

**A CATECHESIS ON CONTRACEPTION
(2nd Edition)**

By

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....

The Immorality of Contraception.....

1. What is contraception?
2. Is contraception immoral?
3. Is it sinful only for Catholics?
4. Why is contraception against natural law?
5. Why does contraception violate the purpose of sex?
6. Why does contraception violate God's plan and the structure of the conjugal act?
7. Explanation of the "inseparability principle"
8. What evils result from contraception?

II. There is No Justification for Sin.

9. Socio-economic, medical, ecological reasons
10. The "principle of totality" misapplied
11. The "principle of lesser evil" misapplied
12. The "helping God or nature" excuse
13. What is wrong with going "against nature"?
14. Why is contraception a "grave", "serious" or "mortal" sin?
15. "Cafeteria style" for a pluralistic society?
16. Will it prevent abortions?
17. God couldn't be so cruel!

III. Conscience has to be Formed and Guided by Magisterium.

18. On Catholics who dissent
19. "Ex cathedra" and infallibility
20. Will it ever change?
21. Following our conscience
22. Can the "People of God" decide?

IV. Self-Control and Mastery are Possible and Beneficial....

23. As many children as physically possible?
24. The meaning of "responsible parenthood"
25. Practice of periodic continence
26. Essentially different from contraception
27. Is it really possible?

Introduction

In 1968, Pope Paul VI upheld the teaching, for many centuries maintained by all Christians, that contraceptive practice was a grave moral evil. He issued the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (HV) (“On the Transmission of Human Life”) aware of the serious opposition it would meet up with in a highly secularized world. Some other Christian communities had already bent over secularizing pressures and had publicly announced its change of moral position. Many Catholics, including a group of experts that the Pope had consulted, recommended and expected that the Pope would follow suit. But he did not.

As the Vicar of Christ on earth, with the responsibility incumbent on the successor of St. Peter, Pope Paul VI, as other Popes had done in the past on similar moral and doctrinal issues, had to uphold the moral truth that “each and every marriage act must be open to life.”(HV, 11) At that time, Pope Paul VI seemed like a lone “voice crying in the wilderness” (Mc 1:3) in the climate of sensuality and hedonism that was being spread by the so-called “sexual revolution.”

Indeed, the years that have passed since *Humanae Vitae* have coincided with the general breakdown in morals associated with the sexual revolution. This revolution has made steady progress, from the free love practiced by isolated hippie communities in the nineteen sixties, to the ongoing gay movement seeking to normalize homosexual "marriages" and to the different social engineering attempts to legislate sexual promiscuity. At present, the sexual revolution is taking a toll on human society in the form of increase in pornography, promiscuity, marital infidelity, divorce, abortion, sexually transmitted disease, and unhappiness in general.

We are witnessing a progressive reversal of values in the fields of human sexuality and family life. The true experience of love is confused with lust. If a child is born out of wedlock, he is called a "love child"; and the child who is a product of the conjugal love of spouses, in contraceptive mentality fashion, is considered a "mistake." Sex is treated as a plaything, an object of recreation, engaged in for pure pleasure. It is something casual; commitments destroy its fun.

Pope Paul VI somehow foresaw this revolution when he warned us of the negative effects of the widespread use of contraception. He saw that contraception would be the cutting edge of the "general lowering of morality." (HV, 14) In retrospect, we can now see that the distortion of sexual values is a direct consequence of the distortion of conjugal love linked to contraceptive practice. Paul VI even foresaw how some governments (“public Authorities who take no heed of moral exigencies”) can abuse their power and tyrannically dictate the behavior of citizens because of contraception. (See HV, 17)

St. Paul's description of the moral situation of pagan antiquity in *Rom* 3:24-32, is reminiscent of our own times. Yet the early Christians, like leaven in the mass of society, were able to transform society through the power of the doctrine of Christ and the Church, which they lived and practiced with consistency. Causes for optimism are the positive response among Catholics to the clarifications and teachings on life and sexual morality from the successors of Paul VI, most notably from the prolific writings and speeches of the late Pope John Paul II on the “theology of the body.” Furthermore, confusion among some Catholics, though still present, has

been amply addressed by such authoritative sources as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), the Apostolic Exhortation about the family *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) and the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

We hope that this brief exposition of the Church's teaching on contraception can be of help to Catholics who want to put their faith into practice and help in the Christian transformation of our society. The contraception issue has ramifications in many other fields as well. We have limited this exposition to the strictly religious and moral aspects of the issue, with the conviction that the Author of the moral law is also the Creator of the universe and the Lord of society, and He cannot contradict Himself.

I. THE IMMORALITY OF CONTRACEPTION.

1. What is contraception?

Contraception is “any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means. (HV, 14)
"Contraceptives" are any device or drug used for contraception. Examples of contraceptive actions are the practice of withdrawal, the use of condoms and spermicides. The Intrauterine Device (IUD) and many contraceptive pills and injectibles are also called contraceptives, but in a high percentage of cases, they actually prevent births by expelling the developing human being already conceived. They are thus properly called "abortifacients" (i.e., they cause abortion). Abortifacients are even more immoral than true contraceptives, because their use violates the Fifth Commandment of God, "Thou shall not kill," showing a disregard for the value of human life.

Closely related to contraception is “sterilization”, such as tubal ligation in females and vasectomy in males. Sterilization is a procedure wherein a person is rendered permanently or temporarily infertile. Sterilization is considered a form of “mutilation”.

2. Is contraception immoral?

It is immoral to practice contraception because it goes against the natural moral law and the true good of human persons in marriage. It is a serious moral disorder and objectively constitutes a grave sin that goes against the virtue of chastity. As such, the Church has constantly opposed it.

3. Isn't contraception sinful only for Catholics?

Contraception is a practice that is immoral for all men because it goes against the natural moral law. Natural law is based on human nature and on God's plan for the good of mankind and is therefore applicable to all men no matter what religion they profess.

The natural moral law, unlike the "law of the gospel" or ecclesiastical law, is binding on all men and not only on Christians or Catholics. In declaring the immorality of contraception, the Church is not imposing her own internal discipline. She is simply fulfilling the role given her by Christ, to be "guardian and authentic interpreter" of the natural law (see HV, 4), whose author is the Creator of all men.

4 Why is contraception against the natural moral law?

Contraception, as an act of spouses to engage in sexual intercourse while deliberately impeding its openness or orientation to the transmission of new life, goes against the very purpose and intimate structure of the conjugal act. In so doing, the contracepting spouses primarily go against the virtue of conjugal chastity (related to the Sixth Commandment of the Ten Commandments).

There are other virtues and values that can be undermined by the practice of contraception. Contracepting persons can also go against value of life, may arrogate to themselves a power that belongs solely to God and may distort the communication of spousal love in their "language of the body". In terms of the Ten Commandments (which are expressions of the natural law), these are contrary as well to the Fifth, First, and Eighth Commandments.

5. Why does contraception violate the purpose of sex?

"Marriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children."(*Gaudium et Spes*, 50) The begetting of children is a fundamental purpose of the conjugal act. To make use of sexuality while deliberately frustrating its orientation and openness to life is to frustrate its purpose. It is an abuse of an important human faculty.

Respecting the limitations, we can make an analogy with eating and nourishment. The natural purpose of the act of eating is nourishment. We eat to live, while pleasure is a valid accompaniment and incentive for eating. Now it would be a violation of the very purpose of eating (and therefore contrary to morals) to deliberately frustrate its nutritive value, just to experience the pleasure of it. Some persons of antiquity would eat excessively, provoke vomiting (in a room called a "vomitorium"), and then go back to the table to eat some more.

6. Why does contraception violate God's plan and the intimate structure of the conjugal act?

The structure of the conjugal act is based on God's plan for the transmission of human life. That plan can be summarized as follows:

-Man is a person, composed of a material body and a spiritual soul, in a substantial unity. He is made in the image and likeness of God, and enjoys an inherent dignity. God's plan

is that human beings, unlike brute animals, come into the world as a result of the genuine love of man and woman, possible only in marriage. Through the conjugal act, within marriage and open to life, the spouses make a reciprocal personal gift of self (cf. HV, 8) while they cooperate with God in the creation of a new human being.

-The conjugal act, as an act of communication of love between the spouses, has two meanings or aspects: the unitive meaning, by which the spouses express their mutual love through a gift of self; and the procreative meaning by which the spouses express the special character of marital love and which the Author of life may crown with the creation of a new human being.

These two meanings of the conjugal act are inseparably connected (inseparability principle). "By safeguarding both these essential aspects,...the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the essence of true mutual love and its ordination towards man's most high calling to parenthood." (HV, 12)

7. Could you explain further this principle of inseparability of the procreative and the unitive meanings in the conjugal act?

The unitive meaning of the conjugal act is a way of manifesting the unique love of husband and wife, by a mutual giving of one's whole self to the spouse. Through contraception, one "tells a lie" with the language of the body, by saying that "I am giving myself completely to you" while in the very same act, the person is holding back an important part of his or her self--one's maternity or paternity. Therefore, a contracepted conjugal act is no longer authentically unitive. It is likewise immoral to have procreation without the unitive meaning, as in the case of test-tube reproduction and surrogate motherhood. Aside from the human fetuses sacrificed for such procedures, the resulting baby is not the fruit of genuine personal and conjugal love.

8. What evils for the individual, the family and society result from contraception?

Through contraception, an individual misuses the gift of sexuality and thereby degrades his human dignity. Because it is a grave sin, the individual also loses friendship with God, endangering the person's eternal salvation.

Contraception opens the way for conjugal infidelity and the general lowering of morality. It is therefore very harmful for the family and for society.

Contraception leads to a loss of respect for woman, so that a man may end up seeing her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment and not as a respected and beloved companion.

Finally, contraception may be abused by public authorities, and thus violate the conjugal intimacy of couples for the achievement of a government's utilitarian goals. These negative effects following from the spread of the practice of contraception were foretold by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*. Unfortunately, these projections are being verified by what is happening in many modern societies.

II. THERE IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR SIN.

9. Could there not be reasons of a socio-economic, medical, ecological, or humanitarian character that could justify some contraceptive practices?

In any human decision, the most important dimension is the moral dimension, because it has the most far-reaching consequences for man's happiness and eternal salvation. There can be no valid reason for resorting to an immoral action because the end can never justify the means. Besides, the Author of the moral law is also the Creator of the whole universe. Thus, there can be no inconsistency between what is morally good and whatever is a genuine and authentic good for man. Many of the socio-economic, medical, psychological or humanitarian reasons that are advanced to justify contraception have been shown to be false by experts in those fields.

-The "population explosion" has been demonstrated to be a myth by objective social scientists. Generally, population growth is not the cause of poverty nor is it an obstacle to economic development. The world is for people and not vice-versa. People are assets to growth and development.

-There are many medical contra-indications and adverse side effects from contraceptive devices and drugs. Besides, fertility is a sign of health, not of disease.

-Ecological imbalance is not due to Population as such, but to man's abuse of his environment. It calls for a rational and temperate use of our natural resources. Respect for nature should precisely lead us to respect our own procreative powers in the first place. In that sense, contraception is one of the worst forms of pollution.

-Finally, while there may be difficult situations calling for humanitarian solutions, the solutions should always respect man's dignity in order to be truly humane. On the other hand, promoting contraceptives assumes that man, like a beast, cannot control his sexuality.

10. Couldn't the so-called "principle of totality" justify that at least some recourse be made to contraception as long as the couple has a general attitude of openness to offspring?

The moral "principle of totality" (by which, for example, an organ could be removed for the good of the whole body) applies to a real and substantial unity, such as a human person. It does not apply to "moral unities", such as the unity of the family or the unity of a society. A false recourse to the "principle of totality" would lead to moral relativism, resulting in violations of individual human rights for allegedly more "total" goods. Totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany or the former Soviet Union ended up perpetrating grave crimes against humanity by falsely invoking this principle.

11. How about the "principle of lesser evil"? Couldn't contraception sometimes be to choose a lesser evil?

The end can never justify the means. One may not do or directly will an evil act, even if good may come of it. One may tolerate a lesser evil done by others. In tolerating, man does not do an evil---he is rather doing something else, good in itself, though foreseeing some evil results for which he is not directly responsible.

12. Shouldn't we "help God or nature" by making use of modern technology to achieve our aim in the area of birth regulation?

God wants us to use our God-given talents in pursuit of his plans. But contraception precisely goes "against nature" because it is contrary to the plan of God, for the transmission of human life in conjugal love. Through contraception, we do not help nature; we misuse modern technology to the detriment of our humanity.

13. What is wrong with "going against nature"? After all, we can do some things "against nature", that are not necessarily immoral or at least not gravely sinful, such as walking with our hands or standing on our heads. Why should going against the nature of the conjugal act be any worse than these?

"Going against nature" in the context of morality does not refer merely to the physical aspect of our actions. To "go against nature" means to go against the "nature of man" which is rational and has an inherent dignity. Contraception presumes that man cannot master himself in order to control his personal behavior according to God's plan for marriage.

14. Why is contraception a "grave", "serious" or "mortal" sin?

Contraception is a very serious moral disorder because it involves important values such as conjugal love, respect for life and obedience to God's plan for man. The Church teaches that human sexuality is a great good by which God makes Man his cooperator in the creation of a new human life. The correct use of sex in marriage is so pleasing in God's eyes that it is a source of merit. In a sense, sex is something sacred. The abuse or misuse of such an important power is therefore a serious moral disorder.

"When, therefore, through contraception, married couples remove from the exercise of their conjugal sexuality its potential procreative capacity, they claim a power which belongs solely to God: the power to decide in a final analysis the coming into existence of a human person. They assume the qualification not of being cooperators in God's creative power, but the ultimate depositaries of the source of human life. In this perspective, contraception is to be judged *objectively so profoundly unlawful* (italics added) as never to be, for any reason, justified. To think or to say the contrary is equal to maintaining that in human life, situations may arise in which it is lawful not to recognize God as God." (John Paul II, *Address to Participants in a Study Seminar on Responsible Parenthood*, 17 Sept. 1983)

15. But we are living in a pluralistic society. There are other members of society who sincerely believe that contraception is not immoral. Shouldn't allowances be made for them, for example by having a "cafeteria style" contraception program, by which each one can choose the contraceptive method allowed by one's conscience?

The Church's stand against contraception is based on natural law. As such, it is applicable to all men of all times. In other words, contraception is immoral objectively, even for those who may not recognize it so, just like any other teaching based on natural law, such as the immorality of murder or theft.

Even making an allowance for the invincible ignorance of some, there can be no justification for a "cafeteria style" contraceptive program supported by the State, in a country where a great majority of the population (in the Philippines, about 82% Catholic and 5% Moslem) profess religious beliefs that maintain contraception to be immoral.

The population program of the Philippine government is very highly contraceptive and at times can be offensive in its presentation to Filipino religious values and cultural sensibilities. Even when promoting "Natural Family Planning," (NFP) it can be morally offensive, because NFP is treated as one contraceptive method more, rather than as a non-contraceptive and chaste way of life.

16. If there are less "unwanted pregnancies", fewer women will resort to abortion. Couldn't the promotion of contraception prevent the spread of abortion, which is a much worse offense?

While it is true that abortion is a more serious offense than contraception, two wrongs do not make a right. Besides, it has been demonstrated that the spread of contraceptive practice increases, rather than diminishes, the incidence of abortion. The availability of contraception facilitates sexual relationships outside of marriage. Furthermore, contraceptive practice fortifies a negative attitude toward new life, which contributes to a person's decision to resort to abortion.

17. But what if a couple is in a very difficult situation, that they really should have no more children? Could God be so cruel as to still forbid contraception?

If a couple is in a very difficult or serious situation, there are other ways of *avoiding* conception (not *thwarting* or hindering conception) which are not immoral and are in keeping with human dignity, such as the various forms of periodic continence.

By respecting the natural processes of the human body, periodic continence leads to a better appreciation and respect for the body that God made. The married couple grows in authentic love through the practice of unselfish self-discipline. Besides, with a Christian outlook, we must be convinced "that there can be no true contradiction between the divine law on transmitting life and that on fostering authentic married love."(FC, 33)

III. CONSCIENCE HAS TO BE FORMED AND GUIDED BY MAGISTERIUM

18. Why is it that some well-known and presumably good Catholics, and even a few priests, say that contraception is alright?

In so far as those Catholics do not follow the clear teaching of the Church, they are not being very good Catholics. And if a priest does not teach the doctrine of the Church, then he is simply not doing his duty as a priest. In all likelihood, they misunderstand the importance of the Church's teaching and are probably confused about the Catholic concept of moral conscience.

19. Could Pope Paul VI have been mistaken in his condemnation of contraception in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*? After all, I have heard that it is not infallible because it is not "*ex cathedra*".

The teaching that contraception is immoral and is against the will of God is a constant teaching of the Catholic Church, not an arbitrary choice of an isolated Pope. Besides, the important question for each one of us, in our moral actions, is not whether something is infallible or not, but whether it is right or wrong. The teaching that rape is immoral is neither "ex cathedra" nor proposed infallibly to be immoral, but it is still immoral.

The ordinary Magisterium of the Church should be adhered to with sincere religious assent. "This religious submission of will and intellect must be given in a unique way to the authoritative teaching of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*. Assent must be given in such a way that his supreme Magisterium is reverently acknowledged, and the judgments proposed by him are sincerely accepted, according to his manifest mind and will, which he expresses chiefly either by the type of document or by the frequent proposal of the same teaching, or by the argument for the position." (LG 25)

All the modern Popes who have dealt with the topic have condemned contraception. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI have repeatedly upheld the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in many different kinds of papal documents, reiterating its binding force upon all, and its basis in natural and divine law. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the clearest and most exhaustive summary of universal Church teaching is clear and unequivocal on this point. Thus, there is a very strong case for maintaining that the teaching on the intrinsic immorality of contraception is an infallible teaching, based on the charism of infallibility that the ordinary and universal Magisterium can enjoy (cf. LG 25)

20. Couldn't this teaching of the Church be changed, just as the laws on fasting and abstinence and the law on usury have changed in the past?

Since the Church's teaching on the immorality of contraception is based on natural law, it will not change in its essentials but can only develop without contradicting the present teaching. The specific requirements on fast and abstinence are not tenets of natural law, but are based on Church discipline. The Church's teaching on the immorality of usury has not changed essentially, but has developed as the concept of money acquired the character of capital. Usury is still immoral, though charging interest is not considered usurious, if it is reasonable and according to law.

"By describing the contraceptive act as intrinsically illicit, Paul VI meant to teach that the moral norm is such that it does not admit exceptions. No personal or social circumstances could ever, can now, or will ever, render such an act lawful in itself."
(John Paul II, *Address to International Congress on Moral Theology, Dec. 1988*)

21. I have been advised that I can follow my conscience instead of this teaching of the Church. After all, my conscience is the proximate rule of morality for me.

Conscience is the judgment we make about the morality of a particular act, based on the moral law. It cannot make autonomous judgments or make up its own laws, just as a human Judge does not make the Law but only determines how a case at hand conforms to the Law.

A Catholic should be guided by Church teaching when he uses his conscience. Otherwise, he has a false or erroneous conscience, and that can never be a proximate rule of morality. Therefore, a Catholic has the obligation to form his conscience so that he can have a correct and sure guide in his moral actions. If he neglects this formation, his error or ignorance could be culpable.

"To appeal to that conscience precisely to contest the truth of what is taught by the Magisterium implies rejection of the Catholic concept both of the Magisterium and moral conscience."(John Paul II, *ibid.*) At times, with only a vague idea of what conscience is, we may think of it as a "little voice" that tells us what to do, but without reference to moral law. We can thus confuse conscience with our own desire or any other subjective impression. We may even mistake a temptation from the devil as the voice of conscience.

22. In some countries, like the U.S.A., surveys show that majority of Catholics do not follow the teachings of the Pope in this matter. Since the Church is the "People of God", shouldn't it adjust its teachings to this majority who express the "*sensus fidelium*"?

Basic principles and moral matters cannot be decided by voting, since their binding force comes from God or from natural law. The governance in the Church was not established by Christ as a democracy. Rather, he instituted the hierarchy to serve the People of God through the exercise of their threefold task of teaching, sanctifying and ruling.

The *sensus fidelium* is an expression of the true faith of the Church when it believes what it receives (*in discendo*); the Magisterium is an expression of the faith of the Church when it teaches (*in docendo*). What those surveys show then is that those persons need to be helped in practicing their Christian faith. It is no secret that there are many Western societies that are in dire need of a renewed evangelization effort.

IV. SELF-CONTROL AND MASTERY ARE POSSIBLE AND BENEFICIAL

23. Does the Church teach that we should have as many children as physically possible?

While the Church definitely promotes the value of life and people, following God's general injunction to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,"(Gen 1:28) this does not mean having as many children as physically possible. Following God's law, the Church encourages the practice of authentic "responsible parenthood".

24. What does the Church mean by "responsible parenthood" in relation to contraception?

The most important aspect of responsible parenthood is to respect the objective moral order established by God. This will lead couples to recognize their duties towards God, themselves, the family, and society, in a correct hierarchy of values. With regard to the number of children, responsible parenthood should not be equated with avoiding children. Responsible parenthood is exercised either "by the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family, or the decision, made for grave motives and with due respect for the moral law, to avoid for the time being, or even for an indeterminate period, a new birth."(HV, 10) Responsible parenthood entails knowledge and respect of the biological processes involved in transmitting life. More importantly, real responsibility involves the exercise of self-control and dominion over the instincts and passion.

25. If a couple legitimately wishes to limit their children temporarily or even for an indefinite period of time, what can they do?

A married couple may abstain from the use of marriage or they can legitimately make use of marriage during the woman's infertile periods. Periodic continence is a good and legitimate practice if done for a serious reason and with the right. Taking consideration of the natural cycle in the use of marriage is not immoral because the connection between the unitive and procreative meanings innate in the conjugal act is not separated. The couple is acting in accordance with virtue and right reason when they abstain and when they make use of marriage. Their mutual self-giving is total and authentic.

26. But both "contraceptors" and those who practice periodic continence want the same thing. So why not use the technology that is most effective?

Regarding the important difference between contraception and periodic continence, Pope John Paul II points out: "(T)he innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language,

namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality." On the other hand, "*The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the person, that is the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control.*" (italics added) To accept the cycle and to enter into dialogue means to recognize both the spiritual and corporal character of conjugal communion, and to live personal love with its requirement of fidelity." (FC 32)

The person who practices contraception and the one who practices periodic continence for a legitimate reason do not want the same moral object. To illustrate, with the limitations of the comparison, a thief and a worker may want the same thing (money for their expenses), but the thief resorts to immoral means while the worker respects the law of God. They both get money, but for the thief, it is loot; for the worker it is earnings. Similarly, there is an essential difference between contraception and periodic continence. The former is intrinsically immoral while periodic continence is not.

27. Is periodic continence really possible? Isn't it too much to demand from married couples?

There are many situations in life, such as sickness, travel, or consideration for the other person, in which spouses are called upon to practice continence. The use of sex, as any other human faculty, demands the guidance of right reason and not just blind passion. Moral uprightness is always demanding, not only in the area of sexuality, but in other fields as well. In the case of periodic continence, domination of the instinct is required, and this is one manifestation of responsible parenthood. When there is self-mastery, love is more human and genuine. On the other hand, there are means of growing in such self-mastery, especially counting on the grace of the sacrament of marriage, filial trust in God and the whole ascetical arsenal of Christianity. "Yet this discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, rather confers on it a higher human value." (HV 21)

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About the Author (for back cover)

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