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History as Debate: An Analysis of Different Approaches to History

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Abstract:

Historical interpretation is the process by which historians analyze historical evidence and craft an explanation of the past. This essay explores unique interpretations of history, including Haskell Fain's approach to history as science, George M. Trevelyan's belief in history as education, Karl Marx's historical materialism, and Alexis de Tocqueville's comparative history. Comparing each of these approaches reveals that although historians may disagree on how history should be interpreted, each interpretation offers unique insights into historical questions that some historians might not have considered. This condition helps provide complete answers to these historical questions by considering all interpretations, whether they be history as science or education, as materialism or comparisons, or even those not discussed here.

Introduction:

There is never a single article, book, or essay on a specific historical event. Historians are constantly debating any given topic; these debates go beyond the mere "facts" found in a historical archive. Rather, disagreement occurs on a more fundamental level: how these facts are to be interpreted and even what constitutes a fact. Why are historians disagreeing over what is considered fact? Is it not counterproductive to blend a fact with subjectivity? As historian Johann G. Droysen explains, interpretation is necessary because the historical archive does not, and cannot, provide a complete picture of any historical event. Furthermore, while historical evidence may explain *what* happened in the past, it cannot answer *why* it happened in such a way.[56]

So, if interpretations are necessary, where do they come from? How many are there if it is even possible to count them all? Is there a limited number of archetypes of interpretation, or does

[1] Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 284.

each historian have a unique approach? There have already been several attempts to categorize interpretations, such as Droysen's causal, conditional, psychological, and ethical categories, as well as Georg W. F. Hegel's class of interpretations in what he called Reflexive Historiography, which includes universal, pragmatic, critical, and conceptual approaches.[57] However, I argue that interpretations of history provide more than just Droysen's claims. Not only do they construct a complete picture of a historical event, but they also define the study of history itself, a condition that establishes the framework for how historians will interpret it. In the following I offer my own classifications that describe several ways of defining history, from viewing history as a discipline of science or a work of literature to as a causal series of events or a study of making comparisons.

History as Science: Haskell Fain and the "Narrative History"

One approach to interpreting history borrows from the sciences by crafting mathematical equations to explain historical patterns. This approach is favored by twentieth-century historian Haskell Fain, who argues in his article "History as Science" that history should be viewed through a more scientific lens. Fain suggests changing what is meant by history, saying, "Suppose, however, that by "science" one referred to geology, and by "history" one also referred to geology. Is geology not an historical science? And is it not one of the geologist's tasks to produce a narrative history of the earth, just as a cosmologist must write a narrative history of the universe and an evolutionary biologist must construct a narrative history of the origin of species?"[58] Fain argues that history is not different from any other social science, since historians

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[2] White, "Interpretation in History," 283.
[3] Haskell Fain, "History as Science," *History and Theory* 9, no. 2 (1970): 156.

write a “narrative history” of humanity similarly to how these other scientists write histories of their own fields.

Note his use of the phrase “narrative history.” Fain is clear in his distinction between “narrative” and “history.” He explains this difference in an example using biological evolution, saying, “The *story* of evolution traces the descent of man and other contemporary species from their ancestral species. The *history* of evolution includes an appraisal of how that story was "composed"; it contains an account of how, by mutation and natural selection, profound changes were wrought in the structure and form of living organisms.”[59] In other words, to Fain, a story explains *what* has happened in a series of events, while history explains *how* this event happened, including the underlying mechanisms that led to such a series of events that create the story.

Although arguing that narratives and history are distinct, Fain also writes that the two complement each other: “Writing a story of evolution presupposes that the elements of the story are genetically related to one another. Writing a history of evolution, in turn, presupposes a story of evolution. To compose a story of evolution requires genetic insight, an ability to arrange one's historical material into ancestral patterns. To transform a story into a history, however, the historian must seek the mechanisms which underlie the genetic relationships he perceives between historical incidents.”[60] Thus, according to Fain, crafting a “narrative history” is a two-step process: a historian must first seek recurring patterns in history to establish some historical event or topic, then find underlying mechanisms that explain these patterns.

But what does Fain mean by “genetic insight”? Such a word choice seems to imply that relationships between two events are causal, where one event directly leads to the next. If that

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[4] Fain, “History as Science,” 173.
[5] Fain, “History as Science,” 173.

were the case, a scientific approach to history is synonymous with a cause-and-effect approach. Fain explains that this implication is not the case. He displays the difference between a genetic and a causal relationship through an example of the parent-child connection:

> Generative acts, of course, must be performed by parents in order to produce offspring. Certain "events" must transpire. But parents are not events and children are not events, though parents cause the birth of their children. If one is on the trail of cause and effect, of course, one will focus upon the relationship between reproductive causes and parturition effects. But the relationship between parents and child is not that of cause and effect, though an act of the father and mother causes the birth of their child. The relationship between parents and child is genetic, not causal.[61]

More generally, genetic relationships identify links between historical incidents, whereas causal relationships identify actions that advance a historical narrative from one event to another. Therefore, relationships that are genetic do not imply that they are also causal, so this approach to history is valid and distinct from a cause-and-effect approach.

The second step of Fain's process, exploring "mechanisms which underlie the genetic relationships," refers back to his definition of history as a social science. As the geologist applies numerical modeling, the cosmologist theoretical physics, and the evolutionary biologist genetics to write their narratives, the historian can apply scientific fields to write their narrative as well. Fain encourages historians to apply scientific methods in history similarly to these fields, such as applying mathematics, statistics, or numerical analysis to explain how or why some historical pattern had occurred. This approach broadens the scope of the subject beyond just the humanities and into fields we may not have considered applicable.

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[6] Fain, "History as Science," 168.

History as Literature: George M. Trevelyan and Education

At the other end of the spectrum, some historians argue there is no distinction between "narrative" and "history" and instead believe that a historical event is synonymous with a narrative. Among these advocates is nineteenth and twentieth-century historian George M. Trevelyan. Trevelyan argues in his book *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian* that history cannot be considered a science because history does not fit in his definition of science. He writes that scientific subjects must have "direct utility in practical fields" or "the deduction of laws of 'cause and effect.'"[62]

Immediately it is clear that Trevelyan and Fain do not view history the same way. For Fain, history is a science because it can apply scientific principles to explain the past. In this case, science acts as a tool historians can use as part of their studies. For Trevelyan, if history were a science, it must be applicable to direct real-world scenarios, such as "invent[ing] the steam engine, or light[ing] a town, or cur[ing] cancer, or mak[ing] wheat grow near the arctic circle."[63] History as a science through this lens means that science must be applied to the whole of history, as opposed to being used as a tool for historians to employ.

While these two perspectives do not seem to have much in common, Fain and Trevelyan may agree on some components of what it means to study history. First, Trevelyan's definition of science is for the physical sciences, fields that include physics, mathematics, and engineering, while Fain argues that history is a social science, fields that include anthropology, economics, and evolutionary biology. But these social sciences, like history, also do not necessarily have

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[7] George Macaulay Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 6.

[8] Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse,* 6.

"direct utility in practical fields," since knowledge in a social science like economics also does not help in "inventing[ing] the steam engine, or light[ing] a town," or other real-world applications. So, while Fain does not define physical science or differentiate physical science from social science, he may perhaps agree with Trevelyan and his assertion of history not being a physical science.

Secondly, both agree that history is not a study of cause-and-effect relationships. Fain explains that while historical events can be related to each other and can form patterns, not every relationship is causal, as described by his parent-child analogy. Meanwhile, Trevelyan's second definition of physical science, the "deduction of laws of 'cause and effect,'" applies particularly to the sciences like theoretical physics. He uses the law of gravitation as an example to show why history is not cause-and-effect, explaining that "The law of gravitation may be scientifically proved because it is universal and simple. But the historical law that starvation brings on revolt is not proved; indeed, the opposite statement, that starvation leads to abject submission, is equally true in the light of past events."[64] Although through different perspectives, Fain and Trevelyan ultimately end up at the same conclusion that there are no cause-and-effect relationships in history. This situation demonstrates how even such contrasting interpretations of history can lead to similar conclusions about the field.

However, Trevelyan still asserts that science has no place in the field of history. Trevelyan explains that "even if cause and effect could be discovered with accuracy, they still would not be the most interesting part of human affairs. It is not man's evolution but his attainment that is the great lesson of the past and the highest theme of history."[65] For Trevelyan,

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[9] Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse,* 7.
[10] Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse,* 12.

learning about the past is itself the most important function of history; for Fain, finding patterns and explaining how or why these patterns have occurred is instead.

While arguing against an emphasis on history as science, Trevelyan's perspective toward history instead suggests an emphasis on education, and indeed, Trevelyan states that "[history's] true value is educational."[66] He argues that in approaching history as literature one can help ordinary people learn about the past and include everyone in historical debate, not just scholars. This emphasis makes the literature approach unique compared to other approaches: it teaches history, while others analyze it. However, that is not to say that historians cannot or should avoid crafting an argument while pursuing the literature approach. One recent example of this idea is Ronald Chernow's book *Washington: A Life.* His work is an ambitious project to chronicle the life of George Washington and provide ordinary people a single, one-volume resource that teaches an important figure in American history. At the same time, though, Chernow also argues against the popular belief that Washington was a stoic and instead claims that he was "a man of many moods, of many passions, of fiery opinions. But because it was all covered by this immense self-control, people didn't see it."[67]

History as Cause-and-Effect: Karl Marx and Materialism

Although Fain and Trevelyan can agree that there are no cause-and-effect relationships in history, not all historians feel the same way. One individual who favors the cause-and-effect approach to studying history is nineteenth-century thinker Karl Marx. In *The German Ideology,* Marx proposes a "materialist method" of history and explains this new perspective by first

[11] Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse,* 12.

[12] Ronald Chernow, "Q & A with Ron Chernow, Part 1," interview with Brian Lamb, *American History TV,* Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, New York, New York, United States, October 2, 2010, 3:43.

defining a "first premise" of history, saying, "The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, orohydrographical, climatic, and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men."[68] Marx elaborates on this relationship between the human and the environment, saying that humans distinguish themselves from other animals "as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life."[69] Marx then claims that these "means of subsistence" define an expression of life for an individual and argues that this claim shows a relationship between the nature of humans and their environment, saying:

> The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.[70]

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[13] Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), in *Marxists Internet Archive,* transcribed by Tim Delaney and Bob Schwartz (2000), 6.
[14] Marx, *The German Ideology,* 6.
[15] Marx, *The German Ideology,* 6.

According to Marx, not only are individuals and their physical surroundings related by these surroundings offering "a definite form of expressing their life," but changes in these surroundings can produce entirely new individuals, since the "means of subsistence" may be changed. This situation suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between the environment and an individual since manipulations in the environment lead to a different nature of an individual. To complete his "materialist method" of history, Marx extends this reasoning to define history itself, saying, "History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity."[71] Since material conditions create the nature of individuals, a succeeding generation of individuals will inherit the material conditions of the previous generation and create themselves based on these past circumstances. And since each generation "exploits the materials," change in society arises from this new set of material conditions. Thus, Marx extends his concept of historical materialism to define history itself: just as how material conditions determine the nature of an individual, changes in material conditions over generations determine the nature of human societies. This historical materialist perspective of history is also a cause-and-effect perspective of history because it proposes that manipulations in the environment change the nature of an individual; likewise, on a larger scale, the material exploitations of one generation impact the material conditions of the next, which exploits these conditions for the next generation to inherit, and the cycle continues.

[16] Marx, *The German Ideology,* 16.

Marx also takes a cause-and-effect approach to history toward the relationship he establishes between the workers and the owners of production. Returning to Marx's "first premise" and the relationship between humans and the environment, recall his statement that the way humans produce their means of subsistence "is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are."[72] Labor, therefore, is an important aspect of expressing an individual's identity, an act of not merely subsistence but also of self-conception. However, in Marx's earlier work, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he criticizes the capitalist economic system of depriving workers of their identities by expropriating their labor to make a profit. The worker in a capitalist world "becomes a servant of his object, first, in that he receives an object of labor, i.e., in that he receives work, and, secondly, in that he receives means of subsistence. This enables him to exist, first as a worker; and second, as a physical subject. The height of this servitude is that it is only as a worker that he can maintain himself as a physical subject and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a worker."[73] This conflict between the worker and the owner forms the basis for Marx's arguments in *The Communist Manifesto*, where the working class, or the "proletariat," and the owners of production, or the "bourgeoisie," form antagonistic relationships that inevitably lead to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system: "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and

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[17] Marx, *The German Ideology,* 6.

[18] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), in *Marxists Internet Archive*, translated by Martin Milligan, revised by Dirk J. Struik, transcribed by Andy Blunden, proofed by Matthew Carmody (2009), 29.

essential product."[74] But Marx takes this idea a step further and describes "the history of all hitherto existing societies" as "the history of class struggles,"[75] and that "every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes."[76] Thus, Marx generalizes his proposed conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to include all other social conflicts of the past. Furthermore, since this conflict in the capitalist system must follow with the new mode of production of communism in addition to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, Marx's "history of class struggles" explains why societies shift to different modes of production throughout history, such as from feudalism in the Middle Ages to capitalism in the sixteenth century.

Such a way of thinking about the past reflects an additional approach to studying history known as dialectical materialism. Similar to debate, dialectics refers to a process of establishing a truth on a subject that people may disagree on. Marx was influenced by nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel, who proposed a three-part dialectic model to explain social change. Although Hegel did not use the following terms, this model became popularized as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis method, where a thesis, or some idea, creates an opposing reaction, which is resolved by the synthesis, only for the synthesis to generate a new opposing reaction in a continuous cycle of social development.[77] Marx, however, believed this model was too abstract and instead proposed his own dialectic model to explain social progress:

> My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the

[19] Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, introduction by Jodi Dean, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Communist Manifesto,* 47-103, Pluto Press, 2017, 65.
[20] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 49.
[21] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 67.
[22] Julie E. Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

> name of "the Idea," he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea." With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.[78]

For Hegel, dialectics deal with the mental world, where human ideas are the core of social change; for Marx, dialectics deal with the material world, where production and economic activity are the core instead. Thus, dialectical materialism is Marx's belief that societies go through necessary changes in social organization due to a conflict among social classes driven by the material world and economic activity. This belief, like historical materialism, is a cause-and-effect approach to history. Marx asserts that the capitalist system must decay because the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie must be resolved, and so the development of communism to replace capitalism becomes the resolution.

Marx, however, never states that history is predetermined, as the cause-and-effect approach to history may imply. Human agency remains important in his models. But this belief does not change his emphasis on historical materialism, where actions in preceding generations directly impact those in future generations, as he explains in his book *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:* "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[79] Hence, the cause-and-effect approach and Marx's historical materialism both suggest a "directional" point of view toward history, but neither claim that the future is predetermined or that our efforts toward social change are futile. However, this idea of

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[23] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), in *Marxists Internet Archive,* translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (2015), 14.
[24] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), in *Marxists Internet Archive,* transcribed by Zodiac and Brian Baggins, proofed by Alex Blain and Mark Harris (2010), 5.

"direction" nevertheless led to tendencies to seek deterministic patterns across history in the twentieth century. One notable example is Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West,* which argues that the history of humans can be explained in terms of groups of people called cultures, each of which experiences a predetermined period of growth and decline.[80]

History as Comparisons: Alexis de Tocqueville and the Spirit of Equality

While some historians like Spengler adopted Marxist thought and the materialist perspective toward history, others rejected such beliefs and took a different approach. One example was French aristocrat and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who laid out a comparative approach to history in his book *Democracy in America.* Tocqueville traveled to the United States in 1831 and was fascinated by the system of local state government, in contrast to France's centralized government that he was part of. He believed that such local government was the key to liberty and a sense of freedom among the American people, saying: "Yet it is at the local level that the strength of a free people lies. Local institutions are to liberty what elementary schools are to knowledge; they bring it within the reach of the people, allow them to savor its peaceful use, and accustom them to rely on it. Without local institutions, a nation may give itself a free government, but it will not have a free spirit."[81] For Tocqueville, liberty is the freedom to participate in government. Although Americans may not be socioeconomically equal, this "free spirit" pervades American society because ordinary people can vote on important issues and believe that their vote is just as important as any other. Thus, Americans not only embody a spirit of liberty for having a say in government, but they also have a spirit of equality for believing

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[25] Northrop Frye, "'The Decline of the West' by Oswald Spengler," *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (1974): 2.
[26] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* vol. 1, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 68.

their votes are equally important, even with the existence of socioeconomic inequalities. It is immediately clear that Tocqueville and Marx do not view society the same way. For Marx, liberty derives from the abolishment of social classes, which are created by economic activity; thus, liberty for Marx is economic. For Tocqueville, liberty derives from a system of local, democratic governments where ordinary people have a voice in current affairs; thus, liberty for Tocqueville is political.

Furthermore, Tocqueville also argues that this "spirit" of equality grows in a continuous upward spiral. He argues in the second volume of *Democracy in America* that once some social justice is reached, there will be more criticism toward smaller social injustices:

> The hatred which men bear to privilege increases in proportion as privileges become fewer and less considerable, so that democratic passions would seem to burn most fiercely just when they have least fuel. I have already given the reason of this phenomenon. When all conditions are unequal, no inequality is so great as to offend the eye; whereas the slightest dissimilarity is odious in the midst of general uniformity: the more complete this uniformity is, the more insupportable does the sight of such a difference become. Hence it is natural that the love of equality should constantly increase together with equality itself, and that it should grow by what it feeds on.[82]

This theory of social progress can be applied to Hegelian dialectics: the thesis would begin with some social system, which would face criticism as having elements of some social injustice. This injustice would be resolved, only to be left with a system that might have smaller injustices but would face equal criticism as the previous. Applying Tocqueville's theory of social change to the Hegelian dialectic illustrates the difference between this model and Marx's dialectical

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[27] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Francis Bowen (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863), 362.

materialism: For Marx, social change occurs through the *decline* of social systems; for Tocqueville, social change occurs through the *improvement* of social systems.

The comparative approach enabled Tocqueville to think about history differently compared to other scholars in his time. Dialectical materialism and historical materialism were influential visions of approaching history in the nineteenth century, defining abstractions like "equality." However, Tocqueville's stay in the United States revealed to him that "equality" was not necessarily economic equality, but equality in the sense of feeling just as important in society as everyone else, even with inequalities like socioeconomic status. Equality for Tocqueville is thus more of a perception within an individual as opposed to some quantifiable measurement, such as receiving equal pay. Through his traveling experience, Tocqueville demonstrates the uniqueness of the comparative perspective and how it can not only find patterns in history as the cause-and-effect approach can, but it can also point to differences across societies and generate a new idea or belief through this manner as well.

Conclusion:

Each of these approaches represents a unique definition of history that shapes the way a historian finds patterns and analyzes historical evidence. For Fain, history is a science, so historians should analyze historical evidence like how a geologist would analyze theirs, such as through numerical modeling; for Trevelyan, history is education, so scholars should emphasize ways to distribute historical evidence to a general audience; for Marx, history is a chain of causal events, so historians should analyze one society to make predictions about what that society will look like in the future, with particular emphasis on the economy; and for Tocqueville, history is

comparative, so historians should analyze similarities and differences across societies to find historical patterns.

This survey of approaches not only proves J. G. Droysen's claim that interpretation in history is necessary to explain why historical events occurred in a certain way, but it also argues that *multiple* historical interpretations are necessary. Each approach offers a unique perspective of analyzing the past, and debate among historians with competing perspectives regarding a historical event provides the best analysis toward the event, offering new perspectives and insights to historians that they might have otherwise overlooked.

Admittedly, analyzing only four interpretations leaves out other approaches that belong in this conversation. However, this debate among historians can surely be extended to include those who view history in ways that were not discussed here. In any case, interpretation in history is important in explaining and analyzing the past. In the words of Hayden White, "...there can be no "proper history" without the presupposition of a full-blown "metahistory" by which to justify those interpretative strategies necessary for the representation of a given segment of the historical process."[83]

[28] White, "Interpretation in History," 283.

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