

CHAPTER 4

Universal Values and Moral Development Theories

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Viewed from a wide angle, the world's communities and subcommunities appear to be an array of values, a colorful moral kaleidoscope. But these dissimilarities among values, as striking as they are, mask the similarity behind the "colors"—the species-specific "crystals" that create discernible and consistent patterns amid the array of value-colors. The argument for universal values, like moral development theories, builds on the notion of similarities among human behavior that stretch across space, culture, and time. Variations can be explained by adequate theory. As James Q. Wilson (1993) explains,

Two errors arise in attempting to understand the human condition. One is to assume that culture is everything, the other to assume that it is nothing. In the first case there would be no natural moral sense—if culture is everything, then nature is nothing. In the second, the moral sense would speak to us far more clearly than it does. A more reasonable assumption is that culture will make

some difference some of the time in the lives of most of us and a large difference much of the time in the lives of a few of us. (p. 6)

Wilson argues that both culture and nature are necessary for the individual expression of values. This chapter attempts to distill the universality of values from their culturally based expressions and show how theories of moral development rest on this assumption of universality. Together, universal values and moral development attempt to create a unified explanation for moral attitudes and behavior across cultures. But some of the objections to such a unified theory of values and development shall also be discussed. The chapter concludes with a philosophical reevaluation of how moral development theories presuppose universal values.

Universal Values

Valuing is a basic activity in conscious humans from the infant who kicks off her blankets or grimaces at the taste of strained squash to politicians or religious leaders condemning the entertainment industry for corrupting the values of youth.¹ But attempts at defining value are rarely adequate for general use. For example, a definition is offered by British philosopher Alan Montefiore (1988):

Positive values [may] be taken to be whatever give positive meaning or point to any object, state of affairs, activity, or institution that people, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, individually or collectively, may treat as good, important, useful, interesting, obligatory, beautiful, and so forth, and that value itself [may] be taken as being whatever is the common or family characteristics of these. (Negative values, this reasoning might continue, could be treated in an appropriately mirror-image-like fashion.) (p. 13)

The problem with such definitions, as Montefiore points out, is not that they are wrong but that they are too broad to be useful. A discussion of values can best be advanced by stipulating the scope of the analysis.

Values, as examined here, are beliefs expressed in judgment statements rather than in fact statements. That is, statements about values are normative as distinguished from descriptive statements that express facts.

The scope is narrowed further by excluding statements of aesthetics and taste. "That is a good painting" and "that poet is lousy" are forms of aesthetic

judgments that clearly express the speaker's valuing behavior but will not be included in this discussion. Nor will the valuing behavior of personal choice ("I like the look of redwood rather than cedar for house siding") or of etiquette ("She should know not to dress like that") be examined.

The scope of values that result in ethical or moral-normative judgments is the important issue here.² These are judgments that implicitly express an assumption about harm or benefit. If the judgment is that for Person A to perform Action X or to refrain from performing Action Y is wrong, immoral, unethical, or bad, the implicit assumption behind the judgment is that some person (perhaps A but usually some other person) will be caused or is likely to cause unjustified harm through A's action or nonaction.³ Judgment statements can be positive as well as negative. If the judgment is that for Person A to perform Action X or to refrain from performing Action Y is right, moral, ethical, or good, the implicit assumption is that someone will benefit.

There is obviously a gray area between the judgment statements excluded in this study and those included. The statements of aesthetic judgment may have moral implications in that the painting may be judged "good" because it is considered to promote a good in society or not cause viewers pain or displeasure in the viewing; the poet may be judged "lousy" because he or she persuades people to break laws or violate accepted conventions through his or her provocative words. Redwood may be preferred by the speaker because redwood is an indigenous wood and the speaker holds an implicit belief that using anything but indigenous woods harms the environment and future generations. And the judgment concerning the woman's style of dressing may concern a social taboo rather than express a fashion faux pas. But it is only by articulating clear standards rooted in universal values that one can have a basis for determining when borderline cases such as these should be included. The rationale, then, for dividing ethical or moral judgment statements from fact statements is that judgment statements necessarily contain a speaker's implicit belief concerning harm or benefit.

Specieswide Moral Values

Whatever the experience or context in which they live, human beings share a particular kind of valuing "hardware." It would be odd if humans

did not share what sociologist Handley Cantril (1965) calls "a genetically built-in design that sooner or later must be accommodated" (p. 315).

Based on a survey of representative samples of adult populations from Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, India, Israel, Nigeria, Panama, the Philippines, Poland, the United States, West Germany, and Poland in the early 1960s, Cantril (1965) developed a list of 11 basic uniformities and similarities in human needs and desires:

1. Satisfaction of survival needs
2. Physical and psychological security
3. Sufficient order and certainty to allow for predictability *
4. Pleasure: both physical and psychological excitement and enjoyment
5. Freedom to act on ideas and plans for improvement of self and context
6. Freedom to make choices
7. Freedom to act on choices
8. Personal identity and integrity; a sense of dignity
9. Feeling of worthwhileness
10. A system of beliefs to which they can commit themselves
11. Trust in the system on which they depend

This list, based on empirical study, is consistent with a conceptual list derived independently through logical analysis by philosopher Bernard Gert 20 years later. Gert (1988), in seeking to describe a moral system that provides a basis for normative judgments of right and wrong, defines an evil as "the object of an irrational desire." "This definition," Gert says, "provides us with a list of evils: death, pain, disability, loss of freedom and loss of pleasure. . . . No rational person insofar as he is rational desires any evil for himself without a reason" (p. 48).

That reason may be factually incorrect, like the mother who throws herself in front of a truck because she (mistakenly) believes that her child would otherwise be hit by it. The reason may be easy to understand, as in the case of the woman who chooses amputation over death from bone cancer. Or, rational people may disagree about the correctness of the reason, as, for example, in the disagreement over the need for physician-assisted suicide or active euthanasia.

A human analogy is required to bridge the chasm between self-interest and morality. The analogy is that other humans are like me in that no one desires for him or herself harm without reason. What is irrational to want

for oneself is immoral to cause another. That is, if it is irrational to desire death, pain, disability, loss of freedom, or loss of pleasure unless one has a reason, then it is immoral to cause these evils to another person without reason.⁴ It is immoral to do so because we recognize that it is irrational for the other person to desire these evils.

Labeling an action immoral does not deny that such actions happen; people do cause unjustified harm to one another.

We do have a core self, not wholly the product of culture, that includes both a desire to advance our own interests and a capacity to judge in a disinterested way how those interests ought to be advanced. Our selfish desires and moral capacities are at war with one another, and often the former triumphs over the latter. However great this war may be and no matter how often we submerge our better instincts in favor of our baser ones, we are almost always able, in our calm and disinterested moments, to feel the tug of our better nature. In those moments we know the difference between being human and being inhuman. (Wilson, 1993, p. 11)

The descriptive reality that some people do bad things does not imply the lack of a universal morality. Few would agree that the moral rule "don't kill" is absolute. Yet few would disagree that "don't kill" is a moral rule that usually ought to be followed. It would be irrational for individuals (without mitigating reason) to desire that the rule "don't kill" not be followed in regard to how others treat them.

One can argue that specific cases of killing are justifiable and still hold that killing is generally wrong. One might argue that killing is wrong except in times of justified war with identifiable combatants; one might argue that it would be rational to wish for assistance in one's death in a time of terminal illness and intolerable pain. Thus, whether a specific act of killing is morally permissible would, indeed, depend on the specific circumstances. But by requiring an explanation for exceptions to be justified, those exceptions actually support the notion of a general law. The result is that one can be universalistic without being absolutist.

Take murder: in all societies there is a rule that unjustifiable homicide is wrong and deserving of punishment. To justify an exception requires making reasonable arguments. My critics will rejoin that if only unjustifiable homicides are wrong, and if societies differ radically in what constitutes a justification, that is tantamount to saying that there is no rule against homicide. I grant the force of their argument, but I suggest in response that the need to make an argu-

ment—to offer a justification for the killing—is itself a sign that every society attaches some weight to human life. (Wilson, 1993, p. 17)

Nor is the existence of a law, rule, or convention necessary for one to act in a way that is consistent with a notion of universal moral values.

But the existence of a natural moral sense does not require the existence of universal moral rules. . . . Most important human universals do not take the form of rules at all and hence are not likely to be discovered by scholars searching for rules. Even the incest taboo, though a universal rule, scarcely needs to be a rule because incest is so rare. As Robin Fox has noted, what is cultural is the rule against incest; what is universal is the avoiding of incest. Much of the dispute over the existence of human universals has taken the form of a search for laws and stated practices. But what is most likely to be universal are those impulses that, because they are so common, scarcely need to be stated in the form of a rule, and so escape the notice of anyone scanning indexes to ethnographic studies. The impulse to avoid incest is one such. Another—and to me the most important—is the impulse to care for one's children. (Wilson, 1993, p. 18)

The impulse to care for one's children provides a world of examples of cultural expression that show the impulse to be universal. Yet, whatever the cultural variation, some behavior toward children—torture, for instance—is universally accepted as wrong.

Moral Development

Moral development theories rest on the notion that human beings develop morally in a way that is analogous with the ways humans develop physically, cognitively, and linguistically. Just as a baby must acquire reciprocal leg motion before he or she can walk, a person must develop a sense of caring for oneself before one can take others' needs into consideration. He or she must be able to understand how external authority interprets "good" and "bad" before one can independently evaluate the appropriateness of the external rules for oneself.

Although moral development theories differ in scope and context, each has four necessary components:

1. First, moral development theories contain a description and explanation for sequential progression. In language development, for example, children babble consonant-vowel combinations before they can intentionally produce words, and they must make a symbol-referent connection before producing meaningful sentences.

Sequential progression in moral development theories includes a move from focusing on self to focusing on others in addition to self. The progression is also from a heteronomous stance, in which right and wrong are defined externally, to an autonomous stance in which morally mature persons have internalized values and are able to use reflective judgment in determining whether or not to follow a moral rule or in explaining the meaning and relevance of the rule.

2. Universality is a second component. Moral development theories are dependent on the concept of universal values. If human beings develop morally in a way that is analogous to the way they develop in other aspects, the correctness of the theory is dependent on having it hold up cross-culturally. Development theories must also be culturally sensitive, however. Two infants may conform to a single developmental description of language acquisition, although one ends up speaking Japanese and the other Swahili.

The combination of universality and sequential progression explains why people cease developing as well as how they do develop. Development of any kind beyond a rudimentary level is dependent on the context in which the person is developing and on the capacities that are encouraged or discouraged.

Superb athletic performance requires attention toward developing physical ability beyond the rudimentary level. Moral excellence requires training and encouragement beyond a conventional level. It is consistent with development theories to find persons or groups within a society who lack the ability to communicate beyond the most rudimentary level, who fall far short of norms for physical fitness, or whose moral reasoning is at a preconventional level. A person may have the natural capacity for a level of development yet never attain that level. And he or she certainly will mature in an environment that favors one type of development over another.

3. The developmental stage limits a person's ability to understand more mature levels of development. Although a person will not be able to

understand or use higher levels of development than one has attained, he or she will understand, sometimes use, and often recognize the inadequacies of the less complex developmental levels. By analogy, a novice tennis player will not be able to understand or use the highly polished moves of the tennis professional. The pro, however, will understand the basic skills and, on occasion, will make a very basic mistake.

4. Moral development theories assume that humans grow to goodness naturally, just as they grow to physical and cognitive maturity. Wilson (1993) calls this the "moral sense" (p. 12). To say that people have a moral sense is not the same thing as saying that they are innately good. A moral sense must compete with other senses that are natural to humans—the desire to survive, acquire possessions, indulge in sex, or accumulate power—in short, with self-interest narrowly defined. How that struggle is resolved will differ depending on character, on circumstances, and the cultural and political tendencies of the day. But saying that a moral sense exists is the same thing as saying that humans, by their nature, are potentially good.

Wilson's notion here mirrors what I have earlier termed the human analogy. The moral sense is dependent on the realization that one being is like another in wishing to avoid harm. The moral sense is further dependent on an empathy that as I would not want this to happen to me, I do not wish it for others either.

Examples of Moral Development theory⁵

Kohlberg's Theory

Lawrence Kohlberg, a Harvard professor and psychologist until his death in January 1987, advanced the moral development theory of Jean Piaget. Piaget (1952), a developmental psychologist, recognized that children used a progressively more sophisticated manner of moral reasoning that complemented their intellectual and cognitive development. Kohlberg (1984) describes six stages of development within three societal levels.

The first level is termed preconventional. At this level, the actor believes that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by an authority

figure who is able to give pleasure or punishment to the actor. We see this in the action of very small children all the time and by people of all ages when caught in life-threatening situations.

The first stage in this preconventional level is "fear of punishment." The actor believes that the "right" action is the one that avoids pain or punishment. The second stage of this level is "hope for reward." Now, the actor believes that the right action is the one that is likely to result in something good for the actor.

The second level is called conventional because it describes the level of morality on which most people operate most of the time. At this level, the actor has shifted his or her perception of a moral arbitrator from an authority figure to the community at large. In the first conventional stage (Stage 3), the actor determines what is right by looking for peer approval. The actor is seeking acceptance by others rather than attempting to avoid pain or achieve direct pleasure.⁶ By Stage 4, the actor has respect for a system that is larger than any one authority figure. Loyalty to the system and adherence to its rules also replace the group as the basis for determining moral prohibition.

With appropriate experiences, actors can reach the postconventional level and operate on that basis at least some of the time. This is the move from heteronomy to autonomy. Actors at this level use reflective judgment to reason through to their own sense of what makes an action right. Whatever an individual, group, or society might say is right, the actor recognizes the individual's responsibility to reason through his or her own beliefs and actions. Again, this level is made up of two stages. The first stage (Stage 5) involves an understanding of social utility. What makes an action right is that it can be decided impartially, without specific loyalties, to bring about the greatest social benefit. The last of Kohlberg's stages, Stage 6, includes an understanding of the principles of justice. Now the actor uses these principles (fairness, equity) to determine moral permissibility and prohibition. The principles of justice are based on the perception that individual human beings have equal and inviolate worth.

Gilligan's Theory

Carol Gilligan (1982b), a protege of Kohlberg, argues that Kohlberg's scope of morality is incomplete. Kohlberg's developmental scale is based

on a notion of rights and equity. Gilligan developed a complementary theory that illustrates the progression of a person's caregiving, which she contends is also part of the moral sphere. Gilligan (1982b) provides a developmental scheme that contains "the language of responsibilities that sustains connection" (p. 210).

Gilligan's developmental scheme is based on an analysis of women's development, which had been largely ignored in Kohlberg's theory. However, Gilligan does not argue for gender-based differences in moral development. Indeed, the integrated, morally mature person would exhibit both feminine and masculine structures. Gilligan (1982a) says,

To understand how the tension between responsibilities and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected. While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same, an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt. In the representation of maturity, both perspectives converge in the realization that just as inequality adversely affects both parties in an unequal relationship, so too violence is destructive for everyone involved. (p. 174)

The developmental sequence, in Gilligan's (1978, pp. 65-80) theory, progresses from care of self to care of others to a final mature level of integrating the care for self with the care for others.

In an ethics of care, the actor at Level 1 is concerned with individual survival. One perceives oneself as powerless and a victim. One is unable to care for oneself or for anyone else. The first transition in her moral growth is to a state of "responsibility." During this transition, the person for the first time tries on the feelings of others. One begins to think about others' needs in determining what is right and wrong but tends to blame others when one fails, instead of taking responsibility for one's own action.

At Level 2, the actor is still unable to care adequately for oneself but has learned that sacrificing oneself for others is the way to be judged "good." At the next transitional state, she or he begins to see that inserting oneself into moral decisions is not selfish but honest. She or he begins to realize that caretaking can include oneself. Last, at Level 3, the person no longer perceives a conflict between caring for oneself and caring for others. Nonviolence is perceived as the unifying principle, with the moral objective of minimizing pain and harm for everyone.

Problems for the Unified Theory

Values Versus Valuing Process

Whereas ethicists tend to identify universally held values, loosely described as a negative obligation to avoid actions that cause evils without justification, moral development theorists emphasize a valuing process. Value theory has traditionally been concerned more with process than outcome. Dewey, the American father of value theory, held "an interpretation of value in terms of active reflective choice that refashions or creates outcomes for human demands, desires, satisfactions, enjoyments. The central phenomenon is the valuational process" (Edel, 1988, p. 18).

Rather than seeing the means versus ends dichotomy as a conflict in interpretation, moral development theory, as illustrated by Kohlberg and Gilligan, provides an explanation of how the two converge. The morally mature person not only uses her or his own reflective judgment to reach decisions about what is right, according to Kohlberg's scheme, she or he also reasons rightly. Moral development in this way can be understood as analogous to mathematical development. A child understands a particular math concept when she or he can both reach the right answer and reason on her or his own why this is so. Appreciating each person (including oneself) as intrinsically deserving of respect and care both reflects an integration of Kohlberg's and Gilligan's morally mature person and the universal value of requiring justification if one is to cause evils.

Are Moral Development Theories Cross-Cultural?

Some researchers have argued that Kohlberg's theory fails to represent the notion of morality as expressed in other cultures. For example, Snarey and Keijo (1991) argue, "building on the classic work of Ferdinand Tönnies, we theorize that Kohlberg's model incompletely represents a communitarian or *Gemeinschaft* voice" (p. 396). The authors conclude that

Future research needs to be maximally open to discovering different modes of moral reasoning, especially at the postconventional level. Such a constructive approach to future research will result in a more adequate and holistic understanding of the universality and variation in moral development. (p. 421)

This is an argument of incompleteness, not of flaws within the theory itself. Gilligan also argued incompleteness. The sphere of morality may be larger than any particular development theory has yet described.

What Counts as Moral Maturity?

Kohlberg has received a variety of criticisms, most often directed at his notion of a more sophisticated morality.⁷ Because the Kantian-Rawlsian concept of reversibility-universality is not fully accepted as the pinnacle of moral maturity, the notion that one would necessarily develop in that way is suspect. Although moral development theory is consistent with descriptive data on universal values, intersubjective agreement is certainly not the equivalent of objective truth. In some respects, there is no answer to this problem; there is no way of "proving" the correctness of Kohlberg's Stage 6.

However, the lack of proof does not constitute a fatal flaw for a unified theory of universal values and moral development nor does it constitute a fatal flaw for the notion of moral development. The developmental explanation of language acquisition does, indeed, both explain and predict how one progresses to a certain level of language production and comprehension. Theories of language development do not adequately explain how and why one becomes a poet, a sports announcer, or a skilled litigator—three occupations that require language excellence. Theories of development do not adequately explain how these dramatically different forms can all be reflective of linguistic excellence.

In an analogous way, theories of moral development can be appreciated for providing structures to help us understand how it is that people progress to a point of understanding the basic universal value, "don't cause evils without justification." The theories can help us understand how and why it is that some people never reach a certain level. Only when compared with what we expect all people to achieve is it possible to appreciate true moral excellence in its variety of examples.

Conclusions

Moral development theories have their origin in observations of the growth processes of moral consciousness in individual children. The ob-

served facts and progressions have then been subjected to philosophical reflections, from which theories emerged. The empirical roots of moral development theories are still visible and cause an obvious problem for their universal applicability. The original scientific observations were narrow; they did not sufficiently cover moral development in, say, African or Asian cultures.

The most pressing challenge for moral development theories today, however, is not their cross-cultural verifications but their grounding in philosophical anthropology. Significant new insights on how humans develop into moral beings can be gained from a vigorous rational analysis of common human nature. In this process, some clear contours of universal principles can be discovered behind and within the kaleidoscope of different cultural colors.

The social nature of the human being, namely the need for being-in-community, is the most fundamental philosophical premise from which to start. Moral reasoning and consciousness are not, primarily, about our individual selves but about judgments on actions, or intended actions, regarding others. The socialization of the moral being takes place in the individual's relationships with others. Families and peer groups are obviously of special importance in this process. The central issue of moral development, however, is not the well-being or self-fulfillment of the individual but how individuals become members of groups and communities with an acceptable and accepted moral ethos.

Most if not all cultures, and particularly non-Western cultures, have a rich depository of wisdom on what it means to become and be a member of a moral community. That moral heritage, often enshrined in wisdom literature, both written and oral, has over space and time been variously adapted and fashioned into moral guidelines with the intention of upholding desired moral standards in different communities. These multicultural expressions of moral wisdom and their moral norms—on the processes of becoming members of moral communities—could greatly enhance and challenge moral development theories advanced in North America and Europe.

This point can be illustrated by Gilligan's theory of an ethics of care. That no one shall intentionally be harmed without reason is the minimum requirement, resulting in negative precepts such as thou shalt not kill or steal. The richness of Gilligan's theory is on the positive side, namely, that part of being human is to care for each other. Ways of caring, and the

priorities within, are expressed by myriad norms across cultures—from simple common courtesy and respect for others to the active commitment toward those whose lives are most vulnerable.

Following Gilligan's theory, Benhabib (1986) introduces the concept of the "concrete other" in contrast to the "generalized other." The concrete other

requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and effective-emotional constitution. In assuming this standpoint, we abstract from what constitutes our commonality and seek to understand the distinctiveness of the other. We seek to comprehend the needs of the other, their motivations, what they search for, and what they desire. Our relation to the other is governed by the norm of *complementarity* (rather than formal reciprocity). Each is entitled to expect and to assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as a concrete individual being with specific needs, talents, and capacities. (p. 341)

The moral criteria guiding such interactions are, according to Benhabib (1986), "love, care, sympathy, and solidarity" (p. 341). This ethics of care not only confirms the other's general humanity but his or her human individuality.

The ontological center from which an ethics of care emanates is crucial for the theme of universal values. Gilligan's moral axiom is that personhood must be respected and revered and that human life must be cared for and cultivated. The ideal moral community or society is a caring community, in which all life is respected and cared for within its concrete context.

Nothing then is more genuinely universal than the essential structure of human nature with its quest for the preservation and development of life, one's own and life in common. Both depend on, and are made possible by, developing patterns of caring relationships to other living beings. These patterns can be called ethical protonorms of communication or universal human values. Moral development theories steeped in philosophical anthropology thus synthesize how humans become morally what they are ontologically. Or to put it more succinctly, how humans learn to conform to their being.

Wilson (1993, p. 7), as noted earlier, is right not to seek universality in moral norms but in the moral sense, that is, in the claims that humans everywhere make on each other as a matter of course—from the claim of "let me live," to the expectations of conviviality that are based on certain

irreducible moral principles, such as caring for each other. The awareness of these specieswide moral claims are crucial when cultures lose their authentic and authoritative moral traditions. When societies are no longer clear about the type of moral order that should prevail, the moral development of children is jeopardized, and moral character formation is hampered. The history of civilizations is littered with cultural aberrations and periods of moral decline and decadence. The same holds true, of course, for individual families and peer groups that influence the process of moral development.

This raises the question about the genetically built-in moral "hardware" or moral compass, which, in general, appears to continue functioning regardless of the moral degradations in the cultural environment. It also raises the question of the collective search for a new, utopian, moral community to which history attests. There seems to be no other satisfactory explanation for these phenomena than the assumption that certain universal values pertain to the human condition as such. It is on this implicit assumption about human nature that moral development theories ultimately rest.

Notes

1. Valuing behavior appears in other sentient creatures but will not be discussed in this essay.

2. The terms *ethics* and *morals* are used synonymously here. Ethics derives from the Greek "ethos" and morals derives from the Latin "mores." Both are typically translated as "custom."

3. This is admittedly an anthropocentric view of ethics, one that places humans as the necessary condition for something being a victim. Although many theories include environment and animals as entities that can be harmed without human victimization, such beliefs are not universally expressed in ethical theories. However, a theory that does not include harm caused to humans is missing the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for something being an ethical theory. It is, therefore, the obvious starting point for building a notion of universal values.

4. *Reason* is obviously a philosophically loaded word and is meant here as a placeholder for some theory of justification. Specific theories of justification (which answer the question, "when is it morally permissible to violate a generally held moral rule?") will differ among cultures and even within a particular culture.

5. This description of theories appeared previously in Elliott (1991).

6. It is easy to understand that at the transition between Stage 2 and 3, the actor when asked might explain that he or she seeks the acceptance of others because that's what makes him or her feel good.

7. See, for example, Modgil and Modgil (1985).

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