WHY HAS THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF LIFE ARISEN IN THE LAST TWO AND A HALF CENTURIES?

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Questioning the meaning of life (or the world, or existence), or complaining that it is meaningless are relatively new phenomena in western culture. Their manifestation is by and large a matter of the last two hundred and fifty years, seems to start with Novalis, who complained that "the meaning of the world has been lost. We are stuck with the letter. We lost that which is appearing because of the appearance."[1] Novalis also declared that modern culture was fragmented and that it is the task of poets to achieve intuitive knowledge of their true selves, to look beyond mechanistic explanations of the world, and reveal to themselves and others its meaning.[2] Of course, Novalis had predecessors. The most important of these is the book Ecclesiastes, which, although it does not use the phrase "meaning of life," conveys the feeling that life is meaningless through phrases such as "all is vanity," "the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be . . . and there is no new thing under the sun," and "what profit hath a man of all his labour?. . . One generation passeth away and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth for ever."[3] But such forerunners are few.[4] All in all, questioning the meaninglessness of life is a phenomenon of recent date.

In this essay I shall try to explain why this is so.[5] First, I shall investigate the nature of such questions by trying to identify what is essential to them (section 1). Next, I shall link the analysis with some cultural, social and economic features of the last two hundred and fifty years (section 2). Finally, I shall try to predict, on the basis of this analysis, whether the problem of the meaning of life will become even more prevailingly felt in the future or, alternately, will simply fade away (section 3).

1

Of the several senses of the term "meaning" I shall concentrate here on two. The first has to do with importance or relevance. Thus "Meeting Jones was a meaningful event in X's life" conveys that the encounter with Jones was important and relevant for X, that it carried weighty consequences and touched on essential issues. Similarly, "This is meaningless in such a large framework" means that something is unimportant or irrelevant in a certain broad context.

The second meaning of "meaning" has to do with understanding. "I did not get the meaning of the text" conveys that I did not understand it. Or, "The meaning of his behavior is that he does not really want to marry" conveys that his behavior should be interpreted, or understood, as implying that he does not really want to marry.

An examination of specific, historical expressions of the questioning of the meaning of life (or complaints that it is meaningless) shows that they can all be reduced to either or both of these two main senses of "meaning." When people wonder what their lives mean they are either saying that they do not see what is important and worthy in their lives, or that they do not understand them, or both. The sensation of non-understanding does not necessarily consist in feeling that events or things cannot be grouped under laws. More often it can be a general feeling that things somehow do not make sense, or do not have a stable identity, or are in some other way strange.

Thus, for example, Clarence Darrow's complaint of "the pointlessness of it all" means either that "it" is entirely unimportant and irrelevant or that it is un-understandable (or both).[6] The same is true of Tolstoy's asking about the goal of our life.[7] Not only our specific activities, but our whole life or the whole world are taken to make sense if they aim at a certain goal. But what should that goal be? There is a feeling that we cannot find sufficiently worthy candidates to assume the role, or that there is something about life that we do not understand.

The charge voiced by, e.g., Bertrand Russell, that life is meaningless because of individual or cosmic finality, that is, because of our personal death or the eventual destruction of the cosmos, can also be reduced to non-importance or non-understanding.[8] The feeling is that nothing is really important and worthwhile since in the end we, our achievements, and all that is around us

will disappear and vanish. To a lesser extent there is also a feeling of non-understanding: if nothing is really important, why take so much trouble?

Non-importance and non-understandability are also at the basis of another concept related to the feeling of the meaninglessness of life: alienation. Readers of Camus' *The Stranger* sense that part of the difficulty of Meursault, Camus' paradigm of alienation, is that, except in a very mechanical way, he does not understand the world around him. He does not comprehend what moves people, what are emotions like anger and hope, what is a crime and what is love. He not only lacks knowledge by description of these things but, more importantly, also knowledge by acquaintance, they are foreign to him. Further, Meursault fails to see that life, love, and the beauty of nature are important. He even does not see the importance of his mother's death, or of his own.[9] Similar feelings are at the basis of the feeling of the Absurd (and, again, that of alienation) in Kafka's novels. Both K. in *The Castle* and Joseph K. in *The Trial* never completely understand what surrounds them. They both show also a strange incapacity to distinguish between what is important and what is not; they continually attach too much importance to trivialities such as small bureaucratic power struggles and too little to an actual opportunity to work (in *The Castle*) or the task of staying alive (in *The Trial*).[10]

Recognizing that feelings of unimportance and non-understandability are essential to the questioning of the meaning of life can help show why this questioning has arisen in the last two and a half centuries. For if what I have written up to now is correct, the meaning of life can be expected to be questioned in cultures that evoke feelings of non-understanding and unimportance. In the next section I shall try to show how the mentality of the last two and a half centuries has indeed evoked these feelings.

2

A new way of thinking and seeing the world which has been developing over a few centuries has become especially radicalized in the last two. One of the characteristics of this new mentality is that it is secular. Feelings common in earlier times—e.g. that God is everywhere present, that He is continually observing and judging us, that He is eternal, holy and absolute—have become scarcer and weaker. For many, religion is marginalized or has preserved a merely ceremonious status; for others, it has stopped being an issue at all.

But the marginalization of religion in modern Western consciousness means the repudiation of a framework that bestowed on the world both importance and understandability. A world with God is a world with an entity of absolute worth. The importance of God extends also to things associated with Him, such as specific places (e.g., churches) objects (e.g., scriptures, relics), behaviors (e.g., praying, fasting), legal institutions (e.g., the Qadi, the Beit-Din), and seasons (e.g., feasts and holy days). Religion also makes the world more understandable by sharply separating categories, thus endowing entities with specific identities; some become sacred, others profane. Certain activities are appropriate (and at specific times), others inappropriate. Men are to behave and dress in a certain way, women in another. A set of rules, governing many parts of people's lives and feelings, distinguishes between sin and virtue, right and wrong. Religion also provides explanations about the world (e.g., that it was created all at once by God) and about the human sphere (e.g., that catastrophes befall us because of God's anger, or that suffering in this world will be compensated in the next one).

While the religious framework for coping with and interpreting the world has become weakened, the influence of another system, taking the methods, standards and nature of the new science as its model, has greatly increased. According to this approach, if rational activity is properly performed, it will produce a certain, complete and final understanding of reality. Rational activity is here taken to be necessary, universal, and absolute.

Thus understood, science and rationality might have aroused feelings similar to those evoked by religion. They too were taken to provide stability, necessity, universality, even absoluteness. Moreover, they were assumed to redeem humanity from poverty and disease (through technological and scientific progress) and wars (through the universality of their teachings). Thus, in its early stages the scientific-rational mentality also endowed life with importance and understandability. The experience of the meaninglessness of life had no cause to emerge in such circumstances.

However, our view of science, and consequently of rationality, has changed over the generations. Contemporary scientists and philosophers of science are aware of scientific revolutions that have taken place in the past and expect others to occur in the future. They see scientific theories as relating to prejudices, methods of research, tools, and scientific fashions. Science is frequently seen as pragmatistic, i.e., as a body of knowledge where entities, processes, and events are endowed with a certain identity for the sake of furthering specific interests. In other words, things are believed to be as they are only because to so believe is useful. Furthermore, theories are frequently seen as merely tentative and doubt is cast on the ability of science to ever provide a full and final knowledge of reality. Today science is taken to be neither precise, nor certain, nor necessary, nor objective. Frequently, it is seen as relativistic.[11]

All this can impart a feeling of non-understanding. The inherent tentativeness of scientific truths can create the sensation that science does not provide real knowledge, and the pragmatistic character of science imparts the feeling that we do not know reality as it is, but only concepts that are useful to us. The feeling of non-understanding is enhanced also by the extreme un-common-sensicality of modern science, expressed most radically in Heisenberg's laws of uncertainty and some conclusions of Einstein's Relativity Theory. All these make the world we live in more nebulous than that of our parents and their forebears.

Moreover, the relativism and pragmatism of modern science make us feel that both it and the things in the world it describes have neither immanent nor absolute worth. We feel that they have value only in relation to conventions or interests that undergo rapid change. Since according to the pragmatistic mood all things essentially fulfill ulterior functions, they not only have no worth in themselves but are also inherently disposable; once they do not fulfill their function, or something else fulfills it better, they are replaced. There seem to be fewer things of stable, inherent value in the world we live in than in the world of our precursors.

Thus science no longer encourages feelings of understanding and importance, as it used to do, or as religion did. It and the mentality associated with it can easily evoke the experience of the meaninglessness of life.

Questioning of the meaning of life is also related to technological and economic changes. Capitalism, competitive and based on assigning the best means to an end, stimulates people to innovate continuously in order to remain in the lead. Thus it incessantly urges people to change their jobs, careers, and places of living. Similarly, it enhances the development of inventive technology to introduce fresh products into the market. Modern technology undergoes such unremitting and speedy transformations that lifestyles can change even within one life-cycle. Hence we experience technological and capitalistic society as dynamic and relativistic; our basic feeling is that "our world changes all the time." Likewise, we experience the world as pragmatistic. The capitalistic-technological frame of mind induces us to understand and estimate things as means to ends. Their value and identity is understood only in relation to a specific end; when it changes, so do they. All this, of course, also enhances our conception of the world as relativistic.

But all this again propagates a feeling of non-understanding and non-importance and, thus, of meaninglessness. We feel that if the identity and value of things can change so swiftly and arbitrarily, they did not really have this identity and value in the first place.

The modern age is characterized also by the centrality of the ideal of happiness. The pursuit of happiness is one of the main driving force behind our science, technological progress and capitalistic activity. The pursuit of happiness is also at the basis of an influential ethical theory—utilitarianism—and plays an important part in modern political thought; in our day the *raison d'être* of states is frequently taken to be the happiness of the citizens (and not, e.g., the objectification of the spirit of the nation). We are also educated to this ideal, both directly and indirectly, from a very early age. It has become the primary motivational force for inducing children to participate in educational activities. Likewise, most of our conscious choices and actions as adults are based on a comparison of the degrees of happiness we expect to derive from various activities. We marry or remain married, for example, not because the family is the building block of soiety, nor because of the Divine command in Genesis to procreate, but because of our estimation of the overall hap-

piness we may derive from the state of marriage. The same is true for our decision to pursue or continue a certain career or find a place to live. The ideal of happiness has become essential in our culture in a way it never was before. True, it was also central in some non-modern theories (e.g., Epicureanism or Stoicism); but it seems never to have had such a dominant role in the self-interpretation of people and everyday life as it does today.

The contemporary relation to happiness differs from previous ones in two other ways as well. First, whereas in previous generations happiness seems to have been identified more with ideals such as contemplation, "obeying the Lord," "doing what is right," honor or commitment, in our culture happiness is widely identified with pleasure, fun and comfort. It is, in fact, the pursuit of comfort and pleasure rather than simple happiness which is the driving force behind scientific and economical developments. And it is pleasure that induces children to learn things ("It's Fun!"). Many of our choices are based on a comparison of probable degrees of fun, and we are taught that a major way for determining what we really, internally want is to try to figure out what gives us most pleasure. Fun and comfort have become what the majority of people seek most of the time; the ideal of the good life is frequently portrayed as one of endless recreation, and one of the models of our culture is that of the playboy. These ideals also figure, of course, in almost any advertisement both as ends and as yardsticks for the value of objects and activities. The centrality of fun in our culture can also be seen in some contemporary trends in philosophy. One of Derrida's self-professed aims is to overcome the traditional preference for the serious to the frivolous.[12] Indeed, he adopts this aim in his own writing which, as some serious commentators fail to see, is sometimes simply meant to be humorous. For example, in "Limited Inc." Derrida answers some of John Searle's criticisms by taking them out of context and playing with their words.[13] Much of his other work, too, especially since 1973, may be seen as containing a strong element of philosophical jest.[14]

The second difference between our relation to happiness and previous ones is that, perhaps because of our technical and practical understanding of happiness as comfort, pleasure, and fun, we expect to be happy. Since we know (or think we do) what brings happiness, and since it is rather technical, we expect to have it.

These characteristics of contemporary mentality have reinforced the feeling of the meaninglessness of life in various ways. First, pleasure and fun, unlike e.g., honor, commitment, or even happiness, are frivolous and unserious. Thus, they have an air of non-importance and, therefore, are conducive to raising the question of the meaning of life. Besides, all in all, many people do not really feel that pleasure and comfort are ideals of real importance and value. Thus, again, an existence which revolves around these ideals is bound to evoke the feeling that life is meaningless.

Second, the expectation of happiness makes us very conscious of moments in which we are not happy, and sensitive even to cases of moderate unhappiness. It also makes us ask why we are not completely happy. At the same time, understanding happiness as comfort and pleasure makes it difficult to explain such objectless, general unhappiness. According to this interpretation, if we do have comfort and do enjoy various pleasures, there is no reason for us to be unhappy. The existence of such unhappiness, persisting in spite of comfort and pleasure, demands an explanation, and one such explanation could be the feeling of the meaninglessness of life. (Another possible answer is of the type given in psychological treatments. But this alternative was not widely and popularly viable in our culture until about three decades ago.) In earlier periods, on the other hand, such a problem did not exist. Of course, it is safe to assume that in those times, too, people suffered from unhappiness even if at times they enjoyed comfort and pleasure (although there were probably fewer such cases, both because there was less comfort and pleasure, and because people had a lower expectation of complete happiness and were thus less sensitive to the incomplete state). Likewise, people suffered from anxiety, depression and neurosis in earlier times as well. However, these types of unhappiness could be explained by, e.g., falling out of favor with God, or having a curse cast on one.[15]

These developments in modern culture have influenced not only the emergence of the questioning of the meaning of life but also its specific modern character. Almost all the pre-modern discussions that can be interpreted as relating to the problem of the meaning of life, e.g., the teachings of the Cynic Hegasias (which are reported suffi-

ciently radical to have caused a wave of suicides in Alexandria),[16] Euripides' *Bacchae* and *The Women of Troy*, or the book of Job, are based on the feeling that life is extremely painful and unjust.[17] In modern discussions, on the other hand, the sensation of meaninglessness often arises against the background of a secure, comfortable and easy life.[18] The modern sensation of the meaninglessness of life, then, is a unique phenomenon in history, related to the scientific, technological, commercial, and mental developments of the last few centuries.

What has been written above may result in the impression that the influence has been unilateral, i.e., that the feeling of the meaninglessness of life is a product of various commercial, technological, mental and scientific changes and not vice versa. I do not think, however, that this is the case. The sensation that life is meaningless is influenced by the search for happiness and the pleasure-ethos; but the delving into the pleasure-ethos and the pursuit of happiness are also a reaction to a meaningless world. We concentrate more and more on happiness and pleasure when we do not see another goal or context which can claim our allegiance. This, in turn, leads to a state of mind where there are even fewer goals and contexts which we take to be important and understandable. The influence is mutual. The same holds good for interest in science, technology and capitalist economic activity. Of course, they have all influenced the development of the sensation of meaninglessness in the ways described above; but the enormous enthusiasm with which they have been adopted and developed has been the outcome of the feeling that other frameworks are meaningless. This feeling was reciprocally enhanced by developments in capitalism, technology, and science. The relation between the feeling that life is meaningless and the factors discussed in this essay, then, is bilateral.[19]

3

If what has been written here is correct, the following practical conclusions can be deduced: first, those who feel that life is meaningless may try to look for what is important or understandable to them, relate to it, and develop it. Second, since there are many answers to the questions "What is important?" and "What is understandable?" there are also many possible answers to the question of the meaning of life. There is no one, objective answer.

Our technological, capitalistic, pleasure-seeking culture may impede our efforts to find and relate to issues of importance and understandability. To do so in face of this culture a few measures may be taken (and indeed have been). One is to try to create or join groups and cultures in which modern economics, science, etc. are less dominant. Another is to try to escape the instrumental, pleasure-seeking culture by moving to places which it has not yet reached. A third, adopted, e.g., by some environmentalists and the European "Greens" is to try to change scientific, technological, or economic realities. A fourth way, taken by some conservative circles, is to call for a return to older ideals and ways of life. Finally, an effort can be made to foster new mental and cultural ideals that fit the present culture and that, even if different from the older ones, do involve more of the elements of importance and understandability (this is the route taken by Charles Taylor in his *The Ethics of Authenticity*). Of course, one can try to combine some or all of these ways.

But what can we expect the future to be like? Will the questioning of the meaning of life become more radical, or will it gradually fade away?

One view may be that the need to have things important and understandable (in the sense these terms are employed in this essay) is essential to human beings, and the less a culture satisfies these needs the more it will call forth the feeling of the meaninglessness of life. Thus, if the present influence of contemporary scientific, technological and commercial factors continues, the future of the feeling of the meaninglessness of life depends on our degree of success in finding and relating to issues of understandability and importance in one or a few of the ways described above.

Another view may be that the need to have things understandable and important (in the sense employed in this essay) is not essential, and if the influence of science, technology, and capitalism persists, questioning the meaning of life will disappear. According to this view, we are now passing through a transitional period. Our standards of understandability and importance were formed in an earlier time—the Middle Ages and the early Modern Era—and molded by a different science, technology, and economy that

shaped not only expectations but also the cultural and mental reality which satisfied them. What was considered understandable and important was expected to be stable, non-relativistic, etc. And the same factors that shaped these views on what is important and understandable shaped a world which was stable and non-relativistic and could thus answer these expectations.

However, the changes in technology, economics, and science have influenced cultural and mental reality at a greater pace than they have affected the standards of importance and understandability. Ideologies frequently change only after the reality that used to satisfy them ceases to do so. This is what happened, for example, with mercantilism or with the ideal of the mounted knight: they both persisted after having become totally ineffectual in an altered reality.

Thus we are now in a transitional period as far as importance and understandability are concerned. Our expectations are still those of the older era, whereas the reality is new. According to this view, we may expect that with time reality will form new expectations of understandability and importance that will suit it better. When this happens, the problem of the meaning of life will completely disappear.

According to this view this, in fact, has already begun to happen. There are many people in our culture, some of them immersed in scientific, technological, and capitalist activities, who do not report any feelings of non-understanding and non-importance (and in some cases, rather the contrary). Many of them may also think it strange that rationality and science, which have rendered so many phenomena explicable, have been taken in this essay to enhance a feeling of basic non-understandability, or that pragmatism and capitalism, which have attached value to so many things, have been taken here to evoke the feeling of non-worthiness. To them, science and rationality supply perfect means for understanding the world, and capitalism and the ethics of pleasure a perfect framework for ascribing importance and value to it. They would expect, then, that the new, more dynamic standards of understandability and importance will soon be accepted by everyone, the gap between them and reality will be closed, and the transitional era will be over. Thus, the frustrated questioning of the meaning of life will disappear. From a disturbing problem it will become another of the many issues in the history of philosophy whose point later generations never completely understand.

Which of the two views is correct? Of course, the fact that in all cultures importance and understandability are or were viewed in a more stable and intersubjective way than in ours does not prove with any certainty that there is some essential need in human beings for some kind of a stable, intersubjective sense of importance and understandability. Universality does not guarantee essentiality since it is always possible that exceptions to the rule will be found in the future (it should also be remembered that the economic and technological basis of our culture is unique in world history). However, it seems to me that the universality, or at least high frequency, of this phenomenon does make it more probable than not that we have some kind of a need to find a more stable, committed, meaning in life.[20]

ENDNOTES

1. Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, eds. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1965-1977), II:594.
2. Novalis, highly influenced by Fichte, also believed that homelessness in the world was due to human finitude, characterized by the search for the infinite which is to be found in the depths of the human soul. In the absolute ego meaning, truth and being are the same, and those who reach their true selves comprehend these issues as well. They also achieve a state of freedom in which the distinction between human beings and nature is overcome. See *Schriften*, I:344; II:163, 389, 528, 533, 545, 550, 562, 568, 584, 588, 594; III:248, 263, 445, 508, 512, 588, 515, 597, 674, 685; IV:242.
3. Ecclesiastes 1.
4. There are many ancient expressions of the feeling that life is painful, as in Euripides' *Bacchae* and *The Women of Troy* or in the book of Job. However, they should be distinguished from the close, yet separate feeling that life is meaningless. The feeling that life is meaningless can be related to pain or sadness, but it does not have to be. It can also arise out of feelings of comfort and pleasure. (Indeed, in modern times this is typically the case.) Likewise, feeling the pervasiveness and inevitability of pain does not

necessarily lead to the feeling that life is meaningless; it may result merely in the conclusion that life is sad and full of suffering.

5. It is curious that philosophers and historians of philosophy have largely neglected this question—an important exception is Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), esp. chaps. 2, 6. The question is more widely discussed in sociological literature, starting with Max Weber's treatment of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) in, e.g., "Wissenschaft als Beruf", *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftlehre* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 524–55. Some more recent discussions are Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York, 1974) and C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization*, (New York, 1966).
6. Clarence Darrow, *Is Life Worth Living?* (Girard, Kansas, n.d.).
7. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London, 1940).
8. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship", in *Mysticism and Logic* (New York, 1918); see also Clarence Darrow, *Is the Human Race Getting Anywhere?* (Girard, KS, n.d.).
9. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth, 1961).
10. Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York, 1969); *The Trial*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth, 1953).
11. Two representatives of this view of science are Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962) and Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1975).
12. See, e.g., *L'Ecriture et la différence* (Paris, 1967), pp. 427–28; *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972), p. 4.
13. "Limited Inc." *Glyph* 2 (1977): 162–254.
14. Humour, jokes and fun can also be widely found in modern visual art, e.g. in the works of Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and the Dada movement.
15. It may be suggested that comfort and technological development have also influenced the rise of the questioning of the meaning of life by freeing people from more immediate, material challenges and endowing them with the problematic leisure of a lot of spare time in which they could ask themselves this question. However, this is probably not the case. Philosophers and thinkers have frequently belonged to the leisure classes, but were nevertheless generally insensitive to this problem up to about two and a half centuries ago.
16. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* I, 34, 83.
17. It is not completely clear that these texts in fact relate to the issue of the meaninglessness of life; they could also be interpreted as simply complaining about the pain and injustice of this world or expressing pessimism.
18. There are exceptions to these generalizations, such as Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* or Camus' *La Peste* in the modern world and Ecclesiastes is the ancient (although Ecclesiastes seems to be a unique exception to the rule in antiquity). It is interesting to note also that Ecclesiastes was traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, famous for both his wisdom and his luxurious and sensual style of life.
19. It may be objected here that many of the scientific, cultural, technological and commercial changes advanced as having influenced the emergence of the questioning of the meaning of life antedate or postdate the early stages of the questioning. Technological development and capitalist activity, for example, were prevalent before the questioning started. Likewise, Einstein's and Heisenberg's theories, mentioned above, did not exercise an impact on the questioning of the meaning of life prior to the first decades of this century. One may answer this objection by noting that the impact of technology and capitalism on our society has been more extreme in the last two and a half centuries than ever before. The same is true of the decline of religion, notwithstanding some ebbs and tides. New theories in science and in the philosophy of science postdating the first expressions of the questioning of the meaning of life only added an impetus to the questioning. But all this, of course, is not meant to show why modern questioning of the meaning of life started precisely at a certain moment. My aim in this essay is to identify the phenomena that I take to have been related to rise of this question in the last two hundred and fifty years, not to examine why it arose when it did and not a little earlier or later.
20. I am greatly indebted for helpful discussions on the topic and comments on an earlier draft of this paper to Charles Taylor, Mira Reich, Elisabeth Oppenheimer, Zev Rosenhek, Eyal Chowers, Eitan Felner and Mor Arazy.

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