

Ecological Selves as Citizens and Governance as Ethical Place-Making

By LISA ECKENWILER

Consider the rational, self-sufficient, self-interested, extractive, and possessive creature who has been so well suited to industrial capitalism and who has created a mode of governance known as liberal interest group democracy. Time for him to go. To replace this formation of self, economy, and governance, I propose here that we embrace an ecological conception of persons. After making the case for this alternative account of selves, I consider what it suggests for the goals of ethics and politics. I argue that we should understand the fundamental goal of governance in terms of “ethical place-making for ecological selves and citizens.” For such citizens, but also by and of them, and for non-human ecological creatures as well. From there, I briefly explore considerations that should guide selections of new models of governance aimed at generating more livable, equitable futures. In the final section of this essay, I identify the ethical and political capacities that ought to characterize ecological subjects, and conclude by reiterating the central place of care and the centrality of places of care in nurturing them.

ECOLOGICAL SUBJECTS—CITIZENS

The independent human being of reason, a self oriented largely toward self-interested calculation and material acquisition, a figure of long standing in the history of Western philosophy, traceable through Plato, Augustine, Descartes and Locke, has been subject-

ed to considerable battering in contemporary philosophy. Rightly so. As feminist philosophers have argued, this long-looming idealization ignores the significance of the body in our lived experience and indeed, renders anything outside the inner recesses of the mind irrelevant—including, I might add, other forms of life and the planet itself, the very foundations of human survival itself.

In neglecting our embodiment, the prevailing account also obscures our inherently social nature, including our embeddedness in filial and communal relationships. Most crucial here are relations of dependence and care over the course of our lives as body-bound, vulnerable beings. A realistic conception of persons highlights the significance of the body and, at the same time, the “fundamental role of all societies [viz.] to provide the circumstances under which humans can be cared for and thrive, given their differing degrees of frailty and vulnerability.”¹

Bodies, interdependence, and caring relations are not the whole story, however, for ecological subjects. *Places*, the locations of human habitation, also have to meet certain conditions if ecological subjects are to survive, much less realize justice. We are located beings, a matter that proves integral to our possibilities. Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s notion of the “misfit” helps to shed light on the idea. Our shared vulnerability is not, she argues, only in our embodiment and potential to suffer, but also in the need for “fit” between

our bodies and our environments. “Misfits” are those who are ensconced in environments that cannot sustain them, where, as she puts it, “the world fails the flesh.”²

We can think about our embeddedness, what we might also call our emplacement, in at least two ways: geographical and social. We have evolved as corporeal creatures within relations of care, provided typically by families. This care is situated, and more or less well supported, in various political regimes.³ Other salient features of social context involve the dense web of social and institutional structures and processes within which we navigate as embodied beings. Social norms and economic structures and relations significantly shape bodies and subjectivities. These social structures and relations generate injustice to the extent that they expand possibilities for some and contract them for others.⁴

We are also located in particular geographic and atmospheric conditions—locatable places—that create the possibility of survival, flourishing, or failing.

Consider the growing body of evidence concerning societal determinants of health inequalities.

Studies show that heightened exposure to hazards (industrial and waste, and weak infrastructure like the levees in New Orleans), and diminished access to resources of all kinds (food, health care, parks and other public space, transportation) harm health. Data suggest that some people face increasing social isolation and depression, and restricted mobility as a result of the configuration of the built environment. The effect of trade agreements and structural adjustment programs on health systems and, more specifically, facilities and their material and human resources also makes clear the essential relationship between place—our embeddedness in it—and health.

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These examples underscore the fact that where and how people are situated amid social structures has important implications for their level of exposure to health threats and for the distribution of health and illness within a population.⁵ Economic status, gender, race and ethnicity, social connectivity, and citizenship/immigration status all figure in the development and persistence of health inequalities. Even “natural”

events like heat waves, famines, and tsunamis, which occur in and affect specific places and people—most often the poor—are, in part, attributable to social practices and policy choices. Climate change is an especially compelling case of the significance of geographical *and* social embeddedness for the health of ecological subjects, for as Marmot says, “the poor, the geographically vulnerable, the politically weak, and other disadvantaged groups will be most affected.”

Coming from another line of inquiry, contemporary work in epistemology argues that the environs we inhabit and traverse are integral to the kinds of thinking, knowing creatures we are. Philosopher Christopher Preston points out that “organisms that know things about the world are situated beings, beings cognitively grounded in the worlds from which they speak. An important part of this grounding is a physical location among material realities . . . [These] comprise some of the important factors relevant to how we know.”⁶

Our emplacement belies one further fiction found within the inherited view of subjects: that we are similarly situated. As the discussion above reveals, ecological subjects are immersed in inequalities of many kinds: social and economic; in access to essential natural resources such as clean air, fresh and drinkable water, arable land; in physical and cognitive capacities.

A final dimension of ecological subjectivity involves what geographers call the “inter-subjectivity” of place.⁷ As ecological subjects, we are “made by and making [our] relations in reciprocity with other subjects *and* with . . . (multiple, diverse) locations.”⁸ Seeing not only our personhood and identities but also *place* in relational terms, as inter-subjectively constructed, “highlights the multiplicity of locations [and] the variety of interactions between people who are located differently that go into making places.”⁹ This formulation seems clearly required in any lucid thinking about life under globalization.

This idea is significant ethically because it raises questions about responsibilities “for those relations with other parts of the world through which . . . identit[ies] are formed.”¹⁰ To the extent that we are “constitutively, elements within a wider, configurational, distributed geography . . . that raises a . . . question [concerning] . . . the geography of relations through which any particular identity is established and maintained.”¹¹ Elsewhere I have argued that we are responsible to others, especially those who help to shape our

identities and habitats not (merely) because of our—the privileged’s—participation in processes that generate injustice and ecological degradation in the places where others dwell (i.e., the relational justice argument, which emphasizes what we have done or contributed to), but also because of who and what we are as ecological subjects—creatures whose identities and habitats are mutually constitutive. If the first argument from relational justice cannot motivate responsible action, the prudential argument—which also hinges on the notion that we, as ecological subjects, corporeal inhabitants of intersecting ecosystems, are so thoroughly relational that we risk harming ourselves if we harm others—might do so.¹²

Thinking ecologically, we find an embodied, socialized, spatialized, interdependent ontology. We “dwell,” and we do so together, cohabiting in particular places within relations of embodied, structural, and ecological interdependence.¹³

TOWARD ETHICAL PLACE MAKING AND COHABITATION

Thinking about persons ecologically suggests we should resist a reductive, decontextualized view of individuals as the units of (moral and political) concern, for we cannot properly be conceived apart from our embeddedness in social relations and geographically, atmospherically identifiable locations in which we become and endure. Social and political responsibility, on this view, might be conceived in terms of ethical place-making.¹⁴

Place is not a fixed or merely an external thing.¹⁵ It can be understood as being *around* us, but also *in* and *with* us.¹⁶ The examples above point to tracts of land, waterways, worksites, dwellings, neighborhoods, hubs and vehicles of transportation, hospitals and clinics (or their remnants), bedrooms and bathrooms, kitchens, food markets, makeshift housing, bodies and psyches. They gesture toward what can be called “transnational space,” which includes, for instance, places of transition for nomads, refugees, and migrant workers—such as borders and immigration offices—or for people getting to and from work and other responsibilities, and places where economic transactions occur amid dense, global financial relations and processes. When using words like “where” and “occur amid,” I am mindful of the fact that financial interactions are not necessarily best understood as isolated events that happen in specific places.

To return to the geographers’ point on inter-subjectivity, places are, in Doris Massey’s words, “con-

structed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. [E]ach ‘place’ can be seen as a particular, unique point of . . . intersection.”¹⁷ Its specificity is its set and configuration of relations and its position within a wider web of social relations. Moreover, because they are shaped by social interactions, places, like subjects, have plural, shifting “identities.” They also become, endure and evolve; they are not static.

Also evident is the need to take seriously what Edward Casey calls the “rhizomatic structure of [our experience of] implacement.”¹⁸ This refers to the reality that our locatedness involves the continuous, often highly patterned navigation between interconnected places: homes, places of work, care settings, borders, and so on. People suffer ill health as a result of social structures and processes that create fragmentation or cause rupture, as in lived experiences of segregation, movement between fragmented care settings, movement from one’s place of employment to care settings, hypermobility, migration, and familial separation.¹⁹

But what more specifically do I mean by ethical place-making? Although geographers have coined the phrase, they do not seem to define it clearly. Lorraine Code argues that ecological thinking aims to “enact principles of ideal cohabitation.”²⁰ Following her lead, I want to suggest that ethical place-making involves first a negative condition: it is place-making that takes care to avoid creating, through our actions, interac-

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tions, practices and policies, conditions of deprivation. Conditions of deprivation are those that make it impossible to support and sustain the capacities of ecological subjects for becoming and enduring. Ethical place-making also includes a positive or constructive responsibility, namely, the obligation to create conditions of plenitude that facilitate and sustain becoming and duration in particular places. And finally there is the positive responsibility to put an end to conditions of deprivation where they already exist and replace them insofar as one can with conditions of plenitude, ecological flourishing, and resilience.

Ethical place-making requires explicit attention to the conditions for embodiment, relations of care, our social positioning, and crucially, our earthly embeddedness. The specific targets of intervention are the social processes and practices that create and sustain deprivation and inequality—for ecological subjects and thus their habitats.

Becoming, as I understand it here, is the capacity for development, evolution, and expansion (within bounds). *Duration* encompasses capacities for sustaining ongoing processes of “conservation, preservation, and abiding”—capacities for continuity, renewal, and persistence.²¹ Duration might mean strengthening at some times, while at others, getting by. Both call for some measure of stability, yet are not static. Below I will say more about the individual and relational meanings of these concepts, as well as what they might mean in terms of human interaction with natural resources and systems. What I want to suggest here is that these concepts may be preferable to others, often found in liberal philosophy, such as “well-being,” “flourishing,” and the like, which are built atop a foundation (often illusory) of self-determination.

Contemporary work on justice has shifted away from thinking strictly about the distribution of resources, or what people have, toward their capacities, or what they “are able to do and to be.”²² What I will call “enabling” conceptions of justice aim at attending to

the social and political conditions that support people’s capacities for self-development and self-determination. Iris Marion Young’s theory of justice as enable-

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ment calls for reform of the social and institutional structures that systematically constrain people’s capacities for self-development and self-determination. Carol Gould’s notion of justice as “equal positive freedom” requires not only “the absence of constraining conditions such as coercion and oppression” but also access to the means or conditions for “self-transformation” and the “development of capacities and the realization of projects over time.” Justice, here too, is about “the availability of *enabling* [my emphasis] conditions” for individuals.²³ Finally, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach emphasizes people’s capacities to be

and to do. As she underscores, here “active striving” and “achievement” matter.

The persistent emphasis on the self in articulating the ideals of justice in these views, however, serves to obscure our interdependence and need for caring relations and for fit with our environs. Liberal formulations of the self and its *telos* risk not reckoning sufficiently with the extent to which our capacities and our possible ends are shaped; that is, we are constrained and enabled by our emplacement—corporeal, social, and ecological—and, crucially, by our intersubjectivity. In a global economic order marked by the retraction of the public sector, rising inequality, and dramatic effects of climate change, a discourse of self-development and self-determination should give us pause.

Even though references to activities such as “development” and “striving” acknowledge our temporality, the emphasis on “being” (well-being) might also serve to obscure the fact that we, our interactions, and the social, economic, and political processes in which we are embedded have a past and are ongoing, opening into the future under ever-changing conditions. Our imaginations are projected toward the future rather than toward a static present when we think about becoming and persisting.

The emphasis on individual choice and activity, including “striving,” “achievement,” and “transformation,” may also eclipse other possibilities for the substance of a good life. Becoming and enduring, moreover, seem to be more in keeping with the realities of ecological limits, reimagined visions of the good life, of the role of work. Striving and achievement may be fine if they are disassociated from the individualist, capitalist, careerist self.

The precise meanings of becoming and duration, in any case, are to be worked out in overlapping political processes (more on this below). While we begin from a theory of needs, certainly human and other,²⁴ we shift our keenest perceptual and knowing capacities toward the habitats—unique and intersecting—where people dwell and move about, for particular and, to no small extent, shared purposes. What is crucial is for ecological subjects and their ecosystems to be dynamically moving and opening toward possibilities that have been discussed and agreed to; that are mindful of our embodied, embedded, interdependent circumstances; and that promote equality among persons and places.

If the scope of ethics and politics includes promoting equitable capacities for ecological subjects to become and endure, and thus promoting ethical

place-making, what are ideal forms of governance? I turn to this question now.

CONCEPTIONS OF GOVERNANCE

With ethical place-making as the aim of responsible action and policy, what form of governance is ideal? Many political philosophers and scientists have highlighted the perils of interest group democracy, so I will not dedicate time to those criticisms here.

Perhaps an ecological version of deliberative democracy could effectively challenge and provide an alternative to the primacy of a materialistic and consumptive notion of interests. Nevertheless, critics are wary of its potential for perpetuating exclusions and

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inequalities. Especially worrisome in this respect are its potential to (1) privilege certain forms and styles of expression (the impartial expert’s for

instance) and thus discount some contributions and forms of expression as less credible (storytelling for example); (2) assume that people are sufficiently symmetrical and that they can reverse perspectives, thus obscuring morally relevant differentiation and particularity in aiming for “unity,” the “common good,” and “shared meaning”; and (3) obscure other possible objectives in political engagement such as recognition or understanding.²⁵

Communicative democracy may better advance efforts to address exclusion and inequality.²⁶ On this model of democratic governance, moral and political engagement should be understood as largely dialogical; decisions emerge from the interactions of a plurality of subjects. Communicative democracy does not privilege impartiality but instead, drawing from standpoint epistemology, identifies and incorporates partialities in generating social knowledge to inform decisions. Instead of discounting or being suspicious about the value of personal narratives, for example, it regards them as resources.

For ecological subjects, indeed, meanings and expressions of well-being, of harm, and so forth are situated, socially and ecologically. Therefore, rather than aiming for unity, this model of democratic governance aims for recognition and understanding. The idea is that participants express their experiences and perspectives so that others situated differently can learn

how it is for them, what the meaning of events, experiences, any given policy is, and perhaps transform what once passed as knowledge to re-shape preferences, even identities.

With respect for a range of speech styles and forms of communicative interaction, things like greetings—smiles, handshakes, hugs—or storytelling can be incorporated as forms of expression that strengthen political discussion. Communicative democracy can also better acknowledge that there may be different understandings of what it is to cooperate or to justify decisions, of what emancipation itself means. And such democracy can embrace different kinds of sites for generating ideas: chosen, even oppositional communities (not those invoked by communitarians), street protests, and marginalized social networks.

Ecological communicative democracy, as I am using the conception, goes beyond feminist standpoint theory in situating knowers and knowledge-production efforts in particular places—socially *and* geographically shaped habitats—and conceives of them as “intersecting . . . with other locations and their occupants. . . . It maps locations of knowledge production and demographics of knowledge producers . . . [and] considers the specificities of the ‘habitat’ conditions and the inhabitants within and surrounding each location, to discern where analogies can be drawn and where exposed dis-analogies demand acknowledgment and/or rethinking.”²⁷

In her exploration of how to operationalize ecological thinking, Lorraine Code invokes the *bioregional narrative*. She sees this as an essential instrument in facilitating epistemic responsibility, which lies at the core of democratic governance. Quoting Jim Cheney, Code explains that a bioregional narrative is one “grounded in geography rather than in a linear, essentialized, narrative self.” Such narratives “map ecological relations to discern conditions for mutually sustaining lives within a specific locality . . . or *the interrelations among them* [my emphasis].”²⁸

Given the nature of ecological subjects, we might say, then, that ecological communicative democracy, in part through tools like bioregional narratives, aims to produce responsible assessments of the habitability of particular conditions for corporeal beings dwelling in care relations, social structures, and material, atmospheric surroundings. It also aims to assess these conditions in relation to others. The essential questions under ecological communicative democracy become, “What would ethical place-making mean here, or here,

or here, and where they intersect?” “What is necessary for promoting mutually sustaining, equitable lives?”

One final form of governance, ecological constitutionalism, would seem to have substantial potential for perpetuating exclusion and inequality. Decision makers may be removed from the pressures of interest groups, but they may also be removed from the public, including (and perhaps most troublingly) those who face injustice. Concerns regarding representation and inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability—in agenda setting, assessments, and discussions of needs—loom large here and indeed are exacerbated by the idea, advanced by some, that a form of interest group democracy should exist alongside.

Vibrant democracies are layered, textured systems of representation. Given what seem to be inevitable time constraints, perhaps a hybrid, ecological constitutionalism—mandated by and informed by deliberative democracy and more communicative models—is ideal. To give up on local governance and participatory, dialogical democracy is to give up on a core principal of most ecological movements. Yet the partial nature of the most responsive and responsible *knowing* and

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of what must be understood—the mapping of bioregional narratives, for example—for the sake of global ecological sustainability compels consideration of a form of governance like ecological constitutionalism. Moreover,

it may be that some societies lack, at least for present purposes, the capacity to rise above self-interest and myopia. Their members may maintain concern only for themselves, for their families and communities, and for their place. Although part of what I have tried to show here is that this myopia is misguided and wrong, when coupled with the timeframe for action ecological constitutionalism merged with participatory models (like ecological communicative democracy) becomes more palatable.

CAPACITIES FOR ETHICAL PLACE-MAKING

If we are to advance from being a people of competitive consumption into *ecological subjects* (a people of sustainable ecological responsibility), what sorts

of capacities characterize us? What is—and should be—found and cultivated among us in order that we become and endure in mutually sustaining, equitable relations of cohabitation?²⁹ Given the concerns raised in the previous section, what capacities might move us toward ideal—that is, maximally inclusive, participatory, and fair—forms of governance?

For humans as ecological subjects, the givens seem to be our embodiment, interdependence, and locatedness. Essential to this understanding, then, is respect for our animality. Nussbaum, for instance, calls on us to embrace a more Aristotelian and less Kantian image

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of a person, “bringing the rational and the animal into a more intimate relation with one another.”³⁰ This

has the benefit not only of “acknowledging that there are many types of dignity in the world”; it also helps to account for our relationality and embeddedness in habitats in a way that the undue emphasis on reason as the principal, if not sole, source of dignity cannot. Additionally, it captures the idea that we consume and excrete, relying on the resources around us in order to become and to endure.

A crucial capacity to cultivate among ecological subjects is moral imagination. Just democracies can only thrive when they take care to cultivate moral imaginations that are able and rich, capable of acknowledging, and, in turn, considering the ethical and political significance of pluralism, differentiation, and asymmetries in “situation,” power, and experience.

Rather than starting from an assumption of disinterest in others, ecological subjects, as interdependent, should nurture their capacities for *recognition*. Recognition has been understood in at least two senses: recognition of an individual’s unique identity as an autonomous individual and recognition of persons as belonging to particular communities or groups. This is taken to be an essentially cognitive process wherein “there is a conscious and explicit acknowledgment of another’s identity.”³¹ Carol Gould argues, however, that recognition should include a third dimension, namely, the recognition of others’ needs for relationships, both interpersonal and associative. To these three forms of recognition, we might add a fourth, given the concep-

tion of subjects in ecological terms: recognition of the places and the conditions in which people dwell.

In turn, ecological subjects should privilege respectful *interest*, engaging others and their ideas—unless they are unjust, intolerant, or unquestionably harmful ecologically—with a sense of appreciation and wonder. We should approach them as we approach gifts, even ones we are not sure we like or for which we, at the time, cannot see a use.

Ideally, ecological subjects should cultivate a *disposition toward empathy* and solidarity. In Gould's formulation, empathy "signifies a feeling or imaginative identification with another and that other's perspective and situation." While the notions of "identification," "mutuality," or "fellow feeling" are ethically perilous given social and ecological differentiation and asymmetries, the practice of seeking knowledge of another's situation, listening carefully, and at least trying to develop feeling for people's expressions about their particular plight—which may well intersect with ours and that of people we know—has value for promoting understanding and realizing justice.³²

Solidarity, while also perhaps a stretch, seems far more possible when we embrace an ecological conception of persons. Traditionally theorized as concerning relations between members of a particular group, region, or society, solidarity has been given a global reach in recent scholarship. Gould, for example, conceptualizes it as "a readiness to establish broader interrelations with a range of others" who may not be one's compatriots or fellow group or community members, but who may "share in a situation of being oppressed or exploited, or who, more generally, are suffering through no fault of their own."³³ And although solidarity is often understood as being motivated by "feeling with" others or a sense of "mutual concern," we can draw upon the ecological conception of the self to underscore our interdependence amid pluralism while avoiding the pitfalls of sentiment and reckoning with our differentiation.³⁴

Instead of taking for granted that we are acquisitive creatures, we should call for privileging critical acquisition. Starting from an expectation of acquisition, then, we should scrutinize what and how much we are trying to get our hands on, not to mention how we are going about it, whether the resource will continue to have generative capacity, and so forth. Stated differently, we will need to sustain ecosystems' capacities to become and endure. Sure, we need stuff. But the conception of self as an extractive, possessive, consumer

under industrial capitalism will have to be replaced, or we'll exhaust the planet's and our own bodies' capacities. While scarcities can indeed be socially constructed, there are very real resource constraints.³⁵

Another essential capacity for ecological subjects is being able to take the long view (temporal and spatial, across terrains and timeframes). This allows for identifying effects and their sources that may not be readily apparent, and for envisioning interventions that can be sustained over time. We might turn here to epistemologist Lorraine Code's discussion of ecologist Rachel Carson's critique of conventional studies on the effects of pesticides:

Viewed vertically, from a top-down observation position that draws linear, causal connections from chemical applications to the destruction of a targeted pest, the power of the then-new post-World War II chemicals to rid the environment, efficiently, of such diseases and insects . . . [seems] impressive. Yet viewed horizontally, taking a longer temporal and spatial view, across terrains and time-frames where their effects become manifest more slowly, the chemicals do not merely obliterate a predetermined target species. . . . They also contribute to the destruction and/or sterilization of insect-eating birds, ground squirrels, muskrats, rabbits, domestic cats, sheep and cattle, destruction that often does not follow the spraying instantaneously.³⁶

In taking the long view, ecological thinking can be understood as emphasizing the future over the past and present. The stakes here are high. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, unless we develop concepts of time and duration that "welcome and privilege the future, we will remain closed to understanding the complex processes of becoming that engender and constitute both life and matter."³⁷

This capacity to take the long view, moreover, holds ethical import. Informing our prevailing conception of responsibility is a specific phenomenology of agency that emphasizes, or "gives experiential primacy" to short-term effects rather than to remote ones. Thus, when consequences or outcomes are generated by an (often wide) array of agents and unfold over time, our sense of agency diminishes; that is, we see ourselves as implicated very little, if at all.³⁸ Ecological subjects should have a sense, then, of individuality but also of solidaristic and long-reaching agency.

Finally, ecological subjects should have well-devel-

oped abilities when it comes to exercising critical social reflexivity. This is crucial for purposes of assessing our situatedness, the nature and extent of our connections, and, in turn, our responsibilities. While a fuller discussion is beyond the scope of my project here, elsewhere I argue in favor of the view that “differences in kind and degree . . . correlate with an agent’s position within the structural processes” and the geography of intersecting, interdependent ecosystems.³⁹

As a final consideration, it warrants repeating that the work of care—principally parenting but also teaching—is crucial to the foundations of social organization and cooperation in part because it creates the next generation of citizens and shapes their capacities: corporeal, social, intellectual, ethical, and political. If ecological civic engagement is to thrive, societies must thoroughly and effectively support those who work to generate it, and attend to the conditions in which it occurs.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

I have argued here that we should reimagine and rearticulate visions of selves as ecological subjects, and transform social life, ethics, and politics into an endeavor aimed at ethical place-making. Forms of governance should be forged accordingly. Whatever model we embrace, at the core must stand a commitment to epistemic responsibility, to knowing well, for the sake of more just and livable futures.

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NOTES

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