Public Reason

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Doubts about the possibility of shared public rationality and reasons derive from a variety of sources: social science, the philosophy of science, and the moral pluralism of modern societies. This article begins by examining the lines of inquiry that have led many to question whether all fully-informed and fully-competent inquirers would come to the same conclusions about science and morals. According to some philosophers and social scientists, the very concept of reason has broken apart, leaving different individuals and groups with different conceptions of rationality, and so of reasons for belief and action. The article then considers the different ideals of public reason that have been advanced to overcome worries about the 'fragmentation of reason.'

1 The Diversity of Reason

1.1 The Enlightenment
Before considering different conceptions of public reason, it is important to grasp what the very idea of public reason presupposes. According to the conception of reasoning that dominated the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reason is inherently universal, and so shared and public. On this Enlightenment conception, reason is a shared capacity of all human beings, and norms of good reasoning are universal. Any premise p that is true for one person is necessarily true for all others; if the inferential rule '$(p \cdot (p \rightarrow q)) \rightarrow q$' is valid for one person, it is necessarily valid for all. The true and valid results of one person's reasoning are thus necessarily true and valid for all. According to this standard Enlightenment view, the use of common human reason produces consensus on not only scientific beliefs, but also moral and political opinions. To be sure, people might disagree on matters of science or ethics, but that would be due to mistaken beliefs or irrationality: some have arrived at the wrong answer. The process of Enlightenment was the only remedy for this— the increasingly better use of reason to uncover truths about the natural and the social world. The ideal or model was that of Newtonian physics: just as our common reason had uncovered the laws of matter and motion, so too could it be expected to uncover the laws of human nature, society, morals, and politics. Each field was awaiting its Newton.

1.2 Relativism and Social Science
It is a familiar story how the systematic study of cultures with radically different norms from those of Europe gave rise to cultural relativism. When confronted with the very different mores of the Zuñi and Kwakiutl Indians and

Dobu Islanders of Papua New Guinea, Ruth Benedict (1934) endorsed a relativistic view—their norms were justified for them, just as Western norms were for Europeans. As anthropologists began to study non-European cultures in more depth, and became increasingly more sophisticated and self-reflective in their techniques, disputes arose about the proper method for anthropologists to interpret the belief systems of other cultures. For example, was a belief in magic or a deity to be understood as simply a false belief on which the 'natives' relied? John Stuart Mill (1974 [1843], pp. 766–7) believed that an investigator could best understand the magical beliefs of other cultures by attributing to them erroneous beliefs and invalid inferential rules. Others, adopting a *principle of charity*, have insisted that the best interpretation of a culture minimizes the number of false beliefs attributed to its members (Davidson 1973). Thus the best interpretation—which makes sense of the 'native's' metaphysical theories, religious convictions, and their beliefs about nature—might seek to show that a belief in spirits is, after all, rational given their world view. Thus the second step in the relativist attack on the Enlightenment's ideal of reason was to endorse *relativism concerning what beliefs are rational* in different cultures. The last step in the relativistic project is to apply tolerance to the idea of reason itself. Can Western anthropologists properly interpret other cultures if they apply their Western conception of reason in their interpretation? Is the very idea of reason culturally relative?

1.3 Pluralism and Indeterminancy

Social science thus provided one source of the 'fragmentation of reason.' Of course there was, and still is, lively debate within social scientific and philosophical circles about whether any such relativistic view of reasoning is justified, and if so to what extent individuals employ different, but equally good, norms of reasoning. Nevertheless, some form of cognitive relativism is widely accepted. Concurrently, developments in the philosophy of science were challenging the idea of common, human, reasoning in the very citadel of the Enlightenment—science itself.

Whatever doubts may be entertained about the application of Western reason to other cultures, or departures from expert norms by ordinary reasoners, surely science is still the model of rational discourse tending to convergence of opinion leading to the truth. To many, Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific practice demonstrated that, rather than a shared project of pursuit of the truth, judged by rules of reason held by all, scientific inquiry takes place within 'paradigms' that determine not only what constitutes research problems but what constitutes success in a research program. *Within* a group of scholars sharing a paradigm the Enlightenment's ideal of common norms of reason and consensus on the truth will be approximated; and insofar as 'normal science' is dominated by a single paradigm in

each field, there often is a common mode of reasoning. But in times of scientific crisis, when paradigms compete, some have insisted that there is no rational, impartial way to adjudicate among the competing theories.

The crux of Kuhn's analysis is that because data underdetermines theories, scientists draw on values in adjudicating among theories. 'To a greater extent than other sorts of components of the disciplinary matrix,' writes Kuhn, 'values may be shared by men who differ in their application. Judgments of accuracy are relatively, though not entirely, stable from one time to another and from one member to another in a particular group. But judgments of simplicity, consistency, plausibility, and so on often vary greatly from individual to individual … Even more important, in those situations where values must be applied, different values, taken alone, would often dictate different choices. One theory may be more accurate but less consistent or plausible than another' (Kuhn 1970, p. 185). The crucial claim is that there is no uniquely rational way to order these various desiderata—simplicity, consistency, plausibility—and different orderings endorse different scientific theories upholding competing truth claims. Equally well-informed scientists employing their reasoning in perfectly legitimate ways can arrive at different judgments about what is true. Fred D'Agostino has generalized the analysis. In any field of inquiry, when there exists both a plurality of criteria and no impartial way to order the criteria, the criteria are apt to be indeterminate in their application. Different orderings produce different outcomes—reasons for belief. According to D'Agostino, the criteria only yield a determinate result when an ordering is provided, but impartial reason cannot give us that. Much of postmodernism is based on this key idea. Reason is inherently perspectival because of the inherent plurality of relevant considerations for which there is no rational, impartial ranking.

1.4 Reasonable Pluralism
Kuhn's analysis of scientific practice and D'Agostino's generalization rely on the idea of indeterminancy: reason undetermines choice between various theories and perspectives. A more modest view maintains that our powers of reasoning are inconclusive on many complex matters of science, morality, and politics. Claim C is characterized by reasonable pluralism if some perfectly reasonable agents do, while others do not, have good reasons for accepting C. For a controversy to be characterized by reasonable pluralism it is not simply the case that people actually disagree about the merits of C, but that it is reasonable for one person to assert C and another not-C. This is a far less radical claim than was examined in the last section: it is not argued that the question 'C or not-C?' is inherently *indeterminate* but only that present beliefs about C are *inconclusively* justified. According to John Rawls, our

disputes about value seem subject to reasonable disagreement because our understanding of what is good and valuable is especially subject to what he has called the 'burdens of judgment.' According to Rawls, reasonable judgments so often are at odds because:

(a)   the evidence is often conflicting and difficult to evaluate;

(b)   (as in Kuhn's example) even when we agree on the relevant considerations, we often weigh them differently;

(c)   because our concepts are vague, we must rely on interpretations that are often controversial;

(d)   the manner in which we evaluate evidence and rank considerations seems to some extent the function of our total life experiences, which of course differ;

(e)   because different sides of an issue rely on different types of normative considerations, it is often hard to assess their relative merits;

(f)   in conflicts between values, there often seems to be no uniquely correct answer (Rawls 1993, p. 57).

Because these matters are so complex and uncertain, different people will reach different, competing, credible, or reasonable conclusions. In the face of complexity, our powers of reasoning do not produce convergence.

2 Conceptions of Public Reason

2.1 Public Rationality and Public Reasons
Important movements in social science, the philosophy of science, and moral and political philosophy thus have combined to cast grave doubt on the Enlightenment's confidence that the free exercise of human reason leads us to agree. In the face of these challenges to the ideal of common human reason, theories of distinctly public reason have been advanced to show how people can *share reasons* (Korsgaard 1996, Chap. 10). However, this idea is ambiguous. It may constitute a response to relativistic social science (Sect. 1.2), which challenges the very idea of a shared conception of human reason. Understood thus, the ideal of public reason is an ideal of *public rationality*, or a shared conception of rationality. The challenge posed by reasonable pluralism (Sect. 1.4) is more modest. Advocates of reasonable pluralism maintain that even if we apply shared standards of reason, our deliberations will not yield shared reasons for belief. In a weaker sense, then, the ideal of public reason is an ideal of *public reasons*, or how we can arrive at shared reasons to believe and act. A theory of public reason may advance a theory of public rationality and/or public reasons.

Three main conceptions of public reason stand out: (a) the epistemic, (b) the consensual, and (c) the political.

2.2 Epistemic Theories of Public Reason

In philosophy, 'epistemology' refers to the theory of knowledge or, more broadly, the theory of justified belief. Epistemic theories of public rationality, then, maintain that at least some common norms of reasoning can be justified to everyone. The Enlightenment view was that *all* valid norms of reasoning can be justified to everyone—reason was inherently public. Epistemic theories of public rationality need not, however, advance such a sweeping claim. Importantly, an epistemic theory of public rationality may adopt a modest version of the 'relativism of reasons' (Sect. 1.2), according to which in *some* cases person Alpha may have a fully justified norm of reasoning N while Beta accepts a fully justified norm of reasoning M, where it is the case that N and M are inconsistent. In cases where only N and M are relevant to deliberation, a relativism of rationality will manifest itself; Alpha may have reasons based on N that Beta will deny on the basis of M, and both will be justified. However, to establish a thoroughgoing relativism of reasoning that undermines the possibility of public reason, it is not enough to establish that this can *sometimes* occur; it must be shown that *no* common norms of rationality can be justified to all—that it is *always* (or at least usually) the case that for any justified norm of reasoning held by Alpha, some person Beta will be justified in accepting a competing norm. That is the sweeping relativistic claim rejected by epistemic theories of public rationality (Gaus 1996).

In reply to the *anthropological argument* (Sect. 1.2), epistemic theorists of public reason can embrace Martin Hollis' view that an anthropologist must build up an interpretation of an alien language by locating a 'bridgehead.' The assumption underlying the bridgehead strategy is that others generally perceive what we perceive and tend to say about it the sorts of things we would say. Relying on these assumptions, the anthropologist begins by translating everyday, basic perceptual sentences such as 'Yes, this is a brown cow' and 'No, it is not raining right now.' Now, Hollis insists, this bridgehead not only includes translations of such basic beliefs, but basic logical rules, since 'what a sentence means depends on how the beliefs which they express are connected, and that to justify a claim to have identified a belief one must show the belief is connected to others.' The point, then, is that the context that sets the stage for the possibility of relativism—that we confront others, different from us but of whom we can make some sense—presupposes widespread shared norms of inference as well as beliefs. Thus the very possibility of mutual intelligibility sets a limit on the extent to which we can understand others as employing cognitive processes different from our own. Furthermore, despite some apparent interpersonal differences in the reasoning, significant

psychological evidence supports the hypothesis that people employ a shared, potentially natural or innate, system of mental inference rules in their actual reasoning.

2.3 Shared Practice Theories of Public Reason

Epistemic accounts of public reason uphold our ability to reason together because they insist that we do, indeed must, share basic rules of inference. In contrast, shared practice accounts of public reason conceive it as arising out of a shared social life and/or shared discourse (see *Shared Belief*). A number of otherwise diverse philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Susan Hurley, and Philip Pettit all point to the idea that reasoning is a social phenomenon. In order to be a deliberator, one must be a member of a community in which one's beliefs and rules are intelligible to others. One comes to understand what is a justified or unjustified belief, and what is a good or a bad way of reasoning, by sharing the norms and standards of communities, including communities of inquirers. Thus some insist that 'ultimately, there is only one criterion by which beliefs can be judged valid, and that is that they are based on agreement reached by argumentation'—we converge on them (this is Habermas's 1991, p. 14 gloss on Rorty's 'particular version of discourse theory'). Habermas draws an intimate connection between mutual understanding (*Verständingung*) and agreement (*Einverständnis*). It would seem that to understand others we must in some way arrive at intersubjective agreement about norms of rationality and good reasons. Consequently, the phrase 'public reason' becomes almost redundant: something can only be identified as reason because it is the object of public, interpersonal, agreement.

Wittgenstein and his contemporary followers such as Hurley (1989) and Pettit (1993) suggest a broadly similar view. Reasoning itself presupposes a 'community'—common rules of thought. Wittgenstein (1958) argued that one could not have a private rule that one only followed once—for in such a case we could not know whether the rule was actually followed. More generally, it has been argued that one cannot have a purely private rule, for one needs to be able to distinguish when one has correctly followed the rule and when one has gotten it wrong. But, assert Wittgensteinians, the difference between correct and incorrect application of a rule cannot be located in individual belief systems, but only by the individual comparing her application of the rule to those of her fellows: each must look to others to check and correct her rule-based performances. Since thinking is necessarily rule driven, the analysis applies to reason itself. Thus it seems that the very idea of rule-following—and, so, of reasoning—supposes agreement with others. If so, the search for reason is a search for agreement.

In one respect this view, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, returns to the basic idea of the Enlightenment—all reason is public reason. But whereas the Enlightenment was confident in asserting this because of the widespread faith in a universal, common, human faculty of reason that could accurately represent reality, shared practice theorists see reason as arising out of a shared public life. To put it crudely, rather than reason producing agreement, agreement generates reason. Thus the publicness of such reason, unlike that of the Enlightenment's, is consistent with a cultural relativistic conception of rationality. The public, intersubjective agreement, reached by one culture—which is constitutive of their very conception of rationality—may be very different from that upheld by another.

Because shared practice accounts of public reason stress the constitutive nature of public ageement to the very idea of reason, and because public agreement may be promoted by political institutions, more radical shared practice theorists such as D'Agostino give political institutions a constitutive role in determining *what reason is* (1996, Chap. 9). This is a radical view indeed—however, it is not entirely novel, perhaps going back as far as Hobbes. For Hobbes ([1651] 1948), the conflict in the state of nature arises from conflicting private judgments; people's private reasoning yields conflicting judgments of right and wrong, as well as matters of fact, and this leads to the less intellectual conflict that characterizes the state of nature. Hobbes's solution is to appoint an 'arbitrator.' This 'judge,' says Hobbes, provides 'public reason' to which private reason 'must submit.' The arbitrator proclaims what each has reason to do, and so defines a single, coherent conception of reason. Because, in Hobbes' view, we have authorized the judge (i.e., sovereign) to define public reason for us, the sovereign's pronouncements constitute a shared public reason on which there is agreement.

2.4 Public Reason qua Political Reason
D'Agostino's radical view allows the political to shape the rational. A more modest proposal with which this radical view is easily confused maintains that the notion of public reason is a purely political idea, in the sense that it concerns only how we reason together *about politics*. This understanding of public reasons lies at the heart of what is commonly known as 'political liberalism.'

Rawls's political liberalism is a response to the problem posed by reasonable pluralism (Sect. 1.4). For Rawls the crucial problem is that citizens in democratic societies entertain a plurality of what he calls reasonable 'comprehensive doctrines'—overall philosophies of life centered on religious, philosophical, or moral beliefs. This pluralism seems a permanent feature of modern societies. 'Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a

plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of free institutions of a constitutional regime' (Rawls 1993, p. xvi). The reasonable pluralism of comprehensive views renders such views unacceptable as bases for the justification of political power. Rawls endorses the 'liberal principle of legitimacy,' i.e., that 'our exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may be reasonably expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason' (p. 137). Thus, because there exists a reasonable plurality of comprehensive doctrines, basing the justification of political power on any of them violates the liberal principle of legitimacy. This leads Rawls to seek a political conception that 'all affirm' and that is 'shared by everyone.' Such a conception would be supported by the diverse reasonable comprehensive doctrines that characterize our democratic societies. It would generate public reasons that would fit into our many reasonable, but irreconcilable, comprehensive views. Some version of the principle of political legitimacy motivates the search for public reasons in contemporary liberal political philosophy: if the exercise of coercive political power relies on nonpublic reasoning, it is oppressive and illegitimate in relation to those who do not share those reasons.

Rawls's core argument—and so his entire political liberalism—apparently depends on the contrast between comprehensive views and the shared, political, conception. Whereas comprehensive conceptions produce diverse reasons that conflict, the political point of view provides public reasons—reasons that all reasonable comprehensive views can endorse.

Habermas (1995) suggests that Rawls posits an '*a priori*' distinction between the political and nonpolitical spheres. At least at times Rawls seems to suggest that the political point of view can be conceptually distinguished from moral, religious, and philosophical matters; whereas the former identifies a common point of view that can be affirmed by all, when human reason is applied to moral, religious, and philosophical issues it leads to reasonable disagreement. It is difficult, however, to accept the claim that some single conception of the political is shared by all reasonable persons in modern democratic societies. Political theorists have often pointed to the 'political' as an 'essentially contested' concept—one that is open to divergent, reasonable, interpretations (Connolly 1983, Chap. 1). If citizens of modern democratic societies disagree about the concept of the political, it cannot serve the function of identifying public reasons that overcome reasonable pluralism. Like the moral and philosophical, the nature of the political itself seems a matter of reasonable disagreement.

An alternative interpretation of Rawls' view is to take the political conception as *constructed out of* that which is shared. On this reading the *non*political is, by definition, those matters on which the free use of reason by citizens in democratic societies leads to different, reasonable conclusions. It is, by its very nature, the realm of reasonable pluralism. In contrast, one might *define* the political as those matters on which reason converges in democratic societies, and so necessarily generates constitutional principles that satisfy the principle of liberal legitimacy. The political is thus characterized as the overlapping consensus of those diverse comprehensive views characterizing modern societies. The problem for this interpretation is that Rawls himself indicates that the free use of human reason leads us to reasonable disagreement about conceptions of justice and constitutional essentials. The 'political' qua 'shared perspective' is limited to the abstract concept of a 'liberal political order' (Rawls 1993, p. 241). 'By this [Rawls says] I mean three things: first, it specifies certain basic rights, liberties, and opportunities (of the kind familiar from constitutional democratic regimes); second, it assigns a special priority to these rights, liberties and opportunities, especially with respect to claims of the general good and of perfectionist values; and third, it affirms measures assuring all citizens' adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their basic liberties and opportunities' (p. 223). Thus stated, the content of public reason seems sparse indeed. Unfortunately, if a more detailed articulation of this idea is provided, Rawls indicates that the use of human reason again leads to disagreement. Apparently modern democratic societies agree on only the most abstract of public—political—reasons.

2.5 Consensus and Convergence Accounts

One important dispute regards whether the conclusions of public reason require shared reasons. According to Vallier (2011), a "consensus conception of reasons requires that public reasons have some common features, such as being shareable or accessible to all; convergence rejects such requirements." (p., 262) Consensus reasons may include shared principles of justice or political values like freedom, equality or promoting the common good, as well as the non-controversial findings of science. Convergence reasons include also the diverse reasons of the public, allowing a conclusion to be vindicated by public reason because each person has some sufficient reason from the perspective of their private commitments. For example, separation of church and state is supported by some secularists because they do not want the state promoting religion, but also by the religious with doctrines of free

faith or who fear the corruption of religion by politics. The key is that the reasoning of different members of the public may converge on some policies even if they lack consensus regarding why those policies are appropriate.

The dispute between convergence and consensus accounts arise from disputes both about the kind of reasons necessary for respecting others and about the practical consequences of accepting shared or unshared beliefs as reasons.

Jonathan Quong (2011) most extensively defends consensus based on requirements of respectful, sincere reason giving (cf. Larmore Morals of Modernity 134-5; Macedo "Multiculturalism for the Religious Right? Defending Liberal Civic Education" in Yael Tamir (ed.) *Democratic Education in a Multicultural State* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 67-8, Schwartzman). Convergence allows you to offer considerations to others because they accept those considerations as reasons, but offering reasons you do not share may seem like mere rhetoric or manipulation. Though reasoners may converge on the same conclusion, Quong argues that only shared reasons can ground seeing each other as having *good* reason, and thus as justified, to endorse the conclusion (2011, pp. 265ff). Quong's argument here depends upon holding that we can see others as justified in holding views that we reject. Reasonable pluralism, however, may entail that different people may be justified in holding contradictory beliefs (see Gaus Justificatory Liberalism, Part 1).

Convergence theorists defend convergence reasoning as compatible with respectful engagement, and even argue that requiring consensus fails to respect diverse individuals. Stout argues that an alternative to the retreat to common ground is a Socratic dialogue in which I show you my reasons and you show me yours, or, more fully, employing the mixed "strategy of expressing one's own (perhaps idiosyncratic) reasons for a political policy while also directing fair-minded, nonmanipulative, sincere immanent criticism against one's opponent's reasons." (Stout, p. 285) Furthermore, respecting people in light of reasonable pluralism may require taking their diverse comprehensive views seriously instead of restricting appeal to them (see Vallier, p. 264, p. 273; Stout, p. 271)

Practical Concerns

While it may seem natural to judge the appropriateness of behavior in actual public discourse in light of an account of the nature of a public reason, some theorists reverse this order of explanation. For instance, Macedo emphasizes that there are "practical political values that inform the liberal ideal of public reason..." (unpublished, p. 36, and Macedo, Stephen. "A Republic of Reasons: Public Reason and the Constitution of the Public Sphere" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the APSA 2008 Annual Meeting, Hynes Convention Center, Boston,*

Massachusetts, Aug 28, 2008). The primary practical concern regards the role of public reasoning for social stability. Potentially cooperative people face a problem of mutually assuring each other of their intentions for ongoing cooperation. Consensus theorists argue that use of shared reasons is meant to solve this mutual assurance problem and thus promote political stability (Weithman, Why Political Liberalism? pp. 327ff), while convergence reasoning involves the private reasons of others that will seem to us "dubious" and not assuring. (Macedo unpublished manuscript pp. 20-21; quoted by Vallier p. 271) Gillian K. Hadfield and Stephen Macedo present a formal model to argue in favor of a consensus theory. Their model indicates that a shared system of reasoning, which enables people to mutually predict each others' behavior, is necessary for assurance of mutual cooperation, particularly in situations requiring decentralized enforcement.

The claims that discourse in terms of shared reasons is needed for stability faces many empirical challenges. In the related context of civic education, Chandran Kukathas argues against Macedo that shared commitments even to liberal values are not even necessary for stability: "Liberal societies seem well capable of operating with a good deal of dissenting opinion, and a great deal of political apathy." ([["Education and Citizenship in Diverse Societies" p. 10 of draft]]) Moreover, restricting the permissible reasons in public discourse to consensus reasoning may cause greater instability. Robert Talisse argues that requirements to omit controversial considerations, as consensus-based public reasoning seems to, leads some to see themselves as under unjustified political impositions preventing them from expressing relevant moral views. Such people will form small, like-minded groups, and research in social epistemology suggests that such groups will move to more radical positions and generate instability (Talisse, "Social Epistemology and the Politics of Omission"). Even informal restrictions leads to radicalization, while critical engagement at least meliorates polarizing tendencies (Talisse, pp. 113-4).

Further empirical social research is needed to resolve disputes regarding the use of different kinds of reasoning on social stability. Relevant to these questions is research on the stability of social norms. Bicchieri reports the stability of norms depends more on observable compliant behavior (Grammar of Society, ch. 4; cf. Gaus Tale of Two Sets). When a coordination point is established, expressions of commitment seem futile in the light of defection and largely superfluous in the light of compliance. Central to Bicchieri's account of norms is that they are often stabilized by convergence of agents with diverse beliefs and preferences for cooperation. Certain social processes allow the separate reasoning of diverse individual leads to a shared public norm. Understanding public

reasons requires a greater understanding of the dynamics of both public dialogues and these other coordination

processes.

3 Conclusion: Reasoning in a Plural Society

Puzzles about the possibility of shared, public rationality and reasons derive from a variety of sources: social

science, the philosophy of science, and the moral pluralism of modern societies. Although developments in all these

fields serve to cast doubt on the Enlightenment's ideal of a common universal reason, they pose different challenges.

The ideal of public reason is as diverse as the sources of our doubts about the possibility of shared ways of reasoning

in contemporary societies. In all its manifestations, however, the ideal of public reason seeks to maintain the

heritage of the Enlightenment—the free use of human reason will lead us to agreement.

See also:

Bioethics: Examples from the Life Sciences; Economics and Ethics; Ethics and Values; Prisoner's Dilemma, One-

shot and Iterated; Utilitarian Social Thought, History of; Utilitarianism: Contemporary Applications; Welfare

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