

PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS AND THERAPY. POLEMIC WITH *THE NEW WITTGENSTEIN*

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The paper argues against the interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy by Conant, Diamond, and Crary presented in *The New Wittgenstein*. Such interpretations are based on the concept of mere (or plain) nonsense and try out a strategy of translating Wittgenstein's work into the idiom of therapeutic philosophy. In my argumentation, I show that it is impossible to effectively interpret *Tractatus* in the way proposed by Conant, Diamond and Crary. This fact has consequences for the concept of mere nonsense. If *Tractatus* is mere nonsense and means nothing, it is impossible to use the *Tractatus* method to identify logical object like problem or philosophical problem and finally identify mere nonsense. If philosophy as a therapy is to cure philosophical problems, then we must have a criterion that allows us to identify such problems as philosophical problems and, consequently, the entire therapy as a philosophical therapy. The concept of mere nonsense does not provide such a criterion. Without such a criterion, the therapy proposed by mentioned authors is a therapy with the use of any tool directed against anything. If we reduce understanding of the author's understanding only and not of his work, there is no reason why this activity should be described as philosophical. My argumentation shows that the consequences of the methodology derived from *The New Wittgenstein*'s basic postulates, will always be confusing and will usually lead to contradictions, arbitrariness, or lack of connection with interpreted text.

Keywords: Wittgenstein – New Reading – Therapy – Philosophical problems

Introduction

The paper deals with the therapeutic aspects of Wittgenstein's early philosophy and refers to the latest interpretations of his thoughts. Classics of the therapeutic trend are Alice Crary, Cora Diamond and James Conant. Their interpretations already have their followers and are becoming stronger in the market of philosophical ideas. The purpose of my text is not to present *The New Wittgenstein*'s content, or more generally, the new reading. The aim is to polemic some of *The New Wittgenstein*'s fundamental claims about solving basic philosophical problems.

Crary places the main emphasis on the therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein in (Crary, Read 2000, 1 – 18). The article of Conant (Conant 2000, 174 – 217) and Diamond (Diamond 2000, 149 – 173) are mainly devoted to how to read *Tractatus*. Their interpretation focuses on Wittgenstein’s statements in *Preface* (Wittgenstein 2005, 3 – 4), and in the final theses that, the book’s propositions are nonsense (Wittgenstein 2005, 6.54). They are nonsense, and stating this fact is at the same time a way of philosophically valorising the message contained in these sentences (or not contained). The knowledge that the philosophical problem does not exist shall have a therapeutic effect on the *Tractatus* reader. Diamond and Conant argue that when Wittgenstein describes his sentences as nonsensical, he does not mean that they are incorrectly constructed, but we can understand what he is trying to say; they are not logically different from gibberish like “piggly wiggle tiggly”, so we should abandon the idea that they are trying to say anything (Diamond 2000, 151 – 153).¹ Diamond and Conant thus describe the mere concept of nonsense.² There is only one concept of nonsense; what is nonsense is the same as other nonsense.³ They, therefore, claim that there is no difference within *Tractatus* between important (or illuminating) and mere (or plain) nonsense, which difference plays an important role in traditional interpretations. Any nonsense is, in their view, mere or plain nonsense. Philosophical therapy is intended to show us that there is no point worthy of attention that does not prove to be nonsense. Everything that can be said expresses sentences that make sense and the rest, including *Tractatus* itself, is mere nonsense.

Such a formulation of the validity of the framework theses of *Tractatus* stands in direct opposition to standard interpretations, according to which the theses of the book are authentic statements which are steps in the argumentation on the representational character of the language and according to which the framework description of *Tractatus*’ theses as nonsensical is the conclusion resulting from this argumentation. In such interpretations, the *Tractatus* framework describes logical divisions among

¹ Crary wrote: “Diamond and Conant argue that when Wittgenstein describes his sentences as nonsense, he does not mean they are improperly formed but we can still make out what they are trying to say. Rather, he means that they are not logically distinct from gibberish—i.e., to use one of Diamond’s examples, not logically distinct from ‘piggly wiggle tiggly’—and that we should give up the idea that they are trying to say *anything*. (Diamond and Conant refer to this as an *austere* view of nonsense.)” (Crary 2000, 12).

² There are various names for nonsense in literature: “mere nonsense”, “plain nonsense”, “austere conception of nonsense”, etc. See Diamond (2000, 155), Conant (2000), Hacker (2000), Ulatowski (2020), Wawrzyniak (2020).

³ Conant wrote: “Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought. [...] The austere conception [...] holds that mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is” (Conant 2000, 176 – 177). Conant and Diamond added: “[...] resolute reading is committed to rejecting the idea that the *Tractatus* holds that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense” (Conant, Diamond 2004, 48).

the types of nonsense, which, according to Diamond and Conant, the book in its entirety allows us to doubt. The guiding idea of these interpretations is that the *Tractatus*' metaphysical theses, although formally nonsense for Wittgenstein, somehow achieve their purpose in *showing* what they cannot *say*. Such theses are, therefore – as I see it – treated as logically different from “piggly wiggle tiggly”. Consequently, their possible therapeutic dimension will be based on some theoretical considerations and not just a pure declaration.

In this article, I will argue against *The New Wittgenstein*'s basic statements on solving philosophical problems. My objections can be summarised in the following list:

- 1) An unwanted consequence of *The New Wittgenstein*'s interpretations is the fact that such interpretations declare therapeutic potency of unlimited range and this fact probably eludes the authors; consequently, such therapies declare the possibility of curing every problem (if they can identify the problem at all); and this is because they do not provide good criteria for identifying a specific philosophical problem (since a philosophical problem can be any problem, then philosophical therapy is directed against every problem).
- 2) The philosophical therapy of which the authors of *The New Wittgenstein* speak is impossible to implement because it is unknown which problem requires treatment.
- 3) There is also no reason why the *Tractatus* (or any other text by Wittgenstein) should be the central text of philosophical therapists; thus, interpreting Wittgenstein seems to be an arbitrary choice and devoid of logical or substantive meaning.
- 4) And if such therapy nevertheless works on some philosophers, it is only the result of the placebo effect.
- 5) For the defence of such therapies, on the contrary, one would have to be able to give at least a criterion distinguishing a philosophical problem from a non-philosophical one; that is to say, one would have to express a philosophical thesis and thus return to the concept of important or illuminating nonsense; in other words, in order to defend an interpretation, one would have to contradict it.

In a further part of the article, I will develop this argumentation.⁴

⁴ There have already been various efforts to argue against new reading and respond to the raised objections. Some of the arguments against new reading may come close to mine. I would like to point out the relative independence of my critique from existing positions. The objects of criticism that are in relation to my text are the concepts of nonsense (Hacker 2000; Williams 2004; Ulatowski

On philosophical problems. Arguments against an interpretation of *The New Wittgenstein*

The therapy proposed by Wittgenstein is designed to extinguish philosophical problems and make them disappear (Wittgenstein 2005, 6.521). The problems originally exist or at least make it seem so. Such a problem can take various forms; some will be more substantial and others less. For example, if someone does not understand a logical issue, it is possible that proof has not been invented yet, but it is also possible that he has not heard the speaker or read the article, e.g., tired, or in distracting conditions. In the first case, the correct answer to the problem will be to look for proof. In the latter case, e.g., repeating the reading activities in more understandable circumstances. However, if we do not adopt such a broad, family character of the term “problem”, which allows for both a lack of logical justification and distraction, then we still need to have arrangements to distinguish the problem from something that is not a problem. The same is true even if we only think that something is a problem, or if something has to be, after being criticised, an apparent problem. Therapeutic interpretations⁵ inevitably incur some logical costs associated with identifying an object, such as a “problem”. Interpreters know what a problem is. This is the case even if we do not ultimately intend to solve a given problem other than by showing that it is meaningless or an apparent problem. Because in a language game about a problem, we have to assume that it makes sense to consider something as a problem. This can only be done if the problem is even hypothetically identifiable. What do I mean by “hypothetically”? Even if it were to turn out that the problems do not exist, we have to know

2020; Wawrzyniak 2020; Crary, Read 2000; Conant, Diamond 2004; Diamond 2004; Diamond 2011; Diamond 2014; Read, Hutchinson 2006; Kuusela 2006) and elucidations (McGinn 1999; Wawrzyniak 2020; Crary, Read 2000; Conant, Diamond 2004; Bronzo 2012). My aim is to make a new critical argument that is relatively independent of others. My argument deals with more general problems than previous ones. So far, individual concepts belonging to Wittgenstein’s philosophy have been attacked. The existence of philosophy, as therapy or non-therapy has been the safeguard of our dispute. We know that philosophy exists and what it more or less is. We know that nonsense is a concept that interests the philosopher; we are arguing only about the details of that interest. My argument deals with the identification of philosophy and philosophical problems in general. It shows that, following the methodology of *The New Wittgenstein*, we have no good criteria for identifying philosophical problems, for identifying philosophy itself, distinguishing it from other activities, that we have no reason to call our project “philosophy”, “therapy”, and “philosophical therapy”, and then that we have no reason to read Wittgenstein and to be suggested by his attempts to solve philosophical problems.

⁵ Crary wrote: “[...] the papers in this volume champion the idea of a therapeutic aim in connection with both the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein’s later philosophy [...]” (Crary 2000, 3). See Crary (2000, 11 – 12). Bronzo characterised the name “therapeutic reading”: “[...] a title intended to track Conant and Diamond’s view that in his early work, just as much in his later, Wittgenstein did not aim to construct philosophical theories, but rather only to provide us with tools for dissolving philosophical problems” (Bronzo 2012, 47).

(or at least unclearly anticipate) what is being sought and what is then excluded. The game makes sense if we have candidates to be a “problem” and some – even vague – reason why we accept or reject proposals as “problems”. This is quite a good ground for argumentation because something has already been established. The resolute interpretations must assume the existence of more or less precise operation to identify the problem. I believe that the interpreters should be ready to pay the logical costs associated with this assumption.

In order to identify a problem, one needs to have some arrangement to distinguish the object-problem from other objects. I would argue for logical or philosophical arrangements, but I can use such arrangements because a serious philosophy and complex problems are demanding such solutions. Another situation is someone who will argue that there are no philosophical findings but only mere nonsense (Diamond 2000, 153). Probably – and I declare a reading in accordance with the principle of charity – advocates of plain or mere nonsense refer to some kind of linguistic habit. That is to say, they will not opt for a “hard” definition of the problem, because there is a risk that something philosophical could be said then, or as Wittgenstein prefers to call it – *show* (Wittgenstein 2005, 4.1212), but instead refer to the fact that the X community uses the word “problem” in a Y-style. The question here is whether the community uses the word in a legitimate, logical, and transparent way and whether there is no risk that the problem will be unidentifiable or that each object of the universe will fulfil the criterion of being a problem (although we do not know what that criterion is because the interlocutor does not agree to give it). If the philosophical and logical considerations are not attractive to us, we can deal with them differently. Let us assume, according to the principle of charity, that we have a current understanding of the word “problem”, and this is a situation that fully satisfies us. Let us assume that we can distinguish between problems and non-problems, and we do not want to investigate this issue because we have doubts about the possibility of the success of such investigations (we assume that it is based on nonsense itself). Then – let us assume – such therapy can identify the problem and (if it is a good therapy) solve it.

Even if we agree that we can identify problems in this risky way, the case does not end here. Some difficulty that we cannot ignore is the fact that *Tractatus* talks about *philosophical* problems. I conclude that this is so, not only because the words “philosopher”, “philosophy”, “philosophical”, “philosophise” appear in this short text, including the title thirty-three times, but also because there is a clear statement in the *Preface*: “The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood” (Wittgenstein 2005, 3). It seems to me that Wittgenstein is situated with his deliberations in

the current of philosophy, even if he postulates the introduction of methods of reaching the truth and the rules of acceptance of statements that improve it, in his opinion.

Why does the qualification of *Tractatus*' problems as philosophical expose the resolute interpretation to difficulties? As before, I would like to believe that by classifying certain problems as philosophical, we can distinguish them from non-philosophical problems, and we have some reasons for this, even if these reasons are not yet clearly defined but only vaguely anticipated. The set of philosophical problems is not indeed established once and for all, and the matter of the "philosophicality" of a particular problem may evolve. Even with such a condition, it should be noted that such momentarily changing qualifications also take place according to some data. Something must be known about objects such as philosophical problems in order to find them at all. In a sufficiently rich universe, and such a universe is the world of human life, we have so many objects that it is difficult to count on an ordinary patch of luck, which will allow us to simply fall into the object-philosophical problem. The conclusion that a specific problem is simply philosophical, and – let say – this is the final word, is simply unsatisfactory. There should be a reason to call the problem specifically philosophical. Similarly, if the philosophical problems are natural for our language (Wittgenstein 2005, 3), then the qualification of them as philosophical rather than, for example, gastric must be supported by some kind of presumptions, even provisional. Otherwise, it will not be possible to distinguish between, for example, hiccups and universals (Bronzo 2012, 62 – 63). If there is no criterion for distinguishing a philosophical problem from a non-philosophical one, then philosophical therapy cannot be distinguished from non-philosophical therapy. Healing philosophical problems becomes then indistinguishable from any other operation, about which someone declares that it is a therapy. I do not think it will even help refer to a particular community's language habit because any linguistic behaviour created within the community would create any problems, and these would be arbitrarily described as philosophical. For example, the enema applied to Good Soldier Švejk, if applied consequently and publicly promoted, could become a cure for philosophical problems. Why not?

The question is: on what basis do *The New Wittgenstein* interpretations qualify the *Tractatus*' problems as philosophical problems? An answer that would satisfy me would involve traditional-philosophical explanations on the one hand and internal *Tractatus*' criteria on the other. The resolute interpretations consider the whole *Tractatus* as nonsense (Crary 2000, 12, Diamond 2000, 151, 153). Consequently, if the *Tractatus* is nonsense, interpreters cannot invoke its internal criteria. They also cannot invoke the traditional-philosophical findings, because then they would find at least a partial correspondence between traditional philosophical problems, such as the problem of the relation of empirical knowledge to the world of facts, the problem of

the relation of language to the world, and the *Tractatus*, which takes up these examples of traditional-philosophical problems. As a consequence, such interpretations would refer to criteria that are absent from the *Tractatus* (because the *Tractatus* = mere nonsense, and this type of nonsense does not provide criteria because it cannot be understood), but somehow present in the *Tractatus* (because the *Tractatus* somehow takes up traditional philosophical issues). These are unwanted consequences.

The texts of Crary, Diamond and Conant take a somewhat different point of view. On the one hand, it will be the point of view – let us call it that – of the “existing term”, on the other hand, the instinct of imitation. What do I mean? Firstly, the fact that, according to the above authors, Wittgenstein was a philosopher is given and obvious, and thus is not problematic. This is the term they just found. If that is the case, then Wittgenstein, as a philosopher, took up philosophical problems. One could say that it is a tautology: a philosopher philosophises. Only that in this way, we still do not have any criterion distinguishing a philosopher from a non-philosopher, and the existence of a series of names such as Plato or Aristotle in our history of philosophy textbooks is temporary and entirely accidental. For if the criterion of being a philosopher is met by chance, but at the same time irrevocably, it may turn out that a philosopher is, for example, anyone, which will make it impossible to reconstruct the history of philosophy, not to mention a scenario close to science fiction, when animals or other elements of nature would turn out to be philosophers. On the other hand, the situation is only apparently saved by reference to Frege, Russell, or Carnap – that means the philosophers because the same question applies to them. On what basis are they qualified as philosophers. If it were well established what it means to be a philosopher and Frege, Russell and Carnap would meet such criteria, then the *Tractatus*, in which we find several issues that coincide with those considered to be philosophical, would also be philosophical, but the philosophical issues that make it possible to make a distinction would not be identical in meaninglessness to the “piggly wiggle tiggly”. The *Tractatus*, however, would say something but would not be mere nonsense. It would be illuminate nonsense in Hacker’s description (Hacker 2000, 365).

The next problem is the question of the instinct to imitate. Conant, Diamond, and Crary say that our aim is to understand Wittgenstein himself, not his theory, but him.⁶ The arguments that refer to the phrases from the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 2005, 3) do not take into account that the normal way of speaking is when we ask the listener after

⁶ Conant wrote about Wittgenstein: “He does not call upon the reader to understand his sentences, but rather to understand *him*, namely the author and the kind of activity in which he is engaged-one of elucidation” (Conant 2000, 198). Crary wrote: “[...] he stresses that recognition of the nonsensicality of the book’s sentences reflects an understanding of the book’s author and not, as we might have expected, of those sentences themselves” (Crary 2000, 13). See Diamond (2000, 155).

the theoretical statement: “do you understand me?” and response is: “Yes, I understand you”. And it does not necessarily mean that such a phrase is built on opposition: either to understand Wittgenstein or what he wrote. That is not the point of my argument. Whether we understand Wittgenstein with his theory or Wittgenstein without his theory, we have already incurred some logical costs in talking about the philosophical problems. If we do not have good reasons to describe someone as a philosopher, someone’s problems as philosophical, because we have just rejected philosophy and *Tractatus*, then we can, in fact, do what someone describing ourselves as a philosopher does, for example, reject propositions as nonsense. And such someone, speaking about everything he hears that this is nonsense, may even look like a philosopher with proper dramatic acting. However, this does not eliminate the groundlessness of our imitation. If we do not know what a philosophical problem is, we have no reason to imitate Wittgenstein and anyone else who calls himself a philosopher. The fact that Wittgenstein had harmonious facial features, a fascinating personality, or a good aphoristic style can provide the basis for the instinct to imitate. However, like any instinct of this kind, it does not solve the question of legitimacy. Regardless of whom I follow, I do it in an unreasonable way. If, on the other hand, I have grounds for imitating Wittgenstein in his philosophical activity, then I either have some concept of the “philosophicality” of the problems he raises (then I examine the correspondence of these problems with Wittgenstein’s problems), or I return to the *Tractatus* = illuminating nonsense conception.

Resolute readers perfectly identify philosophical problems, (that is, in practice, they do something different than they declare). They take the problem they are trying to solve to a higher level. For the problem of self-referral in *Tractatus* is persistently replicated like a malicious virus. Resolute interpretations try to respect Wittgenstein’s intentions, and where Wittgenstein speaks of nonsense, they take it seriously. “Nonsense is nonsense” (Diamond 2000, 153). The trap is that if we consider that “*Tractatus*=mere nonsense”, we fail to complete the task of resolute reading (Hacker 2000, 383, 385). Then we will not find the criterion for identifying philosophical problems. And if we find them in a concept of philosophy other than *Tractatus* postulates, it will still turn out that our interpretation is wrong in qualifying *Tractatus* as mere nonsense because at least part of the *Tractatus* will fit traditional philosophical problems. In the first case, the interpretation is unfounded, and in a strong sense, which is to say, it is unfounded not only by its logical controversy but also by the name it gives to its objects (e.g., philosophical problems). The second case is wrong because it denies the objects the qualities that it must then give them.

The unwanted consequences of resolute standpoint are that in the absence of a criterion for identifying philosophical problems (here we have not gone beyond the alternative of groundlessness or contradiction), it will turn out that our therapy is unable to determine a reasonable range of its effectiveness. It is a therapy that potentially cures any problem since – in the conditions where it is impossible to identify philosophical problems – any problem can turn out to be cured by the therapy. Headache? If you can identify the problem and this is the problem, and it can be a philosophical problem (why not?), then read Wittgenstein. Hiccups? If that is the problem, then read Wittgenstein.

There are, unfortunately, more consequences of this type. If “*Tractatus* = mere nonsense”, then there is really no reason to read it, invoke it, and finally – write interpretations. The practical error is, of course, that we learn about the senselessness of the undertaking from *Tractatus* itself, but we say that it is not so. So, in order to be able to accurately assess *Tractatus*, the reader must read the *Tractatus* and then state that it is pure nonsense, that is, that he did not learn anything from it, also that *Tractatus* is pure nonsense. So, the reader learns from the *Tractatus* how to qualify certain types of statements, but without learning anything from *Tractatus*, he also does not learn it. He learns and does not learn. This is roughly a contradiction. The above consequences can be formulated differently: if *Tractatus* is just mere nonsense, there is no reason for it to be considered by philosophical therapists. If we do not know the philosophical problems, we cannot correctly decide whether *Tractatus* actually overcomes them or takes them at all. So again, we are faced with the alternative of groundlessness (because we use a text which, in our opinion, means nothing) or contradiction (because we do exactly what we say we do not do – that is, we return to the concept of illuminating nonsense, declaring a break with it).

Outside the scope of control of *The New Wittgenstein* interpretation, there is probably also a consequence that invalidates the other side of the problem-therapy relationship, i.e., the therapy itself. Since therapists are not able to limit the scope of the medicine’s action the same therapy may actually turn out to be anything, any action (if we know from somewhere that it must be an action and not something else). The lack of criteria causes philosophical therapy to cures any problem (provided that we know what the problem is). Instead of reading a demanding and difficult philosophical work, anything could be recommended. Each of the following recommendations is suitable as a remedy for a philosophical problem: “leave”, “clean up your apartment”, or “scratch your nose”. The risk of such therapies is not that they are ineffective (I will discuss the placebo effect) but that they are pointless and therefore impossible. The cure can be both reading the *Tractatus* and scratching your nose, i.e., both reading the *Tractatus* and not reading the *Tractatus*. So, carrying out therapy can

be about not carrying out therapy. Such consequences in philosophical interpretations are obviously unwelcome.

If such a therapy still works on some readers, it is an effect analogous to a placebo effect. The problems, which traditionally, as well as according to the *Tractatus*, we could describe as philosophical problems, are complicated. If somebody feels that they are cured of them with the notoriously emphasised nonsense of such problems, it is probably not difficult to become discouraged. These are matters that require concentration and effort, so the therapy consists of the fact that whatever you do not do, you will still be a philosopher; if only this “whatever” is called a philosophical therapy, it may seem attractive in the era of instant culture. However, such a therapy’s operation is not based on any believable finding and therefore by defending it, we are defending the placebo effect, which de facto is not discussed.

If we were to try to defend philosophical therapies, it would be necessary to return to the issue of the criterion distinguishing a philosophical problem from a non-philosophical one, or preferably at least provisional justifications for what we consider a problem at all. Consequently, we would be faced with a choice rooted in tradition, in the *Tractatus*, or elsewhere. Between the different ways of rooting, it is possible to show important connections, and in any case, the operation of valorising the validity of the methods of getting to the truth will require the philosopher to refer to his own activity. To give an example of such a different source of rootedness, let us imagine that someone rejects the *Tractatus*’s theses because they do not like it. They then show that they consider liking to be an acceptable method of carrying out philosophical valorisation. In turn, this method can be further criticised. If someone takes part in the “philosophical game” on fair play principles, then – I assume – they are ready to bear the logical costs connected with the game. The operation of granting or denying sensibility is always based on certain more or less legitimate grounds.

The defence of *The New Wittgenstein* interpretation will aim either at unjustified grounds (demonstrating which ends the discussion simultaneously) or at justified grounds. In turn, the justified grounds are those which will either refer to philosophical tradition, or *Tractatus*, or both, or something else. If tradition is the one, then it will be partially found in *Tractatus* as well, and therefore the interpretation will not be accurate because it will deny its object the qualities that it will then be given. If directly to *Tractatus*, it will be contradictory based on using findings that cannot be used. If to something else, the question is – to what? If all philosophers have so far been wrong, then they have also been wrong in establishing their problems, so when playing a philosophical game, I am on the ground of the same error; if I do not play the philosophical game and – let us assume – I do not make the mistake of the previous philosophers, then I have no reason to call my game “philosophical” because by not continuing with

the mistaken subject matter, I do not have a right to succession the name (apart from the simple fact that the judgement of reasonableness itself belongs to the game it wants to invalidate in this case).

Conclusion

To summarise, it follows from the above that the invalidation of philosophy by using the concept of mere nonsense as a description of the normal philosophical language will inevitably be unfounded or contradictory. And an interpretation containing such an aim will inherit the characteristics of groundlessness or contradiction. Thus, defending an interpretation based on the notion of mere nonsense is impossible in conjunction with *Tractatus*.

For these reasons, I consider the discussed interpretation is unsatisfactory. Resolute reading has its good points, such as pointing out important problems, exploring the relationship between early and late works of Wittgenstein, and pointing out connections to Frege, but its discussed methodological basis is unacceptable.

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