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The Phenomenology of Democracy

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ABSTRACT Human beings originate votes, and democracy constitutes decisions. This is the essence of democracy. A phenomenological analysis of the vote and of the decision reveals for us the inherent strength of democracy and its deficiencies. Alexis de Tocqueville pioneered this form of enquiry into democracy and produced positive results from it. Unfortunately, his phenomenological method was inadequate and he missed the essential core of his 'associative art'. The frequent association of democracy with rationality misleads us about its nature and its requirements. The phenomenology of democracy aligns with the governance concept of democracy. Many attempts to reform democracy, or impose it on others, are misplaced because they do not attend to the essence of democracy.

This article sets out an account of what democracy is in itself. That it should be desirable to have such a paper is the result of well-intentioned persons who incessantly expand the concept of democracy and associate it with social and political initiatives that they deem worthwhile. For example, consider this deliberative and pragmatic account of democracy:

> the principle of democracy which I favour insists on the protection of human rights, recognizes the distinctiveness of subcultures, ensures the principles of inclusion and openness, and ensures the universal application of the rule of law and of open dialogue, not based upon any faith in rationality, but based purely on a principle of a mutual interest in universal survival. (Olssen, 2005, p. 165)

Through such definitions, democracy associates with bids for territory, the privileges of citizenship, forms of trade, and with rights. Democracy is contested, for example, by public choice advocates, those who think it antiquated and inefficient, and innovative theorists. Devine (2004, 2005) shows how they have produced nothing that alters democracy. The effect of such boundless busyness is to cover up and obscure that which is foundational to democracy. It also beclouds how pervasive democracy is in people's lives and the threats to democracy.

The phenomenology of democracy weighs against intellectual accounts of the concept of democracy from the first. Ancient Greece and the Renaissance are customarily credited with the historical reality of democratic forms of governance. This is democracy within elaborate institutional structures. Democracy itself is already a small part of such institutions and the conflicts they precipitate. The same situation can be seen in parliaments today as members bury democracy whilst they engage in formalised political confrontations to strengthen their grasp on power.

The French social theorist, Touraine (2000), argues that the nation-state is no longer capable of integrating and reconciling the conflicting tendencies with the economy, society and culture. Nevertheless, the legacy of these states – rationality and individualism – is built into the emergent global situation of western countries: 'It was the strength of the constitutional nation-state that made rationalization and ethical individualism the twin pillars of modernity' (Touraine, 2000, p. 44). This article argues that in the West, these Herculean pillars remain in place whilst democracy itself withdraws as conflicts evolve around economic liberalism, cultural, ethnic, or

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religious fundamentalism. Nationalistic and theocratic politics shroud democracy, particularly when high explosives are involved.

Education hides democracy's essence when its advocates hold out the pretence that democracy requires educated, enlightened citizens. Democracy was at work long before Aristotle wrote his 'argument from constitutional requirements' which says that 'citizens should be educated so as to have the virtues that will promote the form of political life that they will collectively lead' (Curren, 2000, p. 93). The association of democracy with greater rationality and improved state institutions serves to displace democracy from its roots within small, voluntary, human groups.

A part of the myth of democracy is that it requires higher thought processes and rationality, and when these are redirected it looks as if democracy is displaced. Moutsios reminds us of the dimensions of this displacement when he says there is, on the one hand, the desirable European inheritance of building, general education and culture, 'which gives the potential for the intellectual, ethical and civic development of human beings and therefore the enhancement of democracy' (Moutsios, 2007, p. 510). And then on the other hand, there is the current perceived threat to democracy, because (to use the words of Touraine) we 'no longer live in a world of institutions, but in a world of markets, communities and individuals' (Touraine, 2000, p. 44). If Moutsios and Touraine held a phenomenological account of democracy they would not fear for its future, although they would still be fearful.

With democracy itself so well hidden, alternative associated concepts ascend to become a part of the justification for the formal school curriculum. We read, for example, 'Citizenship education, certainly in Britain, is fast being seen as vital to reinforcing community cohesion' (Golmohamad, 2007, p. 520). In this statement we see that within a leading democratic state there is a decoupling of citizenship and democracy – and a consequential covering over of democracy.

When considering the limitations of citizenship education, Peters observers how concepts of citizenship appeal to the political left and right, and how such concepts (and particularly their concomitant notions of rights) need to be central to global citizenship education (Peters, 2008, p. 6). Again, we can see various concepts, however worthy, take priority over that which is more foundational. When Peters told his audience that the Scottish diaspora resulted in the there being more pipe bands in Aotearoa New Zealand than Scotland he veered closer to what is involved in the embedment of democracy. Like the music of the pipes, democracy is something constituted. The pipers originate the sounds and the sounds constitute music.

We will not find democracy itself within academia, the intrigues of politics, constitutional documents, or education. Democracy will always be well hidden in those scenes as fact and theory take the stage. Let us turn to the alternative, and seek democracy in itself though its phenomenology.

The Origination of Democracy Reveals Its Enemy

It is not difficult to discern the site of democratic practice as a phenomenon. Ask yourself what involves a human being *indispensably* when that being abides with democracy. What must involve the human – not in the name of democracy – in the event of democracy? The leading contention of this article is that democracy is present whenever decisions are made by a vote or plebiscite. Democracy appears in the form of decision making that entails voting with the involvement of others. This article seeks to establish this phenomenological affirmation of democracy and explore some of its implications.

With this formal indication of the site of democracy we can place the origins of democracy, not in constitutional documents or critical events involving kings and the privileged, but rather in the lived experience of small human groups, even families. The term 'formal indication' is used here in one of the senses that Heidegger uses it, to indicate that we are to advance our discussion on the basis of an assertion that is held out but which is open for revision or modification as the discussion proceeds. It reflects the need to start somewhere without the requirement that this starting material be explicated (Heidegger, 1999, p. 62).

The foundation of democracy is to be seen in the human being pressing into the future and the inherent comportment towards future circumstances that are different from those of the present. In other words, it is to be found in the pre-rational, bodying along of ourselves with our distinctive

way of being. Human beings have always been communal and they have always displayed a range of involvements with others of their kind. Democracy itself has its ground in one of these involvements. Probably, the involvements are those which couple the manifest tensions around decision making in emergent communities with the aspirations of individuals who seek to produce something that is beyond their own competence.

This starting place for an enquiry into democracy – that which is small, personal, informal, and immediate – accords with that adopted by a visitor who surveyed democracy within the United States of America:

> It is not undesignedly that I begin this subject with the township. The village or township is the only association which is so perfectly natural that wherever a number of men are collected it seems to constitute itself. (Tocqueville, 1899, p. 48)

Tocqueville observes that villages constitute themselves whilst his assertion that the association of people in the village or township is 'perfectly natural' rallies disputatious anthropologists and historians. The expansion of village committees throughout China in the 1990s provides them with a more recent example to discuss. 'Democratic elections in China's villages coexisting with a one-party dictatorship are such unlikely bedfellows' (Solomon's Foreword in Thurston, 1998, p. viii).

There is an important truth hidden in this alleged instinct to association. It is that the purpose of such an association, the purpose of a perfervid human-upon-human engagement, is *the individuals' desire to achieve something that they cannot achieve alone*. For many people the only way to precipitate practical projects beyond the resources of their own family is through a cooperative venture with their neighbours. You cannot rely on despots in America or China.

Accordingly, democracy comes to people as a tool. It is ready-to-hand paraphernalia. This ontological account of how the human being comes to abide with democracy has the advantage that the involvements constitutive of the situation historically remain extant today. The appropriate place to look for democracy is where neighbours engage for common purposes. Local government globally today is potentially revelatory of the phenomenology of democracy, although not all uses of the term 'local government' relate to democracy. At a local government conference there appeared a 'chief executive' from an autocratically managed city of over 12 million people. Educated in the United Kingdom, he knew all about democracy, but he had no *use* for it.

Those who have a use for democracy have a desire to achieve that which they cannot achieve alone – and that is an expression of materialism:

> The democratic man is therefore prey to the passion of material well-being. Certainly, the love of the goods of the world is not peculiar to the citizens of democracy. But there it takes an intensity and, especially, a completely novel form that forces one to see it as a specific characteristic of these societies. (Manent, 1996, p. 55)

The enemy of democracy is 'other-worldliness', as seen in stoicism, religions that suffice, and in the West today recapitulated in a contemplative lifestyle and a completely satisfied customer. This is my view, and contrasts with the two enemies identified by Tocqueville: those who support a notion of the natural inequality of human beings, and democracies' excessive or immoderate friends. Tocqueville's enemies are possibly those of elaborate democratic systems, but not of democracy itself. Tocqueville, Manent, and I agree that the serendipitous *consequence* of democracy is:

> to render master and servant as strangers to one another, altering their position so that they are no longer one well above the other, but side by side. Thus, the most inherently unequal relationship is thoroughly transformed by democracy. (Manent, 1996, p. 32)

For Tocqueville, the consummate sociologist, this – when related to the role of public opinion – is apparently the essential truth about democracy. For me it is correct (in the sense that it is a consequence) but it is not the essential phenomenon of democracy.

Phenomenological Enquiry into Democracy

The most significant single observation that we can make about democracy at work is that it does not require human beings to be rational. Surprisingly, the reason that democracy 'works' as a tool

is the absence at its heart of a requirement for rationality. This section sets out a preliminary phenomenology of democratic decision making and considers the involvement of rationality in that phenomenon.

Over 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville began his phenomenological enquiry into American democracy with such concepts as the 'embodiment of thought' and the 'democratic soul'. His work was re-evaluated in the 1990s (Mitchell, 1995; Manent, 1996; Bell, 1998). It is unfortunate that Tocqueville bases his phenomenology of democracy upon an inadequate understanding of the phenomenological method. He accurately locates the locus of democracy as being within small organisations.

> The town, or tithing, as the smallest division of a community, must necessarily exist in all nations, whatever their laws and customs may be: if man makes monarchies and establishes republics, the first association of mankind seems constituted by the hand of God. But although the existence of the township is coeval with that of man, its liberties are not the less rarely respected and easily destroyed. A nation is always able to establish great political assemblies, because it habitually contains a certain number of individuals fitted by their talents, if not by their habits, for the direction of affairs. The township is, on the contrary, composed of coarser materials, which are less easily fashioned by the legislator. (Tocqueville, 1899, p. 48)

The distinction between the 'smallest division of a community' and the nation when not adequately pursued during the quest for democracy effectively covers up democracy, as described above.

From Tocqueville's observation there develops an indicator for the health of American democracy (Putnam, 2000). The indicator is the number of bowling leagues in the country. Had Tocqueville been more involved with the phenomena involved in the leagues themselves he may well have noticed that the foundation of voluntary associations is the need of individuals to achieve something more than that which they can achieve alone. Cooperation and a decision-making mechanism are required, unless you have the ability to command. Bowling leagues and other small organisations are a consequence of many things and not the foundation of democracy. Tocqueville's inadequate approach to the phenomenology of democracy is continued by Schultz (2002).

Tocqueville stood aloof from the phenomena of the leagues themselves and consequently he missed the heart of it. Nevertheless, what he achieved regarding the wider involvements of democracy influences seminal political themes, such as the importance of local liberties and political participation, and the danger of citizen apathy. And, Tocqueville's enquiry does point us towards the phenomenon of democracy:

> He did not think that voluntary associations were an all-purpose panacea for the infirmities that democracy fosters. For these associations themselves presupposed particular beliefs, practices and institutions. Too little attention has been paid to the fact that Tocqueville conceived of associating as an 'art,' a 'technique,' a 'faculty and habit.' Accordingly, in order for associational life to improve democratic citizens, democratic citizens must bring to the creation and the maintenance of their associations certain dispositions and skills. Voluntary associations not only generate what Robert Putnam calls social capital ('features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'), they presuppose it. Before there can be social capital, moreover, there must be moral capital. (Berkowitz, 1996, p. 44)

The quotation shows the move from the 'associative art' (the skills and techniques of the individual), to a discussion about associations, and then on to concepts such as social and moral capital. Lost was the opportunity to examine the germination of the associative art. So what is a more adequate method to pursue democracy as it is, as an associative art? How are we to look around the phenomena of the bowling leagues *from the inside*? The method now suggested follows particularly the suggestions of Brentano and Heidegger.

I draw upon my own participation in democratic decision making to persuade you about its nature and dimensions. You must say whether or not my account resonates with you on the basis of your engagement with similar proceedings. I interpret from my perspective that which I

encounter. This is foundational to the phenomenological-hermeneutical tradition of investigation. The task is to describe a way of seeing. In this tradition, an enquiry:

> – has to be – a very personal endeavour, and its power to persuade is more like a historical narrative than an explanatory argument; it is dependent on the resonant strength of the author's voice in speaking from a coherent grasp of historical, philosophical, and scientific traditions to achieve an elucidation of human experience from some perspective. (Heelan, 2001, p. 404)

For over two decades in a typical western democracy, New Zealand, I have been elected to various local organisations and institutions. These include city councils, trusts, and the governance boards of educational institutions. In all cases, as these organisations confront their purposes, issues, or tasks, and as they must make decisions, I am expected to vote. What is at issue now is how I call upon these situations, invoke the term 'phenomenology', and associate them with democracy.

My position 'amidst' democracy, or 'abiding with' democracy, provides the opportunity for the present exploration. Democracy as I abide with it is neither a concept, nor a set of objects, nor a prescribed process. It is what I find it to be as my involvement when I participate in committees. This is the contrast between Tocqueville's sociology and my phenomenology. My involvement does not cease when I leave the council chamber. It is a part of my lived life, something I cannot shed. Nor will I be divested of it when I lose an election. Democracy endures in its abidance with me and it is discernable in the manner in which I comport to situations. Democracy with me just 'is'. Now the locus of democracy is found in myself, and not in organisations, there remains the task of uncovering democracy in itself.

This account of democracy and me draws upon a tradition in philosophy that has its origins as a negative movement with Aristotle. Aristotle wrote many times his account of 'what is' and ultimately it was a particular account that became influential and thereby effectively dismissed the phenomenological alternative. Although not the first to do so, Brentano spectacularly problematised Aristotle's classification of categories of beings and revived his concept of intentionality; and thereby Brentano set Husserl and Heidegger on their trajectories (Brentano, 1975; Safranski, 1998, pp. 24-25; Moran, 2000). 'Democracy' is always something that exists, or more accurately 'something which offers itself and presents itself to one' (Safranski, 1998, p. 24). This places our example, 'democracy', in a category of being that Brentano identified and which is itself a part of the thinkable. It is through Brentano's insight that the individual human being becomes an indispensable part of both any investigation into democracy and an integral part of democracy in itself. As he told his students in the lecture course of 1888-89, the task is to analyse descriptions of phenomena:

> By phenomena, however, [I understand] that which is perceived by us, in fact, what is perceived by us in the strict sense of the word. ... To be a phenomenon, something must exist in itself [in sich sein]. It is wrong to set phenomena in opposition to what exists in itself [an sich Seienden]. ... Something can be a phenomenon, however, without being a thing in itself, such as, for example, what is presented as such [das Vorgestellte als solches], or what is desired as such. ... One is telling the truth if one says that phenomena are objects of inner perception, even though the term 'inner' is actually superfluous. All phenomena are to be called inner because they all belong to one reality, be it as constituents or as correlates. (Brentano, 1995, p. 137)

In the present example, 'democracy' is indeed not an object, it does exist, it presents itself, and that presenting involves aletheia.

Some indispensable features of the phenomenological method which is founded upon Brentano's account of phenomena may be discerned from Heidegger's use of the method in relation to text. When Heidegger undertakes a phenomenological investigation of Kant's writing he catapults into the works in a way akin to the way that I catapult into democracy. Submerged amidst the words, sentences, and paragraphs, Heidegger casts around to find what is there to be found. What is there renders as sense to Heidegger in various ways. He understands that the appearing words-sentences-paragraphs are the result of an ongoing investigation for Kant, and that they are within the sequence of Kant's life, including Kant's enquiries into physical science and then into philosophy. The sense that Heidegger finds in the words-sentences-paragraphs may originate

in Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's reading of Newton and Kant's professional life with his colleagues. Heidegger uses this aspect of his understanding when he opens his lectures to his students in the winter semester for 1926/27 – he says that one account of why Kant wrote something would be 'foreign to Kant's character' (Heidegger, 1997, p. 1). Importantly, the sense that Heidegger discerns in Kant *also* draws from another configuration of sense presences. This is the sense that originates from Kant's primary investigation in itself, and about which Heidegger makes many judgements from within the text. The words-sentences-paragraphs are now vehicles that convey and what is conveyed in itself is available for expository understanding. Heidegger works out 'a Kant-interpretation by way of a precise and detailed analysis of the text' (Editor's Epilogue to Heidegger, 1997, p. 295). Heidegger stays within Kant's text, and paragraph by paragraph he proceeds without inserting any headings or imposing any structure on that which is there. To his students Heidegger says, 'to understand Kant properly means to understand him better than he understood himself' (Heidegger, 1997, p. 2). There are two points to make that indicate what a phenomenological investigation entails: first, in making sense of what he is amidst, Heidegger does not differentiate between the 'personal' and the 'textural' – he takes what is to hand. Second, we appreciate that Heidegger selected the texts that he was to investigate and that this would have involved preliminary work. This preliminary work is now rendered irrelevant for we are here amidst and it is from here that we seek sense. It is only later that Heidegger's editors and translators insert descriptive headings and turn Heidegger's enquiry into a textbook (Heidegger, 1997, p. 295).

The present enquiry into the phenomenology of democracy plunges us into democracy as Heidegger plunged into Kant's works – without seeking to impose a structure, and without the need to distinguish kinds of involvement that render different configurations of sense or meaning. The categories of Aristotle and those who inherited his formulation, in particular in this case those who write in the disciplines of political science, must be allowed to fall away, for democracy must stand as it is in itself with the understanding that I find. Recalling the Heelan quotation above, you are asked to share in this if the understanding sketched regarding democracy somehow holds truth for you. The resonating 'ring of truth' hereby summonsed fourth is aletheia in the sense developed by Heidegger and which contrasts particularly with correspondence theories of truth (Heidegger, 1962). It is as if you stand in the same light that shines on me and allows my understanding. It is that you and I let-something-be-seen and this 'is' without the possibility of its being either true or false (Heidegger, 1962, p. 56). In this way we allow democracy to become unhidden.

Seeing Democracy As It Is

Most people, even those in developed western democracies, will only vote every few years in major elections for regional, national and local assemblies. I vote on issues all the time because I hold elected positions. This situation reveals something useful about the phenomenon of democracy. Most votes taken on any matter are actually the second of two votes. The first is the election that establishes who will vote on the particular matter. This two-vote mechanism has an important consequence – it establishes the legitimacy of the second decision. There is a sense in which those who contribute to the first decision also contribute to the second decision, and accordingly people are inclined to tolerate decisions made by elected bodies more than they might those of a totalitarian regime.

How a vote is taken also reveals something important. At a particular moment, those properly constituted to vote will raise a hand, or press a button, walk through a door, or say 'Aye'. That is the extent of their involvement if they wish no further involvement, which is the situation in the vast majority of cases. The participant's minimal abetment with the decision itself is the participation of a body in a practical predicament. It is a mistake to think that the observed comportment is the conveyance of an intended vote. It is the actual vote itself – that which is complete and entire in itself. To vote is to engage ready-to-hand beings. It is not to engage the contemplative, thematised beings of thought. It is not an entanglement in the realm of ontic entities.

The participants each precipitate or constitute a vote. They do not precipitate or constitute a decision. *Democracy itself constitutes the decision*. The vote is an equiprimordial phenomenon as it

abides with the voter. The decision is another equiprimordial phenomenon. However, from a historical perspective, the constitution of a vote and the constitution of a democratic decision occur one before the other. Thus, no individual makes the decision and some may be disappointed in the decision reported soon after they vote. The two separate easily when you consider the situation where someone votes and dies before the result is known. This occurs frequently when there is a postal vote. Democracy has solicitude for the vote, not the voter.

The equiprimordiality of the vote involves in every case a mix of beings and significations. Brought together into the insight (understanding) that is the vote are the experiences, the knowledge, the construction of the situation, the judgement and the comportment. They are all one unity in the event of the vote. Likewise there is one unity for democracy as it brings about the decision, and that is simpler than the unity of each vote.

One of the strengths of the vote as it contributes to democracy is that equiprimordially it is always a 'lesser involvement'. The vote is the vote, nothing more – it might be about the decision to hang someone but it is still not the hanging. The vote cannot ever be the decision to hang someone because at least one other person votes. This lessening facilitates human involvement with the vote and overcomes indecision and inaction. It overcomes complete responsibility. It sometimes makes courageous decisions possible and sometimes it makes foolish decisions possible. The power of democracy comes from the vote not being the decision.

The separateness of vote and decision decouples any pretence of rationality from the decision. It makes little sense to talk of rational democratic decisions, although we may approve of decisions for other reasons. Nor will you find support for rationality within the events leading to the decision. The naïve account of events is that the participants think about each specific decision with the penetration of Socrates and stand by their rationally derived conclusion with commendable integrity. Observe voting and you will see that the vast majority of decisions are preceded by inadequate and contradictory thought, much of it around matters that are peripheral to the specific content of the decision to be taken. With equal claim to rationality politicians may determine to vote in accordance with their constituents' wishes, higher economic theory, or their perceived personal self-interest. Democracy cares not. It requires only the body to body.

Before the vote there is generally the opportunity to speak about the matter to be 'put' or submitted (not decided) – do not expect this to interest others. In theory and somewhat generally, the only reason to speak to a motion is to persuade others to vote as you intend to vote. Examined against this criterion very few speeches are credible. Democracy functions because it tolerates irrelevant speeches. It is this feature of democracy that provides the strongest argument for political parties in Westminster parliaments. In theory at least, the party provides the mechanism for an extended, more contemplative, consideration of matters. Political parties generally afford some such opportunity. Democracy cannot claim for itself any success in this. Political parties are an attempt to overcome the power of democracy. Faced with democracy – the *particular moment* of decision – human beings seek to manage outcomes.

The attempts at the reform of democracy look misguided from the phenomenological stance. Mention has already been made of Devine's survey of these. One further, more mundane form of objection is worth mentioning. An enduring objection to democratic decision making is that the mechanism delivers the wrong decision. Inevitably, such judgements entail rationality and to the phenomenologist they look flimsy because they require an initial subscription to some particular ontic theory. Consider Ferguson's pitch that the decision-makers are not very competent.

Ferguson, a military chaplain and political activist, counted among his friends David Hume and Adam Smith. He provides an orthodox account of the problems of democracy based upon his classical scholarship and his involvement in the Edinburgh kernel of the Scottish Enlightenment:

> it must be confessed, that popular assemblies, when composed of men whose dispositions are sordid, and whose ordinary applications are illiberal, however they may be intrusted with the choice of their masters and leaders, are certainly, in their own persons, unfit to command. How can he who has confined his views to his own subsistence or preservation, be intrusted with the conduct of nations? Such men, when admitted to deliberate on matters of state, bring to its councils confusion and tumult, or servility and corruption; and seldom suffer it to repose from ruinous factions, or the effect of resolutions ill formed or ill conducted. (Ferguson, 1995, p. 178)

Ferguson's objection to democracy is not that the system does not deliver decisions, but that it delivers poor decisions. The 'sordid' and the 'illiberal' ultimately produce 'resolutions ill formed or ill conducted'.

The phenomenological insight discounts from the situation Ferguson's normative concerns. To invoke Husserl, it 'brackets out' the disputatious, ontic, polemical aspects that engage Ferguson regarding particular decisions. It is his rational assessment about particular decisions that leads him to turn on those involved. The power within the democratic process itself is that the sordid and illiberal are able to vote and produce decisions at all. Those of Ferguson's persuasion, when confronted with this power engage for reform the paraphernalia associated with democracy; they do not engage with democracy itself. Ferguson took the high road to reform, that which in 1998 produced Scotland's Holyrood Parliament without altering democracy at all.

To conclude this overview of the phenomenology of democracy, a comment about how it aligns with the governance concept of democracy: the governance concept of democracy emerges from a particular imperative: *there is paraphernalia required to make practical those decisions rendered by democracy*. Accordingly, there emerges the modern distinction between governance with management, which is a tolerable version of the distinction between those with the ability to vote and those with the ability to dictate. The pervasiveness in the West of situations involving the governance concept of democracy and (by implication) the phenomenon of democracy is set out elsewhere (Shaw, 2003, 2007).

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