Can we learn how to love? An Exploration of Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving'*

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> For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation (Rilke, 2004: 37).
>
> Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it (Rumi, 1999: 84).

The notion of love is traditionally and conventionally associated with idealistic expressions of self-denial, object-worship, self-transcendence, and god-like characteristics. Sentimentality, cliché, and consumerist depictions of human relatedness often supersede the human reality of love, in its ambivalence, its contradictions, its failures and its diversity. Humanness, the pursuit of truth, the striving for happiness, indeed the full spectrum of lived experience, is impacted to at least some degree by the concept of love; from birth to death, across cultural and historical divides, the need/urge/instinct to love and to be loved may be discerned, at times clearly and obviously, more often hidden and disguised, in diverse manifestations of human behaviour. As a result, questions relating to the concept of love have exercised thinkers and writers across many disciplines; attempts have been made to define and describe love, to provide theories of love, and to explain the meaning of love.

Perennial questions of philosophy such as 'who am I?', 'how should one live?' and 'whence meaning and significance?' reflect in a direct way concepts and definitions of love. Platonic, Aristotelian and Pauline discourses on love differentiate between *eros, agape* and *philia*, and explore diverse manifestations of love in sexuality, friendship, and divine worship and adoration.[1] Subsequent philosophers analyse and interpret these conceptions of love, query their boundaries, and offer traditional or revolutionary understanding and conclusion. Within philosophical discourse, religious, ethical and practical aspects of the phenomenon of love are explored, and the opposition between self-love and altruism is examined and sometimes deconstructed altogether. On this point, philosophy encounters psychoanalytic theory regarding selfhood and otherness and the complex relationship between subject and object. Psychoanalysis seeks to free the human psyche from the

constrictions of deception and compulsion, and, in the words of its founder, aims to liberate man 'to love and to work'.[2] Manifestations of mental and emotional distress are addressed with a view to their amelioration, and this is mainly achieved through an understanding of their origins. Tracing the sources of trauma or distress to the enduring influence of early childhood experience inevitably results in a portrayal of the subject's desire for love, a desire which is replicated in the phenomenon of transference in the clinical setting.

The subjective nature of the experience of love ensures that any analysis of this concept is necessarily complex and open to diverse interpretations. In many ways, love is a universal human phenomenon; we all need to love and to be loved. An acknowledgement of this human need is beautifully portrayed in the words of the poet, Raymond Carver, in his poem, "Late Fragment"

> And did you get what
> You wanted from this life, even so?
> I did.
> And what did you want?
> To call myself beloved, to feel myself
> Beloved on the earth (Carver, 2002: 456).

However, love is also a uniquely personal experience which can never be fully articulated in linguistic terms. From a philosophical viewpoint, the concept of love raises many questions: What does it mean to love? What is the relationship between self-love and love of others? Is love an instinctive emotion or is it a decisive and rational commitment? The German philosopher and psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, in his best-selling classic, *The Art of Loving,* examines these and other questions relating to love, and he puts forward a strong argument that love is an art which must be developed and practiced with commitment and humility; it requires knowledge and effort. Fromm provides specific guidelines and signposts towards the development of the art of loving and he concludes with the assertion 'that love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence' (Fromm, 1995: 104). This assertions bears a strong echo of the words of Sigmund Freud: 'Our inborn instincts and the world around us being what they are, I could not but regard that love is no less essential for the survival of the human race than such things as technology' (Freud, qtd. in Erikson, 1998: 20). However, Fromm warns against any expectation of easy answers or quick remedies for the problem of living: 'One word of warning seems to be indicated. Many people today expect that books on psychology will give them prescriptions on how to attain "happiness" or "peace of mind." This book does not contain any such advice…its aim is to make the reader question himself rather than pacify him' (Fromm,

2003: xv). Fromm puts forward a theory of love which is demanding, disturbing and essentially challenging.

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Fromm bases his thesis on his perception of the contradiction between the prevalent consensus that love is natural, spontaneous and universal and consequently not a subject requiring study, application or practice, and the incontestable evidence of the failure of love in personal, social and international realms. People 'believe in' love, they yearn for love and they seek love in diverse ways and places. The human need for love is rooted in our awareness, as rational beings, of our individual separateness and aloneness within the natural and social world. This is one of the existential dichotomies which characterize the human condition: 'Man is alone and he is related at the same time' (Fromm, 2003: 31). Many philosophers throughout history have addressed this paradoxical aspect of being human, and there has been a general consensus on the essential relationship between well-being, flourishing and even survival, and the experience of loving relationships and friendships[3]. As the Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, notes, 'the self knows that self is not enough, / the deepest well becomes exhausted' (Kennelly, 2004: 425), and the possibility of love exists within a welcoming acknowledgement of this insufficiency. According to Fromm, this aspect of the human condition creates the experience of 'an unbearable prison' which may be a significant source of anxiety, shame and unhappiness. Therefore, the individual continually strives to reach out for connection and communication with others; he/she strives to attain the experience of love: 'The deepest need in man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness' (Fromm, 1995: 8). The need to belong, to be part of a community of some sort, is closely linked with our fear of isolation and difference, 'the power of the fear to be different, the fear to be only a few steps away from the herd' (Fromm, 1995: 11). This dualistic aspect of the human condition, one's existential aloneness and one's need for relationship and connection, propels the desire for mutuality and intimacy on a variety of levels. However, when this desire is grounded in the belief that one's completeness and fulfilment as a human being can be achieved through the devotion and support of another, the emphasis is placed on the experience of being loved rather than on loving, and the loving other is diminished and distorted

in order to facilitate this role. This need-based motivation is not characteristic of Fromm's understanding of love and it does not answer the problem of human separateness.

From this premise, Fromm claims that love has been widely misunderstood; love, according to his interpretation, 'is a relatively rare phenomenon and its place is taken by a number of forms of pseudo-love' (Fromm, 1995: 65). The desire to escape one's essential aloneness may be expressed in a passive form of submission or dependence wherein the individual seeks an identity through that of another. Here, the individual renounces his/her responsibility and sense of self, and attempts to live through the perceived greatness or strength of the chosen other. This mode of relatedness may be experienced at a personal, social, national or religious level; in all cases, the individual looks to another for the answers to the problems of living and thus attempts to escape the challenges and demands of human freedom and responsibility. In these situations, there is, simultaneously, the practice of domination and control on the part of the perceived more powerful partner in the relationship. The controlling partner is equally dependent on the submissive other for the fulfilment of his/her desire. Love is cited as the motivation of both parties, based on the assertion that neither can live without the other; one needs the other in order to survive. Such expressions of love are the synonymous with certain forms of romantic literature and music. Interestingly, Fromm points out that these two modes of living are frequently exercised by the same individual, whereby one is submissive or dominating in relation to different persons or objects. In either case, the individual is attempting to dispel the anxieties pertaining to his/her aloneness and difference through a symbiotic or mutually dependent union. The symbiotic union places the focus of creative and productive living on a being or object outside the self: 'for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralyzed' (Fromm, 2003: 64). Fromm describes such a union as 'fusion without integrity', and he considers it an immature form of love which is destined to disappointment and failure (Fromm, 1995: 16). In the words of the poet, W.H. Auden, 'Nothing can be loved too much, / but all things can be loved / in the wrong way' (Auden, 1994: 885). At the root of these immature expressions of love is a predominantly narcissistic pre-occupation with one's own world, one's one values and one's own needs. This orientation towards life precludes an openness to otherness and difference, it limits experience to one's own subjective reality and it diminishes the possibility of relationship, and thus of love, through an exclusive reference to one's own perspective. The person who

experiences life through a narcissistic orientation inevitably views others either as a source of threat and danger or as a source of usefulness and manipulation. From this perspective, the other, person or world, is not experienced as it is, objectively, but rather through the distorted lens of one's own needs and desires.

In opposition to the drive to escape one's existential separateness and aloneness, Fromm insists that 'paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love' (Fromm, 1995: 88), and that the ability to experience love is based on the individual's commitment to the freedom and autonomy of both partners: 'mature love is *union under the condition of preserving one's integrity*, one's individuality…In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two' (Fromm, 1995: 16). The existential need for connection is answered through a relatedness which allows us to transcend our separateness without denying us our uniqueness. According to the German poet, Rilke, this is the only solution to the polarity of separateness and connection which characterizes the human experience. In asserting emphatically that 'one is alone', Rilke argues 'that even between the *closest* human beings infinite distances continue to exist, [but] a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky' (Rilke, 2004: 34). Love accepts difference and distance while simultaneously reaching out to the other with one's whole being: 'Love is possible only if two persons communicate with each other from the centre of their existence' (Fromm, 1995: 80). It is possible only if the individual is committed to a 'productive orientation' towards life: 'The "productive orientation" of personality refers to a fundamental attitude, a *mode of relatedness* in all realms of human experience' (Fromm, 2003: 61). The 'productive' character has developed the ability to transcend the boundaries and limitations of the ego and is subsequently more concerned with giving than with receiving: 'For the productive character, giving…is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power. This experience of heightened vitality and potency fills me with joy. I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive, hence as joyous. Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation, but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness' (Fromm, 1995: 18). However, in order to give, an individual must experience a sense of self, a sense of independence and autonomy, from which to draw that which is offered and given; in love, a person gives of him/herself: 'What does one person give another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives his life…he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humour, of his sadness' (Fromm, 1995: 19). Thus, according to Fromm's

interpretation of love, it is motivated by the urge to give and to share rather than a desire to fulfil one's needs or to compensate for one's inadequacies. This is the basis of mature love: 'Immature love says: "*I love you because I need you*". Mature love says: "*I need you because I love you*"' (Fromm, 1995: 32).

Mature love is an act of giving which recognizes the freedom and autonomy of the self and the other. In this sense, it differs radically from the passive, involuntary phenomenon suggested by the phrase 'falling in love'. Fromm refers to 'the confusion between the initial experience of '*falling*' in love, and the permanent state of *being* in love, or as we might better say, 'standing' in love' (Fromm, 1995: 3). Indeed, Fromm claims that the intensity and excitement which accompanies such moments of intimacy and infatuation is frequently relative to the degree of loneliness and isolation which has been previously experienced; as such, it is commonly followed, sooner or later, by boredom and disappointment: 'this type of love is by its very nature not lasting' (Fromm, 1995: 3). Many thinkers, from Freud to the contemporary philosopher, J. David Velleman, make reference to 'the blindness of romantic love' (Velleman, 2006: 84). In contrast, mature love is an ongoing and challenging activity: 'Love, experienced thus, is a constant challenge; it is not a resting place, but a moving, growing, working together' (Fromm, 1995: 80). It involves an active commitment to and concern for the well-being of that which we love.

But how is such a mature love to be developed and practised? How are the pitfalls of resentment, disappointment and indifference to be avoided, or, at least, constructively managed and overcome? Fromm declares that the work or art of loving is based on the practice of four essential elements: 'These are *care, responsibility, respect* and *knowledge*' (Fromm, 1995: 21). The concepts emphasised here evoke a radically different response than that more commonly associated with romantic or sentimental expressions of love. Clearly, Fromm's theory of love demands commitment, humility and courage as well as persistence and hope in the face of inevitable conflicts and difficulties. Care for the other implies a concern for his/her welfare and being; it involves a commitment in terms of time, effort and labour. We care for that which we love and value, and this caring is directed by our willingness to be responsible – to respond to – the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the person whom we love.[4] However, this commitment to care and responsibility is tempered with a humility and openness which refrains from any attempt to mould the other to a preconceived image or ideal; it does not say 'I know what is best for you' but rather respects the autonomy and individuality of the other: 'Respect…is the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality. According to Velleman, the willingness and ability to see the other as he/she really is fore-

grounded in the simultaneous willingness to risk self-revelation: 'Love disarms our emotional defences; it makes us vulnerable to the other…in suspending our emotional defences, love exposes our sympathy to the needs of the other' (Velleman, 2006: 95). Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as he is. Respect, thus, implies the absence of exploitation. I want the loved person to grow and unfold for his own sake, and in his own ways, and not for the purpose of serving me. If I love the other person, I feel one with him or her, but with him *as he is*, not as I need him to be as an object for my use' (Fromm, 1995: 22). Respect allows the other to be, to change and to develop 'in his own ways'. This requires a commitment to know the other as a separate being and not merely as a reflection of my own ego. Knowledge of the other, as he/she is, requires a transcendence of my own concerns and perspectives, and while full knowledge, of self or other, is beyond human possibility, in the practice and act of loving, I know the other as a human being, similar and different to myself. According to Velleman, 'knowing' the other is essential to love, and this, in part, points to 'the partiality of love': Personal love is…a response to someone with whom we are acquainted. We may admire or envy people of whom we have only heard or read, but we can only love the people we know' (Velleman, 2006: 10). The four basic elements of love, care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are mutually interdependent' (Fromm, 1995: 25), and they form the basis of a mature approach to love.

Of course, there are many kinds of love in the human experience; but Fromm asserts that in all cases the experience of mature love has a similar foundation and orientation. Sexual, parental and brotherly love may be different manifestations of the phenomenon of love; they may be originally motivated by different desires, needs and hopes, but, ultimately, if a mature attitude to love is developed and practiced, the other will not be encountered as an object to serve my purpose. The converse is also the case; Fromm refers to the various forms of subtle exploitation and manipulation which may be discerned behind the outward appearance and assertion of love. Sexual encounters may be primarily motivated by the desire for physical excitement, release and pleasure, or by the urge for domination or submission. In either case, the intimacy experienced is momentary and limited, and the relationship is not characterized by the core elements of care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Parental love is conventionally assumed to be marked by the exercise of unconditional care, concern and devotion; this is often the case. However, since Freud, it is difficult to ignore or dismiss the possibility that some parents at least are sometimes motivated by factors which are not conducive to the healthy unfolding of the child; parents are human, after all, and mistakes are

inevitable[5]. When parental love is offered or withdrawn on conditional terms – obedience, compliance, success, popularity, pleasantness, etc. – the child senses that he/she is not loved for his/her self but only on the condition of being deserving. Psychoanalytic theory explores the lasting impact of such experiences in the adult personality, as the desire for unconditional love remains an unsatisfied craving. Fromm's view of parental roles is rooted in his social and historical context, and he outlines different stereotypical functions and influences associated with the mother and father images. However, he offers a very interesting analysis of two possible approaches within the parental role. (Fromm confines this analysis to the role of the mother, but it may surely be applied across gender lines). Using the biblical images of 'milk' and 'honey', Fromm differentiates between a duty-focussed love and one which is imbued with joy and vitality: 'Milk is the symbol of the first aspect of love, that of care and affirmation. Honey symbolises the sweetness of life, the love for it and the happiness in being alive' (Fromm, 1995: 39). The ability to give the latter is dependent on one's sense of happiness, vitality and joyful engagement; hence, it is rarely achieved and the ensuing effect on the child is lasting and deep: 'Both attitudes have a deep effect on the child's whole personality; one can distinguish indeed, among children – and adults – those who got only 'milk' and those who got 'milk and honey' (Fromm, 1995: 39). Perhaps this analysis suggests a fifth requirement to Fromm's list of the basic elements of mature love. Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are praiseworthy qualities in the loving person; they are an expression of a mature and genuine concern for the other. However, in the real world of human beings, is there not a desire for something other than maturity, generosity and concern in the experience of love? Is there not a desire for 'honey', for a sense of joy in the beloved, and a sense of enjoyment in the very existence of the other? Perhaps this is a necessary addition to Fromm's demanding view of love. The words of the poet, D.H. Laurence, come to mind: 'We've made a great mess of love, / Since we made an ideal of it' (Laurence, 2002: 387).

From philosophical, psychological and religious perspectives, the concept of self-love is a perennial subject of debate and argument. Analysis of this topic ranges over interpretations of selfishness, narcissism, self-centeredness and the apparent dichotomy between our obligations to ourselves and to others. In many cases, the issue rests on the varying interpretations of the words which are used; the negative connotations of self-love usually emanate from associations such as exclusive and obsessive focus on oneself and one's world and a disregard for anything which lies outside this self-contained existence. In contrast, an interpretation of a healthy self-love posits no contradiction between love of self and love of others; rather,

the former is seen to be an essential starting point for the latter. This is Fromm's view: 'Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. *Love*, in principle, *is indivisible as far as the connection between "objects" and one's own self are concerned* (Fromm, 1995: 46). Self-love and love of others are not mutually exclusive but co-existent. Fromm asserts the essential necessity of self-love and self-acceptance as a condition of the ability to love another and to receive the other's love. He points to the distortions and misinterpretations which ensue when this condition is not met; the parent who 'sacrifices' everything for their children, the spouse who 'does not want anything for himself', or the person who 'lives only for other' (Fromm, 1995: 48). Fromm discerns that behind such expressions of 'unselfishness' are often facades masking an intense self-centredness and a chronic hostility to life which paralyses the ability to love self or others.

Fromm's claim that love of self and of others is intricately and essentially linked is based on his argument that love for one human being implies a love for all; when I love someone, I love the humanity of that person. Therefore, I love the humanity of all persons, including myself: 'Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person: it is an *attitude*, an *orientation of character* which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not towards one "object" of love' (Fromm, 1995: 36). In this sense, Fromm concurs with the concept of universal, neighbourly or brotherly love. He argues that 'if I truly love one person I love all persons' (Fromm, 1995: 36). This theory of love is therefore opposed to exclusivity or partiality. It is a view whose validity is rejected by Freud as he points to various historical manifestations of its incongruence: 'After St Paul had made universal brotherly love the foundation of his Christian community, the extreme intolerance of Christianity towards those left outside it was an inevitable consequence' (Freud, 2002: 51). Freud's argument against this dictum also rests on the premise that one cannot love everyone one meets, and stresses the concrete and practical nature of love over universal theories: 'My love is something I value and must not throw away irresponsibly. It imposes duties on me, and in performing these duties I must be prepared to make sacrifices' (Freud, 2002: 46). Interestingly, Freud's argument against the possibility or the expediency of universal love echoes Fromm's thoughts on 'care' and 'responsibility', but Freud is maintaining that we cannot, and would not choose to exercise these values on a universal scale. Universal love is an abstraction and is not applicable in concrete particulars. Freud's contemporary, the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, states the case in his typically aphoristic style: 'There is not enough love and kindness in the world to permit us to give any of it

away to imaginary beings' (Nietzsche, 1984: 89). In his analysis of the concept of neighbourly love, the contemporary philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek, poses the question: 'who is the neighbour?' and concludes that the injunction to 'love thy neighbour' and correlative preaching about equality, tolerance and universal love 'are ultimately strategies to avoid encountering the neighbour' (Žižek, 2004: 72) in all his/her vulnerability, frailty, obscenity and fallibility. Theoretical abstractions about love are rarely translated into action: 'it is easy to love the idealized figure of a poor, helpless neighbour, the starving African or Indian, for example; in other words, it is easy to love one's neighbour as long as he stays far enough from us, as long as there is a proper distance separating us. The problem arises at the moment when he comes too near us, when we start to feel his suffocating proximity – at this moment when the neighbour exposes himself to us too much, love can suddenly turn into hatred' (Žižek, 2001: 8). Idealistic and theoretical proclamations of universal love actually precludes the possibility of loving the neighbour as a real, traumatic, inaccessible other; the popularity of humanitarian causes lies in their inherent paradox whereby one can 'love' from a distance without getting involved. Žižek offers a pertinent analogy: '"Love thy neighbour!" means "Love the Muslims!" OR IT MEANS NOTHING AT ALL' (Žižek, 2001a: etext). Velleman argues that 'human beings are selective in love' (Velleman, 2006: 96) because it is not constitutionally possible to know and to love everybody: 'One reason why we love some people rather than others is that we can see into only some of our observable fellow creatures…we are constitutionally limited in the number of people we can love' (Velleman, 2006: 107). Our choice of love objects is inevitably limited, but this is not to deny the potential value of others as beings worthy of love: 'We know that those whom we do not happen to love may be just as eligible for love as our own children, spouses, and friends' (Velleman, 2006: 108). The French theorist, Jacques Derrida, in his analysis of love and friendship, concurs with this argument when he states that 'The measure is given by the act, by the capacity of loving *in act*…living is living with. But every time, it is only one person living with another', and he concludes with the assertion that 'A finite being could not possibly be present *in act* to too great a number. There is no belonging or friendly community that is *present*, and first present *to itself, in act*, without election and without selection' (Derrida, 2005: 21). Perhaps the resolution resides in the humble acknowledgement of the reality that all persons are worthy of love but that our willingness and ability to love is limited to those whom we choose to know and cherish on a personal level.

Fromm's treatise on the art of loving is provocative and insightful. It exposes the myriad problems associated with the experience of loving and being loved. It

confidently asserts that love is essentially central to human flourishing and survival while also highlighting the demands and responsibilities associated with its practice. Is Fromm's understanding of love idealistic and unrealistic? Does it fail to account for the complex realities of human nature, realities associated with emotion, fallibility, change and vicissitude? I leave it to the poet, Carl Sandburg, to suggest some possible answers:

> "Explanations of Love"
> 'There is a place where love begins and a place where love ends.
> There is a touch of two hands that foils all dictionaries.
> There is a look of eyes fierce as a big Bethlehem open hearth furnace or a little green-fire acetylene torch.
> There are single careless bywords portentous as a big bend in the Mississippi River.
> Hands, eyes, bywords – out of these love makes battlegrounds and workshops.
> There is a pair of shoes love wears and the coming is a mystery.
> There is a warning love sends and the cost of it is never written till long afterward.
> There are explanations of love in all languages and not one found wiser than this:
> There is a place where love begins and a place where love ends – and love asks nothing.' (Sandburg, 1970: 399).

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(Endnotes)

1 For an exploration of these concepts, see Alan Soble's *Eros, Agape, and Philia*.

2 This phrase is attributed to Freud by Erik Erikson, in *Identity and the Life Cycle*, p.102.

3 The philosophy of Martin Buber is concerned with the implications of the I-Thou relationship as distinct from the more common mode of relating to others as objects, the I-It relationship. Paul Ricoeur explores the dichotomy between solitude and connection and he sees its resolution in the experience of 'solicitude' whereby one relates to the other as another 'self'. Solicitude embraces the need for love, the need for others, without obliterating autonomy, responsibility, or self-esteem: it celebrates both our common humanity and our individual uniqueness. Both philosophers share the contention that life is essentially relational and that one cannot become a person by oneself. In Buber's words, 'I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I,* I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting' (Buber, 2004a: 17).

4 See Harry Frankfurt's work, *The Reasons of Love*, for an exploration of the links between love and care; Frankfurt is interested in 'an especially notable variant of caring: namely, love', and he draws connections between 'what we care about, what is important to us, and what we love' (Frankfurt, 2006: 11). Velleman also asserts the connection between loving and valuing: 'Loving someone is a way of valuing him', but he claims that what is valued in love is the personhood of the beloved: 'The qualities that elicit our love are the ones that make someone real to us as a person – the qualities that speak to us of a mind and heart within – and the value that is registered in our love is therefore the value of personhood' (Velleman, 2006: 11).

5 See Freud's work, *The Psychology of Love*, for a comprehensive analysis of his thought on this issue.

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