Scholarship as a Way of Life

Character and Virtue in the Age of Big Humanities

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Commentary: Scholarship as a Way of Life— Character and Virtue in the Age of Big Humanities

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ABSTRACT

From the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, most European scholars considered moral cultivation as the primary purpose of the humanities. The humanities were human not just because they concerned the products of the human mind but also because they transformed scholars and students into better human beings. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rise of Big Humanities questioned this moral purpose. However, Big Humanities also reemphasized the importance of *epistemic virtues* for scholarship. The language of epistemic virtues helped scholars create new communities of learning and scholarship. Within these communities, the language of virtues established common standards of collaboration and granted scholars a sense of purpose. Many of these scholars also continued to associate epistemic virtues with moral virtues.

During the early modern period, European scholars considered humanistic scholarship as an important branch of learning and erudition because of its moral purpose. The Italian humanists, who revived Cicero's concept of *studia humanitatis* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, associated these studies with a particular set of disciplines—grammar, rhetoric, poetics, history, and moral philosophy—which served personal ennoblement. By reading literary, historical, and philosophical texts, a student of the *studia humanitatis* refined his moral character and learned how to suppress his vices and fortify his virtues.[1] Thus, the *studia humanitatis*

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1. Cicero used the expression in *Pro Archia poeta*, 2.3. After Petrarch's discovery of this text in a monastic library in France in 1333, the concept gradually became commonplace among the humanists. See Benjamin G. Kohl, "The Changing Concept of the *Studia Humanitatis* in the Early Renaissance," *Renaissance Studies* 6 (1992): 185–209. Also, Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance," *Byzantion* 17 (1944–45): 346–74.

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were human not just because they concerned the products of the human mind but also because they transformed students and scholars into better human beings. This moral purpose remained an important justification for humanistic education and for its central place within the university curriculum. In 1603, for example, the dean of the faculty of philosophy, and former assistant to Tycho Brahe, Johannes Stephanius, greeted new students at the University of Copenhagen by explaining that the "fruit and effect" of the *studia humanitatis* would be to replace the "vices" in their souls with "virtues," thereby transforming the students from "beasts into human beings."[2] As late as in 1765, Edme-François Mallet explained in the *Encyclopédie* that *Belles-Lettres* had been named *humanités* because "their purpose is to extend graces into the spirit and mildness into the manners and thus to humanize those who cultivate them."[3] Thus, for centuries, scholars considered the humanities, as Pierre Hadot claimed about ancient philosophy, as a "way of life" and practice of humanistic scholarship as a kind of "spiritual exercises" aimed at the intellectual and moral cultivation of the self.[4]

With the emergence of the modern research university in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, scholars became less certain about the unity and uniqueness of the humanities, and sometimes just equated *humaniora* and *studia humanitatis* with classical philology, but they nonetheless continued to emphasize the moral purpose of scholarship. At the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810, the educational reformer, and classical scholar, Wilhelm von Humboldt argued that the university should be a center of the "moral culture of the nation" and a place for "spiritual and moral self-cultivation [*Bildung*]."[5] The great classicist Friedrich August Wolf questioned if names such as *humaniora* or *studia humanitatis* suited his new specialized academic discipline of *Alterthumswissenschaft* but nonetheless agreed that every branch of scholarship "contributes somewhat to the perfection of the human being."[6] Scholars at other universities, in other countries, and in other disciplines shared these ideals. In 1852, the first rector of the new Catholic University of Ireland, John Henry

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2. Johannes Stephanius, "Ad Actum Depositionis 1603," in *Kjøbenhavns Universitets Historie fra 1537 til 1621*, ed. Holger Fr. Rørdam, vol. 4 (Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri, 1868–74), 541–44, 543–44.

3. Edme-François Mallet, "Humanités," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot, vol. 8 (Paris, 1765), 348.

4. Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), and *Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

5. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Ueber die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin," in *Werke*, ed. Andeas Flitner and Klaus Giel, vol. 4 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010), 255–66, 255.

6. Friedrich August Wolf, *Vorlesungen über die Alterthumswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Verlag der Lehnhold'schen Buchhandlung, 1839), 6–10, 7.

Newman, claimed that university training "aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life."[7] As late as 1893, the first chair of University of Chicago's history department, Hermann von Holst, explained that the "university or the students have not done their whole duty, if the student does not carry from the halls of the *Alma mater* the full consciousness into life that knowledge, because it is a good, is also a *sacred trust*." The students should realize, he continued, that "correct thinking is not only intellectually, but also morally a duty toward one's self and toward one's fellow-men."[8]

During the first decades of the twentieth century, however, academics started questioning the moral purpose of scholarship. Today, state bureaucrats and senior university management, such as Humboldt and Newman, normally don't consider the moral education of the nation, or the cultivation of the students' moral character, as the central mission of the university. Governments instead fund universities because they are places for the production and transmission of useful and practical knowledge and only reluctantly accept the existence of humanities departments, if they somehow hone skills considered valuable and if the students find employment after the end of their studies. At the most, for example in the American liberal arts tradition as well as at the remaining progressive universities and colleges around the world, higher education may claim to prepare students to active citizenship and to install the habits of critical thinking, tolerance, and openness to the thoughts of others.[9] To many, the modern university is nothing but, as the president of the University of California, Clark Kerr, proposed in 1962, "a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking."[10]

I. BIG HUMANITIES

Historians of science have connected the decline of the moral purpose of scholarship to the emergence of Big Science. During the first decades of the twentieth century,

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7. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1873), 177–78.

8. Hermann E. von Holst, "The Need of Universities in the United States," *Educational Review* 5 (1893): 116–17. Also, "Nationalisation of Education and the Universites," *The Monist* 3 (July 1893): 493–509.

9. For example, Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). For a recent overview of Anglophone discussions, see also Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. 125–50.

10. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20.

science increasingly became an impersonal and collaborative enterprise and an ever larger part of the world's scientists worked together as teams in huge research institutions and industrial laboratories, such as the German Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft and AT&T's Bell Laboratories. Thus, the individual scientist no longer seemed critical to the progress of science. The scientist was merely a worker among other workers, and the professional occupation with science was no evidence of moral or even intellectual superiority.[11] Modern scholarship, as the sociologist Max Weber explained as early as 1918, "is a 'vocation' organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and knowledge of interrelated facts. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations."[12]

The movement toward collaborative research, as Rüdiger vom Bruch and others have argued, may have started in the humanities rather than in the natural sciences. Vom Bruch emphasized the large research projects of the Prussian Academy of Sciences at the end of the nineteenth century, especially the *Thesarus Linguae Latinae*, but one may also point to the great German historical and philological editorial projects of the nineteenth century, such as *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, founded in 1819 and 1863.[13] These projects demanded considerable organization, the collaboration of many specialized contributors, and substantial financial support. They proved the possibility of scholarly teamwork and the effectiveness of the division of academic labor. As early as 1890, the historian of Ancient Rome and founder of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum,* Theodor Mommsen named such collaborative efforts "big scholarship" (*Großwissenschaft*).[14] A decade later, the theologian and church historian Adolf von Harnack, who in 1911 became the first president of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, introduced the idea of the "big business of scholarship" (*Großbetrieb der Wissenschaft*), with reference to "the progressing division of labor" and the working and organizational practices that the Prussian Academy of Sci-

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11. Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 21–91.

12. Quoted in translation from Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 2009), 152.

13. Rüdiger vom Bruch, "Mommsen und Harnack: Die Geburt von Big Science aus den Geisteswissenschaften," in *Theodor Mommsen: Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alexander Demandt, Andreas Goltz, and Heinrich Schlange-Schöningen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 4), 121–41. Also, Carlos Spoerhase, "Big Humanities: 'Größe' und 'Großforschung' als Kategorien geisteswissenschaftlicher Selbstbeobachtung," *Geschichte der Germanistik* 37/38 (2010): 9–27; and Torsten Kahlert, "'Große Projekte': Mommsens Traum und der Diskurs um Big Science und Großforschung," in *Wissenskulturen: Bedingungen wissenschaftlicher Innovation*, ed. Harald Müller and Florian Eßer (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2012), 67–86.

14. Theodor Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1905), 209.

ence had learned from the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.[15] In the humanities, as in the sciences, the emergence of "big scholarship" also questioned the importance of the individual scholar. Scholarship, as Mommsen remarked in 1895, "strides unstoppable and mightily forwards, but against this giant rising building the individual worker seems constantly smaller and more inferior."[16]

German scholars were unusually well organized and funded, but other European scholars also engaged in collaborative research. One example is Lord Acton's *Cambridge Modern History*. In this work, he employed what he called a "judicious division of labour," which assigned different chapters to specialist contributors. His ambition was that authors should be almost invisible and "that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen, and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison, took it up."[17] In the introduction of the first volume, published in 1902 after Acton's death, the editors further emphasized the "cooperative principle" of modern research:

> The abundance of original records, of monographs and works of detail, that have been published within the last fifty years, surpasses by far the grasp of a single mind. To work up their results into a uniform whole demands the application of the cooperative principle—a principle to which we already owe such notable achievements of historical research as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, our own *Rolls Series*, and the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Without such organised collaboration, an adequate and comprehensive history of modern times has become impossible. Hence the plan of the present work, the execution of which is divided among a large and varied body of scholars.[18]

According to Acton, collaborative research and the invisibility of the authors were not just necessary consequences of information overload and the rise of Big Humanities. The combined efforts of the many Anglophone contributors should deliver if not a "view from nowhere" then at least a view from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.[19] The authors, Acton insisted, should "avoid the needless utterance of opinion, and

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15. Adolf Harnack, *Geschichte der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin: Stilke, 1901), 481, 736, 756.

16. Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 196.

17. Lord Acton, *Longitude 30 West: A Confidential Report to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), unpaginated. Also, Josef L. Altholz, "Lord Acton and the Plan for the Cambridge Modern History," *Historical Journal* 39 (1996): 723–36.

18. A. W. Ward, G. W. Protheo, and Stanley Leathes, eds., *The Cambridge Modern History*, 13 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902–11), 1:vii.

19. Also, Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

the service of a cause. Contributors will understand that we are established, not under the meridian of Greenwich, but in longitude 30 West; that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike."[20] Thus, the *Cambridge Modern History* should serve as an example of, what Lorraine Daston has called, "aperspectival objectivity," which transmitted the facts without the personal interference of the authors or the moral or political lessons that they believed could be inferred from these facts.[21]

II. VIRTUES OF BIG HUMANITIES

As the essays in this focus section show, if collaborative research caused anxieties and doubts about the moral purpose of scholarship, it only reemphasized the importance of *epistemic virtues*. The essays discuss important figures in the formative period of Big Humanities, such as Harnack and Acton, and demonstrate how they, their students, and their critics were almost obsessively occupied with questions about character and virtue. Even if their research appeared impersonal and impartial, these scholars still considered their work as a "way of life" rather than just a "vocation." Working together on collaborative projects, and avoiding "the needless utterance of opinion," demanded a particular kind of character and particular kinds of personal qualities. As Herman Paul argues in the case of Albert Naudé, scholars who followed the models of large collaborative projects, here the model of the historian Georg Waitz and the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, often promoted epistemic virtues such as thoroughness, precision, and accuracy.[22] Adolf von Harnack, Katharina Manteufel argues, similarly identified a group of students who could be considered "reliable," "scrupulous," and "self-sacrificing," for specialized philological work.[23] Thus, Big Humanities promoted a scholarly character similar to the character promoted by Big Science.[24]

These epistemic virtues were important for the practice of collaborative research. If humanities research should be progressive and accumulative, this research, as Acton explained in his proposal for the *Cambridge Modern History*, relied upon work of others. The publication, Acton claimed in 1896, was "a unique opportunity of record-

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20. Acton, *Longitude 30 West*, unpaginated.

21. Lorraine Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," *Social Studies of Science* 22 (1992): 597–618.

22. Herman Paul, "The Virtues and Vices of Albert Naudé: Toward a History of Scholarly Personae," *History of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2016): 327–38, in this issue.

23. Katharina Manteufel, "A Three-Story House: Adolf Von Harnack and Practices of Academic Mentoring around 1900," *History of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2016): 355–70, in this issue.

24. Also, Lorraine Daston, "Objectivity and Impartiality: Epistemic Virtues in the Humanities," in *The Making of the Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Westeijn, vol. 3 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 27–41.

ing, in the way most useful to the greatest number, the fullness of the knowledge which the nineteenth century is about to bequeath." Where "all accessible information has been thoroughly absorbed" there was no reason for the authors to repeat the investigations and where the sources had already been published there was no reason to visit the archives. The credibility of the *Cambridge Modern History* therefore depended upon the credibility of contemporary historians and source editions. Acton, who, as Léjon Saarloos shows,[25] was renowned for his accumulation of material and factual knowledge, did not consider it possible for any individual to overview the "many thousands of volumes" of new historical works and sources. As editor, Acton therefore also depended upon the credibility of the contributors and, in his proposal, emphasized the need to find "the right men," that each contributor should be a "true scholar," and that, especially if new archival and manuscript work was necessary, "all will depend on the successful selection of writers."[26]

The language of virtues may also have granted researchers in the Big Humanities a sense of purpose. Doing collaborative research demanded dull, monotonous, and repetitive work and, during the second half of the nineteenth century, scholars often compared their work to factory work. When Mommsen in 1890 invented the word "big scholarship" he related it to "big industry" (*Großindustrie*).[27] Harnack similarly associated the "big business of scholarship," as quoted by Manteufel, with the "mechanization of the work."[28] The idea that one, through one's work, came to belong to a virtuous community of scholars may have served as compensation for the anonymity as well as for the many hours of hard labor. Harnack, for example, answered a former student's complaints about the harshness and loneliness of archival work by, in Manteufel's words, "heavily stressing the need for community spirit."[29] Scholars also condemned those who did not exhibit sufficient community spirit, as Christiaan Engberts shows in the case of Heinrich Ewald,[30] and thereby further emphasized their own dedication to collective scholarship and willingness to sacrifice.

Impersonal and self-sacrificing research, however, was not the only ideal of humanistic scholarship, even in the Age of Big Humanities. The ideal may have been dom-

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25. Léjon Saarloos, "Virtue and Vice in Academic Memory: Lord Acton and Charles Oman," *History of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2016): 339–54, in this issue.

26. Acton, *Longitude 30 West*, unpaginated. Also, on epistemic virtues and credibility in historiography, Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Inventing the Archive: Testimony and Virtue in Modern Historiography," *History of the Human Sciences* 26 (2013): 8–26.

27. Mommsen, *Reden und Aufsätze*, 209.

28. Manteufel, "A Three-Story House," 368.

29. Ibid., 367.

30. Christiaan Engberts, "Gossiping about the Buddha of Göttingen: Heinrich Ewald as an Unscholarly Persona," *History of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2016): 371–86, in this issue.

inant for a time, and in particular disciplines, but other ideals remained important. Paul shows how the conflict between Albert Naudé and Max Lehmann was interpreted as a conflict between two competing ideals of scholarship, between the cautious collecting of sources and facts, on the one hand, and bold conjectures and hypotheses, on the other, and shows that contemporaries considered both ideals necessary for the progress of scholarship. Harnack, as Manteufel notes, argued that the accumulation of material only should be considered as the foundation of more independent and synthetic work and admonished his students not to become too occupied with detail and nuance. Saarloos similarly shows that even Acton's admirers associated his lacking productivity with his overemphasis upon the accumulation of material and factual knowledge. Acton's critics were harsher and, as Saarloos reports, his Oxford colleague Charles Oman even described Acton as an example of scholarly "megalomania."[31] Thus, the epistemic virtues of Big Humanities could turn into vices if taken to excess or, as in Oman's critique of Acton, could be recast as vices in a different context. The personal qualities that made a great editor of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* or the *Cambridge Modern History* may not been those most desirable in a writer of original historical works or in an Oxford don. Thus, the definition of the proper scholarly character was negotiable and different hierarchies or "constellations" of epistemic virtues were concurrently possible.

The scholars not only considered scholarship as a "way of life," but also engaged in, what can be considered as, "spiritual exercises" to acquire and maintain their epistemic virtues. This socialization into the academic community first happened in educational institutions and, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, most importantly in so-called exercises (*Übungen*) and practical courses (*cours pratiques*) in institutionalized seminars, where students had access to source materials and reference works and learned to do research under the guidance of a professor. Professors and students, who participated in such exercises, often considered themselves as parts of "schools" or even as professorial "families" with particular epistemic virtues.[32] The con-

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31. Saarloos, "Virtue and Vice in Academic Memory," 351.

32. On the seminar, Bernhard vom Brocke, "Wege aus der Krise: Universitätsseminar, Akademiekommission oder Forschungsinstitut; Formen der Institutionalisierung in den Geistes und Naturwissenschaften 1810–1900–1995," in *Konkurrenten in der Fakultät: Kultur, Wissen und Universität um 1900*, ed. Christoph König und Eberhard Lämmert (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1999), 191–218; and Gert Schubring, "Kabinett—Seminar—Institut: Raum und Rahmen des forschenden Lernens," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 23 (2000): 269–85. Also, on the exercises, Carlos Spoerhase, "Das 'Laboratorium' der Philologie? Das philologische Seminar als Raum der Vermittlung von Praxiswissen (circa 1850–1900)," in *Theorien, Methoden und Praktiken des Interpretierens*, ed. Andrea Albrecht, Lutz Danneberg, Olav Krämer, and Carls Spoerhase (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 53–80; and Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Private Übungen und verkörpertes Wissen:

tributions to this focus section show how scholars continued training and exercising these epistemic virtues, even after the end of formal education, and thereby reinforced their communities and the boundaries between them. Reviews and commemorative literature, as Paul and Saarloos show, delivered personified examples and "stereotypes" to imitate or avoid. In private letters, Manteufel documents, professors continued mentoring and counseling their former students, offered support and advice, and nurtured a sense of emotional closeness, despite spatial distance. Rumors and gossip, Engberts argues, also strengthened community bonds and distinguished insiders from outsiders.

III. AFTER VIRTUE?

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some scholars still associated the epistemic virtues with moral virtues. The French historian Gabriel Monod, for example, emphasized how Georg Waitz in his teaching Göttingen "wanted to accomplish a moral as well as an intellectual work" and "to form men as well as scholars."[33] Thus, the decline of the moral purpose of the humanities was not a necessary consequence of the emergence of Big Humanities. As the essays in the focus section illustrate, large collaborative research projects could even strengthen the sense of belonging to a virtuous scholarly community. Still today, epistemic virtues, such as precision, accuracy, and thoroughness, remain important for scholarship—even if these qualities are no longer described as virtues—and, for most humanities scholars, scholarship remain a "way of life"—even if it has been described as a "vocation" for a century. However, the claim that scholarship demands particular epistemic virtues, and that these virtues can have moral significance, does not necessarily imply that scholars in the humanities are intellectually or morally superior to other human beings, as the Renaissance humanists insisted. After all, carpenters and airplane mechanics value precision, accuracy, and thoroughness no less than philologists and literature professors. But it does imply that the quality of humanities scholarship, as the quality of most other products of human craftsmanship, depends upon the quality of the person making it. As Steven Shapin recently has noted: "Knowledge of things still depends upon knowledge of people. The world of the face-to-face and the familiar still figures in making and warranting knowledge. The late modern expert still retains some characteristics of the early modern virtuoso. Trust in familiar people still has not been replaced by the apparatuses of

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Zur Unterrichtspraxis der Geschichtswissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Akademische Wissenskulturen: Praktiken des Lehrens und Forschens vom Mittelalter bis zur Moderne*, ed. Martin Kintzinger and Sita Steckel (Basel: Schwabe, 2015), 143–61.

    33. Gabriel Monod, "Georges Waitz," *Revue historique* 11 (1886): 383–90, 384.

surveillance, control, and institutional discipline."[34] The claim also implies, one could add, that the practice of scholarship can still be considered as a kind of "spiritual exercises," which may serve the intellectual and moral cultivation of the self. At least in this limited sense, we can still regard ourselves as inheritors of the *studia humanitatis*.

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34. Shapin, *The Scientific Life*, xvii.

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