Truth and Freedom

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What does truth have to do with freedom? In asking this question, I mean to ask about the relation between our epistemic and political values—and in particular, whether we must justify our political principles in terms of our epistemic principles, or vice versa.

By an epistemic principle, I mean any principle that concerns, in a suitably broad sense, what is rational to believe. Such principles will come in different forms. One example would be

> Vision: If, in normal observational circumstances, it visually appears as if p, then you are prima facie justified in believing that p.

Others may concern the reliability of methods for forming belief:

> Logic: Deductive inference from true premises is a reliable way of forming beliefs.

And still others, what we might call "meta-epistemic" principles, will concern our cognitive and epistemic goals, e.g.

> TG: Having true beliefs is a proper goal of inquiry.

Put so abstractly, one might wonder how such principles could have *any* relation to our political values. But in fact a relation is not that hard to see, and indeed, in the liberal democratic tradition, many philosophers have, in some way or other, taken it that at least some of our political principles can

be, perhaps even must be, justified by certain epistemic or meta-epistemic principles. Call this the *epistemic priority thesis.*

How the epistemic priority thesis is defended and articulated varies of course. Thus, for example, some have argued that, despite substantive differences in our moral commitments, we can justify our appeal to certain types of practical reasons over others in the public domain by appeal to shared epistemic principles. In some cases, the point is that we justify certain democratic procedures by (in part) their "publically recognizable" epistemic value (Estlund, 2007, 8). For example, we might justify our employment of free speech protections in part arguing that in the long run, such protections enable societies that have them to achieve more truth beliefs than false ones.[1] Alternatively (and more plausibly in my view) we might argue that democratic political institutions are necessary to allow for widespread epistemic trust (that is, trust in others ability to know) and that societies with greater epistemic trust are likely to generate greater amounts of knowledge than those that do not.[2] Or more directly, we might argue that our very commitment to certain democratic principles and institutions requires a prior commitment to basic and shared epistemic principles.[3]

Whatever the details, one might think that there is something troubling about this entire strategy. Indeed, Richard Rorty always took it that a central component of the pragmatist point of view is that the epistemic priority thesis has things backward. As he famously remarked, "if you take care of freedom, truth will take of itself" (1999 118). Ascribing this thought to Dewey, he took this to mean that

> Instead of justifying democratic freedoms by reference to an account of human nature and the nature of reason, Dewey takes the desire to preserve and expand such freedoms as a starting point—something we need not look behind. Instead of saying that free and open encounters track truth by permitting a mythical faculty called "reason" to function unfettered, he says simply that we have no better criterion of truth than that it is what results from such encounters (1999, 119).

I take there to be something deeply right about this thought—but I also think there is something profoundly misleading about it is as well. In this

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[1] The obvious example here is Mill (1861), but interpretations of the market place argument obviously vary enomoursly.

[2] See Fuerstein 2008; Lynch 2012 for variations on this theme.

[3] For a direct argument of this sort, seeTalisse, 2007. Compare Habermas, 1996, 107.

essay I want to say why that is, and why truth and freedom need each other – neither can go it alone.

I.

As the above passage makes clear, one common complaint Rorty and others have with the epistemic priority thesis is that the whole approach requires robust metaphysical assumptions about human "nature." And indeed, the enlightenment thinkers often tended to make such assumptions, seeing us, with Locke, as stamped by our Maker with common rational abilities. But in fact the epistemic priority thesis doesn't require such a position. Again, the rough idea is that we can justify our appeal to certain types of political principles by appeal to epistemic principles. Clearly, nothing in that position *requires* that the justification of those principles be *supernatural*. Indeed, nothing in the position requires *any* particular stance on the metaphysical character of the epistemic principles themselves. Whether, or the extent to which such principles reflect "real" facts out in the world is an important question. But it is not the same question as whether they justify or are justified by, other principles.

In saying this, I don't mean to deny that most defenses of the epistemic priority thesis will generally *presuppose* that there be at least some common rational abilities shared by humans. Consider Vision above: it is natural to assume that if it is true, then many human beings form beliefs by vision; likewise with Logic. Yet surely we can grant this is the case without much metaphysical fuss. After all, the extent to which we do share cognitive abilities is an empirical matter, as a hypothesis that human organisms brains are generally (if not universally) disposed to form beliefs via certain processes and methods. As such, we should be cautious about ruling it out *a priori*.

Consequently, in what follows I will mostly ignore the nature/nuture complaint against the epistemic priority thesis. In part because I think it is an empirical matter (and the "nature" side is winning the data race) and in part because I think there are more interesting things to talk about. In particular, I think there are least two more serious objections to the epistemic priority thesis.

The first objection is that epistemic values can't be prior simply because there are no distinctively epistemic values. Rorty himself often seemed to embrace this position at least in one form, by denying that TG—that truth can be understood as a goal of inquiry.

According to Rorty, the social practice of giving reasons to each other neither needs nor requires justification by appeal to what he considered the "transcendent" goal of truth. The only thing that transcends a social practice, Rorty thinks, is another social practice—so it doesn't help to think that truth is the aim of such practices:

> I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater patience, greater inclusiveness and so on. I see democratic politics as serving such concrete, describable goals. But I do not see that it helps to add "truth" . . . to our list of goals, for I do not see what we shall do differently if such additions are made (Rorty, 2000, 7).

Why is that? Because, as he says:

> The grounding premise of my argument is that you cannot aim at something, cannot work to get it, unless you can recognize it once you have got it. . . . We shall never know for sure whether a given belief is true, but we can be sure that nobody is presently able to summon up any residual objections to it, that everybody agrees that it ought to be held (2000, 2).

In sum, the argument appears to be this: Truth cannot be the target of our justificatory practices—of inquiry—because we can never know whether our beliefs are true. And a target we can't know we've hit is no target at all. Yet we can know whether "everybody agrees" with a belief. Therefore, agreement or consensus, not truth, is the proper aim of inquiry.

The argument is interesting in its own right. But if sound, it would obviously undermine the epistemic priority thesis. If we can't pursue true beliefs, then the principle that we should pursue true beliefs is false or at least moot. And if so, then no such principle can be used to ground any other principle, political or otherwise.

But is the argument sound? There are some obvious objections. First, it is not at all clear why it is any easier to shoot at "agreement" than it is to shoot at truth. And the problem isn't just what we mean by "everyone". Even if it is just "everyone in my culture," or even "everyone in my culture who looks and speaks like me"—it will be very difficult to recognize whether we have agreement, since some of the aforementioned have views I think are crazy (and vice versa – see "Party, Tea"). Figuring out that "everyone agrees" with me in regard to even the most mundane beliefs is not easy.

More fundamentally, Rorty's argument assumes a mistaken picture of how justification (reason-giving) is related to truth. In general, we can distinguish between the ultimate end or value that *governs* a practice and the more immediate aims that are justified because they are means to this end. The former is the light, however faint, by which the practice steers, so to speak; the latter are the more immediate reference-points practitioners may take to move them along their way. In saying that true belief is a goal of inquiry, we take it to be an aim of inquiry in the first sense. One thing we can agree with Rorty about is that an individual inquirer rarely has anything so fancy as truth as a conscious aim in her everyday life. And even when she does, she cannot achieve that end directly. One does not simply will oneself to believe. Rather, we pursue truth indirectly, by pursuing evidence that supplies us with reasons for belief. Indirectly or not, however, it is truth that supplies the point of this enterprise, and what distinguishes it from merely pursuing that which will rally others to our cause, or flatter our opinions. It is also what distinguishes it from the practice of answering objections simpliciter – that is, from the practice of simply saying that which silences your opponent, or gets them to nod in agreement. Reasons are important in and of themselves. But reasons for a belief are *reasons* precisely because they are not mere means to their own end; they are means to the further end of truth. Thus justification (reason-giving) is distinct from truth precisely as a means is distinct from its end.

Rorty takes this sort of point to show only that the word "true" has what he calls a "cautionary" use. We use the word in this way, he thinks, to remind ourselves that what may be justified to one audience may not be justified to another, or "to remind oneself that there might be . . . objections that have not occurred to any one" (2000, 5). And of course he is right that it is certainly good to remind ourselves of this fact. The question is why. And the most obvious reason we think it good to remember the possibility of unanticipated objections, is surly not because we think that answering objections is good in itself or some such. Rather, we think it is important to remember because some of those unanticipated objections might turn out to be *right*. In other words, what passes for truth now might not be true. Justification, reason-giving, is a means to truth; but it is an imperfect means. No surprise there. What means are?

One final note of speculation: Putting aside his most explicit remarks on the subject, Rorty's fundamental problem with the pursuit of truth principle may be different than the one I've canvassed here. Perhaps he thinks that it is impossible to ever hit the target of truth, not because it is a unverifiable target, but because the target itself is fundamentally flawed. His point is that the sense in which we might think that truth is the

goal of reason and justification is a dubious, metaphysical sense of truth. It involves, as he elsewhere makes clear, a commitment to a looking-glass view of the mind, a view according to which our thoughts, when correct, are mirrors of nature. In short, it assumes an objectionable correspondence theory of truth. Luckily, we needn't settle whether the correspondence theory of truth is salvageable in this essay. I'm inclined to think that, taken as a global theory of truth, it isn't. But there is, fairly clearly, no entailment between TG and the correspondence theory. One can adopt TG and hold, for example, that there are different kinds of truth—just the view I'd suggest. That, however, is a matter to be pursued elsewhere.[4]

I want instead to end this part of the paper on a cautionary note of my own. Not only is it conceptually difficult to dispense with the goal of having true beliefs and still retain the distinction between what is justified and what is true, it is also politically difficult. Those of us brought up intellectually in the nineteen-eightes and nineties were schooled on the thought that the concepts of meta-narratives and objective truth were the concepts of the oppressors. They were tools used by The Man to put us down. But that philosophy has proven to be too destructive for the Left's own good. The hard lesson of the last several decades is that it is difficult to stand up for progressive values as being better than the opposition's while at the same time saying (sotto voce) that they aren't really objectively true.

Once you give up on the distinction between what is true and what passes for truth, you give up the ability to criticize the inanity that passes for truth around you. This was something that a "unnamed" Bush advisor (that is, Karl Rove) knew very well when he famously told Ronald Susskind that "we are an empire now – we make our own reality". Convince people that truth is what passes for truth and you convince them of more than any particular view, you convince them to give up questioning all together.

II.

Our first argument above was aimed at the value of truth—that is, at the meta-epistemic principle TG. I now want to turn to the second argument against the epistemic priority thesis I mentioned earlier. Answering it is, in my view, a far more difficult affair. In part, that's because for this argument, we can simply grant truth is a goal of inquiry and yet still cause

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[4] I pursue it in Lynch 2009.

plenty of trouble for any view that wishes to appeal to common epistemic principles.

The core of the argument is this: I can't defend my fundamental epistemic principles against challenge with epistemic reasons. If so, then either I can't defend them at all or I must defend them with practical— that is, explicitly normative moral or political reasons. Hence the epistemic priority thesis is mistaken because either (a) epistemic principles have no ground; or (b) the priority runs in the other direction.

Prior to laying out the argument, we need to make some distinctions. I'll say that an epistemic principle is *fundamental* if any attempt to defend the principle is subject to "epistemic circularity" – that is, the defense will ultimately require presupposing that said principle is justified. Logic is an obvious example; Vision seems a likely candidate as well, as does the obviously associated principle:

> Sense Perception (SP): Sense perception is a reliable method for forming beliefs about the external world.

But I won't quibble over the examples here. Suffice to say that is highly likely that amongst the epistemic principles we would endorse (should the matter come up) some will be fundamental in the in the sense defined.

One could defend such principles in various ways: let's say one epistemically defends a principle if one provides an epistemic reason for it – a reason for believing it is true. To "provide" a reason in the sense I'm interested in is to exchange it. Thus I'll say that A provides a reason R to *B* for some P, only if were B aware of her principles, and reason consistently with them, B would recognize that R is a reason for P. That is, in order for A to give a reason to B, *B* should be *able* to recognize—even if she in fact does not – that it is a reason from his standpoint.

It is this sense of exchanging or providing reasons that is generally relevant when there is a need for coming to some mutually recognized agreement on some course of action. We frequently expect our doctors, for example, to be able to articulate, in terms we can understand, at least some reasons for why we should take some medicine or undergo some surgery. We expect engineers to be able to articulate, or otherwise make clear, the rational basis of their views on, e.g. the safety of a bridge. But such expectations are not just limited to experts. In any typical conversation over what to do or what to believe, or both, we typically assume that when someone makes some assertion, that they will be able to say something in defense of it when challenged. If they can't, then in many cases, we will regard their assertion with suspicion. At the very least, we

may find ourselves less willing to act on it, and hence to commit to it ourselves.

These facts about exchanging or providing reasons are completely compatible with some familiar distinctions. Being justified *by a reason* is distinct from *recognizing that it is a reason*. Moreover, one can have reasons one doesn't give or receive. But that isn't what is at issue when we argue over principles. Here what we wish to exchange or provide is a *reason to commit, or to defend our commitments*. [5]

With these points in place, we can now lay out what I'll call the Challenge Argument: You can defend a fundamental epistemic principle under challenge only if you can give a reason for that principle. Fundamental epistemic principles can be shown to be true only via circular arguments. Circular arguments can't be used to provide reasons— in the sense defined above—for believing anything. If I don't trust your methods, and therefore accept your principles, your reassuring me that they are reliable because employing them tells you so won't impress me. Hence, fundamental epistemic principles cannot be defended under challenge by appeal to epistemic reasons. Epistemic reason, as we might put it, can't defend itself. This point appears to have at least two alarming implications. The first is that it appears that our fundamental epistemic commitments can be epistemically *incommensurable*. We can't resolve disagreements over fundamental epistemic principles with epistemic reasons.

This isn't to say that we can't know which epistemic principles are true. We might be able to know that p without being able to exchange or provide reasons for p. But that fact is of little use in *resolving disagreement*. It is a platitude that a debate can be resolved only if there is some equally recognizable common ground between the participants. We may well know (via an epistemically circular argument, perhaps) which basic sources are reliable, and hence which epistemic principles are true. But that fact has absolutely no traction when one is trying to justify one's employment of a source in the face of open and explicit doubts about its reliability or the extent of its reliability.

The question at issue is not how we do *in fact* to persuade others to "accept" our epistemic principles. A big stick or a bribe is probably the most expedient method. Our question isn't about expediency but

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[5] We may be unaware that we are committed to some principles by our commitments to other principles. Thus if you challenge my commitment to principle P, I might successfully give you a reason for my commitment even if you fail to appreciate that I've done so simply because you are unaware that P is entailed by some more fundamental principle to which you are already committed. This should come as no surprise.

rationality. It is about whether it is even *possible* for reasons to move us when it comes to our fundamental epistemic commitments. The real issue is existential. Not for nothing did Descartes began his most famous work announcing that he had come to change his mind about his most fundamental principles. Yet what the Challenge Argument seems to imply that we cannot understand how changing our minds about fundamental epistemic principles can be rational.

A Cartesian thought experiment illustrates the point. Suppose Descartes comes to accept a fundamental principle on Tuesday that he did not accept Monday. He adopts a new fundamental principle that wasn't part his previous repertoire. If he is to now recognize this change as having been rational, then he must be able to give a reason for this change that he knows his previous self would have recognized. He must think it possible to explain his later self to his earlier self. If he admits that he cannot do this, then it is mysterious how he could presently understand his change in view as one that was based on rational grounds. He may hold his new fundamental principle for reasons, but he cannot, on Tuesday, understand his *adoption* of it as being based on reasons. From this point, the argument takes a now-familiar form: any reason he could now give to his earlier self would be circular; and circular reasons wouldn't be accepted by his earlier self as reasons. If this is so, then the skeptic will say that it is hard to see how Descartes could see *his own change of mind* as having been rational.[6]

It certainly seems possible to improve one's epistemic situation by adopting new and more reliable sources of belief—including new basic sources. To do that is to commit to new fundamental epistemic principles, to improve your epistemic point of view. And it is highly attractive to think that such improvement is, or at least can be, a rational process—one based on reasons. And yet that is precisely what the above line of argument rules out. Epistemic incommensurability begins at home.

III.

How does this second argument – the Challenge Argument –threaten the epistemic priority thesis? That depends on how we understand that thesis. So far, we've described it as the position that some of our political principles can be justified by epistemic principles. But this is ambiguous: it could mean that some of our political principles have the property being justified (or being justified to believe) in virtue of certain epistemic

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[6] This conclusion is slightly softened by the fact that it leaves open the possibility that a negative change in epistemic view—transitions from holding a principle to not holding it—might well be recognizable as rational. But this is small consolation.

principles having the property of being justified (or being justified to believe). Or it could mean that we can *justify* (provide justification for) our political principles by appealing to our epistemic principles. Strictly, it is only this second interpretation of the epistemic priority thesis that is threatened by the Challenge Argument. The first interpretation would be threatened only if we held something like

> Believing P is justified only if it is possible to provide reasons to believe P under challenge.

But one might wonder whether we could defend such a view. After all, you might think that small children, were they to ever have the implicit belief that sense perception is reliable, would be justified in so believing without being able to even spell "reason" let alone provide reasons for that belief.

But this, I think, is small solace. For it is pretty clear that we DO want to be able to defend our fundamental epistemic principles with reasons. It is part of the very concept of a civil democratic society that disagreements, where possible, be settled by appeal to reasons. Democratic politics is not war by other means: democracies, as I've said elsewhere, are spaces of reasons (Lynch, 2012b)

Of course, the question might be moot if we never did in fact have conflicts over our epistemic principles. But we do. Really divisive disagreements---such as the disagreements over evolution or over the age of the earth—are typically not just over the facts. They are also about the best way to support our views of the facts. And disagreements over how best to support our views of the facts are disagreements over epistemic principles. Thus while there may be a few people who agree with the creationists because they really think that the scientific evidence supports that view, for most people, science has nothing to do with it. Their belief in creationism is instead a reflection of a deeply held epistemic principle: that, at least on some topics, scripture is a more reliable source of information than science. Now I am not saying that we should agree with the creationist on this point of course. Nor am I saying their views are defensible. What I am saying is that the ideal of civility in the public sphere demands that we don't simply dismiss challenges our principles –any more than we think the creationists should dismiss our challenges to theirs. We need to find ways of defending our principles from a common point of view.

But the reason we need to do so goes beyond an appeal to civility. We need to be able to justify our epistemic principles to each other from a common point of view because we need shared epistemic principles in

order to even have a common point of view. Without a common background of standards against which we measure what counts as a reliable source of information, or a reliable method of inquiry, and what doesn't, we won't be able *to agree on the facts*, let alone values. And if you can't agree on the facts, you can hardly agree on what to do in the face of the facts. Simply put, we need a common currency of epistemic principles because we often have to decide, jointly, what to do in the face of disagreement. Sometimes we can accomplish this, in a democratic society, by voting. But we can't decide every issue that way, and we certainly can't decide on our epistemic principles—which methods and sources are *actually* rationally worthy of trust—by voting. We need some forms of common currency before we get to the voting booth. And that means that we need to face up to the Challenge Argument.

IV.

The last several sections put us in a conceptually awkward situation. We've seen that we can't just dispense with the idea that we aim at having true beliefs. We have reasons—conceptual and political—for thinking that inquiry is aimed at truth. So perhaps we can ground some political principles on the meta-epistemic principle TG. At the very least, the path seems open to ruling out political principles that might in some conflict with TG.

But the Challenge Argument rains on that parade. For it suggests that even if inquiry is aimed at truth, disagreements over how best to do so might still be incommensurable. We can't defend our fundamental epistemic principles with epistemic reasons. But, as I just argued, we can't just give in and say that there are no reasons for our epistemic principles. We need to appeal to a different sort of reason.

But what sort of reason? One obvious candidate is pragmatic. Perhaps certain epistemic principles are better than others because, e.g. the methods they recommend as reliable are simply more useful than others. One might justify the methods of science, for example, by noting that it is only by relying on them that we can build bridges, make medicines, and so on. And of course that is correct. But this point alone won't answer someone who might challenge such principles. First, skeptics about scientific reason are rarely if ever skeptical about it across the board. Their quarrel is with its use in certain domains. They aren't going to say that we should never use observation, logic and experiment to figure things out. What they will argue is that these methods have a lower priority in

some subject matters than others. In some domains, other methods trump. People who think that the Torah or Bible or Koran is a better—not the only—means to the truth about the origin of our planet, for example, see the matter in that way.

But appealing to the utility of science is a good start: it is the right sort of reason, even if it is, by itself, insufficient. Even if we can't give epistemic reasons for epistemic first principles, we can give *practical* reasons for employing the methods of science, and therefore for committing to the principles that give them more weight than others. Consider, for example, that the epistemic principles of science have certain democratic virtues that many of their rivals lack. One of the virtues of scientific rationality is that it privileges principles that—as we in fact just noted—everyone appeals to most of the time – just because we are built that way. Of course the fact that people can't help but use methods like observation and logic doesn't prove that those methods *are* always more reliable than others, or even reliable at all. (Just as the fact that people thought the earth was flat doesn't mean it was). But it does mean that principles which privilege these methods – which give them more weight than others, no matter what the question – have an obvious virtue: they recommend methods that aren't secret or the province of a few. They recommend methods that everyone can and does use. Indeed, it is this very virtue of scientific methods that was so celebrated in the enlightenment. Prioritizing scientific methods is liberating precisely because it frees one from appeals to authority, from the thought that something is true because someone in power says so.

Obviously this suggestion needs further development. But it gives the flavor of the sorts of reasons we can appeal to over and above the epistemic. Of course, one might worry that this sort of reasoning is too "subjective". Do we have any real reasons—other than personal What we need is a procedure for generating objective practical reasons – reasons for preferring epistemic principles that abstract from our own current political and epistemic interests preference—for thinking this is the case? I think we do, as I've argued elsewhere (2012a, 2012b). One way to do so is to adopt a form of argument made familiar by Rawls.

Imagine playing a game the point of which is to figure out, together with other players, what epistemic principles and methods to privilege on another world (call it Parallel Earth). Principles are privileged on Parallel Earth, let's imagine, when they are taught in the schools, used to make decisions about grants and the like. In playing the game, you know that Parallel Earth is will appear just like our planet. And you also know you will live on Parallel Earth after the game ends. But you don't know two important facts: when playing the game, you don't know what

social and educational position you'll occupy on Parallel Earth. And you don't know what methods are going to be reliable on Parallel Earth. But you have to decide which methods to privilege on Parallel Earth anyway.

So how *are* you going to decide? Since we players don't know which methods are actually going to be reliable (or if any will be), we can't base their decision on which methods we think will produce the truth. That's out of bounds as far as the game is concerned. And yet since we also don't know our future social position, it is unlikely we'll decide on methods that would only be available to a few, or which would allow some people to have secret knowledge that no one else could ever obtain. After all, *you* might not turn out to be a member of the inner circle. The methods that it will make sense to endorse will be those that build on everyone – just by being human – can appeal to. Methods that build on common experience are by nature non-secret, open to public revision and capable of being used repeatedly. That alone gives us a practical reason to privilege them, to give them more weight—independently of the question of whether they are reliable.

Of course, it would take some work to show that scientific principles and methods would turn out to have these democratic virtues. But it seems very likely that they do. And if so, then we have an objective reason for favoring scientific principles of rationality over others—a reason that could be accepted no matter what your prior epistemic commitments. Fundamental scientific principles give weight to methods like observation and experiment. Because of their open public nature, they are the sorts of principles we would commit to were we to abstract from considerations of truth and social power. These are the principles we would favor in an ideal state of social and epistemic equality. These are, in short, the more democratic epistemic principles.

If we take this sort of argument seriously then Rorty was at least half-right. We can't hope to ground our political principles on our epistemic principles. In fact it sometimes goes the other way around: we often have to ground our fundamental epistemic principles on our democratic values. But to say as much is not to simply endorse the idea that if we take care of freedom truth takes care of itself—it is not to endorse the idea that politics first, epistemology second. Foundationalism turned on its head is still foundationalism – just with the ceiling tiles acting as the floor. The right lesson to draw, in my view, is that we can't get away from the fact that our political and epistemic values are, at the deepest level, intertwined. They form a raft, a web—pick your metaphor. The hard part isn't seeing this fact; the hard part comes in trying to make sense of how we should improve our values – epistemic and political. The hard

part is making sure that truth and freedom take care of each other.

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