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Fiction, Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of the Self

The claim that literary fiction is a valuable source of knowledge can be confronted with the following skeptical objection: on a standard account of the conditions for both the possession and transmission of knowledge, fiction cannot be considered a source of knowledge, for we are not justified in believing any claims from fiction. Our paper argues that the skeptic is wrong. We will start by introducing the notion of *self-knowledge*, the knowledge a person has of their own conscious attitudes, and distinguish it from *knowledge of the self*. Both kinds of knowledge concern a person's beliefs about herself, but they differ in their precise scope and justificatory conditions. We will then argue that the self-knowledge one easily gains by reading fiction is an important route to knowledge of the self, which in turn is hard to obtain, and that a case can be made for literary fiction being an especially valuable source of knowledge of the self.

1. Knowledge from Fiction

> *Car ils [sc. my readers] ne seraient pas, comme je l'ai déjà montré, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes, mon livre n'étant qu'une sorte de ces verres grossissants comme ceux que tendait à un acheteur l'opticien de Combray, mon livre grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes. (Proust 1927, 211)*

In contemporary debates in philosophy, the claim that literary fiction is a valuable source of knowledge seems to have more proponents than opponents. Cognitivists, i.e. philosophers who defend the idea that fiction has a significant cognitive value, have argued that we can gain knowledge of empirical facts, knowledge of concepts, knowledge of what is possible, knowledge of human nature, or knowledge of emotions.[1] Literary scholars, in contrast, typically do not aim to argue for fiction as a source of knowledge. Rather, they tend to take for granted that fiction not only delights but also instructs, to use Horace's famous phrase from the *Ars Poetica*. And, on the face of it, doesn't our own reading experience speak for the cognitive virtues of fiction? After all, literary fiction "speaks *about us*," as Martha Nussbaum has it, "about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections" (1990, 171; emphasis in the original). So how could we possibly fail to learn from it?

Philosophers broadly distinguish two kinds of knowledge: non-propositional knowledge (e.g. knowledge of how to ride a bike or knowledge of what it is like to face a tiger in the wild) and propositional knowledge.[2] In this paper, we are interested in propositional knowledge. In order for a person to have such knowledge, a set of conditions must be met. While there is no consensus in the philosophical literature as to what exactly these conditions are,[3] there is a very influential strand which claims that in order to know that p is the case, a person

must have a belief that p is the case, and p must actually be the case, and the person must also have sufficient grounds for believing that p is the case. This is often called the "JTB"-theory of knowledge, where "B" stands for *belief*, "T" for the *truth* of this belief, and "J" for the belief being *justified*. For example, in order for a person to know that Belgium is a country, they must believe that Belgium is a country, this belief must be true, and they must also be justified in holding it.[4]

Since the justification condition ("J-condition" in what follows) will play a crucial role in this paper, we will take a moment to reflect on why a true belief needs to be justified in order to constitute knowledge. A number of answers have been discussed in the literature. One has to do with stability: a belief that is firmly grounded by reasons (and thus justified) cannot be shaken easily. In order to give such a belief up, the reasons for holding it need to be shaken, too. If knowledge has some stability built into it (so that we cannot claim to *know* what we are willing to give up at the slightest whim, or what we attain by mere wish), the justification condition can explain why this is so. Moreover, knowledge seems to be closely intertwined with rationality: *knowing* something can hardly be epistemically irrational. And if what we know is necessarily supported by sufficient reasons, then this very fact can explain the rationality built into the notion of knowledge; for being rational simply means being supported by sufficient reasons.[5]

2. The Skeptical Challenge

The skeptic about knowledge from fiction claims that any beliefs we may gain from fiction do not meet the J-condition, i.e. are not justified. Those of us who wish to defend the idea that we can gain knowledge from fiction thus face the following challenge: How can we gain knowledge from fiction if our true beliefs from fiction are not justified?

Why would the skeptic think that beliefs from fiction are not justified? There are several reasons, of which we will mention only one here.[6] We usually don't have direct access to the truth of statements taken from a work of fiction. Rather, an author or narrator communicates truths by way of, say, a novel. In order for us to be able to gain knowledge through such testimony, the person transferring truths usually has to have knowledge of these truths and thus be able to transfer this knowledge. Moreover, we have to have sufficient reason to believe that our source is reliable. And although this is of course only a simplified version of how knowledge is transferred,[7] one may doubt that the conditions mentioned are met in our everyday encounters with works of fiction.

To begin with, what is said in a fiction is (usually) not asserted, and it need not be true. Consider, for example, some facts about geography. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), we read that there is a place called Maycomb "some twenty miles east of Finch's Landing" (10). It is very possible that, in writing a

realistic novel, Lee carefully checked the facts before setting the scene. But she certainly also made things up, and she knitted both together so that one cannot easily tell fact from fiction. Since we cannot know whether we are facing a truthful assertion – more generally: since we cannot know which, if any, of the sentences of the novel are to be taken as genuine assertions – we do not have sufficient reason to believe that there is a place called Maycomb "some twenty miles east of Finch's Landing". Consequently, we are not justified and fail to know.[8]

But why, one may ask, should we take the skeptic seriously? Doesn't the skeptic's problem stem from a theoretically loaded notion of knowledge? And couldn't we avoid the problem by giving up this notion and replacing it with a different notion of knowledge?[9]

We believe that this is not an option, for several reasons. First, note that when philosophers are concerned with giving precise conditions for the possession of knowledge, they aim to systematize our everyday understanding of knowledge. This means that we may be well-advised to listen to what they have to say, because they are concerned with *our* issues. Second, there are of course other notions of knowledge. After all, to talk about what a cat or dog might know may come naturally to some, even though it may not make sense to ascribe beliefs to animals or ask whether they are justified in holding them. Moreover, we may use 'know' or 'knowledge' when we talk about astrology, even though there is probably no justification whatever available for astrological claims. There are many more contexts in which people use the words 'know' and 'knowledge'. Different cognitive states or abilities (using 'cognitive' in a fairly broad sense) have different conditions of acquisition and possession (other than JTB, that is), and their respective possession will be of greater or lesser value to the knower. And we may, of course, ask whether we can gain such states or abilities from fiction.

Nevertheless, the 'philosopher's' notion of knowledge, and the JTB-analysis of knowledge in particular, should be taken seriously. Epistemologists who have focused on this conception of knowledge aim to study what they think occupies the '*pole position' in a subject's cognitive relation to the world*. The primary motivation in many epistemologists' work is to understand what it means to stand in an epistemologically impeccable relation to the world. In Laurence BonJour's (2010, 58) terms:

> Knowledge in the sense that is […] delineated by this conception is supposed to be a supremely valuable and desirable cognitive state, one whose possession marks the difference between full cognitive success and at least some degree of cognitive failure: knowledge is the epistemic *summum bonum*.[10]

We are concerned with the question whether fiction provides a source of knowledge thus understood. And to answer this question, it is not important whether other relations between mind and world – other states, cognitive or not, which one may or may not acquire while reading fiction – are worth studying.

Let us, then, return to the skeptical challenge and see how it can be met. We could claim that generally, the J-condition, like the other conditions of knowledge, may be, and often actually is, met in our encounters with fictions. This has been argued by Tilmann Köppe (2008), who contends that we can acquire empirical knowledge about the world from fiction, mostly (and simply)

because, despite the fact that we are reading *fiction*, we are not cut off (and actually cannot be cut off) from our ordinary justificatory resources. Just as we will check whether an informant's testimony is reliable in everyday contexts, so we will check the information we get from reading fiction by using the very same resources – including, first and foremost, our background knowledge. Optimistically, Köppe (2008) suggests that in our encounters with fiction, the J-condition is not any harder to meet than in our other encounters with testimonial knowledge.

In this paper, we will follow a similar line. We will argue that, for a particular *type* of knowledge, the justification condition is necessarily met when we engage with fiction. This type of knowledge is self-knowledge: knowledge of our own conscious states. However, as will become evident, not too much is gained from this result. In order for the claim that we can gain knowledge from fiction to be interesting, a case needs to be made for the claim that the knowledge in question is relevant and important. We aim to achieve this by building on the distinction between self-knowledge and knowledge of the self. This distinction rests on the claim that the self is elusive, and that there is much to be discovered about it. Engaging with fiction may help us attain knowledge of our elusive self by supplying us with self-knowledge.

Finally, maybe not too much is gained by showing that engaging with fiction *might* be useful along these lines – what we want to know is whether it actually *is*. We will thus also argue that it is not only theoretically possible to gain knowledge of the self from fiction, but that gaining this type of knowledge comes close to the heart of reading literary fictions.

3. Self-Knowledge and Knowledge of the Self

What is self-knowledge? In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Brie Gertler (2015) introduces the term as follows: "In philosophy, 'self-knowledge' standardly refers to knowledge of one's own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states".[11] Initially, this amounts to circumscribing a domain of knowledge, i.e. an area about which we may gain knowledge, and the type of access we have to it. Thus, self-knowledge is knowledge of a person's own conscious mental states, where 'own' points to their being perceived from a first-person point of view.

But, apart from its domain and type of access, is there anything special about self-knowledge? Many philosophers have thought so, and several proposals have been discussed in the literature.[12] We cannot, and luckily need not, go into any detail here. Rather, we would like to point to one particular feature of self-knowledge which is important for our concerns. Remember that the claim that fiction is a source of knowledge is contested on account of the claim that the J-condition for knowledge is not met in our encounters with fiction. Self-knowledge, however, is importantly different from other kinds of knowledge.

For an instance of self-knowledge entails a belief about one's own conscious mental state which is arguably justified by default: "anyone who is in a state of that kind [i.e. a conscious mental state] is justified in believing that she is, even if the thinker doesn't actually have this belief."[13] Accordingly, self-knowledge involves the following mental states: first, a conscious mental state of some kind and, second, a justified belief about that state. While we surely don't form a belief about each of our first-order conscious mental states, such a second order belief is justified if formed. So, for example, if I am consciously aware that I am feeling angry, then I am justified in believing that I am feeling angry.

Let us now turn to the skeptical challenge. We have seen that beliefs about our conscious mental states are justified by default. Any activity which involves our conscious mental life thus involves the potential for self-knowledge. So, for instance, if you are consciously walking down the street, you will be in a position to gain self-knowledge of your sensations of walking down the street, and if you are imagining Michelle Obama as the next president of the United States, you will be in a position to gain self-knowledge of your imagining Michelle Obama as the next president of the United States. There is no reason why this should not apply to mental states we are in when we engage with fiction: once we pick up a work of fiction, we will be in a position to gain self-knowledge of the conscious activities that are involved in reading.

Also, note that if self-knowledge is a potential by-product of *any and all* conscious mental states, it seems that gaining self-knowledge is not something one might, or even *can*, reasonably *strive* for, given that striving for something involves some effort of one kind or other. And it might not strike us as something that might reasonably *motivate* picking up a work of fiction (rather than doing something else or nothing, that is).

This, however, is not how getting to know oneself is usually thought about; it has a better reputation. The dictum ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ (*know thyself*), after all, has been a primal focus of ancient ethics, and it certainly entails that knowing oneself is something worth striving for, something that does not come easily (cf. Wilkes 1999). As Kathleen Wilkes (1999, 30) notes, there is a lot about our mental lives that we do not know automatically: "We do not need Freud to tell us that there is much in the mind of which we are not conscious; which we don't know about; [and] which we can get to know about, if at all, only with difficulty." Think of jealousy, envy, love, or the like. We can easily be wrong about, for instance, whether it is envy or love that motivates some of our actions, and while it may be essential to be clear about our motivation, it takes effort.

Now, as explained above, knowledge of this sort is not self-knowledge of some *conscious* mental state. The central idea is rather that there is something to be discovered about our own minds, something that is not present in any conscious moment and hence readily available as an object of knowledge. But how can the conception of self-knowledge referred to above be reconciled with this idea?

One way of doing so is by drawing a distinction between two kinds of mental phenomena, each of which may be the object of first-person knowledge. While

according to the concept of self-knowledge referred to above, self-knowledge has conscious mental states as its object, to know that one is jealous, or envious, or in love, does not amount merely to knowledge of a conscious mental state. With love, for instance, what we know about ourselves is quite different. Consider the following characterization by Richard Moran (2007, 464):

> love is much less of a feeling than an orientation of people toward each other which patterns all their dealings with each other, something that provides a kind of norm that they take themselves to be beholden to, and that structures their sense of what is important, what is trifling, and what is unthinkable between them. This is the love that can be put to the test, that one can strive to be true to, and succeed or fail at. Contrasted with love in these ways, delight or disgust remain 'mere' emotions, however powerfully felt or powerfully motivating.

According to this account, love is best understood as a disposition. He who is in love with someone will be prepared to act or be disposed to think or feel in particular ways in particular circumstances, and especially, of course, toward particular people. A similar account may be useful for other states such as envy, jealousy, pride, racism, or homophobia. The mental phenomena to be distinguished from conscious mental states, then, are dispositions, and the sort of knowledge that one may reasonably strive for is knowledge about one's own dispositional states.

In order to draw a distinction between the knowledge one may have about one's conscious mental states on the one hand and the knowledge one may have about one's dispositions on the other, we will refer to the latter using the term 'knowledge of the self', where the notion of 'self' is taken to refer, in Moran's words, to what "structures" a person's "sense of what is important." It might also be referred to as a person's 'core' or 'essence'. Knowledge of the self, in other words, has as its object the kind of person we are.[14]

As many have noted, we do not have a sense organ that provides us with immediate knowledge of the self. First-personal access to the self, it seems, is just as limited as third-personal access. Thus Julia might know that Tilmann is in love with Anna more clearly than Tilmann himself does. Confronted with the truth of his being in love, Tilmann might even deny it. Nevertheless, it is *Tilmann's* behavioral tendencies (including his tendencies to act, think, feel, etc.) that make this claim true, and it is *Tilmann's* behavior (actions, thoughts, feelings, etc.) that will provide evidence for its truth. Thus if we want to know whether someone suffers from homophobia, we can expose them to a situation where a homophobic person would act in a certain way and see if they act in that way. And this 'someone' might as well be us.

Where does the distinction between self-knowledge and knowledge of the self lead us? To put it in a nutshell, we believe that the distinction allows us to determine a particular role for fiction in our striving for knowledge of ourselves. For, as we have seen, knowledge of our innermost dispositions depends on an awareness of evidence for their existence. We need to expose ourselves to situations and 'see what happens'. Fiction provides us with a vast array of such op-

portunities: when reading fiction, we are, in our imagination, presented with situations – people, places, events – that call forth our imaginative responses. And keeping a close eye on these responses will reveal something about ourselves.

In order to support our thesis, let us go back to the novel we have already considered, albeit only briefly and in passing. In Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we read the story of Jean Louise Finch, a witty schoolgirl who reports episodes from her everyday life in Alabama in the 1930s. As *Wikipedia* notes, "The novel is renowned for its warmth and humor, despite dealing with the serious issues of rape and racial inequality".[15] This brief characterization already hints at an important feature of the novel: it deals with issues one can hardly avoid taking a stance on, and it does so in a manner that asks for a particular, emotionally toned response.[16] Noticing such responses will provide us with self-knowledge. And this self-knowledge will, at the same time, be evidence in our quest for knowledge of the self. For if we know that, upon reading the description of Arthur "Boo" Radley provided in the last chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we experience a sense of strong, imagined pity,[17] this is evidence that we are disposed to feel pity in circumstances such as the ones described in the novel. And this may well be something we didn't know about ourselves before. In short, then, reading fiction not only provides self-knowledge, it is also an excellent tool for generating knowledge of the self. Carefully attending to our reactions to fictions yields evidence about who we are.

Also, note that imaginarily pitying "Boo" is not an extraordinary thing to do. The novel actually asks for it. More generally, having a broad array of imagined attitudes toward what goes on in the fiction is part and parcel of engaging with literary fiction. It's probably even a predisposition of understanding the fiction, and most certainly also of much of the enjoyment and appreciation of it. This is why we think a case can be made for the claim that it is not only theoretically possible to gain knowledge of the self from fiction, but that gaining this type of knowledge comes close to the heart of reading literary fictions.

Let us briefly summarize what has been said so far. The skeptic claims that while reading fiction may provide us with true beliefs, these beliefs do not amount to knowledge since we lack justification for them (the J-condition is not met). In response to this claim, we have, firstly, pointed to self-knowledge, i.e. knowledge about our own conscious mental states. Once we form a belief about our conscious mental states, this belief will necessarily be justified. However, the claim that we can gain self-knowledge seems uninteresting. We have, secondly, conceded this point and argued that self-knowledge gained from fiction provides us with evidence of knowledge about the self, which might, in contrast to self-knowledge, be highly significant for us.

4. Objections and Replies

Let us close by briefly considering three objections to this account of the cognitive significance of fiction. This will help to flesh out some of its aspects in greater detail, and to see its scope and limits.

The first objection says that fiction might sometimes mislead us: a fiction may lure us into imaginarily doing things which we would not do in real life, and as a result into having mental states that we would not have in response to a real-life situation. The claim is that our reaction to the fiction does not point to our real dispositions. For instance, suppose you read about Van Helsing and his heroic quest to kill Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897). In response to the story, you imagine being similarly brave, ready to risk your life for those in need. Now, does knowledge of your mental state provide you with conclusive evidence for knowledge of your dispositions? Let us suppose it does not. For in real life, you are not a fierce and relentless killer, but rather ordinary, even cowardly – disposed to run and hide when things get rough, rather than fight tooth and nail against evil. The fiction *Dracula*, then, does not help you to gain knowledge about yourself, it may even foster illusory beliefs.

In response to this objection, we would like to point out two things. Firstly, evidence is usually taken to be defeasible. If it seems to us that reflecting on our imaginary response teaches us something about a disposition, then it may still be the case that we have stronger evidence to the contrary. For instance, while at first glance, our imagining being brave seems to point to a corresponding disposition, we may later remember that our cowardice is really a weak spot we are trying to fight, and our imagining being brave is the expression of a wish rather than a disposition to act. This, however, does not mean that in cases where there is no evidence to the contrary, we cannot gain knowledge of our dispositions. Secondly, our imagining being brave despite the fact that we are not may actually be perfect evidence – not of our bravery, but of our susceptibility to be misled in our self-assessment, or of our tendency to imagine favorable things about ourselves. And knowing this about ourselves may be important. So the self-knowledge in question may serve as evidence – just not for what we initially thought it was.

The second objection, relating to the first, claims that it is disputable whether mere *imagination* is able to give us evidence concerning our *real* dispositions. Don't we need actual episodes of certain behaviors in order to know that we are disposed to act in the said way? After all, we can imagine about ourselves whatever we please. And certainly not all we imagine will correspond to an actual behavioral tendency.

Our reply to this objection is somewhat hesitant. For some tendencies to act (think, feel, etc.), the objection might be correct.[18] For others, though, we are not so sure. Consider an account of the imagination such as the 'counterpart theory' developed by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft (2002). According to them, there is nothing about the imagination that predicts the necessity, or even

likelihood, of its going astray when we ourselves are its object. We may of course fantasize about ourselves, but we may also imagine doing (feeling, thinking, etc.) something in a reliable fashion. This is what people often do in planning, in therapy, or in cases of mental practice as a musician, to name but a few instances. There is broad experimental evidence that such practices by and large yield reliable results (cf. Currie 1995). So neither the skeptic nor the proponent of the evidential role of self-knowledge (with regard to our imaginings) for knowledge of our selves should overstate their case.[19] Note, however, that the latter is certainly not in a worse position than the former.

The third objection is this. It might strike us that, unwillingly, we have conceded too much to the skeptic. On our account, engaging with fiction, like any other conscious activity, is a source of self-knowledge. However, the skeptic may not be overly impressed by this result, for self-knowledge comes easily with any conscious mental activity. Reading fiction is, on this account, epistemically on a par with standing next to a traffic light or taking a warm bath: all of these activities put us in a position to gain self-knowledge. We therefore introduced the notion of knowledge of the self (to be distinguished from self-knowledge). But, the skeptic claims, fiction turned out to be a generator of merely defeasible *evidence* for knowledge of the self – and that surely is something different from being a generator of *knowledge* of the self.

Our answer to the objection is that trying to draw a sharp line between gaining knowledge from some source on the one hand and gaining sufficiently strong evidence for some knowledge claim on the other may be a vain effort. Consider a reputable newspaper such as the *New York Times* as an information source. Are you prepared to say that one readily gains knowledge from it (rather than evidential support for some claims to knowledge)? Even the *NYT* does not give you direct access to the *facts* but only someone's *report* of them. You may be epistemically entitled to believe what you're being told, but there is a gap between you and the facts. Even the strongest epistemic entitlement, i.e. reason to believe in the truth of some claim, is not identical with what *makes* the claim true, i.e. the corresponding fact. And as long as there is a difference between truth and justification, there is the possibility of error in any truth claim, however strong its justification. So arguably, even an information source such as the *NYT* that is generally considered to be supremely reliable does not, on the skeptic's account, give you knowledge, but only some justificatory resources for a corresponding truth claim.

At this point, however, the skeptic is in an unfavorable position. They can either endorse the claim that we cannot gain knowledge by transmission at all, no matter whether the source we are dealing with is the *NYT* or a novel, but only by direct acquaintance with the facts. This is certainly not how we should think about the feasibility of transmitting knowledge, and if the skeptic is forced to this endorsement, then their position is absurd. Or the skeptic can claim that it is possible to gain knowledge rather than mere evidential support by listening to the words of others. But then it seems that the *NYT* and fiction are epistemically pretty much on a par with each other.

And if, epistemically, fiction is on a par with the *NYT*, that's not too bad a result for the cognitivist. Literary fiction thus turns out to have instrumental value. It allows you to "read in yourself", as Proust has it in the quotation given at the beginning of this paper.[20]

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[1] For recent surveys, see Mikkonen 2013 and Scholz 2014.
[2] For an outline of this distinction, see e.g. Bieri (1994, 11-14).
[3] For a recent survey, see Jenkings Ichikawa / Steup 2012.
[4] Edmund Gettier (1963) has shown that these three conditions are not sufficient: arguably, we also have to have the *right kind of justification* in order to have knowledge. Gettier's contribution has shaped contemporary debates and accounts of knowledge significantly.
[5] For further discussion, see e.g. Zagzebski (1999, 100).
[6] For more reasons, see Köppe (2008, ch. 3.3.2).
[7] For a more elaborate account and discussion, see Moretti / Piazza 2013.
[8] For some caveats, see Klauk 2015.
[9] For qualms with notion of knowledge outlined above, see Borgards 2007, or Klausnitzer (2008, 28).
[10] It may be worth noting that BonJour himself is critical of this conception. See also Weiner 2009, and Pritchard / Turry 2014.
[11] Gertler (2015, Introduction).
[12] For a survey and many references to the current debate, see Gertler 2015.
[13] Gertler (2015, sec. 1.1 "Epistemic security"). See also Smithies (2012, 261).
[14] It might be objected here that different people will have vastly different ideas about what counts as the 'core' of their personality, or self. But that is as it should be. 'Self' is just shorthand for whatever someone truthfully takes herself/himself to be.
[15] Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Kill_a_Mockingbird (08.01.2017).
[16] Gregory Currie (2010, 86) thus speaks of the "framing", or "framework", associated with a story: "a framework is a preferred set of cognitive, evaluative, and emotional responses to the story."
[17] This formulation owes itself to a Waltonian account of our emotions towards fiction, see Walton (1990, ch. 4). However, nothing depends on adoption this particular account.
[18] Which ones? Being in love may be a case in point. For being in love is being in love with a specific person. So, in order to be illuminating about this disposition, a fiction would have to prompt you to imagine doing several things connected to this particular person (including thinking about her, feeling towards her, etc.). And how could a fiction do *that*? Compare imagining being brave or homophobic which are attitudes that may manifest themselves in many different

situations or towards many different people. (Actually, a certain generality as to situations/objects might be a precondition for counting as a bearer of either bravery or homophobia).

[19] As has often been noted, taking imagined responses as evidence for behavioral tendencies is usually a safe thing to do. Imagining doing something does not come with the consequences of actual actions.

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