Critical Consideration on God's Essence and His Features in Open Theism

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Open Theism, as a new perspective in theology, has attracted attention of many scholars and mainly claims that some teachings of classical theism are not in accordance with Scripture and depict God in the way of Greek metaphysic and Hermeneutical pattern. Therefore, Open Theists proposed a new model of theology based on the notion of Openness in reaction to deterministic model of classical theism. Their point of view had some implications like mutability, temporality and direct involvement of God. But these lead to some problems in their view like inconsistency and ambiguity in addition to denying absolute perfection from Him. In this paper, we will clarify these defects and give solutions based on Islamic thought and Lastly introduce Doctrine of Badāʾ by which we will answer many of unsolved problems that led some theologians toward Open Theism. It will be shown that by Badāʾ there will be no room for inconsistency in Devine properties.

Introduction

The correct conception of God's essence and his features is one of the most important issues in philosophy of religion and has always been important in human life. Dealing with it makes us aware of the limitations of our finite understanding. Many of great religions, thinkers and philosophers have some arguments and views in this area, that each of them has the decent review in its place. Although some of them are worshiping the same god (like Islam and Christianity) but His features definitions are different in them. In this paper we are going to review Open Theism's point of view based on a critical perspective.

They tried to strive for a biblically and conceptually sound understanding of God and of the package of Devine properties that contribute to a coherent understanding. We believe that unless the portrait of God is compelling, the credibility of belief in God is bound to decline. So Open Theism's portrait of God is going to be investigated in this paper. But at first, it seems necessary to briefly review the previous point of views of philosophers and philosophical schools:

Several of the philosophers before Socrates produced ideas about God that were discussed by Plato and through him influenced Jewish, Christian and Islamic thinking about God. Most scholars disagree concerning what Plato considered God. Some believe that he refers to the "Good" as the highest of the forms (eternal truths that are the patterns of all reality) as deity. Others believe that his God is what he called the "Demiurge," who fashioned the preexisting matter into the present universe (Rowan, 1977: 385-413). But Open Theists assert that Plato distinguished between a personal God (the Demiurge) and an impersonal principle (the Good) and then elevated the principle above the personal (Pinnock, 1994: 62).

However, Plato's view about God's features is not a point of disagreement since he sees God as the best being that can be imagined, perfectly good and never the author of evil (Plato, 1937: 85-279), changeless, all-knowing, omnipotent (Plato, 1937: 901) and timeless Plato, 1937: 37-38).

After Plato, Aristotle's writings on God are relatively few and scattered throughout his works. In fact, he is not that interested in the "problem of God." Rather, his interest lies in the "problem of change". Therefore, Viewing Plato's Forms as inadequate for the task of explaining motion, Aristotle argued that there must be an "unmoved mover" as the first cause of all motion (Aristotle, 1941: 1071) and named it God. In sum, Aristotle says that this supreme God "is a substance which is eternal and unmovable, without parts and indivisible, impassive and unalterable" (Aristotle, 1941: 1073).

Another thinker whose ideas about God were effective on his followers was Philo of Alexandria (A. D. 45). He, following Hellenistic pattern, believed that God's essence is unknowable but his properties are timeless, omnipotent, all-knowing, simple, alone, immutable and impassible (Wolfson, 1947: 2/38-137). Mention should be made that Philo rejects the determinism of the Stoics and affirms that human have libertarian freedom, meaning that God providentially cares for us but does not determine all that happens (Pinnock, 1994: 71).

Among church fathers, most of them followed the definition of Plato for God, though there were some who affirmed change, mutability, possibility for God and libertarian human freedom and rejected any predetermination on God's part (Chadwick, 1966).

Augustine, the Last of church fathers, deeply influenced by neo-Plotinus, in his confessions 7.11 maintained the traditional list of Devine attributes like timelessness, omnipotence, immutability (Augustine, 1960: 7.11) as did Aquinas with adding a few touches related to God's Providence and Human free will of his own. Since he defines omnipotence as the ability to do anything that is not logically contradictory for God to do (Aquinas, 1989: 30-127).

In Reformation Era, Martin Luther and John Calvin sought a return to biblical theology and make a tremendous revolution in theology, though they came to some of the same conclusions as did Aquinas before them (Luther, 1957: 80; Case- Winters, 1990: 44-89).

In a division, Modern theology is divided into three sections, examining the views of progressive, moderate and conservative (Pinnock, 1994: 91). The first one ranges from antirealism, where God is merely our religious discourse or lifestyle, to process theology, where God is ontologically dependent on the world (Pinnock, 1994: 91).

The conservative view emphasizes on Devine transcendence, immutability, timelessness, omnipotence, simplicity and exhaustive foreknowledge and the like. Stephan Charnock, William G.T Shed, A.H. Strong, Louis Berkhof and J.I. Packer are the ones that belong to this group.

Lastly, the Moderate theology, according to the division stated before, is believed to represent an emerging perspective about God standing between the classical theism of the conservative and the radical revisions of the progressive. According to division, in this view, God, though ontologically distinct from creation (contra process theology), enters into a genuine give and take relations with his creatures and is mutable, temporal with dynamic omniscience and general sovereignty. Evangelicals, advocating an open view of God, called for a major shift in our understanding of God. Some like James Oliver Buswell Jr. and Richard Foster, who demonstrated the openness of God from biblical texts (Fretheim 1984), Thomas Torrence, Jürgen Moltmann and finally contemporary Philosophers of religion like Richard Swinbume, J. R. Lucas, Peter Geach, Richard Purtill and Keith Ward defend openness of God (Pinnock, 1994: 96-98).

This new perspective introduced officially by the effort of some theologians namely Richard Rice, Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger in late 20th. As a reaction to classical theism, they tried to expand their ideas through the Christian society. We are going express and then criticize their point of view in the followings in a qualitative surveying method that involves both online and physical surveys, this issue and critique can help to better understand the issue of relationship between religion and modern science. Before that the reason of emergence of this thought would be explained.

Open theism; A Reaction to Imposed Metaphysical Pattern

Open theism is a sub branch of Evangelical tradition that emphasizes basing its views on Scripture. It is thought that this theology is a reaction to what is called imposing the foreign metaphysical and Hermeneutical pattern from classical theism to simple and clear text of the Scripture; the text which is, in their view, merely the simple expressing of emotions, purposes, actions and reactions of God (Vanhoozer, 2012: 122).

The most important reason of emerging this perspective, in the ideas of its supporters, is that many of doctrines of classical theism origins from Greek Philosophy, especially the Neo-Platonic Philosophy. So, they should be reviewed and modified based on teachings of Scripture (Pinnock, 1994: 60).

On the one hand, they criticize Calvinistic tradition and it is completely deterministic view which is originated from Augustine ideas, and on the other hand they are in conflict with Hellenistic impact seen in classical theism; the doctrine that owes to thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and Neo-Platonians and claims that God is quite independent existent from the world and beyond it. The God who is a simple, Abstract, timeless, eternal, omnipotent, changeless, all-knowing and taking no place. He exists all over the world and is alert of all state of affairs eternally. His power is absolute and an infallible knowledge belongs to him. To put in nutshell, the God described in classical theism is the only and the most perfect existent that deserves these properties (Pinnock, 1994: 60).

Open Theism confront with this traditional notion of God and criticize this position of classical theism strongly. It claims a new doctrine that gives a more rational and accurate concept of God being free from Greek thought and representing the God that is depicted in Scripture. For an instance of their effort in making concept of God free from Greek thought, they attribute to him, temporality and changing features based on Scripture (Pinnock, 1994: 117-118). We will clarify these two from their view and consequences of accepting this position in the following.

Consequences of temporality and changing properties in God

Classical theism has made the strong claim that God is timeless, in the sense of existing outside of time and sequence. This view strongly emphasizes God's transcendence over the world. And since a timeless being would be totally actualized, it implies strong immutability and impassibility as well (Nash, 1983). However, Open Theists believe that accepting timelessness presents many difficulties from a theological standpoint;

First, it is hard to form any idea of what timelessness might mean, since all of our thinking is temporally conditioned. Second, it creates problems for biblical history, which portrays God as One who plans, experiences the flow of temporal passage and faces the future as not completely settled. If God did not experience events as they transpire, he would not experience or know the world as it actually is. If God's eternity were timeless, God could not be related to our temporal world (Pinnock, 1994: 120).

Therefore, they tried to present a new understanding of God's eternity that does not cancel or annihilate time but stands in a positive relation to it. Eternality of God in their view means that God transcends our experience of time, is immune from the ravages of time, is free from our inability to remember, and so forth. They affirm that God is with us in time, experiencing the succession of events with us. Past, present and future are real to Him. Therefore, there has never been and never will be a time when God does not exist (Sanders, 2007: 200-205).

The last point about Open Theism view on God's eternality is that when they say He is in time, they do not mean that God is exhaustively in time, since as in human experience, that we partially transcend time through memory, imagination and reason, God's transcendence over time is vastly more perfect than ours. So, the Creator of time is the One who most perfectly experiences it (Pinnock, 1994: 121).

It seems that hardness of imagining God's timelessness and experiencing time by Him beside relation of an a-temporal existent with his creatures is a problem devoted to us since we are limited to time, but for God, who is creator of time, it would not be a problem. Also, we believe that attributing temporality to God is due to simulating Him to human while there should be differences between Creator and creatures.

Mullā Sadrā, a prominent Islamic philosopher, has an attempt to solve the problem of relation of God to time. He believes that God could not be in realm of time, but relates to it. In his perspective, God is not in time, as declared by Open Theists, but he is with time since he is the creator. Certainly, the creator cannot be limited by his creatures or he would not be creator.

Sadrā, following his pedagog Mirdāmād and for solving this problem, proposed the idea of realms of time, *Dahr* and *Sarmad*. According to it, realm of time belongs to changing creatures, while *Dahr* is the realm of changeless ones and *Sarmad* is the devoted realm of God that no one can enter into it. Mention should be made that no creature from time realm can have an impact on the *Dahr* Ones and changeless creature of *Dahr* are unable to affect God in *Sarmad*. But it is acceptable vice versa; therefore, God can relate and act in time, although we do not know how he does (Mullā Sadrā, 1976: 128).

Another argument, being proposed by Sadrā, in defense of God's timelessness is based on Devine absolute perfection, according to which, God neither lacks perfection nor waits to get a new one. While by attributing time to him, Devine absolute perfection would be corrupted. Since there are some perfections, maybe in future that are going to get by Him (Mullā Sadrā, 1976: 128). Therefore, he should be timeless.

By this point, changeless of God is proved too. While another property attributed to God by Open Theism, is changing emotions, experiences and knowledge though they defend changeless essence of Him (Pinnock, 1994: 117-118). But admitting mutability in His properties results in Devine essence change too, since they are identical. According to Mullā Sadrā's school of philosophy, God's attributions like knowledge, providence and power are identical to His essence

and this cannot be ignored unless we accept eternal and independent existence of those attributions from God, while it is evidentially rejected (Mullā Sadrā, 1999: 160).

To explain the theory of unity of God's essence and his properties, being accepted by Shia Imāmiah and Mutazeli theologists, we should say that it does not mean that God's essence substitutes his properties and there is no property in him, but that he is an example of both his essence and his properties like knowledge, providence and there is no duality between them. To simulate this, we can look at human essence and his properties, where there is no duality between them (Mofid, 1992: 57). Certainly, we do not believe in separation of human essence and his features, nor do Open Theists. So, how they do this about God, as the most perfect existent by attributing mutability to His properties?

Therefore, believing in God's temporality and his changing features would result in problems that make Open Theists to alter some of their principles, although they proposed these principles due to completing their doctrine of Openness, the notion that we believe is ambiguous in their words. So, it is going to be investigated in the next part.

Ambiguity of notion of Openness

For utilizing the notion of "Openness", Open Theists have proposed many explanations. Clark Pinnock believes that choosing this title is due to being an interesting and novel metaphor reminding the open heart of God toward his creatures (Pinnock, 2003: 1). Also, he expresses another reason claiming that although God has determined purposes in governing the world, but for realizing them, he uses open ways and methods (Pinnock, 2003: 3).

William Hasker, another well-known Open Theist, suggests other reasons for selecting Openness, that are human openness beside God's openness toward future, human and the world. He declares that God is not remote, closed off and self - contained. Rather He is open to us, his creatures, to the world He has made and to the future. We in turn need to be open toward God and toward the future He is creating for us. Hasker emphasizes that these are the central themes of "Open Theism" (Hasker, 2004: 97).

Pinnock, also, in his book in common with other four, declares two main reasons for the title chosen. 1- Open view of God. 2- Open view of Future. According to first, God knows the future as the realm of possibilities and undetermined events. In other word, He is open toward changing events and occurrences in history. But the second means that the futures is partially undetermined, uncertain and open (Pinnock, 1994: 104).

It can be seen that there are many reasons in naming this theology. Openness of God, future or human? Which of these has been the core reason of choosing this name? If they affirm openness of God, again it would be asked that toward whom or which, this openness has been meant? Human, creatures, the world or the future? Also, this can be asked about human's openness likewise. About open ways or methods of God in governing the world is the same story.

Therefore, we can see ambiguity in the reason of naming this doctrine. Open Theists disagree about the real notion of the name of their school, while tried to review the main principles of classical theism based on their ambiguous claimed view and attempted to make consistency in their ideas. Certainly, the first step should be defining the main notion of the doctrine clearly as done by others. They, also, in order to complete their Open perspective, proposed God's involvement in the world but it seems that their view is inconsistent.

The way of God's action (involving) in the world

Open Theists has tried to bring out a doctrine in which God has action and reaction. A god who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans. They emphasize that their understanding of Scripture has led them to depict God in such way. Since in their understanding, the Bible presents an open view of God as living and active, involved in history, relating to us and changing in relation to us (Pinnock, 1994: 103-104).

They affirm that though acknowledging the truth of Divine immanence, theologians and classical theists usually place the preponderance of their emphasis on God's transcendence. Also, they preferred to speak more of God's power than of weakness, more of God's eternity than of temporality, and more of God's immutability than of loving changeableness in relation to us and this represents a theological distortion that must be corrected.

Therefore, Open Theists believe that it is important to recognize that God is both transcendent (that is, self-sufficient, the Creator of the world, ontologically other than creation, sovereign and eternal) and at the same time immanent (that is, present to the world, active within history, involved, relational and temporal) (Pinnock, 1994: 104-105). So, by proposing immanence they believe in God's involving in occurrences of the history.

Here is a question; two concepts of transcendence and immanence, how can be found in one existence? The one, who is ontologically other than his creatures, how can involve in their affairs? Is it possible for Him to exist in a world that is based on change and motion and to do affairs directly? Open theism just has escaped from some apparent problems in classical theism and therefore tried to propose a new depiction of God. But they didn't think of contradictions made by their portrait of God.

Mention should be made that they have misunderstood the correct involvement of God. Since they put God's action in the world beside his creatures in order to make a relation between them, to solve the problem of His providence and human Free will and to attribute responsibility to human in their view. But we believe that another way of authorship of God can be considered without any direct involvement in the changing world, by which the problem of incompatibilism between human Free will and God's providence and foreknowledge can be solved. It is named longitudinal agency. According to this method, God's authorship in the world is through universe agents and not directly. For instance, God has involvement in human affairs but through his Free will. Therefore, there is no direct involvement for God in the world though He has impact in it.

Open Theists, though believe in causality, causal necessity and impact of a collection of causes (Hasker, 2017: 863; Rhoda, 2013: 289), but don't accept causality of God in all happening of the world and only prefer to consider Him partially and directly in happenings of the world.

According to Mullā Sadrā's view, considering the causal system in the world solve the apparent problem of incompatibility between human Free will and God's providence and foreknowledge. In this doctrine, causal system requiring human Free Will in his actions, prevent from any determinism, since every action of human in his life (future, present or past) would be done through his Free Will and this is a necessary principle. Also, God's involvement in human life is only through human will as He knows that A would be done at T by human Free will. So, this is not going to result in determinism (Mullā Sadrā, 1981: 6/394).

From this point of view, there will be no room for directly Devine involvement of in the world, in addition to solving the problem of incompatibilism and creating an open future for human. Also, responsibility is gifted to human in all his actions. It seems that by adding this premise to Nelson Pike's prominent example, we can solve the issue of incompatibility between God's foreknowledge and human Free will too. In next part you will see that.

Adding Philosophical premises to Pike's Example

One of the most well-known arguments that shows incompatibility of human Free will and God's foreknowledge belongs to Nelson Pike. In "Devine Omniscience and Voluntary Action" he proposed this argument. Regarding his premises, he proved that Jones cannot do an action voluntarily if we believe in an eternal omniscient God. Since it would result in not existing of God, or falsehood of his belief or not having that belief (Pike, 1992).

As declared before, with regarding causal system in happening of actions in the world, there will be no room for occurrence of them by human deterministically. Since his Free will is one of the causes that help to realize those actions, although God's knowledge and providence are some of the other causes affecting longitudinally to realize them.

Therefore, by adding some philosophical premises to Pike's argument, it seems that the incompatibility would be gone. Those premises are:

P_1: Every happening in the world is done only through causal system.

P_2: Devine foreknowledge includes all happenings and their causes.

P_3: Human Free will is one of the causes of realizing human actions.

P_4: God knew in t_1 that Jones with his Free will decided to cut the lawn of his yard but then changed his mind.

C: Jones is free to cut the lawn of his yard.

Therefore, by adding some philosophical premises to the argument, the contradiction is gone. This was ignored by Open Theists, so they accepted his example. The last consideration on doctrine of Openness in our view is that they attributed immutability to God in order to complete their novel doctrine of Openness of God with some unacceptable implications namely God's temporality and

immutability in His essence. But with an Islamic principle we can admit His change and Openness without any of those implications. That principle is Badāʾ.

Superiority of Badāʾ over Openness Theory

According to Open Theism, immutability is one of God's properties. As stated before, attributing this feature is in purpose of depicting a social, relational and open God and in order to present a new theological system based on biblical teachings. But believing change in God requires denying some perfections and some absolute properties in him in addition to attributing change to his essence according to it's being identical to His properties. Here, with the help of an Islamic teaching we will try to solve this issue without accepting any change in God's essence. That principle is called "Badāʾ".

The principle of Badāʾ is one of the exclusive doctrines of Shia School in the Islamic tradition. To believe in this doctrine, Shia scholars have been inspired by some Quranic verses (2: 51; 7:142; 13:39) as well as some traditions (ḥadiṯ) (Al-Kuleyni, 1986: 204).

Badāʾ is an Arabic infinitive (بداء) literally meaning "appearance" or "emergence". When it is used in the form of a verb, commonly means that a new opinion appears or emerges to the subject so that he/she changes his/her previous opinion. In other words, it means "changing one's mind." (Ibn Manẓūr, 1987: 1/347; Ibn Fāris, 1983: 1/212; Rāghib, 1991: 1/113). Thus, Badāʾ means that God's will, knowledge and decision in some cases change and he is open to future but it does not signify any immutability in Devine essence (as declared by Openness doctrine). While with regarding the principle of immutability of God, the literal meaning seems to be unacceptable.

Therefore, the literal meaning led to diverse interpretations of this doctrine among Shia thinkers (Saeedimehr, 2018), and these different interpretations have resulted in some misunderstandings and objections from non-Shia (Sunni) theologians rejecting firmly the plausibility of the doctrine of badāʾ. Thus, over the last centuries, there has been a historical debate over this issue among the Islamic sects (Al-Ṭusi, 1984: 421).

In reaction to such refutations, Shia scholars have tried to prove that there has been misunderstanding about idea of Badāʾ since it never implies any change in God's essence and absolute properties or repenting His initial decision so that mutability could be attributed to Him. thereby, their duty was to establish rationally that doctrine of Badāʾ never contradicts any other theological principle about God and His properties (Zādhoosh, 2003).

Here we are going to present a successful effort in resolving this apparent contradictory which is proposed by the Muslim philosophers. But before that, it is necessary to show the issue that has caused the controversy.

Literal meaning of Badāʾ or immutability of God

Literal meaning of Badāʾ apparently implies change in attributes of God and regarding to principle of the Divine simplicity, His very essence alters too. So Badāʾ will end in a change in His essence

and this obviously contradicts the reasonable principle of the Divine immutability. Several theological problems regarding the diversity of the Divine attributes, including God's knowledge, will and impassibility can be found around this subject. In this survey, we will focus on one version of the problem concerning the relation between Badāʾ and God's knowledge.

Literal meaning of badāʾ implies a change in God's knowledge ("changing His mind") and if so, this change leads to a theologically inconceivable result that is mutability in His essence. The present problem can be draw up as an argument against the doctrine of Badāʾ:

> (1) Badāʾ implies a change of God's knowledge.
>
> (2) A change of God's knowledge implies a change of His essence (according to the principle of the Divine simplicity).
>
> (3) God's essence is immutable; it is impossible for Him to change. (The principle of God's immutability)
>
> Conclusion: Divine Badāʾ is impossible.

We will name this argument the "knowledge argument" (KA). Considering the above formulation of (KA), via Muslim philosophers' ideas we can deny the second premise and then the whole (KA), while the third premise, is so widely accepted by Muslim theologians and philosophers and the first one seems to be undeniable to them. Thus, to respond to (KA), they deny the second premise. Their view is based on relational knowledge. In following it will be explained.

God's Relational Knowledge

Muslim philosophers believe in two kinds of Divine attributes: absolute vs. relational attributes. What our minds can grasp from the Divine essence itself without regarding any other aspects of His Existence and relations, is related to absolute attribute. Divine life and His power are examples of this kind. On the other hand, relational attributes come to our mind because of relation between God and other beings, since if there was not such a relation in reality this concept could not be attributed to God. "Creator" is an example for the relational attributes. Since by not considering the relation between God (creator) and beings (creatures) we will not be capable of using the concept of "creator" as a Divine attribute (Saeedimehr, 2018: 33).

Regarding this distinction, there should be mentioned that for Muslim philosophers, some of the Divine attributes can be seen both as an absolute and relational one. Knowledge is a good example. It is widely accepted by Muslim philosophers that we can use "knowledge" as an attribute indicating a kind of perfection in the very essence of God with no need of considering another being. In this perspective, knowledge is an absolute attribute of God. Also, we can consider it as a relational attribute (Saeedimehr, 2018: 33).

With above analysis, Divine simplicity would be restricted to absolute attributes of God. And change in this kind of attributes results in change in God's essence. Also, mutability of God's relational knowledge, because of changeability of things and beings, never affects the Divine immutability, since it is not identical with God's essence.

Therefore, Badāʾ leads to change only in God's relational knowledge and not His absolute one. Since, it happens just in beings and events of the world that could be knowledgeable by God's relational knowledge. If anyone wants to answer the problem of change of God's essence by Badāʾ, He or she can go like followings:

    i. God has two kinds of attributes; absolute and relational.

    ii. Only absolute ones are identical with God's essence.

    iii. Knowledge is both an absolute and a relational attribute for Him.

    iv. God's relational attributes are changeable but this change does not imply a change in the essence of God.

    v. Badāʾ implies to the change of God's relational attributes (like knowledge).

    * Therefore, Badāʾ never leads to any change in God's essence.

Conclusion

Open Theism, though emerged on purpose of reviewing of some classical theism principles and restoration of modern theology's loyalty to Scripture in late 20th, but confront with some problems that cannot be ignored at all.

Hardness of imagination of God's timelessness is related to us not to Creator of time. Also, there is an attempt to solve the relation of God to time by Mullā Sadrā in which attributing temporality to Him implicates neglecting Devine absolute perfection that is unacceptable. Besides, God's mutability, proposed by open theism is rejected too. Since it requires God's change in His essence as declared that it is identical with His properties like knowledge and providence, the ones that is believed to be changeable in Open Theism.

Another critique of Open theology is related to the ambiguity of the notion of Openness as it is not determined what is meant by their scholars. Also there seems to be inconsistency in their view of God's involvement. Since they recognize that God is both transcendent (ontologically other than creation) and immanent (involved). The problem is that: The one, who is ontologically other than his creatures, how can involve in their affairs? We proposed instead, on the base of Mullā Sadrā's view and according to causal system, another way of authorship of God, that is called longitudinal agency, although used by Christians. In this doctrine, God's involvement in the world is through causal system, and is through causes that are near to effect, as in human affairs through his Free will. So, there will be no room for determinism.

Lastly, we introduced an exclusive doctrine of the Shia School, according to which, God is social, relational and open to future with absolute perfections and unchangeable in His essence. That is called Badāʾ. In this model, God changes but not in His essence and His absolute attributes but in His relational ones. Therefore, no change and immutability can be attributed to God and He is Open to the world.

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