

# A relational society

*Michael Rustin*

In a previous [Manifesto instalment](#) we described the ways in which vocabularies of the economy – the ways in which it is conceived and described in the dominant discourse of ‘free markets’ – give rise to misleading and false conceptions of the good. We have argued that the present economic order is in many respects destructive to well-being, and is fast becoming unsustainable in its own terms, because of its propensity to crisis, and because of the burden it places on planetary resources and the physical environment. Thus, the principles of economic life are, in our view, in need of deep and substantial rethinking. This instalment proposes one sphere where such rethinking may begin.

Neoliberalism has as one of its basic presuppositions the idea that the human world is composed essentially of individuals, who should as far as possible be free to make their own choices and to advance their own interests, in pursuit of whatever they may deem their happiness to be. To be sure, individuals are expected to avoid interfering with the freedom of others, and systems of moral and legal regulation exist to ensure that such limits and protections are enforced. But these are seen as applying to what are essentially individuals, acting without reference to a wider social context.

In reality, of course, individuals do not pursue their interests in isolation from or even in negotiated contractual exchanges with one another; they do so within large and complex economic and governmental systems, which generally have far more influence on their opportunities and chances in life than the personal decisions they make. The capacity to formulate desires and aspirations, and the capabilities to advance them, are substantially shaped by individuals’ conditions of birth and family origin, even in those societies which are

most open to individuals' own strivings. Livelihoods (the essential means of life, and the grounds for being able to make choices and pursue goals) are usually made available to, or withheld from, people, by decisions taken within organisations of many kinds, such that the individual freedoms which the dominant order proclaims as its first principle are in fact mightily constrained by forces over which no individual has control – although of course some have more power than others.

Economic libertarians such as Robert Nozick believe that democratic (and other) governments wrongly interfere with individuals' freedom to dispose of themselves and their property as they wish, for example through taxation. Many socialists and Marxists hold, to the contrary, that the division of powers between those who own capital and those who own only their labour imposes gross inequities on who has access to what kinds of freedom, and makes a mockery of the idea of the equal freedoms of the individual. Gerry Cohen also put forward a telling refutation of Nozick's idea of freedom, by drawing attention to the unjustified assumptions he made about what morally belongs innately and exclusively to an individual, and what does not.<sup>1</sup>

Our argument is that the entire basis of this debate – the idea of the autonomous, self-seeking individual as the foundational 'atom' of the human world – is wrongly conceived. For human beings are essentially *social* beings – and individual freedom and choice, where they emerge and exist, are the outcome of delicate and precarious social arrangements, not primordial facts of nature.<sup>2</sup> A besetting fault – indeed pathology – of contemporary capitalist societies is that in their relentless advocacy of individual freedom, gratification and possessiveness, they undermine the very social conditions which make its exercise, for most people, possible.<sup>3</sup>

This instalment is concerned with the kinds of relationship with others on which individuals depend for their well-being, through various phases of their lives. The quality of social institutions – in the spheres for example of health, education, work, criminal justice or citizenship – depends substantially on what qualities of human

relationship they facilitate. In the abridged version of this article published in *Soundings* 54, I go on to discuss human relations with nature. Spatial relations, important in understanding links between the global and the local, are not considered here.<sup>4</sup>

## Human needs and the welfare state

In the long arguments about what in one discourse is called the welfare state, in another social protection, and in another social rights and entitlements, a crucial demand has been for recognition of the realities of unavoidable and universal human dependency.

Human beings come into the world entirely helpless, and are dependent, for many years, on the care of others. Indeed, they are even dependent, as human scientists now tell us, on their loving care, since the capacity of persons to develop minds and emotional resources depends on the quality of attention given to them through their infancy and childhood. Throughout their lives, but in particular in their later years, people are vulnerable to illness, and nearly all will experience a period of time when they are as intensely vulnerable and dependent upon the ministrations of others as they were when they were first born.

In complex, educated, industrial societies, our experiences of dependency and need are not confined to those that are, in a basic sense, given to us by our biology. Societies require individuals to achieve learning and development, take up roles and positions within them, and to survive social transitions (for example to and from school, into the world of work, to parenthood, to disoccupation and retirement) and sudden rupture in the pattern of their lives. These are expectations placed on individuals from their earliest days of life, and where they are not, or cannot, be met, a repertoire of remedies and sanctions are invariably mobilised to bring about some acceptable level of compliance with social norms. (Different societies employ different regimes of compliance for their deviants, and these change with the times, as Michel Foucault among others has shown.) When children first enter the world, they already bring with them complex material

and relational needs, whose satisfaction or otherwise by their primary carers will always have lasting consequences for their later development and well-being. A child's entry into the world beyond his or her family, and into the different stages of education and the challenges which this brings, carries with it another cluster of needs, for the provision of which children and their families depend on others, in schools and other supportive social agencies. Later still, comes the transition for young people to being receivers of and participants in education, to the world of work, when individuals are expected to become the makers of goods and the producers of value in their own right. This transition involves its own vulnerabilities, which in present economic circumstances have become particularly acute, since for many young people work of any kind, and especially work which offers the prospects of personal satisfaction and development, are absent. Today, even the transition from university to employment, for the relatively privileged young people who have been to university, is often hazardous and full of anxiety, so defective has society become in its support of such crucial stages in the life-course. Paul Mason has recently argued that the existence of large numbers of unemployed graduates in many parts of the world has been a potent force in 'kicking off' protests, in the Arab Spring and elsewhere.

Nor is the experience of becoming a parent to be understood as a merely 'natural' function, capable of being undertaken outside of a supportive network of social relations, including families, friendships and formal institutions. These include the medical services necessary to support the birth of a child, and the material arrangements which are essential if a family is to have somewhere to live, and resources on which to live – which can no longer to be taken for granted given the deficiencies of contemporary housing and employment opportunities.

And later still, there is an inevitable transition from the world of work into retirement, and the experiences this can bring, which may range from the imposition of an abrupt loss of identity (which may amount to a kind of social death) to entry into a phase of post-retirement life which can have the potential both for new kinds of

freedom and satisfaction, and for experiences of loneliness and emptiness.

The modern 'welfare system', for want of a better term, was constructed during the earlier epoch of capitalism that we have called the social democratic settlement, as a set of responses to these various phases of dependency. This settlement recognised – and indeed insisted – that the 'law of the market' could not, for the majority of people, provide sufficiently for such needs.

One means of public intervention then chosen was material support, providing for the redistribution of money and resources to individuals and families at dependent phases of their life-cycle when these could not be adequately provided by individual self-provision (and of course this still, in somewhat attenuated form, continues to function). And although there was usually some element of redistribution between richer and poorer involved in these transactions, a much more important logic was redistribution not between members of different social classes, but between people at different phases of their life-cycle. That is, from those at a phase of life when they *were* able to support their families from their earnings in the labour market, to those who at another phase of life became excluded from it, for reasons of age, sickness, economic circumstances (local or more pervasive unemployment) or misfortune. One of the achievements of Peter Townsend's research on poverty was his demonstration that poverty was a condition which was and is suffered by large numbers of unexceptional individuals, at particular phases of their life-cycle, and was not merely the experience of a particular social class of the disadvantaged and the poor.<sup>5</sup> The idea that poverty is such an exceptional, marginal and indeed blameworthy condition lies behind the current scapegoating of 'scroungers' and those dependent on welfare benefits, as if they were in some way responsible for the crisis and weakness of the British economy, which they plainly are not.

Many forms of intervention in response to human needs are not, however, primarily material or financial in nature, but involve activities

of nurturing, caring, educating, advising, nursing, rescuing and protecting. In the myriad of occupations devoted to these services (child care, medicine, teaching, nursing, social care, even policing) the primary work consists of responding in qualitatively specific ways to the needs of people, with the attention, commitments and skills which are appropriate to each particular situation. A diversity of capabilities and sensitivities are involved in all of these activities, each supported at best by distinct occupational cultures, whose moral essence is illuminated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'.

Today, in the system of neoliberal capitalism, the primary goals of these fields of work – namely to respond to needs arising from different kinds of vulnerability – are at risk of being pushed to the margin by the reframings of organisational and personal tasks in terms of economic gain, market advantage, profit seeking and compliance with instructions and regulations that often have little relevance to the tasks in hand. One of the main reasons why there is such dismay and outrage in the public sector at the changes being imposed on it so ruthlessly at the present time is the belief of its workers that the principal value and meaning of what they do goes unrecognised, disparaged and even abused by policy-makers and the managements that are made to serve as their instruments.

It is of course inevitable that in modern societies the services which provide for human vulnerabilities are organised within formal institutions. These are often highly complex organisations, sometimes involving sophisticated technical resources, as in medical care. For reasons of scale these are necessarily 'impersonal' in some of their operations. Resources are always necessarily limited, and impersonal procedures – for example the use of web-based systems to convey information or make appointments – may be time- and cost-saving to good effect. Good quality human services, even if they depend primarily on face-to-face interactions (such as between teacher and pupil or therapist and client) can neither be created nor maintained without education, training, planning and organisation. Difficult

choices have to be made in deciding how to provide complex human services, in regard to which kind of institutions work best in which circumstances. There is no universal solution to be found to the question of what organisational forms can provide the optimal containers for each kind of service. Different arrangements will be appropriate in different circumstances – and may include, for example, uniform forms of provision sanctioned by the central state, services largely shaped by professional expertise, locally-provided services sanctioned by voters, voluntary services, or those provided by competitive providers in a market. What is, however, certain is that many different ‘voices’ and interests need to be involved in deciding democratically, and through public discussion, which institutional forms are best in what conditions.

Yet a single imposed ‘universal model’ for the provision of services is exactly what is now being propagated and enforced under the regime of neoliberalism. This is based on the doctrine that services will be provided effectively and efficiently only where providers are motivated primarily by financial incentives. One aspect of this is the belief that the transfer of a hitherto public service to a private provider is *ipso facto* likely to lead to its improvement and to greater efficiency. This programme of privatisation was first introduced in the previous period of Conservative government (with denationalisations and the compulsory contracting of services by local government), was slowed down under New Labour though remaining very much part of its agenda, and has now been accelerated under the Coalition government. Indeed the urgency of this process, for example in the National Health Service, suggests that the government intends to entrench such transfers from the public to the private sector before the next general election, through binding contracts, so that they have become ‘facts on the ground’ in the event of their defeat.

The assumption that the introduction of a profit incentive will of itself improve provision is, however, a false one. It seems often to lead to a displacement of attention from the provision of the service, and the complex systems and cultures required to achieve this, to the short-

term aims of financial return. The gross scandals of A4E, the firm to whom the lion's share of the Preparation for Work programme was handed over, and of G4S, the company entrusted with providing security for the London Olympics, are examples of the risks. Similarly, the assumption that scrapping 'regulations' defining standards will on its own deliver sufficient incentive to companies to invest where formerly they did not appears to make the most simplistic assumptions about what determines investment decisions in a complex economy. (This agenda of deregulation now encompasses the spheres of health and safety, employment protection, building standards regulation, planning controls, energy saving requirements and even fire regulations and disability access requirements.) The corporate sector has itself rejected a number of deregulatory proposals of this kind as simply irrelevant to its decision-making; these include, for example, the proposal to reduce the period within which employees will have protection from unfair dismissal, and the offer of employee shareholdings in return for the surrender of employment rights.

It is this same logic which now demands that provider organisations and their sub-units operate as businesses or quasi-businesses, with the state of their balance-sheets given priority over all other indicators of their performance and value. Such 'market disciplines' have been widely imposed on institutions which are still formally 'public' in their ownership, ostensibly as means to improve their efficiency. But it is clear that the 'public' character of these institutions can be made into a mere external shell, which allows their internal remodelling into structures and cultures very close to those of corporate businesses.

Once this remodelling has taken place, it becomes only a further step to allow 'fully private' providers entry into what have been redefined as 'markets', and for the wholesale privatisation of public services to take place. This is a programme of privatisation in effect by stealth and misrepresentation, since even as these organisational changes are enforced, public denials continue that this direction has anything to do with privatisation. This is also the logic which has legitimated increasing inequalities of rewards to individuals, with



differentials between those in more and less senior positions increasing by multiples over recent years, even in so-called public institutions. One hardly has to be cynical to recognise that the tacit purpose of creating a stratum of super-managers (e.g. university vice-chancellors, NHS and local authority executives, and their phalanxes of lieutenants) paid at something approaching the level of private sector managers is to weaken their identifications with the professional cultures and values in which they often began their careers, and to recruit them as accomplices to the new order of the rich.

The problem is that if organisations and their managers and employees are incentivised chiefly to do what is in their own economic interests, the consequence is liable to be the invasion and corruption of their primary tasks and commitments. The 'economic' logic of maximising financial (or reputational) returns for an institution often runs counter to the 'needs-based' logic of fulfilling their professional and human goals. And what may well begin, for a senior public manager, as an external pressure on him or her to meet demands to achieve greater efficiency or solvency, over time may become an internalised commitment to financial goals. These now come to be perceived as the only reality that matters, in contradistinction to what they may now see as a merely sentimental or reactionary loyalty of more junior organisational members to professional client-oriented goals and methods. The seduction of high salaries comes to be not merely the material satisfactions they bring (and financial insurance against the omnipresent risk of failure and dismissal) but also the satisfactions of competing for status, prestige and power with other 'high earners', clearly a major motivation among the elites of the private sector.

The excessively stratified reward system of the Football Premier League, astonishingly tolerated by supporters of the game, now serves as a mirror for the entire society, as it symbolises and legitimises the displacement of spheres of intrinsic value by the esteem accorded to money alone (linked in that instance to the larger financial circuits of Russian – and American – corporate oligarchy and to Gulf oil). Those

who try to establish the principle and practice of supporter-owned clubs further a democratic cause whose symbolic significance goes well beyond football.

In many fields of practice, it is people in the most difficult (and often most 'disadvantaged') 'cases' who are both those most in need of services, and the most demanding of their resources. How does an institution, or its practitioners, decide between the priority it gives to the perceived needs of its clients, and its own financial or reputational interest? Marketised systems provide strong incentives to cherry-pick and to cheat, to find ways of maximising economic returns while minimising the commitment of resources to the most needy. How much easier it is to demonstrate strong educational performance if one excludes weak pupils; or to achieve high returns in health care if one avoids taking on the most chronically vulnerable patients. Or to be a 'world class university' if only the most talented and privileged students are enrolled. This is not to mention the grosser forms of cheating which are sometimes revealed, as when payment is claimed (as in the finding of jobs for young people in a recent case) for services which are not even delivered. The principles of responsiveness to the needs of others, and of pursuit of individual and institutional self-interest, are frequently in conflict with one another. A different set of assumptions and values is needed if this contradiction is to be resolved, and a proper priority accorded to human well-being.

The separation of norms and powers through a system in which 'welfare institutions' looked after dependency needs, while the private sector economy gave scope to the pursuit of individual interests, was an earlier attempted institutional resolution of this dilemma. But the marketisation of the entire society, including its provisions for needs and welfare, is unravelling this compromise. Even the commitments of individual practitioners become confused and disorganised when the systems around them insist that what matters most is not the needs of their patients, pupils or other service users, but more self-centred imperatives bearing on the competitive success of their organisation. Sometimes conformity to an organisation's principles of

self-interest is enforced by placing employees' own futures in jeopardy, for example through competitive redundancy and re-employment procedures. Regulatory systems – which have become an increasingly pervasive aspect of modern forms of governance – often merely incentivise self-interested behaviour by institutions or their workers, even when their ostensible object is to ensure that they respond appropriately to people's needs. This is because compliance can become an overriding preoccupation within organisations, distracting practitioners from responsiveness to their primary task, rather than assisting them in it.

## Relationships and well-being

The development of human potentialities and capabilities, and thus the potential both for individuals' fulfilment and for the production of social goods, depends essentially on the quality of relationships within which they are nurtured. This is a proposition to which we think a redesign of our economy and social system needs to give deep attention.

It is obvious, from everyday experience, that this proposition is true. We know that children do better, in terms of physical and emotional health, and educational development, the better the quality of early care that they receive. A measure of governmental acknowledgement of this truth is accorded by the provision of services in early years – it was the rationale for the now-diminishing Sure-Start programme. We know that children learn more in school if they have more attention from teachers. This is why one of the benefits sought in the purchase of private education is smaller classes and more favourable pupil-teacher ratios. (Another benefit, of course, not much related to this, is the achievement of social segregation from the less fortunate, and closer association with the more privileged.) The universities of highest standing have more resources to spend, per student, than lower-ranked universities. The principal resource in question is the time of their academic staff, although whether universities always choose to devote this to the education of their students, as against other reputational priorities, is another issue.

In entering paid work for the first time (or perhaps at any time) the finest gift any new entrant can receive is a supervisor, manager or mentor who has an interest in and a commitment to his or her well-being and development. It is a good fortune when someone's early occupational experience is of this kind, and it often makes a lasting difference to later career development and fulfilment. Furthermore, such qualities of concern, once experienced, are often internalised, and become part of a 'habitus' which is lived out in later practice, to the good of later entrants into a field or institution who benefit from a 'passing on' of the attention earlier given.<sup>6</sup> (Thus, gifts may not merely be given in reciprocal exchange, but may also later be passed on to strangers.) Such good occupational practices, based on recognition of the importance of relationships for personal development, are not merely the attributes of individuals. They can be embodied in institutions and occupational cultures, over long periods, and may contribute a great deal to the reputation and success of a particular organisation or enterprise. Someone once told me, apropos of a particular young person entering her first permanent job, 'She is fortunate – that organisation (which my informant knew well) has a reputation for nurturing those who join it.' And so it proved.

We know, further, that the quality of attention which doctors or nurses give to their patients makes a great deal of difference to an individual's experience of illness, and the anxiety and emotional (indeed physical) pain to which this gives rise. There is a substantial scientific literature on the emotional dimensions of health care, from the different research perspectives of information-sharing, emotional labour, and unconscious defences against anxiety. But there is no room for doubt about the central relational issue. Furthermore, although the developments which have taken place in regard to care of the dying, through the hospice movement and its broader extensions, owe a great deal to the pharmaceutical management of pain, its achievements are also due to the recognition of the emotional and relational ambience surrounding patients. Indeed one is inseparably linked to the other, since lack of attention to physical pain is sometimes an effect of an

environment in which the patient cannot be seen as a whole person. Such inattention is often a self-distancing defence against the recognition of pain and suffering.

Of course one could also cite countless more 'exceptional' cases, of the many prominent individuals, for example writers and artists, sometimes from obscure and difficult backgrounds, who have attributed the beginning of their creative life and its opportunities to a particular friend or teacher, whose interest in them was the key to their discovering or recognising their potential. Or one could point to the common experience of young people learning to do music, or to act, or to swim, and how much difference the quality of attention from a teacher can make.

## **A measure of value**

This perspective suggests that a significant measure of value, and indeed of the well-being of a society, should lie in the qualities of relationship which are available to individuals at each stage of their life-course. It is not, as we argued in a previous instalment of this Manifesto, economic growth as it is counted in money terms by which we should measure the progress or improvement in our society, but by the attention given to people and their development. It is surely obvious, furthermore, that as the investment in human labour that is required to produce material goods diminishes, thanks to modern technologies, so the potential availability of human resources for the development and care of persons should increase. There is no conceivable material or technological excuse for unemployment, when there is abundant work which could and should be done, in nurturing, developing and expressing human capabilities.

Nor should this be thought of simply as the substitution of one kind of 'consumption' for another, or a change in the balance between them. Labour invested in human relationships is a form of 'production', as much as labour invested in the manufacture of commodities. Since it shapes future capacities, it is even more an investment in the future.

This is the case for the 'human work' which takes place in schools or day-nurseries, or in training and developing employees, or in looking after the ill, or indeed in the appropriate punishment and care of offenders. It is also the case in the work of looking after customers – think of the difference this makes, comparing good and bad experiences on holiday or even while shopping.

In the post-capitalist future which we would like to see, a different priority given to the cultivation of human needs and capabilities would be a significant indicator of progress. A different economic and institutional architecture from that which we now have will be needed if we are to bring these objectives into the centre of public policy, and as indicators of progress.

## Questions of policy

It may reasonably be asked what the implications of this argument might be for policy. Changing a climate of basic assumptions may be a good thing, but how do such changed ways of thinking become embedded in social action? And furthermore, how can such changes be made real – as opposed to, in effect, being stolen by management personnel and customer relations departments, to make it seem as if their organisations have become more sensitive to human needs, while in reality little has been altered but appearances? (And governments too have proved adept at seeking legitimacy by changing the appearance of what they do, rather than its reality.)

Below are some brief pointers to means by which development in the directions proposed can be considered:

(1) There is the apparently mundane but in fact crucial issue of numbers. The number and ratio of staff members assigned to look after people – especially dependent people, whether they be infants, children, students, patients or the very old – is always a crucial indicator of the quality of care and attention that will be available. They are in a sense its 'material base', whose limitations cannot be overcome by mere will or good intentions. This obvious reality is routinely denied

– even lied about – by those wishing to ‘economise’ on the costs of services, even though the smallest inspection of what is provided through the market for ‘private’ customers makes it clear that human attention is nearly always the principal ‘extra’ that is being paid for by the privileged. We need both to argue the material case for sufficient staffing, and to contest the notion that ‘efficiencies’ can make cuts bearable.

(2) There are the norms and practices of inspection and audit, now routine in all public services and no doubt in private corporations too. Audit and inspection are commonly seen as engines of standardisation and one-dimensionality, and indeed they have for the most part been of this kind. But need they be? Could forms of public accountability not be developed which are inclusive and democratic, and which were attentive to the human qualities of services, rather than to their conformity to rules, procedures and ‘outputs’?

The questions need to be posed of what it is that is to be inspected for, and who is to do the inspecting. How open and dialogic are the relations between the auditors and the audited, the watchers and the watched? What qualities of relationship are desired to exist between providers and clients, in for example a day nursery, a care home, a hospital, a school, a university or even a prison? The recent disaster of the Mid Staffordshire Hospital Trust shows the extent to which current regimes of inspection may neglect such basic dimensions of quality. Systems of inspection which gave a high emphasis to the relational qualities of institutions, and which involved communities of practice in thinking about these issues, would be a potential means of change.

(3) There are also questions of the initiation, training, support and leadership of work-forces, in all of these sectors. This is not simply a question of making institutions more democratic in their governance, or more equal in their distribution of payments and rewards, though this is nearly always desirable. Relationships of dependence are, almost by definition, not equal, and inequalities are also inherent in most environments which facilitate learning. The functions of leadership and

authority can be benign and responsible, rather than exploitative and repressive, and such roles are essential to a good society, in many of its spheres of activity. Enabling individuals to learn, over a life-time, to acquire the capabilities to be good citizens, attentive to the development and needs of others as well as to their own interests, is more relevant to human well-being than the pursuit of the chimera of 'economic growth' as the measure of human happiness.

## Notes

1. G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom*, Oxford University Press 1988.
2. This idea that individuals are the outcome of complex social arrangements and relationships was the starting point of the field of sociology, for example in the work of Emile Durkheim in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was the grounds for sociology's critique of the 'individualist' disciplines of economics and psychology as descriptions of the ontological foundations of human existence. The rise of sociology to prominence during the decades of the post-war welfare settlement, and the antipathy to it by neoliberals from the 1980s onwards, reflects these differences in world-view, refracted in academic as well as in many other spheres of life.
3. Another dimension of the debate about relationality concerns the functions of the government and the state. IPPR's recent short book *The Relational State* (G. Cooke and R. Muir (eds), IPPR 2012) argues for a reconceptualisation of the role of the state, its principal author Geoff Mulgan arguing that just as the state previously changed from being a coercive to a delivery state, now is the time to move towards the relational state. This argument seems to be a self-critique of New Labour's approach to government when it was in office, and as such is welcome. Mark Stears and others in this symposium suggest that it is mistaken to suppose that the state can be relational, but propose instead that it can facilitate relationships, through supporting structures in which the commitments of people to one another can flourish. I am closer to Stears's position than to Mulgan's in this argument. But this focus on the functions of the state only addresses some of the issues we are raising here. A top-down, centralising and bureaucratic state is certainly one enemy of a relational society. But, in our time, its greater one is the ethos of an unfettered corporate capitalism, insisting on individual choice and



the virtues of competition as its principal values. On this crucial subject *The Relational State* is silent.

4. On spatial relations see David Featherstone and Joe Painter (eds), *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey*, Wiley 2013.
5. See P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Penguin 1979.
6. This concept of the 'internal' denotes the idea that relationships have unconscious as well as conscious dimensions. The 'object relations' perspective in British psychoanalysis has relevance to the perspective put forward here, as I have proposed elsewhere.

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