Article

JOHN DEWY’S RIVAL VERSIONS OF VIRTUE

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ABSTRACT
In 1932 Dewey and Tufts issued an extensively revised edition of their famous *Ethics* of 1908. Both versions are now available as public domain resources on the Internet, and teachers are likely to assign the second edition, since it reflects the authors’ mature views. However, at least as regards Dewey’s treatment of virtue, I argue that the earlier version is pedagogically superior to the later one. I contend that the revised treatment of virtue is in fact less true to the book’s celebrated genetic approach, and that the first edition also makes better use of the cultural resources that Dewey could reasonably assume were at the disposal of his public.

John Dewey’s *Ethics*, which he co-authored with James Hayden Tufts, is now available as an online text in the public domain. Indeed, unrestricted access copies are obtainable on the Internet for both editions of the *Ethics*: the first edition of 1908 and the much revised second edition of 1932. This should be welcome news for teachers, because the book represents a cornucopian instructional resource. The *Ethics* constitutes an ambitious and comprehensive work that is organized into three distinct parts, which respectively treat the historical and cultural background of Western mores, the main currents of Western moral theory, and the ethical aspects of several modern social problems. Given the text’s wide sweep, readings could be assigned from it that would complement nearly any course in which moral philosophy predominately figures.

The second edition was issued approximately twenty-four years after the first, and was so extensively revised that Dewey and Tufts begin the preface to the later edition by admitting their doubt as to whether it might not have been better to call it an entirely new book. The basic layout and approach of the original were retained, but apparently about two-thirds of the text was completely rewritten. In their preface to *The Later Works* edition (Vol. 7: 1932) of the revised *Ethics*, Abraham Edel and Elizabeth Flower point to several significant changes that Dewey introduced to the section on moral theory, a section for which he served as the sole author in both editions. The modifications are important enough to merit thinking of the
1932 version as representing Dewey’s mature views on the subject. Nevertheless, I will argue that—at least as concerns the unit on virtue—teachers should assign the original edition instead of the revised one because the former is pedagogically superior to the latter.

In what follows, I contend that the revised treatment of virtue is in fact less true to the book’s celebrated genetic approach (and hence less effective pedagogically), even though Dewey continued to embrace that approach. Furthermore, I argue that the first edition makes better use of the cultural resources that Dewey could reasonably assume were at the disposal of his public than does the second.

The Genetic Approach

In their preface to the first edition, Dewey and Tufts emphasize the book’s genetic approach to its subject matter, to which they credit three distinct advantages. In the first place, they claim that through learning about the mores of bygone eras students instinctively compare them to their own moral beliefs, and so gain a keener awareness of the latter. Secondly, the study of the human past provides a carefully documented record of how people have actually behaved under the influence of different customs and beliefs, and so furnishes a body of reliable data for moral theory. Lastly, by tracing the origins and careers of various ethical ideas, the concepts in question are presented in simpler and more intuitive forms than if they were simply introduced in their fully developed versions. The most important reason for the authors’ adoption of the historical approach would appear to be pedagogical, and they specifically cite their own “classroom experience” as evidence for the effectiveness of the method. That pedagogy was a foremost consideration for Dewey and Tufts was only natural, since they were explicitly proposing the Ethics as a textbook. The preface includes specific suggestions to instructors confronting time limitations as to which chapters could be most easily elided from lesson plans.

The layout of the text was consistent with the authors’ commitment to the genetic treatment of their topic. Part I, which was wholly written by Tufts, comprises an historical survey of the major cultural eras of Western civilization, namely, the Greek, Roman, Hebrew, medieval, and modern. Part II presents a synopsis and analysis of Western ethics, followed by a sampling of practical moral problems in modern society in Part III, to which both authors contributed chapters. The various parts were carefully integrated, so that, for example, Dewey’s treatment of moral philosophy in Part II makes continual reference to the historical contexts in which the various moral philosophies arose, contexts explored in Part I. As Edel and Flower note, this integration was one of the book’s major selling points in 1908, and was one of the reasons that it attracted twenty reviewers at the time.1

Dewey’s original discussion of virtue fits well into the book’s overall design. The virtues receive their own chapter, with sections analyzing each of the four cardinal virtues in turn: temperance, courage, justice, and wisdom. Dewey explicitly
anchors his presentation in Western culture by making etymological references and relating the four cardinal virtues to Greek, Roman, and Christian traditions. Thus, the student who has even a superficial acquaintance with Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, or Aquinas will readily find some familiar points of reference in the presentation.

In the revised edition, the discussion of the cardinal virtues is considerably compressed, rendering the analysis much denser and consequently harder to follow. Virtue no longer receives its own chapter, but is instead treated in a section at the tail end of a chapter entitled “Approbation, the Standard and Virtue.” Gone are the section headings for the individual cardinal virtues, as well as most of the discussion which situated them in the Western heritage. Indeed, only a passing allusion is made to the cardinal virtues. The new analysis insists upon the futility of cataloging the virtues, due to the fact that customs and objects of interest are continually changing in post-traditional societies, and differ from era to era and from culture to culture. In fact, Dewey argues that the virtues can only be defined in terms of their qualities as interests, and he proceeds to focus almost exclusively upon these qualities, which makes his analysis quite formal and abstract. The reader is provided with little in the way of Aristotelian-style concrete examples of virtue and vice, in which the former constitutes a golden mean between the excesses and deficiencies of the latter. In addition to abandoning any attempt to list the virtues, Dewey insists upon their natural interpenetration in moral character, and on the fact that they cannot be adequately considered in isolation from one another.

Neither the emphasis upon virtues as qualities of interest nor the doctrine of their interpenetration were new to the later edition. Dewey had made essentially the same points in 1908, but nevertheless had still provided his public with the time-honored framework of the cardinal virtues. As we have seen, in the revised presentation of virtue there is much less that would be easily recognizable to the average student. It’s arguably an odd strategy in a work intended as a textbook for a broad public. His revised treatment of virtue portrays the subject matter as being so free flowing and interconnected that the general reader interested in the virtues could easily feel him-or herself to be beholding the nighttime sky from some planet in a distant galaxy, a skyscape in which all the familiar points of orientation—the moon, the pole star, the visible planets, the Milky Way, the constellations—are missing.

Dewey’s revised presentation of virtue is actually quite reminiscent of his treatment of religious faith, in that the topic of interest to the general reader is so altered under his optic as to become nearly unrecognizable. His major treatise on religion was *A Common Faith*, in which he propounds a naturalized and humanistic transformation of the various historical religions, arguing that a religious dimension of experience can exist divorced from any and all beliefs in the supernatural. Because the supernatural claims of the various religions are at best highly speculative, and at worst patently contradicted by modern science, Dewey promotes a profound theological reform. But, of course, many believers would no
longer recognize their own faith after such a reform, or perhaps see any point to it. For the religiously devout, genuine faith inherently involves belief in the divine, in an eternal realm and eternal beings that are distinct from the physical universe. Is not Dewey’s continued use of words such as “faith” and “religious” within the framework of his atheistic naturalism idiosyncratic and needlessly confusing?

The Deweyan reply, of course, is that the deluge of new knowledge and theories which has resulted from the application of scientific methods of inquiry has rendered many inherited beliefs and ways of thinking obsolete, or at least in need of serious revision. Indeed, the intellectual reconstruction of traditional ideas and values in the light of improved scientific understandings is one of the chief tasks that he sees for contemporary philosophy. On this score, he is undoubtedly correct in a general sense, but his conservative critics have long charged that in some instances the mission of philosophical reconstruction is little more than intellectually dolled-up progressive political ideology. The mistake of many conservatives has been to almost wholly reduce Dewey’s thought to an underlying social and political agenda, and to thereby overlook his considerable contributions to every major branch of philosophy.

Nevertheless, the conservative complaint that the call for intellectual and cultural reconstruction is somewhat insidious, because it so easily lends itself to being abused, is not wholly without merit. Perhaps Dewey’s Hegelian heritage predisposed him in some instances to find dialectical Aufhebung (synthesis or sublation) where others would more realistically see jagged historical ruptures, discontinuities, and dead ends. History, after all, is replete with the tragic, in the form of catastrophic but meaningless acts of nature; the frequent frustration of human hopes and desires; and irreparable, bitter loss, the latter of which extends from the mortality of the individual to the death of entire cultures and ways of life. The question of religious belief, at least as concerns the world’s major forms of organized faith, would appear to admit of little middle ground. For most religionists, the existence of the divine is not simply a possibility, but a strong likelihood, whose significance for human affairs cannot be easily overestimated. In light of the scientific and historical evidence, naturalism arguably provides the best-warranted theoretical perspective on the universe, but for most religionists its adoption would mean the death of their faith. The traditional believer is confronted by a tragic choice that pits intellectual scrupulousness against the fulfillment of deep-seated needs for security and reassurance. Atheist or true believer, no one can have it all, and one is reminded of the fact that many a former addict occasionally mourns the loss of his or her substance of choice, as one would a departed lover.

By stretching the lexical meaning of some key terms to the point of warping them, Dewey would appear to give us religion without the divine. By the end of his discussion of virtue, one is left wondering whether he would also give us moral character without the virtues.
Moral education is not politically neutral. Dewey’s contention that a fixed canon of the virtues along ancient lines would not be well-suited to the multi-cultural, rapidly innovating societies of the present is undoubtedly correct. Even if this point be granted, however, the question still remains as to how to best manage the challenges created by highly fluid social conditions. Dewey’s progressivism is perhaps most evident at this juncture, because he more or less opts to embrace the dissolution of the ancient traditions and canons; nevertheless, a more conservative response is also conceivable. One could recognize the inevitability of change in the long run, but try to slow it down in order to mitigate the shock of the new in the short term. The American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, whose works were repeatedly cited by Dewey and Tufts in the *Ethics*, put this issue this way: “whether even an inadequate type of culture is not better than no type at all.” From a conservative standpoint, Dewey could be reproached for having overestimated the intellectual and emotional capacity of the masses to successfully integrate new ideas and adapt to novel social circumstances.

**Moral Evolution**

Edel and Flower argue that one of the major theoretical changes in the revised edition was Dewey’s rejection of the first edition’s unilineal theory of moral evolution. According to the unilineal conception, moral evolution involved a transition from customary morality, which was informed by a collectivist mentality, to reflective morality, which could only arise in the conscience of a critically minded individual. On this view, moral evolution tracked closely with the growth of individualism as displayed in the temporal trajectory of Western civilization, hitherto the most advanced stage of political and economic liberalism. Per the unilineal model, insofar as non-Western societies are able to advance socially, they will do so along the path blazed by Occidental ones.

By 1932 Dewey had come to see the unilineal model as being untenable. His acquaintance with the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, a colleague at Columbia, was a decisive factor in his change of mind. Boas is perhaps best known for his criticism of unilineal theories of social evolution and his development of an alternative to them. He was able to persuasively argue that the claims of the unilineal theorists were largely speculative by demonstrating in a number of cases that the ethnographic data was inconsistent with the unilineal model. His general approach was to show that the same data could be more consistently interpreted by assuming that each culture was primarily the product of its unique setting and history. Skeptical of sweeping theories of social evolution, Boas insisted upon the need for cultural anthropology to establish a sound scientific foundation through painstaking fieldwork and meticulous description of specific cultures. Like the historian studying a past occurrence, who assumes that no two historical events are identical, it was incumbent upon the anthropologist to recognize the uniqueness
of each culture. Just as the historian must be ever wary of anachronistic bias, so must the anthropologist be perpetually on guard against ethnocentric chauvinism. In order to counter ethnocentric bias, Boas propounded cultural relativism as a methodological principle, arguing that the anthropologist should seek as far as possible to identify any culturally acquired beliefs, values, attitudes, or habits which might skew his or her perception or understanding of the target culture, and suspend them, at least for the purposes of anthropological study.

Dewey’s mature view of Western individualism is consistent with Boas’ anthropological theories. In addition to the influence exerted by the latter’s arguments, both China and Japan provided Dewey with examples of societies which were clearly advanced, but nevertheless noticeably more communitarian in their basic cultural orientation than their Occidental counterparts. Dewey lectured in Japan in 1919, and travelled from there to China, where he subsequently stayed for two years. By the time of the rewriting of the Ethics, he no longer treated individualism as a higher stage in a universal pattern of societal evolution, but rather emphasized the need to understand it as a distinctive development within Western culture, involving specific historical circumstances and causes.

The revised version of virtue is also clearly in line with Boas’ cultural relativism. Indeed, Dewey’s standpoint in the passages in question is virtually that of a cultural anthropologist. His analysis assumes that as a rule virtue and vice represent those aspects of character which are commonly perceived to be helpful or harmful to others. However, because such perceptions vary from culture to culture, the specific contents of the virtues as well as the definite forms that they take are culturally relative. Hence, his analysis focuses on their most generic features, which would be those most likely to be cross-cultural. He asserts that although the customs which constitute the subject matter of the virtues are transient, their characteristic qualities as social interests are more enduring.

While cultural relativism arguably proved to be an important heuristic for ethnologists, its use by Dewey is problematic, since it indirectly suggests a basic equality of all cultures—past and present, primitive and advanced—for the purposes of his study. Indeed, he argues that no community could survive without attitudes of approval or disapproval regarding certain aspects of communal living, such as respect for human life, fairness, and so on. Even in the absence of formal law, such shared attitudes serve to support and enforce the basic rules without which even the most rudimentary forms of social organization would scarcely be possible. All forms of action which are truly social, and not just instances of two or more individuals operating in close proximity to each other, involve cooperation; and cooperation is a rule-governed form of behavior. In order for two people to effectively combine their forces and coordinate their conduct, each partner must adopt the intended end of the activity as his or her own. Even if only for the satisfaction of some momentary need, the individual must intentionally shape his or her behavior
to conform to the aim in question. In a well-functioning partnership, interaction appears almost choreographed, since each action on the part of the one calls forth a relevant response and invitation on the part of the other. In other words, in cooperative behavior the individual submits him- or herself to a joint end, essentially rendering it as his or her rule of action.

Dewey is probably correct that all cultures employ group approbation and disapprobation in order to achieve a minimum of social order and harmony, and so have their respective catalogs of virtues and vices. Nevertheless, his revised treatment of virtue tends to undermine his overall genetic approach to moral theory, because his survey is primarily concerned with cultures in which morality is not predominately customary, but reflective in nature. Although he cautions that in practice neither type exists in a completely pure form, he clearly believes that mores in primitive societies are mainly of the customary variety, whereas reflective morality is realized to its fullest extent in advanced civilizations.

Mores are not the only component of culture which typically differs in simple versus complex societies. In their earliest forms, many of the core components of culture, such as language and religious beliefs, undoubtedly arose in a more or less spontaneous and unplanned manner. In simple societies tradition represents the single greatest source of moral authority, though of course the customary way of doing things is never completely impermeable to change, accidental or otherwise. For instance, cultural diffusion has sometimes resulted in considerable alterations to time-honored modes of thinking and acting in even the most insular communities. On the whole, however, few social agencies exist to challenge the legitimacy of custom in primitive cultures. In societies with an advanced division of labor, on the other hand, the development of specialized knowledge and technology tends to generate new social roles which fall outside the general cultural pattern. Once distinct social action systems have emerged, the basis is laid for conflict between the ways of the elders and those of the specialists. The former is bent on transmitting the cultural heritage, and the latter strives to achieve certain, narrowly delimited ends through instrumental reasoning. On the one side, the stability of the tried and the true beckons, whereas on the other, the promise of discovery, innovation, and progress calls.

People can, of course, adopt customs and respect traditions and nevertheless possess little genuine historical consciousness, and indeed this is true for most members of primitive societies. While such cultures evidently have some degree of collective memory that is preserved in oral traditions, it generally does not rise above the level of anecdote, legend, and myth. Full-fledged historical awareness involves a chronological ordering and evidence-based interpretation of events which aims to descry their causes and significance. In his Philosophy of History, Hegel argued that historical consciousness was originally ushered into being in states with edicts and laws, since in order to achieve its long-term plans the political class required
actors capable of understanding the purpose of prior legislation, which always implied a well-defined before and after. Hence, whereas stateless societies had little historical awareness, advanced ones could not function without it. Within the new perspective, society could itself be taken as an object of thought and its institutions and practices recognized as human creations susceptible of being redesigned, at least to some limited extent.

The idea of purposefully reorganizing society was probably originally suggested by the appearance of the sole agency up to the task, namely, the state (i.e., any centralized form of government with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force). As Hegel argues, law was probably the earliest and most important tool at the disposition of the first social engineers. Furthermore, whereas culture in simple societies is almost entirely the result of spontaneous and uncoordinated contributions from the entire community, in complex ones the cultural heritage has been supplemented by the efforts of specialists, such as scholars and artists. Indeed, the continuous development of the cultural heritage in advanced societies is so rich and elaborate that it cannot be adequately conveyed to the rising generations in a casual and desultory manner, after the fashion of simple societies, but requires formal schooling for its transmission (a point that Dewey insists upon in the first chapter of *Democracy and Education* [see Section 3: The Place of Formal Education]).

The difference between historically aware cultures versus those which lack historical consciousness extends to the conception of virtue. Although many simple societies have their particular lists of virtues and vices, in the West and in China the conception of virtue underwent considerable expansion by philosophers. Dewey’s assumption that virtue and vice tend to be almost wholly identified with specific customs and actions among primitive peoples is confirmed by a wealth of ethnological observations. The very interests that he identifies as the most enduring aspects of virtue—namely, wholeheartedness, persistence, and impartiality—themselves presuppose a cultural innovation in which a fundamental distinction was drawn between the mere appearance of virtue and the real McCoy. The new emphasis on the psychological dimension of virtue is only natural in more complex social environments, wherein the ongoing division of labor has resulted in novel forms of behavior and social roles that spring the confines of custom. Because the individual has increased opportunities for choosing between different courses of action, his or her decisions and motivations take on greater significance. The notion of virtue is gradually detached from specific actions and social roles, and it comes to be seen as a more generic underlying aptitude and propensity of the unique individual that largely determines the interpersonal qualities of his or her conduct. In short, moral character proper is born, and with it, personality and conscience.

As regards Western culture, Plato’s depiction of the life and times of Socrates constitutes the iconic exploration of the gap between the demands of conscience and the enticements of worldly success. Many of Socrates’ interlocutors struggle
to some extent with the temptations of power, prestige, or wealth, and Plato offers a dramatic yet often humorous parade of Athenian notables through his pages, including politicians, playwrights, and priests. The enduring value of the dialogues has probably had less to do with Plato’s specific vision of the good life than it has with his unforgettable portrayal of what it means to seriously undertake the quest to live in accordance with virtue. As pursued by Socrates and his students, self-examination and philosophical reflection are shown to be indispensable elements of the good life. The cultural transmission of Plato, say, in an introductory philosophy course, contributes to a community of inquirers whose very existence represents a living tradition of reflective morality, a tradition that has to be actively taught if it is to perdure.

At least in principle, Dewey agreed with this view, as is clearly evinced by his commitment to the genetic method for the purposes of both analysis and instruction in the Ethics. In the chapter on the didactic significance of geography and history in Democracy and Education, he observes that the genetic method was perhaps the chief scientific achievement of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Its principle is that the way to get insight into any complex product is to trace the process of its making,—to follow it through the successive stages of its growth.4

The learning of history, he argues, better equips the student to “make human connections” in a manner which deepens his or her understanding of contemporary institutions and practices. The historical approach adopted in the Ethics is perfectly consistent with this view, and in his introduction to the section on moral theory, Dewey explains that the aim is not to provide the student with “commandments” or a “catechism,” but rather to enrich his or her understanding of the issues so as to make the student’s personal decisions better informed. Yet the second edition’s abridged version of virtue fails to elucidate the presence and nature of the living past-in-the-present nearly as effectively as did the original.

Dewey’s correspondence with Tufts regarding the revision of the Ethics shows that perhaps he himself was aware of this shortcoming. In a letter that Dewey probably wrote to his co-author in 1930, dated August 9, he included an outline of Part II, according to which an entire chapter was to be dedicated to virtue, and was to be structured as follows:

Ch Two VIRTUE AND VICE

Sec one Virtue as Goodness of Character. That is, approved habits constitue virtues. Contrast as again of custom and reflection. ||

Sec Two. Intellectual Virues—Concerned with formation of intentions forseesight fo consequences. Platonic theory of wisdom. Nature of thoughtfulness, etc.
Section three Executive Virtues, Seeing things, including judgments, through Force, "courage" etc

Section Four Esthetic Virtues—or excellence of immediate disposition, feelings etc. Importance of order, proportion, grace etc Temperance.

Section Four Virtue as completeness, integrity, Justice, Righteousness etc relations of justice and charity, kinds of justice etc. (about eight thousand words)5

In the revised version that ultimately went to press, the chapter in question was reduced to a mere section, and the discussion of virtue was correspondingly compressed. Consequently, none of the distinct treatments of the intellectual, executive, and esthetic virtues that had originally been planned remained. In a subsequent letter to Tufts, dated October 23, 1931, Dewey makes the following remark concerning his ongoing revision of Part II:

Dear Tufts,

You must be wondering what Im doing with the Ethics. Before I went to Austria last August I got five chapters of Part Two rewritten. I re-wrote what I rewrote several years ago, shortening it still further, and I hope improving it, tho perhaps I am cutting out almost too much of the historical theoretical parts.6

While this comment does not precisely identify the passages on virtue as among those about which Dewey is worried that he has excised too much historical material, they would certainly constitute likely candidates!

As to Dewey’s specific rationale for opting for the pedagogically weaker presentation of virtue, we can, of course, only speculate. However, given that Boas’ cultural relativism played a key role in his decision to reject the unilinear model of moral evolution that was implicit in the first edition, it seems probable that he believed the revised treatment of virtue to be more consistent with the relativist perspective. The revision proved to be problematic, however, since even the revised version of the Ethics presupposes a form of moral evolution, albeit no longer a unilinear one. Despite the new recognition of the historical particularity of Western individualism, both Dewey and Tufts remain committed to the distinction between customary and reflective morality, and to the thesis that the former is characteristic of simple societies, whereas the latter is promoted by the social conditions associated with the appearance of civilization proper. In other words, although the revised version of the Ethics rejects a unilinear model of moral evolution, it still presupposes the existence of moral development, albeit in a multi-lineal form. By “moral development” the authors do not, of course, mean that people have become more virtuous, but rather that there has been a growth of moral understanding and moral imagination that has generally accompanied the
development of more complex forms of social organization and interaction. In fact, their perspective seems to anticipate the views of some twentieth-century neo-evolutionist anthropologists and sociologists, such as Elman Service and Talcott Parsons. In 1931, just one year prior to the issuing of the revised edition of *Ethics*, Dewey published a collection of essays under the title *Philosophy and Civilization* that included a treatise entitled “Interpretation of the Savage Mind,” the thesis of which he described as a contribution to “genetic psychology.” Dewey’s neo-evolutionism is even more apparent in his treatment of the “savage mind” than it is in *Ethics*.

Strictly speaking, Boas’ cultural relativism only rejected the claims of the unilineal school of social evolution, and did not discard the idea of social evolution per se. Nevertheless, Dewey’s neo-evolutionism goes a step further than Boas’ cultural relativism, since the very enterprise of moral theory presupposes the existence and legitimacy of reflective morality. The entire *Ethics* is in fact an exercise in reflective morality, and so inherently privileges the reflective over the customary moral standpoint. Indeed, Dewey and Tufts’ stated intention is to make reflective morality even more reflective. While the advanced nations of the Occident were not the only societies to achieve thoughtful moral self-awareness, such self-consciousness was, by the authors’ own admission, infrequent at best in primitive cultures. Hence, Dewey’s revised treatment of virtue is somewhat confusing, because it fails to make explicit the fact that the contemporary Occidental notion of virtue incorporates meanings which reflect the historic contributions of virtue theorists. Dewey’s standpoint in the second edition would appear to be that of a citizen of the world who is elaborating a meta-ethics, rather than that of a Western moral philosopher who is writing to a predominately Western public. Yet he continued to tout the genetic method of instruction as a way of shedding light on cultural meanings, and thereby helping the student to access a rich heritage. Because his original treatment of virtue was much truer to the genetic approach, it constitutes the superior version, at least for instructional purposes.

Lest my thesis be too broadly construed, I should hasten to add that I am by no means claiming that the 1908 edition of the *Ethics* is superior overall to the 1932 revision; indeed, I tend to believe the contrary, since I think that most of the changes introduced by Dewey and Tufts were warranted. My contention concerns only the section on virtue. Happily, given that both editions are now available with unrestricted access on the Internet, teachers can easily assign selections from both.

Notes


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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