

Living in Harmony with the Cosmos: A Comparative Study between Confucianism and John Dewey

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The concept of living in harmony with the cosmos is difficult to grasp and has become misunderstood and misinterpreted in the Western tradition. However, it offers fruitful contributions to contemporary discourse by establishing a dialogue with Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience. For Dewey, as for Confucius, the world does not have an established order but must be achieved through the creation of new patterns or modes of interaction. Using a comparative methodology, this article analyzes the Deweyan and Confucian conceptions of nature and the relationship between human beings and the environment defended by both authors. This approach, which combines Dewey's philosophy and Confucius' thought, can contribute to our current world, a time of spiritual and natural crisis.

Keywords: aesthetic experience – immediate empiricism – nature – harmony – continuity

Introduction

In 1982, Richard Rorty published *Consequences of Pragmatism*, in which he argued for the work and relevance of the philosopher John Dewey. However, in this book Rorty criticized "the dark side of Dewey," that "bad philosophy" whose content focused on metaphysical issues (Rorty 1982, 74). This view has led some researchers to forget Dewey's ontological proposal, which the philosopher called cultural naturalism.

This kind of ontology sees nature as a cosmos, a pluralistic, non-reductive and dynamic process in which human beings are involved. It thus proposes an experiential approach to nature and develops an ontology that is concerned with how nature reveals itself in the course of human existence. For this reason,

as Thomas Alexander has pointed out, Dewey's ontology is a non-reductive one in which "creativity, emergence and possibility are at its heart" (Alexander 2013, 248). In contrast to traditional metaphysics, he seeks to recover the continuity between human beings and nature through a renewed notion of integration, which we can find in his notion of aesthetic or consummative experience. And this kind of creative proposal can help us to understand the spirituality in Confucianism and the aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Dewey argues that two main problems have affected modern philosophy as a result of the undervaluing and even forgetting of everyday life. The first concerns the relationship between beliefs about the nature of things and values. The second problem is the relationship of science to the objects of ordinary experience. These two issues have led to a supremacy of the objects of knowledge over the ordinary objects we experience. In contrast, Dewey's philosophical project seeks to overcome the consequences of dualisms and proposes an ontology based on the principle of continuity between living beings and the environment. That is, he presents a new interpretation of reality that postulates that things "in the ordinary or non-technical use of the term 'thing' are what they are experienced as" (Dewey 1905, 158).

My approach attempts to explain the nature and scope of Dewey's ontology through a comparative methodology that brings the Deweyan notion of aesthetic experience into dialogue with the Confucian concept of harmony. Despite some differences, I believe that there can be a significant connection between John Dewey's philosophy and Confucius' thought. Both authors emphasize experience as a way of self-realization and see philosophy as an art of living. For both Dewey and Confucius, there is no fixed order in nature, only a dynamic one that is achieved through the creation of new patterns or ways of interacting. That is, they see nature in terms of possibilities, and recognize that we are involved in a creative and receptive engagement with the world.

Following previous studies by eminent scholars (Hall and Ames 1987, 1999; Ames 2003; Grange 2012; Behuniak 2019; Shusterman 2009), this article compares the ideas of these thinkers from different traditions and times. This methodology does not lead to a new synthesis of the thought of Dewey and Confucius, but the comparison offers a new view of our relationship with our environment. First, I consider the resonances between Dewey's concept of nature and the Confucian concept of nature. That is, they see nature as a cosmos characterized by an aesthetic order that will be a consequence of the ongoing interaction between human beings and their environment. Secondly,

I emphasize that both authors defend a creative interaction between man and nature. Both authors believe that human beings and the environment are involved in continuous processes of becoming and present their philosophical project as an art of living.

I. Defining the Notion of Nature

The Dewey, like Confucius, presents an ontological proposal that rejects universal principles or imposed patterns. That is, the two authors do not seek a logical or rational order that can be realized through the imposition of transcendental laws, categories or substances. They see nature as a process of becoming, a process of self-creation that never ends. In order to understand this concept, this section formulates a number of qualities that characterize the Deweyan concept in relation to the characters used by Confucius, “*xing*” (性) and “*tian*” (天).¹

A. Nature as a Dynamic Whole

The first quality characterizes the Deweyan notion of nature as a pluralist whole. From the beginning of his work, the American philosopher considered “nature” as a dynamic and organic whole. Nevertheless, it should not be interpreted as mere identification (Hickman 2009, 20) but as a relationship of the parts in which each one depends on the other (Ryder 2013, 79). Thus, we can find the influence of Hegelian philosophy. Dewey owed to Hegel the emphasis on the interdependence of different elements. Thus, as Larry Hickman has said, for Dewey, “nature is not a ‘thing’ but instead a complex and fecund matrix of objects and events, experienced in part as an expanding source of novel facilities” (Hickman 2007, 136 – 137). This quality of nature has certain similarities with the notion of the “cosmos” as a dynamic process attributed to Confucius. As we can read in the *Analects*, nature (*tian*, 天) does not speak, but merges with the processes and various elements that make it up:

子曰：予欲無言。

子貢曰：子如不言，則小子何述焉？

子曰：天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？

The Master said, “I think I will leave off speaking.”

¹ *Tian* (天) is a key concept in Chinese traditional philosophy, and there are three ways in which philosophers employed the concept. First, *tian* means everything in the world, “an infinite multiverse.” Second, *tian* means nature itself, that is, the order of the environment in which humans inhabit. Third, *tian* means the law of the world. In these pages, I consider the second meaning, but all three are equally important.

“If you do not speak,” Zigong replied, “how will we your followers find the proper way?”

The Master responded, “Does *tian* speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grown within it. Does *tian* speak?” (Confucius 1999, 17:19).

Therefore, both authors do not see nature as a mere accumulation, but as a set in which the different parts are related to each other. And this relationship is not something imposed from outside. The world is not organised by some kind of higher or supernatural being. Tu Wei-Ming defines it as a spontaneous, organic process of self-generation of life (Tu 1989, 69).

B. Nature as an Environment of Possibilities

The second key feature of nature is its contingent character. Joseph Margolis (2004, 142) has emphasized that one of the main themes of *Experience and Nature* (1925) was to highlight this feature. Dewey himself points out that the discovery of this fact implies the beginning of wisdom (1925, 308). He characterizes the world as “precarious and dangerous” (Dewey 1925, 42), and this leads to the emergence of religion with its ceremonies, rites, cults, myths, and magic. Later, these variants are transformed into morality, law, and industry (Dewey 1925, 42). In other words, the protection against change, initially built up by magic, is later established as a necessary and universal law, standardizing the natural and attributing an inherent rationality to the universe (Dewey 1925, 45).

For Dewey, however, the diversity of forms that can be given in nature makes it impossible to restrict it to the concepts established by philosophy. He therefore rejects the abstraction of a priori nature by proposing a logic of concrete experience, growth and development. This proposal transcends nominalist logic and will be the basis from which human beings create an aesthetic order. Similarly, the Confucian tradition does not share the Western belief in a fixed order of the cosmos. Confucius does not seek social uniformity or immutable natural laws, which are modified by the contingent nature of nature. This is what we can read in the *Analects*:

子路曰：衛君待子而為政，子將奚先？

子曰：必也正名乎！

子路曰：有是哉，子之迂也！奚其正？

子曰：野哉由也！君子於其所不知，蓋闕如也。名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不

則民無所措手足。故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子於其言，無所苟而已矣。

“Were the Lord of Wei to turn the administration of his state over to you, what would be your first priority,” asked Zi Lu.

“Without question it would be to ensure that names are used properly (*zhengming*),” replied the Master.

“Would you be as impractical as that?” responded Zi Lu. “What is it for names to be used properly anyway?”

“How can you be so dense!” replied Confucius. “An exemplary person (*junzi*) defers on matters he does not understand. When names are not used properly, language will not be used effectively; when language is not used effectively, matters will not be taken care of; when matters are not taken care of, the observance of ritual propriety (*li*) and the playing of music (*yue*) will not flourish; when the observance of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark; the people will not know what to do with themselves. Thus, when the exemplary person puts a name to something, it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken, it can certainly be acted upon. There is nothing careless in the attitude of the exemplary person toward what is said” (Confucius 1999, 13:3).

In this sense, contingency does not establish an alternative to the rational order. Rather, it shows that laws and rules are external patterns that individuals gradually introduce in their continuous interaction with the environment. The order will therefore be aesthetic, built on a particular context. This is why we read in the *Analects*: “溫故而知新，可以為師矣。” Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new – such a person can be considered a teacher” (Confucius 1999, 2:11).

C. Nature as a Set of Change

This leads us to the third key feature of nature, the notion of “change.” For Dewey, nothing in nature is definitive (Dewey 1925, 100). Nature is contingent, and although we can make predictions and control some elements, we can only do so by isolating nature. This had been the Western way of analyzing nature since classical Greece. Even Aristotelian philosophy, which was closer to empirical facts and openly pluralistic, ultimately establishes a final and permanent principle (the prime mover). It is for this

reason that Dewey rejects the Aristotelian notion because he sees it as eternal, unchanging and immaterial (Campbell 1995).

In this sense, a consideration of Confucian terminology can help us to clarify the characteristics that Dewey ascribes to it. Confucius does not try to explain the dynamic reality, but rather explores the modes of behavior and the potential of human action in this continuous becoming. As we read in the *Analects*, one must know how to adapt to changing circumstances. That is, the notion of “nature” in Confucian thought is defined as an organic process in which we interact and participate:

子曰：可與共學，未可與適道；可與適道，未可與立；可與立，未可。

The Master said: “You can study with some, and yet not necessarily walk the same path (*dao*); you can walk the same path as some, and yet not necessarily take your stand with them; you can take your stand with them, and yet not necessarily weigh things up in the same way” (Confucius 1999, 9:30).

This definition shows a convergence with Dewey’s philosophy, despite the fact that Confucius follows the Chinese tradition of his time (Tu 1989, 67), and the American philosopher tries to leave behind the philosophical tradition that reduced the continuous flow of nature to eternal, ideal, and static forms. This opposition, which is a transformation of this first superstition, assumes a hierarchical duality in which the superiority of the realm of Being is emphasized in contrast to the inferior and illusory realm of the phenomenal. In fact, in his view, the notion of “absolute experience” is a product of this kind of philosophical system (Dewey 1925, 56).

In contrast, we cannot formulate an absolute ontology of natural beings because natural events are so varied and complex that there is no single form of approach or knowledge. We live in a universe that is not finished but is constantly deciding where to go and what to do (Dewey 1925, 68). For this reason, human beings must adapt to their changing situations; their interactions and knowledge are characterized by plasticity.

D. Nature as an Organized System

The fourth characteristic of nature will be organization, although this does not imply a fixed end. For Dewey, nature is not something that appears but something that happens, and science is its transcription. In the chapter “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy” (1910), the philosopher explains how Aristotle introduced a fixed and immutable principle to explain nature. In contrast, the theory of evolution provides Deweyan thought with a new

dynamic approach to reality: the tendency of the universe to change as a process of continuous “evolution” in which there is no design (as Aristotle would say), but rather a tendency (Dewey 1925, 68), which should be understood as a moment in the process.

The tendency to change is a characteristic notion that we find in the Chinese tradition and in Confucian thought. Dewey acknowledges this in his article on Chinese philosophy, “As the Chinese Think” (1922). In this text, the American philosopher affirms that

[t]his predisposition to change should not be defined as mere Eastern fatalism but as one of the most valuable contributions that Chinese philosophy makes to human culture and specifically to Western society characterized by impatience, stress and hurry; the Chinese philosophy of life embodies a profound valuable contribution (Dewey 1922, 223).

Chinese tradition and Confucianism view the whole universe as a process of generation and transformation. This tendency to change is based on structures of relationships between humans and nature rather than on individual characteristics of things. It works, as Robin Wang points out (2012, 89), “through analogies and correlations” and Confucianism draws from the *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)*:

乾道變化，各正性命，保合大和，乃利貞。首出庶物，萬國咸寧。

The method of Qian is to change and transform, so that everything obtains its correct nature as appointed (by the mind of Heaven); and (thereafter the conditions of) great harmony are preserved in union” (Yi Jing 1:1).

This propensity to change is a key aspect of understanding natural and human affairs. Man and nature are in a process of change, a great spontaneous current of life, a successive movement that Confucius will call *dao* (Fung 1991, 122 – 123). Against the notion of nature as something finished, both authors assert its vital character. Therefore, although there are certain repetitions and regularities that allow us to make certain predictions and controls, this should not lead us to think of nature as an ordered substance, but as an organized process in which change is not only possible but necessary.

E. Nature as a Process under Construction

The fifth quality is utilitarian. For Dewey, there is no separation between nature and culture, but both are phases, one initial and one later, of expanding the meanings of human experience in different situations (Hickman 2007,

139). The philosopher shows great respect for Emerson (see Dewey 1903) and was influenced by his dynamic vision of nature understood as a process, a transition, in which man participates, to which man belongs (Emerson 1950, 7 – 9). As R. D. Richardson Jr. has pointed out, for Emerson the notion of “nature” is defined as the way things are (Richardson 1999, 97), out of which we create new interactions.

That is, nature has an instrumental function which does not imply a negative or pejorative meaning. We can read in Emerson’s *Nature* (1950, 8): “Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material but is also the process and the result.” From his pragmatist interpretation, Dewey develops an ontology based on this interaction between humans and nature, stressing the interdependence of these two elements. The history of the universe can be seen as a continuum in which there is no division between the natural world and the cultural world.

Hence, the Chinese character *xing* (姓) in ancient times mainly means nature and human nature. The former refers to the inherent nature of all things, and the latter to the inherent qualities that all people share and the moral nature of human beings. Confucian scholars had different interpretations of whether human nature is good or evil. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of this is that we can find continuity between humans and nature.

As Jim Behuniak noted, human effort and intelligence are not alien to the cosmos. “Through such powers, as Mencius suggests, we realize our own natures (*xing* 性) and provide service to *tian* in the process” (Behuniak 2019, 213). Dewey and Confucian thinkers focus on human experience. Therefore, as Fung Youlan has argued, there is no demarcation between the state of nature and the state of art (or culture), but both are a continuum (Fung 1991, 123). Art is natural and helps nature.

According to the Chinese philosopher, all kinds of art are useful to people and to the world, and the history of the universe is defined as a continuous whole (Fung 1991, 122). This has suggestive resonances with the Deweyan proposal since the American philosopher also tries to show the continuous character between nature and culture.

II. The Concept of Aesthetic Experience and the Notion of Harmony: A Creative Way of Living

As noted above, both Confucius and Dewey see philosophy not only as a body of doctrine but above all as an “art of living.” They do not search for some essence but seek to cultivate harmonious relationships with one’s surroundings. Both

philosophers focus on man as a living being who adapts to his changing environment through a creative process called *he* and an “aesthetic experience.” This section analyzes these two concepts from an aesthetic perspective that seek to highlight meaningful orientation and participation in the world.

Dewey introduces the notion of aesthetic experience to distinguish it from the experience that occurs continuously in the process of life. Current research has taken up this aspect following the third chapter of *Art as Experience* (1934), entitled “Having an experience,” but it is necessary to consider it within its cultural naturalism. For Dewey, experience is not a perception of nature, but part of it. Human beings participate in nature through continuous interactions, and nature is modified by human beings. These interactions constitute the process of life and are not necessarily cognitive. Humans are constantly expanding their horizons of meaning, and Dewey introduces the aesthetic quality to point to those experiences that imply meaningful endings and completed actions. Aesthetic experience is thus more complete and inclusive than other experiences because it implies a process of growth in which human beings create new meanings and reach a new harmony with the environment. In Dewey’s words:

Aesthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality, but it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience. This fact he takes to be the only secure basis upon which aesthetic theory can build (Dewey 1934, 52 – 53).

This quotation provides an important aspect to consider. Aesthetic quality does not presuppose luxury or a transcendent character but is rooted in life and will be an essential quality of our daily process. An aesthetic experience is a complete act that occurs in our lives when we are most alive and focused on our engagement with our surroundings. We must therefore define aesthetic experience as a process that reveals the meaning of human creative interaction with the world. That is, Dewey conceives of aesthetic experience not as a special attitude or distinct encounter with works of art, but as a previous phase of knowledge; it is the kind of experience which merges in the immediacy of situations.

Dewey’s notion of “aesthetic experience” then unfolds from a philosophical project aimed at improving human life. This approach has several resonances with Confucius’ notion of harmony. As Roger Ames has highlighted, this Confucian term has been forgotten in Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy, which has given it a series of connotations that have distorted it (Ames 2014, xi). However, Chenyang Li’s recent research on this

concept allows us to make a suggestive comparison with the Deweyan term. In his introduction to Chenyang Li's work, Roger Ames describes it as follows:

The Confucian notion of harmony is conceived of as a generative, creative, and (dare we say) "aesthetic" process in which the heterogeneous and diverse elements of the cosmos, including the human worlds – what are often referred to as "the myriad things" (*wanwu*) – are orchestrated into deep, harmonious relations that resonate with each other and entail productive tensions and resistance as well as agreement (Ames 2014, x).

Harmony is a creative process that emerges in tense situations. Chenyang Li explains that it is a continuous renewal of human interactions and relationships with the environment. In his study of the concept, Li identifies five basic characteristics that help to clarify the term. The first is heterogeneity, according to which the different parts are not uniform, but rather a variety of arrangements. The second is the tension that naturally arises from difference. The third will be coordination; in other words, tension does not necessarily mean conflict, but cooperation. The fourth will be transformation and growth; that is, coordination implies that the tension will be transformed and the conflict will eventually produce a transformation and a harmonious relationship. The fifth characteristic will be renewal, that is, harmony is not achieved as a final state, but as a state of an ongoing process (Li 2014, 9).

In this way, harmony is seen as a relational and dynamic matter and can be defined as "interactive and processive in nature" (Li 2021, 44). Harmony is associated with a kind of aesthetic order that characterizes nature and man's interaction with his environment. Moreover, Confucianism is primarily concerned with morality and aesthetics, as Peimin Ni has pointed out (2021, 170). The notion of harmony can be seen as an aesthetic ideal rather than a moral one. This is not to deny the importance of the moral in Confucian thought, but to emphasize the creative dimension of the concept. This is what we can read in the *Zhongyong*:

中也者，天下之大本也；和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。

This notion of equilibrium and focus is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained, and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world (Hall – Ames 2001, 86).

Similarly, we can read in *Art as Experience*: “While man is other than bird and beast, he shares basic vital functions with them and has to make the same basal adjustments if he is to continue the process of living” (Dewey 1934, 19). Dewey appeals to a new context in which nature and experience live in harmony (1925, 10), reconciling human beings and nature in the ongoing process of experience. Similarly, the Confucian notion of harmony presupposes a kind of balanced existence between human beings and nature. For this reason, in contrast to Dascha Düring, harmony is not only a human task, but a committed relationship between humans and nature (Düring 2021, 156).

Harmony between man and nature does not simply mean domination or the use of resources. It requires mutual adaptation through creative tension. And this process never ends. An existing order is the result of a previous harmonization that will fail in the future. Dewey states in his *Logic*: “As long as life continues, its processes are such as continuously to maintain and restore the enduring relationship which is characteristic of the life-activities of a given organism” (Dewey 1939, 33).

From his own philosophical proposal, Confucius also points to the need to restore balance through the notion of “harmony,” which presupposes the existence of multiple and diverse possible relationships. As Chenyang Li has pointed out (2006, 589), the Confucian proposal does not consider the world as a single element, but rather as composed of an infinite number of elements in continuous interaction. Likewise, R. Ames and D. Hall have underlined the importance for Confucius of human growth, characterized by its creative aspect. That is, man is constantly realizing himself and this is an art (Hall, Ames 1987, 66).

In this way, both Confucius and Dewey emphasize creative interaction rather than a pre-established order or pattern that explains the origin of things. Dewey shares with Confucius and the Chinese tradition the absence of an external intelligence to explain the creation of the universe (Tu 1989, 37). In F. W. Mote’s words: “they have regarded the World and man as uncreated, as constituting the central features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself” (Mote 1971, 17 – 18).

Thus, the qualities that characterize Confucius’ thought can be clarified by relating it to Dewey’s thought, since the comparison reveals the aesthetic character of this interaction. Dewey shares with Chinese thought a belief in the continuity of being as an essential aspect of its ontology, proposing an aesthetic order. As Ames and Hall have pointed out, Confucius’ thought can be defined as an “art of contextualization” (1998, 117). He does not develop a

theory of truth, nor does he assume the existence of a pre-established and fixed order. Rather, he is concerned with human action in search of a harmonious way of life. We can read in the *Analects*:

子曰：吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。

From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty realized the propensities of *tian*; from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries (Confucius 1999, 2:4).

In this sense, there is no distinction between ordinary and extraordinary, profane and sacred, and nature and people. Human beings are perpetuating a natural process through their interactions with their natural environment. For this reason, restoring harmony or developing the aesthetic experience is far from conquering nature. On the contrary, it is the way to develop a particular *modus vivendi* based on the ontology of events of both philosophers.

The best way to understand Confucianism is to recognize that this tradition dissolves the “sacred/secular” dualism that Behuniak has addressed (Behuniak 2019, 217) and presents an approach to spirituality as a process of creative and receptive engagement with the world. Rather than looking for a fixed definition or eternal patterns, Dewey and Confucius are more concerned with the interaction of particular people in particular contexts. Human beings, like our environment, are not fixed entities but are involved in a continuous process of becoming. Accordingly, Confucius’ works are about a way of acting, i.e., “the way.” In this sense, both authors present their philosophical project as an art of living, “an art of contextualizing” (*ars contextualis*), which seeks harmonious interaction with the universe through active and creative participation.

III. Conclusion

According to Roger Ames and David Hall, although Dewey was one of the pragmatists whose mission was to extend the understanding of instrumentalism beyond technical reasoning, he ultimately failed because of its naturalistic bias (1987, 79). However, I think this problem is distorted when we compare his notion with the Confucian proposal, understood as the continuity between nature and man. Both philosophers develop an ontology that emphasizes situations, those events in which nature and experience occur in a continuous flow.

Dewey developed his proposal in opposition to those schools of philosophy that had characterized the human condition as a purely economic or theoretical problem. Historically, the difficulties experienced by the living creature in interacting with its environment had been treated in a practical way, as a matter of resource exploitation; or in an abstract way, as dealing with the possible conflict that certain conditions might create for intelligence. The tradition assumed that these meanings were something singular, to be studied by metaphysics or logic, separate from nature (Dewey 1925, 151 – 153). However, as Dewey points out, meaning cannot exist without this interaction of human beings with the world. It is from this emergent ontology, based on human-nature interaction, that the instrumental character of nature must be understood.

This ontological proposal can help us to understand spirituality in the Confucian tradition. One of the key points of Confucianism is the balanced interaction between man and nature, between beings (the living) and things (the existing). In other words, despite living in a world of conflict and tension, human beings and nature tend to correct disorder and chaos in order to achieve peace and harmony. And this tendency not only resonates with Deweyan philosophy, but the comparison between these two ideas may contribute to our current world, a time of spiritual and natural crisis. We live in a time of environmental crisis in which nature is facing great challenges and degradation. Moreover, some people have experienced a personal crisis marked by a profound questioning of or lack of meaning in life. In this sense, Confucian philosophy develops a kind of spirituality that hints at the fulfillment of human existence. And this kind of approach does not depend on transcendental realms, but on human orientation, attitude and interaction with the environment.

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