The absolute Good and the human goods

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Abstract: By the absolute Good, I understand the Idea of the Good; by the human goods, I understand pleasure and reason, which have been disqualified in Plato's "Republic" as candidates for the absolute Good (cf.R.505b-d). Concerning the Idea of the Good, we can distinguish a maximal and a minimal interpretation. After the minimal interpretation, the Idea of the Good is the absolute Good because there is no final cause beyond the Idea of the Good. After the maximal interpretation, the Idea of the Good is the One. The maximal and the minimal interpretation go beyond the textual evidence. I will defend two theses: (1) Since the Platonic Socrates deliberately gives no more information, it seems wise to stop with Socrates and to give only a formal, not a substantive, interpretation: The absolute good is the third item between and above knowledge and the known. (2) To mediate between the absolute Good and the human goods, Plato's Eleatic Stranger introduced in the "Politicus" an intermediate principle.

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Dialogues
on the Idea of the Good

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The absolute Good and the human goods

By the absolute Good I understand the Idea of the Good, by the human goods I understand pleasure and reason, which have been disqualified as candidates for the absolute good (cf. R. 505b-d). I will first say something on the Idea of the Good, then I will go on to the human goods and the relation between the human goods and the absolute good. Thereby I will defend two theses: (1) The absolute good is a third item between and above knowledge and the known. (2) To mediate between the absolute good and the human goods Plato introduced in the 'Politicus' and 'Philebus' an intermediate principle, the appropriate (μέτριον).

I

As we all know Plato characterizes his Idea of the Good as beyond being, 'surpassing it in dignity and power' (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβείᾳ καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος) (cf. R. 509b9-10). Concerning this famous formula we may distinguish a 'minimal' and a 'maximal' interpretation. The 'minimal' interpretation has been advanced by F. M. Cornford: 'But can it be proved that these words mean anything more than that, whereas you can always ask the reason for a thing's existence and the answer will be that it exists for the sake of its goodness, you cannot ask for a reason for goodness; the good is an end in itself; there is no final cause beyond it?'[1] This teleological interpretation of F. M. Cornford has been accepted by H. Cherniss, R. E. Allen, M. Isnardi-Parente, L. Brisson and others who reject the esoteric interpretation advanced by the Tübingen school.[2] The 'maximal' interpretation has been advanced especially by the Tübingen School, e.g. Hans Krämer in his article 'ΕΠΕΚΕΙΝΑ ΤΗΣ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ'.[3] The Idea of the Good is the One of the 'so-called unwritten doctrines' (Aristotle, Phys. Δ2.209b14-15). This position has now been accepted by G. Reale, J. Halfwassen and others who read Plato in the esoteric way.[4] Esoteric means here not only, that we have to acknowledge the existence of these 'so-called unwritten doctrines' as they are reported mainly by Aristotle, but that they give the

decisive clue how we ought to interpret some difficult passages such as the simile of the sun.

It is important to note, that both interpretations go back to Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle characterizes the Good in a very platonic mode (cf. Lys. 220b6-8) as that which is an end in itself, if desire shall not be empty and in vain (cf. NE. A1.1094a18-22). Therefore – we may conclude – 'you cannot ask for a reason for goodness' (F. M. Cornford). It is in this sense that the good or the end in itself is beyond any reason. The Good is a final word. On the other hand the Good has been characterized by Aristotle as the One (cf. Metaph. N4.1091b13-15. EE. A8.1218a18-20): The decisive testimony we find in the *Metaphysics*: 'Some say that the One itself is the Good itself; in fact they believe that the essence of it is primarily the One' (Metaph. N4.1091b13-15).[5] Since for Plato the Idea of the Good is also the Good itself (cf. R. 507a3, 534c4) the 'maximal' interpretation has inferred that the essence of the Platonic Good is the One. This Aristotelian interpretation has been expanded by Plotinus for whom the Idea of the Good is the *transcendent* One and therefore also *beyond* knowledge and being (cf. e.g. Plot. Enn. V.1.8, V.3.12-13, V.4.1, V.9.2, VI.7.37, VI.7.40). The aristotelian interpretation points toward to the neoplatonic one, as has been remarked long ago by L. Robin.[6]

Now against both interpretations, the 'minimal' and the 'maximal' one, there are objections: If Plato says with the 'formula' that the Idea of the Good is beyond being only that there is no final cause beyond the Good, we may ask why he uses the analogy of the sun to express this idea. As the sun makes things not only visible, but brings them also into existence and gives them growth and nourishment, so the Good gives to the objects known not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality (cf. R. 509b2-8). This epistemological and ontological function does not consist only in the teleological one that the Good is an end in itself and that there is no point of asking what is the end of the end in itself. If Plato had only wanted through the simile of the sun to underline the finality of the Good, he could have said it also without the analogy of the sun. It would have been enough to say that the good itself is a thing 'that every soul pursues as the end of all its actions' (R. 505d11), a remark we find in the early (cf. Hp. mai. 297b, Grg. 468b, 499e-500a), middle (cf. Symp. 205e-206a) and late dialogues (cf. Phlb. 20d), and that there is no point in asking what is the end of this final end. We find this argument already implied in the *Lysis*, applied to the friendly (φίλον): 'With that, then, to which we are truly friendly, we are not friendly for the sake of any other thing to which we are friendly'(Lys. 220b6-7, tr. J. Wright). Therefore it does not make sense to ask, what is the reason for the truly friendly. Although the 'minimal' interpretation is not excluded by the

text, it is not a sufficient interpretation since it plays down the epistemological and ontological function of the Good.

On the other hand, the 'maximal' interpretation is not mentioned by Plato in any dialogue. Nowhere does Plato say, that the essence of the Good is primarily the One. So we cannot be sure that Plato meant this. Of course the platonic Socrates says: 'I only wish it were within my power to offer, and within yours to receive, a settlement of the whole account. But you must be content now with the interest only; and you must see to it that, in describing this offspring of the Good, I do not inadvertently cheat you with false coin' (R. 507a1-5. tr. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve). So Socrates makes explicit that he does not say everything about the Good, and that what he says may be not adequate or may be even false. In fact what he has to offer is just only an 'opinion without knowledge', i. e. an opinion without argument: 'One who holds a true belief without intelligence is just like a blind man who happens to take the right road, isn't he?' (R. 506c7-9). But Socrates seems not even to be sure that he happens to take the right road: 'Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it' (517b6-7. tr. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve). So even if the truth of the 'maximal' interpretation is supported by Aristotle's evidence, this interpretation has also to accomodate the 'epistemic modesty' (Ch. Kahn) of Socrates, which is here probably not ironic but genuine. This modesty regards God as the objective criterion of truth (cf. R. 517b6-7).

But in fact Plato never says directly that the essence of the Good is the One. He says only that the Good is similar to the sun and that the sun is the source of the light, and the light is a third thing (γένος τρίτον) without which the eye will not see and colours will remain invisible (507e1-2). Therefore also the sun is *a fortiori* a third thing. In similar vein the Good is a third item between and above knowledge and the known, without which knowledge cannot know and the known cannot be known. For this transcendence above knowledge and the known in the simile of the sun speaks that the idea of the Good is something 'other and more beautiful' (ἄλλο καὶ κάλλιον) (R. 508e5-6) than both and that it would be a category-mistake to subsume the αἰτία under the αἰτίατον.[7] Since the platonic Socrates deliberately gives no more information on the Good, it seems to be wise to stop here and to see how far we can go simply with what Socrates says about the Good. But for Socrates it is just the third item between and above knowledge and the known. This means: *If* the Good is the One, then it is the One in the sense of this third item between and above knowledge and being. This is, in my opinion, the starting point for any interpretation of the One and the reports of Aristotle on the One, the ἀόριστος δύας and the ideal numbers. The ἀόριστος δύας or the great and the small *may be symbolized by the divided line,* and the *ideal*

numbers by a continuation of the bisections of the *upmost part* of the line which represents the εἴδη αὐτά (510b8) – in my opinion, the ideal numbers. I have developed this interpretation which is based strictly on the written texts in my book *Platons Idee des Guten*.[8]

II

I may be forgiven for not going into the details of this complicated story but I now go on to make a connection to two late dialogues which I did not discuss in my book. In this way I hope to give something like Plato's reply to an old criticism of this Idea of the Good and to say something on the relation between the absolute good and the human goods. For Socrates characterizes the Idea of the Good not only as beyond being, but also says: 'Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state' (R. 517c4-6, Cornford's tr.). Now the question arises, how it is possible to have an intellectual vision of an idea in order to act with wisdom either in private or in public life. The old criticism which dates back to Aristotle is that it is not humanly possible to realize or to possess the Idea of the Good (οὐκ ἄν εἴη πρακτὸν οὐδὲ κτητὸν ἀνθρώπῳ)(EN. A4.1096b34). This criticism has been repeated by K. Popper and others who speak of 'the emptiness of the Platonic Idea or Form of the Good'.[9] It is something of a commonplace and also a non trivial truth. But it is only one side of the coin.

Since even in the new collaborative commentary on the *Republic*, ed. by Otfried Höffe, we cannot find any acknowledgment of the other side of the story, it may be worthwhile to identify the weak point of this old reproach to Plato and his Idea of the Good.[10] What these critics seem to overlook is that Plato anticipated Aristotle's criticism, though not in the *Republic*, but in the *Politicus* and *Philebus* – in the *Politicus* as regards matters of state, in the *Philebus* as regards one's own life.

In the middle of the *Politicus* he speaks of the exact itself: 'That at any rate what is stated now will some time be necessary for the exposition of the exact itself (περὶ αὐτὸ τἀκριβες ἀπόδειξιν)' (284d1-2. Tr. R. Ferber). Regarding the 'exact itself' it is at least a plausible hypothesis that it is the Idea of the Good. What speaks for this hypothesis is that in the *Republic* the Idea of the Good is the aim which the politician (i.e. the philosopher king) must have in view in his public and private actions (cf. R. 519c2-4), the exposition (διήγησις)(R. 506e7) of which, however, is left out already in the *Republic* (cf. R. 506d-e). Now it would indeed be improbable that Plato would have cancelled this aim in the *Politicus*. The 'royal man with insight'

(ἄνδρα τόν μετὰ φρονήσεως βασιλικόν) (Plt. 294a8) who rules without laws, could this be anybody other than the philosopher-king? It is true that the statesmen may – *horribile dictu* – 'also kill or chase away some people and thus purify the state for its best (ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ), ..., as long as they maintain it by using only science and right and from a bad one make of it as much as possible a better one' (Plt. 293d4-5), just as the physician may do what he wants 'provided it is only for the best of the body' (ἐπ' ἀγαθῷ τῷ τῶν σωμάτων) (Plt. 293b6-7). But at what should this acting 'to the good' direct itself, if not at the Idea of the Good? Thus we nevertheless may presume: As 'the royal man with insight' signifies the philosopher-king, so 'the exact itself' signifies the Idea of the Good.[11] Now about this Idea of the Good which seems to be the ultimate aim of Plato's ethics, we read nothing in the *Politicus* and of course no character is able to realize this idea of the good, since notwithstanding its special status the idea of the good transcends the empirical world. To this extent the criticism of Aristotle and Popper is completely justified.

On the other hand, Plato develops in the *Politicus* the concept of the appropriate or τὸ μέτριον. All arts and also the art of the statesman presuppose something which is appropriate in itself and not in relation to others. This appropriate is not an idea, since it is indeed paraphrased as 'the graceful (τὸ πρέπον), the opportunity (τὸν καιρόν), the right (τὸ δέον)' and 'all that has its seat in the middle between two extreme ends' (284e6-8). How could an idea have its seat 'in the middle between two extreme ends'? But the appropriate is also not a sensible phenomenon, since it functions as an absolute standard for what is relatively more or less: 'For if this has not been agreed, it is certainly not possible for either the statesman or anyone else who possesses knowledge of practical subjects to acquire an undisputed existence' (Plt. 284c1-3. Rowe's tr.). Since the appropriate is neither an idea nor a phenomenon, the hypothesis suggests itself that the appropriate is somehow an intermediate between phenomena of the senses and ideas, namely a standard for judging the realization of an idea – here presumably of 'the exact itself' – in the inexact world of the senses.

Likewise, as an ideal temperature takes up the middle between the two extremes of a temperature that is too cold and one that is too warm and thus functions as the basis of judgment about whether a temperature is too warm or too cold, thus the appropriate is not the idea of measure or 'the exact itself', but functions as a criterion of judgment for concrete phenomena in the world of senses.[12] The appropriate is a standard of judging whether political actions in the phenomenal world are appropriate, etc.

But as an ideal temperature is not everywhere the same, so the appropriate is not the same everywhere, since it is indeed also characterised as the

graceful, the opportunity, the right, and 'all that has its seat in the middle between two extreme ends' (284e). Also for this reason it cannot be exact. But this appropriate does not 'imply',[13] but rather copies (we may assume) - even though inexactly – an exact itself, namely the idea of 'the exact itself' or the good itself. Therefore also the standard of judgment still does have something of the exact itself or the good itself, especially when the good itself has to be identified with the most exact measure, as Syrianus reports as regards the Aristotelian dialogue *Politicus* (πάντων γὰρ ἀκριβέστατον μέτρον τἀγαθόν ἐστιν)(in Met. 168, 33-35), in which Aristotle seems to refer to the Platonic *Politicus*. So between ideas and phenomena we have something which is an non-mathematical intermediate – non-mathematical because it is not to be identified with the μαθημάτικα as μεταξύ between ideas and phenomena which Aristotle ascribes to Plato (cf. Metaph. A6.987b14-18) – and gives a standard for the application of the exact itself in the world of senses. It is a regulative principle comparable to the aristotelian mean (cf.NE. 1108b11-1109a19) which has to direct our ability to make judgements in the phenomenal world. This point constitutes an addition to the commonplace of Plato as the philosopher of the ideas and the Idea of the Good. It shows also that the criticism of Aristotle has in some sense been anticipated by Plato because at least this appropriate can be realized and possessed by men (πρακτὸν καί κτητὸν ἀνθρώπῳ).

But Plato has also become well aware of the fact that not only no state, but also no character can realize the Idea of the Good in his soul and that the Idea of the Good is not the 'human good' or the good for man. In the *Philebus* he tried to find also a remedy for this, since the theme of the *Philebus* is what is good for man, pleasure or reason (cf. Phil. 11 b). But what is Good for man, is in the final analysis, neither pleasure nor reason: 'Pleasure is not the first of all possessions, nor yet the second; rather, the first has been secured for everlasting tenure somewhere in the region of measure (μέτρον) or what is measured (μέτριον) or appropriate (καίριον), or whatever term may be deemed to denote the quality in question' (Phil. 66a. Tr. Hackforth). Since measure is the good for man, neither reason alone nor pleasure alone, but a measured or appropriate mixture of pleasure and reason is the good for man. For neither reason nor pleasure have the decisive characteristic of the 'Good itself' (Phil. 67a6): to be an end in itself or to be self-sufficient: '... they came short of self-sufficiency (αὐταρκείας) and the quality of being satisfying (ἱκανοῦ) and perfect (τελέου)?' (Phil. 67a7-8. tr. Hackforth). So we may say: as in politics the very objective, although not quantifiable, standard to which the statesman has to orient himself is the 'appropriate, the graceful, the opportunity, the right and all that has its seat in the middle between two extreme ends' (Plt. 284e6-8),[14] so in the human soul the standard to which one has to orient oneself is 'measure (μέτρον) or what is measured (μέτριον)

or appropriate (καιρίον), or whatever term may be deemed to denote the quality in question.' (Phb. 66a6-8. tr. Hackforth). And this appropriate determines the right proportions between reason and pleasure. More exactly the 'quasi-unity' of the good (τοῦτο οἷον ἕν) (Phil. 65a3), i. e. the conjunction of the three 'beauty, symmetry and truth' (Phb. 65a2) 'may most properly be held to determine the qualities of the mixture, and that – because that is good – the mixture itself has become so' (65a2-5, tr. Hackforth with a small alteration by R. F.). So the three 'beauty, symmetry and truth or reality' are the criteria of the qualitiy of the mixture between reason and pleasure. Probably 'beauty, symmetry and truth or reality' determine the quality of the different acts of reason and the different pleasures insofar as they determine the 'degree' of participation in the good of those acts. Although it is not spelled out how we have to apply these three criteria and we don't get much further detail,[15] we may assume that the Platonic Good in this threefold form may also be realized and possessed by men (πρακτὸν καὶ κτητὸν ἀνθρώπῳ). But this accommodation of the Good to reality (in the ordinary sense of the word) is not the final word of Plato on the Good. On the one hand, we stand only 'upon the threshold of the Good and of that habitation where all that is like thereto resides' (Phil. 64c1-3). From this it follows, that 'beauty, symmetry and truth or reality' are not the Good itself any more than the habitation of a person is the person itself. And Protarchus says that the discussion goes on: 'There is only a little still left to be done, Socrates. I am sure you won't give up sooner than we do; so I will remind you of the tasks that remain.' (Phil. 67b11-13). Although it is again not spelled out, what are the tasks that remain,[16] we may assume that in the famous oral lecture or lectures *On the Good*, Plato did give more information about the Good than in the dialogues, although in these famous lectures the relation between the absolute Good and the human goods, such as wealth, health and strength seems also not spelled out, as we may guess from the famous remark of Aristoxenos in his *Elementa harmonica* (vgl. Elem. harm., II, 30-31).[17] But we may be pretty sure that what he really thought to be fit to be written down and what he thought realizable in his later years by human souls on the one hand and human politics on the other he did indeed write down in the dialogues, especially in the *Politicus* and the *Philebus*. But this does not by itself imply that Plato gave up the theme of the Idea of the Good or 'the exact itself' just as he did not give up the ideal of the philosopher-king or of the 'royal man with insight' (ἄνδρα τὸν μετὰ φρονήσεως βασιλικόν) (Plt. 294a8) who rules without laws (cf. Leg. 711d-e, 739b-e, 875c), although he admits in his last work: 'But, as things are, such insight is nowhere to be met with, except in faint vestiges' (ἢ κατὰ βραχύ) (*Leg.* 875d1-2, tr. A. E. Taylor).

Notes

[1] Cornford, 1951[3], 132.
[2] Cf. Cherniss, 1945, 98, n.142, Allen, 1983, 194, Isnardi-Parente, 1986, 23, Brisson, 1994, Addenda, 600.
[3] Krämer, 1969, 1-30.
[4] Cf. Reale, 1997[20], 336-341, Halfwassen, 1992, 236-245.
[5] Cf. also Isnardi-Parente, 1997, 467: 'L'autore dell'identificazione uno-bene è certamente, agli occhi di Aristotele, Platone, come si evince facilmente da 987b20-22, 988a10-11,...'
[6] Robin, 1908, §289, 600.
[7] Pace Brisson, 2000, 83-87, and in this volume, 85-97, this ἄλλο seems to be an index for the absolute transcendence of the Good in relation to truth/being. For the inevitable contradiction between this transcendence and the fact that the Idea of the Good is nevertheless 'the brightest in the region of being' (518c) and 'the happiest in the region of being' (526e) and that the dialectician has to give a logos of it (cf. 534b) cf. Ferber, 1989, 149-154.
[8] Cf. Ferber, 1989, 49-219, esp. 58-79, 149-216.
[9] Cross and Woozley, 1964, chapt. 10, 260. The quotation we find in Popper, 1970 , footnote 32 to chapter 8.
[10] Cf. e.g. the postscript of Höffe, 1997, chapt. 16, 333-339, esp. 337: 'Somit bleibt Platon der *Politeia* treu, da er die Herrschaft von Gesetzen nicht für das beste hält, sondern verlangt, die eigentliche Souveränität dem "königlichen, mit Einsicht begabten Mann" zu übergeben (294a).' That is right, but overlooks that in the *Politicus* Plato introduces the theory of τὸ μέτριον as a substantial modification of the *Republic* and the theory of the Good. Neither Höffe nor J. Annas, 1997, 141-160, pays any attention to this modification, although Annas writes rightly: '... and any treatment in depth of Plato's political ideas will find more of substance in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.'
[11] Cf. for further remarks, Ferber, 1995, 69-70, note 27. Rowe, 1995, 208, objects: 'However (a) phrases of this type do not necessarily refer to forms (see above [*Phd.* 103e]); (b) there is no parallel for such a way of describing the form of (the one), or unity;...'. But in *Phd.*, 103e3, αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος seems to refer to a form and I assume only that αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς refers to the Idea of the Good, although if the good is the One, αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς may also refer to the One as the Tubingen school assumes. Rowe continues: 'That "the accurate itself" might in principle mean "the really accurate account [sc. of the matter]" now seems to me not seriously in doubt, as e.g. Stallbaum agrees.' But on the one hand we cannot ignore the scholars who see in αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς the reference to an idea, cf. e. g. Ferber, 1995, 69, note 27, on the other hand also in Stallbaum's/Rowe's reading the reference of this 'really accurate account [sc. of the matter]' does not exclude the 'matter' of the Good, as Rowe agrees, ibid.: 'if this [the notion of measure] is either identical with, or closely related to, the principle of the good (as it seems reasonable to suppose), then the Plt. here will be comparable to those passages in other dialogues, notably ... the *Republic* (504e ff.), which make goodness the key to the understanding of the universe and of man's life within it.' Therefore also the reading of Brisson, 2000, 60, seems to me to be too restrictive: ' je me refuse à interpréter περὶ αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς comme une expression désignant les formes et donc à renvoyer à *Philèbe*, 59a '. For Brisson, 2000, 60, τὴν περὶ αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς ought to be a periphrase of ἀκριβῆ. But the reference to a form is not excluded, since for Plato exactitude of method is tied to an object, as has been noted long ago by Campbell, 105: 'αὐτὸ τἀκριβὲς is that absolute principle which is essential to and identical with perfection of method'. The whole matter may be decided only in a larger context, cf. for such a contextual reading of the trilogy Tht. - Sph. - Plt.: Ferber, 1998, 419-444, esp. 420-424.

[12] So it is a misunderstanding of M. M. McCabe, 1997, 97, to write: 'Ferber suggests, that if τὸ μέτριον describes a judgment we make about concrete particulars, then it is not the same in each case, and cannot be exact. This implies, he suggests, that there is a form of the exact. I do not find this implication in the text (indeed, if this is an unwritten doctrine, then I wouldn't, would I?).' But since probably nobody has ever suggested this 'unwritten doctrine', also M. M. McCabe will not find it in the text.
[13] McCabe, 1997, 97.
[14] Cf. on the development of this idea in Aristotle, Brown, 1997, 77-91. We may assume that also the Platonic mean is relative not to individuals but to human beings, since this Platonic mean is an objective and absolute standard for the statesman and his art in general, although the application of this mean may have some variety in the empirical world. Cf. to this complex issue Ferber, 1995, 63-75, esp. 68-69.
[15] Cf. the remarks of Migliori, 1993, 310, which remain by necessity rather general: 'Ciò serve a darci un quadro completo: la misura si rivela in tre ordini, estetico, ontologico e gnoseologico; proprio mentre dice che cogliamo il Bene sotto tre Idee diverse, bellezza, verità e proporzione, Socrate sottolinea che non sono tre, ma che vanno prese insieme e che c'è una causa unica, che è il Bene, all' origine dell'essere e delta bontà delta mescolanza.'
[16] D. Frede, 1993, LXVII, writes: 'So our dialogue seems to be a preface to two other Platonic works: the cosmology of the *Timaeus* and the ideal social life as described in the *Laws*.' But neither the *Timaeus* nor the *Laws* leads us much beyond the 'threshold' into the house of the Good and themselves leave important things out, cf. Ti., 53d6-8, Leg., 968e 2-4, despite the fact that it is hard to determine, whether Plato really intended the *Philebus* to be read as a 'preface' to the *Timaeus* or the *Laws*.
[17] Cf. the new reconstruction of Ferber, 1989, 154-216. My sincere thanks go to Ch. Gill for some helpful comments and stylistic improvements.

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