

Rescher on the Justification of Rationality

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Abstract: In his recent book *Rationality*, Nicholas Rescher offers a provocative attempt to justify rationality. In this paper I critically assess that attempt. After clarifying the philosophical problem at issue, I examine Rescher's effort to solve it. I argue that Rescher's justification succeeds, but that he mistakenly characterizes it as pragmatic. It succeeds only if it is understood non-pragmatically. Consequently, Rescher must give up either his justificatory argument, or his commitment to a pragmatic justification.

Nicholas Rescher's book *Rationality*¹ is an impressive systematic treatment of a variety of philosophical questions concerning rationality. It extends Rescher's previous work on epistemic justification and on rationality, and repeats and reinforces his long-standing commitment to a systems-oriented methodological pragmatism concerning rational justification.² Of special note is Rescher's effort to justify rationality itself. It is this effort which is my topic here.

In what follows I will argue that Rescher's justification of rationality succeeds, but that he mischaracterizes his achievement. For while Rescher insists that his justification of rationality is pragmatic in character, and agrees with "[p]hilosophers of pragmatic inclination [who] have always stressed the ultimate inadequacy of any strictly theoretical defence of cognitive rationality" (p. 41), I will argue that his proffered justification — which in my view constitutes a compelling "strictly theoretical defence of cognitive rationality", and so satisfactorily resolves the question 'Why be rational?' — belies his pragmatism. I will thus be

arguing that Rescher's justification of rationality — which is very much like my own attempt to resolve that question³ — is both better and worse than Rescher portrays it: better, in that it works, and its force extends, beyond the confines of (Rescher's) pragmatic commitments in epistemology; worse (for Rescher, at any rate), because it lacks the pragmatic character that Rescher thinks it must have.

Because it is not immediately obvious how the question 'Why be rational?' is best understood, or what constraints a satisfactory philosophical resolution of it must meet,⁴ I begin by trying to get clearer on what the question asks, on what constraints a philosophical justification of rationality must meet in order to be successful, and, especially, on how Rescher understands that question and those constraints.

1. What is the Question Concerning the Justification of Rationality?

For Rescher, "[r]ationality consists in the intelligent pursuit of appropriate ends." (p. 1) Such pursuit centrally involves "cogent reasons," (p. 3) and rationality "pivots on the deployment of 'good reasons': I am being rational if my doings are governed by suitably good reasons — if I proceed in cognitive, in practical, and in evaluative contexts on the basis of cogent reasons for what I do." (p. 4) Rationality is on Rescher's view normative: it tells us what we "should" do. Its declarations have a normative force, enjoining us as to how we ought to go about settling questions of

what to believe, do, or value." (pp. 9-10, emphasis in original) "A rational person," accordingly, "is someone who is impelled by reason in what he believes, does, and values — who endeavors to let all his proceedings be governed by, and shaped with a view to, the strongest reasons." (p. 10) Rescher's account of rationality stresses its normativity, and sees that normativity as flowing from the goodness or cogency of reasons which render beliefs, actions and evaluations rational. This "good reasons" normative conception of rationality is the one I shall be presuming, following Rescher, in what follows.⁵

Why should we value rationality, as it has just been characterized? Why should we strive to be rational? Many philosophers have regarded these questions as trivial and as admitting of obvious answers; others have regarded them as ill-formed, nonsensical, and/or in principle impossible to resolve. At the outset of his discussion, Rescher aligns himself with both these views:

Why should one be rational? In a way, this is a silly question. For, the answer is only too obvious — given that the rational thing to do is (effectively, by definition) that for which the strongest reasons speak, we *ipso facto* have good reason to do it. (p. 33)

And Rescher approvingly cites Kurt Baier's argument for the claim that "The question 'Why should I follow reason?' simply does not make sense." (p. 33, emphasis in original)

There is already a tension in Rescher's understanding of the question, for, as these citations show, he regards the question both as "silly" and as having an answer which "is only too obvious", on the one hand, and as one which "simply does not make sense" on the other. Now if the question has an obvious answer then it must make sense; if it does not make sense then it cannot have a proper answer, obvious or otherwise. So we must eliminate at least one of these stances.

It is not difficult to do this, for Baier's argument that the question makes no sense is easily defeated. The crucial step in the argument is the claim that "'Should I follow reason?' means 'Tell me whether doing what is supported by the best reasons is doing what is supported by the best reasons'." (p. 33, emphasis added) Is this claim about the meaning of the question correct? I think not. The question is better understood as asking why one ought to believe or do that which is supported by the best reasons: why one ought to grant that reasons have probative or evidential force, or acknowledge as genuine the putative evidential force routinely attributed to (good) reasons; and, if genuine, how one might account for that probative force—from what source does it flow? These are serious and deep questions about the nature of reasons and their ability to warrant the beliefs and actions for which they speak, and about the appropriateness and importance of epistemological constraints on our believing, judging, acting and valuing. To dismiss them as nonsensical is to dismiss a concern that lies at the very heart of epistemology. Not only is the original question not nonsensical, the answer to it constitutes the core of our understanding of the normativity which Rescher rightly regards as basic to rationality, and to epistemology more generally. So the tension noted above is removed as soon as we see that the rejection of the question 'Why be rational?' as nonsensical is too quick, for it fails to recognize a deep and fundamental question⁶ about reasons and their epistemic force.⁷

And in fact, despite his endorsement of Baier's argument that the question is nonsensical, Rescher acknowledges that this response to the question "is a bit too facile." (p. 34) But he does not do so in response to the argument of the preceding paragraph. Rather, Rescher sees the Baier response to the question as facile, and "the job that needs to be accomplished ... [as]

more complicated," (p. 34) because of what he calls "the predicament of reason":

...in this world, we are not in general in a position to proceed from the actual best as such, but only from the visible best that is at our disposal — 'the best *available* (or *discernible*) reasons'. We have to content ourselves with doing 'the *apparently* best thing' — the best that is determinable in the prevailing circumstances. But, the fact remains that the alternatives whose adoption we ourselves sensibly and appropriately view as rational given the information at our disposal at the time are not necessarily *actually* optimal. The problem about doing the rational thing — doing that which we sensibly suppose to be supported by the best reasons — is that our information, being incomplete, may well point us in the wrong direction. Facing this 'predicament of reason', we know the pitfalls, realizing full well the fragility of those 'best laid schemes'. So the problem remains: Why should we act on the most promising visible alternative, when visibility is restricted to the limited horizons of our own potentially inadequate vantage-point? (pp. 34-35, emphases in original)

It is to this understanding of the question 'Why be rational?' that the rest of Rescher's discussion is addressed.

Understood in this way — "Why be rational, given that we know that even our best judgments concerning the rationality of alternative beliefs, actions and evaluations might be mistaken and lead us astray?" — the question is readily answered. The "predicament of reason"⁸ concerning Rescher involves nothing more than fallibilism; the answer to this reading of the question is simply that while we have no guarantee that rationality will yield success, the (subjectively assessed) chances of success are maximized by believing and acting in accordance with reason. Rationality provides no guarantee of success, but such a guarantee is not necessary for acting in accordance with reason to be the best that we can do in our fallible and imperfect circumstances. Thus: "[y]ou should be rational because

this affords the best rationally foreseeable prospects of success — on the whole and in the long run." (p. 37) Here Rescher is perfectly correct.

But this point—that following the dictates of reason can lead us astray; that fallibility reigns in all matters epistemological—does not address the deep question concerning rationality and the normative force of reasons raised earlier. Why should we acknowledge the putative probative force of reasons as genuine? If genuine, from what source does this probative force flow? To this understanding of 'Why be rational?' Rescher claims that there is nothing to say; the remainder of his discussion is aimed at showing that rationality can be, and ought to be, justified pragmatically. I address this point next. In addressing it, I hope to show that Rescher's pragmatic justification of rationality has the welcome but unintended consequence that the deep question concerning rationality can be answered in a non-pragmatic, "strictly theoretical" way.

2. The Pragmatic Justification of Rationality

If I am right that 'Why be rational?' is best understood as raising a network of closely related, fundamental questions concerning the evidential force of reasons, and so the normativity of rationality in particular and epistemology in general, then Rescher's dismissal of the question as either "silly" or nonsensical is a mistake. Moreover, his efforts to justify rationality pragmatically, in the face of the "predicament of reason", in terms of apparent optimality and "the efficacy of rationality" (p. 38), follow a red herring. Justifying rationality pragmatically, in terms of reasons which offer guidance but do not guarantee success, requires nothing more than a straightforward appeal to fallibilism: following the dictates of reason does not guarantee success, but it provides the best

chance of success. As Rescher puts the point: "As long as rationality improves the prospects of success, no matter how modestly, its call represents the best bet, the advisable course, the sensible thing to do. No *guarantees* are necessary." (p. 35, emphasis in original) Here Rescher is quite right. But this point, though correct, does not address the deep question concerning reasons and their probative force which 'Why be rational?' raises.

Nevertheless, in filling out his case for the pragmatic justification of rationality, Rescher (apparently inadvertently) does address the deep question—and he does so successfully. That is, he offers a compelling answer to the deep question, in non-pragmatic terms. Let us then look to Rescher's attempted pragmatic justification of rationality, and see how this attempt leads to a compelling non-pragmatic answer to our deep question.

Rescher's pragmatic justification of rationality is straightforward:

1. We want and need rationally cogent answers to our questions — answers that optimally reflect the available information.
2. Following the path of cognitive rationality (as standardly construed) is the best *available* way to secure rationally cogent answers to our questions.
- [3.] *Therefore*: Following the path of standard cognitive rationality in matters of inquiry (that is, in answering our questions) is the rational thing to do: we are rationally well advised to answer our questions in line with the standard processes of cognitive rationality.

It must be stressed that this reasoning is of the following pattern: We have the inherently appropriate objective *O*; course of action *A* is the optimal available path to this objective; therefore we are rationally well advised to follow this path. This, clearly, is a quintessentially pragmatic style of argumentation.

It is appropriate to proceed rationally not because we know that by doing so we will (inevitably or probably) succeed, but because we realize that by doing so we will have done the very best we possibly can towards producing this outcome: we will have given the matter 'our best shot'. (pp. 39-40, emphases in original)

This pragmatic justification of rationality works, in that it provides a good answer to the "predicament of reason": given that rationality cannot guarantee success, it nevertheless affords us our best chance of success, "*as best we can (rationally) judge*." (p. 40n, emphasis in original) However, it does not address the deep question concerning rationality: it does not tell us why we should acknowledge as genuine the putative evidential force of reasons—why we should be moved by considerations judged by "the standard processes of cognitive rationality" to be good reasons—or what the source of this genuine evidential force might be. Rescher is clear—indeed emphatic—that no non-pragmatic argument can tell us this:

The sort of argument for rationality that we have contemplated is thus a *practical* argument rather than one that proceeds in the strictly cognitive sector of reason. And this is the best that can be had....One cannot marshal an ultimately satisfactory defence of rational cognition by an appeal that proceeds *wholly* on its own grounds. In providing a viable justification the time must come for stepping outside the whole cognitive/theoretical sphere and seeking for some extra-cognitive support for our cognitive proceedings. It is at just this stage that a *pragmatic* appeal to the condition of effective action properly comes into operation. (p. 41, emphases in original)

Thus, on Rescher's view rationality cannot be justified purely theoretically or "wholly on its own grounds"; a justification of rationality cannot succeed if conducted wholly within the "cognitive/theoretical sphere." Any successful defence of rationality must appeal to something "outside" that sphere. For

Rescher, it is pragmatic considerations which fill the bill.

As Rescher is well aware, this pragmatic justification of rationality faces a serious challenge on grounds of circularity:

This practical line of argumentation...says (roughly): 'You should be rational in resolving your choices because *it is rational to believe that* the best available prospects of optimality-attainment are effectively realized in this way.' [To this line of argumentation the] sceptic is bound to press the following objection:

The proposed practicalistic legitimation of reason conforms to the pattern: 'You should be rational just because that is the rational thing to do!' And this is clearly circular. (pp. 42-43, emphasis in original)

It is in answering this sceptical challenge to his pragmatic justification of rationality that Rescher offers, inadvertently, a non-pragmatic, "strictly theoretical" justification.

3. Rescher's Response to the Sceptic: A "Strictly Theoretical" Justification of Rationality

The sceptical challenge centers on circularity. The charge is that Rescher's pragmatic justification of rationality relies upon rationality — one "should be rational just because that is the rational thing to do" — and, therefore, that this attempted justification is problematically circular. Rescher accepts that his proffered justification is circular, but denies that it is viciously or problematically so:

It might seem questionable to establish the jurisdiction of reason by appeal to the judgement of reason itself. But, in fact, of course, this circularity is not really vicious at all. Vicious circularity stultifies by 'begging the question'; virtuous circularity merely co-ordinates related elements in their mutual interlinkage. The former

presupposes what is to be proved, the latter simply shows how things are connected together in a well-co-ordinated and mutually supportive interrelationship. The self-reliance of rationality merely exemplifies this latter circumstance of an inherent coordination among its universe components. (p. 43)

Rescher here argues that a justification of rationality which presumes rationality need not beg the question even though it presupposes exactly what is to be proved: namely, that reasons can have genuine evidential force, and therefore that one ought to acknowledge, and believe and act in accordance with, such reasons. But it is not immediately obvious why this is not in fact question begging. Rescher is arguing that one ought to be rational because there are good reasons for being so. But if the point at issue is whether — and if so why — we should take "good reasons" seriously, then Rescher's argument does seem to beg the question, since it presupposes that putative good reasons are in fact epistemically forceful. That, after all, is why (according to Rescher's argument) we should be rational: we should be rational because there are good reasons for being so. But if the sceptic is asking why we should take good reasons seriously, and endeavor to believe and act in accordance with them, then Rescher's argument does appear to beg the question against the sceptic by presupposing that good reasons actually afford warrant, and so are to be taken seriously.

Rescher acknowledges that his argument appears to beg the question, but denies that it actually does so. It is in spelling out this defence of his argument that he begins to offer his non-pragmatic, "strictly theoretical" justification of rationality:

Admittedly, the reasoning at issue has an *appearance* of vitiating circularity because the force of the argument itself rests on an appeal to rationality: 'If you are going to be rational in your beliefs, then you must also act rationally, because it is rational to

believe that rational action is optimal in point of goal attainment.' But this sort of question begging is simply *unavoidable* in the circumstances. It is exactly what we want and need. Where else should we look for a *rational* validation of rationality but to reason itself? The only reasons for being rational that it makes sense to ask for are *rational* reasons....we have no way of getting at the facts directly, without the epistemic detour of securing grounds and reasons for them. And it is, of course, rationally cogent grounds and reasons that we want and need. The overall justification of rationality *must* be reflexive and self-referential. (p. 43, emphases in original)

Rescher here argues that a justification of rationality must rely on reasons if it is to be of any worth; that any such justification must therefore presuppose the potential forcefulness of reasons and in this sense be self-reflexive; and therefore that the circularity involved in his justificatory argument is unproblematic:

There is accordingly no basis for any rational discontent, no room for any dissatisfaction or complaint regarding a 'circular' justification of rationality. We would not (should not) want it otherwise. If we bother to want an answer to the question 'Why be rational?' at all, it is clearly a *rational* answer that we require. The only sort of justification of anything—rationality included—that is worth having at all is a rational one. That presupposition of rationality is not vitiating, not viciously circular, but essential—an unavoidable consequence of the self-sufficiency of cognitive reason. There is simply no satisfactory alternative to using reason in its own defence.... Given the very nature of the justificatory enterprise at issue, one just cannot avoid letting rationality sit in judgement on itself. (What is being asked for, after all, is a rational argument for rational action, a basis for rational conviction, and not persuasion by something probatively irrelevant like threats of *force majeure*.) (pp. 43-44, emphases in original)

Rescher's point here is I think exactly right. A rational justification of rationality needn't be regarded as viciously circular,

or as begging the question against the sceptic, because the presumption of the (possible) force of reasons utilized by Rescher in his argument is a presumption made by the sceptic — and indeed by anyone who asks 'Why be rational?' — as well. As Rescher argues, asking for a justification of rationality is asking for a *rational* justification; the very asking of the question commits the questioner to the presumption of the potential force of reasons, for in asking the question she is asking whether there are *reasons* which justify rationality, and in asking it seriously she is committing herself to judging the matter in accordance with the strength of reasons which can be brought in favor of or against being rational. Thus anyone who seriously asks the question 'Why be rational?' has, in committing herself to judge the matter in accordance with reasons, already committed herself to the (only *seemingly* problematic or question begging) presumption of the potential epistemic force of reasons.

So Rescher is right: a rational defence of rationality is not question begging or viciously circular; it merely acknowledges, as any serious questioner must, that seriously asking 'Why be rational?' presupposes a commitment to rationality, i.e. to deciding the question on the basis of the best available reasons. Thus the presumption of rationality in Rescher's argument does not beg the question against the sceptic, but rather presupposes that which the sceptic, and indeed *any* serious inquiry into the question 'Why be rational?', must presuppose: that the question must be settled on the basis of reasons if it is to be properly settled, and therefore that all parties to the debate must presume the potential force of reasons. As Rescher argues, this presupposition is "not vitiating, not viciously circular, but essential — an unavoidable consequence of the self-sufficiency of cognitive reason....Rather than indicating the defect of vicious circularity, the self-referential character of a justification of rationality is a precondition of its

adequacy!" (p. 44) The self-referential justification of rationality does not beg the question, nor is it viciously circular. Rather, it is itself probatively forceful—despite the fact that it is the probative force of reason which is at issue.⁹

But what sort of justification of rationality is this? As we saw earlier, Rescher wants to reject any non-pragmatic, "strictly theoretical" justification; in his view, a "viable justification" of rationality "must [involve] stepping outside the whole cognitive/theoretical sphere and seeking for some extra-cognitive support for our cognitive proceedings." (p. 41) Does Rescher's justification meet this constraint?

Surprisingly, it does not. The justification of rationality just rehearsed does not involve any extra-cognitive support for rationality, nor does it proceed by "stepping outside the whole cognitive/theoretical sphere." On the contrary, what Rescher has given us—despite his insistence that rationality must be justified pragmatically, and cannot be justified "strictly theoretically"—is a non-pragmatic, strictly theoretical justification.

Further perusal of Rescher's discussion reveals that Rescher is of two minds with respect to the pragmatic constraint he thinks a justification of rationality must meet. For while Rescher sometimes insists on this constraint, as we have seen, at other points he explicitly disavows this constraint and argues that a successful justification of rationality must acknowledge "the self-sufficiency of cognitive reason", and so must not rely on "something outside itself":

From the angle of justification, rationality is a cyclic process that closes in on itself, not a linear process that ultimately rests on something outside itself. (p. 43)

And again:

From the justificatory point of view, rationality is and must be autonomous. It can be subject to no external authority. (p. 44)

These passages seem to contradict Rescher's claim that a "viable justification" of rationality "must [involve] stepping outside the whole cognitive/theoretical sphere and seeking for some extra-cognitive support for our cognitive proceedings." (p. 41) Rescher appears to be claiming that a satisfactory justification of rationality both must and must not proceed from "within" the rational sphere; both must and must not appeal to pragmatic considerations which are "outside" that sphere. Of course he cannot have it both ways. Which way can he have it?

If my rehearsal of his argument is accurate, then his justification of rationality succeeds only when interpreted "strictly theoretically." It makes no appeal to pragmatic considerations, but rather rests on his insistence (a) that genuine, satisfactory justifications are based on good reasons, and therefore (b) that seeking a justification of rationality—asking 'Why be rational?'—involves seeking good reasons for being so, and so acknowledging that reasons can (at least in principle) be good. Since good reasons provide warrant for their targets, anyone asking 'Why be rational?' is committed to the potential warranting force of reasons. Consequently, the question is answered in its being seriously asked: one should be rational—i.e. believe and act in accordance with reasons—because reasons have (or at least in principle can have) warranting force. This much is presupposed in the very asking of the question.

This answer to the question affords a "strictly theoretical" justification of rationality. It does not rely on pragmatic considerations, or indeed on any "authority" "external" to reason itself. And if Rescher's and my arguments are correct, then it works: it offers a satisfactory justification of rationality. Therefore, the justification of rationality needn't be, and isn't, pragmatic. Pragmatic considerations are irrelevant to the answer to the justificatory question, so long as that question is under-

stood as I interpreted it above: as asking about the genuineness, and the source, of the probative force of reasons, and so of the normativity of rationality, and of epistemology more generally. Rescher's pragmatic constraint is not met by his argument. But his argument's success shows that that constraint is not a condition which a putative justification of rationality must meet in order to succeed.

Conclusion

If my analysis is correct, then Rescher has slain a mighty philosophical dragon. To justify rationality—to successfully answer 'Why be rational?'—is to resolve a hoary and fundamental philosophical problem. This is what Rescher has done. For this we are all deeply in Rescher's debt.

But his own account of his success is I think mistaken in its characterization of

the proffered justification as pragmatic. The mistake is suggested by Rescher's ambivalent attitude towards the potential of a "strictly theoretical" justification of rationality: at some points he insists that such a justification must fail; elsewhere he insists that a successful justification of rationality must be so, and cannot rest on any "external authority." He both insists on, and undermines, a pragmatic justification. As I have tried to show, his proffered justification succeeds only when read as non-pragmatic, self-reflexive, and "strictly theoretical." In so far as Rescher is of a mind to insist that rationality can only be justified pragmatically, this is bad news for him. But it is nevertheless good news for all those friends of rationality (and of informal logic and critical thinking) who hope that rationality, and their advocacy of and commitment to it, can themselves be self-referentially justified.

Notes

¹ *Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1988). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this work.

² Among Rescher's many works on these and related topics, see especially his *Methodological Pragmatism: A Systems-Theoretic Approach to the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: New York University Press, 1977).

³ 'Why Be Rational?: On Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking', a shortened version of which appears in D. Ericson, ed., *Philosophy of Education 1989* (Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society), 1989, pp. 392-401.

⁴ Philosophers have understood and answered the question in a variety of ways: some deny the legitimacy of the question; some accept it as legitimate but despair of an answer; some accept it as legitimate but answer that we should not be rational; and some, of course, like Rescher, accept it as legitimate and try

to say why we should be rational. For a systematic review of these different responses to the question, see my 'Why Be Rational?', *op. cit.*

⁵ I agree with much of Rescher's account of rationality, and especially with those normative, "good reasons" aspects of it just stressed in the text. But I differ with Rescher's thesis that "[w]hat makes reason into [sic] a good reason is the fact that its implementation leads our efforts in appropriate directions, and the best reasons are those that achieve the most in this way." (p. 6) I would characterize the goodness of reasons not in *pragmatic* terms, as Rescher does here, but rather in *epistemic* terms, i.e. in terms of probative or evidential force. Compare my discussions of these matters in *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁶ Actually questions, i.e. the questions just noted. For ease of exposition I will continue to write as if 'Why be rational?' constitutes a single question in what follows.

⁷ A clarificatory note may here prove helpful. Fallibilism requires that *putatively* good reasons needn't be *genuinely* good reasons. The "deep question", however, does not concern fallibilism, nor does it concern the standards of reason evaluation we actually use — although, at a less deep level of inquiry, we of course can (and do) ask about the legitimacy or appropriateness of such standards. The "deep question" about putative/genuine reasons is rather this: even assuming *ideally* adequate standards of reason assessment, is there any reason to think that a reason picked out as good by such standards is genuinely epistemically forceful?; i.e. if it is putatively good in the sense of being recommended by such standards, does this entail that it packs genuine probative punch? This is how I am understanding the "deep question." It is *not* a question about the genuineness of actual practices and standards; it is rather "simply the abstract question of whether, if there should happen to be any 'good' reasons, they ought to shape belief and action." That is, the question concerns the epistemological status of such goodness. The

last quote is taken from Robert C. Pinto's comments on an earlier draft of this paper; I am grateful to Pinto for his searching criticisms.

- ⁸ "The predicament of reason" is the subject of Rescher's chapter 2.
- ⁹ See "Why Be Rational?", *op. cit.*, for further discussion.

Rescher beautifully criticizes what he terms the "Rock Bottom Fallacy," according to which rationality must be justified by some non-rational decision, on the basis of the argument of the present paragraph. See pp. 44-45. But notice that the criticism goes through, as his justification of rationality goes through, only if we give up his claim that that justification must be pragmatic, and must not proceed "wholly on its own grounds." (p. 41)

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