument is far more radical than is usually conceived. He claims this is why “many are convinced that there is some difficulty in knowing God, and in even knowing what their soul is. The reason for this is that they never raise their mind above things which can be perceived by the senses: they are so used to thinking of things only be imagining them (a way of thinking specially suited for to material things) that whatever is unimaginable seems to them unintelligible.”<sup>49</sup> He strictly opposes such a limitation of thought. If God cannot have a body, then one has to think of him differently. Anything that has a body appears in a world, in a discourse. From this one can infer that God has to be non-discursive, un-worldly. God has to be even more subtracted from any bodily materialisation than the cogito. He has to be that which can only be grasped from within a discourse, a world, but as that which is

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47 Jacques Alain-Miller once referred to the lack of lack as “a place – where there is nothing.” Miller 2002, 139.

48 Descartes 1985b, 128-9.

49 Ibid., 129.

at the same time logically 'prior' to it (since he created it): *He is the post-discursively graspable pre-discursive*, the lack of lack.

He is what we cannot comprehend discursively (by imagining him). But we can think that there is something that we cannot comprehend. Put differently: *we can think that there is something that we cannot think*. We can think that which will always have been logically 'prior' to any discourse and it is unthinkable since thought is essentially discursive. If any existence – even the cogito – belongs to a discursive setting, Descartes demonstrates that we can think what *is* but does not exist. We can think being – “God” – but we think it as that which is unthinkable, because it does not exist. Hence, we have a clear and distinct idea of the unthinkable that is also completely rational. We can think the unthinkable, as that which we cannot think, yet we are forced to think it.

But, what does one think if one thinks what one cannot think? Descartes' answer is: freedom. One, thus, thinks the essence of human being. Therefore, Descartes is a dualist, but a peculiar one. He is a dualist because he thinks that there is thought, discourse, etc. on one side and that there is the unthinkable on the other. What does this mean? In the *Meditations*, Descartes has shown that I can err because I am in one respect absolutely God-like, namely what concerns my freedom. I am so infinitely free that my will can will A, and Non-A, at the same time. This is why I can err, but it also entails a claim about the essence of God and, as I resemble him in this respect, also about the essence of human beings. Jean Paul Sartre has demonstrated that God's freedom, in Descartes, is that of an absolute contingency of a creative will (this is why God is the name of the infinite), in short: God does not need to create, he wills it, and that he wills it, is contingent.<sup>50</sup> If human essence is God-like, humans are as free as he is, and if God is the name for the unthinkable, then this means that my essence is not a natural one. For, God is not natural; he is the creator of nature. This is why my essence must be – although I appear when I exist as a natural entity – non-natural, even a-natural. *My freedom is a-natural and at the same time I am a natural being*. Yet, and this is Descartes' claim, one should never naturalise one's essence. Since, as soon as one conceives freedom just to be a capacity that one naturally has (embodied in one's body), one already misconceives of freedom ends up in a state of indifference. Against this Descartes' claim is this: *there*

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50 Sartre 1967. In this regard Descartes anticipates the claim of Meillassoux that contingency precedes any kind of existence.

*is no relation between the human and the animal, between body and soul – they are two different substances – but there is something like a human animal, an embodiment of the non-relation*. There is no relation between the soul and the body but there is something like an embodiment of this very non-relation which is the human animal.

### **Acting-As-If-One-Were-Not-Free: Fatalism**

On this ground, Descartes develops his wonderfully counter-intuitive argument for fatalism. Since freedom is not a capacity that I have naturally, it results from contingency (namely from something unthinkable). Freedom is not a capacity, but a result. There needs to be something making freedom possible. I am only free when I am contingently forced to be. This is why, as soon as one has started to conceive of the cogito, one is forced to think that which one can only think as that which one cannot think (i.e. God). That thinking is forced to think what it cannot think, means that the very notion of thinking implies that its proper concept originates from a determination that does not originate in thought itself, but from something or somewhere else. This also holds for freedom. I am forced to think, and I am forced to be free. I am unfree as soon as I conceive of my freedom as something that is in my power. This turns freedom into a capacity. But rendering freedom in terms of a capacity that I have (this is what grounds indifference) – as paradoxical as this may sound – implies that one hands oneself over to arbitrariness as weak form of contingency. What is, thereby, implied in the idea of freedom as capacity is not only a wrong concept of freedom, but, also, a wrong concept of contingency.

This is because as soon as I start to emphasise the “may-be,” the possibility of the two sides of a choice over the actual choice of one of the two sides, I do not only side with indeterminacy, but also with the idea that things could go either way. I hence conceive of contingency in terms of arbitrariness. One can thus derive that indifference also names a status in which either way is fine with me.<sup>51</sup> Indifference emphasises arbitrariness, of two possible ways that might even conceptually prove to be contradictory; and, as soon as I do so, I emphasise something which can be, but also cannot be. I, thereby, side with a weak form of contingency. Not with a contingency that would enable me to make a choice – contingency as origin of freedom – but with a contingency

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51 In political terms, this implies obviously not only the abolishment of politics but also the very procedure in which any parliamentary election is fundamentally grounded.

of the choice and its outcome. I, thereby, side with, what Descartes calls, "Fortune".<sup>52</sup> As soon as I think that I have the power to choose whatever will be the course of the world or history, and I remain within this possibility, I have the impression that I could determine the world any time I want. Yet, actually, I rely on the arbitrary and fortunate contexts that always already determine me in a heteronomous manner. When I believe that the reality, and actuality, of my freedom lies in its very possibility, I hypostatize this very possibility, and end up being determined by arbitrariness.

To avoid this hypostatization of weak contingency, only one thing may help: the defense of absolute necessity, of utter determinism.<sup>53</sup> The idea Descartes puts forward is the following: one has to assume that everything is already predetermined, although one can never, and will never, know how. This disposition of mind is the only one that avoids me falling into the idealist position of assuming I could determine anything, and that everything is in my power, i.e. that freedom is my capacity. Such a stance, first of all, suspends the identification of freedom and capacity. And it enables to assume the full determinate impact of contingency (of God), that ultimately turns into necessity. This is, precisely, what he calls fatalism. To assume this position, as he claims one needs to courage (or even boldness).<sup>54</sup> Why? Since, in the first instance, the fatalist stance seems to imply the very abolishment of freedom. And indeed, it is the abolishment of freedom: of freedom as a capacity. What Descartes proposes is, to act as if one were not free. This is what sets up the very condition of actual freedom. For, thereby, any objectifying gesture is avoided, which could turn freedom into a capacity, creates indifference, and leads to heteronomous determination, and ultimately even to a wrong understanding of heteronomy. By fully assuming that one has objectively nothing in one's power,<sup>55</sup> and will never know anything about God's, i.e. contingency's plan. But, it is precisely this,

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52 Fortune is therefore for Descartes a „chimera which arises solely from an error of our intellect.” Descartes 1985a, 380.

53 It should be clear that here Descartes is in strict party line with Hegel and Freud – as Hegel always defended absolute necessity (and totality) and Freud absolute psychic determinism.

54 Courage „disposes the soul to apply itself energetically to accomplish the tasks it wants to perform, whatever their nature might be.” Descartes 1985a, 391. Boldness is defined as “kind of courage which disposes the soul to carry out the most dangerous tasks.” Ibid. And getting rid of freedom as my capacity is quite a dangerous maneuver.

55 Descartes here makes a case comparable to Badiou: We have no power against truth. Cf. Badiou 2005.

which makes it possible to conceive of my actions in a purely subjective way. By acting as if I was not free – that is: being a fatalist – I affirm a determination that I cannot deduce from my capacities; namely, that I am only free when something happens to me which forces me to make a choice. I thereby do not simply become the instrument of the Other, of God's will (Descartes is not following any Eichmann-logic); I rather become even more responsible for my deeds, because everything is determined but it is fully unclear how. This is why, in some sense, I should not care about how it is determined. Since even the Other – here God – is also determined by contingency, which is to say that God has no plan about his plan either (he is also determined by contingency). For Descartes, I have to assume that I am determined (I am forced to be free or to think by something that does not spring from my thought or freedom), and this implies in the heart of the human, at the origin of true human actions, thus, lies something determining him in a manner that cannot leave us indifferent. Through fatalism one affirms that impossible possibility that true human actions are possible, although there is no objective guarantee (neither in me nor in the world) for them. This also affirms that the human animal is, in its heart, an inhuman entity. If one assumes this can avoid the type of indifference I outlined above. Fatalism, the defense of absolute necessity, can be considered to be a tool for a renewal of a true inhuman humanism, of real actions and actions of the real, in short: of freedom. Simply put for Descartes, and to me this seems valid especially today: only a fatalist can be free. This is because there is nothing to hope for, there is nothing to rely on, and in some sense there is nothing in our power. But, this avoids falling for the trap to act as if one were free. Therefore, even more so today I claim, one should risk being a fatalist. One should risk following the new battle cry: act as if you were not free.

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