

Education and a meaningful life

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1 The idea of a meaningful life

I imagine no one will doubt that education – at home and school – should help to equip children to lead a meaningful life. Some would also say that the aim is especially worth emphasising today, when there is so much in the news about depression and happiness.

What is it to say that one's life is meaningful? People may understand this in different ways. In particular, there is a divide between a certain religious way of looking at this, and a secular. In this paper, I shall be concentrating on the secular, but before turning to this, a few words about the religious view.

On this, human life is part of God's creation. It exists for a reason, a reason in God's mind. This often has to do with what happens when this life ends.

This life can be seen as a testing-ground, for instance, the successful passing into eternal life in heaven, those failing, into eternal damnation.

For religious believers of this sort, each of us lives a life that *is* meaningful even if not all of us – eg. non-believers – *take it to be* meaningful in this sense. A secular person can certainly accept that meaning, in one of its senses, can directly have to do with what someone has in mind. The meaning of a cough, for instance, may lie in a desire to attract someone's attention. So there is no problem about agreeing that the term 'meaning' can be used in this intentional sense. What the secular thinker finds problematic, owing to doubts about the existence of God, is the notion of *divine* intentions.

That there is room for a purely secular notion of life's meaningfulness is clear from the feelings of meaninglessness that non-religious people sometimes experience, when in a state of depression, for instance, and/or when contemplating suicide. They see no point in living. Perhaps the things that used to make sense for them no longer do so.

Others close to a depressed person often make the distinction between appearance and reality that we have just seen used in a religious context. The

suffering person *takes her life to be* meaningless although in fact *it is not so*. She has an interesting job, a loving family, keen artistic interests and so on. She is simply going through a bad patch.

This gives us an entrée into what counts as a meaningful life in a secular sense. But before examining that more closely, two points about how the secular sense differs, or may differ, from the religious.

First, in the religious context, the meaningfulness of an individual's life is a function of the meaningfulness of human life in general in relation to the whole cosmos. This makes meaningfulness, whether of a particular life or of human life in general, dependent on something that lies outside that life. In other words, life has an extrinsic meaning. Is this true of the secular sense? If we say of the depressed person that she is leading a meaningful life even though for her it all seems pointless, it looks as if we have in mind only features intrinsic to her life – an absorbing job, a loving family and so on. Coupled with this, we do not see the meaningfulness of her life as dependent on the meaningfulness of human life as a whole.

Secondly, is the same notion of meaningfulness at work in the two contexts? There is no suggestion in the secular sense that a human life is an intentional product, so any sense of meaningfulness that relies on this is ruled out. But might there still be something in common? We also relate meaningfulness, more generally, to intelligibility. A string of random words is meaningless, a well-formed sentence is not. A paragraph in an academic article may be so opaque that we are inclined to say it doesn't make sense. Could it be that both the religious and the secular notions of a meaningful life rely on the idea of intelligibility – of something capable of being understood?

This fits the religious case where an individual human life is to be understood in terms of divine intention. It also seems to apply to the secular notion. For the radically depressed person, the things that have filled her life – her work, her relationships with her friends, her home life, her artistic interests – none of these things now seem to make sense. The different components of her life are in one way like words randomly put together to make what looks like a sentence. They lack overall intelligibility as parts of a larger whole.

I'll now leave the religious notion behind and try to fill out this notion of intelligibility in the secular context. Human beings do what they do for reasons. They flip a switch in order to turn on a light, believing that this is an effective means of doing so. They frown to show their disapproval. Behind these reasons lie others. We turn on the light because we want to read a poem; we disapprove of what someone has done because it is unkind. Further reasons can lie behind these reasons, not only wider goals under which eg reading a poem falls, but also further beliefs about effective means to ends or about moral values like not causing others distress.

We are reminded by this how a human life is built around nests of reasons, stretching from the most local – eg at the level of switching on a light at a particular time and in a particular place – to worthwhile goals, interests and attitudes which are pervasive throughout one's life, or a significant section of it – eg. pursuing a love of German literature, or respecting others' interests.

This notion of nesting helps us to understand what it is for a human being to lead a flourishing life, ie. a life of personal well-being. We can take it as read in this context that flourishing depends on the meeting of certain basic

needs – for oxygen, food, drink, shelter, adequate income, health, social recognition and so on. It also depends on the successful and wholehearted pursuit of worthwhile activities and relationships of intrinsic importance to one. It is here that the notions of nesting and pervasiveness come into the picture. If the person who has a lifelong love of German literature is able to pursue this interest with enthusiasm and success, this contributes to her flourishing – as do her friendships, her work as a dental nurse, her part in the upbringing of her children and her passions for snorkelling and gardening.

It is not, of course, as if our pervasive interests of this kind are always mutually discrete. Perhaps most usually they interconnect in subtle ways. Values one sees in Goethe's poems may resonate with those permeating one's family life. The delights of snorkelling can be shared with one's friends.

Neither can the pervasive interests that figure so prominently in this account of personal well-being be properly characterised as belonging solely to this sphere and not at all to the sphere of one's moral attachments and responsibilities. There is no sound basis for compartmentalising personal well-being (sometimes labelled 'prudence') and morality. The mother

devoted to the upbringing of her children has this as a major personal goal. But penetrating her activities are constant thoughts about her moral responsibilities, conflicts between competing moral demands on her, altruistic concern for the well-being of her daughters.

How does this brief sketch of personal well-being connect with meaningfulness? It shows that the flourishing life must be a meaningful one. It is so not in any 'deep' sense. Perhaps the association that some people make between meaningfulness and profundity is, if not a direct product of the religious interpretation of the term, something like a secular shadow cast by the latter. What I am at pains to bring out, throughout this paper, is the everydayness, the banality, of the secular notion of meaningfulness. Most of us take it for granted in 99% of our own lives and in those of other people.

The flourishing life must among other things be a meaningful one. The specifics of one's day-to-day activities are intelligible only against the background of more and more inclusive reasons, culminating finally in one's most pervasive worthwhile goals and attachments. While there is no good reason, as we have seen, why these should have to be isolated from each

other, neither is there a good reason why, guided by the perhaps misguided desire that a life be maximally meaningful, these more global concerns should have to harmonise together to meet an ideal of a unitary life. Some people may want such harmony, whether in the form of a super-concern under which all others fit, or via deliberate balances between opposing concerns. One might imagine someone, for instance, choosing a tranquil, sedentary, cerebral activity like reading literature as a counterweight to rock climbing or being a reporter in a war zone. Such a life would have more unity than one containing several unassorted interests, but it would not necessarily be more meaningful.

To say that a flourishing life must be meaningful is not to say that every feature of it relevant to its flourishing must be. For it may contain events that are not intelligible in terms of reasons, a bad toothache, for example.

If a life is meaningful, must its possessor *see it as* meaningful? Normally, this must be the case, given the necessary role of practical reasons in human life explained above. The person switching on a light to indulge in her master-passion of reading German literature knows that this is why she is doing this. She almost certainly will not have this thought consciously in

mind while flipping the switch, even though, if pressed about why she is acting as she does, she will be able to come out with the reason. A meaningful life does not require reflectiveness about one's nested structures of reasons, even if it does require a self-awareness which could take a dispositional rather than an occurrent form. Grasping that one's life is meaningful does not demand conscious awareness that it is so.

Sometimes a person may be leading what is to some degree a meaningful life but see it as meaningless. We have come across such a case already, in the shape of the woman suffering from depression while having an interesting job, close friends, a loving family life and so on. With her, strands of intelligibility which have helped to give her life the structure it has within various frameworks of reasons have begun to fray or snap. She may go through the motions of being good company when with her friends, but she can no longer see any point in this. Why be with friends when one no longer shares their *joie de vivre* and must be a burden to them? One is better off alone with one's own misery.

Are there lives which *are* meaningless, as distinct from being seen as meaningless? Meaningfulness, like its cognate, intelligibility, is not an all-

or-nothing phenomenon. It can come in different degrees. Could it be that, possibly for all but young infants and some people with severe learning difficulties, no human life is entirely devoid of meaning?

I mention young infants because, on the analysis so far given, it is hard to see how they could yet be leading a meaningful life. There is no, even embryonic, structure of practical reasons at work in it. They feed, sleep, cry, eliminate, move their limbs. There are certainly reasons why these things occur, but these are to be understood as largely biological causes: they are not reasons connected with the subject's intentions and goals as in the case of switching on a light to read a book. Only when infants become capable of intentional action – like reaching for a piece of fruit to put it in their mouth – are they beginning to be capable of entering the world of meaningfulness. As yet, it is indeed the merest beginning, for it is only as they come to understand language – and this can begin before they are able to use it – that they are able gradually to join the rest of us in getting inside a framework of reasons connected with goals of importance to them by which their lives can be structured.

We do not think of an infant's life as meaningless, but as potentially meaningful, given her initiation into the framework just mentioned. Infants apart, the more someone's life includes a large measure of isolated or unintelligible activities, the less meaningful it is. Take as an extreme case someone who flits from one hedonic delight to another in an apparently random way and has no settled interests or attachments. Or take that most notorious of philosophical inventions, Rawls's man with a love of counting grass blades in a city park. His life is more structured than that of the butterfly hedonist. Perhaps he can show how most things he does facilitate his master commitment. The problem in his case is that this commitment is so obviously pointless.

There are other ways in which a life can be meaningless, at least for a spell. – When, for instance, a framework by which one has previously lived crumbles away and there is nothing left to rely on. One loses one's religious faith, perhaps, and therewith the point of one's most central activities. Or someone with whom one has lived intimately for a long time suddenly dies and one's whole world becomes empty. Or, like Alan Johnston in Gaza, one is kidnapped and left for months in a room with nothing to occupy one – but

unlike Alan Johnston one lacks the inner strength somehow to give structure to the void and connect it with one's regular life.

Perhaps one might say of some of the examples in the last paragraph that these lives seem, rather than are, meaningless. This may be based on the assumption that some of the structures that contribute to the meaningfulness of a life are still in place when a central structure disappears. Someone who loses their faith, for instance, may still have a loving family, close friends, a rewarding job and other interests. In the trauma of loss of faith it may seem to them that their whole life is in pieces, but this is not so. I am sure this is very often what happens, but sometimes a trauma can be more all-pervasive. In such cases, like the loss of a lifelong companion, who, as one says, 'has meant everything' to one, or the sudden loss of many of one's faculties, a life can indeed become meaningless, and not merely seem so.

Some kinds of slavery can provide another kind of meaninglessness – where one's life is tightly organised in the interests of the slave owner and one has no opportunity to inject any personal goals or attachments into it. Being reduced to a tool, a useful machine makes a meaningful life all but impossible. In industrialised societies some forms of work are not slavery

but still undertaken reluctantly as a means of survival. Those who undertake them do not lead lives totally devoid of meaning; but meaningfulness comes in degrees, as has been said, and lives of this sort may well be less meaningful than those involving more pleasurable or fulfilling work

To come back to the example of slavery. This shows that a life structured around means and ends is not necessarily a meaningful one. For this, the ends have to be one's own, not someone else's.

But what is it to say that they are one's own? We need not claim that one's ends must be autonomously chosen – as distinct, say, from being imbibed unreflectively from one's community. People in tradition-directed societies, who come to have a ready-made pattern of life rather than one adopted in preference to alternatives, can still lead meaningful lives. - As long, that is, as, unlike the slaves described above, they wholeheartedly embrace their roles as mothers, shepherds, or whatever. It may well be that, in a modern liberal society like Britain, we think of a meaningful life usually in the context of autonomous choices, but conceptually the two notions can be detached from each other.

2. Education for a meaningful life

If this will do as a brief exposition of life's meaningfulness, what shall we say in this regard about the aims of education?

First, we must be careful not to make meaningfulness too important. If we make preparation for a meaningful life the *central* aim of education, we should remember that, on the analysis given so far, it seems as if a tyrant or a master criminal may lead a meaningful life, or at least have the sense that he is leading one. He may see his tyranny or criminal activity as enabling him to enjoy all kinds of goods – the intrinsic pleasures of running something successfully, winter scuba diving in the Caribbean, looking after one's family etc – which could well figure in the meaningful life of someone morally untainted. Equipment for a meaningful life may well be a necessary ingredient of worthwhile educational aims, given the place that meaningfulness must play in a personally flourishing and morally responsive life. But it cannot be enough on its own.

I shall assume from now on that education should have to do with facilitating lives of well-being, both the pupil's and, via the altruistic aspects

of the latter, those of other people. These lives will be meaningful lives. Importantly, their possessors must also feel them to be meaningful. An outwardly successful life accompanied by chronic depression is not a flourishing one. For it to be so, you have to be involved in your major activities, including your relationships, if not always with enthusiasm, at least wholeheartedly. You lose yourself, as we say, in what you are doing. This is not always pleasurable. A close relationship or a professional commitment can bring with it anxious concern, even anguish.

The upshot of all this is that parents and teachers should bring children up with the sense that their lives are meaningful. They should also, of course, *be* meaningful. Both these requirements point towards involving children in activities and relationships in which they can be fully and successfully involved, on the way to their coming to have major, pervasive commitments of this sort throughout their lives.

The second – reality – requirement underlines the parent's or teacher's responsibility to try to ensure the sense of meaningfulness is not built on sand. Parents should think twice about their conviction that their child is a genius in the making, perhaps leading them into expectations that may fall in

pieces around them when they are older. Deeply held religious convictions may (or may not) also be ill-founded and lead to similar misfortune. What would help in such cases is an epistemological element in a child's education – in the shape of a disposition to test the credentials of beliefs like these – about one's own abilities and predilections, as well as about one's place in the cosmos.

Some activities that parents and teachers encourage are minimally open to the possibility of such disappointment. Reading literature, for example. Its rewards are immediate and intrinsic – and not dependent on an improbable future event like the realisation of high hopes about a child's giftedness, or, in the religious case, attaining paradise.

Since a meaningful life depends on nested frameworks of reasons, parents have to begin as early as infancy the long process of building these up, a process in which school teachers will later participate. Children come to know what a meaningful life is by engaging in one. The knowledge they require is not of a theoretical sort such as may figure in academic learning. It is not as though they can acquire it from books while their everyday life is filled with isolated experiences – in school and from TV and print media –

forming no larger patterns of personal significance. Education for a meaningful life has to be a process that pervades one's day-to-day life. This is why educational reformers who pin their hopes on isolated happiness lessons as an antidote to present or later depression may be on the wrong track. None of this is to deny that higher-order reflectiveness about meaningfulness, meaninglessness and their place in human life should not be encouraged in young people's education – eg, when appropriate, in literary studies and philosophy.

Educators should facilitate the child's leading an autonomous life as well as a meaningful one. As we have seen, the two do not necessarily go together. One can flourish and hence live meaningfully in a tradition-directed society. But in a society like our own, constitutionally based on liberal, democratic values, people are expected to make their own decisions about the major contours of their lives. The frameworks of meaningfulness that their parents begin to create for them early on as part of their everyday lives are unlikely to serve them for ever. Most young people will choose to launch out on their own. Leaving the nest of home life and formal education may bring with it the risk of an at least temporary loss of a sense of meaningfulness as traumatic as losing one's faith, job or long-term partner. There are many of

us who have experienced this. Is it only to be expected? Or should we think about how such traumas may be avoided?

To some extent this touches on wider social issues beyond the province of home or school education. I have already spoken about jobs widely seen as unattractive. It is interesting that we use the term ‘meaningful work’ to describe jobs that can be fairly easily fitted into an overall pattern of preferred activities, taking a person’s life as a whole. The more mechanical, repetitive or boring a job is, the harder it is to fit into such a pattern. Yet, for countless young people leaving school, jobs like these are, or seem to be, all that lies ahead of them.

If we assume that it is employment policy, not education policy, that can do most to help people to lead more meaningful lives in this respect, what might parents and schools do to help young people cope with the transition from a sheltered to a more fully-fledged existence?

I focus on two linked suggestions.

[1] First, there is no one meaningful pattern of life that people can lead. In my own life, for instance, I could have devoted much more time to going to concerts. I could have concentrated more on politics and less on academic pursuits. For most of us, there is a whole array of worthwhile activities, suitable to our temperament and experience, that we might have, but have not, engaged in. A good education begins to open up such possibilities for us. This is not only so that we can choose, as autonomous beings, what we prefer. It is also something of an insurance against failure. If we cannot become a chef, say, there are still other forms of meaningful work fitting our predilections.

This way of thinking about education as opening up possibilities is less ambitious than some other versions of this same notion. It is easy to be seduced by the thought: the autonomous persons we have in mind as the products of education should, in principle, have a good understanding of all the options open to them. If those responsible for their education restrict the number of options, they are imposing on them their own view of the good life and its constituents. Learners have the right to be, and ought to be, acquainted with a comprehensive range of possible options. (See, for

example, White 1973: 25; and Keith Thompson's critique in Thompson and White 1975, Section 2).

Sometimes this argument rests on a subjectivist view of personal well-being, which makes this a function of the satisfaction of the individual's major informed desires. But it may also go with accounts locating worthwhile activities in a realm not dependent on subjective preferences. What characterises it is its insistence on comprehensiveness. In this it fits well with an approach to the school curriculum emphasising 'a rounded education', or initiation into *all* the major branches of knowledge.

We need to ask whether this attachment to comprehensiveness is justifiable. If we dig back to the seventeenth century, we find a religious justification, in radical protestant circles at least, for an encyclopaedic approach to learning. It is a Christian duty, insofar as one is able, to gain an understanding of God's created world in all its manifold variety. This is because God is all-knowing and there should be an 'instauration of the image of God in man' (Hotson 2005). This kind of reasoning gains little purchase today.

With regard to acquaintance with options among worthwhile activities, as distinct from an understanding of the world, the argument just given, to do with avoiding imposition of other people's value systems, may seem more appealing to modern readers, at least those with liberal sentiments. Its weakness is that it may bring with it another kind of illiberalism. It favours acquainting young people with an unrestricted range of possible worthwhile activities. But why should we think that this will be good for them, rather than bad for them? However the aim is met, it sounds as if it will take a lot of time. There is an issue here about whether 'acquainting with' implies that, in order to make informed choices, learners must actually *experience* all the different activities, or whether in some cases non-experience-based *knowledge* of them is enough. The former will take more time than the latter, but even the latter will consume a great deal of it, given that so many activities are involved. There is also an issue about how one counts 'all activities' and how these can be incorporated into a learner's programme. In the area of reading fiction, for instance, are we to count as separate items detective stories, ghost stories, war stories, historical novels (and so on)? What about the many different forms of chemical engineering, acting, sightseeing, gardening....? Whatever the answers to all these questions, obliging a student to follow a time-consuming programme which opens up

possibilities in this sense is an infringement of his or her liberty that is hard to justify, especially as [a] for reasons of time, only a small fraction of these activities can figure as components of any human life taken as a whole, and [b] the learner is likely to be temperamentally attuned only to a few of them.

Temperamental attunement is a key consideration in an education for a meaningful life. As already said, we want learners to choose among options and not be imprisoned within just one pattern of meaningfulness. But the more emphasis there is on comprehensiveness, the harder it will be for many students to see good reasons for what they are doing and hence the more their work is likely to be accompanied by a sense of its meaninglessness.

What students will need for a meaningful life is not comprehensiveness, but, for reasons mentioned already, acquaintance with a number of options which will suit the sort of people they are in process of becoming. I am not implying here any such determinism as is found in developmentalist or other nativist accounts of growing up.

All this speaks in favour of tailoring programmes to individual predilections and allowing pupils increasing scope as they grow older to share in the construction of these programmes. I should underline here that all this is in

the context of educational for a meaningful life. There may well be other educational aims, to do with citizenship, for instance, in attaining which individual inclinations will figure less. This said, if work on citizenship is to be meaningful to students, it still has to mesh in with their motivational structures.

In this scheme, young people will leave school with plenty of experience of engaging in a range of activities which both help to make their present lives meaningful and which they can also take onwards into the future as the foundation of a life that will continue to be meaningful. There will be sufficient flexibility in this for them to pass to other valuable activities within their repertoire if one source of meaningfulness dries up. This way of conceiving the passage from home and school to the world beyond is likely to make the transition less prone to a temporary loss of meaningfulness.

[2] Accompanying this kind of opening-up of options must be time to explore them, to decide which are more important than others. Under present arrangements, there is little opportunity to do this at school, since examination work is so demanding. It is widely seen as one of the functions

of undergraduate life at university to permit this kind of experimentation and review. Gap years also help in this.

The goal – time for exploration – is admirable, but we need to rethink the means of achieving it. First, the goal is desirable for everyone, yet under a half of young people in the UK go on from school to university and even fewer take a gap year on the way. In the interests of a meaningful life for all, we need a system which is socially fairer. Second, this exploratory role of undergraduate education is accompanied at present by its academic role in preparing students for degrees. While there is a strong case for a period of exploration after the age of eighteen, the taken-for-granted view that it is a good thing that young people go straight from school to studying for a (usually specialised) degree is less defensible. While this may suit some people's predilections, it may well not suit others'. Some people may do better to go to take a university course later in life when more highly motivated to do so. For these, following the conventional line may well detract from a sense of the meaningfulness of their lives. They may end up – as I and many others have done – with a specialised degree in history or mathematics and not know what use it is to them. Third, we could reconceptualise the later years of schooling so as to build in more time for

exploration at this point rather than later. This would mean reducing academic pressure to study for examinations. Since this pressure has mainly to do with securing a university place, breaking the conventional link between leaving school and going straight on to university should help in this reduction.

If we put these various considerations together, we see the need radically to rethink how we try to realise this exploratory aim of education, so that all adolescents have the same opportunities as others, beginning with the later years of schooling and not necessarily tied to pursuing a university course.

3 Meaningfulness and the school curriculum

I turn, finally, to a major obstacle in the way of education for a meaningful life. I have in mind the way we think about the school curriculum and its timetabling. If students change after every fifty minutes to a different academic subject, this would seem a hindrance to meaningfulness. Their teachers should be helping them to knit together patterns of practical reasons in the way already described. More and more, their day-to-day lives should become filled with increasingly complex pursuits of all sorts – not only

academic ones – on which they can be enthusiastically engaged. No doubt they will want to turn from one to another at intervals, sometimes back to a task that previously occupied them. A régime like that can be expected to maximise their sense of involvement. Yet the actual régime to which they have to submit is one of changes of activity fixed by the bell and along a narrow gamut of traditional academic subjects. The system looks highly counterproductive from the point of view of meaningfulness.

It may not always have done so. The traditional subject-based curriculum and the timetabling that goes with it are traceable back in Britain, America and northern Europe to radical protestant thinking of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (White 2006: ch5). They then made sense given certain assumptions: that (as has already been mentioned) as full as possible a knowledge of God's world is necessary for salvation; that time is God's time and not a minute of it is to be wasted; that children may well die young and so need to be stocked with knowledge as early as possible; that relentless labour in the service of God is a religious duty; that lifelong economic activity for social betterment as a manifestation of one's faith is facilitated by a régime of largely modern subjects rather than the classics alone.

The kind of curriculum and timetabling arrangements to which we have become used were once unproblematic as preparation for a meaningful life. 'Meaningfulness' in that context has to be understood in its religious sense. It is not at all clear how meaningful current arrangements are in a secular interpretation of the term.

Some evidence for this may be found in the perceived irrelevance that these arrangements have for many children and the behaviour problems that can ensue. This is not surprising. The onus is on those who would support the status quo to show how its basis in traditional academic subjects which students have no option but to study, and in frequent and unrelated changes of direction among them, are intended to help learners develop a framework of practical rationality.

Do students more compliant with the system find it more meaningful? Some of them, like myself when young, may take its being so on trust. They assume that the school knows what is best for them, even if they do not know this themselves. This can lead to their forcing the fragmented patterning of their schooldays into their own peculiar kind of meaningfulness. Diligent learners build up study routines that give their lives

a structure, having taken it on authority that all this is for the best. I suspect this is a widespread phenomenon among the keenest of young learners and will strike a chord with many readers of this paper. The trouble with this, however, is that, as many of us will know, the hoped-for good can sometimes prove a chimera and one's labours come to seem wasted.

To make school life more meaningful requires rethinking the traditional academic curriculum of discrete subjects and the traditional way in which this is timetabled. It means beginning farther back. We need to reconsider what schools should be for and arrange learning activities in the light of these aims (White 2007). If, as has been argued, one of the aims should be to equip learners for a life which both seems to them and is meaningful, it should be instantiated in each one of their school activities, inside and outside the classroom.

Note

The basic idea for this paper arose from reading remarks about meaningfulness in Joseph Raz's essay 'The role of well-being' (Raz 2004: 279-81) and his citation of an unpublished DPhil dissertation by Malte

Gerhold (2004). I am grateful to both authors for the stimulation their works have provided.

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