

**KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND REALITY: ADVAITA
VEDĀNTA AND HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY IN
DIALOGUE**

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Abstract:

This study investigates an international philosophical debate between *Advaita Vedānta* and Husserlian Phenomenology by analysing their mutual focus on knowledge, awareness, and reality. Both traditions, despite originating from different historical and cultural settings, converge on the supremacy of consciousness as the fundamental basis of experience and existence. *Advaita Vedānta*, with its non-dual metaphysics of Brahman as pure consciousness, asserts that the cosmos is *Māyā*, a phenomenal manifestation based in ignorance (*Avidyā*). Conversely, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology aims to suspend the natural attitude via *epoché*, uncovering the transcendental ego as the foundation for all meaning and intentionality. This study employs a comparative hermeneutic methodology to elucidate how both frameworks delineate the relationship between subjectivity and the world, avoiding ontological dualism. Advaita facilitates self-realization (*Ātma-jñāna*) by dissolving the distinction between the knower and the known, whereas Husserlian inquiry focuses on the formation of meaning within consciousness. The dialogue highlights significant intersections that clarify a universal philosophy of consciousness and emphasize the contemporary importance of cross-cultural phenomenology. This study contends that integrating Vedāntic non-dualism with phenomenological reduction presents novel avenues for reevaluating epistemology and metaphysics outside the confines of Western empiricism and Indian scholasticism.

Keywords: Advaita *Vedānta*, Husserlian Phenomenology, Consciousness, Knowledge, Reality, Non-dualism, Intentionality, Brahman, Epoché, Comparative Philosophy.

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Introduction:

The Indic non-dual tradition of *Advaita Vedānta* and Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology offer distinct but complementary answers to the eternal philosophical concerns of knowledge, awareness, and reality. *Advaita Vedānta*, a non-dual *Vedānta*, identifies ultimate reality with unqualified consciousness. According to the Upaniṣadic maxim *prajñānam brahma*, the ultimate explanation of existence is a luminous awareness rather than a set of properties or dispositions (Aitareya Upaniṣad; Olivelle, 1996). Classical *Advaitic* exegesis, exemplified by Ādi Śaṅkara and later interpreters, views knowledge (*jñāna*) as a liberating realization (*ātma-jñāna*) of the individual self (*jīva/ātman*) and the universal substratum (Brahman), often expressed as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss) (Radhakrishnan, 1953/19). *Advaitic* texts and commentators emphasize that the phenomenology of ordinary cognition and metaphysics of ultimate reality are intertwined. The apparent plurality and objectivities of the world are a result of ignorance (*avidyā* or *māyā*) that conceals Brahman's immanent presence (Isaeva, 1993). Husserl's phenomenology begins a methodological and epistemological effort that begins with rigorous description, not metaphysical identification. Husserl advised philosophers to return to "the things themselves" and reflect on experience to reveal its structures (Husserl, 1983). Instead of a philosophical base, Husserl proposes epoché, a suspension of the natural attitude, to define the intentional structures that constitute objects for consciousness in their pure givenness. The core idea of intentionality, inherited and changed from Franz Brentano, states that "consciousness is always consciousness of something" (Brentano, 1973; Husserl elaborates on this thesis throughout his early and middle writings). Thus, Husserl

shifts philosophical questions about reality to how objects, meanings, and intersubjective worlds are constituted within and correlated with conscious acts. The transcendental ego emerges as the formal pole in which sense and meaning unite.

Despite their very distinct starting points, both traditions base philosophical research on consciousness, but with different theoretical goals. The ontological thesis that Brahman is consciousness elevates illuminating awareness to the ultimate existent in Advaita. The Upaniṣadic phrase *prajñānam brahma* is a philosophical statement that links epistemic capacity (knowing) with ontological status (being), redefining epistemology as a path to metaphysical liberation (Olivelle, 1996; Radhakrishnan, 1953/1996). Instead of ontological assimilation, Husserl emphasizes how things are created in experience and maintains methodological neutrality about reality. According to Dermot Moran, the epoché "brackets" statements about the world's independent existence so the philosopher can examine its meaning (Moran, 2000). Result: philosophical tone difference. Advaita's soteriological metaphysics dissolves the subject-object split, while Husserl's descriptive science of consciousness keeps subjectivity and objectivity analytically distinct even while they are connected. This disparity is evident in how each tradition views the knower-known relationship. The last insight integrates the knower, known, and knowing into a single reality—the self's knowledge of itself as Brahman—in Advaita's style. According to Isaeva (1993) and Radhakrishnan (1953/1996), *Advaitic* writers emphasize that liberation involves eliminating superimpositions that create dualism. Husserl articulates a structural gap: intentional acts (noeses) and their correlates (noemata) are distinct moments in consciousness,

and phenomenological analysis seeks to reveal their constitution without enveloping them in metaphysics. The methodological commitment to description rather than identity allows Husserlian phenomenology to map many forms of consciousness (perceptual, imaginative, remembering, judging) and provide a taxonomy of experiential modes that does not assume any one mode exhausts reality. However, comparative interaction can be quite productive. Advaita's claim that ultimate reality is luminous awareness prompts phenomenology to define ontological previous consciousness. Can phenomenology's analytic tools—intentionality, noesis/noema correlation, eidetic reduction—explain Advaita's "luminous" experience as self-revealing knowledge? Advaita's non-dual insight challenges phenomenology's intentional description: how can a form of knowing that is not an intentional relation to an object but rather a self-manifestation of awareness be captured without betraying methodological commitments? Thus, metaphysical statements (Advaita) and methodological modesty (Husserl) can be tested and refined in discourse.

This study engages in discourse for three interrelated reasons. First, we can clarify each tradition's conceptual resources for disputes concerning mind's ontology and self-knowledge's epistemology by comparing Advaita's ontological identification of consciousness with Husserl's descriptive analysis of constituting acts. Second, contrasting these frameworks reveals ignored distinctions like liberative knowledge and constitutive description that can improve philosophy of mind and comparative metaphysics debates. Cognitive science, phenomenological psychiatry, and metaphysical disputes in analytic philosophy all focus on consciousness, selfhood, and reality, making the cross-cultural conversation urgent. A

successful synthesis or controlled opposition between Advaita and Husserlian phenomenology promises fresh conceptual tools for these debates and a model for intercultural philosophical activity that neither flattens diversity nor exoticizes otherness.

Advaita Vedānta: Consciousness as the Ground of Reality

Advaita Vedānta's philosophy re-values consciousness as the ontological ground, not just a phenomenon or a correlate of embodied cognition. It views consciousness as the locus of all apparent multiplicity. Upaniṣadic *mahāvākya prajñānam brahma* (meaning "Consciousness is Brahman") asserts that the absolute is luminous, self-revealing awareness, not an abstract quality. The *mahāvākya* reframes the philosophical problem by identifying ultimate being with knowing, merging epistemology and metaphysics into a single task. Realizing one's true nature (*ātma-jñāna*) becomes the metaphysical disclosure of the substratum (Brahman). Many modern translators and academics view the Mahāvākya as a representation of being and knowing (Olivelle, 1996/2008; Radhakrishnan, 1953/1996). In Śaṅkara's commentarial and independent writings, classical *Advaitic* exegesis explores the identity's metaphysical (ontology) and soteriological (liberative praxis) implications. Brahman is described by three interconnected predicates: sat (existence), cit (awareness), and *ānanda* (bliss), which are not accidental attributes but irreducible modalities of absolute reality. The *sat-cit-ānanda* formula identifies Brahman as the unconditioned substrate, underlying all empirical being and cognition. Cit means self-luminous awareness that does not need to be illumined and can "shine" in and through all cognitive states, according to commentators.

Advaita argues that cognitive knowledge alone cannot eliminate the basic misapprehension (*avidyā*) that hinders one's oneness with Brahman. Advaita's concept of *jñāna* differs from epistemic acquisition as it is a transforming recognition that is immediate, self-revealing, and non-intentional, unlike subsequent phenomenologists' intentionality. According to Isayeva (1993) and Upadeśa Sāhasrī translations, Śāṅkara's pedagogical tone emphasizes the collapse of the knower, instrument, and known into one reality, resulting in liberation (*mokṣa*). Advaita argues Brahman is consciousness. Being conscious is not a Cartesian attribute of a substance. Instead, the claim is that "subject" and "object" assume a self-illuminating awareness independent of the subject-object paradigm. Advaita grammar distinguishes between empirical (*vyāvahārika*) and absolute (*paramārthika*) truth levels. Empirical truth involves dualities, action, causation, and pragmatic language, while absolute truth eliminates the categories of agent and patient. The *paramārthic* perspective views consciousness as the manifest identity of *ātman* and Brahman, with the claim "I am Brahman" (*aham brahmāsmi*) signalling the move from empirical to absolute perspectives (Olivelle, 1996/2008; Radhakrishnan, 1953/1996).

For precise comparison studies, some *Advaitic* properties are crucial. Advaita describes awareness as self-luminous (*svaprakāśa*), meaning it does not require further epistemic instances to be known. Many *Advaitic* writings refer to the witnessing consciousness (*sākṣī*) as observing mental contents without being observed. When ignorance is dispelled, this consciousness is acknowledged as Brahman. Second, Advaita views the world-appearance (*jagat*) as ontologically dependent, with the diversity of names and forms being a dependent

manifestation (*māyā* or *avidyā*), while Brahman is the unmixed reality. Advaita emphasizes immediate realization (*anubhava/ātma-jñāna*) over rational reconstruction or argumentation. Scriptural testimony, reasoning, and direct perception serve as aids, but final knowledge is direct and non-instrumental. *Advaitic* awareness as base emphasizes self-luminosity, ontological grounding in Brahman, and liberative instantaneous knowing.

Comparative philosophy must understand the *Advaitic* claim about consciousness alongside traditions that treat consciousness as structurally purposeful, such as Husserlian phenomenology. The distinction goes beyond terminology. The nondual basis is metaphysically identified with the real in Advaita, but phenomenology describes how objects are given, constituted, and meant in consciousness. In the latter approach, intentionality—the fact that consciousness is always "of" something—is the analytical pivot (Husserl, 1983, pp. 94–95). Advaita's description of self-luminous awareness questions whether noesis/noema structures can fully capture all forms of knowing and whether phenomenology can account for self-presenting, non-objectifying awareness without abandoning its methodological limitations. This doesn't mean the traditions conflict. Instead, thorough reading shows complimentary capabilities. Advaita provides a comprehensive soteriological account of how consciousness is realized and described in practice, as well as a metaphysically robust conception of the ground that resists reduction to cognitive functions or brain correlates. Husserlian phenomenology uses intentionality, epoché, and eidetic reduction to explain how objects and intersubjective worlds develop in experience. The comparative task is to ask how Advaita's concept of self-luminous, nondual awareness can be made intelligible within phenomenological categories

without distorting its soteriological thrust, and how phenomenology's analytics can refine Advaita's description of illumination structures and ignorance removal.

Husserlian Phenomenology: Consciousness as Constitutive Horizon

Husserlian phenomenology views consciousness as the constitutive horizon through which the world appears and acquires meaning. Husserl's project begins with Brentano's insight that intentionality is the essential structure of consciousness: "consciousness is always consciousness of something," which directs attention to lived experience's correlative structure and the way objects are given within acts of meaning. Husserl uses the epoché and phenomenological reduction (the "method of parenthesizing") to reveal these structures. This disciplined suspension of the natural attitude allows the philosopher to examine how entities are presented, constituted, and validated in consciousness rather than making premature ontological commitments about their independent existence. Phenomenology asks how the world is constituted as a world for experiencing subjects instead of whether the external world exists independently (a metaphysical question in the natural attitude). What are the formal structures of noesis (the act) and noema (the object as intended) that make objectivity intelligible? Husserl's account centers on constitution. Constitution refers to the intricate syntheses, retentions, protentions, and purposeful correlates that create a meaningful, stable reality in lived time and intersubjectivity. Husserl illustrates that perception, imagination, memory, judgment, and affectivity have different noetic profiles but work together to make objects present and meaningful to consciousness. Transcendental reduction does not negate the natural world's reality but frames

its unquestioned positing so the philosopher can focus on givenness. In Dermot Moran's summary of Husserl's technique, the epoché "brackets" everyday ontological assumptions to allow descriptive rigor in investigating the world's meaningful structures. Husserl uses consciousness as the fundamental field that organizes sense, identity, and intersubjective validity, keeping description apart from ontological statement.

According to Husserl (1983), intentionality is a family of directednesses: perceptual intentionality presents objects as belonging to a spatio-temporal field with sensory givenness and horizontality, imaginative intentionality presents objects with a different mode of givenness, and noematic intentionality abstracts the object as a correlate with determinate sense. Husserl's noesis and noema account allows phenomenology to explain objective sense without psychological reductionism or naive realism by taxonomizing experience modalities. The noema is the object-as-intended, the meaningful correlation that anchors every conscious act. The "object" philosophy must study is both the outcome of constitutive syntheses and the condition for intersubjective world agreement. The transcendental ego and approach to transcendental phenomenology are also important to Husserl. Husserl claims that the transcendental ego, a formal pole, is the vantage point for meaning and experiencing unification after completing the epoché and attending to constitution. Phenomenology must explain how meaning is constituted if the sciences assume an already meaningful reality. Husserl refuses to make the transcendental ego into a metaphysical hypostasis identical with the world. Instead, he treats it as the formal locus of unity and sensation, where subjectivity and objectivity are correlated and demonstrated. A sophisticated middle path is

reached: consciousness is presented as the constitutive horizon whose formal structures make the claim that there is an objective, shareable world possible.

Husserl's temporality and retention/protection account supports consciousness as a constituent horizon. Unity of the temporal object—how a song remains similar for consciousness as its tonal phases pass away—exemplifies synthetic procedures that create continuity, identity, and diachronic meaning. Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness reveals that horizontality is both intentional and temporal, with each content situated within implicit horizons that provide fullness to incomplete givenness (Husserl, 1983, pp.43–48). Phenomenology shows that the “world” as experienced is always shot through with horizons—expectations, anticipations, and retentive sedimentations—and that this horizontality is necessary to perceive objects as determinate and persisting over time. Husserl also carefully handles intersubjectivity and the objective world. Husserl explains how empathy (Einfühlung), horizon projection, and community sense practices enable the experience of others and the validation of objective assertions. Science builds on the life-world (Lebenswelt), a culturally and materially grounded horizon of meaning created through intersubjective syntheses. Thus, Husserl accommodates consciousness's formative function and worldhood's irreducible sociality: the world is co-constituted by a community of sense-makers who deposit and improve the noematic scopes that govern objectivity.

The Husserlian perspective does not regard consciousness as ontologically ultimate, unlike some non-dual traditions, but it nonetheless gives awareness epistemic and methodological

supremacy. This restraint—bracket, describe, clarify—is intentional: phenomenology aims to explain how objects, meanings, and sciences are based in consciousness without reducing the world to the ego. Phenomenology's methodological modesty is philosophically powerful: by exposing constitution, it can analyse self-consciousness, intentional directedness, temporal synthesis, and intersubjective validation better than naturalism or simplistic idealism (Moran, 2000, pp. 164–184).

Consciousness as the Locus of Reality:

According to *Advaita Vedānta*, ultimate reality is non-dual and the individual's awareness is the ground itself. According to Olivier (1996)/2008, p. 98, “Consciousness is Brahman” (*mahāvākya: prajñānam brahma*). The Vedāntic view identifies consciousness as the ultimate substratum of existence, consisting of the “is-ness” (sat) of existence, the awareness (*cit*) that knows, and the bliss (*ānanda*) that illuminates it. Some Advaita interpreters state that consciousness is self-evident and self-revealing. It can know itself without a mind.” Q354 (Advaita Vision, n.d.) This supports the radical argument that consciousness is self-luminous and foundational: reality exists because awareness is there, not things or faculties. Husserl also elevates consciousness as the horizon where objects, meaning, and reality emerge, but more methodically and descriptively. Husserl says “consciousness is always consciousness of something” (1983, p. 94). This axiom supports his claim that all consciousness is deliberate, oriented to a noema, correlate, or object inside a meaning horizon. According to Husserl (1983, p. 60), the philosopher uses the phenomenological reduction (epoché) to suspend prejudiced ontological assertions about the universe and “return to the phenomena” of

conscious experience. In this framework, awareness is investigated as the horizon of all objective reality, not just natural-psychological occurrences.

Though in distinct terms, both faiths define awareness and reality. Advaita claims a metaphysical identity in which the knower, known, and knowing process merge. According to Vedāntic teachings, all objects appearing ‘within’ awareness are actually consciousness itself (Advaita Vision, n.d., Q354). Husserl claims that “without consciousness no ‘world’ would be given, no object would be constituted; and the world as given is only given in and through consciousness” (Moran, 2000, p. 12). Both see awareness as the locus—the place, the horizon, the condition—of reality. Horizon is another convergence point. The world of things, consciousness, and plurality in Vedānta is seen as appearing within and supported by the transcendent ground of awareness. The locus of reality is not an object among objects, but the background of all appearing. Husserl’s phenomenology uses internal and external horizons to formalize the idea that a physical entity is surrounded by a ‘co-givenness’ horizon (Husserl, 1982 [quoted in IEP], sec. 44). The object’s givenness depends on its horizon: no item is exhaustively given but always implies ungiven horizons. Husserl considers consciousness the objectivity horizon. Advaita and Husserl agree that reality is constantly within awareness.

Finally, both traditions reject an object-centric ontology and emphasize that knowing is about turning toward or uncovering the locus. Advaita emancipation involves “I am That” (*aham brahmāsmi*), seeing one’s actual self as the non-dual consciousness of reality. According to Husserl, phenomenological insight is “seeing how meaning comes about” by considering

consciousness’s constitutive role (Britannica, n.d.). Thus, consciousness is the deeper condition in which things emerge, are known, and are real.

Ontology and Intentionality:

Advaita identifies Brahman with illuminating, self-revealing consciousness. The statement “Consciousness is Brahman” is a metaphysical statement that blurs the boundary between knower and being (Olivelle, 1996/2008). Classical Advaitic commentators and Śāṅkara-era exegesis argue that consciousness is the foundation for the world’s apparent multiplicity and its ontological derivativeness (Radhakrishnan, 1953/1996; Isayeva, 1993). According to Upadeśa Sāhasrī (trans. Jagadananda, 1949; Isayeva, 1993), Advaita (*jñāna*) views “knowledge” as liberating, removing *avidyā* and revealing the ontological primacy of awareness, transforming being rather than just being aware (Upadeśa Sāhasrī, trans. Jagadananda, 1949; Isayeva, 1993). In contrast, Husserl’s phenomenological program views consciousness as the constitutive horizon of sensation and objectivity as a methodological move rather than an ontological identification. Husserl’s key axiom—“consciousness is always consciousness of something”—encapsulates intentionality and emphasizes act-object correlation (Husserl, 1983, p. 94). Husserl suggests suspending the natural attitude and studying how objects are supplied, created, and meaning in the stream of consciousness to access these structures (Husserl, 1983, p. 60). This epistemic strategy frames ontological claims to disclose objectivity requirements, not denying an external reality. The epoché “brackets” the taken-for-granted world so the philosopher can describe the constitutive processes that make it meaningful (Moran, 2000, pp. 11–12). In summary, Husserl prioritizes awareness for philosophical

investigation but does not identify it with the ontological order.

The discrepancy is crucial when considering intentionality. Husserl inherited and reworked Brentano's insight that mental phenomena are defined by intentionality toward correlates. Husserl's structural assertion can be analysed using noesis/noema correlation, retention/pretention, and the many syntheses of objectivity (Husserl, 1983, pp. 94-120, §36-40). Husserl analyses intentionality: perceptual, imaginative, mnemonic, emotional, and judging awareness have distinct noetic profiles and noematic correlates. Husserl maintains a controlled gap between the act (noesis) and the intended correlate (noema) to allow descriptive studies of how experience builds an object's sense, horizontality, and intersubjective validity. Advaita emphasizes a non-objective, immediate consciousness through phrases such as *sākṣi* (witness), *svaprakāśa* (self-luminosity), and direct *ātma-jñāna*. On the *Advaitic* view, the final, liberative recognition is the discovery that the subject and ontological foundation are one. The Upaniṣadic *mahāvākyas* and Śāṅkara's educational rhetoric challenge Husserl's phenomenological analysis by rejecting the categories of knower, known, and knowing (Upadeśa Sāhasrī, trans. Jagadananda, 1949; Olivelle, 1996/2008). Thus, Husserlian directedness risks missing a non-objectifying self-presence that illumines itself rather than being directed "toward" a correlate, which act-object schemas cannot capture. This distinction affects philosophy practically. Using its noesis/noema analytic framework and temporal and intersubjective syntheses, phenomenology may map gradations of givenness, explain horizontality, and explain the formation of community, objective world-hood. A philosophical claim that compresses subject

and world into one ontological substrate without surrendering crucial explanatory distinctions regarding how objects are regarded as having determinate sense is hard to reconcile with these analytic results. Conversely, Advaita's metaphysical move provides an integrated ontological and soteriological account of why a non-dual awareness must be primary, but it risks flattening phenomenology's rich descriptive distinctions and glossing over the structural complexity of intentional acts that produce ordinary objectivity if invoked uncritically.

Thus, Husserl's bracket, explain, clarify approach is philosophically crucial. Husserl may wonder: may intentional structures (e.g., a unique form of auto-intentionality) describes some introspective accounts of self-present awareness, or does it refer to an epistemic category outside intentional analysis? Husserl warns against turning the transcendental ego into a metaphysical hypostasis since it is a formal pole, a locus for sense unity, not the world (Husserl, 1983, pp. 159-170). Advaita argues that the ultimate reality, Brahman, is an ontological reality and that transcending subject-object duality is fundamental for liberation (Isayeva, 1993; Upadeśa Sāhasrī, trans. Jagadananda, 1949).

Conclusion:

This study, "Knowledge, Consciousness, and Reality: *Advaita Vedānta* and Husserlian Phenomenology in Dialogue," examines how consciousness aids knowledge and reality production, despite differing intellectual backgrounds and philosophical purposes. In contrast to Advaita's strong metaphysical premise and soteriological practice, Husserl's disciplined descriptive approach explains the formal structures by which worlds are provided, objects produced, and intersubjective validity established. These resources show potential

convergences—conscious givenness and horizontality—and important divergences—*Advaitic* ontological identification versus Husserl’s methodological bracket and analytic maintenance of the noesis/noema split. Intercultural communication offers two benefits. It first displays conceptual holes each tradition struggles to fill. Advaita’s nondual metaphysics explains why consciousness resists functional or neurophysiological description, but its ontological identity risks obscuring Husserl’s examination of fine-grained phenomenological variations across modes of experience. Husserl’s careful taxonomy of intentional structures helps explain objectivity and experience’s temporality, but his methodological restraint leaves open how to treat contemplative traditions’ self-manifesting, non-objectifying awareness without naturalizing or reducing them. Advaita can refine assertions about conscious givenness’s patterns and gradations using analytical distinctions, while phenomenology can utilize a broader vocabulary to describe self-presenting awareness.

The paper advises two methodological safeguards. Comparative study must first honour each tradition’s goals and terminology: Subsuming Husserlian analytic distinctions under doctrinal metaphysics eliminates methodological rigor, and translating *Advaitic* soteriological principles into phenomenological jargon impairs their applicability. Second, synthesis should avoid simple assimilation and illuminate mutually by showing where phenomenological accuracy may verify metaphysics claims and where metaphysical breadth can push phenomenology toward deeper descriptions of non-ordinary forms of experience. These findings imply several scholarly actions. Comparative and analytic philosophers of mind should cooperate with Indian philosophers to closely analyse original texts and strictly handle meditative

tradition phenomenological findings. Cognitive science and contemplative studies could benefit from utilizing phenomenologically informed tools to collect first-person reports of non-dual experiences and assess if they are unique auto-intentionality or severe cases of known intentional characteristics. Finally, metaphysicians should rethink the inferential process from phenomenological description to ontological statement and establish self-report and eidetic description criteria to avoid circularity. Comparing *Advaita Vedānta* and Husserlian phenomenology is a fruitful philosophical exchange that reframes concerns and expands research. Future study can aim for a more comprehensive account of consciousness that maintains conceptual rigor while considering the possibility that consciousness’s deepest forms may be both the location of meaning-constitution and metaphysical contemplation. This account would not resolve all arguments, but it would provide a continuous, methodologically pluralistic solution to why and how consciousness affects reality.

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