

## **The Evolution of Conflicts The Conflict Theory of Gerhard Schwarz and its Application to Xenophobia<sup>1</sup>**

Gerhard Schwarz is an Austrian scientist with a *venia docendi* in philosophy and group dynamics (Lewin 1947). He has done extensive work in the theory of social groups and organizations. Throughout his writings the theme "conflicts" plays an important role. The first work of Schwarz I personally read was an article titled "Konfliktlösung als Prozess" (Conflict-Solving as a Process - Schwarz 1977). His main scientific work is his book "Die heilige Ordnung der Männer. Patriarchalische Hierarchie und Gruppendynamik" (The Holy Order of Men. Patriarchal Hierarchies and Group Dynamics - Schwarz 1985). The most practically-oriented book is his latest: "Konfliktmanagement" (Conflict-Management - Schwarz 1999). In this summary I will mainly refer to this last book.

Throughout his work Schwarz stresses that different social entities (individuals, pairs of persons, triangles of three persons, groups, and organizations) have typical modes of interaction and **typical forms of conflicts**. One of the main elements of his theory is that there are radical differences in the organizational structures (and the type of corresponding conflicts) when

- S** a pair is transformed to a group of three persons (prototype: a couple gets a baby);
- S** a group is transformed to an organization. This transfer changes the style of communication from direct communication (everyone talks to everyone directly) to the need of formalized "indirect" communication structures (reports, agendas, rules...).

Schwarz gives a classification of conflicts according to the type of social entity in which they typically occur: intra-personal conflicts, conflicts of pairs, "triangle-conflicts", group-conflicts and conflicts of organizations. Although this typology seems to be very plausible and useful to me, I will not attempt to go into detail about it here. For the rest of this paper I will confine myself to Schwarz's theory of conflict solving. For the sake of brevity I will refer to this theory of conflict solving as "the conflict-theory of Gerhard Schwarz".

### **1 Six Levels of Conflict Solving**

The basic idea of Schwarz's conflict-theory is simple. He says that there are six levels (or stages or modes) of conflict-solving strategies, which form a certain order or sequence:

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1. **escape:** "run away"
2. **destruction:** "kill your opponent"
3. **submission:** "subordinate your opponent"
4. **delegation:** an independent authority (judge) decides the conflict
5. **compromise:** an arrangement between the two positions
6. **consensus:** seeking for a dialectical synthesis

These six levels form a kind of order or learning process. This process might appear

- (1) as progress in an individual conflict,
- (2) as progress in the consciousness of conflicts in a person or organization, or
- (3) as progress in the social abilities of mankind as a whole to manage conflicts.

Schwarz postulates a kind of evolution in the ability to deal with conflicts: the most primitive form is simply to run away, the most elaborate form is the art of transforming opposing positions to a new level of synthesis where the conflict disappears.

## 1.1 Escape

Escape is the most elementary form of "solving" a conflict: if there is a problem, run away. Schwarz sees this as the dominant problem solving method of primitive nomadic hunting tribes: if there is a problem, go somewhere else where things (e.g. deer for hunting) hopefully will be better. Of course there are numerous modern counterparts of escape as a conflict solving strategy, which would be worth a closer inspection.

The main disadvantage of escape is that the conflict is just avoided, not really solved or even addressed. A modern variant of this habit to avoid painful confrontations is a strategy which has been coined "**shifting the burden**" by Peter Senge (1990). Senge has found that in many social systems (notably organizations) one can find problems which would need a radical solution. A radical solution eliminates the roots of the problem and does not deal just with the symptoms. (Actually the origin of the word "radical" is the latin word radix = root.) Radical solutions are usually painful and unattractive in the short run. They often need to endure a phase of "worse before better". So it happens too often that the necessary radical solution is avoided. Instead, the symptoms are attacked with "quick and dirty" solutions. Think of a person who takes an aspirin against the pain of a damaged tooth, hoping thus to escape a visit to the dentist.

If escape is not effective, a conflict often enters the next stage: destruction.

## 1.2 Destruction

Both parties of a conflict meet to fight a life-and-death struggle in order to resolve the conflict. Often an escape ends in such a "showdown". When one cannot run away any longer, "high noon" has come. So the prototype of this kind of solving conflicts is the duel. The two combatants shoot at each other. As soon as one of the two has been killed, the conflict is permanently eliminated.

The main advantage of this form of conflict-solving is that the polarity between the two positions is eliminated radically. The main disadvantage is that no learning is possible. This favors a survival of the best "gunners", which might be inadequate for post-wild-west societies.

### 1.3 Submission or Subordination

This is the more cultivated variant of resolving a fight: the loser is not killed, but only subordinated. The prototype might be a war between two tribes, where the members of the losing side are not killed, but put into slavery. Schwarz sees in the slavery a significant advantage over simple killing for both sides: the winner of the conflict gains labor force for his benefit and the losing side is spared its life.

According to Schwarz the invention of submission is one of the great advances in the history of cultures. It has opened the possibility of specialization and of sharing work ("Arbeitsteilung") among groups. Slave-master relationships have provided the chance for the progressive development of this relation, which is not possible for combatants. Moreover the principle of subordination is the basic building block for the next level of conflict solving: delegation.

### 1.4 Delegation

Conflict solving by delegation does not require a fight between the two opposing parties of a conflict. Instead, the issue is decided by an independent third party. The prototype of this form of solving conflicts is the lawsuit in a court, where a judge (or a board of judges) decides the case. Schwarz (1985, 1999) gives several formal requirements, all of which have to be fulfilled in order for conflict solving by delegation to work properly:

- 1) The conflict must be of a kind that there is a right and a wrong solution.
- 2) A higher authority, which is accepted by both sides, must exist and this authority and its decision must be unquestionably accepted by both sides.
- 3) This independent authority must be able to discern between the right and wrong solution.

The first requirement is most certainly not trivial. We will see later in section 1.6 that there is an important type of conflict (which Schwarz refers to as **aporetical conflicts**) that do not fulfill this requirement. The second requirement is trivial, yet it has tremendous practical importance. Without a concept of an authority, which is accepted by both sides, conflict solving via delegation is impossible. The third requirement is rather straightforward: if the higher authority chooses the wrong alternative, we cannot consider this as a proper solution of the conflict.

Conflict solving via delegation has an institutional counterpart: the **hierarchy**. Schwarz stresses a close connection between the emergence of conflict solving by delegation and the emergence of hierarchies. Both the second and the third requirements from above are granted in hierarchies *per definitionem*. We have just to consider the fundamental law of hierarchology "' 1: *The boss is always right*". In a hierarchy the choice of the boss becomes "right" or "truth", just because it has been decided by him or her as the higher authority.

Schwarz gives an excellent example of the close relation between conflict solving and hierarchies by citing an episode from the Old Testament. In Second Moses, Chapter 18, Verses 13-27 it is reported that Moses, the leader of the people of Israel on its journey through the wilderness to the promised land, was overwhelmed by the many controversies he had to decide among his people. Jitro, his father in law, suggested that Moses should elect trustworthy men as overseers over 10, 50, 100 and 1000 people among the families and tribes of Israel, so that they could solve all the minor issues. Only the most critical cases should be brought to Moses as the highest authority. Moses did so and thus installed a hierarchy with the purpose of solving the conflicts among the people. It is most interesting that immediately after this in Chapter 20, God

gave Israel the 10 commandments at the mountain Horeb. Schwarz interprets this in the following way: The 10 commandments were given as a set of rules for the overseers (judges) of Israel. He stresses that any hierarchy needs a set of formal rules or laws or codes which insure that the hierarchy can fulfill its vital functions.

Schwarz sees in the hierarchy and the underlying principle of conflict-solving by delegation one of the most fundamental and successful achievements in the evolution of human societies. Over thousands of years the hierarchy B the "holy order" B proved to be one of the most efficient and powerful ways to structure organizations. Schwarz thinks very generally that social entities are institutionalized answers to major conflict themes, and act as institutionalized methods of conflict-solving.

### 1.5 Compromise

A compromise is different from delegation. The Viennese saying "We won't need a judge" ("Wir werden keinen Richter brauchen", which is said when two parties agree to manage some issue themselves) indicates the issue very precisely: the two conflicting partners agree that they want to find a solution themselves without an external judge. Usually a compromise is somewhere in the middle between the original opposing positions. Wage agreements between trade unions and employer associations are a typical example. First the trade union says: "We request +4.5% to the income of every worker!"; Then the employer's association says: "We offer 1.3%" B and after some weeks of ritualized negotiations both sides agree to, for instance, +2.8% plus other special agreements that each side can present to its own members as a success in the negotiations.

Another example for conflict solving by compromise is bargaining at an oriental bazaar about the price of some article. A theoretical requirement for successful compromises is that there exists a common scale on which the difference between the two positions can be measured. At the bazaar this is simply the price to be paid for a certain item., In the case of wage agreements it is usually some absolute or percentage increase in the wages of employees.

### 1.6 Aporetic Conflicts

The need for this sixth conflict solving strategy exists because there is a type of conflict that cannot be solved through any of the previous methods: this is the **aporetic conflict** or **apory**. A conflict has to fulfill three conditions in order to be called **aporetic**:

- (A) There must be two opposing positions.
- (B) Both positions must be true or at least legitimate.
- (C) Both positions must depend upon each other; one cannot exist without the other.

Condition (A) is trivially necessary for any conflict. Condition (B) is definitely non-trivial. It makes clear that aporetic conflicts cannot be resolved by the means of our conventional true-false logic. In particular, aporetic conflicts are not solvable by delegation. According to the first condition, in delegable conflicts only one side can be right and the other must be wrong. B This is not the case for aporetic conflicts, where **both** sides are "right".

Yet condition (C) is the trickiest aspect of aporetic conflicts. It says essentially that both opposing positions are necessary: no side can exist without the other. Thus a primitive

elimination of the conflict (e. g. by destruction of the opposite position) is actually impossible, because it would ultimately result in the elimination of both sides. In order to understand this, let us imagine a strike as a weapon of workers against their employer. If the workers strike too extensively, the existence of the firm is in danger: the firm might lose its market-position and its revenues. The management would have to quit the business and to close the plant. Thus a strike cannot be extended *in extremis*, because of the aporetic relation between the employer and employee side. For the same reason the management cannot fire its whole workforce, because it depends upon them, too.

Another very fundamental apory discussed by Schwarz is the **relation between freedom and law or freedom vs. order** in a societal entity: (A) Both positions are opposed to each other: laws like "It is forbidden to enter the lawn" obviously reduce our freedom. (B) Both positions are legitimate: order without freedom would be brutal dictatorship and slavery; and freedom without "law and order" would be just anarchy. (C) Both positions depend upon each other: in order to grant freedom, some kind of order is necessary (e.g. in form of a constitution which grants the right of free speech); on the other hand some kind of freedom is necessary to establish "law and order". Just for this reason the pilgrim fathers had to leave their home countries and went to America: there they had the freedom to establish a new, democratic order.

The apory between freedom and order appears also in hierarchical organizations: how much autonomy and freedom does the administration give to the employees in their realm? On the one hand centralized regulations are necessary to keep the hierarchy functionally alive (think of the "10 commandments" for Israel!); on the other hand the employees need some freedom within their position in order to organize their work effectively. Any hierarchical organization has to balance this aporetic ambivalence between centralized regulation and individual freedom at the forefront of a business.

## 2 Progress in Solving Conflicts

### 2.1 Fundamental Apories

When I heard first about aporetic conflicts, my reaction was that an apory must be something very strange and extraordinary. Over the years I have learned that the opposite is true. Actually some of the most fundamental polarities of mankind can be seen under a conflict-theoretical perspective as apories. Schwarz mentions four fundamental aporetical polarities: life vs. death; individual vs. group; young vs. aged; men vs. women. For each of these polarities some aporetical aspects can be identified.

Schwarz has a very interesting (yet debatable) hypothesis about these four basic polarities. He asserts that it is a fundamental function of hierarchies to overcome any of these four apories. The conflict between the young and the older is resolved by the fact that in a hierarchy people have to work their way upwards.; This implies that the older people have the higher positions and thus rule over the younger. The polarity between individual and group (or institution) is resolved by the fact that each individual in a hierarchy can be replaced by another; only the institution has to remain stable. Schwarz interprets this as the dominion of the institution over the individual. The conflict between men and women is resolved in hierarchies through the fact that (according to Schwarz) hierarchies in their purest form are just hierarchies of men (see the book-title "Die Heilige Ordnung der Männer - The Holy Order of Men; Schwarz 1985). Women are principally excluded from this (proto)type of hierarchy. The last basic polarity between life and death

Schwarz sees as resolved in the following way: In hierarchies rules and regulations continue to exist even if the individual person dies or has left the hierarchy. Thus the "death" rules over "life" in a certain sense.

Personally I think these analogies are interesting, but possibly a bit too far-stretched. Yet I would like to stress that Schwarz addresses here a very important question: *What is the function of organizations and institutions concerning our desire for getting aporetic conflicts (re)solved?* As an example I personally think that marriage is an institution which has the function to overcome the aporetic polarity between men and women. This does not mean that I think that any apory can be resolved on earth. To resolve the polarity between life and death in my opinion requires concepts like eternal life in heaven and something like the resurrection of the dead; which surely transcends our earthly realms.

## 2.2 Apories Institutionalized

What I gain from Schwarz is the fact that aporetic conflicts can be "institutionalized", which means that a certain organization or institution is formed with the purpose that the apory or conflict is well enclosed within the organization. These aporetic conflicts embedded within an institution are not just a mere problem or something that is inevitable. On the contrary: the existence of this kind of conflict is a fundamental reason why the institution exists at all! Schwarz discusses in detail the example of an insurance company. During a consulting process in an insurance company Schwarz noted first an **apory between the sales personnel** (who promised the customers all and everything just in order to sell the insurance policy) **and the casualties department** (who had to say too often to the customers "Sorry, that kind of accident is not covered by the terms of your insurance policy"). The aporetic relation of both departments is obvious, especially the fact, as noted in condition (C), that both need each other. But this is only the first level of apories that Schwarz discovered. On an even more fundamental level the **mere product "insurance policy" has an aporetic character** on a psychological level. On the one hand the policy is contracted, because accidents can happen. On the other hand, Schwarz found that there is a strong belief among customers that signing an insurance policy psychologically has to do with the wish to **avoid** an accident or catastrophe. Schwarz compares insurance fees with biblical sacrifices, where people voluntarily killed an animal in order to ensure their protection from more serious occurrences. The slogan of an Austrian insurance company "*Thre Sorgen möchten wir haben*" ("We want to have *your* troubles") addresses exactly this second desire of customers: to get rid of casualties by an insurance policy. Schwarz reports that the conflict between sales personnel and the casualties department was accepted much more readily when the insurance people became aware of the fact that even their product has aporetic aspects about it.

Schwarz sees such aporetic aspects not only in insurance policies, but also in familiar things like telephones, private cars or money. For details see Schwarz (1999) chapter 6.

## 2.3 Dealing with Apories: a Dialectical Process

Schwarz provides some theoretical guidelines about how an aporetic conflict can be treated. He thinks that such a conflict often evolves in several steps, which have a typical sequence (although relapses to earlier steps are usual):

- (1) The conflict emerges: the two opposing positions arise and become apparent.
- (2) Fight: destruction or submission?

- (3) Both sides recognize that they would destroy themselves if they killed the opposite side.
- (4) Attempts are made to reach compromises.
- (5) The polarity appears within both opposing sides.
- (6) The synthesis: both sides find a new balance on a higher level.

Phase (1) implies that the conflict is no longer kept "under the surface". In phase (2) both sides try to "win" the conflict. This is impossible, because in an aporetic conflict both opposing positions depend upon each other and thus no side can eliminate the other. At some point, phase (3) is entered. If the elimination of the opposing position is impossible, usually a *modus vivendi* arises, and a compromise is looked for (phase 4). The search for compromises must fail, because aporetic conflicts do not involve differences which can be measured on a common scale, where both sides can meet in the middle. There is no common scale and therefore there is no middle that can be found; for instance, where could there be a middle position between men and women or life and death? The key for a successful management of aporetic conflicts comes in phase (5): each side discovers that the opposing position can be found "within their own camp". At this stage dissidents are revealed, which make clear that one's own position includes somehow the opposite position, as well. If we denote two opposing positions as A and B, then the people of camp A recognize that position B is among them, and the people of camp B see position A emerge within the own camp! At this stage an aporetic conflict becomes truly interesting and constructive. In a struggle between the polarities of freedom and order (at least some of) the people of the "law and order" camp would cry for more freedom and the people of the "liberty" side start to ask for order and regulations in order to save their liberty! This opens the door to a new way of living (phase 6), where both positions are equally represented in both camps and thus the polarity vanishes.

These six steps should be taken only as an idealized and simplified model. In reality it well might happen that drawbacks from a more advanced phase to an earlier phase take place. Moreover I think that for some of the most fundamental apories we will not be able to reach a synthesis level (6) in our earthly lives.

Concerning the progress in the original six levels of conflict solving (described in 1.1. - 1.6), Schwarz believes that progress to a higher level of conflict solution can only be achieved if there is insight by all conflicting parties that the new level would bring more advantages than disadvantages. There must be an expectation that something essential can be gained by the progress to a higher conflict solving level. If a dictator has more advantages in continuing his brutal regime, he will never be willing to allow democratization.

### 3 Xenophobia: a Special Apory

#### 3.1 Different Forms of Xenophobia

Let me define **xenophobia** as a fear or hatred against someone or something that is strange or different than oneself. A necessary condition for xenophobia is that the mere fact of being different alone is sufficient for the negative feelings. For a xenophobe it is not necessary that the other person behave in a peculiar way. Being different is sufficient reason to create conflict.

This broad definition allows the inclusion of different variations of xenophobia:

**Racism** := hatred against people of other races and/or other cultures.

**Sexism** := hatred against the opposite gender, usually hatred of men against women.

**Fascism** := hatred against an opposing political opinion. etc.

### 3.2 Xenophobia and Apories

The fields where the different aspects of xenophobia arise seem to be of aporetic nature. Let us look at this hypothesis in more detail. In the case of sexism, i.e., hatred against the opposite gender, Schwarz (1999, pp 96ff) says that the relation between the sexes is one of the most fundamental (but not yet properly addressed in our western societies) apories of mankind. To determine the aporetic nature of the relation between different races is not so difficult, either: different races usually establish different cultures, which result in differing norms and behaviors. So we can conclude that there are different cultural positions within different races, which is the first theoretical requirement for a conflict. Moreover all these different cultures are legitimate, because any culture is part of the identity of this "ethnos". As a third point we find that ethnic or biological differences are actually necessary to identify a culture or race. If all races except one would be eliminated this would let vanish the concept of race itself.

This last point might be better seen within the field of fascism or political differences. If all political differences and any political opposition were eliminated, politics itself would cease, being downgraded to a crude authoritarian dictatorship. The existence of different political opinions and political parties are considered an elementary requirement for us in order that we can speak of (democratic) politics at all. This implies that opposing political opinions depend upon each other in a certain way. It is not possible to eliminate opposing political opinions without killing the very essence of non-monocratic politics itself. The second requirement of an apory, that both opposing sides are true or legitimate, is a crucial point in our pluralistic view of politics, too. So we can conclude that our pluralistic democratic style of politics is in its very essence of an aporetic nature.

We can also conclude that important variants of xenophobia (racism, sexism ...) are of an aporetic nature. With this background xenophobia can be interpreted basically as an attempt to avoid or to get rid of aporetic conflicts by trying to eliminate the opposing position. Since the desire for harmony and unity is a very strong emotional force in humankind, this offers an explanation why xenophobic behavior might be so massive.

Moreover we have to take into account that apories are actually opposing our common "yes-no" or "right-wrong" logic. According to binary logic an apory should not even be allowed to exist! Being confronted with an apory is a scandal for our dualistic logic. Accepting an aporetic situation implies the acceptance of something that is basically illogical. Xenophobic fighting against an apory thus can be justified with the argument that its intent is to defend rational logic! This gives a clue why xenophobic arguments are so often very catchy and hard to deal with in a logical discourse.

### 3.3. Standing against Xenophobia

These considerations show that standing against xenophobia is not so simple. Xenophobia cannot be eliminated as simply as darkness can be eliminated by switching on a light. Crude anti-xenophobia is in massive danger of becoming xenophobic itself. An 'anti-fascist' saying that "All fascists have to be imprisoned in concentration camps" argues himself like a fascist.

Paul Watzlawick's concept of **first-order change** vs. **second-order change** (Watzlawick/Weak-

land/Fisch 1974) is a fine theoretical frame for evaluating strategies against xenophobia. With the terms *first-order change* and *second-order change* Watzlawick coins two essentially different styles of solving a problem. First order change means that a problem is tackled directly in the following manner: if the problem increases, the proposed intensity of the solution has to be increased, too. If it is getting colder, increase the heating. If you need more money, withdraw more from your bank account. If you get hungry, eat more. If your car is too slow, step on the gas. If somebody does not understand you, speak louder. For many simple problem situations first order solutions are perfect.

Yet Watzlawick shows that there are numerous types of problems where first-order solutions are disastrous. When another person does not understand our language, it does not help to speak louder. We have to change the language to make ourselves understood. If the glass in the windows of a house are broken, more heating would not suffice to prevent the cold. It is necessary to repair the windows to fight the cold efficiently. When your vis-a-vis does not understand your language, speaking louder would not really help to make yourself understood. When the brakes of a car are blocked, it is not a good idea to "solve" this problem by just opening the throttle. This might overheat the brakes and in the worst case this could inflame the whole car. The proper solution would be to loosen the brakes. Such **second-order solutions** are usually not like pulling a lever within the system but a change of the structure of the system itself.

In aporetic situations first order-solutions generally don't work. On the contrary: they usually worsen the problem and not infrequently are found to actually be the problem. Watzlawick (1974, chapter 3) summarizes: "More of the same - or: When the solution becomes the problem". The arms race between the USA and the former Soviet Union is a good example for this principle. Every side just "reacted" to the increase in armaments of the other side. This first order solution "more weapons against the threat" actually **was** the problem, as can be seen easily from a second - order viewpoint.

First order solutions are not suitable for xenophobia, either. They just lead to a destructive escalation of the conflict. What is true for aporetic conflicts in general, can be applied to xenophobic constellations in particular: Don't try to eliminate the tension by brute force and resist simple first order "solutions"! At first sight this is considerably more difficult than just hitting against the opposing position, but this is the price we have to pay for a successful management of xenophobia.

## 4 Resolving Xenophobia

As for any aporetic conflict, there is no quick solution for resolving xenophobia. I have already pointed out that simple fighting against xenophobia on the level of a "first order solution" definitely would not help. Simple opposition against xenophobes is itself a kind of xenophobia against the xenophobic! To make a second-order solution possible it is necessary to resist the simple first-order fighting. And this decision is usually painful and often it has to some extent the character of a sacrifice. Sacrifices are not very popular in our days, but they may actually have the power to transform vicious cycles to virtuous cycles. Let me make the point clear: here "sacrifice" does not mean something mystical or even theological, but it means the simple fact of "worse before better", as it has been coined by Senge (1990). For having the chance of achieving some long-term beneficial effect we have to bear a short term disadvantage. This is the basic idea behind any form of investment, which might be more easily accepted than "sacrifice". Saving

money with interest is a very elementary and practical example for this principle: One spends less money today for a future benefit, which is higher than the present disadvantage. The same is true for any form of business investment: first we spend some considerable amount of effort, time or money in order to achieve a later "return on investment".

I have the very strong impression that overcoming xenophobia requires some sacrifice – or some essential kind of "social investment", if you like; but it is hard for me to argue on the level of rationality here. I have thought very hard about what one might have to "put on the altar" to overcome xenophobia. I must admit that I have no rational argument to this question in my head. I have only an answer in my heart - and it is not very comfortable to me: My heart says that we have to sacrifice nothing less than our own positions, our view of this world ("Weltanschauung") - our own "truth" about the things we believe as the "facts" of this world to overcome xenophobia. At the very bottom it seems to me that the mere fact that each of us is the creator of his or her own world (as this has been proposed by the Radical Constructivists, like Paul Watzlawick, Ernst Glasersfeld or Heinz von Förster) is the seed of all this fear ( i.e., xenophobia) of the things and persons and idea(l)s out there, which apparently are different from us and which are terrifying us, because they are somehow a danger to our identity. If we want to reach a higher level of a synthesis, these differing positions and world-views have to be sublimated and dissolved. It is like an egg cell which has to allow a sperm cell to penetrate the cell boundary: without this readiness to lose its own identity no fertilization, no synthesis of a newly created living being is possible.

Again: "to sacrifice of my own position" is not presented here as a rationally argued answer to the xenophobia issue. Seriously speaking I consider this just as the edge of a systemic answer, which is far from fully unfolded in my mind.

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