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On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense

Friedrich Nietzsche

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On Truth and Lies in a Sense Beyond Morality

(1873)

Somewhere in a faraway corner of the universe, which is spread out into countless solar systems, there was once a star where clever animals invented knowing. It was the proudest and most dishonest moment in the history of this world, but it was still only a moment. After Nature had breathed a few times, the star froze over, and the clever animals had to die. Someone could write a fable like this, and still he would not have shown well enough how pitiful, how shadowy, how short-lived, how pointless and how full of fancy the human mind looks in Nature. There were endless ages when this mind did not exist, and when it is gone again, nothing will show that it was ever there. That is because this mind has no bigger mission that reaches beyond the realm of human life. No, it is purely human. Only the one who owns it and gave birth to it takes it so seriously and with such drama that he thinks the world turns around it. But if we and the gnat could understand each other, we would learn that even the gnat floats through the air with the same sense of drama, and feels that it is the flying center of the world. Nothing in Nature is so bad or so small that it will not, at the tiniest puff of this power called knowing, swell up at once like a balloon. And just as a simple porter wants someone to admire him, so the very proudest man, the philosopher, imagines that the eyes of the universe are pointed at his actions and thoughts from every side, like telescopes.

It is striking that the mind manages to do this. After all, the mind was given to the most unlucky, the most fragile, the most short-lived beings only as a tool, a way to keep them in existence for a moment. Without that extra gift, they would have every reason to run away from life as fast as Lessing's baby son did.[1] That pride which comes

with knowing and feeling spreads blinding fog in front of people's eyes and over their senses. So it fools itself about how much life is worth, because it carries inside it the most flattering opinion of knowing. Its most general effect is deception. But even its smallest, most specific effects have something of deception in them.

The mind is a tool for keeping the individual alive, and it shows its main strength in pretending. It is by pretending that the weaker and less sturdy individuals keep themselves alive, since they were not given horns or the sharp teeth of predators to fight the battle for survival. In human beings this art of pretending reaches its highest perfection. In people we find deceiving, flattering, lying and cheating, gossiping behind others' backs, showing off, acting important, wearing disguises, hiding behind agreed rules of behavior, and putting on an act for others and for themselves. In short, there is the constant fluttering back and forth around the one single flame, which is vanity, like moths around a candle. All these things are so much the normal rule, the law, that hardly anything is harder to understand than how an honest and pure urge for truth could ever have arisen among people. People are sunk deep in illusions and dreamy fantasies. Their eyes only skim over the surface of things and see "shapes." Their senses never lead them to truth. Instead, their senses are happy just to receive signals and, you might say, to play hide-and-seek on the outside of things. On top of that, at night a person lets his dreams lie to him for his whole life, and his sense of right and wrong never even tries to stop them. And yet there are said to be people who, by using a strong will, have broken the habit of snoring. What does a human being really know about himself? Oh, if only he could see himself completely, just once, as if he were placed in a brightly lit glass case! Doesn't nature keep most things secret from him, even about his own body? For example, the twisting coils of his guts, the fast flow of his blood, the complicated trembling of his fibers. Nature does this so as

to shut him away and lock him up in a proud, false kind of knowledge. Nature threw away the key. And pity the dangerous curiosity that might, for a moment, be able to peek out and down through a crack in the room of consciousness. It would discover that man, not caring about his own ignorance, is resting on something pitiless, greedy, never satisfied and murderous. It is as if he were dreaming while riding a tiger, hanging on its back. So, with things being this way, where in the wide world does the urge for truth come from?

When an individual tries to protect himself against other individuals in the natural state of things, he mostly uses his mind only for pretending. But people, both because they need to and because they get bored, want to live together in groups, as a crowd. So they have to make peace, and at least try to make the worst war of all against all disappear from their world. This first peace deal brings with it something that looks like the first step toward that mysterious urge for truth. That is because what is from now on going to count as "truth" now gets fixed. In other words, people invent a name for each thing that is the same for everyone and that everyone must follow. And the rules set by language also give the first laws of truth, because here, for the first time, the difference between truth and lies comes into being. The liar uses the accepted names, the words, to make what is not real seem real. For example, he says, "I am rich," when the right name for his situation would be "poor." He misuses the fixed agreed rules by swapping words around when it suits him, or even turning them upside down. If he does this in a selfish way that also hurts others, society will stop trusting him and will even push him out. In this way, people are not so much trying to avoid being fooled; they are trying to avoid being harmed by being fooled. Deep down, even at this point, they do not hate deception itself. They hate the bad, harmful results of certain kinds of deception. And people want truth only in a similarly limited way. They want the pleasant results of truth, the ones

that help keep them alive. They do not care about pure knowledge that has no effect. They are even hostile toward truths that might turn out to be harmful or destructive. And besides, what are these agreed rules of language, after all? Could they be the products of knowledge, of the love of truth? Do the names and the things really match? Is language a proper and complete expression of everything that is real?

Only through forgetting can people ever come to imagine that they have "truth" to the degree just described. If a person does not want to settle for truth in the form of saying the same thing twice in different words, which is to say, with empty shells, then he will always end up with illusions instead of truth. What is a word? It is a nerve signal expressed in sounds. But to go from the nerve signal to the conclusion that there is a cause outside us is already the result of using the rule of cause and effect in a wrong and unjustified way. Suppose truth had been the only thing that mattered when language was born, and suppose certainty had been the only thing that mattered when names were given. Then how would we dare to say "the stone is hard"? We talk as if we knew "hard" in some other way, and not just as a completely personal signal inside us! We sort things into genders. We call the tree masculine,[2] and the plant feminine:[3] what random word-pictures! How far they have flown beyond the rules of certainty! We speak of a "serpent";[4] the name describes nothing except the twisting, winding movement, and so it could just as well belong to the worm. What random dividing lines! What one-sided favoritism, given sometimes to this quality of a thing and sometimes to that one! If you put the different languages side by side, you can see that with words, truth or exact expression matters very little: otherwise there would not be so many languages. "The thing as it really is" (which is exactly what pure truth with no practical effect would be) is also completely beyond the grasp of the person who creates language, and it does not seem worth any great effort to reach. He names only the way things

relate to humans, and to express those relations he calls on the boldest word-pictures. A nerve signal is first turned into a mental image! That is the first word-picture! Then the mental image is copied into a sound! That is the second word-picture! And each time, he jumps completely out of one realm and lands right in the middle of a totally different one. Imagine a man who is completely deaf and has never once sensed a tone or any music. This man might be amazed by Chladni's sand patterns, the shapes that form in sand when a string vibrates. He might discover that their cause lies in the vibrations of the string, and then announce that now he knows what people mean by "tone." That is exactly what happens to all of us with language. When we talk about trees, colors, snow and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves. And yet all we have are word-pictures of the things, and these word-pictures do not match the original reality in the slightest. Just as the sound shows up as a pattern in the sand, in the same way the mystery x of the thing as it really is appears first as a nerve signal, then as a mental image, and finally as a sound. In any case, then, language did not come into being by following logic. And all the material in which and with which the truth-seeker, the researcher, the philosopher works and builds does not come from what things really are. If it does not come from cloud-cuckoo-land, the land of clouds, it certainly does not come from the reality of things.

Let us think in particular about how general ideas are formed. Every word immediately becomes a general idea. You might assume this happens because the word serves as a reminder of the original experience that gave birth to it, an experience that happened only once and was completely unique. But no. It happens because the word has to fit, all at once, countless cases that are more or less similar, which really means never the same, and so in fact completely different. Every general idea comes from treating different things as the same. It

is certain that no single leaf is exactly like any other. And it is just as certain that the general idea "leaf" was formed by carelessly leaving out these individual differences, by forgetting the qualities that make each leaf different. And now this general idea makes us think that in nature, besides all the leaves, there is something called "the leaf." We imagine it as a kind of original model, from which all leaves were woven, sketched, carefully measured, colored, crinkled and painted, but by clumsy hands, so that not a single copy came out correct and reliable as a true copy of the original model. We call a man "honest." We ask, why did he act so honestly today? Our usual answer is, "Because of his honesty." Honesty, with a capital H! That again means: the "leaf" is the cause of the leaves. We truly know nothing at all about some basic quality that we could call "the Honesty." What we do know about are many individual actions, each different from the others. We treat them as the same by leaving out what is different, and we now name them honest actions. Finally, out of them, we invent a hidden quality and give it the name "Honesty." Ignoring what is individual and real gives us the general idea, just as it also gives us the idea of form. But nature knows nothing of forms and general ideas. So it knows nothing of species either, only an x that we cannot reach and cannot define. Because our contrast between the individual and the species is also a case of seeing things in human terms, and it does not come from what things really are. On the other hand, we do not dare to say that it does not match reality either. That would be a stubborn claim made without proof, and as such it could no more be proven than its opposite.

So what is truth? It is a moving army of word-pictures, name-swaps, and ways of seeing things in human terms. In short, it is a collection of human relationships that were heightened, transformed and decorated by poetry and fine speech, and that, after being used for a long time, seem to a people to be fixed, official and binding. Truths are

illusions that people have forgotten are illusions. They are word-pictures that have been worn out and have lost their power to stir the senses. They are like coins rubbed smooth, whose stamped face has worn away, so that they no longer count as coins, but only as metal.

Still, we do not yet know where the urge for truth comes from. So far we have only heard about the duty that society lays on people so that it can exist at all: the duty to be truthful, which means using the usual word-pictures. Put in moral terms, we have only heard about the duty to lie according to a fixed agreed rule, to lie as a crowd, in a style that everyone must follow. Now, of course, people forget that this is how things stand with them. So they lie in this way without knowing it, out of habits that are centuries old. And through this very not-knowing, through this very forgetting, they arrive at a sense for truth. Because they feel they must call one thing "red," another "cold," and a third "dumb," a moral feeling about truth wakes up in them. They look at the opposite, the "liar," whom nobody trusts and everybody shuts out, and by that contrast they prove to themselves how worthy, reliable and useful truth is. Now, as a "reasoning" being, a person puts their actions under the control of abstract notions. They no longer let themselves be swept away by sudden impressions and feelings. First they turn all these impressions into general ideas, paler and cooler, so that they can tie the ship of their life and actions to them. Everything that makes humans stand out sharply from animals depends on this ability: to boil down the solid, concrete word-pictures into a pattern, and so to dissolve a perception into a general idea. Inside these patterns, something becomes possible that could never work with the first raw impressions of the senses. People can build a pyramid-shaped order with castes and ranks. They can create a new world of laws, privileges, lower levels and borders. This new world now stands across from the other world, the world of first impressions, and it looks like the more fixed, general, familiar and human of the two. So

it seems to be the one that sets the rules and gives the orders. Every word-picture that comes from perception is one of a kind, with nothing equal to it, and so it slips away from every attempt to sort it into a class. But the great "building of ideas" has the stiff, regular order of a Roman wall of burial niches, and in logic it gives off the same sternness and coldness we find in mathematics. Anyone who has felt the breath of this coldness will hardly believe that the general idea, too, hard as bone, six-sided, and as easy to swap around as one of a pair of dice, is still only the leftover of a word-picture. They will hardly believe that the illusion of turning a nerve signal, like an artist, into mental images is, if not the mother, then at least the grandmother of every general idea. Now, in this game of dice, "truth" means using every dice exactly as it is labeled, counting its dots carefully, sorting things precisely, and never breaking the order of castes and the ranking of levels. The Romans and the Etruscans, for their own purposes, cut up the sky with strong mathematical lines, and so they shut a god up, so to speak, inside a sacred sky-zone, a space marked off in this way. In the same way, every nation has over its head a sky of ideas divided up like mathematics. And it takes the demand for truth to mean that every god of the mind may only be looked for in his own realm. Here we can truly admire humans as mighty geniuses of building. They managed to pile up an endlessly complicated dome of ideas on a foundation that moves, as if on running water. Of course, to get a grip on such a foundation, the building has to be like one made of spider webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, yet strong enough not to be torn apart by every wind. In this way, humans as geniuses of building rise high above the bee. The bee builds with wax that she gathers from nature. Humans build with the far more delicate material of ideas, which they must first make inside themselves. They deserve great admiration for this. But not because of their urge for truth or their drive toward pure knowing of things. If someone hides something behind a bush, then looks for it and finds it

in the very same spot, there is not much to brag about in that looking and finding. Yet that is exactly how things are with looking for and finding "truth" in the realm of reason. If I make up a definition of "mammal," and then, after looking at a camel, announce, "Look, a mammal," then yes, a truth has been brought to light. But it is worth very little. I mean that it is seeing things in human terms from start to finish. It does not hold a single point that is "true in itself," real and valid everywhere, apart from humans. Someone who looks for such truths is really only looking for the world turned into something human. He tries to understand the world as a human-like thing, and all his struggling wins him, at best, the feeling that the world fits him. The astrologer studied the stars for the sake of people and in connection with their good and bad luck. In a similar way, such a seeker studies the whole world as something tied to humans: as the endlessly drawn-out echo of one original sound, the human being; as the many copies of one master model, the human being. His method is to use humans as the yardstick for everything. In doing so he starts from a mistake: he believes that these things stand right in front of him as pure objects. So he forgets that the original word-pictures of perception are word-pictures, and he takes them for the things themselves.

Humans can live with some calm, safety and steadiness only because of several things. First, they forget that early world of word-pictures. Second, there was a hardening and setting of an original mass of comparisons and mental images, which once poured out like a burning liquid from the deepest power of the human imagination. Third, they hold an unshakable belief that this sun, this window, this table is a truth in itself. In short, a person lives this way only because he forgets that he himself is the one doing the seeing, and more than that, a person who creates like an artist. If he could escape from the prison walls of this belief, even for a single moment, his sense of self would be destroyed at once. It already costs him some effort to admit to

himself that an insect or a bird sees a world different from his own. And it costs him effort to admit that asking which of the two ways of seeing the world is more accurate is a pointless question. To answer it, you would need a measuring stick of true seeing, and that is a measuring stick that does not exist. On the whole, it seems to me that "true seeing" is an empty thing full of contradictions. By true seeing I mean a perfect expression of an object inside the person who sees it. But between two completely different realms, like the seer and the thing seen, there is no cause and effect, no accuracy, no expression. At most there is an artistic link. I mean a kind of suggestive transformation, a stumbling translation into a completely different foreign language. And for that, you need at the very least a realm in between, a force in between, which freely composes and freely invents. The word "phenomenon", meaning how things appear to us, is full of traps, so I avoid it as much as I can. For it is not true that what things really are shows itself in the world we experience. Imagine a painter with no hands who wanted to express, through singing, a picture he saw clearly in his mind. Even by switching realms like that, he would still reveal far more than the world we experience reveals about what things really are. Even the link between a nerve signal and the mental image it produces is not a necessary one. But suppose the same mental image has been produced millions of times. Suppose it has been handed down through many generations of people, and in the end it appears to all humankind, every time, as the result of the same cause. Then it finally becomes as important to humans as if it were the one and only necessary mental image. It seems as if the link between the original nerve signal and the mental image were a tight link of cause and effect. It is just like a dream that repeats forever: people would experience it and judge it as if it were real. But when a word-picture hardens and sets, that does not at all prove that this word-picture is necessary, or that it is the only one that is right.

Surely anyone who is used to thinking about such things has felt a deep distrust of any idealism of this kind, meaning any view that the world is made by our own minds. He feels this distrust every time he has clearly convinced himself that nature's laws are forever fixed, present everywhere, and never wrong. He has come to the conclusion that as far as we can reach, up into the heights we see through a telescope and down into the depths we see through a microscope, everything is completely secure, complete, endless, settled, and unbroken. Science will be able to dig in these mine shafts forever and with success, and everything it finds is sure to fit together and not contradict anything else. How little this looks like something made up by imagination! If it were made up, it would surely give itself away somewhere, showing that it is only an appearance and not real. Against this, one can answer as follows. First: suppose each of us had different senses. Suppose we ourselves could sometimes see like a bird, sometimes like a worm, sometimes like a plant. Or suppose one of us saw the same signal as red, another as blue, and a third person even heard it as a sound. Then nobody would talk about nature being so orderly. Instead, people would think of nature only as something extremely personal and dependent on the one seeing it. Second: what is a law of nature for us, anyway? We do not know it in itself. We know it only through its effects, that is, through how it relates to other laws of nature. And we know those other laws, again, only as collections of relationships. So all these relationships point only to one another, and in their real nature we cannot understand them at all. The only things we really know in them are the things we add ourselves: time and space, meaning relationships of order and of numbers. Everything amazing that we marvel at in the laws of nature, everything that seems to need an explanation and might tempt us to distrust idealism, lies really and only in the strict exactness and unbreakable firmness of our ideas of time and space. But we produce these ideas inside ourselves, and we throw them out into the world as

automatically as a spider spins its web. Since we are forced to think of all things only in these forms, it is no longer amazing that in all things we actually find nothing but these forms. For all things must carry within them the laws of number, and this very general idea of number is the most amazing thing about everything. All the obedience to law that impresses us so strongly in the paths of the stars and in chemical reactions is, at bottom, the same as the qualities we ourselves attach to those things. So it is we ourselves who make that impression on ourselves. From this it clearly follows that the artistic making of word-pictures, which is how every sensation in us begins, already takes these forms for granted, and so it can only be carried out inside them. And only because these original forms stay so constant can we explain how, later on, a building of general ideas could be put together out of the word-pictures themselves. For that building is a copy, in the realm of word-pictures, of the relationships of time, space and number.

[1] The German poet Lessing had been married to Eva König for just over a year. A son was born and died on the same day, and people had given up hope that the mother would live. In a letter to his friend Eschenburg, the poet wrote: "... and how much I hated to lose him, this son! For he had so much good sense! So much good sense! Don't think that a few hours of being a father have turned me into a silly, doting father! I know what I'm saying. Wasn't it good sense that made them have to drag him into the world with a pair of forceps? That he so quickly sensed how bad this world is? Wasn't it good sense that he took the first chance he had to get away from it?..."

Eva König died a week later. (Translator's note.)

[2] In German, the word for tree, "der Baum", is masculine. (Translator's note.)

[3] In German, the word for plant, "die Pflanze", is feminine. (Translator's note.)

[4] Compare the German "die Schlange", meaning snake, with "schlingen", meaning to wind or coil; and compare the English "serpent", which comes from the Latin "serpere", meaning to creep. (Translator's note.)

2

As we saw, at first it was language that did the work of building ideas. In later times, it is science that does it. A bee builds the cells of its hive and fills them with honey at the same time. In the same way, science works without stopping on that huge wall of burial niches for ideas, that graveyard of impressions. It keeps building newer and higher floors. It props up, cleans, and repairs the old cells. Above all, it tries to fill that giant framework and to sort into it the whole world we experience, that is, the world seen in human terms. The person of action ties his life to reason and its ideas, so that he will not be swept away and lose himself. In the same way, the person who searches for truth builds his little hut right next to the towering building of science, so he can work alongside it and find shelter there. And he does need shelter. For there are terrible powers that keep pressing in on him. Against the "truth" of science, they hold up "truths" made in a completely different way, carrying banners and symbols of the most mixed and varied kinds.

There is an urge in us to make word-pictures. It is the most basic urge humans have. We cannot argue it away for even a moment, because if we did, we would be arguing away the human being itself. In truth, this urge is not beaten, or even tamed, just because a regular, rigid new world has been built out of its dried-up leftovers, the ideas, as a fortress to hold it in. This urge looks for a new field to work in, a different river-bed to flow through, and it finds one in myth and, more

broadly, in art. It keeps mixing up the labels and the cells where ideas are filed away, by setting up new figures of speech, new word-pictures, new name-swaps. It keeps showing its burning desire to shape the world of the waking person so that it becomes as colorful, irregular, disconnected, charming, and forever new as the world of dreams. For really, the waking person only knows for sure that he is awake because of the stiff, orderly net of ideas. That is exactly why, when art tears that net of ideas for a moment, he sometimes comes to believe he was dreaming. Pascal is quite right when he says that if the same dream came to us every night, it would fill our minds just as much as the things we see every day. In his words: "If a workman were sure that he would dream every night, for a full twelve hours, that he was a king, I believe he would be just as happy as a king who dreams every night for twelve hours that he is a workman." Think of a people who are easily stirred by mystery, let us say the early Greeks. Because of the constant wonder that myth takes for granted, their wide-awake day was actually more like a dream than like the day of a thinker who has been sobered up by science. Suppose any tree might at some point speak as a nymph. Suppose a god, disguised as a bull, might carry off young women. Suppose the goddess Athena herself might suddenly be seen driving a fine team of horses through the markets of Athens, with Pisistratus riding beside her. And every honest Athenian did believe this. Then at any moment, just as in a dream, anything is possible. All of nature swarms around people as if it were nothing but gods in costume, gods who thought it a huge joke to fool humans by taking on every possible shape.

Humans themselves, though, have an unbeatable tendency to let themselves be fooled. A person is like someone under a spell of happiness when a storyteller tells him epic tales in such a way that they seem real, or when an actor on stage makes the king seem more kingly than any real king ever is. The mind, that master of disguise, is

set free and let go from its job as a slave, as long as it can fool people without harming them. And then it celebrates its wild holiday. It is never richer, prouder, more lavish, more skillful, or more daring. With the joy of a creator, it throws word-pictures into a jumble and moves the boundary stones of abstract ideas. For example, it might call a river "the moving road that carries a person to the place he would otherwise walk to." Now it has thrown off its shoulders the badge of slavery. Usually, with gloomy, fussy eagerness, it tries to show the way to some poor individual who just wants to stay alive, and it goes out hunting for loot and plunder like a servant working for his master. But now it has become the master itself, and it can wipe the look of need off its face. Whatever it does now, compared with what it did before, carries pretending inside it, just as what it did before carried the mark of twisting things. It copies human life, but treats it as a good thing and seems completely happy with it. That enormous framework and fence of ideas, which the needy person clings to in order to save himself and get through life, is for the freed mind only a scaffold and a toy for its boldest stunts. When it smashes that framework to pieces, throws it into a jumble, and then puts it back together mockingly, pairing the strangest things and pulling apart the things closest together, it shows that it has no use for those emergency tools of misery. It shows that it is no longer guided by ideas but by direct insights. From these direct insights, no regular road leads into the land of ghostly patterns, the abstractions. Words were not made for them. When a person sees them, he goes silent, or else he speaks in forbidden word-pictures and in never-before-heard combinations of ideas. He does this so that he can respond creatively to the impression of the powerful direct insight happening right now, at least by tearing down and mocking the old fences of ideas.

There are times in history when the reasoning person and the intuitive person stand side by side. The first is full of fear of direct insight.

The second is full of scorn for abstract thinking. The intuitive one is just as unreasonable as the reasoning one is lacking in art. Both want to rule over life. The reasoning person does it by knowing how to meet the most important needs with planning ahead, good sense, and regular habits. The intuitive person does it as an "over-joyful" hero, by ignoring those needs and treating only that life as real which puts on a show of appearance and beauty. Sometimes the intuitive person swings his weapons more powerfully and wins more often than his opponent, as happened, for example, in the early history of Greece. Wherever that happens, and the conditions are good, a culture can grow, and art can set up her rule over life. All the ways such a life expresses itself come with this pretending, this denial of being in need, this splendor of word-pictures, and above all this open, direct pretending. Nothing about how people live suggests that need invented it: not their houses, not the way they walk, not their clothes, not even their clay jugs. It seems as if all of these were meant to express a high and noble happiness, a godlike calm, and a kind of playing at being serious. The person guided by general ideas and abstract thinking uses them only to keep bad luck away. He does not even squeeze any happiness for himself out of those abstractions. He just tries to be as free from pain as possible. But the intuitive person, living in the middle of a culture, gets a harvest from his direct insights. Besides keeping evil away, he gets a steady flow of light for his mind, fresh life, and a sense of being set free. Of course, when he does suffer, he suffers more. He even suffers more often, because he cannot learn from experience. Again and again he falls into the same ditch he has fallen into before. When he suffers, he is just as unreasonable as when he is happy. He cries out loud and finds no comfort. How different things are for the Stoic when the same bad luck hits him! He has been taught by experience, and he governs himself by general ideas. At other times he only looks for honesty, truth, freedom from being fooled, and protection from traps and sudden attacks. But in his mis-

fortune he pulls off a masterpiece of pretending, just as the intuitive person did in his happiness. He does not show a twitching, changing human face. Instead he shows something like a mask, with calm, dignified, balanced features. He does not cry out, and he does not even change his tone of voice. When a heavy thundercloud bursts over him, he wraps himself in his cloak and walks away from under it with slow, steady steps.

THE END.

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