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Research Article

Aristotle for all? The work of Walter Mooney Hatch

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Abstract

This article considers the publication in 1879 of the *Moral Philosophy of Aristotle*, a book aimed at Oxford University undergraduates studying for the Classics degree course known as *Literae Humaniores*. This book is of contemporary interest. It takes us to the heart of the question of whether the work of Aristotle is meant for everyone or just for a select few. In principle, whatever we have inherited from Antiquity (whether materially or intellectually) belongs to us all. Therefore, there is an educational requirement to make it accessible to everyone and this should apply to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. But Aristotle is famously obscure and so in practice the study of Aristotle is confined to a small elite. Hatch's *The Moral Philosophy of Aristotle* tries to overcome the problem of Aristotle's obscurity by paraphrasing the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a popularising fashion and in sharp contrast to the way Aristotle is usually presented. To bring out the distinctive qualities of the Hatch approach this article compares *The Moral Philosophy of Aristotle* with the translations published in the modern Clarendon Aristotle series, which are intended for a readership made up largely of professionals working in universities. The article contrasts Hatch's goals of readability and dogmatic clarity with the insistence on semantic fidelity which is the hallmark of the Clarendon series. The article concludes that there is a greater risk of distorting Aristotle's meaning on the Hatch approach, but that this is compensated for by its pedagogic merits, and suggests that ideally teachers will use both Hatch and Clarendon together.

Keywords: Oxford; Hatch; Aristotle; obscurity; *Ethics*; commentary; translation

Is Aristotle for the select few?

There cannot be many Classics teachers who do not from time-to-time wrestle with the thought that a Classical education (in the words of the *Classics for All* website) "was considered a privilege for the few, not the many". In fact, many in the profession are animated by the hope that the future of Classics will be an egalitarian one. To quote David Hogg, a teacher in Walthamstow in London, Classical subjects "should be available to everyone" (Hogg, 2017, 12).

But if the mantra of today is that we want to be open and accessible to all, how is this worthy wish going to play out when it comes to the towering figure of Aristotle? Dante's "master of those that know" has exerted an extraordinary spell over the history of the Christian and Muslim worlds alike. For centuries, until his dethronement in the 17th century, he exerted unparalleled authority in Europe's universities. Even after the scientific revolution, his views on *Ethics* and politics continue to supply the framework within which all debate must take place. Indeed, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth the *Ethics*) represents one of our great cultural inheritances even if Aristotle is not on people's lips as he once was.

In his case one is tempted to adapt Snowball's commandment in *Animal Farm*: "all Classical subjects are accessible but some are more accessible than others." The prevailing fashion in Classics is to give priority to the beginner over the expert. We are not here to have a polite conversation amongst ourselves after all. But this popularising crusade seems not to extend to Aristotle. There is no clear view indeed as to whether the work of Aristotle is meant for all or should be reserved just for a select few.

When putting into effect the Hogg principle of availability to all, it should not make any difference whether the inheritance from Antiquity we are concerned with is material or intellectual. But in practice it clearly does, and this difference of treatment requires some explanation. As a first step in this direction, I propose to consider an egalitarian initiative from 145 years ago.

My focus is the Victorian schoolmaster Walter Mooney Hatch, whose passion for Classical education drove him to bankruptcy. Hatch was a brilliant undergraduate at Oxford in the 1860s, gaining a fellowship at New College before embarking upon a career as a schoolmaster, and then becoming the Rector of Birchanger in Essex. He died suddenly aged just 33, a few minutes after preaching the Advent Sunday sermon.

I quote from his brother's obituary sermon on him:

> His intellect was essentially philosophical. He had a keen insight into the subtler issues of great questions. He had just enough dreaminess to be speculative, and although his bent was rather critical than constructive, he could not only analyse a theory but frame one. But he had a passion for education of another kind. He loved boys, and he found that boys loved him. He resolved to devote himself to educating them. He was possessed with the idea that much of the

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> education of boys in England is based on a mischievous separation of moral and intellectual from religious culture. He thought that the two might be blended into a perfect harmony, and that the chapel rather than the hall or classroom should be the centre of school life. In the important institution[1] to the headship of which he was soon appointed, the noble theory which he conceived is still being carried into practice. The splendid chapel with its living services is a visible record of what he did. He left it to others to carry on, while he himself endeavoured to form a still nobler institution in another part of the country. But there the ways of the world baffled him; legal difficulties and other obstacles came in the way, and he left the scheme incomplete to do what good he could here among you (Hatch, 1890, 112-113).

The reference to "a still nobler institution" is a school Walter Hatch attempted to set up in Cheshire. This proved to be a financial disaster and in 1875 he was forced into bankruptcy and his New College Fellowship was sequestered to pay off his debts. Reluctantly he abandoned teaching[2] but continued to pursue his educational goals by working on a book that aimed to make the Nicomachean *Ethics* intelligible to a modern reader. This book was published posthumously in 1879 as *the Moral Philosophy of Aristotle* (Hatch, 1879) [henceforth MPA].

In what follows I shall consider this work in order to examine the difficulties that arise whenever attempts are made to introduce Aristotle's writings to a wider public. Such an endeavour faces many pitfalls but I hope that what I have written brings out the heroic nature of his life and makes clear the merits as well as the demerits of popularisation.

Mods and Greats in the 1870s

The view in Oxford University in the 19th Century was certainly that Aristotle was for all. His understanding of human nature made him a valuable source of moral understanding that should be disseminated as widely as possible.

Aristotle's *Ethics* was taught as an education in moral character. This was the thinking behind the 1851 reform of the Literae Humaniores degree syllabus[3]. Between them Plato's *Republic* and the *Ethics* dominated the lecture lists for Greats in the last 30 years of the 19th century. This was not something that the undergraduate could choose to opt out from. Lectures were compulsory in Oxford, and the Greats examinations involved written papers on both works. An indication of the position ten years after the publication of Hatch's book can be gleaned from the lecture list for the Michaelmas term of 1889-90: undergraduates were faced with no less than six courses on the *Republic* and seven on the *Ethics*[4] (Stopper, 1981, p. 269).

But the problem with Aristotle is that he is too difficult to be readily understood.

Aristotle's obscurity

Aristotle wrote the *Ethics* for an educated elite and the obscurity that is built into his writing was a guarantee that only that elite would be able to get the benefit of his thought. Because the *Ethics* was so important in the minds of Victorian educationalists, they felt compelled to insist that undergraduates should be fully conversant with it. But these undergraduates were not the educated elite that Aristotle had in mind even if they were at the time themselves an elite within Victorian society.

The preface to Hatch (MPA, v) takes as its starting point the words of Sir Alexander Grant, quoted from his article for the 9th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "The problem how to translate Aristotle into English has not yet been solved … the problem is how to convey, in readable English, a philosophical style, full of technical terms for which we have no exact representatives. Circumlocution, or paraphrase, becomes necessary".

There is another word for what Grant describes as "a style full of technical terms": obscurity. Obscurity is a widely recognised feature of the Aristotelian canon from its first appearance. This is because Aristotle's own published dialogues (which supposedly matched Plato's dialogues for readability) were not preserved and the works that have survived (often described pejoratively as lecture notes) were not meant for publication at all and assume the esoteric knowledge of Aristotle's fellow philosophers. Hence the obscure style that Grant refers to. The fifth century commentator Ammonius (in Cat. 7, 7-14) for example asks why Aristotle is contented with obscure teaching. He suggests that it is just as in the temples, where curtains are used for the purpose of preventing everyone and especially the impure from encountering things they are not worthy of meeting. In other words, the obscurity is deliberate so that empty minds will be put to flight.

W M Hatch and The Moral Philosophy of Aristotle

Hatch recognised the problem of Aristotle's obscurity and it was the purpose of MPA to solve it. The book consists of a translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a translation of a paraphrase attributed to Andronicus of Rhodes and an analysis of each book. There were six contributors in all[5]. A review of the book in the philosophical journal *Mind* (July 1880) states: "The book has been completed by some of his friends who thought well of the scheme and of its execution and considered the book likely to be useful, especially to students at the universities."

If deliberate obfuscation is a genuine part of the Aristotelian tradition, Hatch sees himself as engaged in an attempt to reverse it. He does not want to put students off. As a good teacher his instincts are to welcome all comers. He characterises the chief aim of his book as to make the *Ethics* intelligible to a modern reader by modifying the style in which the original is written. What he has in mind is to remove the obscurity by exercising what he calls metaphysical imagination. This is necessary in order to give a logical coherence to Aristotle's expressions: the sequence and interdependence of those ideas should be clearly marked and not left to the ordinary reader to reconstruct. Hatch feels that this justifies him in inserting missing links of thought, in expanding hints and in bringing to light what he calls an unapparent inference beneath the surface. He forestalls the objection that such a procedure will inevitably distort the original: he claims that no additions have been made to Aristotle's statements and no inferences have been inserted which his words do not strictly and immediately imply.

Unapparent inferences and missing links of thought are of course, the stock in trade of anyone involved either in teaching Aristotle or in interpreting him for modern scholarship. This has in fact been true from the time when the Aristotelian works were first available to a wider public. Immediately commentaries had to be supplied to address the problem that the texts themselves are

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obscure and elliptical. But Hatch for all his traditionalism is not working within that strand of the tradition.

The Clarendon Aristotle

The Hatch approach is at odds with modern assumptions about translating Greek philosophical texts. You could sum up the approach of modern Aristotelian scholars as saying, 'obscurity is not a problem – in fact, it is our bread and butter!' Fidelity to the meaning of the text is instead the guiding principle and this is expressed by trying to avoid as far as possible the importation of alien and anachronistic ideas. The aim is to make as few presumptions as possible. The Clarendon Aristotle series exemplifies this approach[6]. Jonathan Barnes expresses the point very well:

> Fidelity is the only virtue which a translator need cultivate . . . In a translation of a philosophical work intended for philosophical readers it is, I assume, fidelity in the matter of sense which must be paramount . . . such semantic fidelity is an ideal to which real translations can only approximate (Barnes, 1993).

The primary goal was that of ensuring that contemporary philosophers better exploited Aristotle's philosophical writings (Hamlyn, 1968). This is why Clarendon editions contain, as well as a translation, a detailed commentary which forms the bulk of the book. Obscurity and ambiguity are to be explored rather than eliminated in Hatch's manner. The goal of semantic fidelity is paramount. A reader has to be prepared to take on board a number of interpretative problems whether at the level of individual words or at the level of the chapter or book.

Over the last 50 years as the Higher Education sector has mushroomed the Clarendon series has become even less considerate for the needs of the generalist reader. Its target market is the contemporary philosopher working in the field of ancient Greek philosophy, which is seen as a burgeoning area of professional university labour. It is taken for granted that undergraduates studying Aristotle do so in order to acquire greater academic expertise (in Hatch's Oxford, most undergraduates had no such ambition).

The commentary offers different interpretations wherever there is an ambiguity: the commentator discusses these, reaching a tentative conclusion where possible or just recognising the complexity of the problems of interpretation while presenting a neutral translation and inviting readers to make up their minds on the basis of the help given.

A Clarendon translation tries to avoid importing anachronistic concepts. Austin who set the tone for the series shared the view expressed by Collingwood about Oxford philosophers who view ancient Greek concepts through the lens of their own theories (translating *polis* as state for example) and then go on to complain that the Greeks held many erroneous views about the state (Rowe, 2023). It is as if someone were to translate trireme by steamer and then announce that the Greeks held a great many false beliefs about steamers. He may well have had Hatch in mind. Hatch repeatedly translates *polis* as state and as a result attributes to Aristotle the creepy totalitarian view that the state is the guardian of the whole life of its citizens and aims to direct everything to a noble and virtuous end.

Hatch's style of translation

As already noted above Hatch deployed what he calls metaphysical imagination; he was quite open about taking a creative line rather than being obsessed with matching Greek technical terms with an English term of art. The context alone determines the *mot juste*.

Hatch chooses to translate Aristotle's text and the ancient paraphrase in an interpretative rather than a neutral manner and the analyses which constitute approximately 15 per cent of the whole work are also highly tendentious. The reasoning behind Hatch's choices has to be reconstructed by the reader or just taken on trust. The argumentative spadework is not open for inspection.

Hatch assumes he has authority. He writes as somebody with expertise accumulated from studying Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. But his conception of the tradition is seen through Christian spectacles. The Christianised Aristotle he presents is probably the aspect of MPA which grates most on a modern reader in our post-Christian culture. It may well have grated on readers of the 1870s, since by that decade the decline in religious faith was well under way and a sceptical and doubting attitude to Christianity had also become commonplace. This was indeed the mischievous separation of intellectual and religious culture that motivated Hatch's educational mission. The goal he set himself was to blend the two cultures into a perfect harmony. In a school setting this meant that the school chapel, i.e. God, was central to all educational activity. In the context of Aristotle's *Ethics,* the harmonisation took the form of reading Aristotle as a Christian author.

Hatch's Christianised Aristotle is omnipresent throughout the MPA. But I shall confine myself to his appearance in the very opening sentence of the *Ethics* (1094a1-3). Here is a modern translation: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." (Barnes, 1984, 1,729).

Hatch (MPA 11) translates as follows: "Every art and every step to knowledge and similarly both every moral act and every decision of the will seems to have some 'good' or 'purpose' at which it aims. The supreme good therefore or 'purpose of all things' is, as philosophers have well described it, that at which all things aim."

I have underlined seven ideas that have no basis in the Greek in just one sentence. Of these I shall focus on "the supreme good", which translates the Greek *tagathon* (literally 'the good'). The substitution of 'the supreme good' for 'the good' is entirely the work of Hatch's metaphysical imagination.

Its significance is explained in the accompanying analysis (MPA, 1): "the subject of the Treatise is an inquiry into the nature of the *Summum Bonum*. What constitutes the perfection of man? What is that ideal towards the attainment of which all the powers and tendencies of our nature are directed? What is the perfect life?"

The replacement of the good by the supreme good in the translation allows Hatch to interpret Aristotle as committed to a belief in what Hatch calls the *Summum Bonum.* This term imports God into the discussion. The Christian Humanist Leonardo Bruni is the decisive influence here. Medieval translations of the *Ethics* into Latin had rendered *tagathon* as *bonum* ("the good") but the worry that this would have the idolatrous consequence of identifying the ultimate good with an earthly state led Bruni in his 1416 translation to offer an alternate rendering of *tagathon* as *summum bonum* ("the highest good") in an evident reference not to a human good but to God (Lines, 2024).

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Another factor is the Christianising paraphrase a translation of which Hatch has included. Whereas the opening sentence of the treatise considers only human activity of one sort or another, the paraphrase gratuitously adds the things moved by Nature, and this encourages Hatch to conclude that the existence of the *Summum Bonum* is proved by what he calls with grandiose capitalisation the Analogy of Nature. Hatch is appealing to the fact that we see that things which lack intelligence such as natural bodies act for an end, and concludes from this that some intelligent being must exist to direct them, namely God.

If one does not make the connection with the Christian God, it is difficult to see how or why Hatch claims that the Analogy of Nature forces us to conclude that there is such an ideal as the *Summum Bonum* and that it ought to be attained. If the Analogy of Nature is portrayed as forcing a moral ought upon us, this can only be because from a Christian perspective our moral duties are conceived as duties to God.

Hatch is in effect formulating religious dogmas which can then be woven together to form a comprehensive theory. One should remember the verdict of his brother (who was an eminent theologian) that he could be critical and constructive and he could frame theories as well as analyse them. The dialectical nature of Aristotle's treatise is not lost but merely supplemented with a systematising structure. What he does not go in for is dialectic, that is to say the use of philosophical argument. Aristotle's philosophical reasoning is important for discrediting rival dogmatic positions but dialectic alone is not going to supply a moral theory. Hatch as philosopher may appreciate the nuances of the dialectic but Hatch as teacher must concentrate on being dogmatic. The elements of Aristotle's Moral Philosophy have to be asserted rather than proved.

The very definitiveness with which Hatch presents Aristotle has a pedagogical advantage. From a teacher's perspective it is much easier to convey material that is cut and dried and from which inconsistencies and uncertainties have been removed. The teacher will not get bogged down in problems of interpretation and the pupil can leave the lesson with a strong impression of a clear point of view. In that respect Hatch's approach has as its virtues the avoidance of the very things which characterise the Clarendon approach where the complexities in all their mind-numbing detail function as a sort of guarantee that no interpretative short cuts have been taken. The Clarendon series is of course aimed at the professional philosopher and the novice student who uses it is expected to jump in at the deep end in the hope that simply by coping with the open-ended method employed he or she will emerge with some understanding of the professional way in which the exegesis of ancient philosophy is now practised.

That was not at all the purpose of the Greats Course in 1870s Oxford, which can be thought of as in practice a training ground for the future administrators of the British Empire. That the best training for these people should be Aristotelian philosophy was never doubted. In the words of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article of Sir Alexander Grant quoted earlier, "The University of Oxford, during the present century, has made a renewed study of Aristotle one of its chief instruments of education - and with great success, as was especially testified to by the late Dr Arnold of Rugby. Aristotle's great knowledge of human nature, exhaustive classification, and clear methods of disentangling a question and dealing with what is essential in it, render many of his works an excellent curriculum for training young men, and fitting them for all the superior business of life".

Arnold considered Ancient Athens as so analogous to his own times that the wisdom of the philosophers of that period was highly applicable.

> Thus, the largest portion of that history which we commonly call ancient is practically modern, as it describes society in a stage analogous to that in which it now is; while, on the other hand, much of what is called modern history is practically ancient, as it relates to a state of things which has passed away. Thucydides and Xenophon, the orators of Athens, and the philosophers, speak a wisdom more applicable to us politically than the wisdom of even our own countrymen who lived in the Middle Ages; and their position, both intellectual and political, more nearly resembled our own (Arnold, 1874, 522).

Against this background, Hatch's earnest enthusiasm to achieve moral improvement by teaching Aristotelian *Ethics* becomes easy to understand. His sense of moral urgency does not allow there to be a vacuum of interpretation around Aristotle's *Ethics*. As far as he was concerned the work had a direct and clear value in improving the moral character of young men because he shared Arnold's faith in the practical wisdom enshrined in Aristotle's text. As a vehicle for imparting good character to those destined for careers in the church, politics, and the civil service it possessed charm and good sense (Turner, 1981). This powerful sense of conviction helps us to understand why Hatch is robust and dogmatic about what the text means in a way that would be shocking in a modern university seminar.

The paraphrase as a form of commentary

Hatch includes the paraphrase of Andronicus in lieu of a commentary[7]. He says that in the absence of a commentary and perhaps even after it has been made, the best interpretation is that which was current in the Aristotelian schools (MPA, vii). For it is known to have been the practice in them, as in the other schools of Greek philosophy, to interpret the meaning of an author by rewriting the text in the form of a paraphrase. They preserve early traditions of the meaning and have the value for an ordinary reader of making some obscure thoughts clear by varying and expanding their expression.

Paraphrase is thus for Hatch better than a commentary. One should bear in mind Hatch's success as a sermonising schoolmaster who made the chapel the intellectual centre of school life. When a headmaster preaches a sermon on a piece of scripture, he does not discuss it in the way that an academic researcher would: he sees a meaning there and he provides us with that meaning in as attractive a way as possible. This is what a paraphrase is doing.

What is the advantage of a paraphrase compared with the more conventional commentary along the lines of the Clarendon series? These offer a detailed dissection of the Greek text to which frequent reference is made and are not intended as a way of teaching Aristotle to a relative beginner. They are suited to philosophical specialists who, like Aristotle himself, are comfortable to live with uncertainties and ambiguity. They do not make teaching easier since that is not their primary purpose. The paraphrase in contrast is a teaching tool par excellence. Like a church sermon it prioritises supplying a clear meaning straight away without bothering to argue for it. It is presented as a *fait accompli* which can be embraced as a secure basis for learning. The disadvantage of course is that if

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you want to use it as an academic resource the reasoning behind the interpretation has to be reconstructed and is opaque.

Does the Hatch approach have a future?

Hatch's dogmatic and authoritarian reading of Aristotle appears critically naïve from today's perspective. The collapse of moral consensus in the 20th century has been profound and this has meant that radically different points of view and presuppositions now dominate the background against which moral philosophy is conducted. The willingness of Hatch's contemporaries at Oxford to fall into line around his reading of Aristotle seems to us remarkable. The ready cooperation of six different figures over a 2-year period (the book was published within two years of Hatch's death) is certainly impressive.

By today's standards also the work of Hatch will be deemed inadequate in terms of Aristotelian scholarship. But this misunderstands the context and purpose of Hatch's work. He was aiming his work at the ordinary reader, as he calls him. What is wanted is a clear explanation of Aristotelian *Ethics*. An exhaustive and painstaking analysis in the style of the Clarendon series would have been positively unwelcome. The *Ethics* should not of course be studied as a source of dogmas to be memorised by the students who need to be put on the correct path. There is no correct path.

But if you approach it via Hatch, you will have a good chance of understanding a version of Aristotle, and one that could be labelled the traditional view. Hatch saw the need to popularise the *Ethics* in order that Oxford University could claim to have made the thought of Aristotle available to their students. If we today find Aristotle as obscure and difficult as our Victorian predecessors did, we too can benefit from the popularising work of Hatch provided that we take his dogmatic pronouncements with some degree of scepticism. The pedagogic value of his work lies precisely in the Victorian concepts he used to make the *Ethics* come alive for the Victorians. The important Aristotle is the Aristotle given by the tradition. Hatch gives us a good impression of that tradition as he perceived it in the 1870s and, as a beginner's starting point, that should be good enough for anybody.

The pursuit of semantic fidelity over the last century cannot be faulted. It has revolutionised the study of Aristotle at universities throughout the world. But if the benefit of Aristotle's thought is to be made available beyond the walls of the universities Hatch's book is an excellent teaching tool for achieving that. We are lucky to be living in an era when we can draw upon both the Hatch and the Clarendon approaches. The way forward for teachers who wish to inspire their students with a love of Aristotle is to make judicious use of both approaches.

Author biography. Alan Towey has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from King's College, London and taught Classics and Philosophy for over 40 years in a variety of English schools. His translation of Alexander of Aphrodisias *On Aristotle On Sense Perception* was published in 2000.

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Notes

1 St Paul's School, Stony Stratford.
2 "I ought to consider my school life finally ended" he wrote to Alfred Robinson, the Bursar of New College in November 1875 (letter quoted with the permission of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford).
3 Known colloquially as Mods and Greats, the course lasted four years and the last two years ("Greats") focused on History and Philosophy.
4 These are typical figures. Different lectures were aimed at different audiences and if you were an undergraduate you would not have to attend all the lecture courses. But the *Republic* and the *Ethics* were certainly well served.
5 At his death Hatch had completed the first six of the ten books that make up the treatise. W.A. Spooner undertook books 8 and 9, and E. D. A. Morshead revised books 7 and 10. Parts were then revised by Arthur Chandler and Alfred Robinson, the New College Bursar mentioned earlier at footnote 2. The whole project was guided to completion by Walter Hatch's brother Edwin.
6 This series of translations published by Oxford University Press was initiated by J L Austin, a dominant figure in Oxford philosophy in the 1940s and 1950s until his early death in 1959.
7 This paraphrase appears in the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* as a work of Heliodorus of Prusa (vol. 19.2), but this attribution is now regarded as a hoax and a likely provenance is 14th century Byzantium, possibly the circle of John Kantakouzenos (abdicated 1354). See Ierodiakonou, K. and Börje B. (2018) "Byzantine Philosophy", in Zalta, E. N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition). Available online: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/byzantine-philosophy/ (accessed 25 August 2024).

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