



Research Article

Ype de Boer*

Badiou and Agamben Beyond the Happiness Industry and its Critics

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Abstract: Modern continental thought is skeptical toward happiness and no longer easily reconciles its pursuit with a desire for justice, the good, and truth. Critical theory has unmasked happiness as a commodity within an industry, an ideological tool for control, and a sedative to, justification of, and distraction from social injustice. This article argues that these diagnoses make it all the more important that philosophy, rather than taking leave of happiness, once again turns it into a serious object of thought. Employing the work of Badiou and Agamben as case studies, it asks what a critically informed yet affirmative philosophy of happiness should entail at a structural level. Assessing their philosophical models of happiness, this article 1) recognizes in their work a revival of the ancient ideal of a true, just, and happy life, 2) opens up a new way of evaluating their work, and 3) articulates basic requirements of a contemporary, affirmative philosophy of happiness beyond the happiness industry *and* its critics.

Keywords: Badiou, Agamben, happiness, critical theory, happiness industry, ethics, true life, Saint Paul, love

1 Introduction

Why philosophize about happiness? For ancient Greek philosophy, this question would perhaps have constituted a rhetorical one. Speaking in general terms, for them happiness is itself the “why” of human endeavors. One might surely debate its characteristics, whether it is attainable and if so how, but for most philosophers, both its philosophical and existential values were obvious. Yet today, philosophy is not so confident in this matter. Sceptis exists concerning the philosophical gravity, worth, and potential of happiness. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt famously relegates happiness to the sphere of labor and of bodily metabolism, strictly excluding it from the higher spheres of work and action. Starting with Adorno, each new generation of critical theorists formulates its own critique of the ideological, commodified, and fetishist character of modern happiness. In 2010, for instance, Sara Ahmed explicitly challenged happiness as the highest object of human desire, exposing the way the “promise of happiness” functions to justify or distract from social injustices.¹ Even more recently, in response to current “positive thinking” movements, the empirical “science of happiness,” happiness economy, and the general prominence in the West of an Americanized “pursuit of happiness,” Eva Illouz and Edgar Cabanas have argued that the happiness industry and science should be seen as a new and oppressive form of government:

¹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

* **Corresponding author: Ype de Boer**, Faculty of Philosophy Theology and Religious Sciences, Department of Metaphysics and Philosophical Anthropology, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, e-mail: ype.deboer@ru.nl, ypedeboer@gmail.com

[W]e have become servants of its obsessive pursuit; because it is not happiness that stretches and adapts to us ... it is rather we who have to stretch and adapt to fit happiness's consumerist logic, to comply with its tyrannical and veiled ideological demands, and to accept its narrow, reductionist and psychologist assumptions.²

All in all, modern critical thought no longer easily reconciles a desire for justice, the good, and truth with a pursuit of happiness. In the West, so it seems, this pursuit has become either a tool for exploitation or otherwise too personal and egoistic, privileged and delusory. As a consequence, happiness is now rarely taken up as a philosophical topic to be developed constructively and affirmatively. The contrast this implies with ancient philosophers can hardly be overstated. For them, happiness did not stand in opposition to morality, autonomy, the good, or truth but was considered something like the boon of moral pursuit, its subjective part, its testimony, or its result. As has been pointed out many times, the very opposition between morality and happiness, most famously articulated by Kant, is Modern and has a prehistory in the Christian tradition. To be clear, the ancient connection between happiness and the good did not mean that the Greek philosophers did not know of and critique false promises of happiness, leading one astray both morally and in other fields. Already for Plato such shadows abounded, as did their conjurers. However, for them, this only made the philosophical ideation of happiness all the more urgent and precarious. True happiness, whether as Platonic *homoiosis theoi*, Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, stoic *ataraxia*, or Epicurean *hedone*, was perceived to be achievable through the right orientation, from insight into the nature of existence and a praxis in accordance with it. In this sense, for them, no discrepancy exists or at least should not exist between ethico-moral orientation, truth, and aspiring to live happily. One could even argue that the good life, the true life, and the happy life for them ultimately amount to the same thing (which is not to say that living the good life means being always cheerful), and the possibility of such a life intimately involves attaining the right understanding of existence and developing an attitude in accordance with it.

In response to modern happiness scepticism, this article asks whether a continental revivification of the ancient ideal is worthwhile, and if so, in what guise. For if indeed, as modern critics lament, happiness has been usurped by the market, popular politics, neoliberal privilege, a "happiness industry," or whatever we call it, would that not necessitate even more strongly that philosophy once again makes it a serious object of thought? If indeed happiness has been isolated from moral, social, and ontological concerns, should we simply accept this separation? What could a philosophy of happiness offer other than what the marketeers, social scientists, therapists, fitness coaches, physicians, priests, or ideologues *and* their critics tell us about happiness? And could it escape modern critique?

In order to investigate the stakes involved in such a philosophical endeavor, I develop a comparative analysis of the intertwinement of ontology, truth, and happiness in the work of two contemporary philosophers who, both in their own way, have placed happiness again at the center of philosophy: Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. Critically schooled, both philosophers are exceptionally aware of the commodification of happiness and its alleged isolation from other domains of thought. Yet in addition to their critical diagnoses, they nonetheless develop affirmative strategies reminiscent of the ancient philosophical engagement with happiness. Rather than with the intricacies of their complex notions of happiness, which would require a much more detailed study, my main concern here is with the insight their work might offer on the following issue: What should a critically informed yet affirmative philosophy of happiness entail at a structural level?³ Employing their work as case studies to answer this question, I begin with a general description of their concern with happiness in order to identify a *subtractive* and an *affirmative* side to it. In order to grasp the ontological underpinning of their subtractive move, I compare their readings of the Letters of Saint Paul. This is followed by an analysis of their distinct notions of love, which allows me to interpret the *affirmative* aspect of their rival images of happy life. Gathering these insights together, I formulate a number of basic criteria along which philosophy could reintegrate affirmative reflection on happiness, beyond the happiness industry, and its critics.

² Cabanas and Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens*, 177.

³ I limit myself to three shared themes in the works of Badiou and that of Agamben: the theme of the true life, their reappraisal of the letters of Saint Paul, and their conceptualization of love.

2 Happiness in Badiou and Agamben

At first glance, the qualification of Badiou and Agamben as philosophers of happiness may seem counter-intuitive. Agamben is often considered one of the most pessimistic and gloomy philosophers of contemporary continental thought. Badiou, for his part, might well be considered a philosopher who strongly prioritizes a militant fidelity to truth over any desire for happiness, a fidelity that depends precisely on a serious unhappiness with the ways of the world. However, both philosophers are quite explicit in their affirmative interest in happiness, and it should prove fruitful to view both Agamben's supposed gloominess and Badiou's militancy in light of this interest.⁴ In his short book *Metaphysique du bonheur réel* from 2015, Badiou leaves no doubt about the importance of happiness for philosophy: "All philosophy ... is a metaphysics of happiness, or it's not worth an hour of trouble."⁵ As the French title announces, such a metaphysics of happiness involves a distinction between "real" or "true" happiness and illusory or deflated notions of happiness. Indeed, for him, the philosophical aspiration to happiness necessarily involves breaking with convention and with conventional images of happiness.

Philosophical desire is ... the desire for a revolution in thought and existence – as much collective existence as personal existence – and with the aim of a real happiness, distinguished from that semblance of happiness which is satisfaction.⁶

This call for a revolution in thought and existence is embedded in a diagnosis of modernity as blocking the path to true happiness. It does so by pretending to already be a free world, stimulating distraction, emphasizing particularity over universality, and trying to purify life of risk and chance.⁷ The result is a diminished, impotent, and ultimately dangerous notion of happiness that Badiou wittily dubs "user satisfaction," evoking an image of happiness comparable to the satisfied consumer filling in his user's poll positively.⁸ The metaphysics of happiness Badiou proposes thereby has to combat at least two modern trends: that of safety and contentedness.

A guiding thread through the work of Agamben is the diagnosis of a complete subjection of human life to the governing of various political, juridical, health, and spectacle apparatuses. As with the diagnosis of Badiou, this situation has two sides, one having to do with fear and safety, the other with conformism. With fear and the desire for safety, because, as he infamously argues in his *Homo sacer*-series, Agamben claims we are on a slippery slope toward a "permanent state of exception" allowing governing apparatuses free reign over those aspects of human life that once were thought to be outside the force of law. We allow this to happen because the governing apparatuses legitimize themselves in the name of ever more frequent crises, be they martial or economic, concern pandemics or natural disasters. Additionally, presaging the critique of Illouz and Cabanas, Agamben faults the apparatuses of consumerism and the market for appropriating our "desire for happiness" in such a way as to produce a

subject who readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures, his amusements and his occupations, his diets and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses.⁹

Over and against this fully outsourced and protocolized existence, wherein the joy and freedom of humanity consists in functioning properly within these apparatuses, Agamben places an enigmatic "happy life," that has

⁴ With this focus on happiness, this article additionally contributes to the mounting body of literature on comparatively evaluating the work of Badiou and Agamben, which has mostly been centered on their respective readings of the Letters of Saint Paul (Van der Heiden), their respective ontologies (Leung), understandings of *Pistis* (Cimino), and politics (Prozorov). As this article argues, it is their respective ideas of happiness that neatly tie together these various aspects of their thought, underscoring their shared inheritance of the ancient theme of the true life while still allowing for an appreciation of their different models.

⁵ Badiou, *Happiness*, 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And other Essays*, 23.

caused many readers headaches but which is nonetheless generally considered to be one of the core concepts in his philosophy.¹⁰ Happy life is the generic indication of the more technical concepts “form-of-life,” “messianic life,” “profane life,” or even “eternal life” which at various points throughout his oeuvre are presented as the alternative to the above-mentioned juridicization and protocolization. As is the case with Badiou’s metaphysics of happiness, this happy life is conceivable only through a renewed understanding of the nature of human existence and reality in general. In order to deactivate the apparatuses governing human existence, we need to move beyond the logic sustaining them by arriving at a different understanding of life and being.

On the one hand, one could understand Badiou and Agamben as developing the critical strand of thought mentioned above, wherein “bourgeois” happiness is “unmasked” as a sort of ‘opium for the people. Happiness thus conceived is then a sign of comfortable immersion in an unjust and violent, controlled world. Yet beyond this critique, they *simultaneously* endeavor to formulate affirmative criteria by which to envision alternate forms of a happy life. This is where they differ from the earlier mentioned critical theorists. As with many works in critical theory, taking seriously the diagnoses of Illouz, Cabanas, and Ahmed might induce a radically suspicious attitude toward one’s own enjoyment and, moreover, one that is theoretically cryptic. Suspicious, for the lack of affirmative criteria means one has no way of figuring out whether or not and to what degree one is alienated or whether one’s joy is actually a sign of oppression. Cryptic, because how can such critique make sense without affirmative criteria against which to measure today’s malaise? The Habermasian critique of Foucauldian discourse analysis as “cryptonormative” is well remembered here:¹¹ not explicating one’s normative criteria does not mean they are not effectively present, but rather leads to avoiding the responsibility of justifying one’s own affirmative perspective, which would make one’s theory open for discussion and critique of others.¹² By contrast, while taking the critical diagnoses of conventional happiness to their extreme, Agamben and Badiou at the same time explicitly conceptualize affirmative notions of true happiness. Their philosophy advocates not only a “way out” of contemporary society, namely a form of subtraction from the regions of the convention into a space “excepted” from it and from which one might critique this convention. They simultaneously offer ways back in, by conceptualizing how this exceptional space constitutes an alternate vantage point from which to navigate human existence in a way that does not stand opposed to justice, truth, and the good. In the text I just quoted on apparatuses, Agamben calls this vantage point the “Ungovernable,” in his text on Saint Paul a “messianic remnant” and throughout many other texts: “potentially.” In Badiou’s text on happiness, the point outside convention is simply called a “truth.” It is the task of the philosopher, so he writes, to put oneself and one’s immersion within a comfortable conventional existence at stake in the name of an “unconditional halting point ... of a truth, of an Idea, or of a value, that prescribes us this risk.”¹³

In this general sense, both Badiou and Agamben can thus be considered to reanimate the philosophical trope of ancient philosophy I started with.¹⁴ Such a perspective brings with it its own demand as regards

¹⁰ De Boer, “The Profane Land of the Happy. On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben.”

¹¹ See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 284.

¹² While Ahmed does convincingly open up a more affirmative space for *unhappiness* as an instigator of ethical and political change (See Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 87, 216) and her identification of the plurality and singularity of “happy objects” might even suggest ways of investigating it affirmatively (Ibid., 22), she does not provide a criterium by which to analyze whether one’s (un)happiness is authentic or rather delusory or oppressive. Yet clearly the book itself critiques various forms of false happiness.

¹³ Badiou, *Happiness*, 55.

¹⁴ A more direct influence might be the later work of Foucault on *parrhesia*, the courage of truth. In his lectures, Foucault relates the risky endeavor to speak inconvenient truths before powerful people to the Platonic, mostly theoretic ideal of a “true life” and its cynic appropriation, which significantly transforms this ideal into a form of life that “must manifest directly, by its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility and the evident value of another life, which is the true life” (Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 184). Whereas for Plato it is a matter of orienting oneself based on the idea of a highest good, for the cynics the “*bios philosophikos* as the right life is man’s animality, taken up as a challenge, practiced as a task and thrown in the face of others as a scandal” (Ibid., 265). In any case, for all the above mentioned, a philosophical endeavor to conceptualize happiness relies on the ability to navigate existence from a point beyond the realm of doxa, considered as true and as the only true way to happiness.

conceptualizing happiness. Beyond the empirical research conducted in the science of happiness – measuring endorphins and vital functions in test settings, evaluating the various effects of positive thinking on mood and career success, analyzing happiness surveys and formulating indexes, etcetera – which analyze and produce the contentedness, feeling well, safe, and healthy so mistrusted by critical theory, this philosophical type of happiness pivots an alternate understanding of existence, that is, an alternate ontology and corresponding *metanoia* (transformation of thought and perspective) rendering possible a “true” rather than inauthentic happy life.^{15,16} Using a Heideggerian vocabulary, happiness is in this way relocated from the ontic plain, that of actual and measurable things, feelings, fantasies, and social structures, to the ontological plain, concerning the way in which we understand and engage this actuality. Moreover, to incorporate also the moral and political critique of happiness by critical theorist, this ontological conversion is to be positively realigned with concerns for justice and the good. Happiness is then reasserted as a matter of ontology-based ethics, in the sense of (the right) attitude and mode of existence. With this in mind, I shall now assess the thoughts of Badiou and Agamben in two ways. First of all, in terms of their respective formulations of an ontological “point” from which to re-perceive existence, and second in terms of the happy praxis, form, life, or “type” that is to ensue from it.

3 The Possibility of an Outside: Saint Paul Metano(mas)ia

A good place to start analyzing the kind of happy, ontological re-orientation that Badiou and Agamben propose regarding convention, is their diverse interpretation of the letters of Saint Paul. In these letters, they find a condemnation of a stifling and totalizing *nomos* (meaning institutional law and traditional custom), which promises salvation but instead produces sin, *and* the reference to a point subtracted from this all-encompassing *nomos* from which to conceptualize an alternative. At stake here is the possibility of a “way out” of sociocultural convention and malaise. Here, I will take the critique of *nomos* for granted and focus on the subtraction achieved through the messianic call. Take for instance the famous passage from Corinthians (7.17-22):

But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. Is any man called being circumcised? let him not remove the mark of circumcision. Is any called with a foreskin? let him not be circumcised!

15 Concerning the work of Agamben, the claim that it utilizes a distinction between an inauthentic and an authentic life, is not without problems. For it is precisely such distinctions between a proper and an improper life that Agamben repeatedly faults the various machines for installing. It is by separating *zōē* (natural life) from *bios* (politically qualified life), the good life from simply living, that apparatuses promising a good and happy life legitimize their procedures, regulations, exclusions and inclusions as well as their violent attitudes toward lives that do not confirm to their idea of the good life. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben explicitly questions the recurrent separation of life in relation to the terminology of proper and improper: “[W]hy, in our philosophical tradition, does not only consciousness but the very Dasein, the very being-there of the human being, need to presuppose a false beginning, which must be abandoned and removed to give place to the true and the most proper? Why can the human being find itself only by presupposing the not-truly-human [...]?” (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 45). Agamben attempts to avoid this problem by developing happy life as form-of-life, a life that is always already formative, emphasizing not supremacy over animal, natural or simple life, but its intimacy with even the most abject, animal and “undignified” or “inauthentic” aspects of life. However, whether Agamben in this way really escapes the trap of separation and ethical hierarchy is questionable, as the valuation of this form-of-life does itself imply a negative valuation of those lives that instead try to appropriate bare and natural existence through regulation or other projects. For the sake of clarity, and in accordance with Agamben’s explicit denunciation of conformist and protocolized existence *and* with his appraisal of his alternate *vita felice*, in the rest of the article, I consider it thus still qualified to make use of the distinction authentic and inauthentic in discussing the promissory aspect of Agamben’s work.

16 In *Happiness*, Badiou targets not only empirical science and critical theory. As I argued above, this science and this critique in fact only concerns satisfaction. The additional problem lies in the twentieth century general philosophical abandonment of metaphysics, whether as hermeneutics, analytic philosophy or postmodern philosophy. Without “wagering” on a metaphysics, one cannot make space for a “true” happiness within one’s philosophy. See also Di Leo, “Wagering on Happiness. Philosophical Affect in Badiou,” 164. For both Badiou and Agamben, happiness is to be understood as an extension of their ontology.

Circumcision is nothing, and the foreskin is nothing ... Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a slave? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free: use it rather.¹⁷

This passage attests to a peculiar “messianic” tension between the one called and his or her worldly conventions, distinctions, and identities (Jew and non-Jew, Free man, and Slave – in terms of our topic, insert here “happy citizen,” various indications of privilege, feeling well, and “unhappy citizen,” oppressed, marginalized, excluded identities, etcetera). The calling doesn’t concern anyone in particular but addresses one at a level unencumbered by worldly identities, factual and social situations; it somehow traverses them. However, if after being called everybody may “abide in the same calling wherein one was called,” then what is supposed to be the transformative effect of this calling? There are many interpretations of this tension and the attitude toward “the ways of the world” it is supposed to engender. Weber, as Agamben remarks, famously interpreted it as an attitude of “eschatological indifference.” In a similar vein, Nietzsche reproached Paul for diverting attention away from this world to an illusory *Hinterwelt*. Based on their varying ontologies, both Badiou and Agamben develop an alternate reading in which not indifference or negation, but *affirmation* is key (and happy life what is to be unlocked).

3.1 Badiou and the Happy Militant

Badiou, who has referred to his participation in the events of May ‘68 as his own conversion from Saulos to Paulos,¹⁸ conceptualizes the messianic call as an “event” that ruptures “time’s cruel routine” and conformity with convention and announces the Idea of universality.¹⁹ The universality of the event consists first of all in the fact that it addresses the human being by breaching through particular, dividing identities – everybody may hear the call. Its universality consists, second, in the way it calls upon the human being to rearrange the *status quo* in its name, establishing new unities and connections between previously divided and opposed particularities: the messianic community bridges the worldly divisions. While historically of course creating new divisions between those who do and those who do not follow Christ, its philosophical potential resides, according to Badiou, in the announcement of such distinction traversing universality and non-identitarian forms of community. The possibility of such a rupturing event is backed by the ontology developed in *Being and Event*. Taking Cantor’s theory of infinite infinities as a frame for a modern ontology, Badiou argues that we should think of being as pure multiplicity. Because there is no set of all sets, philosophy should no longer take the One or totality as its ultimate principle but instead conceptualize truth as what disrupts a given set which presented itself as totality. In everyday life, we encounter being as totalized within certain “situations” or “worlds” wherein everything has its place according to some general rule, kept in place by what he provocatively calls the “state.” Here, the state can be the actual State (which Badiou writes with capital S), but just as with Paul’s use of *nomos* also more broadly “convention” or “custom,” which ratify situations as *status quo*. Accordingly, we mistake things – which in Badiou’s view are always multiplicities in the sense that they can become part of infinitely different sets – for their reduced representations as particularities of a given set. This would count for the “happy citizen” who contends herself with what the world offers her, but also for the master of suspicion who recognizes things only as particularities of the set “Happiness Industry.” However, because of the ontologically open multiplicity of things, every situation or *status quo* can, according to Badiou, in principle become disrupted by something not (fully) represented in that particular situation.²⁰ Such an open disruption Badiou calls an *event*. Because it disrupts from somewhere “outside” representation, this event presents itself first of all only as a *possibility* of something radically new of which there is no representation

¹⁷ Qtd. In Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 19.

¹⁸ De Bloois, *Badiou*, 10.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 66.

²⁰ Multiplicity cannot, for Badiou, again be understood in terms of various “ones” making up a multiple, each multiple consists only of further multiples. “[T]he multiple is only ever composed of multiples. Every multiple is a multiple of multiples.” Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 44.

(yet). The idea of universality allows one to take up a position that is not bound to specific particularities but is instead faithful to an “infinite generic multiplicity.”²¹ Just as with the messianic calling, in worldly terms, it at first glance does not seem to prescribe any content. Precisely because it takes its point of departure from a place outside worldly thought and action, from the perspective of the world it is “nothing” or an “impossibility,” a sort of empty gesture.

And indeed, as Badiou stresses, unless the called subject does not act on it, and decides to reshape its life accordingly, nothing happens, the *status quo* remains, and no sets are rearranged. However, the open space of universality might also form a “point” which enables the human being to *decide* whether or not it agrees with the “ways of the world.” As such, it might equally instigate the human being to become the subject or “carrier” of the Idea of universality and rearrange the sets and situations of the *status quo* in terms of a new world. Only then does an event become a truth. Emphasizing the Pauline stress on *faith* and *labor*, Badiou explicitly interprets Saint Paul as a “militant figure,” who calls upon his listeners to become “militant subjects” of the idea of universality. Truth, for Badiou, is never simply a revelation, but has reality only in and through the subject who changes the world in its name. If the subject “answers the call,” then it and the event become part of what Badiou calls “truth procedures,” of which he recognizes four: politics, where a *status quo* is breached in the name of a new community or society, science, in the name of new possibilities of knowing, art, of a new language of forms and love, a newly shared world of Two instead of One.

It is on the same model that Badiou developed his idea of happiness. His critique of convention is a critique of what happens (or fails to happen) to the human being when it remains within the *status quo*. That is, when for her all there is are the things measurable by happiness scientists, one’s social life and status, health, possessions, fortunes and misfortunes, and opinions. Not only are one’s thoughts and practices then limited according to what it finds represented in one’s life situation, it is also governed by those who benefit from retaining this *status quo*. The high point of happiness would then be to fit in, to find your satisfaction in what the *status quo* allows you to be and have, and the legitimization, sedatives, or distractions it offers for the injustices and inequalities in the world. By contrast, true happiness for Badiou depends on the conversion from such conformity to the non-conformist subject of a truth event. It depends on a “point” of truth announcing the possibility of universality. The corresponding attitude is that of a “militant subject” of a truth procedure, at decisive points *dissatisfied* with the ways of the world and which devotes his life to the materialization of new ways by rearranging the worldly situation accordingly. For Badiou, happiness is first of all a name for the various “affects” that belong to the different truth procedures: political enthusiasm, artistic pleasure, scientific beatitude, or amorous joy. True happiness, accordingly, is dependent on taking part in a truth procedure, risking your comfortable place within existence to change the world in the name of universality. Beyond both the happiness industry and its critique, Badiou thus ontologically argues for a way out of the contemporary situation and re-establishes the connection of happiness with a militant, universal concern for social justice.

3.2 Agamben and the Happiness of Potentiality

In Agamben’s reading of Saint Paul, the messianic call and corresponding conversion have quite a different character. Distinguishing himself from Badiou, for Agamben, the calling doesn’t necessarily involve a concrete change in the world. The messianic vocation does not substitute a “less authentic vocation with a truer one” (TTR, 23) but constitutes rather a *revocation* and *repetition*: it does not “have any specific content; it is nothing but the repetition of those same factual or juridical conditions *in which* or *as which* we are called” (Idem). What is at stake is still change and transformation, but not of worldly conditions, it transforms the *way in which these conditions are lived*. It concerns an “internal shifting of each and every single worldly condition by virtue of being ‘called’” (TTR, 22). To establish the effects of this shifting on worldly convention, Agamben

²¹ Badiou, “Eight Theses on the Universal.”

emphasizes the Pauline verb *katargein*, which he translates as “rendering inoperative.” The term, as Agamben argues, relates to the Aristotelian opposition between *dynamis* and *energeia*, potentiality and actuality. As a “compound of *argos* meaning inoperative, not at work,” it indicates an “etymological opposition with *energeia*.”²² To render something inoperative is to be understood as a “taking out of *energeia*, a taking out of the act.”²³ Rendering inoperative is thus not to be confused with destroying, leaving one with nothing or a sort of clean slate – the world rendered inoperative is still there. Agamben can in this way establish an enigmatic “remnant,” something that remains after worldly identities and meaning have been deactivated. By deactivating, by taking out the actuality of something, this same thing is *restored to potentiality*.²⁴ Annuling a *nomos* having become totalitarian, its actuality or effectiveness is suspended, and in its place, the potentiality of that which it held captive is released. The messianic call halts the ongoing actuality, revokes it, calls it back, but precisely to repeat or take up again, this same actuality, but now from the point it was called back to: potentiality. This potentiality of life, which remains after the messianic deactivations of “the ways of the world,” is Agamben’s version of the point outside convention from which to re-orient oneself, it is his alternative to the Badiouan Idea of Universality.

Agamben’s analysis is likewise backed by ontological considerations. In several essays taken up in *Potentialities*, Agamben explores a conception of reality in terms of potentiality. There, he argues that human potentiality is always at the same time impotentiality. Rereading Aristotle claims that one is only truly “able” to do something if she is at the same time able to *not* do this thing. This might seem a trivial remark but for Agamben its consequences are enormous. First of all, it explains why human life does not develop only in one generic form, genetically prescribed, but instead in a multitude of singularly different forms of life, cultures, languages, and histories. In distinction to most animals, humans not only realize pre-given potentials when triggered by occurrences, but because they are also capable of not realizing their potentials for them a gap exists between potentiality and actuality. This gap allows human beings to also not do something or do something in a slightly or radically different way than earlier. If this is true, however, then most if not all of human endeavors could have been and always can be otherwise than they are. That is to say, insofar as human convention, the ways of the world are as much the result of human potentiality as they are of *impotentiality*, they are radically and irreducibly *contingent*.²⁵

For both Paul and Agamben, this is a happy message. Yet how could such an experience, taking away all supposed certainties, the foundations of society, my identity, etcetera, amount to a happy transformation? For Agamben, it is the very prerequisite of true engagement with existence and everything in it. Called back to potentiality, the actuality of things and the conventional rules governing their use and establishing their meaning no longer have the same hold over existence; instead, things, others, and life are opened up for “free use” – a notion which he will develop more systematically some 20 years later. The idea is that, whereas one’s thought and practice, one’s “use” of life, others, and things was earlier determined by “actuality,” by the customs, meanings, and protocols holding sway, through insight into the contingency of reality one can now recognize the potentiality inhering in things. This insight thus constitutes a sort of awakening from the happiness industry and discourse. It allows one to recognize and critique the rules governing this industry and discourse, but, importantly, also to explore new ways of using life. Rather than disengagement or

²² Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 91.

²³ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁵ In Agamben’s oeuvre, the hero that renders experiential this impotentiality traversing human actuality is the clerk Bartleby from a short story by Herman Melville. After initially doing a great job as a copywriter at a law-firm at Wall-street, Bartleby at some point stops working and starts replying to any request or command given him with his famous “I would prefer not too.” Special about this phrase for Agamben is that it disrupts the ongoing actuality of work, labor, and achievement at Wall-street not by proposing some alternate activity or by simply stating that he will not do what is asked of him, but by creating an open sphere that does not prescribe any (alternate) will or activity. In his view, it renders experienceable that this open space lies before any and every human activity – also that of Wall-street. From the point of view of this open sphere, no labor, duty, or activity can be considered necessary. This is the restoration of “the ways of world” to the open space of potentiality from which it stems. The messianic call should thus be interpreted as the experience of potentiality, deactivating one’s actual life situation in order to restore to it the potentiality traversing it.

alienation, it thus constitutes the possibility of a *renewed engagement* with life, awakening to the possibility of a different type of relation to the facts of existence than prescribed by law, tradition, and convention. A happy life amounts to a conversion backed by an ontology that allows one to engage with things in view of their potentiality rather than their prescribed, static, or oppressive actuality.

Thus, in Agamben's work too, the possibility of a liberation from convention and the cultivation of an alternate, more true and happy attitude toward it, are backed by ontological considerations and based on an insight into the contingent nature of existence. Further on, we shall see that this alternate attitude is coupled with justice.

4 Changing the World Through Love

Having thus outlined the “subtractive” move of Agamben's and Badiou's thought and their idea of a possible ontological *metanoia*, I now wish to elaborate on the nature of this new attitude as a happy one. The radical critique of false images, industries, and discourses of happiness and the injustice they keep in place, whether by denying the possibility of universality or by subjecting potentiality to a certain actuality, is to be surpassed by a sort of supreme affirmation, on a par with the desire for justice and the good. An affirmation, that is, not just of the goodness or justice of this or that thing, person, institute, or project, but of a *new* world based on universality (Badiou) or of *this* world reinterpreted in terms of potentiality itself (Agamben). To conceptualize such an affirmation, both philosophers develop a notion of *love*. Yet, it is precisely there that the differences between Badiouan and Agambenian happy life become stronger. This most clearly comes to the fore in their appraisal of *work* or *labor*. Whereas for Badiou, love is the very labor of changing the world in the name of an event, for Agamben, love is a receptivity toward the world liberated from any works, tasks, or to-be-achieved goals.

4.1 Badiou and Loving Work

In his book on Saint Paul, Badiou interprets love (agape) as completing the fidelity to the truth event. Whereas faith declares only the *possibility* of a “new man,” the “reality,” or “materiality” of it requires labor: “‘love’ is the name of that labor. Truth for Paul is never anything but “faith working through love.”²⁶ In this way, love is a “universal power” and an attribute of every truth procedure:

The subjective process of a truth is one and the same thing as the love of that truth. And the militant real of that love is the universal address of what constitutes it. The materiality of universalism is the militant dimension of every truth.²⁷

As a structural element of truth procedures, it does not in itself have any pregiven content: *labor* is precisely the rendering concrete, manifest, and material of a new way of living (politics), knowing (science), form language (art), or world of Two (love). The task of the militant subject instigated by the event of universality is to create itself the new terms, forms, and language for re-shaping the world in its name.

In addition, love as *amorous* love is also the name of one of Badiou's four truth procedures itself. Like happiness, true love, as he states in his *In Praise of Love*, is threatened by a *status quo* that defines itself in terms of safety and comfort. Referencing dating sites and apps, he argues we are everywhere being presented with a simulacrum of love in the form of a perfect match. The problem here for Badiou is not that such a perfect match might not exist, but first of all it frames love in terms of a preservation of identity. Your lover should fit your world and who you are, so as to match with it perfectly. Second, since an algorithm has already

²⁶ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 92.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

established that you are suited for each other, the risk and anxiety of a first encounter are tempered. In effect, anyone not completely matching your situation, potentially disrupting your image of self and world is all too easily declined and replaced by a new candidate offered to you by the algorithm. For Badiou, however, true love necessarily involves a risky, disruptive encounter. Its very power consists in unsettling your *status quo* in such a way as to be able to experience the world, yourself, and others in a new manner: it too constitutes an event announcing the idea of universality. As such, it provides the opportunity to move from a world dictated by “One,” that is, by your own identity, to an irreducible “Two” that allows for the concrete construction of a new world built on alterity instead of identity (Two not necessarily in the sense of monogamy; one can be the subject of multiple truth procedures, multiple loves). Just as with the Pauline event, to become true and real, the amorous encounter needs to be decisively asserted by the lover(s). They need to declare their loyalty to this event (of minimal universality) and change the world in its name. Love is metaphysical in the sense that it forces the lovers to restructure their world in an “unending” way. This is not to say that one should stick together no matter what – a constructed world may perish – but that the construction itself is never finished. At each “point” in a relationship, living together, caring for a child, additional lovers or affairs, and so on, the lovers need to choose whether or not to reaffirm their love and reconstruct their world of two accordingly. As such, “love is always the possibility of being present at the birth of the world.”²⁸ Joy, the effect of this true love is one of Badiou’s forms of true happiness.

Happiness, for Badiou, is thus affirmatively developed in relation to an event that does not distract from or makes one escape the real world and its issues, but that demands one deal with its pluriform challenges. Loving labor is the creative and constructive part of happiness.

4.2 Agamben and Loving Receptivity

Agamben develops the Pauline notion of love in a strikingly different manner. He quotes the following passage from Paul:

Love is magnanimous; it acts kindly, love does not envy; love does not boast; it does not become haughty; it does not behave improperly; it does not seek its own; it is not provoked; it does not keep a record of evil. It does not rejoice over injustice, but it rejoices with the truth. It covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.²⁹

In this passage, love is associated with 1) “all things” and with acting kindly, 2) rejoicing in truth, and is 3) opposed to possessive – appropriative – attitudes (jealousy, pride, and seeking its own) and to injustice.

First, how is it connected to all things and acting kindly? Earlier, Agamben had already developed an understanding of love in his essay *The Passion of Facticity*, where he comments on the way Heidegger affiliates “letting be” with loving:

To embrace a “thing” or a “person” in its essence means to love it, to favor it. Thought in a more ordinary way, such favoring means to bestow essence as a gift. Such favoring is the proper essence of enabling, which not only can achieve this or that but also can let something essentially unfold in its provenance, that is, let it be. It is on the “strength” of such enabling by favoring that something is properly able to be.³⁰

Building from this passage, Agamben develops the experience of potentiality as allowing for a letting be that is not simply passive and indifferent to actuality but means instead an engagement of love and the ability to “let something essentially unfold in its provenance.” Recasting reality in the mode of contingency, upon everything the gift of potentiality is bestowed, that is, the ability to be otherwise than it is. As such, it enables transformation, growth, and also change. Here, we see again how deactivation not necessarily means destruction, but

²⁸ Badiou and Truong, *In Praise of Love*, 26.

²⁹ Qtd. in Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 129.

³⁰ Qtd. in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 200.

more modestly the ability to engage something afresh – which of course may lead to critique and revolution. In a fragment called *ease* from *The Coming Community*, Agamben writes that, viewed in this manner, it is as though beings are surrounded by a “halo” or “aura”; that is, an open space of potentiality the “empty place where each can move freely.” Agamben can therefore call love a mode of “hospitality,” which makes room and creates an empty space in which and by which things can take place, develop, and grow.³¹

Second, how is it connected to truth? What makes love not simply one mode amongst others, but an ontologically primary one? In *The Coming Community*, Agamben develops an ontology of beings as “whatever beings” or *quodlibet ens*. Conventionally, we take this *quodlibet* or “whatever” to mean something like “a being it does not matter which,” take your pick, all will do. However, Agamben reads in it the exact opposite meaning, namely a “being such that it *always matters*,” a being that is *wanted*, following the “libet” in the Latin term. Pushing the etymology with poetic license, he rephrases whatever beings as beings grasped in their “lovability.” With this term, Agamben seems to indicate beings insofar as they, first of all, draw our attention and affect us, even before anything we predicate of it.³² Agamben calls this the primary way in which beings give themselves to be known as their “taking-place.” Understood in its subjective aspect, love is a mode of hospitality, “the experience of taking place in a whatever singularity.”³³ Understood from the side of the object, love exposes things in their lovability – in their very potentiality to affect and be.³⁴

Third, how is it related to justice and the good? Evil, Agamben writes, is “only our inadequate reaction” to the experience of potentiality.³⁵ Instead of appreciating and affirming the potentiality inherent in things, one mistakes it for a fault, deficit, or danger to be remedied or curtailed in the name of some desired actuality. It consists of closing oneself off from the lovability of objects, negating their potentiality, or remaining blind to it because we are fixed on a to-be-achieved or to-be-secured actuality. In this way, we fail to do justice to both beings and ourselves, capturing them instead in abstractions and protocols, subsuming them into a “work” to be done. This can be the work of “changing the world,” or the “work” that needs to be done on oneself, one’s career, etcetera. In this way, the potentiality of existence is subsumed under a supposed idea of how it should be or become and this subjugation of potentiality to actuality is precisely the ontological error at the base of the governing apparatuses that Agamben challenges. If happiness itself is taken to lie at the end of such “works,” then the pursuit of happiness transforms into its very opposite, rendering it impossible instead.³⁶ If evil consists in this unjust reaction to potentiality, then good and justice, by contrast, consist in *doing justice* to the very potentiality inhering in beings, to their “taking place”:

God or the good or the place does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority. The being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone, is divine.

As I argue elsewhere, in more detail,³⁷ that the good is not something that “takes place” but the very “taking-place” of entities implies that the good is not something other than or outside beings, not something above or

³¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 24.

³² Like the consideration of beings as multiple, the notion of whatever being is designed to avoid the pitfall of understanding beings only in relation to the sets to which they belong. Whatever beings are beings “as such” that is, no longer in reference to any universal or general predicate of which they represent a particular version. Beings give themselves first and foremost to us as such, and only through abstraction or predication can we mistake them as just particulars of various sets defining them. For a discussion of the similarities in this regard between Badiouan and Agambenian ontology, see Leung, “The One, the True, the Good... or *not*: Badiou, Agamben, and Atheistic Transcendentality,” 79–86.

³³ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁴ For a further elaboration of this subjective and objective side to love, as well as their indeterminacy in the work of Agamben, see my article “The Profane Land of the Happy. On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben,” *Religions* 2023, 14, 808. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060808>.

³⁵ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 31.

³⁶ This amounts to an idea of happiness as “a merit; it is something you *deserve* or are deemed *worthy* of,” which lies at the basis of every moral or juridical protocol that, claiming a definite knowledge of what human beings should be and need, subsume human existence to staying within prescribed bounds. Marijssse, “Agamben’s Happy Life,” 143.

³⁷ See my discussion of Agamben’s *The Coming Community* in my forthcoming book: de Boer, *Agamben’s Ethics of the Happy Life. Beyond Nihilism and Morality* (Bloomsbury AC).

beyond them. It means refraining from positing the good as a criterium or an ideal to be used in order to judge beings, either in the form of a supposed essence to which they are to confirm *or* a *telos* to be achieved. Instead, the good concerns beings as they “remain” after such teleological or essentialist frameworks are deactivated. No longer means to certain fixed ends, beings can be viewed as “means without ends.” This counts not only for oppressive structures but also for neutral or pleasant ones – they too can be happily engaged with precisely insofar as an aura of potentiality envelops them. Lovability is what remains after everything has been rendered inoperative and has been liberated from any overarching ideas of necessary work or labor to make things other than they are. Thus engaged, we do justice to beings and are aligned with the good.

In the same book and elsewhere, Agamben calls this loving sphere of pure potentiality, of means without ends, a completely *profane* sphere that has been liberated from any transcendent or sacred goals or ideals. Accordingly, happy life, simultaneously, good, true and just, is defined as “an absolutely profane ‘sufficient life’ that has reached the perfection of its own potentiality.”³⁸ It is absolutely sufficient and profane because it no longer seeks happiness in some to-be-achieved goal or searches for meaning in anything above or beyond beings such as they give themselves in their potentiality. It reaches the perfection of its *own* potentiality in this way, becoming hospitable to oneself, one’s surroundings, and the others one engages with. The happy conversion Agamben’s philosophy aspires to achieve and surrounds the world with a “profane halo,” recognizing and enjoying at the heart of entities an engendering potentiality. This attitude is not to be confused with fatalism, which would mean a surrender to things as they are in their actuality. Recognizing and enjoying the potentiality of beings means precisely becoming receptive to their potentiality to be otherwise, making room for possible changes and uses of life even in the most dire circumstances. A happy life is a life attuned to this engendering potentiality.

5 Evaluation: Happiness Beyond Industry and Critique

This article has presented the work of Badiou and Agamben as an invitation to once again take up the ancient philosophical responsibility to *combine* critique of false images of happiness with conceptualizing an ontologically based, morally informed, true happiness. It is written from the intuition that both the happiness industry *and* its critique call for such a new philosophy of happiness. The industry because its satisfaction formulae never really seem to deliver what they promise (one can have a good social network, a fine job, a nice house, religious ideas, and political ideals etcetera and still be unhappy). Its critique, because the very diagnosis of modern happiness as delusory, empty, and legitimizing injustice, along with admonitions to value instead our “unhappiness,” relies on unexplicated criteria of happiness that are needed to render intelligible and consistent precisely such diagnoses and admonitions. Schooled in critical theory, Agamben and Badiou share a deep mistrust of happiness as it is promised in modern society, that is, as a commodity and/or as the result of functioning within apparatuses that govern the *status quo*. Beyond such critique, however, they conceptualize a space outside convention which allows one to explore beyond these apparatuses the possibility of a more authentic relation to existence: the Idea of Universality and potentiality respectively. What their work advocates is that, when it comes to happiness, something irreducible to “worldly things” and discourse is at stake, which has to do with the very way in which we engage existence, convention, others, and life in general. Herein lies the main difficulty for any critically informed, affirmative philosophy of happiness: it not only needs to explain what this “something other” consists in but first of all convince both the satisfied citizen *and* its critics that it constitutes a real possibility. In the work of Agamben and Badiou, this possibility is extra precarious in that it depends on a subtractive experience (event or potentiality) that might also not occur and, even if it does occur, might be misinterpreted, or simply abandoned. Like love, which always seems too hyperbolic and romanticized to be real until one actually experiences it, so too happiness in the philosophical sense is contingent upon an event or experience allowing one to grasp its possibility. What differentiates their happiness from the commodified, conformist versions, is its reliance upon truth and justice (or the good), a

³⁸ Agamben, *Means without Ends*, 114.

reliance backed by their ontologies. The subjective, ethical attitude corresponding to their proposed ontological reorientation is love, conceptualized either as the labor that materializes universality in changing the world or as a mode of hospitality and receptivity that liberates things (others, oneself, the world) from any overarching *telos* and corresponding *work*. Happiness is the habitual enjoyment of this loving reorientation.

Having established this move beyond the happiness industry and its critique in the works of Agamben and Badiou, a new way of comparing and evaluating their philosophies is opened up. Even these summary sketches allow one to see that, despite the above strategic correspondences, their models of a happy life develop in alternate directions. Nor do they, moreover, unequivocally succeed in escaping the critiques of happiness discourse. One can well imagine Badiou faulting Agamben's happy life for ultimately ending up with the very conformism that it is supposed to avoid: if the experience of potentiality does not necessitate any labor to change the world but instead allows for a happy, loving dwelling among things as they are, then it might be just a more intricate form of legitimizing satisfaction with the ways of the world. From my outline, for instance, it is not clear in what way Agamben's identification of the "taking place" of entities with the good and his identification of regarding them in this manner as doing justice to them, would be enough to combat social injustice and other evils in the world. Surely, the experience of potentiality enables one to develop new uses for things and thus also critique and reorganization, but it makes no promises as to its results on this factual or worldly plane. As such, it might, at least from the perspective of the critics of the happiness industry free one a bit too radically from the ways of the world. Just as easily, however, would it be to argue from an Agambenian perspective that by emphasizing the militancy of the happy subject and its necessary labor in the name of the Idea of Universality, Badiou repeats the very framework that according to Agamben underlies the governing apparatuses telling us that in order to become happy or good we need to do this and that, enslaving the potentiality of things in the name of some to be achieved future. In addition, the very identification of happiness with, for instance, the effect of political enthusiasm, seems to enable not only a fight for social justice but also a dictatorial and violent, uncompromising "righteous" attitude. Especially if one acts in the name of an in itself incommunicable idea of the universal, trumping earthly rights and whatever else is part of the *status quo*, it is not clear how this happy militant might not turn into a form of fundamentalism beyond compromise or accountability. To be clear, however, such critiques in fact target possible *degenerations* of their models of happiness, and not so much their models themselves, which both Agamben and Badiou present as *prerequisites* for happiness (and justice), rather than as *guarantees* of happiness (and justice).³⁹ It is also at this level that they formulate their critique of modern happiness discourse – they argue that they cover over, distract from, or simply deny the reality or possibility of such prerequisites.

Accordingly, for this article, what is more important than whether or not Badiou or Agamben propose the *right* model, by affirmatively reclaiming happiness as a philosophical object, they allow such debate on prerequisites to take place once again. Rather than leaving happiness to happiness science and industry and to critics only concerned with "unmasking" happiness as a commodity and form of false consciousness, their philosophies reopen the affirmative philosophical discourse on happiness. Not in *opposition* with critical theory, but in a way that valuably supplements critical theory's devastating diagnoses of modern western happiness and additionally demands of these diagnoses to articulate the (ontological) criteria by which they measure. Their respective models allow one to trace the value, difficulties, and more generally the complexity

³⁹ While Agamben and Badiou have themselves opposed their philosophies in ways resembling the one I just presented, it might be more fruitful and interesting to focus on the ways in which their philosophies resonate. In this vein, Sergej Prozorov has convincingly argued that, at least insofar as it concerns their respective ontologies, their thought "share the ontological understanding of politics as the process of the affirmation of pure being against the historically contingent apparatuses of government." One might even, as Prozorov suggest, argue that also at the level of "action" these authors are not so far from each other as one might initially expect. As we saw, the Agambenian emphasis on potentiality in no way indicates passivism or fatalism, but rather opens up the possibility of new use and action. Similarly, notwithstanding the Badiouan emphasis on "action," the point of his particular type of action concerns precisely those things and possibilities that remain unrealized and absent if one stays within the status quo or "actuality." Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*, 54, 55.

required in formulating a philosophy of happiness that might compete with psychological, entrepreneurial, or health models.

Let me, by way of conclusion, translate this Agambenian and Badiouan move beyond the science of happiness and its critics into four basic (if not necessarily exhaustive) requirements for a contemporary philosophy of happiness.

- (1) At the risk of being accused of making an empty gesture, philosophy must dare to speak in the name of happiness itself. That is, provide an account of true happiness, and not only analyze its commodified guise, its function within discourse, or its ideological instrumentality. Otherwise, philosophy cannot properly distinguish between contemporary *misuse* of happiness and happiness itself, and consequently, the various critical diagnoses of modern happiness discourse remain without foundation.
- (2) Reflection on happiness must involve “truth” in the sense that it is strictly related to an insight concerning the true nature of existence in contrast to conventional approaches to it. It thus requires both critique *and* ontological debate.
- (3) If happiness is to be something other than fitting in well and feeling good within “the ways of the world,” its relation to justice and the good should be re-established against the modern separation.
- (4) In order for the experience or insight into true happiness to be effective, it is to be translated into a praxis or an attitude allowing one to not only theoretically distinguish false promises of happiness from authentic one’s, but also to shape one’s life accordingly.

Starting from these basic premises, happiness ceases to be a simple *signum* of feeling well and fitting in or a perverted *symptom* of false consciousness, and becomes once again, as it was for the ancient philosophers, a matter of *orientation* toward the truth and toward the good. Philosophy ideates happiness as something that does not itself fully coincide with the factual level of existence and is never measurable as an “achievement” in that domain, but instead concerns the very possibility of a sort of ethical navigation within the facts of one’s life. Of course, as we saw in my evaluation of the models presented by Agamben and Badiou, following these requirements in no way guarantees the connection between happiness, truth, and the good, but they do provide us with criteria for evaluating competing models of happiness beyond consumer satisfaction and its critique. Additionally, it would also allow us to revisit the very diagnosis of a happiness industry and see whether one might not also recover some genuine ethical elements *within* what is oftentimes all too easily dejected as “bourgeois” forms of happiness.

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