Cultivating Ethics in the Peer Review Process

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ABSTRACT
After describing the content and implementation of an anti-racist scholarly review training informed by recent scholarship in technical communication (TC), the authors reflect on an unanticipated outcome of that training: a participant using language from the training in an attempt to silence an author they were reviewing. We analyze this experience through a framework of modern virtue ethics scholarship and explore ways to cultivate more ethical peer review practices. Drawing upon elements of ethical self-cultivation articulated by Vallor, we use concepts of moral habituation, relational understanding, and reflective self-examination to understand how to cultivate more ethical, reflexive peer review processes.

CCS CONCEPTS
• Social and professional topics → User characteristics; Race and ethnicity..

KEYWORDS
peer review, virtue ethics, anti-racist design, academic publishing

1 INTRODUCTION
The social justice turn in technical communication (TC) frames the problem of injustice as a technical communication problem and invites TC scholars, practitioners, and teachers alike to collaboratively develop solutions to that problem [1]. One specific context that has received growing attention in TC for its potential to exclude certain knowledges and knowledge-makers is scholarly peer review.

There is a growing body of literature in TC that outlines how scholarly review can be and often is exclusionary and suggests approaches to more equity-based practices [2-5]. In 2021, 19 TC scholars collaborated to develop Anti-Racist scholarly reviewing practices: A heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors (hereafter, ARSRP) [3], which acknowledged the existing exclusionary and oppressive philosophies and practices of reviewing in the field of TC. These philosophies and practices can reinforce white, dominant, and patriarchal norms by gatekeeping dominant norms; shielding racist behavior through anonymity; and exploiting the labor of Black, Indigenous, and scholars of color [3]. In this document, the authors provided a heuristic for editors, reviewers, and authors to reimagine themselves participating in a system of inclusivity rather than gatekeeping. ARSRP complements Alexander et al.’s [2] SKK framework that effective peer review is specific, knowledgeable, and kind, though ARSRP added explicit calls to center anti-racism. Also early in 2021, the editors of publications in TC released a statement, #InclusiveTPC, committing their publications to the work of anti-racist and inclusive practices. One of the approaches indicated in the document for increasing inclusion in TC publications is “revising review guidelines” [6]. From the language and publication dates of this scholarship, we understand that inclusive scholarly review practices are a current priority for the field of TC.

ARSRP and the SKK framework provided important, foundational concepts and practices for more inclusive peer review. This paper builds on that work by applying those frameworks and reflecting on the effects of that application. We begin by describing an anti-racist scholarly review training that was developed using the ARSRP and SKK framework as guides. From there, we identify one potential drawback of the training: as inclusive peer review processes are still budding, we, as a field, have yet to cultivate a shared understanding and ethics of those processes. While there are many ways in which this understanding might be cultivated, in this paper, we suggest that Vallor’s [7] framing of virtue ethics, including moral habituation, relational understanding, and reflective self-examination, can help us better understand how to cultivate more ethical, reflexive peer review processes that center anti-racism and inclusion.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE ANTI-RACIST SCHOLARLY REVIEW WORKSHOP
As a graduate student in TC, Sam researches approaches for making technical editing more inclusive to alternative knowledges and knowledge-makers. When they were asked to edit a collection on graduate student instruction, they wanted to implement the approaches to inclusive and anti-racist editing and peer review described in scholarship like [8], [2], and [3]. The edited collection was to be written for and by graduate student instructors, so the peer reviewers were also graduate student instructors. Recognizing that most graduate students never receive formal training in peer review [9] and wanting to make the peer review process of their book explicitly and intentionally anti-racist, Sam decided to host a workshop that presented anti-racist scholarly review strategies and gave participants an opportunity to practice those strategies with peers. The event was sponsored by the center for teaching and learning at the authors’ institution. Graduate students on the center’s listserve were invited, along with the peer reviewers from Sam’s edited collection, though participation was completely voluntary. The one-hour workshop was hosted virtually over Zoom
During the first week of December, 2021. There were 17 participants, of which three served as reviewers of Sam’s edited collection.

### 2.1 Content of the Workshop

In November 2021, Sam met with the editor-in-chief and managing editor of Technical Communication Quarterly (TCQ) to brainstorm content for the workshop. During this meeting, we drew heavily from ARSRP [3]. This meeting greatly informed the content and organization of the workshop, as described below.

After introductions, there were five minutes of group discussion around the prompt: “Think of a time when you were assessed or evaluated by another person (e.g., peer review, performance evaluation at work, test, dissertation/thesis defense, annual review). Broadly, what kind of feedback or comments were most useful? What kind was the most painful or difficult to receive?” This activity served not only to get participants interacting with each other but also to frame them as always, already experts on the topic, valuing their previous lived experiences as knowledge.

Next, Sam presented a summary and graphic of the SKK model of peer review outlined by Alexander et al [2]. The best practices presented were to be specific (by giving detailed, actionable comments and prioritizing coherence over copy editing); knowledgeable (by becoming familiar with the journal and looking for gaps in literature, especially by underrepresented scholars); and kind (by interpreting the role of the review as a mentor, advocating for the author, and making suggestions for greater inclusivity).

One of the main concerns identified by the editor and managing editor of TCQ with the peer reviews they receive is that there is an overemphasis on minute details and copyediting and not enough emphasis on broader ideas and content of the paper. They believed that training reviewers to focus on cohesion might help move reviewers toward more comprehensive editing. This suggestion aligns with calls in technical editing literature [10] for increased focus and training in global-level (rather than sentence or paragraph-level) problems that can impair how users interact with and comprehend texts. In the next activity, participants were prompted to question if the different sections of an article inform one another by skimming the introduction, conclusion, methods, and headings/subheadings. Sam modelled the processes of reviewing for coherence using a full-length article and the participants practiced the same technique on another full-length article.

In the next activity, participants applied the SKK framework to revise review comments to be more specific, knowledgeable, and/or kind. All of the comments related to the article they had just reviewed for coherence. All of the example comments were provided in a Google doc, and participants added their revised comments below each example. After 10 minutes of revising comments, as a group, we read through each original comment and the revised comments to identify trends in the revisions and discuss what reviewers hoped to achieve through their revisions.

Next, participants were presented with point A from ARSRP: “Recognize a range of expertise and encourage citations practices that represent diverse canons, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing” [3]. Sam summarized the practices from this heuristic point as reviewers must (1) recognize that citation practices are political, (2) recommend relevant work by underrepresented scholars, (3) interrogate existing canons and recognize why they might be purposefully uncited, (4) respect lived experience as expertise, and (5) reimagine the field beyond your perspective and beyond what might currently exist. At this point, Sam emphasized that the responsibility of the participants as anti-racist scholars is to become familiar with underrepresented scholars and knowledges in their respective fields; that is not work that a workshop can do for them.

After establishing the reviewers’ responsibility in anti-racist practices, the next activity invited participants to think critically about how to apply that understanding in a tricky situation. Participants discussed what they would do if they recognized that an author was citing marginalized or underrepresented (MMU) scholars, but doing so through string citations without actively engaging in the MMU scholars’ research. With this activity, participants recognize the slippery nature of anti-racist work, in which simply citing underrepresented scholars isn’t the only consideration—reviewers must also consider how those scholars are being cited [11].

The workshop ended with a list of suggestions and suggested resources for reviewers to continue informing and supporting themselves in the practice of anti-racist scholarly review. These suggestions included findings and engaging in scholarship by MMU scholars; establishing coalitions of support at different levels of power [1]; reflecting on their current citation practices; and creating systems of accountability. During this part of the workshop, participants were encouraged to share ways in which they have or could strengthen their practice of anti-racist reviewing.

### 2.2 Benefits and Drawbacks of the Anti-racist Reviewer Training

While the remainder of this paper analyzes the specific context of a drawback of this training, and offers a possible framework for addressing this drawback, we want to pause here to recognize the vast importance of developing, implementing, and evaluating resources and training in anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices. We have provided the previous description of Sam’s training as one way to enact and apply the anti-racist and social justice frameworks that many TC scholars have already developed and continue to develop. We call on others in the field to continue the work of making sense of and applying SKK and anti-racist scholarly review practices within the specific contexts and contours of their institutions and communities.

In this case, Sam was uniquely situated as both the facilitator of the anti-racist reviewer trainer and the editor of a book for which a number of the training participants served as scholarly reviewers. This position provided Sam with a perspective on how the reviewers who participated in the training transferred the skills from the training into their reviews. While this paper is not a systematic investigation of the impacts of anti-racist reviewer training on reviewer feedback (though this training was a pilot for just such a study), there was one unexpected result of the experience that led the authors to reflect seriously on the meaning and impact of the training: one participant used the specific language presented in the training to silence the voice of an author in their review.
for Sam’s edited collection. Reviewing a text of 5,000 words, the reviewer wrote over 4,000 words in comments to the author and over 1,400 words of summary in the reviewer recommendation document, often explaining the rationale for such thoroughness as trying to be specific enough for the author to make necessary revisions. This practice aligns well with the SKK framework, which emphasizes specific, actionable feedback, but we are concerned with the labor that 5,500 words of feedback suggests and that the quantity of feedback surpassed the length of the original text.

The extensive critical feedback—feedback the authors would not label ‘kind’—was often framed by the reviewer as an act of kindness, relating to the author that the reviewer was indicating any and all perceived flaws in order to help the author. In relation to coherence, the reviewer gave a number of suggestions about organization, but these suggestions were to delay or downplay evidence of lived experience to center more ‘valid’ evidence. In this sense, the reviewer seemed to have considered the importance of coherence but was not yet ready to accept some of the tenets of ARSRP point A to respect lived experience as expertise [3]. In these ways—by overpowering the author’s voice through more feedback than the original text, by framing potentially harmful critiques as long-term kindness, and by using coherence to marginalize the author’s lived experience as a scholar of color—the reviewer applied the content of the training in such a way as to silence the original author.

After reflecting on this problematic review, Sam, who had never edited a book before, was at a loss about what to do. Subpoint of B in ARSRP [3] indicated that “Editors...interfere before sending potential traumatic reviews to authors” (p. 8). Sam believed that sending the review as it was could be harmful to the original author and, thus, felt that some kind of intervention was necessary. As their usual course of action, Sam brought the case up with their PhD cohort for brainstorming and advice. We talked through many options, including sending the chapter to a different reviewer. While each option had merits, Sam decided to summarize some points of the reviewers’ comments in their own words, and only the summaries were sent to the original author of the text. In this way, Sam believed they were mitigating harm to the author, respecting the effort and concerns of the reviewer, and keeping within the book’s publishing timeline.

During this informal meeting, fellow PhD student Rachel indicated the potential for a virtue ethics framework to make sense of the experience and to suggest possible directions for future trainings and interactions with reviewers. While other frameworks could also be applied, one benefit of a virtue ethics lens is that it considers definitions and behaviors of commonly valued virtues, such as kindness, that people may not interpret or enact in the same way. Importantly, virtue ethics emphasizes the key role of learning and practice in developing the types of virtues valued by humans across cultures—things like honesty, fairness, compassion, and more. When applied to peer review practices, virtue ethics can help ground behavior as a reflection of the kinds of traits we do (and ought to) value in academic editing and publishing: inquiry, dialogue, and kindness. What follows is an overview of how a virtue ethics framework can open up spaces to reassess current practices and enact more inclusive ones.

3 VIRTUE ETHICS

3.1 Description of Framework

Technical communicators have long attended to questions of ethics in the field. Katz’s [12] landmark essay about the ethic of expediency in the Holocaust defined ethics as “human character manifested in behavior” (p. 260). In exploring devastating examples about how plainly written, efficient technical communication can be used to expedite genocide, he asked whether technical communicators may contribute to harmful outcomes when we don’t explicitly consider ethics. This move toward integrating ethics more fully into discussions of technical communication practice and teaching was echoed by Dragga [13], who advocated for further attention to ethics in TC and identified “two major perspectives on ethics: that is developing good character (chiefly through narratives of heroic lives) versus determining right behavior (chiefly through analysis of moral dilemmas)” (p. 162). This two-fold framework is echoed in Cook’s [14] work, which identified ethical literacy as one of the core literacies that should frame technical communication programs and pedagogies.

Some scholars have argued that ethics tends to focus on how we understand individual, rather than social, action for good [15]. Savage [16] acknowledged this individualist perspective, noting that “expecting the individual to act alone on the basis of a personal ethical standard effectively disempowers most people” (p. ix) because structural imbalances of power favor the “ethics” of those with the most power in a given context. Noting that collaborative, ethical decision-making is complex and challenging, Savage wrote that his “own preference is to leave ethics in the category to which it is consigned in contemporary mainstream culture and to turn to social justice with all of its connotations of politics and ideology” (p. x). Such a stance is consistent with the social justice turn in technical communication, but it is also somewhat reductive of the broad scope and applications of ethics. As Walwema et al. [17] contended, “we do not agree that the field should be content to accept a reduction of ethics to ‘personal concerns.’ To do so would be to miss the vital ways in which ethics can connect to other more highly relevant areas of inquiry” (p. 259). Within the scope of this paper, one such area of inquiry is peer review and inclusive editing. Because of its inherently interpersonal scope, peer review cannot be thought of as merely the purview of individual ethics; rather, an exploration and application of ethics, specifically virtue ethics, can help provide a framework for more inclusive peer review.

It is important to note that virtue ethics is one of many possible ethical frameworks through which to examine the peer review process, and virtue ethics is by no means exclusionary of antiracist goals and practices. For example, Ithuuaqiyaaq & Walton [4] applied Gloria Anzaldúa’s framework of conocimiento to the practice of editorial and peer review processes, where they noted the ways in which Anzaldúa’s stages of conocimiento “provide a structure for engaging in the manuscript review process in a way that mediates among potentially conflicting worldviews” (p. 379). While Ithuuaqiyaaq and Walton’s work was not framed explicitly as virtue ethics scholarship, the principles they applied from Anzaldúa highlight the ways in which peer reviewers can engage in more deliberate ethical practice as they “help repair wounds created from
the embedded and internalized racism and other systems of oppression in academe” (p.392). Their section of reviewer takeaways mirrored many elements of Alexander et al.’s SKK framework, and they specifically noted how kindness—a virtue—can be enacted in the review process as reviewers “advocate for inclusivity, acknowledge a manuscript’s strengths, and provide prompt feedback” (p. 392). Such a definition can assist peer reviewers in understanding more explicitly how to enact virtues, like but not limited to kindness, in the peer review process, regardless of the specific ethical lens applied.

Virtue ethics is an ethical framework that has roots in several ancient philosophical traditions. Dragga [18] noted that in Confucian virtue ethics, achieving perfection involves a two-fold process requiring both individual and collective application. Similarly, ancient Greek virtue ethics emphasized how the cultivation of virtues had both internal (individual) and external (social or public) goals. As Colton and Holmes [19] explained, using the virtue of justice as an example, “being just is a reward unto itself—one feels good about being just and wants to be identified as just; however, being just also achieves good ends—the equal and fair treatment of others” (p. 35). In this example, individual motivations and actions contribute to a collective good as well as to an individual sense of well-being.

For a more explicit treatment of virtue ethics, we turn to the philosopher Shannon Vallor [7], who argued for “virtues to be more consciously cultivated...and exercised not only individually but together, in acts of collective human wisdom” (p. 10-11; italics original). Vallor’s virtue ethics framework outlines seven core elements that can be found in classical and contemporary traditions, and while Vallor’s work did not explicitly discuss antiracism or peer review, her framework can be used to better understand how the process of peer review can be tied to individual virtues activated and practiced for the common good—antiracism being one such virtuous practice. Processes of identifying and cultivating virtues for individual and collective well-being ties in well with other frameworks, including Anzaldúa’s conocimiento, which Fernández and Gamero [20] defined as an “iterative process of conscious de-construction/re-construction of the self, others and the social world” that “exposes the individual to deeper, often new and complex, or contradictory, ways of knowing that transcend normativity, hierarchy, objectivity, and duality in thinking and being” (p. 16). Again, the emphasis on individual insight, critical reflection, and cultivated action underscores a connection between virtue ethics, antiracist practice, and broader inclusive practice in peer review. When not approached ethically, peer review can be harmful and exclusionary. Cultivating virtues in the peer review process can help reviewers understand how to avoid harm and magnify help.

The following section expands on Vallor’s virtue ethics framework by applying the first three elements of her framework—moral habituation, relational understanding, and reflective self-examination—to the peer review case described above.

### 3.2 Virtue Ethics in the Context of Peer Review

The challenging peer review experience articulated above was certainly an outlier in Sam’s experience as a book editor. Yet it was also clear that some of that reviewer’s comments and practices as a peer reviewer were explicitly tied to the reviewer’s interpretation of Sam’s antiracist scholarly review training. Given the relative simplicity of the SKK heuristic outlined as part of the training, Sam was surprised to notice the language of the training reflected in the peer review in ways that seemed unkind and exclusionary. At the root of this disconnect is the challenge in assuming that everyone will interpret and enact virtuous behavior similarly. For example, the reviewer believed they were enacting kindness (and specificity) by pointing out, in detail, all the flaws and weaknesses they perceived in the text they reviewed. But for Sam, the level of specificity was unkind, and they elected to send the chapter author a summary of reviewer feedback rather than the harsh feedback itself. This led both Sam and Rachel to question how reviewers might cultivate more ethical practices in partnership and dialogue with editors.

Vallor’s concept of moral habituation provides some insight. Vallor [7] described moral habituation as a process of “setting down...some basic patterns of moral activity that in turn open up the possibility for more specific, refined, and intentionally directed habits of moral activity to develop” (p. 66). Vallor’s discussion of this form of deliberate, intentional habituation is drawn from the classical concept of hexis, or the practice of right actions, and she noted that “one’s access to human models of moral excellence becomes important” in enacting the “appropriate mean relative to the circumstances” (p. 68; italics original). This concept of hexis is connected to the Confucian philosophical concept of li, which Vallor defined as “ritual action” or practice, as well as the rites that “embody a vast repository of culturally specific, standardized, and highly formed social practices with action-guiding content spelled out in rich detail” (p. 70). We can apply the concepts of hexis and li to the context of peer review, particularly in the relationship and dialogue between editor, reviewer, and author.

The academic peer review process tends to be linear and discreet. Authors submit work to editors, who in turn assign peer reviewers. Peer reviewers read author work and submit comments back to the editor. Editors then pass along (or, in some cases, summarize) reviewer feedback to authors. To preserve the standard of anonymous peer review, neither the reviewers nor the authors are explicitly aware of each other’s identity. As a result, all communication is funneled through editors. If a peer reviewer’s feedback is particularly harsh, off-track, or insufficient, the editor may respond or intervene, as Sam did. But established practices do not generally provide for, expect, or encourage much dialogue between editors, reviewers, and authors. In the context of virtue ethics, the hexis of ethical, inclusive peer review requires learning and practice, which is less likely to happen without dialogue on the review process. Non-dialogic peer review practices rely on individualized sense of what it means to be knowledgeable or kind, for example, but when individuals define and enact knowledge or kindness differently from how editors or authors do, that individualized sense falls short of supporting collective well-being and may, in fact, perpetuate harm and marginalization. By engaging in dialogue, the editor may be able to function in the role of a “human model of moral excellence” [7] as Vallor described, with “moral excellence” in this case being defined in less lofty terms as someone with experience, insight, and oversight to the entire process of peer review and editing. Such perspective enables editors to provide training and feedback that encourages specific ways of enacting virtues
such as knowledge and kindness. Similarly, returning to the concept of li, academic publishing is replete with "culturally specific, standardized, and highly formed social practices" [7] that may lead reviewers to believe that a certain form of rigor and critique in peer review is not only requisite but desirable—attributes explored in the ARSRP as well. Editors could provide feedback to reviewers, even in brief ways, which could help reviewers cultivate more socially just, inclusive forms of peer review.

Vallor's second element in her framework is relational understanding, which is based on the concept found in classical ethics traditions that "the human person [is]...a relational being, someone whose identity is formed through a network of relationships" [7]. The concept of relational understanding contrasts with frameworks such as utilitarianism, in which the self "ought to act autonomously, without relying on the external guidance of others" (p. 76; italics original). Drawing upon classical traditions, Vallor noted that relational understanding has roots in friendship and filial piety. Buddhism adds the sense that "all beings are causally interconnected," and virtues like equanimity "seem to require the cultivated person to practice ethical 'neutrality' and to extend loving kindness...and compassion...to all creatures" (p. 81; italics original). The utilitarian framework of autonomy and individuality may seem common and even desirable in a peer review context; after all, more collaborative, dialogic approaches to peer review would require shifts in established practices as well as different patterns of labor and engagement for all involved. Yet the concept of relational understanding can be perceived as both descriptive and prescriptive of the human and technological interconnections that take place in the peer review process.

While we cannot always predict how behaviors and motivations shape engagement with peer review, we can recognize that even when mediated through technology, peer review is fundamentally about the interconnections between individual humans. In writing about care as a virtue, Vallor [7] noted that established systems, particularly ones with unequal levels of privilege "have long allowed individuals to divest themselves of the responsibility for caring practices by delegating these responsibilities to hired substitutes or, increasingly, by using technology to meet needs that previously could only be met by the active labor of human caregivers" (p. 139). The anonymity of peer review can distance reviewers and authors from caring for each other, shielding behaviors like racism [3]. Relational understanding demands that we recognize our place within systems and our relationships with other people and that even "anonymous" interactions are interpersonal. As Clem & Cheek [8] described in their inclusive editing paradigm, editors (which would include peer reviewers) must develop an ethics of care for the texts and authors they are entrusted with; they are responsible for attending to and prioritizing the humanity of authors (p. 142). Editors and peer reviewers should take care to acknowledge, reframe, and emphasize the relational understanding at the heart of the peer review process. Connecting to our shared humanity during trainings, through empathy-building exercises and informal discussions, and as often as possible during peer review process can help us develop relational understanding.

Finally, Vallor [7] identified the virtue of reflective self-examination as a key element of her virtue ethics framework, which applies to cultivating more ethical peer review practices. Vallor explained that "a good life presupposes a lifelong habit of reflective self-examination, in which one turns a critical eye upon one’s actions and dispositions" (p. 84) and aligns those actions with desired character and attributes. Concepts of self-reflection are common in many philosophical traditions and comprise a common form of inquiry in higher education. Yet perhaps paradoxically, the practice of self-examination cannot be undertaken effectively in isolation; rather, individuals rely on both external and internal inputs in order to have self-reflection increase critical awareness. For example, the peer reviewer cited in this paper may have earnestly felt they were enacting specificity, kindness, and knowledge in their feedback. Without information to the contrary, that reviewer would likely perceive very little need or desire to engage in reflective self-examination. As a result, the call for reflective self-examination relies on both relational understanding and moral habituation, as well as on recursive feedback about their peer review feedback and how that feedback may be received or interpreted by authors and editors. More training and dialogue throughout the peer review process could encourage opportunities for reflective self-examination that allow for greater awareness of how to enact more inclusive practices. Additionally, in situations where editor feedback to reviewers is not established, reviewers could request such feedback as part of a self-reflective process.

4 CONCLUSION

Within the field of TC, editors and scholars have enacted significant contributions designed to make the peer review process more inclusive. For example, ARSRP [3] emphasizes how current practices can reinscribe racism by perpetuating systems and practices that are "opaque and contain hidden tacit practices that can exclude new scholars, especially those who are already marginalized." Recognizing established norms that may be exclusionary requires a reassessment of standard practices and a commitment to increased dialogue between authors, reviewers, and editors. ARSRP details concrete practices editors can undertake to increase transparency and flexibility and to call awareness to current practices that perpetuate harm. These important contributions help shape anti-racist editorial practices. Current scholarship in technical editing also emphasizes the need for increased dialogue between editors and authors. Clem & Cheek [8] argued that dialogue is a necessary component of inclusive editing practice, noting that "Inclusive editing is not an independent practice to be done in isolation" (pg. 142). Instead, dialogue between authors and editors disrupts the power imbalance between editors and authors and values "the knowledge of the other stakeholders to critically investigate the document. Editing, then, moves from a place of prescriptive, hegemonic 'fixing' to a space of counterhegemonic dialogue" [8]. The powerful potential of dialogue between editors and authors could also be leveraged to encourage more ethical, inclusive peer review. In most cases, reviewer guidelines are designed to instruct reviewers about expectations for feedback, but such guidelines are generally linear rather than dialogic. Reviewer trainings such as the one implemented by Sam can play an important role in opening up spaces for dialogue and interaction about what constitutes ethical peer review—and
how we can cultivate and enact more ethical review practices. Including discussions of ethics into these types of trainings can help to define and cultivate ethical peer review practices that rely on shared definitions of ethical actions and inclusive practice.

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