

THE CONTINGENT A *PRIORI*: KRIPKE'S TWO TYPES OF EXAMPLES

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The thesis that the necessary and the *a priori* are extensionally equivalent consists of two independent claims:

1) All *a priori* truths are necessary

and

2) all necessary truths are *a priori*.

In *Naming and Necessity*¹ Saul A. Kripke gives two *types* of examples of contingent truths knowable *a priori*. So he disagrees with the first leg of the thesis. As we will see later, his examples depend on the direct designation theory of names. While there have been attempts to provide examples of the contingent *a priori* that do not depend on that theory, most of those examples should be viewed as expansions, or modifications, of Kripke's examples. Philip Kitcher, for example, gives an interesting example that has nothing to do with theories of names, but is produced using the indexical 'actual'.² His example, however, is a variation of Kripke's Neptune Type example.³ In what follows I will focus on Kripke's two types of examples and modifications of them. I will argue that although both types of example fail, it is possible to modify his Standard Metre example in such a way that we have an example of the contingent *a priori*.

Kripke's Two Types of Examples

In *Naming and Necessity* Kripke gives two types of examples of the contingent *a priori*, both of which have received much attention. The first type is exemplified by the Standard Metre example. We can fix the reference of 'one metre' by saying

3) Stick S is one metre long at time t.

¹ S.A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1981).

² P. Kitcher, 'Apriority and Necessity', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980) pp. 89-101. See also G. Evans, 'Reference and Contingency', *The Monist* 62 (1979) pp. 161-89.

³ More recently Timothy Williamson has argued that there are contingent *A priori* truths that have nothing to do with either indexicals or theories of names. See 'The Contingent *A Priori*: Has It Anything To Do With Indexicals?', *Analysis* 46 (1986) pp. 113-17.

The person who utters (3) in order to fix the reference of 'one metre' wants to mark out a certain length, and he does so by utilizing the contingent fact that S happens to have that length at t. At the same time, he knows automatically and without any further investigation that S is one metre long.⁴

In the second type of example the reference has to be fixed by a description as opposed to by ostension or description. Upon noticing such and such discrepancies in the orbit of Uranus, we might say

4) If Neptune exists, Neptune is the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus

thus fixing the reference of 'Neptune' even before the planet was ever seen.⁵ We apparently know what (4) expresses *a priori*, and yet it is not necessarily true, since some other object might have caused the perturbations.

The difference between the two types of examples consists in the relationship between the reference fixer and the object being named. In the Metre Type examples, the reference fixer is *en rapport* with what is being named. He sees the thing he dubs 'one metre', or at least something he dubs 'one metre' (for all we know the 'stick' might be a holograph).⁶ There is a causal relationship between what is being named and the speaker such that the speaker can form an idea of the object, and have a *de re* belief with respect to it.

The situation is entirely different in the Neptune Type examples. There the speaker fixes the reference of a name without being *en rapport* with what is being named. The speaker has a description, and stipulates that if that description uniquely designates something, then that thing, whatever it is, is called 'N' (where 'N' is a name). The speaker does not stand in the appropriate relationship with what is being named to have *de re* beliefs with respect to it, although he can of course have *de dicto* beliefs with respect to it.

This difference between the two types of examples of the contingent *a priori* has not been recognized in the literature,⁷ but I believe the difference is so significant that they require separate treatment. This is supported by the fact that some arguments against the contingent *a priori* rest on the claim that (in the Neptune Type examples) we cannot have *de re* beliefs

⁴ Kripke, 54-57. For other versions of this type of example, see D. Kaplan, 'Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice', *Approaches to Natural Language*, ed. J. Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1973).

⁵ Kripke, p. 79. Other examples of this type are given by K. Donnellan, 'The Contingent *A Priori* and Rigid Designators', *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. P.A. French, T.E. Uehling, and H.K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) pp. 45-60, and Kitcher in 'Apriority and Necessity'. Kripke's example of Jack the Ripper also falls into this type.

⁶ I will discuss this possibility later.

⁷ When Donnellan and Kitcher discuss Kripke on the contingent *a priori*, they focus on Neptune Type examples, excluding Metre Type examples. N. Salmon, *Frege's Puzzle* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), Albert Casullo, 'Kripke on the *A Priori* and the Necessary', *Analysis* 37 (1977) pp. 152-59, W.R. Carter, 'On *A Priori* Contingent Truths', *Analysis* 36 (1976) pp. 105-6, and D. Odegard, 'On *A Priori* Contingency', *Analysis* 36 (1976) pp. 201-3, all focus on Metre Type examples in their discussion.

about the object named. This claim, however, does not affect the Metre Type examples. I will first discuss the Neptune Type examples, and then move on to the Metre Type examples.

When Kripke originally presented these examples, he talked about statements instead of propositions, and he has expressed concern that the ‘apparatus of propositions’ might break down.⁸ Unfortunately, he has no ‘official doctrine’ on propositions, and he has never discussed the objects of belief in detail. Subsequent discussion of the problems raised by Kripke has shown that we have little reason to believe that the apparatus of propositions breaks down, as Kripke feared might happen. Since I do not think that it will affect the following discussion whether we think the truth bearers are statements or propositions, I will follow tradition, and talk about propositions as the objects of belief.

Neptune Type Examples of the Contingent *A Priori*

In the Neptune example, the sentence that expresses a contingent truth that we can apparently know *a priori* is the following:

- 4) If Neptune exists, Neptune is the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.

Since we are not *en rapport* with the object being named, all we need in this example for a successful naming to take place is a uniquely identifying description.

Donnellan’s discussion of this type of example depends on his distinction between knowing the truth of what is expressed by a certain sentence, and knowing that the sentence expresses a truth.⁹ A person I know who never claims anything that is not his might say ‘That is mine,’ resulting in my knowing that the sentence expresses (on this occasion) a truth. But if I do not know what ‘that’ refers to, I fail to grasp the truth expressed by the sentence. If we now, following Donnellan, call knowledge *about* an object *de re* knowledge, ‘That is mine,’ as expressed above, does not provide me with such knowledge.

In the Neptune Type examples the stipulations fix the reference of names, as opposed to providing them with meaning. Consequently, the names do not have any descriptive content. So if the stipulations give us any knowledge at all it must be knowledge *about* the object named, or *de re* knowledge.¹⁰ But Donnellan correctly observes that, since our beliefs are *not about* the object named, we cannot have *de re* beliefs regarding it.¹¹ For that reason Kripke’s example fails.

In ‘Apriority and Necessity,’ Kitcher takes this type of example a step further, and gives us a variation he believes is a genuine example of a

⁸ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 21. See also ‘A Puzzle About Belief,’ *Meaning and Use*, ed. A. Margalit (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979) pp. 239-283.

⁹ Donnellan, p. 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

contingent *a priori* truth. He agrees with Donnellan that we cannot have *de re* beliefs of this type that are contingent but *a priori*, so he provides an example involving a *de dicto* belief.

Let us introduce 'Shorty' in the following way:

5) If Shorty exists, then Shorty is the shortest spy.

Having done this, he considers the sentence

6) If Shorty exists, then Shorty is a spy.

Kitcher then continues:

The fact that 'the shortest spy' was used to fix the reference of 'Shorty' does show that the name 'Shorty' does not have a *particular* descriptive content. However, to use that description to fix the reference of 'Shorty', I must intend to use 'Shorty' as an abbreviation for a closely related description: 'Shorty' must abbreviate 'the shortest actual spy'. So . . . I have a *de dicto* belief in the proposition that if there is a shortest actual spy then the shortest actual spy is a spy.¹²

If we now consider the proposition expressed by

7) If the shortest actual spy exists, the shortest actual spy is a spy

Kitcher claims that it is both contingent and *a priori*.

How does the use of 'actually' affect Kitcher's example? It does so in the following way. If we read 'Shorty' as 'the shortest spy', then, if (6) expresses a *de dicto* proposition, it expresses the same proposition as is expressed by

6') If the shortest spy exists, then the shortest spy is a spy.

But the *de dicto* proposition expressed by (6') is necessarily true. If the shortest spy does not exist, then (6') is true, and if he does exist, then it follows from the meaning of the words that the consequent cannot be false, so (6') is true in all possible worlds.¹³ But if 'Shorty' abbreviates 'the shortest actual spy' then (6) expresses the same proposition as is expressed by (7) which appears to be contingent. The reason is that 'actual' fixes the reference of 'Shorty' to the shortest spy in *this* world, and there are worlds in which the person who is the shortest spy in this world is not a spy. It appears therefore that what (7) expresses is contingently true, if true.

But let us look more closely at the consequent of (7), namely

8) The shortest actual spy is a spy.

(7) expresses a contingent truth only if what (8) expresses can be false. In order to determine whether what (8) expresses can be false we need

¹² Kitcher, pp. 96-97.

¹³ (6') can be read as follows: The shortest spy is such that if he exists, then he is a spy. On that *de re* reading (6') expresses a contingent truth, but that reading is incompatible with the passage quoted on p. 5.

to evaluate it at different worlds. I will argue that (a) there is only one reading of 'actual' under which (7) expresses a contingent truth, and (b) the proposition we believe when we then assent to (7) is not the contingent proposition expressed by *that* reading of (7), but rather is the necessary proposition expressed by (6').

Let us begin by considering (individual) names. They can be used either internally or externally with respect to the world in question. When I ask you to imagine a world in which Hitler is not of German nationality, using 'Hitler' externally, then my use of the name is external to the world I ask you to imagine. To use 'Hitler' internally with respect to a world is to be in that world and to there use the term.¹⁴ The same distinction can be made in the case of indexicals, such as 'actual'.¹⁵

Let us first evaluate (8) when we use 'actual' internally. On this reading 'actual' is used to designate the person who is the shortest spy at the world of evaluation. In that case, (8) is a typical Fregean proposition where reference is secured by a 'fit'. So (8) expresses a truth at all worlds where there is a shortest spy. Therefore, (7) expresses a truth at *all* worlds.

Let us now see how (8) fares when 'actual' is read externally. On this alternative we treat 'the shortest actual spy' as a rigid designator, such that at any world, 'the shortest actual spy' designates whomever it designated at our world. When we evaluate (8) at a world, we need to look for the person who at *our* world is the shortest spy, and find out whether or not he is a spy. Since (8) says of *Shorty* that he is a spy, and there are worlds at which *Shorty* is not a spy, (8) expresses a contingent truth. Furthermore, since there are worlds at which the antecedent of (7) is true while its consequent is false, (7) expresses a contingent truth on this reading. It remains to be seen what epistemological status (7) has. Recall that Kitcher maintains that when one believes the proposition expressed by (7), one has a *de dicto* belief. This is to be expected, since we are not *en rapport* with the object being named. Furthermore, since it appears to be a consequence of the indexical theory of actuality that 'actual' is a purely referential term with no descriptive content, 'actual' does not play any role in the content of our belief when we assent to (7). If it did, the resulting belief would be a *de re* belief. But that in turn means that the object of our *de dicto* belief when we assent to (7) is more perspicuously expressed by

(6') If the shortest spy exists, the shortest spy is a spy.

But we have already established that (6') expresses a *necessary* truth.

The situation we have here is as follows: Kitcher agrees with Donnellan, who correctly pointed out that examples of the Neptune Type involving

¹⁴ For more on the internal/external distinction on proper names, see W.R. Carter, 'On Obstinate and Persistent Designators', *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983) pp. 415-21.

¹⁵ On the assumption that 'the shortest actual spy' can be read as 'the shortest spy in the actual world', the internal use corresponds to van Inwagen's augmented weak version of the indexical theory, and the external use to his strong version of the indexical theory. See P. van Inwagen, 'Indexicality and Actuality', *The Philosophical Review* 89 (1980) pp. 403-26.

de re beliefs fail. He therefore attempts to provide an example of that type involving a *de dicto* belief. The indexical in his example can be used in two ways: internally or externally. The internal use results in a necessary truth, and the external use yields the same result if it expresses a *de dicto* belief. Consequently Kitcher fails to provide a Neptune Type example of a contingent *a priori* truth.¹⁶

Metre Type Examples of the Contingent A Priori

When Kripke evaluates the modal status of (3), he says that since 'one metre' is not to be synonymous with 'the length of S at t_0 ', but rather has its reference determined by it, it is *not* necessarily true that S is one metre long at t_0 .¹⁷ And when it comes to the knowledge the reference fixer has of what (3) expresses, he says that it is *a priori*,

For if he used stick S to fix the reference of the term 'one metre', then as a result of this kind of 'definition' (which is not an abbreviative or synonymous definition), he knows automatically, without further investigation, that S is one metre long.¹⁸

So, according to Kripke, what (3) expresses is both contingently true and knowable *a priori*.

What it is we supposedly know *a priori* has been a source of some controversy. W.R. Carter¹⁹ argues for instance that if an object has a property, then there exists such an object, so, more specifically, if S has the property of being one metre long, S exists. But then, before we know that S has that or any other property, we must know that S exists. Our knowledge of that, however, is *not a priori*. For that reason, Carter argues, our knowledge of 'stick S is one metre long' cannot be *a priori*.

If this is all there is to the Metre Type examples, it is surprising that they have drawn any attention at all. This is, however, an understanding that still prevails. In his recent book, G. W. Fitch dismisses the contingent *a priori* for the very same reason Carter does.²⁰

But Carter and Fitch miss the point of the example. What we supposedly know *a priori* is the *length* of stick S. We can of course not know *a priori* whether it exists or not, but the question we need to answer, and which should be at the centre of the controversy, is: given the *a posteriori* knowledge that S exists, can we know *a priori* that it is one metre long? Casullo argues as follows against the claim that we can know *a priori* the *length* of S by

¹⁶ For a discussion of 'I am actual', which Kitcher argues is also a contingent *a priori* truth, see A. Casullo, 'Actuality and the A Priori', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1988) pp. 390-402.

¹⁷ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Carter, 'On A Priori Contingent Truths', pp. 105-6.

²⁰ See Fitch, pp. 180-81.

utilizing Donnellan's distinction between the attributive and referential use of definite descriptions.²¹

Suppose one uses the definite description attributively when introducing 'one metre' by means of (3). Then 'one metre' is being introduced as a name of whatever length happens to satisfy the definite description. The speaker is in fact using the term 'one metre' as an abbreviation for the phrase 'the length of S at t'. As a result, (3) expresses a necessary truth. For that reason, (3) fails to express a contingent *a priori* truth when the description is used attributively.

If, on the other hand, the description is used referentially, the situation is different. Now the speaker is introducing 'one metre' as a name of a *particular* length. But, Casullo argues, one can only know *a posteriori* that S *in fact* has that length. For that reason, (3) expresses a contingent *a posteriori* truth. It is tacitly assumed that these are the only interpretations of the definite description involved, so all the possibilities have been exhausted. Kripke's example therefore fails.

While I agree with Casullo's assessment of the attributive use, I think that more can be said about the referential use and the evaluation of that alternative. When Kripke describes his example he claims that 'one metre' is to be a name of the length S *in fact* has, and that one's knowledge is of *the length S has at t*. I agree with Casullo that we cannot know this except *a posteriori*, and so, obviously, does Nathan Salmon, who dismisses the example with the following words:

Knowledge concerning a particular length that a certain stick (if it exists) is exactly that long would seem to be the paradigm of a posteriori knowledge.²²

After fixing the reference of 'one metre' by uttering (3), the speaker knows, and he may even know *a priori*, that (3) expresses a true proposition. But that does not provide him with knowledge of S's length. In order to know how long S is he needs further experience. Consequently, if we want to find a Metre Type example of a contingent *a priori* truth, we need to move away from the stick's *actual* length.

Suppose that we take (3) to be a statement about the length S *appears to have* rather than a statement about the length S *in fact* has? Does this reading provide us with a contingent *a priori* truth? Let us consider

3') The length stick S appears to have at t is one metre.

²¹ Casullo, 'Kripke on the *A Priori* and the Necessary', pp. 155-59. In 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference', *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* pp. 6-27, Kripke argued convincingly that Donnellan's attributive/referential distinction is of no semantic significance. So why employ that distinction in an argument against Kripke? It is important to notice that Casullo does *not* utilize the distinction for semantic purposes. Instead he focuses on how we can use it when *introducing* names. Casullo's use of the distinction is therefore compatible with Kripke's claim that the distinction is only of pragmatic significance.

²² Salmon, p. 142.

We assume that we know that S exists, and instead of being concerned with our knowledge of the length S *in fact* has, we shall consider only our knowledge of the length S *appears* to have.

Since it is somewhat difficult to deal with lengths, I will start with an analogous example involving colours.²³ Suppose someone were to introduce 'red' using 'the colour of S at t' referentially. Furthermore, suppose that because of some peculiar lighting conditions unknown to the speaker and everyone else, S appears red while it is in fact white. In spite of the fact that 'the colour of S at t' designates the colour white, the speaker has succeeded in introducing 'red' as a name of the colour red. Let us look closer at the modal and epistemological status of the propositions involved.

Since the speaker succeeded in introducing the name 'red' as a name of the colour S appears to have, although S is, unknown to everyone, white,

9) The colour of S at t is red

does not accurately represent the manner in which 'red' was introduced. Everyone is under the impression that S is red, and that can be captured by

9') The colour S appears to have at t is red,

which is how a more careful speaker would fix the reference of 'red'. Note that the speaker is *not* introducing 'red' as a name of whatever colour S happens to appear to have. He might have been walking around for days looking for the right colour for 'red', having already introduced 'blue', 'green', and 'yellow' in a similar way. For that reason (9') does not express a necessary truth. The example, therefore, presupposes that the speaker knows that S exists, and that he then stipulates that the colour it appears to have is to be called 'red'.

Having described this case, the metre example becomes more clear. The situation we have is this. The speaker is looking at a stick he knows to exist, and which appears to have a certain length. He utters (3'), and thereby fixes the reference of 'one metre'. When he utters (3'), he uses the description referentially, so he refers to the particular length the stick appears to have. Since the stick could have appeared to have a different length at t than it has, (3') expresses a contingent truth.

The question that needs to be answered when we evaluate the epistemic status of (3') is: to what does 'the length stick S appears to have' refer? Does it refer to a way of being appeared to, or the apparent length of S? The former describes a subjective state of the perceiver, while the latter describes an objective relation between objects and perceivers of a certain sort under specific conditions. In order to bring out this difference let us consider examples.

Empirical psychologists conduct experiments to discover the effects

²³ The example is a variation of an example provided by Casullo in 'Kripke on the A Priori and the Necessary'.

surroundings can have on our colour and length perception. Examples of visual illusions involving length are the Muller-Lyer illusion, and the Ponzo (railroad track) illusion. In both, lines of equal length appear to be of different lengths, so although their length is the same, their apparent length is different. An example involving colours utilizes an effect called simultaneous contrast, where surrounding one colour with another changes the appearance of the colour surrounded. Because of this effect, two lines of the same colour, surrounded by different colours, will appear to be of different colours, so the colour of the lines is different from their apparent colour.²⁴ But the way I am appeared to when I look at the colours or the lines might be different from both the way they are and the way they appear to be. I might for instance see as red a blue line that appears to be green because of a retinal malfunction.

Given this, let us first look at the objective reading of (3'). In that case we are concerned with the apparent length of stick S. Kripke's example failed because it was necessary to conduct an empirical investigation in order to find out whether S's apparent length was its actual length. It remains to be seen whether this example is open to the same kind of objection. Does the speaker know without further empirical investigation whether S *in fact* appears to be one metre long? If not, then the example fails.

We might argue that since we are now concerned with the apparent length of an object but not the length it in fact has, the speaker needs no further information to know its apparent length. His knowledge that S's apparent length is *one metre* results from the 'definition' that introduces the name. No further empirical investigation is needed in order to find out what length S appears to have. The speaker knows automatically and without further investigation that S's apparent length is one metre. We have therefore an example of a contingent *a priori* truth that depends on naming.

This line of reasoning, however, does not avoid the problem. Just as it is possible for someone to sense as red an object whose apparent colour is green, it is also possible that the speaker's subjective experience be of a length different from the stick's objective apparent length. Consequently, further empirical investigation is necessary in order to determine what length the stick *in fact* appears to have. The objective reading, therefore, does not give us what we are after. Instead we end up with a *posteriori* knowledge.

Let us then look at the subjective reading of (3'). The speaker is appeared to in a certain way and he introduces a name to refer to the manner in which he is appeared to rather than some objective feature different from the length he is appeared to. Consequently, he does not need to conduct any further empirical investigation in order to find out whether the stick appears to have the length he named 'one metre'. As a result of the 'definition' used to introduce the name, he knows automatically and without further investigation that the the manner in which he is appeared to is one metre long. We have therefore an example of *a priori* knowledge.

²⁴ These illusions are discussed in E. B. Goldstein, *Sensation and Perception* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 117-19, and pp. 245-47.

The speaker introduced 'one metre' as a name of the manner in which he was appeared to, which is the length S appears (subjectively) to have at t. Since *this particular* appearance could not have been longer or shorter than it was, it might be objected that the example I have provided is of a necessary truth. But the objection fails to take into account that S could have appeared (subjectively) to have at t a *different* length than the one it actually appeared (subjectively) to have. In that case the manner in which the speaker was appeared to when the naming took place would have been different. Consequently, it is contingent that this particular appearance has the property of being *one metre* long.

It might be objected that the example I have provided is not a genuine example of a *a priori* knowledge, since it depends on my *a posteriori* knowledge of how I am appeared to. But here we must distinguish between (a) the experience necessary to *acquire the concept* involved in the proposition believed, and (b) the experience necessary to *justify* one in believing the proposition in question. Experience of type (a) is *not* incompatible with a *a priori* knowledge.²⁵ One knows that p *a priori* provided that no experience *other* than that needed to acquire the concepts involved in p is necessary to know that p. In case of (3'), experience is necessary *only* to introduce 'one metre'. Once the reference of this term has been fixed, no further experience is necessary in order to know (3'). Consequently, the example I have provided is a genuine example of the contingent *a priori*.

Is it possible that the above account of *a priori* knowledge is too liberal, and that the example I have provided does not survive a 'proper' account of *a priori* knowledge? Consider for example the thought that I have been appeared to redly. Since we are sticking to what is humanly possible, and it is humanly impossible to acquire the concept red (as involved in the thought) unless having been appeared to redly, it seems to follow that 'I have been appeared to redly' is, on my account, an *a priori* proposition.²⁶ But notice that the premise 'it is humanly impossible to acquire the concept red unless having been appeared to redly' can only be known *a posteriori*. Since that carries to the conclusion, I am *not* committed to the view that 'I have been appeared to redly' is an *a priori* proposition.

There is, however, a significant difference between Kripke's metre example and the one I have provided. Kripke's example was exciting for it involved knowledge of *how things are* in the world. *That* surely goes against how we traditionally think of the *a priori*. But the example I have provided involves

²⁵ Even though I need experience to acquire the concept of a bicycle, I know *a priori* that all bicycles are bicycles.

²⁶ This objection was raised by an anonymous referee for the journal. Given that there is much controversy about the nature of *a priori* knowledge, a full answer to the referee's objection would have to include a lengthy discussion of the issues involved. For instance, in *The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), Philip Kitcher gives a non-traditional account of a *a priori* knowledge. For a lucid discussion of that account, and of the *a priori* in general, see A. Casullo, 'Revisability, Reliabilism, and A Priori Knowledge', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (1988) pp. 187-213. The issues are complex, and cannot be settled here. I will only say enough to show that a promising line of defence is available to me.

no such knowledge. Since that is the case, most of the excitement that surrounded the contingent *a priori* was based on false hopes. It is true that it takes only one example to show that the traditional account of the relationship between the *a priori* and the necessary is false. But the example provided here does not conflict with the leading idea behind the traditional account; namely, that we cannot know without experience features of the physical world.²⁷

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