

NECESSARY TRUTH AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL  
INTERPRETATION OF  
DESCARTES'S COGITO ARGUMENT

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Perhaps the two most famed occurrences of the idea of necessary truth in Descartes's works appear in the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditation II*, each as an integral part of what we will call the Cogito Argument.<sup>1</sup> In the *Meditations* we read: "After having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is *necessarily* true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it" (HR I 150; my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> And in the *Discourse on Method*:

But immediately afterwards I noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it had to be necessarily that the "I" who thought this should be something, and remarking that this truth "I think, therefore I am" was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I came to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the Philosophy for which I was seeking. (HR I 101; my emphasis)<sup>3</sup>

The strange thing about the Cogito Argument is that it seems Descartes depends upon necessary truth to establish his "first principle," and yet it would also seem that prior to the statement of the *Cogito* in each case he has argued that necessary truths are subject to doubt. Necessary truths are not subject to the same doubt as sensory data, says Descartes, "For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be

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<sup>2</sup>"HR" refers to the Haldane and Ross English translation; "AT" refers to the Adam and Tannary French and Latin edition. Roman numerals indicate volume.

<sup>3</sup>Translation slightly altered to convey more explicitly the sense of necessity in the phrase "*il fallait nécessairement . . .*"

suspected of any falsity [or uncertainty]" (HR I 147). Yet we can make mistakes in even the simplest calculations; and then it is also possible that "some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me" (HR I 148). Thus, necessary truths are still subject to doubt—yet the Cogito Argument is said to be necessarily true. It seems highly unlikely that anyone would employ so blatant a contradiction in founding so extensive a philosophical system. We are led to wonder whether the necessary truth of "*cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am) is somehow of a different nature than the necessary truths previously rendered dubitable.

Even intuitively it seems that the necessary truths involved might be of different kinds. *A priori* necessary truths such as "all bachelors are unmarried" might be the whispering of some malignant demon, as might the results of simple arithmetical calculations. While these truths may be called necessary, they do not necessitate any existential or metaphysical fact. The knowledge that all bachelors are unmarried does not entail the knowledge that any actual bachelors exist. However, in "*cogito, ergo sum*" the idea of existence plays a strange role. The Demon Argument does not render this truth dubitable, since if one were being deceived about it by a malignant demon, a being would have to be there to be deceived—but if this were the case, one could not be deceived about it. What can we learn about necessary truth and necessity in general from Descartes's Cogito Argument? What does Descartes mean when he uses "necessarily" in the context of the Cogito Argument? And what are the further implications of this claim to necessary truth?

To investigate these questions, I will first examine an interpretation of the Cogito Argument which I will call the transcendental interpretation, since it makes reference to Kant's transcendental philosophy. This is the only interpretation which offers us a clue for solving the mystery surrounding Descartes's use of the term "necessarily" in the Cogito Argument—as will be shown by contrasting it with some other important interpretations, namely, the standard inferential theory and Jaakko Hintikka's performative theory. Then I am going to consider some contemporary philosophico-logical theories about necessity. While we tend to think in terms of the trusty Kantian labels of a *priori*-analytic, a *priori*-synthetic, and a *posteriori*-synthetic judgments, this rethinking of Descartes in terms of transcendental philosophy will paradoxically show that these Kantian terms are inadequate for describing what is going on in the Cogito Argument. My conclusion will be that Descartes's argument provides a possibly unique example of a *posteriori* necessity, and that this necessity paves the way for Kant by establishing a distinction between

subjective certainty, through clear and distinct ideas, and the objective freedom of things in themselves—since the interesting thing about the Cogito Argument is that it can also be construed as *a priori*-contingent.

## II.

Before I begin my discussion of the several interpretations of the Cogito Argument, it is important to note that the aim of the Cogito Argument is not to prove anyone's actual existence, but to show that there is at least one thing of which one cannot doubt, namely, one's own existence. That is, the aim of the argument is not to show existence, but rather indubitability. In Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*, Principle VII is "that we cannot doubt our existence" (HR I 221), *not* "that we exist." Furthermore, it is not at all clear how the establishment of one's existence could lead to the establishment of God's existence. Descartes's establishment of the Cogito shows rather that there are clear and distinct ideas (HR I, *Discourse on Method*, 102) by means of which *res cogitans* (literally, "thinking substance") can also recognize the existence of God. The immediate utility of "*cogito, ergo sum*" is to show that there is at least one thing that is indubitable. Therefore, a good interpretation of the Cogito Argument will not ask whether Descartes succeeds in proving his existence, but will focus on the type of indubitability it achieves.

The first interpretation I discuss will be the standard inferential interpretation. I say "standard" inferential interpretation, since the transcendental interpretation, as will be seen, also involves the notion of inference. A typical representation of "*cogito, ergo sum*" as an inference is as a syllogism with suppressed major premise, for example:

1. [For all  $x$ , if  $x$  thinks then  $x$  exists.]
2. Descartes thinks.
3. So Descartes exists.

And then by conditionalization,

4. So if Descartes thinks, then Descartes exists.

However, this syllogism derives its necessity from being an *a priori*-analytic truth. As I noted above, Descartes's Demon Argument placed all *a priori* necessary truths under doubt. So all *a priori* necessary truths such as this syllogism are not able to achieve the status of indubitability.

Another problem with the standard inference theory is that any verb can be used in place of "think" and the syllogism is still valid. The real problem is that, as Hintikka notes, the systems of logic in which "*cogito, ergo sum*" can be proved are "based on important *existential presuppositions*" (7). In modern logic, the presupposition is explicit, since it

is assumed that for any bound variable  $a$  there exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  equals  $a$ .

These systems

make more or less tacit use of the assumption that all the singular terms with which we have to deal really refer to (designate) some actually existing individual. . . . It turns out, therefore, that we in fact decided that the sentence "I exist" is true when we decided that the sentence "I think" is of the form  $B(a)$  (for the purposes of the usual systems of functional logic). That we were then able to infer  $(\exists x)(x = a)$  from  $B(a)$  is undoubtedly true, but completely beside the point. (Hintikka 7–8)

When we allow the existential presuppositions of the syllogistic inference, any verb can be substituted for "think." The action of that verb would then be dubitable under the category of that which the Dream Argument renders dubious (i.e., *a posteriori*-contingent knowledge, primarily).<sup>4</sup> And finally, Descartes himself explicitly says that

when we become aware that we are thinking beings, this is a primitive act of knowledge derived from no syllogistic reasoning. He who says, "I think, hence I am, or exist," does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but, by a simple act of mental vision, recognizes it as if it were a thing that is known *per se*. (HR II, *Reply to Objections II*, 38)

The standard inferential interpretation seems to misread Descartes by assuming that if the Cogito Argument is called necessarily true, it must be a syllogism. Under this interpretation, "*cogito, ergo sum*" is no different from other truths rendered dubitable for Descartes by the Dream Argument or the Demon Argument. The net result is that we are no closer to solving the mystery of Cartesian necessity.

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<sup>4</sup>In other words, when we formulate the *Cogito* as a syllogism, we actually get a tautology: For all existents, if an existent thinks then an existent exists. Thus, we can substitute "ambulo" (I walk) for "cogito" (I think), and we get the same effect: For all existents, if an existent walks then an existent exists. But the knowledge that one is walking, or the action of walking, is rendered dubitable by the Dream Argument, so one would be able to doubt one's own existence whenever one doubted oneself to be walking, thinking, etc. Descartes surely did not intend for the argument to function in this way, and in fact it does not.

Hintikka takes such a rejection of the standard (or syllogistic) inference theory as the departure point for his performative theory. He notes that while it is not contradictory for him or anyone else who is not De Gaulle to say "De Gaulle does not exist," it is "awkward" if De Gaulle says this (10). Hintikka asks why this should be so, but instead of proffering an explanation, he makes the obvious remark that it is "existentially inconsistent" for De Gaulle to assert that he does not exist (10). In effect, Hintikka explains the problem of existential inconsistency as a problem of existential inconsistency. He further states that

the inconsistency (absurdity) of an existentially inconsistent statement can in a sense be said to be of *performatory* (performative) character. It depends on an act or "performance," namely on a certain person's act of uttering a sentence (or of otherwise making a statement); it does not depend solely on the means used for the purpose, that is, on the sentence which is being uttered. (12)

Again, this is somewhat uninformative—Descartes's *Meditations* formulation, "This proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it" (HR I 150), clearly indicates that the act or performance of formulating the sentence has something to do with its necessity; the interesting thing is not this, but the question of *how* that experiential element functions in Cartesian necessity.

The performative theory is a description, but not an explanation, of some of the odd features of the Cogito Argument which I mentioned in my introduction. Hintikka does nothing toward solving the mystery of how Descartes can call "I think, therefore I am" a necessary truth, but merely makes the mystery explicit by using obscure terms like "existential self-verification." Descartes probably does not intend to say "I know by means of a tautology (when logic's existential presuppositions appear explicitly) that I am," but rather "It is indubitable that I exist." How can any existential claim be indubitable? How can it be *necessary*? Whether existence works as a predicate at all has been debated at least from the time of Kant's statement: "The object, as it actually exists, is not analytically contained in my concept, but is added to my concept (which is a determination of my state) synthetically" (505). If the judgment that something exists is very likely a synthetic judgment, how can "*cogito, ergo sum*" be necessary? Is the Cogito Argument, then, simply the camouflage for an unquestioning "existential faith"? Do we simply say "I exist," and take our existence as an indubitable ostensive proof of that statement? And furthermore, by relying on performances are we not

simply falling back once again on the *a posteriori* contingent truths susceptible to doubt under the Dream Argument?

A transcendental interpretation, or transcendental inference theory, offers an explanation, not merely a description, of the mystery. The essential principle of the transcendental interpretation is that the entity to which Descartes's "I" refers is not himself insofar as he constitutes an object of experience for himself, but rather the "transcendental ego," the *Bedingung der Möglichkeit aller Erfahrung*—that is, the presuppositions of the possibility of experience such as the transcendental unity of apperception and the fact that it must be possible for the "I think" to accompany all of our presentations. It should not, of course, be considered anachronistic to say that Descartes refers implicitly to an entity which Kant later explicitly describes in his critical philosophy.

The possibility of interpreting the Cogito Argument transcendentially was first brought to my attention by the German logician Rainer Trapp's paper, "'Credo\* Me\* Cogitare Ergo Scio\* Me\* Esse<sub>1/2</sub>'—Descartes's 'Cogito Ergo Sum' Reinterpreted." Trapp differentiates between the "ego" considered as an object of experience like any other and the transcendental ego, or "ego\*." He makes a similar distinction between the existence which is presupposed in modern logic, existing in the manner of all objects of experience, "on a par with entities that *might be*, or even certainly *are*, only products of the mind" (existence<sub>1</sub>) and existence<sub>2</sub>, indubitable existence "analytically implied by being a transcendental Ego" (256). Trapp then analyzes the Cogito Argument in terms of epistemic logic and argues that Descartes "*would have been justified* in arguing for [the] logically stronger and philosophically more substantial proposition" (265) that appears in the rather singular title of his paper. Trapp's conclusion will have some importance to our discussion of philosophical logic later on.

There is textual evidence for this interpretation of Descartes's "I" as the transcendental ego. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes states:

For if I say I see, or I walk, I therefore am, and if by seeing and walking I mean the action of my eyes or my legs, which is the work of my body, my conclusion is not absolutely certain. . . . But if I mean only to talk of my sensation, or my consciously seeming to see or to walk, it becomes quite true because my assertion now refers only to my mind, which alone is concerned with my feeling or thinking that I see and I walk. (HR I 222)

While Descartes can doubt the veracity of experience (e.g., whether he actually sees or walks), he cannot doubt the fact that he *has* experience. And while Descartes cannot doubt that he has *experience* of phenomena, he would also never assert that the phenomena are *objectively* real. From the fact that he has experience, Descartes infers the transcendental ego as the presupposition of experience. In another passage, *Reply to Objections V*, we read: "You have no right to make the inference: *I walk, hence I exist*, except in so far as our awareness of walking is a thought . . . from the fact that I think that I walk I can very well infer the existence of the mind which so thinks, but not that of the body which walks" (HR II 207). Here we see that "*cogito, ergo sum*" is an inference, not according to syllogistic logic, but rather according to *transcendental* logic.

From the very fact that Descartes can be aware that he is walking, from the very fact that his consciousness arranges raw sense data in the form of experience, Descartes is able to infer a self. This "self" that is inferred is transcendental in character because by the very fact that it is the source of experience, it is never directly experienced—or in other words it transcends experience. Just as the indubitability of this inference forms the first principle of Descartes's philosophy, the first principle of all synthetic judgments for Kant is the transcendental unity of apperception, derived from essentially the same inference, which stipulates that the "I think" must be able to accompany all our presentations.

Hintikka also seems to sense something of the transcendental character of the Cartesian ego and the transcendental logic underlying the Cogito Argument. He compares the relation of *cogito* and *sum* to the relation between a process and its product, rather than the standard-inferential relation of a premise to a conclusion (16). A transcendental inference theory would correlate "process" with the transcendental ego, and "product" with experience or the ego as an object of experience, a "*Ding für mich*." A similarly transcendental metaphor that appears in Descartes's own writing, which Hintikka refers to in the same passage, is that of the relation between a source of light or *lumen* and illumination or *lux* (AT II, Letter to Morin, 13 July 1638, 209). Trapp explains how this relation leads to a transcendental inference: "My respective transcendental Ego, consciously performing some mental activity . . . is the *only* thing which in reflecting *I clare et distincte recognise not to be (only) a product of my mind,*" by consequence of which "it is the *only thing in itself* which I *positively know to exist<sub>2</sub> (also) as a thing in itself*" (256). The only thing not a product for someone making this transcendental inference is the producer, that is, the transcendental ego.

This material or transcendental inference, unlike the syllogistic one, achieves indubitability. "I think" as a product, namely, experience, stands in a necessary relation to the transcendental ego or "producer," the "I am." What kind of necessity this must be, in consequence, will be seen in the next section.

### III.

Through a brief examination of some modern philosophico-logical theories I will show that the transcendental interpretation indicates that the "necessary" truth in the Cogito Argument can be viewed either as an *a priori* contingent truth or as an *a posteriori* necessary truth. I will then conclude that when Descartes mentions necessity, he means the latter.

The *a priori/a posteriori* distinction is generally considered an epistemological one, whereas analyticity/syntheticity is considered a semantic, and necessity/contingency a metaphysical notion (Grayling 46). If something is known *a priori*, it is known or theoretically can be known "prior to experience," while *a posteriori* knowledge comes after, or in, experience. A necessary truth is one that (metaphysically) could not have been otherwise. If ever a bachelor has existed, it is necessarily true that he was, or is, an unmarried man. A contingent truth is one that might have happened otherwise; for example, I am sitting in front of a computer typing, while it is conceivable that I might be going for a walk instead. We generally think of necessary truth as something known *a priori*, and contingent truth as something known *a posteriori*. However, Alvin Plantinga argues in *The Nature of Necessity* that there is such a thing as an *a priori* contingent truth. For example, one might know *a priori* the contingent but true statement "I believe that  $7 + 5 = 12$ ."

Belief is not (*pace* Hume) a special brilliance or vividness of idea or image; there is no specific sort of experience I must have to know that I believe that  $7 + 5 = 12$ . So perhaps I know *a priori* that I believe that  $7 + 5 = 12$ . If so, then I have *a priori* knowledge of a contingent truth. (Plantinga 8)

It is interesting to note in connection with this point that when Trapp applies epistemic logic in representing the Cogito Argument he ends up with "I\* believe I\* think, therefore I\* know I\* exist\*" (where the asterisk represents the transcendental sense of these terms). It is probable that Descartes's belief that he thinks is precisely the sort Plantinga has in



mind as suitable for categorization as *a priori* contingent. From this *a priori* contingent truth results another: that I know I exist. Hence Plantinga writes:

Similarly, perhaps my knowledge that I *exist* is *a priori*. For perhaps I know *a priori* that I believe that I exist; I also know *a priori* that if I believe that I exist, then indeed I do exist. But then nothing but exceptional obtuseness could prevent my knowing *a priori* that I exist, despite the contingency of that proposition. (8)

This is one way in which "*cogito, ergo sum*," or the observation that "this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it," can be considered as *a priori* but *contingent*.

As for the possibility of a *posteriori* necessity, Saul Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity*, challenges the notion that necessary truths are always *a priori*. He gives the example of a mathematical theory called the Goldbach Conjecture, which tells us that an even number greater than 2 will be the sum of two prime numbers. Since this has not been proved mathematically, we do not know whether it is true or false, but we do know that if it is true, it is necessarily true, while if it false, it is necessarily false. However, in the absence of a proof, it does not follow (from the fact that it is necessary) that we know anything *a priori* about it, or even that we *could theoretically* know anything *a priori* about it (Kripke 36–37). This is a possible example of non-*a priori* necessity. Kripke also gives us an idea of what a *posteriori* necessity might be:

All the cases of the necessary *a posteriori* advocated in the text have the special character attributed to mathematical statements: Philosophical analysis tells us that they cannot be contingently true, so any empirical knowledge of their truth is automatically empirical knowledge that they are necessary. (159)

Could the Cogito Argument be a candidate for a *posteriori* necessity? An interesting support for the idea that the necessity of the Cogito Argument is *a posteriori* is Descartes's statement, cited above, that his existence is recognized "by a simple act of mental vision . . . as if it were a thing that is known *per se*" (HR II, *Reply to Objections II*, 38). Frankfurt brings up a question about this passage: If one wishes to construe Descartes's "simple act of mental vision" as a means by which the evidence of "sum" is intuitively grasped, "then why does Descartes say

that he recognizes existence only *as if* it were a thing known *per se*? If *sum* were intuited as self-evident, it *would* be known *per se* and not just *as if*" (338). The fact that *sum* is not recognized as a thing known *per se* might indicate that it is neither an *a priori*, analytic, necessary truth, nor merely a self-evident contingent fact; that it is recognized "*as if* it were a thing that is known *per se*" lends some credence, Frankfurt endeavors to show, to the idea that "*cogito, ergo sum*" is indeed a type of inference. In the first part of this paper, I argued that such an inference would be transcendental and necessary. The fact that *sum* is not recognized immediately as a thing known *per se* might also indicate that while it is recognized as necessary, this is so only *after* Descartes has experienced thought. After the experience of thinking, Descartes recognizes that the experience itself necessitates the transcendental ego, and thus he makes the transcendental inference by grasping that "I think, therefore I am" *must* necessarily be true. Since this truth can only be recognized after or in experience, it is clearly *a posteriori*; and yet the inference is necessary. In fact, the very idea of a transcendental logic seems to necessitate *a posteriori* necessity.

This I take to be the solution of the mystery surrounding Descartes's use of the term "necessarily." The transcendental interpretation of the Cogito Argument is the only one that makes it obvious why Descartes called its truth "necessary" after doubting *a priori* necessary truths. It is of relevance to Cartesian scholarship that the "special character" of the necessary truth in the Cogito Argument is that it is *a posteriori*; and it is relevant to the field of philosophical logic to discover that Descartes's Cogito Argument evinces *a posteriori* necessity *par excellence*.

#### IV.

A few questions still remain. What is the ultimate utility of this *a posteriori* necessary truth in Descartes's philosophical system? And what does it mean that the Cogito Argument can also be interpreted as an *a priori* contingent truth?

A *posteriori*-necessary/*a priori*-contingent truth plays similar roles in the philosophies of Kant and Descartes. T. K. Swing writes in the preface to his book *Kant's Transcendental Logic*:

I have argued that Kant calls his material logic transcendental logic chiefly because he intends it to be the logic of transcendence, that is, the material logic that enables the Cartesian subject to transcend its subjectivity and attain objective knowledge. Descartes himself

practically assumed the necessity of such a logic of transcendence (the logic of clear and distinct ideas) throughout his *Meditations* and even made some fragmentary attempts to construct one in his *Discourse on Method*. (viii)

Swing paraphrases a Leibnizian observation: "apperception (self-recognition) is never possible in the domain of perceptions and . . . becomes possible only in the domain of necessary truths;"<sup>5</sup> Swing adds, "We can never encounter in the domain of perceptions what is other than ourselves" (347). Descartes is effective in showing that he cannot *doubt* that he exists, but, of course, anyone's existence is contingent. The analysis of "*cogito, ergo sum*" in this paper indicated that if it is necessary, it is nevertheless *a posteriori*; and to be considered *a priori*, it also has to be considered contingent. Although one cannot doubt one's existence, to assert that one exists in reality is still a synthetic proposition. The *Bedingung der Möglichkeit* will never be more than a presupposition, albeit a necessary one, and the transcendental ego by its very nature can never be perceived. So while Descartes, as Kant would do in his turn, recognized that his inability to doubt his existence indicated that there were certain rules that the understanding was never without, and proceeded to construct a philosophy based upon clear and distinct ideas, the recognition is also implicit in his philosophy that what transcends experience cannot be known. Implicit in Cartesian certainty is Kant's later denial of knowledge to make room for faith.

Descartes infers his own existence as a presupposition of the possibility of experience and then posits God's existence as a presupposition of his own existence. In accordance with the rules of clear and distinct logic that have been discovered, Descartes cannot think of his being, as a *res cogitans*, except as being contingent upon some other, ultimately necessary, being, who is also the one who implanted clear and distinct ideas in him. This ultimate transcendent source he infers with even more certainty than the transcendental source. "I conclude so certainly that God exists, and that my existence depends entirely on Him in every moment of my life—that *I do not think the human mind is capable of knowing anything with more evidence and certitude*" (*Meditations*, HR I 171; my emphasis). However, the fact that Descartes recognizes the contingency of his existence upon God suggests that he would acknowledge the transcendent as essentially divorced from experience. He cannot

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<sup>5</sup>The reference is to *The Monadology* 28, 29, and 30.

know anything with more certitude than that there is some transcendent source of his experience, but this is not to say that he knows that transcendent source, or even that it is with *absolute* (i.e., objective) certainty.

The utility of the necessity of "*cogito, ergo sum*" is that it paves the way for subjective certainty by establishing a logic of clear and distinct ideas; but the fact that it can also be construed as *a priori* contingent is useful because it preserves objective freedom. As Swing puts it,

The necessary truths that are produced by the compulsory imposition of the categories on the objects may provide the subjective certainty but can never secure the knowledge of objects as they are in themselves. Kant himself admits the impossibility of knowing the objects in and for themselves. Human reason, which must impose the same set of categories on all objects, is the slave of its own autocratic rule; such an autocratic reason can gain subjective certainty only by forfeiting the possibility of attaining objective truths. (360)

Since Descartes laid all the emphasis upon the subjective certainty he managed to obtain, it took a Kant to make explicit what the Cogito Argument had achieved, namely, the denial of knowledge in order to make room for faith.

In a letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, Descartes wrote:

Though God has willed that certain truths were necessary, that is not to say that he has willed them necessarily. For to will that they be necessary and to will necessarily, or to be necessitated to will them, are completely different. (As cited in Alanen and Knuuttila; AT IV 118)

Descartes will not impose his own human notions of necessity on God. Perhaps there is more humility in Cartesian certainty than we recognized before. Perhaps previous scholarship has been somewhat uncharitable to Descartes by assuming that he either stayed within the limits of traditional categories like *a priori* necessity or depended upon a metaphysical faith that performative utterances imply existence. A careful examination of his use of the term "necessarily" informs us of the possibility of "hybrid" categories like *a posteriori* necessity and *a priori* contingency, yielding new ideas for contemporary philosophical logic about what necessity can be.

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