

What Can We Know A Priori?¹

C.S.I. Jenkins

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Abstract

Michael Devitt has been developing an influential two-pronged attack on the a priori for over thirteen years. This attack does not attempt to undermine the coherence or significance of the distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori, but rather to answer the question: ‘What Can We Know A Priori?’ with: ‘Nothing’.

In this paper I explain why I am dissatisfied with key extant responses to Devitt’s attack, and then take my own steps towards resisting the attack as it appears in two recent incarnations.

Devitt aims firstly to *undermine the motivation* for believing in any a priori knowledge, and secondly to provide reasons directly *against* believing in any. I argue that he misidentifies the motivations available to the a priorist, and that his reasons against believing in the a priori do not take account of all the options. I also argue that his attempt to combine the two prongs of the attack into an abductive argument for his anti-a priorist position does not succeed.

1. Introduction: The Shape of the Attack

This paper attempts to deflect attacks on the a priori due to Michael Devitt in his articles ‘There is No A Priori’ and ‘No Place for the A Priori’ (2005a and 2010 respectively). These articles develop themes and ideas from Devitt’s earlier work (see e.g. Devitt 1996, 1998 and 2002), but I shall concentrate on these two recent formulations. Devitt’s attacks are motivated by a position he calls naturalism. The assumption that naturalism and the a priori are at best uneasy bedfellows is a rather widespread one, no doubt due in substantial part to Devitt’s efforts. Nonetheless, it is one that I suspect of being mistaken. Existing attempts to respond to Devitt’s arguments due to Bonjour (2005b) and Rey (1998) don’t strike me as getting to the heart of this point, as I shall explain below.

Familiarly, the term ‘naturalism’ can be used in quite different ways by different philosophers and by the same philosopher at different times.² Devitt sometimes appears

¹ I am grateful to audiences at the University of Nottingham and the Northern Institute of Philosophy, and in particular to Michael Devitt and Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa, for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

² Jenkins forthcoming offers a partial survey of the variation in usage.

to use the term to refer to the view that ‘epistemology is part of science’ (Devitt 2010, p. 271, fn. 1). On other occasions he uses it to refer to the view that ‘all knowledge is [justified by experience]; there is only one way of knowing’ (2005a, p. 105). In correspondence, Devitt has confirmed that he understands by ‘naturalism’ what is best captured in the latter passage, and he regards the view that epistemology is part of science as a consequence of this. I’m by no means sure it should be so regarded, but for current purposes this need not matter. I shall interpret ‘naturalism’ in Devitt’s preferred way here.

My approach is thus different from that of, say, Antony (2004, p. 1), who wants to reclaim naturalism (or at least the word ‘naturalism’) from those philosophers who associate it with the claim that all knowledge is justified by experience. I am prepared to play the game on Devitt’s terms in his vocabulary. My line is that there are *still* problems with his arguments, so understood.

To begin with, let me provide a bit of background, and then sketch the outlines of Devitt’s attack. A prioricity, for Devitt, appears to be bound up with issues of both justification and revisability. A priori knowledge can be construed as knowledge which is *justified* independently of empirical evidence, and/or as knowledge which is *unrevisable* in the light of empirical evidence. In Jenkins 2008b I describe some of my reasons for preferring to distance a priori knowledge from issues around revisability in the light of experience (or, to use terminology I think is more epistemologically perspicuous, empirical defeasibility). But for the most part I shall set aside this difference between myself and Devitt in what follows. I also shall not focus on any potential differences between a priori *knowledge* and a priori *justification*, but follow Devitt in moving freely between the two.

The attack Devitt wants to press has two parts. Firstly, there is an argument which attempts to undermine (what Devitt presents as) the motivation for believing in the a priori. The motivation in question stems from the thought that there is some knowledge – e.g. of mathematics and logic³ – which seemingly *cannot* be justified by experience, nor revised in the light thereof, and hence must be a priori. Devitt argues that this motivation for a priorism can be removed by showing that there is an alternative, naturalistically respectable, story to be told about how we come to have our apparently a priori knowledge through experience.

³ I do not doubt that there are philosophically important differences between these two kinds of knowledge, and between them and other kinds of putatively a priori knowledge. Nevertheless, I shall follow Devitt in taking mathematics and logic as paradigms of the putatively a priori knowable, and in assuming that any other putatively a priori knowable subject matters will be like them in all relevant respects. I don’t think any issues that are important for the current debate are unduly neglected in so doing.

Secondly, Devitt argues that not only is there no positive reason to believe in any a priori knowledge, but the a priori is also deeply mysterious and obscure, and this is a reason to *reject* it.

With regard to the apparently a priori parts of our knowledge of mathematics, logic and so on, Devitt thinks that between them his two arguments establish that ‘the *best* explanation of that knowledge is that it is empirical’ (2005a, p. 106). The second argument is meant to show that a priorist explanations are hopeless, and the first is meant to show that we have an empirical explanation which is at least promising, despite being imperfect. Between them, they are supposed to add to up to an abductive argument for the view that nothing is known a priori.

In this paper I shall try to resist each half of Devitt’s attack, and also the abovementioned way in which he attempts to combine the two into an abductive argument. It is perhaps worth saying at this point, in the spirit of full disclosure, that in the service of that goal I shall be talking about a position on the a priori that I have developed and discussed in previous work. However, my aim is to undermine Devitt’s argument without presupposing that such a view is correct.

2. Devitt’s First Argument

Devitt’s preferred account of how we come to have apparently a priori knowledge is inspired by Quine (e.g. 1951 and 1969). Devitt, like Quine, thinks of experience as confirming whole theories or world-views *en masse*. And among the beliefs that share in such holistic justification, on the Quinean picture, are the mathematical and logical beliefs to which some might imagine a priori justification accrues. The justification which logical and mathematical beliefs enjoy, according to Devitt and Quine, is actually no different in kind from that which accrues by the same means to more obviously empirically-based beliefs.

Devitt argues, on the basis of his adoption of this Quinean line, that there is no motivation for believing in the a priori. We have a good Quinean story to tell about how all apparently a priori knowledge was in fact acquired empirically, he says, so we don’t *need* another story. And because we already believe in empirical ways of knowing, it is efficient to refrain from postulating other, non-empirical, ways.

Devitt addresses the objection that it is counterintuitive to reject the a priori. He argues that the intuitions which originally led us to think that knowledge of mathematics and logic must be a priori are in fact merely intuitions ‘that this knowledge is not justified in some *direct* empirical way’ (2005a, p. 107). He continues: ‘Those intuitions are preserved. Yet we can still see the knowledge as empirical: it is justified in an *indirect* holistic way’. (Devitt does not offer any argument in support of his claim that the relevant intuitions are

merely intuitions of lack of *direct* empirical justification. But I shall not pursue this point here.)

BonJour (2005b) has responded to this first argument of Devitt's by criticizing the Quinean position on which it relies. One of BonJour's main charges is that in order to give a justification for his holistic methodology, Devitt must 'appeal to the very set of holistic rules whose correctness is at issue in establishing that correctness' (p. 116). But this, BonJour says, is circular. BonJour also apparently thinks that *unless* he can give such a justification of his methodology, Devitt has no justification for anything he comes to believe by employing the rules in question.

But a healthy degree of epistemic externalism motivates Devitt's reply (2005b, p. 120), which is that:

For an inference to justify a person's conclusion it simply has to *be* good. In an epistemological moment the person may indeed have the insight that the inference *is* good. Still, the justification of her conclusion does not depend on her having this insight.

Rey (1998) is also critical of Devitt's first argument, arguing that Quinean holism is too vague and obscure to undermine the motivation for belief in the a priori. Rey suggests that for all we know, when properly developed, the Quinean picture might even *accommodate* a priori knowledge: such knowledge might sometimes be the upshot of respecting theoretical virtues such as simplicity and generality (whatever they turn out to be), of which Quine approves (see Rey 1998, p. 31).

But I think Quine's epistemology is clear enough for the purpose to which Devitt wants to put it, and I think it is also clear enough that on that account there is no a priori knowledge. That Quine's view is *holistic* means that, for Quine, empirical justification accrues to *all* of our beliefs at once, en masse, in the same way and to the same degree. The kind of 'obscurity' of which traditional accounts of the a priori can be fairly accused is, I think, best described as a failure to be philosophically promising, *qua* explanations of how we have the knowledge in question. Quinean holism, for all its *vagueness* or *imprecision*, does not in my opinion share that particular failing.⁴

Where I want to criticize Devitt is in his larger-scale ambitions for the claim that an account of mathematical and logical knowledge can be given in Quinean terms. The question is: how is this supposed to undermine any motivation for believing in the a priori?

⁴ Rey (1998) also has a positive suggestion to make about how reliabilists can be both naturalists and a priorists. This, if successful, could go some way to undermining Devitt's *second* argument, which has as its premise the claim that the a priori is deeply obscure because there is no good account of how it works. But as I am not a reliabilist, I think we need to look elsewhere to establish that there are promising ways of understanding the a priori knowledge which Devitt's argument does not acknowledge.

Devitt considers only one such motivation (Devitt 2010, p. 271):

There are many examples, drawn from mathematics, logic and philosophy, of knowledge that does not seem to be empirical. It does not seem possible that this knowledge could be justified or revised “by experience.” It *must* be justified in some other way, justified a priori.

Devitt doesn’t, I take it, intend us to take the motivation described here to be that *propositions* which are knowable a priori cannot also be known a posteriori. (That would be very implausible, and unacceptable to most defenders of the a priori.) Rather, I take him to intend a reading according to which some *knowledge* (the state of knowing, rather than the proposition known) is a priori and couldn’t be otherwise.

I am certainly sympathetic to the thought that some pieces of mathematical and logical knowledge *seem distinctive* with respect to their epistemological underpinnings in appearing to enjoy some kind of independence from experience. But I am not at all sure whether any modal claim of the kind focused on by Devitt in the second and third quoted sentences is a good way to capture the appearance in question. It is particularly surprising that Devitt should employ a modal formulation of the relevant intuition in his 2005a, since BonJour, in the paper with which Devitt 2005a engages (BonJour 2005a), gives an argument for the existence of the a priori which is premised on the claim that ‘there seem *to be* many, many examples’ of propositions which there are a priori reasons to believe (pp. 100-1, emphasis added). This non-modal formulation strikes me as a more appropriate target for Devitt’s attention. But, as I shall explain in a moment, the modal formulations of ‘the motivation’ are the only ones to which Devitt’s arguments speak.⁵

The substitution of a modal claim for a non-modal one strikes me as making Devitt’s task easier than it should be. Devitt is trying to undermine the supposed motivation for believing in the a priori by establishing that there is an empirical (Quinean) story to be told about how we have our seemingly distinctive knowledge of mathematics and logic. If the motivation is supposed to be that such knowledge *cannot* be empirical, then it is reasonably plausible to think that all he needs to do to undermine it is describe a way in which that knowledge *could* be justified (and, if required, undermined) by experience. But if the motivation is supposed to be that the knowledge in question *is* not empirical, it is not enough to describe such a possibility. (Note that this point applies regardless of whether the modality in question is alethic or epistemic, something which Devitt does not clarify.)

⁵ BonJour does use modal talk in a *separate* argument to the effect that rejecting the a priori amounts to ‘intellectual suicide’: see BonJour 2005a, pp. 101-3. But this is not an argument from the seeming distinctiveness of a priori knowledge.

Of course, sometimes we believe p only because it seems to us that things couldn't be any other way, and when it transpires that they can our motivation for p disappears. But Devitt has not argued that anything of that kind is going on in this case.

Moreover, there are various other motivations for believing in the a priori which Devitt does not address. I shall not attempt an exhaustive list of these here; many depend on the details of particular epistemological views that Devitt presumably rejects. For example, Field's nonfactualism about epistemic normativity gives him a reason to accept the a priori, but not one to which one could expect Devitt to be amenable. See e.g. Field 2000 for details. Similarly for motivations for believing in a priori justification which derive from particular claims about the nature of content and its connections with rationality; see e.g. Ichikawa and Jarvis 2013. I shall just describe one other kind of motivation, one to which many of those who call themselves 'naturalists' could in principle be receptive, and which therefore might be more to Devitt's taste.

Suppose, not that we it merely *seems* to us that certain pieces of knowledge are independent of experience (whether necessarily or otherwise), but that the *best overall theory* of how we have that knowledge entails that we have it a priori. That, I take it, would give us some motivation for believing in the a priori, especially if we also had reason to think the account *good enough*. I myself am inclined to think that this may well be the case; the account I sketch in Jenkins 2008a (on which more below) strikes me as strictly preferable to Quine's. Like Quine's, it requires no additional faculties beyond the sensory apparatus that we all acknowledge, but in addition to doing a better job of accommodating the appearance of some knowledge being distinctively independent of experience, it does not require any commitment to holism about propositional confirmation, and it does not threaten to leave knowledge of dispensable mathematical propositions unaccounted for (see Jenkins 2008a, pp. 152-3).

In my opinion, it does this without compensating loss of other theoretical virtues, and I don't know of another account that performs equally well or better. But notice that there is nothing particularly special about my making an appeal here to *this* particular account. Anyone who thinks some other a priorist account of our putatively a priori knowledge outperforms all rival accounts of that knowledge (including Quine's) will be able to muster a motivation for a priorism along the lines indicated. The general structural point I am seeking to illustrate is that *merely describing a Quinean alternative* to a priorism does nothing to undermine such motivations.

3. Devitt's Second Argument

The aim of the second half of Devitt's attack on the a priori is to argue that 'the whole idea of the a priori is too obscure for it to feature in a good explanation of our knowledge of anything' (2005a, p. 111). He notes that a priori knowledge is often characterized

negatively, as knowledge which is *not* derived from experience, but, he says, a positive characterization is needed ‘if we are to take the a priori way [of justifying a belief] seriously’. While I don’t agree with the letter of this claim about how the a priori should be *characterized*, I do think that there is a philosophical need for a positive *story* about how the a priori works, even if the a priori is negatively characterized.

I also grant that traditional attempts to tell a positive story about the a priori are unsuccessful. In particular, I am sympathetic (see Jenkins 2008a, §§2.4-2.5) to Devitt’s criticisms of attempts which appeal to analyticity and conceptual competence, of which he asks questions like the following (2010, p. 286):

even if reflection did lead to these beliefs, why suppose that, simply in virtue of her competence, this process of belief formation *justifies* the beliefs, or gives them any special epistemic authority ...?

Devitt criticizes Peacocke and Bealer, each of whom adopts a view within this tradition, on the grounds that neither really answers this kind of question. Peacocke never explains why a belief which is bound up with the possession conditions of a concept should be, just in virtue of that, an epistemically *good* thing to believe. And Bealer never explains why concepts must be such that any ‘intuitions’ the having which is constitutive of those concepts are bound to be true.

I agree with Devitt about Peacocke. I would put the point about Bealer slightly differently: Bealer is at liberty to stipulate that his term ‘concepts’ is reserved for things such that the intuitions constitutive of possessing them are true. But then he owes us an explanation of why he thinks we should take ourselves to *have* any concepts in this sense. (See Jenkins 2008a, §2.5 for more detailed discussion.)

I am also happy to grant to Devitt that BonJour’s attempts to make the a priori unmysterious are unsuccessful, though not for Devitt’s reasons. Devitt replies to BonJour that ‘nothing in the experience of having an intuition supports the view that *it is a priori* or, indeed supports *any* view of what justifies the intuition’ (2010, p. 288; this comment is originally presented in the discussion of Bealer, but Devitt refers back to it when discussing BonJour on p. 290). But I don’t find this response satisfying. BonJour may use the appeal to phenomenology partly as a basis for confidence in the *existence* of the a priori, but he also uses it as grounds for rejecting the claim that the a priori is mysterious or obscure. It is the latter kind of use that concerns us here, but Devitt’s comment looks like a response to the former kind.

A better response to BonJour is to point out that the kind of mystery involved hasn’t got much to do with unfamiliarity. What’s mysterious about the a priori is the *philosophical strangeness* of knowledge that can apparently be obtained without experience of the world. The kind of ‘naturalism’ that appeals to me (roughly speaking: the view that some sort of scientific world-view is broadly correct) instructs against belief in faculties that our best scientific investigation of ourselves and our cognitive lives gives us no reason to believe in.

Such investigation does not give me reason to believe in a faculty of rational intuition, as it gives me reason to believe in faculties of vision, hearing, and so on. To a naturalist of my stripe, then, the (prima facie) mystery about the a priori is not that it is *unfamiliar* to us but that it is philosophically strange to have to postulate the kind of faculty which (again prima facie) a priori knowledge would seem to require.

Despite my points of agreement with Devitt, however, he clearly can't claim to have shown that there is no promising account of the a priori just by showing what's wrong with a small selection of accounts. I shall discuss one other account here:⁶ that of my 2008a, which I think bears interesting relationships to both traditional accounts and the Quinean picture. These relationships make this account an appropriate object of interest to philosophers inclined towards naturalism in Devitt's sense (and other related senses). They also enable me to use the account to indicate clearly the distance between what Devitt's second argument establishes and what he concludes. (It also happens to be the option I consider most promising.)

The 2008a view, in outline, is that we can secure certain kinds of knowledge by relying on guidance provided by our concepts, but that the reason this is possible is that the concepts in question are related to experience in such a way as to make this process a trustworthy guide to the world. I like to think of the view this way: our concepts are sensitive to our experience, and as a result they form a trustworthy on-board map of certain aspects of the world's structure. We can (more or less self-consciously) read information off this map by engaging in activities such as the ones philosophers sometimes call 'conceptual analysis' and 'conceptual examination', and by engaging in certain of the activities which non-philosophers might call 'just thinking about things'. But the information *got in there*, as it were, via our experience of the world. This process of making concepts a reliable guide to the world is what I call (empirical) concept grounding.

In some respects, this account is similar to the kinds of 'Cartesian' options to which Devitt has raised some objections (see Devitt 2005a, pp. 112-3). The account relies on the possibility of our being guided, in the formation of certain beliefs, by the structure of our concepts. Devitt offers two objections to this kind of view. The first asks why we should believe that our concepts guide belief-formation in the requisite way, and the second asks why beliefs secured through such processes as conceptual analysis would be justified.

On the first point, Devitt is concerned that we may not have the requisite 'privileged' access to relations between our concepts for a story of the envisaged kind to work. Conceptual competence, he says, does not involve possession of a 'tacit theory' about the concepts involved. And nor does the fact that a concept's content is constituted by relations (inferential and/or causal) mean that reflection will lead one to *believe* that one's concepts stand in such relations. However, the idea that we can read information off our

⁶ Other notable proposals not refuted by Devitt include Boghossian's account appealing to implicit definitions (see Boghossian 1996, 1997 and elsewhere), which I object to for reasons outlined in Jenkins 2008a, §2.4.

conceptual maps is not based on the claim that conceptual competence involves possession of a tacit theory,⁷ or on the claim that a concept's content is constituted by relations such that examining those concepts will necessarily lead us to believe in the obtaining of those relations. My more modest proposal is simply that, whatever concepts are like, *sometimes* we are guided in the formation of beliefs by sensitivity to the structure of our conceptual maps. Admittedly, I have no worked-out story to offer as to how exactly this is done, but the lack of such a thing is merely one of the respects in which 'we are not close to solving the epistemological problem of *anything*' (Devitt 2005a, p. 107).

On the second point, I think Devitt is quite right to challenge the *traditional* defenders of conceptual analysis as to what is supposed to justify the beliefs secured through conceptual analysis. My version of this type of view, however, is purpose-built to address this question, and, specifically, to address it in a way that will satisfy an empiricist. What makes those beliefs justified is their epistemic dependence on the experiences to which the guiding concepts are sensitive. This is the part of the account which fixes what I think is missing in the stories told by Peacocke and Bealer (see Jenkins 2008a, §2.5): neither of them explains *why* beliefs acquired in the special way count as justified. I say it is because of the link between concepts and experience.

An appealing feature of the Jenkins 2008a proposal is that it accommodates the distinctive phenomenology of (putative) a priori knowledge in a rather more satisfying way than does the Quinean manoeuvre of saying that such knowledge is special only in being less likely to be revised in the face of recalcitrant experience on account of the disruption this would cause to the web of belief. On my proposal, we *really do* have a different way of coming to know the truths of (say) mathematics and logic (on which more below), and this way *really does* (at least sometimes) proceed through analysis or examination of concepts, just as it seems to. The apparent epistemic independence of experience enjoyed by knowledge secured in this way is neatly explained: experience plays its epistemic role solely in the grounding of our concepts, which is a process that we need not, and generally will not, have much or any awareness of. The part of the process of which we *are* – at least sometimes – aware is the part where we examine our concepts (or just: think), and read off information such as that $7+5=12$. We do this in the armchair; no further input from experience is required at this stage. Naturally, it seems to us as if the information were being secured without reliance on experience at all.

This is not the place for detailed discussion of this account of this type of knowledge. What I do want to do, however, is mention a relevant point from my 2008a, namely that, *on many definitions*, knowledge secured in the way just described will count as 'a priori'. Of course, if 'a priori' is defined simply as 'non-empirical', this won't work. But other features that might be considered characteristic of the a priori are features of the kind of knowledge I've sketched. For example:

⁷ Quite the contrary; see Jenkins 2008a, pp. 132-4.

- (a) The knowledge is epistemically independent of empirical *evidence*. The kind of work experience does in grounding a concept is *not*, I think, the same kind of work that it does in evincing a proposition. (Of course, some piece of experience could do both kinds of work at once, but that is irrelevant.)
- (b) The knowledge is independent of the kind of *immediate* empirical grounding that some people think we have for propositions about how things current appear to us. It is also independent of *inductive* empirical grounds, of empirical *testing*, and of the kind of *holistic* empirical grounding for an entire theory that the Quinean believes in. Indeed, it seems that none of the classic kinds of a posteriori grounding is in play.
- (c) Rather, it is in virtue of one's *understanding* – that is, one's grasp of certain concepts – that one secures the knowledge.
- (d) The kind of justification secured in this manner could only be undermined if it turned out that our way of conceptualizing the world was inappropriate.

Features like these mean that we get the best continuity with existing usage of the phrase 'a priori' if we include within its extension the kind of knowledge that is secured through examination of empirically grounded concepts. It is also worth noting that we can use the terms 'empirical' and 'non-empirical' to mark the distinction between the empirical and the non-empirical, freeing up the terms 'a priori' and 'a posteriori' to do the kind of work I have in mind.

What all this boils down to is that there is an account of a priori knowledge which is not at all in tension with the spirit of Devitt's naturalism. The knowledge in question is ultimately empirical.

There is, however, a reading of the claim that 'there is only one way of knowing' (which Devitt 2005a, p. 105 takes to be part of his naturalism) on which it does not sit comfortably with the account of a priori knowledge that I've sketched. For on that account, there are at least *two* ways of knowing: the ordinary empirical way(s), and the way that proceeds through the examination of empirically grounded concepts. But there is another way to interpret Devitt so that even this is consistent with the view I've outlined: if the claim that 'there is only one way of knowing' is meant to be merely a trivial consequence of the claim that all justification is empirical, then in that sense I need not disagree with him that there *is* only one way of knowing, namely: through experience.

Insofar as what I have said in this section is correct, Devitt's claim that the a priori is too obscure to be taken seriously has not been established. Note that even if we do not in the end decide to describe the account defended here as an account of a *priori* knowledge (and I am not particularly concerned to argue terminology with those who prefer not to do so), its existence still puts pressure on Devitt's move from the failure of traditional a priorist accounts to the correctness of the *Quinean* empiricist account. Even for a naturalist in Devitt's sense, there are other options, and at least one of them can do more to respect the appearance of a prioricity than Quinean holism.

4. Combining The Two Arguments

Devitt claims (2005a, p 106) to be able to establish that ‘the *best* explanation of [purportedly a priori] knowledge is that it is empirical’ (emphasis in original), on the basis of having established as premises the conclusions of his first and second argument discussed above. These conclusions are, respectively, (1) an empirical explanation exists of all supposedly a priori knowledge such as knowledge of mathematics and logic, and (2) that a priori explanations of such knowledge are hopeless.

As a final parting shot, I want to record that I do not think that *even* establishing these two claims (supposing Devitt could do so) would suffice to show, as Devitt supposes, that the knowledge in question is empirical. It could be, for instance, that the a priori explanations are indeed hopeless, and yet Devitt’s proposed empirical one, while it does indeed exist, turns out to be even more hopeless. In that case, an a priori explanation is still the best one we have. Moreover, even supposing it *were* established that the best explanation of the knowledge in question is one on which it is empirical, that still would not suffice to show that such an empirical account is good *enough* to merit belief. So it still would not establish that all or any of our purportedly a priori knowledge is in fact empirical.

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