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The Philosophical Roots in Western Culture for the Pro-Abortion Stand

Donald DeMarco, Ph.D.

Every Westerner, from the moment he begins to learn, is exposed to the unseen danger of becoming "Westernized". To become "Westernized" is to have achieved the infelicitous combination of a deep unawareness of the intellectual presuppositions of Western thought, and an authoritative posture that betrays complete confidence in their validity. When pervasive, this form of intellectual somnolence is critical because it prevents a people from properly understanding its culture and therefore from making needed corrections and improvements. A modernized Socratic admonition might read: "The unexamined culture is not worth perpetuating."

Dr. DeMarco is an assistant professor of philosophy at St. Jerome's College, Waterloo, Ontario. In this article he details the five major philosophical schools which he feels have shaped the pro-abortion mind. His evaluation and criticism of each school provide new discussion grounds for those who defend the pro-life movement.

May, 1974
Atomism

The history of Atomism begins in ancient Greece with Democritus, who believed that indivisible units called atoms (in Greek 'atom' means uncuttable) were the ultimate building blocks of the physical universe. He reasoned that if these atoms were unveiled, they would reveal the secret of matter and explain the laws governing its behavior.

The history of science from Democritus to the theories of atomic physics in the 20th century chronicled the continuing drama of this search for the atom. Successive discoveries by such men as Dalton, Mendeleev, Rutherford, Bohr, Fermi and others provided increasing credibility for the existence of atoms. So convincing grew the idea that these indivisible units constituted reality that Atomism was transplanted from its natural soil in matter to a more ethereal home in society.

People were gradually liberated, thanks to the general spirit of Atomism, from thinking of themselves as belonging essentially to a class or a group, a church or a community; and took pride in the idea that they were, like atoms, entities unto themselves. Public and private life became more clearly distinguishable from each other, as did public and private morality.

The Renaissance period and the Age of Enlightenment offered man a heightened sense of individuality and private life became more clear-cut. Individualism evolved; his personal accomplishments. Rights became absolute because individuality was the absolute essential character of man. Just as what was essentially real in the physical universe was believed to be the individualized atom, so too, what was essentially real in human society was believed to be the highly individualized man.

The less individualized members of society accorded unlimited indulgence and envy to the self-made man, the star, the man of 'conspicuous consumption', the man of property, the 'top dog', the tycoon.

Atomism and Abortion

The woman who conceives herself as primarily an individual insists that she be given the freedom to maintain that individuality. This freedom is logically extended to give her sovereignty over all aspects of her sexuality and reproducibility. Margaret Sanger declared in 1920, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother."

Viewing the fetus as part of the woman's body, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz regards abortion as a crime "without victims":

- During the first two to three months gestation (when most abortions are performed), the embryo cannot live outside the womb. It may therefore be considered part of the woman's body. If so, there ought to be no specific laws regulating abortion. Such an operation should be available in the same way as, say, an operation for the beautification of a nose.

- In a similar vein, women's liberationist Alice S. Rossi writes:

  The passage of ... a reform statute is only one step on the way to the goal of maximum individual freedom for men and women to control their own reproductive lives. Such freedom should include the personal right to undo a contraceptive failure by means of a therapeutic abortion.

Phrased in the negative, freedom to maintain one's individuality becomes freedom from sexual servitude. Dorothy Kanyon, former municipal-court judge of New York exclaims, "For a state to force a woman to bear a child against her will is outrageous."

Lawrence Lader adds:

- To force these women to bear a child against their will, as a result of contraceptive failure, becomes the cruelest and most flagrant sentence that society can inflict.

Abortion, insofar as it protects a woman's individuality is seen as a private matter. Dr. Lawrence Kolb, professor of law, writes:

  Having an abortion is usually a very private matter... A woman's right to privacy included her right to decide whether she would bear a child she had conceived.

Dr. Alice Thompson, Dean of Women at Westford College, under-

scores the private nature of abortion:

- Even she never considered the option (abortion) and never used it, she ought to be a matter of principle know that she could. To deny her this right is a violation of her freedom as a person.

The fetus, viewed as part of the woman's individuality, logically becomes her property to be disposed as she sees fit. Philosopher Ti-Grace Atkinson states that "Both her (the pregnant woman's) reproductive function and the fetus constitute her property." Women's liberationist Barbara Sykes Wright, member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), adds:

- Therefore I, and thousands upon thousands of women like me, believe that any law forbidding an abortion under good medical conditions is immoral and in addition unconstitutional, for it violates her right to control her property—her body—as well as her life, liberty and happiness.

Applying the general philosophy of Atomism to the fetus, we easily see how the developing child could be interpreted as a threat to the individuality of the mother, especially when the mother does not conceive of her individuality in terms of involvement with a child.

In addition, individual rights, because they safeguard that which is primary in man, are themselves primary. Therefore, an unwanted fetus, by interfering with a woman's individuality, would be violating her primary right to individuality.

Rejoinder

If the primary and essential character of man is his individuality, then the playwright is correct when...
he says, "Hell is other people." Human experience, however, shows loneliness to be the most unbearable pain man suffers; it shakes the very depths of his soul. The sense of what psychologists call "no-relatedness" is felt at the center of man's nature because man is destined to be more than an atomic unit.

The basic truth that man is inclined by nature to transcend the atomicy of individuality has been symbolized in many ways throughout history: In the Hindu "tat tvam asi" (that art Thou); the pagan myth of the androgyn (the man-woman); and the Christian Triune God (Father-Son-Holy Spirit). The ancient Greeks lacked a word to distinguish private from public morality. The Romans taught that one man alone was no man at all. Modern philosophers of Personalism present man as essentially related to another in an "I-Thou" dynamic reciprocity.

If the need to overcome singleness through love, care and communication is rooted in man's nature, then the atomic picture of man is a false one.

Cartesianism

Rene Descartes, a 17th Century mathematician, came to philosophy with a sacred mission: to rescue philosophical thought from the shipwreck of scepticism and establish it once for all on the firm ground of indubitable certitude. He reasoned that philosophy would be preserved for all time if it could begin with a premise that was undeniably true and proceed unerringly according to a rigorous mathematical methodology.

The beginning was everything. Unless built upon a bedrock of certainty, the whole edifice of philosophy would ultimately tremble. Descartes set about his search for such a beginning by refusing to take anything for granted. He doubted everything. The basis for his true philosophy would have to pass the most severe test. Applying his methodic doubt, he soon realized that although he could doubt everything else, he could not doubt the fact that he was doubting.

Thus he struck upon one of the most famous of all philosophical assertions: "I think, therefore I am" (Cogito ergo sum). Descartes' explanation of his "Cogito" was as follows: It cannot be doubted that I think. Furthermore, it is precisely this capacity to think that gives me the assurance that I exist. This is how I am essentially different from substances that can't think. I am a thinking thing and other substances which lack this capacity to think are mere extended things.

The double significance of Cartesian thinking to this discussion is the identification of what man is (his essence or nature) with consciousness, and the dualism by which body (extended thing) and mind (thinking thing) are classified as separate entities.

The influence of Descartes cannot be overestimated. Nearly all historians of philosophy agree that he fully deserves the title "Father of Modern Philosophy". Without some understanding of Descartes, modern thought is incomprehensible.

Cartesianism and Abortion

Philosopher Michael Tooley of Stanford University, writing in Philosophy and Public Affairs, employs a self-consciousness test to determine when a member of a species has a right to live.10

Professor P. F. Strawson points out that it is not unusual for people to regard consciousness as the identifying predicate of person.11

Moralist Joseph Fletcher so strongly supports a dualistic separation of moral personality from the body that Germain Grisez suggests his being "influenced by the mind-body dualism of seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century philosophy."12 For Fletcher, neither personhood nor moral status are predicates of the consciousness-lacking human body.

...a fetus is not a moral or personal being since it lacks freedom, self-determination, rationality, the ability to choose either means or ends, and knowledge of its circumstances.13

...a patient who has completely lost the power to communicate has passed into a subnormal state, outside the forum of conscience and beyond moral being.14

According to Fletcher, "person" is non-existent in the absence of the synthesizing function of the cerebral cortex and before cerebralin is play.15

In a highly publicized incident in 1962, Mrs. Sherri Finkbine, who had ingested thalidomide during the second month of pregnancy, was denied a legal abortion in her home state of Arizona. Fearing that the fetus she was carrying would be deformed, she obtained a legal abortion in Sweden. In support of her mother's decision, Terrie Finkbine writes, "A man can think, dream, hope, and love. A fetus cannot.16

Applying Cartesianism to the fetus, we conclude that since the fetus apparently lacks consciousness, it has no essential claim to being human. Also, the fact that body is not reducible to spirit nor matter reducible to consciousness precludes the fetus's being human. Therefore, to abort a fetus is not taking a human life.

Rejoinder

Rev. Charles Carroll, former Executive Director of the Center for Human Values in the Health Sciences at the University of California at San Francisco, writes:

The wise man faces the fact that being precedes thought and, examining Descartes' popularly accepted dictum, Cogito, ergo sum, he wonders if the truth is not more likely reflected in Sum, ergo cogito, or better yet in Sum, ergo cogito, ergo aestimo — "I am, I think, I value.

Surely, being precedes thought and being and thought precede value.17

The Cartesian partition of thought and thing, soul and body, mind and matter, has taken its toll from modern man in various forms of intellectual schizophrenia, moral puritanism, and what Ralph Barton Perry has termed, "the egocentric predicament".

The historical results of Cartesianism show conclusively that the separation of thought from what is thought causes man to lose his sense of feeling "at home" in the world. It has also led to the sub-
ject to Kant, the idealism of Hegel, and the scepticism of Hume. And Descartes based his philosophy on "I love, therefore we are", "I feel, therefore I am"; "I care, therefore I am human", or even "I rebel, therefore we are", he would have affirmed not only the self but the self in creative dialogue with "the other". Rather, Descartes incarnerated his philosophy in the sterility of the closed ego.

The logical philosophical antides to Cartesian egocentrism are: Heidegger's philosophy of "care" (Sorge), Blondel's "integral realism", Buber's primary word "I-Thou", Whitehead's "organismic philosophy", Marcel's "creative fidelity", Kierkegaard's "leap of faith", and Maritain's "knowledge through connotatuity".

Existentialism

The most popular and influential of all the innumerable forms of existentialism has been the one explicited by Jean-Paul Sartre. In addition to winning wide acclaim for his core of philosophical writings, Sartre has reached broad political, literary, and theater audiences through the dramatic means of his novels, plays, essays, and political statements. He has, in fact, amassed so strong an international reputation that in many circles his thinking has come to be identified with existentialism.

At the center of Sartre's existentialism is a radically novel concept of man. Foregoing use of the word "man", Sartre chooses the expression "being-for-himself" (etre-pour-soi). "Desiring to make himself" thus becomes the basic characteristic of the being who is conventionally called man. But "Being-for-himself" is incomplete and seeks, through his conscious free choices, to overcome his incompleteness, define himself in time, and achieve an essence.

The relation between freedom and essence, therefore, is crucial. It is only through freedom and its authentic expression in free choice that the "etre-pour-soi" achieves an essence. One might not what the "etre-pour-soi" before it achieved an essence. Sartre's response is well known: "Existence precedes essence." One is a human, or man, or animal, a substance, or anything at all until it can make itself or achieve its essence through free choice.

While the details of Sartre's philosophy are not widely known, his doctrine of the essential importance of freedom has been widely circulated and deeply felt.

Existentialism and Abortion

Ashley Montagu formulates his notion of humanity as well as his defense of abortion by an expression as significant and succinct as Sartre's "Existence precedes essence." He writes: "Humanity is an achievement, not an endowment."18

Sartre's long time friend and philosophical associate Simone de Beauvoir reiterates the position that it is only through free choices that value and essence can be created. Accordingly, the fetus is yet to be valued; yet to achieve an essence.

Creative acts originating in liberty establish the object as value and give it the quality of the essential; whereas the child in the maternal body is not thus justified. It is not only a gratuitous cellular growth, a brute fact of nature as contingent on circumstances as death and corresponding philosophically with it.

In Sartrean existentialism the purity of the free choice determines an action's morality. Dr. David R. Mace, an abortion psychologist, exemplifies this philosophy in counselling his clients. "It doesn't really matter what Helen decided," he writes. "Take your destiny into your own two hands," and make a choice you can live with comfortably in the coming years. He adds, underscoring the subjective aspect of the pregnant woman's agonizing decision, "...try to weigh the issues, and then list the three options in the order that seems best for you."20

Presbyterian theologian Herbert Richardson, emphasizing the importance of free choice in the determination of the nature of the fetus, writes:

Indeed, within his value system (the person who has already accepted the value of technical control over sexual life) the primary mark of the humanity of the fetus is precisely that it is wanted and voluntarily created—not that it is unwanted, but somehow biologically complete. It is precisely his choosing it that creates his sense of responsibility for preserving its life.21

Sexual and career freedoms are also viewed as important enough to justify abortion. Dr. Henry Morgenstern of Montreal, who admits to having aborted more than 6,500 women between 1969 and 1973, argues that sexual freedom should exclude the burden of unwanted pregnancy.

But incidents happen—and they always should. Women should be allowed to abort when they, in the 1970s, females should have the same sexual freedom as males.

Author: Lana Clarke Phelan and Patricia Theresa Maginnis underscore the essential priority of career freedom over compulsory pregnancies:

Abortion laws (that is, antabortion laws) are woman-control laws, or chattel laws, if you prefer.22

Forced by law into unending pregnancies and child care and rearing, most women had absolutely no opportunity to free their energies or money for other occupations.23

Application of Sartre's existentialistic conception of freedom and his doctrine of "etre-pour-soi" to the fetus, would make it appear that since the fetus has no freedom to overcome its incompleteness by making choices, it totally lacks any claim to essence or nature. Moreover, a fetus is not human where it was conceived by accident or through force since its value and essence could not originate apart from the creative liberty of the conceiving woman. Thus abortion, according to Sartrean thinking would not constitute taking the life of a human being.

Rejoinder

The principle "existence precedes essence" can be taken only metaphorically. It is one thing to say that nobody ever fulfills all of his potential. But it is quite another to say that a person has no essence at all until he fulfills a certain amount of that potential. (Wha-
ev that amount is remains unspoken. Sartre contends that if one did fulfill all of his needs he would become a "being-in-itself" ("être-en-soi") deprived of needs, freedom and consciousness.

If there can be existence without essence, what is it, then, that exists? Existence doesn't exist. Whatever exists must be something other than existence itself. This other something is the essence, nature, meaning or structure of that which does exist. Therefore, existence and essence are really contemporaneous; they have no reality apart from one another.

The fact that man is never fully developed, or fully free, or fully conscious does not mean that he is devoid of essence, nature, meaning, or structure. It is perfectly reasonable to suppose, as do many contemporary psychotherapists, that the meaning of man is to be always in the process of becoming. Nothing in this whole world is ever static, unchanging, or perfectly fulfilled. Furthermore, the nature of the existing fetus is intrinsically determined and is not conferred or withheld by the purity of his mother's free choice or by the degree of wantedness she attaches to her pregnancy.

Empiricism

Empiricism is the broad area of philosophical thought dedicated to the perennially varied theme of 'seeing is believing'. The cardinal principle underlying Empiricism is that whatever sensation cannot verify is simply unverifiable. Empirical philosophers have always allied themselves with physical scientists, since both have a abiding enthusiasm for the observable and describable. Also the continually have prided themselves in opposing the armchair philosopher who creates a world of dreams and dogmas that are empirically unverifiable.

Because empiricist philosophers have emphasized observation and describable experience, they are known as 'realist' philosophers. The 'sensim' of David Hume, the 'utilitarianism' of John Stuart Mill, the 'pragmatism' of John Dewey, the 'positivism' of Ernst Mach, and the "language picture theory" of Ludwig Wittgenstein are a few significant landmarks in the protean history of modern Empiricism. These schools have vehemently opposed less positivistic philosophies dealing with matters such as metaphysics, God, and moral values.

By applying the principles of Empiricism to the fetus, we note that the fetus is not a being with whom an adult can visually identify, especially in the early stages of fetal development. In the egg's blastula or gastrula stages, what can be observed, described, or experienced has virtually nothing in common with the human being known outside the womb. The assertion that the fetus has an unobservable soul which gives it a sacred value is purely conjectural by empiricist principles.

Empiricism and Abortion

Strict empiricists reject as an unscientific speculation (if not as laughable) the claim that the microscopic fertilized ovum is a human being. They say that the embryo at any stage is "merely a blob of protoplasm", or "a parasite", or something going through a "fish stage" of development. In addition, they label it a "product of conception" (Los Angeles Abortion Symposium, 1971), mere "tissue" (a Johns Hopkins professor of medicine), and a "growth" (a New York city abortion counselor). Fleming and Beebe state that until quickening, it is a live cluster of embryonic cells, and not a human being.

What makes it particularly difficult for the empirical minded individual to accord humanity to the fetus is the lack of a common observable basis which would identify the two. The adult who is observed to enjoy a whole network of relationships and a wide variety of experiences does not resemble the relatively inert fetus in the least. As Rudolf Gerber notes: "no comparison exists between an adult acting in the world and an unborn fetus who has months to travel before achieving his first social act at birth." Sarvis and Rodman reflect a similar empiricist tendency when they write:

It is much easier to empathize with an adult woman who strongly wants an abortion or with a woman who has been injured as a result of a criminal abortion than it is to identify with an unseen fetus. Thus, aborting a fetus is not taking a human life, because what is described by the ordinary empirical experience of man does not correspond to what is described by an empirical experience of the fetus.

The essential limitation of Empiricism as an all-inclusive philosophy is that it fails to justify itself. The statement "Only what is sensed can be verified", itself is not sensed and therefore cannot be verified. We catch the radical empiricist trying hopelessly to jump over his own shadow. Einstein alluded to the limitations of Empiricism when he said that the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible. That by which a thing is known differs radically from that which is known. The measure and the thing measured are not one and the same. It is quite possible to comprehend certain universal laws and remain unable to comprehend that which allows comprehension: knowledge of the process by which the universe is known. Furthermore, Empiricism does not get to the being of things, nor is it concerned with their most fundamental attributes. Goodness, love, beauty, and truth—verities which nourish the very soul of man—transcend the limiting scope of the empiricist.

It is necessary, therefore, that some truths exist beyond the finite range of sense observation. Once we admit this necessity, we are able to approach with respect the thesis that what makes a man to be man involves the spiritual. It is not how he is seen but what he is that makes man a man...
Sociology

Sociology is an extension of sociology. It seeks to establish, on a sociological basis, both man's meaning and his justification. It is acutely aware that without the redeeming grace offered by society, man's life degenerates to what Thomas Hobbes called a "state of nature" where men are driven above all else by "a perpetual and restless desire for power after power that ceaseth only in death." That which gives man a more elevated station, grants him a wider dimension, magnifies his importance, and refines his sensibilities is society. In short, society humanizes man. Without the blessing of society, man is either pre-human (pre-socialized), or sub-human (un-socialized).

In recognizing society's humanizing role toward the individual, sociologists do not ignore the welfare of the community. In fact, utilizing the axiom that the whole is greater than the part, sociologists stresses that the good of society transcends the good of any one individual. Therefore, with the humanization of man and the good of society in mind, sociologists interprets the meaning and justification of a human being as participating in the process of humanization through the sum total of his inter-relationships with other members of society; and 2) contributing to the general good of society. An individual's life is no human meaning or human justification whenever he is pre-social; whenever he is of "no social stimulus value"; or wherever his own good contradicts the good of society.

Sociologists and Abortion

Dr. Edmund Overstreet, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of California at San Francisco, speaks of legal abortion as being no longer merely a means of providing medical care, but as a form of sociological care for the community. Niagara Falls abortionist Dr. K. Walker (pseudonym—W. Gifford-Jones) states that he does abortions for 'sociological reasons.' Glanville Williams writes that calling a sygote a human being would be acceptable "if there were no social consequences of doing so."

Professor Garrett Hardin argues forcefully that restricting women from obtaining legal abortions would ultimately be "ruinous to the social system."

"Is it good (or) a woman who does not want a child to bear one? An abundant literature in psychology and sociology proves that the unwanted child is a social danger. Unwanted children are more likely than others to grow up in psychologically unhealthy homes; they are more likely than others to become delinquents, and... when they become parents they are more likely than others to be poor parents themselves and breed another generation of unwanted children."

Hardin contrasts abortion with compulsory pregnancy and advises society to be more concerned about protecting itself from the more harmful effects of the latter than in chastising women for their occasional sexual indiscretions:

If (a woman is) pregnant against her will, does it matter to society whether or not she was careless or unskilful in her use of contraception? In any case, she is threatening society with an unwanted child, for which society will pay dearly.

William Kopit and Harriet Pilpel, writing in a working paper for the New Civil Liberties Union Board of Directors, echo similar sociological sentiments:

"The enormous social costs that the present 1965 abortion law create (sic) is clearly an evil that far outweighs any right to life that a fetus may be thought to possess."

Philosopher Lorenne Smith emphazizes a cardinal sociological point when she justifies abortion by appealing to the incomparsable advantages abortion represents to society:

"The advantages of abortion to parents and children in low-income groups, to women as a class, to society as a whole, clearly outweigh the disadvantages to the aborted fetuses."

Therefore, under the principles of socialism, taking the life of a fetus, if it is done in the interest of society is not illicit since the fetus does not possess the right to threaten to contravene the common good.

Rejoinder

If man's meaning and justification for living are conferred upon him by society, then there is no substantial basis in reality for such a conferred. Society, as such, does not have substantial being. Although it answers a natural human need, society exists by convention or agreement. Man precedes society in actual existence. Thus, the state exists for the benefit of man, who has substantial being, rather than man for the benefit of the state which has its being through convention or agreement.

The argument that it is justifiable to kill one in order to improve the lot of many is based on the fallacy that two lives are more important than one life. If each man's life is absolute, that is to say, his everything, then it is incomparable. Things can be compared to each other only when they have something in common. But the very thing one man does not have in common with another is his own center of existence upon which 'his everything' is either allowed to continue or is destroyed. Dostoevski has argued convincingly that man should not bargain for even a lasting and perfect utopia if the price were the torture of one innocent child.
To describe man as presocialized or unsocialized is to speak of him as the outside of his being. Man as human nature, although it flowers in a just society, is an inner essence and springs forward with the help of society not by the power of society.

To abort an unwanted child because he might later prove to be a disadvantage to society is to treat the innocent with more severity than the guilty; to give more weight to a fearful hypothesis than courage would allow, less hope for a positive reality than justice would require.

Conclusion

“Non omnis omnia possimus” (We cannot do everything for everyone) is a truism; however, it should not allow society to set aside its efforts against the evil of one-sidedness. Individuality, consciousness, freedom, empirical science, and societal needs are indeed significant, but when isolated from their complementary values and raised to a level of unique significance, they merely illustrate a culture’s immaturity. Whereas individual one-sidedness may be helpful to a society in offsetting and counterbalancing other forms of individual one-sidedness, collective one-sidedness is a different matter.

Kierkegaard writes:

But just as one generation affects round hats, and another prefers them three-cornered, so a fashion of the age promotes forgiveness of the ethical requirement. I am well aware that every human being is more or less onesided, and I do not regard it as a fault. But it is a fault when a fashion selects a certain form of onesidedness and magnifies it into a total form. It has been the genius of the West to divide and conquer. Each of the five preceding philosophies represents a one-sided and fragmented approach to reality. Atomism separates the individual from the community and treats him as absolute. Cartesianism separates the ego from the other and man from nature, rendering their inter-relationships unaccountable. Existentialism (a transgression) separates existence from essence and makes freedom absolute. Empiricism separates the material from the spiritual and makes matter absolute. Socraticism separates the intrinsic from the extrinsic and treats the extrinsic as absolute.

If these varieties of Western thought are ever to be cured of their one-sidedness, they must first be examined at their point of origination. Many contemporary thinkers, having lost patience with the materialist penchant of the West, have looked to the spiritual genius of the East to find the true philosophy of life. Others have sought a reconciliation of Eastern mysticism and Western materialism. Wherever and however the solutions are to be found, the truth remains that no one is free who will not reflect. It is indeed ironic, as psychologist Carl Jung has pointed out, that “in the West there is as great freedom politically as there is lack of it personally; whereas in the East we find just the opposite.” According to an ancient myth, when Poverty and Plenty mated, Love was born. Perhaps when Apollo consents to dance with the Furies and the Furies permit themselves to bask in Apollo’s sunlit reasoning, Truth and Peace will flower.

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