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# In praise of strangeness. Exploring the hermeneutical potential of an unlikely source

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## Abstract

In a field already investigated extensively, the article focuses on a particular aspect, namely on the *nature* of the interaction between the *self* and the *other*. The leading question is: What is the *hermeneutical potential* of the *other* and the *stranger* in relation to the self? The following dimensions are examined: the direction of flow of the interaction, the power relations involved in the process, the claim of the other on the self and the existential dimensions of strangeness.

The first section examines various approaches to the other in a number of disciplines: anthropology and ethnology, art and art history, religion, philosophy, communication theory, and pedagogy. Several common traits are evident: The flow of action is predominantly from the self to the other; the power relationship is unequal, skewed in favour of the self; the other is rarely perceived in his or her own right but is compared with the self who serves as norm; and strangeness is seen as inherently problematic and accompanied by negative connotations. There is consequently a constant attempt to scale down differences and to domesticate the other by various means.

An alternative approach aims at reversing the normal power relationship and releasing the potential of change for the *self* in the encounter with the other. This requires a conscious decision to change the direction of action – from the other to the self and not vice versa. Furthermore, to break the binary hold of subject on object, the *de*centring of the subject is necessary. This requires the recognition of the "incompleteness" of human existence (Nyamnjoh) which opens the self for new possibilities. Acceptance of the radical openness of systems (in this case the "system" of human relationships) is the key to release the "excess" of potential available to the self in the encounter with the other and with what is strange and alien.

In this context, the strategies of liberating and of enrichment through the other becomes important. Even when considering the dark side of strangeness, these strategies still apply and illustrate more clearly the existential necessity of strangeness. The potential of the other and of strangeness for liberating and enriching the self remains undervalued.

**Key words**

*The self, selfhood; the other; stranger; strangeness; xenophobia; liberation; enrichment of the self*

## 1. Introduction

Why is strangeness both alluring and threatening? Why do others attract as well as repel us? From the very beginning of our self-awareness, the other has been a constant companion and the unknown the persistent counterfoil of what is familiar to us. In fact, the very emergence of a sense of self is due to the realisation that I am *not* the other that I exist in distinction from others. "Own" is defined in terms of what is different from and strange to me.

But, as Simmel already argued, the strangeness characterising human relations is not something exterior to ourselves. For him, the stranger is not a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather "the person who comes today and stays to morrow (sic)" (1950 [1908]:402). The relationship with the other is characterised by both nearness and remoteness. The stranger who is close by is at the same time far and although far, he or she is actually near.

Strangeness and the other are therefore deeply embedded in human consciousness and are themes that influenced large domains of human thought, including history, literature, philosophy, psychology, theology and many others. The literature on the "other" and the "stranger" is seemingly endless,[1] raising the legitimate question whether anything new can be said on the subject.

The background of this article is a wider research project undertaken by the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study under the title "Being Human Today". This project originated from the realization that after twenty years of a new democratic dispensation in South Africa, many of the expectations of 1994 remain unfulfilled. More specifically, the more

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[1] To mention just a few authors beside numerous others: Buber (1970), Levinas (1978, 1987), Kristeva (1991), Ricoeur (1992) and Kearney (2003). The South African context, the contributions of Adam & Moodley (2014), Smit (2017) and Vosloo (2006, 2009, and 2015) are recent examples.

humane society that was so fervently anticipated seems to be more remote than ever. The project consequently explores two interrelated questions:

> What does it mean to be human? And: What is the nature of the world in which we aspire to be human?[2]

A more "humane" society depends essentially on the nature of the interrelations between individuals and groups. In a context like South Africa which is characterised by wide-ranging diversity and high levels of inequality, achieving constructive relations is not only a challenge, but co-existence itself can be threatened if strangeness becomes the dominant factor. As Benjamin (1991:697–698) has reminded us, human history (despite it remarkable achievements) is also riddled by continuing incidents of conflict, xenophobia, war and destruction. The understanding of and the interaction with the stranger is therefore not only of "academic" significance, but one of the great existential challenges of our time.

This contribution is not intended as a comprehensive overview of the field in any sense. Its focus is restricted to one aspect, namely the *nature of the interaction* between the "self" and the "other", and more specifically, to the question: What is the *hermeneutical potential* of the other and the stranger in this process? Would it be possible to think of strangeness as an asset and as an opportunity? To explore these possibilities, we need to examine in more detail the *direction* in which the interaction normally takes place,

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2    "To start with the second: What characterizes the context in which individuals and societies find themselves in the first half of the 21st century? It has variously been described as the technological age, as a globalized world, as a network society, as 'postmodern'. All of these descriptors refer to an important aspect, but hardly covers the whole. Perhaps the most striking feature is our growing awareness of the complexity of our world and the realization that developments on the social, economic, political, technological and other fronts interact and affect each other. The piece-meal, sectorial, oversimplified models of society, coupled with our fragmented understanding of science and of the planet have potentially destructive consequences for the world, but also for our humanity. Our context forces us to continue our exploration of the physical and biological world. In doing so we also have to reflect on the first question, namely the fundamental issue of how our humanity is constituted. This gives rise to further questions, for example how our understanding of humanity is influenced by these contextual factors and what kind of human society/societies are emerging from this interaction" (*http://stias.ac.za/research/themes/being-human-today/*).

the *power relations* at stake here and the *claim* the other makes on the self in the process.[3]

The first section provides a brief analysis of how different approaches conceive of the interaction with the other/stranger[4] where the latter is perceived as "object". Then the focus is reversed: What happens when the subject becomes object? What is the effect of the stranger and of strangeness on the self? From this perspective, an alternative approach is developed before reaching a conclusion.

## 2.  Conceptions of the interaction between the self and the other/stranger

As indicated above, the pursuit of a "more human" society in post-1994 South Africa – whether described in terms of *ubuntu*, social cohesion, inclusive democracy or an open and free system – depends on the relationships between its citizens. More specifically, on whether these relationships are experienced as positive, constructive, empowering and liberating.

The relationship with the "other" provides the basis of our social matrix. It begins with the self-awareness of the individual or the group. This self-awareness is the consequence of the experience of differentiation, of distance from the "non-I" or the "non-us". Without the experience and consciousness of the "other", there is no "I".

One consequence of this process of consciousness formation is that from the very beginning the "non-I" has the potential to attract negative associations. This tendency covers the whole spectrum from mere "neutral" variation to the experience of the other as strange, as threatening or even as

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3   "Self" is used in this article to refer to the consciousness of own existence. It is the consciousness that I exist as a person in distinction from others. The terms *selfhood* and *identity* are also used in this regard, although each has its own nuances.

4   "Other" and "stranger" are used interchangeably in this article, marking two points on a scale. Although the "other" is not necessarily "strange", it is nonetheless a "non-I". Both terms derive their specific profile in contrast to the consciousness of "self". It is merely a difference in degree – the "stranger" is further removed from the "I" than the "other".

a "monster" (Kearney 2003).[5] "Different", "strange" and "enemy" represent merely different stages along one and the same trajectory.

This kind of thinking is true not only of individuals – larger entities like nations and even whole "civilizations" exhibit the same tendency. In his remarkable book *Orientalism* Edward Said makes clear how during the eighteenth century a certain "attitude" towards the East came to the fore which permeated almost all aspects of European society. This attitude had its deepest roots in the experience of strangeness – the "Orient" was for Europe of the time "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1991:1).

It is furthermore important to note that in this process the focus is consistently one-directional – originating from the subject and directed to that which is experienced by this subject as strange. "Strange" is strange in relationship to the knowing/experiencing subject. The focus is on who and what the stranger is, how the stranger should be understood, and how one should behave towards the stranger. As in the case of diversity (be it in terms of culture, race, gender or function) the phenomenon *itself* (diversity or strangeness) is understood as being inherently problematic (or at least potentially problematic)[6]. It is something uncomfortable, even threatening, and therefore needs to be neutralised or ameliorated in some way. The subject-dominated nature of this discourse is one of its most prominent (but at the same time most underestimated) characteristics.

This line of thinking therefore often leads to attempts to "domesticate" the stranger by more or lesser aggressive means – by annexation, assimilation, *suiwering* ("cleansing"), neutralisation, transformation, conversion, "re-education", incorporation, subjection, enslavement – or even elimination. The stranger is the "entity" supposed to undergo these actions – willingly or unwillingly, often ending in the use of force. It is the stranger who should be tamed, the "devil" who needs to be exorcised.

But what if we reverse the perspective and ask: What happens to the antagonist of the stranger in the process? How does it affect the subject

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5   Streib (2005:236–238) distinguishes between further nuances of strangeness: "xenophobic anxiety", xenophobic fear", "dissonance", "threat and challenge".

6   Cf. Lategan 1999.

from whom the attempt to decrease or eliminate strangeness emanates in the first place?

These counter questions remain theoretical if dominant pattern continues, that is, when the focus is on the stranger while the self retains control and serves as the criterion against which the stranger is judged. How pervasive this pattern is, becomes clear when we look at some examples from a variety of disciplines.

## 2.1 Anthropological and ethnographic perspectives

With its focus on the characteristics of different peoples, anthropology and more specifically the sub-discipline ethnology have a natural interest in the unfamiliar and the strange as far as culture and social relationships are concerned. But even before the era of scientific description, the attitudes of individuals and groups when entering unknown territory and encountering strange people, already displayed certain patterns. As Todorov (1982) has shown, the great "voyages of discovery" of the fifteenth century offer intriguing examples in this regard. He distinguishes four types of responses to the unfamiliar:

The first is illustrated by the attitude of Columbus himself – he does not discover America but rather *finds* it. Inspired by his faith, he travels west to bring Christianity to India and to conquer the new world for the Spanish royal couple. There he finds not the unfamiliar, but the familiar – in line with his expectations. Instead of learning local languages, he takes a few inhabitants to Europe in order that they "may learn to speak". Columbus thus discovers *Europe* in America – the unfamiliar is only temporarily strange and compatible with the self.

Las Casas also proceeds from the equality of all humans, but goes a step further. The human dignity of the Indians should be protected in view of the injustices inflicted on them by their Spanish conquerors. The local inhabitants should therefore be understood in terms of their own culture. If the two sides do not know the other's language, the other will remain a barbarian in the eyes of the other.

The third position represents the opposite of this view. Here the basic *in*equality of humans is the premise and the focus is on the difference between people – leading inevitably to denigration and contempt. In its

extreme form, the Indian population is described as people who can only be compared to animals.

The fourth model also takes the otherness of the stranger as point of departure, but transforms this into a utopian ideal. The Indian becomes the ideal to which all humans should aspire. This leads to divergent responses: For some, it implies a quest for complete (or at least partial) identification with the other, but for others it serves as a further motivation for subjecting the indigenous population (Sundermeier 1996:23).

Despite the profound differences between these responses, they share one common trait, namely the asymmetry in the relationship with the stranger. The initiative, conceptualisation and action do not proceed from the stranger, but from the subject who experiences the other as strange in the first place. Although somebody like Las Casas wants to protect the dignity of the stranger, the conqueror retains the dominant position. Sundermeier describes the situation succinctly: The stranger is not perceived as stranger. What the fifteenth century European sees when he looks at the new world, is a mirror image of himself – an image which either confirms his self-understanding or contradicts it. The result is a deeply embedded ethical attitude with dire consequences: assimilation, subjection or even annihilation.

For a long time, anthropology followed the same contours in its scientific orientation. A shift only occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when Malinowski introduced his "bare-foot" approach and the idea of "participant- observation". The stranger suddenly became the centre of attention. By learning local languages and participating in the every-day life of communities, the goal was to see and experience the world "through the eyes of the other".

But who was eventually served by this approach? The stranger was still not observed for his or her own sake. According to Sundermeier, the greatest beneficiary of the process was ethnography as scientific enterprise who used this approach to establish its own methods and scientific procedures – either by using the sociological insights of Durkheim to analyse the social function of each rite, or by searching with Lévi-Strauss for the universal code underlying social structures with the help of structuralism. But in the process the distance from the stranger as stranger increases.

Social anthropology certainly shows a greater awareness of the role of the researcher and of his or her influence on the results obtained by the scientific endeavour. But even here the detour via the stranger in the ends leads back to the self (Sundermeier 1996:29).

## 2.2 Art and art-historical perspectives

Can insights from art and the history of art help us further? Artists, after all, act as the seismographers of their time who anticipate tremors and impending shifts long in advance – and reflect that in their work. Especially the unfamiliar and the stranger are observed through different eyes and represented in unusual ways. Great art is therefore often ahead of its time, experienced by contemporaries of the artist as weird and disturbing, only to become "normal" over time.

Since the fifteenth century, the history of art by and large reflected the general fascination of Europe with the "new world". Here too, inhabitants of America and their customs were not observed in their own right, but represented in terms of the European ideal of beauty of the time – a trend that continued into the twentieth century. A well-known example is Gaugin who leaves Paris in 1890 on his first visit to Tahiti with the explicit purpose to escape everything artificial and conventional (Mathews 2001:157–167). Like Malinowski would do later, he learns a local language and becomes fully part of everyday life. His style of painting also changes, but his real viewing public remains the art circles of Paris for whom his paintings are intended. As Sundermeier aptly remarks: "Der europäische Künstler geht zwar aus seinem Lande, aber er geht nicht aus sich heraus" (2001:41). Likewise, Picasso and some of his contemporaries at the beginning of the twentieth century like Vlaminck and Derain find inspiration in strange worlds and cultures, without making these their own. As is well known, Picasso was strongly influenced by examples of African art, especially the masks which he discovered in the then Musée d"Ethnographie and which were the direct inspiration for his painting *Les Demoiselles d"Avignon* (Leighton 1990:625). Although he tried to deny it later ("L'art négre? Connais pas!"/ African art? Don't know it! – cf. Howlett 1951:85), the influence is unmistakable. It is the "primitive" of Africa which attracts him and enables him to offer – via his art – a critique of that which he experiences as the European decadence of his time. Nonetheless, his public and his intellectual frame of reference remain Europe – which is all the more ironic because his convictions were

in essence anti-colonial and his work was intended as a protest against the atrocities of Belgium and France in Africa (Leighton 1990:626).

## 2.3 Religious perspectives

In view of the fact that the stranger occupies an important place in most religions and that love for the neighbour is proclaimed by many as a general ethical ideal, one could expect important perspectives on our theme. The three "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) place a high premium on the obligation of hospitality, on the respectful and just treatment of strangers, and on charity towards all. The protection of and care for "the stranger within your gates" is a recurring theme and this stranger is even explicitly included in the commandment on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). In Islam, hospitality and respect towards strangers are likewise of the utmost importance. It is a right as well as a God-given obligation for which the Quran provides extensive directives, referring among other examples to the conduct of Abraham towards his guests (Quran 51:24–27).

Nevertheless, in these ethical injunctions the focus is not on the stranger as such nor on the implications for the self-understanding of the believer. The stranger does not challenge the boundaries of the believing community – on the contrary, the goal is rather the *inclusion* of the stranger in this community. Despite other differences, the basic approach is that of the missionary. The stranger is per definition an outsider, and therefore the one in need of conversion, change, education, inclusion or integration in the (already existing) community of believers. It is the other who lacks something, whose thinking and behaviour need to be altered. The method can be brutal or subtle – ranging from conversion and baptism by force to the most refined forms of persuasion, often with the willing cooperation of the convert him- or herself. The power relationship remains unequal. The convictions of the missionary are not on the line[7], but those of the target of conversion. It does not really matter with what motives or in what spirit the interaction takes place – with what heroic self-sacrifice, what self-denying commitment, what admirable integrity or sincerity. The direction remains the same and the expected result (the conversion of the other) unchanged.

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7   Grünschloss (1999:297) speaks in this regard (with reference to the encyclical Nostra Aetate 2) of a "hermeneutisch unüberwinbare" position because the own horizon of understanding can never be relinquished.

## 2.4 Philosophical perspectives

Perhaps more extensively than any other discipline, philosophy from its earliest beginnings has concerned itself with the theme of strangeness and of the "other". Already in his *Symposium* (section 189–193) Plato recalls a myth told by Aristophanes to explain the deepest ground of our longing for the other. Originally, humans were created with four arms, four legs and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search for their other halves. Love is simply the name of the desire for and pursuit of the whole, be it between man and woman, man and man, or woman and woman. This longing is more than mere yearning for the other person, but encompasses also the search for all that is good, wise and beautiful. (We shall return to this idea of a lost unity, of a wholeness that needs to be restored).

In the course of time, this primordial desire has been conceptualised and interpreted in a wide variety of ways. However, as Sundermeier (1996:53–54) makes clear, the switch-points and consequently the direction of this desire were programmed from the start, resulting in three basic models of the relationship with the other. In all three the initiative remains in the hands of the subject. The first is based on the discovery of the *self* in the other. The other serves as mirror for recognition and affirmation of the self. The second focuses on similarities rather than on the self – on that which I share with the other. This provides the impetus to strive for consensus, harmony and peace. The third, "realistic" model takes the opposite as point of departure – differences should not be glossed over, but negotiated. The aim is not so much to understand the other, but to find suitable ways how to deal constructively with differences.

Important for our theme is that all three models attempt – in various ways – to reduce, suspend or even eliminate the strangeness of the other. Even in the case of the third which acknowledges the reality of differences, the aim is to bridge or negotiate them[8].

Does reflection on the other reveal different trajectories in the subsequent history of philosophy? How is the interaction between the self and the

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8    "Die Gegensätze sollen durch das Tun des Guten überwinden, das Schlechte, Fremde und Häßliche in der gemeinsame Anstrengung abgelegt und ausgeschaltet werden" (Sundermeier 1996:54).

other conceptualised by later thinkers? Restricting ourselves to this specific aspect and without attempting a comprehensive analysis in any sense, we shall look at only four eclectically chosen representatives: Hegel, Husserl, Buber and Levinas.

Hegel's well-known dialectical approach which he applied to wide variety of fields (most prominently to history) is the result of his "phenomenology of the spirit" in which he attempts to reach down to the core of human consciousness. For him, this consciousness is characterised by both independence and dependence, which in their turn create the conditions for dominance and subjection. The individual cannot attain truth on his own – for this, the other is needed. However, this interdependence presupposes a tension which can only be resolved by contest and struggle. Conflict should therefore neither be avoided nor diluted – it enables us to discover the contours of the truth that much clearer. The important point for our purpose is the emphasis Hegel places on understanding the nature of the interaction between the self and the other.

Husserl pursues the phenomenological trajectory further but develops a more complex understanding of the other. He does not take history as his point of departure, but wants to get below the surface of phenomena to comprehend the inner structure of human existence. Through a process of phenomenological reduction and intuition ("Einfühlung") he is looking for the "primordial being" ("Ur-Ich") which is divested of all that is strange. The interesting point is that in this process the stranger plays an important role. The first step is to distance the "authentic self" ("Mir-Eigene") from what is unfamiliar. However, for this the presence of the stranger is needed. The route to self-discovery goes via the stranger, but at the same time the latter is rendered accessible by searching for points of similarity. The self remains both point of departure and criterion by which the stranger is evaluated. As Waldenfels (1989:53) points out, the self-functions as "Vorlage, als Original für das Fremde". The strangeness of the stranger is thereby effectively neutralised. Even more – the relationship with the stranger presupposes no dynamic, vibrant interaction. It is merely the sterile denotation of the boundaries of the self, of that which lies outside the self.

Can Martin Buber, the famed exponent of the I/Thou relationship and the champion of the "dialogical principal" help us further? For him, the relationship with the other is certainly dynamic, but the remarkable shift

in his thinking is that the self no longer occupies the dominant position. The self does not exist on its own, but becomes the "self" through the other, is only possible by the grace of the other[9]. The other is constitutive for the self and for human existence *überhaupt*.

Although Buber does away with the customary inequality between the self and the other, a different problem arises. The other is longer overwhelmed by the self and provides the essential counterpoint for the I/you relationship to function. But in the process, the other is deprived of its strangeness. As constituent element of the self it becomes part of the self and is therefore no longer "strange". Is the advantage which strangeness might offer thereby lost?

In this regard, the approach of Levinas signals a fundamental shift. This change is the outcome of a life-long quest to understand the face-to-face encounter with the other as well as the ethical implications which flow from this encounter. He consequently develops a totally different understanding of the power relations between the self and the other which leads his thinking in new directions and results in what Bergo (2015) calls a "hermeneutics of lived experience in the world"[10].

His distinctive approach is informed by three, interrelated factors. The first is what can be called a "de-centring" of the self. The self is no longer the centre pin around which all else revolve, the dominant partner in the relationship with the other, the default criterion for the assessment of others, the one who needs to be affirmed in his or her self-understanding by the other, or the natural beneficiary of the encounter with the other. Secondly, the perspective is reversed from the other to the self. The other is no longer the "object" which the self needs to understand, deal with or, if need be, exorcize. In so far as the focus is on the self, the aim is not to satisfy the needs of the self, but to understand the *claim* which other makes

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9   Buber 1970:62: "I require a You to become: becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter"

10  "Levinas's philosophical project can be called constructivist. He proposes phenomenological description and a hermeneutics of lived experience in the world. He lays bare levels of experience described neither by Husserl nor by Heidegger. These layers of experience concern the encounter with the world, with the human other, and a reconstruction of a layered interiority characterized by sensibility and affectivity" (Bergo 2015:1).

on the self. Thirdly, the self is *liberated* by the encounter with the other. This liberation is in the first place a release from the restrictions of the self and from the confines of the subject/object binary. At the same time, it is the freedom to break new ground, to set off on a journey, to explore the unfamiliar. "Levinas will unterwegs sein, wie Odysseus" (Sundermeier 1996:63).

But – and that is the big difference with Odysseus and also with Nietzsche and his "Verlangen nach Wanderschaft, Fremde, Entfremdung, Erkältung, Ernüchterung, Vereisung (2013 [1886]; vii–viii) – the voyage into the unknown is not meant as a mere detour to return again in the end to the familiar. The focus on the other, the strange and the unfamiliar is a permanent attitude of openness to other possibilities and for a focus on the future. For Ricoeur (1992:318) this openness assumes almost ontological dimensions – what Atkins (2017) describes as a "primordial openness".

Not only is the perspective reversed, the power relations altered, but the initiative has also changed hands. It is the other as stranger who elicits a response. The face-to-face confrontation with the other thus enables the first step towards changing the self.

The ideas of Levinas did not receive general acceptance and he remains a controversial figure[11]. His approach nonetheless contains important points of departure for an alternative appreciation of the other.

## 2.5 Perspectives from communication theory

Despite the valuable insights philosophy has to offer for our theme, there are also some limitations. These concern – ironically enough – especially the philosophical tradition which one would expect to contribute most to clarifying the relationship with the other, namely hermeneutics[12]. To explain why this is the case, we need to look more closely at how hermeneutics conceptualizes the process of understanding – in this case the understanding of the other and the stranger.

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11  Cf. for example Žižek (2005) and Hand (2009:109–121).

12  During the second half of the twentieth century this approach became especially prominent with many well-known exponents like Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur in philosophy and Bultmann, Fuchs, Ebeling, and Jüngel in theology.

Hermeneutics aims to offer more than communication theory or techniques of formal explanation, but wants to come to grips with human understanding as such. In this process, *re*-cognition[13] plays an important role. There already exists in the other some measure of communality on which to build – in fact, the ideal is for the horizon of the self to overlap with that of the other. This "merging of horizons"[14] represents for Gadamer (the most famous exponent of this approach) the real goal of understanding. The difference of the other and the strangeness of the stranger need to be dissolved by the process of merging. The self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*) of the subject remains the focal point – not the understanding of the other.

Although Gadamer made a major contribution to the advancement of hermeneutics in general, the quest for the merging of horizons has the (unintended) effect of encouraging the assimilation or elimination of strangeness and is therefore not very helpful for our purposes. In fact, is the expectation of such an overlapping and merging realistic in the first place? Is "understanding" in this sense really possible? Would a more modest ideal, like that of consensus, not be more achievable?

More than any of his contemporaries, Habermas pursued this ideal of consensus. It lies at the root of his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handels* (1987) in which he expounds his ideas of rational behaviour ("Handlungs-rationalität) and processes of social rationalisation ("Gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung"). A major contributing factor to his thinking was the student revolt of 1968 in Paris, which subsequently spread to other European cities. These protests were so disruptive and the communication between authorities and students so dysfunctional (the parallel with the 2016 student protests in South Africa immediately springs to mind!), that it became a serious question whether real understanding between the 1968 generation of young people and the incumbent authorities was indeed possible. A new approach was urgently needed. Against this background Habermas developed his strategy of sustained dialogue and rational communication. His proposals found wide acceptance, underlining the dire need for a more constructive handling of social conflict and of the tensions between older and younger generations. His views no doubt gave

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13  Gadamer 1972:357: "Zwar ist es richtig, daß alles Verstehen von Texten der Philosophie Wiedererkenntnis des in ihnen Erkannten verlangt".

14  "Horizonverschmeltzung" (Gadamer 1972:289, 375).

new impetus to a democratic culture of open communication and to a shift in the direction of persuasion and consensus rather than confrontation and violence.

What is not always so clear is that the approach of Habermas can let important aspects of our theme recede into the background. The pursuit of consensus is only possible by means of a process of restriction on the one hand and of conformation on the other hand. He correctly understands that inequality hinders effective communication and that all participants should have an equal opportunity to participate and to be heard. But this requires a prior commitment by all involved to keep to certain rules of the game and furthermore that there is a sufficient degree of overlap between the "life-worlds" (Habermas's term) of participants to enable a dialogue and the reaching of consensus. As far as the first is concerned, eliminating any form of inequality or hierarchy among participants proves to be very difficult in actual practice. As far as the second is concerned, there is only a narrow band of "life-worlds" which accepts rational persuasion as ground-rule. In reality, it remains restricted to certain forms of (Western) democracy and excludes for example a "mythical" understanding of the world (cf. Nyamnjoh 2017).

The preconditions required by Habermas for reaching the desired consensus thus imply a certain narrowing down of the mode of communication (rational dialogue) as well as the equalisation of power relations, which renders his approach less suitable for our specific purpose.

## 2.6 Pedagogical perspectives

The dominant role of the self in relation to the other seems to be so entrenched that even in cases where there is a deliberate attempt to interact with the stranger, the initiative, evaluation, and the structuring of the discourse still emanate from the self.

It is therefore surprising that new perspectives emerge from an unexpected quarter, namely from pedagogy. Although the education process can also be one-sided when the educator remains in control with the learner per definition as the designated recipient, the ultimate goal is an effective *learning* experience. In contrast to "convert", "learn" implies a two-way encounter which makes it in principle possible to reverse the direction of interaction.

Interestingly enough, it is the practical experience gained in teaching religion in a multi-religious and multi-cultural setting that led to a situation where a one-directional approach is increasingly being replaced by a two-way interaction, simply because the former has no chance of success. In this regard, two guidelines are important. Firstly, the differences between one's own and other religion(s) should neither be denied nor glossed over and secondly, accepting that in the interaction one's own convictions are inevitably placed at risk. "Bevor somit interreligiöses Lernen didaktisch modelliert werden kann, bedarf es einer Hermeneutik des Fremden, die grundlegend danach fragt, wie der oder das Fremde, Andere, Differente wahrgenommen und erschlossen werden kann" (Gärtner 2015:1).

It is in this context and to counter the tendency in inter-religious discourse to strive for uniformity and to underplay differences that Sundermeier (1996:132–136) develops his "Differenzhermeneutik". Through a kind of "osmotic exchange" in the interaction with the other, it becomes possible to construct an own identity in distinction from but at the same time in relation to other identities.

The emphasis on the reciprocal nature of the interchange between the self and the other also implies that the possibility of *failed* communication and of *mis*understanding remains open. It is only in the one-directional model where the initiative and control remain in the hands of the self and where the optimistic expectation of communication that will always be successful can be maintained. Bennett (2002:34–38) refers in this regard to the "potential of resistance" which is always present in the interaction with the other. Understanding remains a *process*, moving through phases of denial, justification, relativizing, acceptance, adaptation and integration of differences.

In this regard, Streib (2005:236–238) provides an interesting typology of different styles in dealing with strangeness. The style which experiences strangeness as resistance and as challenge is of special significance for our theme. Streib is concerned with the "Mehrwert" (added value) which strangeness can contribute to the benefit of one's own identity. It is this potential "profit" inherently present in strangeness which holds the key for an alternative approach to the other which should be pursued further.

## 3. Outline of an alternative approach

The preceding discussion makes clear how complex the encounter with the other and the dealing with strangeness can be. Furthermore, these interactions are predominantly negative. The other and the stranger remain in essence problematic and a potential threat which needs to be negotiated in a variety of ways. At the same time, the subject retains the dominant position. If the further question is asked how the interaction with the other and stranger can contribute to ensure a more "humane" society, the challenge becomes even more formidable.

But can one realistically expect anything different? Syntactically and logically speaking, the subject remains the initiator of action – action which flows from subject to object. Furthermore – the other comes into view because there already exists a subject who is observing. The "other" and "stranger" are different and unfamiliar in relation to, from the perspective of and in terms of the experience of the self.

Is an alternative approach imaginable? That is, an alternative to the "standard model" and which is therefore bound to be "contra-intuitive"? With this goal in mind, let us return to two themes we have already touched on: Humankind's yearning for a lost completeness and the etymological roots of the term "stranger".

With regard to the former: Although the myth of Aristophanes as recalled by Plato focuses in the first instance on the pining of separated individuals for the missing other, it forms part of a much deeper and wider yearning, namely the longing for the lost completeness of our existence. Since this initial separation, the human condition is characterised by an enduring sense of incompleteness. For Nyamnjoh (2015), the experience of "incompleteness" has important consequences for our life with others[15]. It not only underlines our dependence on others, but calls for humbleness in the sense that we are not the sole controllers of our fate. It encourages "conviviality", that is, the willingness to reach out and to form constructive

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15  The opposite of this is a sense of complacency (cf. Levinas 2003:51). "Incompleteness" does not mean the loss of agency or that the self is dissolved in in a vague relativity. It rather signals a deep sense of being in want that more is possible. It engenders a sense of modesty – in contrast to one of self-satisfaction.

relationships with others. This represents the first step towards the de-centring the subject, to which we shall return below.

Secondly, it is useful to trace the etymological roots of the term "stranger", while bearing in mind that it is risky to infer the meaning of words from their history. This is not our intention, but rather to point to a trace that was indeed part of the original root, but which was lost during the later development of the word. *Xenos* in Greek originally had two meanings: "guest" and "stranger" (Liddle and Scott 1953:1189).[16] The guest is not necessarily unknown, but strange in the sense that he or she is not part of the normal household. The guest is nonetheless welcomed and becomes part of the family in the most intimate way. *Xenia* ("friendship towards the guest")[17] and respect form part of the sacred duty towards the stranger who after all might be a god in disguise. The same custom is found in other cultures. In Mali the front room of the house with a door to the street is traditionally reserved for the guest while the family occupies the back quarters. In rural South Africa stories are told where the family had to forgo their meal to serve an (unexpected) guest. Such gestures of hospitality and respect stand in sharp contrast to the negativity usually associated with the stranger.

These two issues already point us in the direction of an alternative approach. However, in order to be convincing, this will require a more comprehensive proposal to address all the relevant and inter-related aspects – a task well beyond this preliminary investigation. Here we shall only outline in broad terms the contours of such an approach. The basic building blocks for this purpose already became evident in the discussion of Levinas and can now be taken a step further.

The first concerns a changed attitude towards the other and the stranger. In view of the customary tendency to regard either as negative or as a threat, it will require a conscious decision to focus on the positive aspects of the relationship. By this is meant more than a friendly disposition or benign tolerance, but being able to recognise the hidden and often mis-appreciated

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16  We find the same duality in Latin. In his work on hospitality, Derrida points out that *hostis* can refer to both "enemy" and "host" (cf. Kearney 2002:10–11).

17  The German "Gastfreundschaft" retains the idea of friendship, while the Afrikaans and Dutch equivalent "gasvryheid" alludes to the generous treatment of the guest.

*potential* available in the other. Waldenfels makes the important point that we are dealing here with an "Überschuss"[18], a surplus which both precedes the interaction with the other as well as supersedes it.[19] But this requires an openness towards this excess. It is precisely the reduction of the other to what is known or acceptable to me which silences the other and deprives us from seeing the potential inherent in the stranger.

Above we referred to a similar statement by Streib about the "added value" which strangeness can contribute to the own identity. Both Waldenfels and Streib requires us to look at the stranger through different eyes – not in the first place as a problem or a threat, but as a potential *source* for enrichment, expansion and renewal.

At the same time, it should constantly be kept in mind that the added value of the stranger can only be unlocked if the *integrity* of the stranger remains in place. To put it differently, the stranger should be engaged to the full extent of his or her strangeness – not in a toned down, sanitized or user-friendly version. This means a willingness to face strangeness in its full extent, in all its rawness, in its often upsetting and shocking reality. The own view of reality and socialized stereotypes are usually so deeply ingrained that it requires unusual measures to pry them loose. That is why Führing (1996:116) stresses the "potential to irritate" inherent in strangeness, because this can be the trigger to discover alternatives. In the same spirit Kristeva enjoins us to appreciate strangeness as catalyst. She therefore becomes a champion for the "disruptive and transformative powers of semiotic "otherness" (Kearney 1994:337). Kearney himself refers to the "limit-experiences" which we can encounter in the presence of "strangers, gods and monsters". "They subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again" (2003:3).

The open, unrestricted encounter with the other at the same time presupposes a willingness to leave the comfort of "home". As transpired from our discussion of Levinas, it requires a "Wanderlust", an adventurous

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18  It concerns "… einen Überschuss, der aller Fremdbetrachtung und Fremdbehandlung vorausgeht und über sie hinausgeht. Nicht nur die Reduktion von Fremdem auf Eigenes, auch der Versuch einer Synthese zwischen beiden gehört zu den Gewalttaten, die den Anspruch des Fremden zum Verstummen bringen" (Waldenfels 2004:322).

19  Ziarek (1995:19) talks in this regard of the "excess of alterity".

spirit without a predetermined destination or a prior decision of what the outcome should be – in other words, an attitude of constant openness towards new possibilities. Or, as Nietzsche (2013 [1886]:viii) describes it, a radical quest for "Entfremdung, Erkältung, Ernüchterung".

The radical openness at stake here has far-reaching consequences. It implies breaking out of the narrow binary confines which defines the I/ thou-contrast and the acceptance of a much more complex matrix of relationships. Important as the interaction between individuals may be, it is only part of a wider web of multiple interactions. But the restriction of the self is not limited to binary oppositions. Charles Taylor describes how secularism has produced an "exclusive humanism" by deliberately removing large parts of human experience from consideration. This resulted in a sense of self and its place in the universe that is "not open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers". Such a "buffered" self could not be maintained indefinitely. In his remarkable analysis of Amos Tutuola's work and significance for this debate, Nyamnjoh (2017:8) shows how Tutuola was able to combine an openness to a world of spirits, powers and cosmic forces, while "still be "enchanted" enough to have the confidence of Taylor's "buffered" self, exploring one's own "powers of moral ordering""[20]. It is this ability to straddle different worlds which holds the key to an expanded sense of self.

The embracing of complexity not only does better justice to our present reality, but also sets us free to consider a variety of alternative possibilities. In this regard Kearney (2002:7) makes the case for a critical hermeneutics of the stranger which moves beyond binary divides in order to "expose the other in the alien and the alien in the other ".

The acceptance of the reality of complexity also means that an irreversible *de-centring*[21] of the self has taken place – to which we have already referred in our discussion of Levinas. In a complex matrix one node by

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20  I am indebted to Francis Nyamnjoh for drawing my attention to this aspect of Tutuola's work.

21  Kearney (2003:3) describes this as the realization by the ego "that it is never wholly sovereign". It means that the self-sufficiency of the self can no longer be maintained and that the "incompleteness" of the human condition henceforth serves as point of departure. Levinas (2003:51) talks in this regard of the restrictions caused by the "sufficiency of the fact of being".

definition cannot be the central point. This decentring subverts all forms of domination which the self assumes in customary relationships. The illusionary power of humans over nature is increasingly being questioned by models of sustainable development. In the same vein, it is no longer self-evident that the self is in control of the relationship with the other. We have already noted how Levinas reverses the "normal" order by showing that it is the awareness of the (already existing) other which awakens the sense of responsibility towards the other as a secondary reaction. In this case the self still retains the initiative, but when the stranger assumes this function by making an appeal to the self (Waldenfels), a reversal of roles has occurred. The self now becomes the "object" of attention, the "receiver" of the action which emanates from the other, the one who undergoes change.

This reversal has consequences for all aspects of the relationship between the self and the other. Because it goes so much against the grain of conventional behaviour and inborn prejudice, it will require a resilient and sustainable strategy to have any significant and lasting effect. Two basic components needed for such a strategy are liberation and enrichment.

"Liberation" refers in the first place to a critical awareness of and a conscious effort to distance oneself from embedded stereotypes and prejudice. As Simmel points out, because the stranger as outsider is not directly involved, he offers a certain "objectivity" that frees us from our preconceived ideas[22]. But the concept has wider ramifications. It also implies freeing oneself from the confines of a narrow band of defence mechanisms that usually regulate relations with the other – mechanisms of justification, demarcation, exclusion and entitlement. There is a much wider spectrum of modalities available for shaping the interaction with the other, such as reaching out, engaging, inclusion, respect, esteem and reconciliation.

In this regard, unmediated interaction is of cardinal importance. Keeping our distance is a well-known strategy to ensure that stereotypes remain intact. The nature of the engagement changes when it happens *in the presence of the other*. It is for this reason that Levinas (as we have seen above) sets so much store by the face-to-face meeting in his development

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22  "… he (the stranger) is freer practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent" (Simmel 1950[1908]:403).

of a "hermeneutics of lived experience" (Bergo 2017:1). The importance of this factor is confirmed by numerous case studies in the actual practice of finding common ground and consensus (cf. Lategan 1998). Of course, knowledge of the other and the unmasking of stereotypes can be achieved by indirect means, but not as effectively as being in the presence of the other. The latter does not eliminate the need for further reflection or what Ricoeur (1992:1) calls the "primacy of reflective meditation over the immediate positioning of the subject", but it does avoid intermediate levels which can derail the process of overcoming divisions.

Liberation from self-centeredness and the narrow confines of the own perspective is just the first step. It prepares the ground for a second step, namely the ongoing enrichment and broadening of self through the other. This requires the recognition of the "radical openness of systems" (Chu 2003) (in this case the "system" of human relations), which in its turn clears the way to give free rein to our imagination and our inborn curiosity. Meyer (2011:104) explains the importance of this impulse, while Nietzsche talks of the "dangerous curiosity" for an undiscovered world.[23]

The result is a mind-set which is willing to explore the full reach and all the potential which human existence can offer – not only the contingent, individual expression of that existence. In this regard, Simmel values the "mobility" of the stranger who is not tied to one location or position, but who "always finds expansions and new territories" (1950:403). The stranger not only evokes a sense of responsibility in us (Levinas), but offers a new perspective on life, a different understanding of reality, an alternative course of action. The stranger thus represents a reservoir of not-yet-lived experiences, of not-yet-realised options, of not-yet-implemented strategies.

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23  "Ein Antrieb und Andrang waltet und wird über sie Herr wie ein Befehl; ein Wille und Wunsch erwacht, fortzugehn, irgend wohin, um jeden Preis; eine heftige gefährliche Neugierde nach einer unentdeckten Welt flammt und flackert in allen ihren Sinnen. "Lieber sterben als hier leben" – so klingt die gebieterische Stimme und Verführung: und dies "hier", dies "zu Hause" ist Alles, was sie bis dahin geliebt hatte! Ein plötzlicher Schrecken und Argwohn gegen Das, was sie liebte, ein Blitz von Verachtung gegen Das, was ihr "Pflicht" hiess, ein aufrührerisches, willkürliches, vulkanisch stossendes Verlangen nach Wanderschaft, Fremde, Entfremdung, Erkältung, Ernüchterung, Vereisung … "Nietzsche 2013:Vorrede 3). For a contemporary description of the same circumstances, cf. Kearney (2003:4).

Because what is proposed here is in essence contra-intuitive, it is also susceptible to misunderstanding. It is therefore necessary to stress that the acceptance of the "radical openness of systems" which is proposed here, does *not* imply the elimination of all boundaries. After all, there can only be talk of a system if there are limits or borders which distinguish it from other systems. What *is* important, is that these borders are not absolute, but *porous* and that they may change in the course time. At the same time, it is not a plea for the abolition of distinctions as part of a postmodern discourse. To be able to enrich the self, the other has to remain *different*, and the "irreducible non-integration of alterity" (Ziarek 1995:28) respected.

## 4. The dark side of strangeness

The proposal to explore the positive potential of strangeness may come across as a misguided attempt to salvage something from a concept that is in its very essence negative. The fact that it is presented as "counter-intuitive" seems to confirm that it is at odds with common experience. Not all encounters with the other and strangeness are beneficial. For many, it is the epithet for all that is undesirable, menacing and destructive – not only in a conceptual sense, but also from existential experience. In view of a global surge of antipathy against outsiders, migrants, and uninvited refugees who are perceived to be a threat to the established order of things, causing shifts in power in many countries, culminating in death and destruction in the wake of xenophobic violence, we indeed cannot ignore the dark side of strangeness. Any plea for the appreciation of the positive dimensions of strangeness therefore also have to account for its opposite.

Among many examples of the negative potential of strangeness involving even violence and destruction[24], we shall look briefly at one specific instance, namely the effect of the strangeness inherent in the concept of "blackness". We do this at the hand of Achille Mbembe's analysis of the term in his book *Critique of Black Reason* (2017).

As Mbembe (2017:25–37) shows, "blackness" represents a kaleidoscope of meanings and associations, both negative and positive. It can be the expression of pride and self-affirmation, but it can also be the description of

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24 Cf. for example Adam (2011); Adam & Moodley 2013; Nyamnjoh 2016.

denigration, backwardness and all things undesirable. Two, intermingled narratives are at play here. The one, which Mbembe calls the "Western consciousness of Blackness", proceeds from questions like: Who is he? What differentiates him from us? Can he become like us? How shall I deal with him? The self remains the measure and the centre of meaning. "From this perspective, anything that is not identical to that *I* is abnormal" (2017:28). The second narrative proceeds from questions like: Who am I? Am I what people say I am? What is my real social status, my real history? "If the Western consciousness of the Black man is an *identity judgement*, this second narrative is, in contrast, *a declaration of identity*" (2017:28).

In all of this, a process of estrangement is taking place – from the other but also from the self. In order to create distance from the undesirable, the latter is depicted as not being part of the self (we are not like this), as unfamiliar, menacing, dangerous. At the same time, the second narrative also involves taking distance from the self. Am I really what others think I am?

The important point for our theme is that the strangeness at stake here is an *imposed* strangeness. It concerns attributes that are *projected* on the other, not how the other necessarily sees and understands him- or herself. In essence, this is what constitutes racism – differentiation by ascribing something external and negative to the other[25]. "Racism consists, most of all, in substituting what *is* with something else, with another reality" (Mbembe 2017:32).

This form of strangeness – the strangeness providing the rationale for racism – is also in need of liberation and expansion. As has often been pointed out, the discrimination, injustice and trauma inflicted by the policy and practice of treating the other as different, inferior and not having the same rights have wounded perpetrator and victim alike, producing what Mbembe (2017:36) calls a "mutilated humanity".

The first step required is unmasking the lie underpinning the imposed strangeness. For the perpetrator, it means demolishing existing stereotypes and discovering a shared humanity in the encounter with the other. For

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25 "Race and racism also have the fundamental characteristic of always inciting and engendering a double, a substitute, an equivalent, a mask, a simulacrum. A real human face comes into view. The work of racism consists in relegating it to the background or covering it with a veil" (Mbembe 2017:32).

the victim, it is an even more arduous task involving a two-fold challenge: Breaking through the hard crust of an imposed and false identity, discarding the burden of a negative self-image and secondly, reconnecting with the real self and finding ways to express the fullness of an untrammelled and liberated identity.

Both those in a dominating position and those who are dominated are furthermore in need of expansion as second step, but along different routes.[26] For the traditional dominators, be they colonialists, empire builders or racists, the unmasked other not only contradicts their ingrained prejudices, but also becomes a source of new possibilities far beyond the narrowness of an isolated existence. For the dominated, the other in the guise of the dominating party offers a contradictory proposition. On the one hand, it is the opposite of all one should aspire to, on the other hand it represents all the benefits the dominated had to forego. The real alternative in this case is the *imagined other* which not only breaks the mould of existing reality, but opens up unlimited possibilities for an alternative existence.

The dark side of strangeness thus does not contradict the constructive potential of strangeness, but reconfirms the need for liberation and expansion. In fact, it reveals the *existential necessity* of strangeness and the *constitutive power* of the other. The liberation of the erstwhile dominator depends on the presence of the real other, while the realisation of the full potential of the formerly dominated depends on the imagined other.

## 5. Conclusion

Does the encounter with the other then in the end lead back to the self? Is the pious talk of taking the stranger seriously and learning from the other just a new variation of narcissism, a new confirmation of the self-centeredness of the self?

It is *essential* to return to the self – not for the sake of self-affirmation, but to ensure that our default self-centeredness is effectively changed. This is

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26  How quickly the former dominated can revert to the role of the new dominator is illustrated by recent events in our immediate environment. Recent events in Zimbabwe and South Africa make clear that "liberator" and "suppressor" are not permanent epithets, but roles that can be assumed interchangeably by the very same individual or group.

after all where change begins. But we are returning – via the detour of the other – not to the same "I", but to one that is hopefully de-centred, now on the receiving end of the action and no longer dominating the encounter, focused not on defence and justification in the first place, but on liberation and enrichment.

The question still remains: Have we really grasped the hermeneutical potential of the other and taken full advantage of the "surplus" that is available? As we have seen above, many facets of the other and of strangeness have already been explored, leading to important insights[27] – such as seeing our own face in the mirror of the other; recognising ourselves in the other; understanding ourselves in terms of "strangeness"; untangling the riddle of the self and the other; distinguishing between different kinds of self and different kinds of other; opening ourselves completely to the other; accepting ourselves as the other; making the stranger more familiar and the self more strange; respecting and welcoming the stranger; appreciating the other as catalyst; finding a therapy for strangeness; and developing a "grammar of living together".

But is there not more to expect from the impact of the other on the self? Has the liberation and enrichment of the self through the other really been achieved? After all, more than *understanding* is at stake here – in the end it is about *change*. And – as Epictetus and his fellow Stoics already taught us – the starting point of change is ourselves. To give a twist to Marx: The challenge is not merely to *understand* the other (and the world), but to *change* the self through the other.

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27  Cf. Calvin 1997, Buber 1970, Gadamer 1972, Levinas 1987, Ricoeur 1992, Kearney 2003, Vosloo 2009, Smit 2017.

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