Cupitt's Dogmas

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TAKING LEAVE OF GOD by Don Cupitt
SCM Press 1980 pp xiii + 174 £4.95

Taking Leave of God (the title comes from a sermon by Meister Eckhart) is a fascinating book. In one way or another, perhaps unintentionally, it brings to focus some of the most fundamental problems in theological work at the present time. It should be said at the outset that I am not out to defend or attack or even expound the "Christian Buddhism" which Don Cupitt commends to us as the faith for the future and as the legitimate descendant of traditional biblical Christianity (p xii). Nor is it any part of my concern to ask how a Christian Buddhist can remain, or be allowed to remain, Anglican chaplain of a Cambridge college. This is the point at which Roman Catholics often indulge in some easy fun at the expense of the famous "comprehensiveness" of the Church of England. We let that opportunity pass if for no other reason than the plain fact that there are many priests in communion with the bishop of Rome who remain in their ecclesiastical posts while being public supporters of versions of the Christian faith ("Christian Marxism", for instance, or those forms of Catholicism which view everything through the grid of Marian "revelations" at Fatima or wherever) which are not obviously and self-evidently any more "legitimate" than Cupitt's Christian Buddhism. In Britain, faced with Anglican eccentricities, Catholics are much inclined to preen themselves on the soundness of their doctrine – forgetting that a conversation with Catholics in Naples or Mexico or the Philippines or in Vatican City might easily reveal variations on the Catholic faith which are a great deal more bizarre and off-centre than anything any Anglican chaplain at Cambridge is ever likely to produce.

1 As the author says in the preface (p xiii): "If you do not feel the pressures that have led me to the position here described, then this book is not for you". Much of the adverse comment on Don Cupitt's writings no doubt comes from critics who have not felt the same intellectual pressures, or who at any rate have not admitted to themselves that they have. The passion with which some of

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his adversaries seek to protect the general Christian public from his work may suggest that the pressures represent a much deeper threat than might appear from the easy game of scoring scholarly points against him and showing up his logical confusion.[1] "It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher", so Iris Murdoch once wrote, "what is he afraid of?" – meaning by that, presumably, that, even when one is saying something reasonably public and objective, one is likely to be laying stress on certain elements in the argument because one's own personal experience leads one to fear that they are frequently neglected or misconceived. What Cupitt is afraid of, theologically, stands out with clarity. Theology lives on disputation and the commitment of all parties runs so deeply into their lives that sides will be taken according to how the currents of antipathy and sympathy swirl round the opening paragraphs of Cupitt's preface. *Taking Leave of God*, in my judgment, is pretty bad theology but it is far more interesting than a great deal of good theology. There may be something perverse in preferring Cupitt's work to the standard fare in academic philosophy of religion, in comparison with which he so obviously lacks the wary professional skills. He has certainly provided a book which every first-year theology student would profit from working through. The classical blunders which he makes, and the well-known knots into which he ties himself, would exercise the student reader's growing powers of logical rigour and scholarly ingestion. But the central dogmas (as I shall call them) that hold Cupitt in their spell are widely shared. Indeed demythologizing these dogmas is at the top of the philosophical agenda at the present time. Reading his book, then, routes one directly into communication with many people who innocently share his dogmas. With luck, it might also begin to show how difficult the process of transcending these dogmas must be. Only a slow cure is effective.[2]

That "wrong" theology may often be far more interesting than good solid stuff may seem an offensive claim to make. In extenuation, one may recall an admiring review by Cornelius Ernst of Hugo Meynell's *God and the World* (*New Blackfriars* November 1971, pp 525-6) – "a very good book, serious, cool, cogent and succinct" – which concludes as follows: "Reassured as I am by Dr Meynell's honest and persuasive account of classical theism, that it is not inconsistent with my experience of God and the world ... I still ask why it is that I don't find classical theism a satisfactory way of sustaining and completing the partial meanings of my experience. I wonder why it is that Barth's contradictions, for instance, so clearly exposed by Dr Meynell, still have a kind of fascination; I hope I am not being simply perverse". In the context of that review, of course, "classical theism" obviously meant the

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thought of St Thomas Aquinas about the question of God, in contrast with that of Karl Barth. Whatever disagreements there might have been between them on matters of detail, Cornelius Ernst and Dr Meynell were agreed in their general interpretation of the thought of St Thomas. Their understanding of St Thomas would always be immeasurably more profound than anything that Don Cupitt has ever offered. The "traditional theism" which he is rejecting in this book is vulnerable on the central issues to devastating criticisms that St Thomas himself would have made. And nobody would claim that Cupitt's work bears comparison with that of Karl Barth. On the other hand, many Christians today surely find Barth's work just as alien and inaccessible as that of Aquinas. Indeed Barth's work would no doubt be included among "the rationally structured systems of classical theology" which, according to Joseph Stephen O'Leary, "have become uninhabitable". He goes on to ask whether the style that pervades doctrine from the Council of Nicaea to the time of Pope Pius XII may not belong to an epoch of which we are now experiencing the closure.[3] Dissatisfaction with classical theism *even at its best* extends very widely among perfectly orthodox and respectable Catholic theologians. But the advantage of Cupitt's caricatured and vulgarised version of "traditional theism" is that it undoubtedly exposes what people commonly believe – notwithstanding all the careful work of apologists. The fears that his two main philosophical dogmas reflect are very widely shared; the question is whether he isn't relying on straw men to chase out his bogeys.

2 Cupitt's work is always so fertile in raising questions and provoking protests that it would be quite impossible in the space of an essay like this to touch on them all. Before turning to his two great dogmas we may linger for a moment on a couple of points taken almost at random from a dozen or more that beckon.

Cupitt says that many people today are quietly agnostic about Christian *doctrine* but quite capable of practising the Christian *religion* to strikingly good effect (p xii). That seems absolutely right. It is the basis of his idea of "Christian Buddhism": roughly, and in passing, the idea is that "Buddhism", being without any doctrines about what is the case (I don't know if that is true) offers a model of a "God-less" or "atheistic" form of "religious" reverence for life, which would be greatly improved by cross fertilization with the sort of behavioural attitudes apparently recommended and exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth (who was not, of course, in any sense "divine"). However all that may be, "spirituality precedes doctrine", as Cupitt reminds us (p 11). The Catholic faith, for the majority of us, is primarily a way of life and a form of worship and a tradition of spirituality, and the fact of the matter

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is that the doctrines are left on the back burner with the gas turned very low. It is perfectly possible to practise the Catholic form of the Christian religion to strikingly good effect without ever coming to grips more than notionally with questions about the status and meaning of the doctrines. There are many such Catholics today, as Karl Rahner noted some years ago, and they are to be found not only among middle-class university graduates and the like. The difference between Cupitt and Rahner on this point is only that Rahner would think that dispensing with the doctrines altogether would turn Christianity into mythology. Cupitt splits the world up into societies which are "mythological-traditional" or else "technological-utilitarian" (p 17), and it is salvaging something of the religion of the former to provide some religious dimension of spirituality for the latter that now drives his current thinking.

Cupitt lays great stress on the radical difference between those whom he calls Modern People (in effect himself, me and no doubt you) and the entire human race up to the year 1781 or thereabouts. Nobody is likely to hold that people today are *exactly* the same as people were a thousand or ten thousand years ago. Social changes, the movement of history, the expansion of knowledge, the development of science, and so on, obviously make our form of life significantly different from any form of human life that precedes us. Nobody is likely to hold that we are *totally* different from our ancestors – at least of two thousand years ago, but it is worth considering how much we should really have in common with people of ten thousand years ago. "Presented with the human form", as David Wiggins says, "we entertain immediately a multitude of however tentative expectations"; but we might rapidly discover, as in a strange country with entirely strange traditions, that we could not find our feet with Stone Age people or whoever.[4] But this marks one of the great watersheds in theological work today. Some people always want to stress the remoteness of even the relatively recent past, so that anything written a few hundred years ago becomes almost unintelligible without great leaps of historical imagination. Others will always insist on the continuity – "human nature never changes", and so on. Cupitt evidently belongs with those who make the most of the *dis*-continuity – "the remarkable gulf between modern secular scientific-industrial cultures and all other societies" (p 16). But on Cupitt's view you, (including him and me again too) are also extremely remote from most people alive on this planet at the present time – e.g. "the socialist countries, being closed, ideological, tightly-disciplined and conservative, in many ways resemble traditional societies more than modern, which is why they seem in many cases to be so suc-

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cessful in preserving traditional religion" (p 17)! Thus Cupitt's Modern People occupy the tiniest possible corner in the immensity of historical and geographical space. They (we) are the handful of people on this planet who are the product of the European Enlightenment of the late 18th century. Put like that, of course, the claim may sound a trifle arrogant. But the question is whether Cupitt puts his finger on the real difference between people like you and me and people of the Stone Age or of any totalitarian society today (assuming that we are not well on the way to living in one such ourselves).

3 The great difference, according to Cupitt, is that every other social order but ours has been, or is, "heteronomous". What that means emerges in the picture conjured up by such quotations as these, beginning with the opening words of the book: "Modern people increasingly demand autonomy, the power of legislating for oneself ... they want to live their own lives, which means making one's own rules, steering a course through life of one's own choice, thinking for oneself, freely expressing oneself and choosing one's own destiny" (p ix). The great difference comes out, for instance, in the rebellion of young Asians in Britain against arranged marriages and the like: "The traditional individual found his own nature, situation in life and destiny all readymade for him. Guided by providence, he followed a predestined path through life. By contrast, the modern person is no longer content to live his life so completely within an antecedently-prescribed framework. He wants to define himself, to posit and pursue his own goals and to choose for himself what to make of himself" (p 19). As far as religion goes Cupitt writes as follows: "the principles of spirituality cannot be imposed upon us from without and cannot depend at all upon any external circumstances. On the contrary, the principles of spirituality must be fully internalized a priori principles, freely adopted and self-imposed. A modern person must not any more surrender the apex of his self-consciousness to a god. It must remain his own" (p 9). There is much else in the same vein.

Thus Cupitt dogmatizes about the Modern Person. The only way to be moral at all is to practise "autonomy". As Cupitt says: "A life lived in resigned acceptance of limitation and in passive obedience to God and tradition does not deserve to be called a moral life. I must appropriate, internalize and truly make my own the standards I live by". Yes, but exactly how much is being said here? A life may surely be lived in acceptance of limitation without necessarily being "resigned": again and again Cupitt's choice of adjective blocks off certain options and possibilities. For that matter, a paraplegic and many another modern person not so obviously and physically confined may find some form of

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"resignation" not only essential for sustaining life at all but actually also liberating and creative (I don't suppose Cupitt doubts it). It all depends, in any case, on what you mean by "resignation": it is one thing to cave in and capitulate in dishonourable submission, it is another thing altogether to accept the inevitable without repining (as the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines it). Resignation is often admirable, whether in the form of Christian faith or as Stoicism (the only serious alternative in our culture).

Even with sympathy for Cupitt's detestation of *imposed* moral rules one finds it hard to follow why it is that "the principles of spirituality cannot be imposed upon us *from without* and cannot depend *at all* upon *any* external circumstances" – my italics. How does one ever learn anything, if Cupitt means what he says? We don't have to think that children need to be trained in roughly the way that dogs and other domestic animals are to think that at some point anybody who is learning has to depend on instruction "from without". But for Cupitt depending on somebody else is selling your soul to him. He writes: "If it (*sc:* the morality that I actually adopt) derived its authority from another I could not fully adopt and internalize it without becoming dependent upon that other, and so forfeiting my freedom". To depend on another at all is to forfeit one's freedom.

Now, obviously it is a good thing to think for oneself, express oneself freely, and so on. Of course I should "make my own the standards I live by" – but is that quite the same thing as "making one's own rules"? The whole problem is that Cupitt veers between a heady existentialist libertarianism and the common-sense advice that any parent or teacher will give a child. The standards, if it is a matter of making them one's own, are obviously antecedently *given:* they are initially somebody else's standards, and to that extent they are plainly "external", prior to my choosing them. The power of legislating for oneself, in that case, is not the power of *inventing* one's own idea of right and wrong; it is the common or garden variety of trying to think for oneself, form one's conscience and suchlike. Everyone wishes to be Captain of his own Soul, so Cupitt tells us: "I must be autonomous in the sense of being able to make my own rules and impose them upon myself" (p ix), "each chooses his own ethic" (p x), and so on in the same style. It is all the difference between making one's own rules and making the rules one's own, but Cupitt blurs the distinction all the time, apparently unwittingly. Some of the time what he says is no more than the sensible parent's advice – attempting to get a child to think for himself, to be reasonably critical of the moral standards which one hopes that he has learned to internalize from his upbringing, and so on. And certainly everybody needs to have the

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courage to be critical of the standards of any authority that demands unthinking loyalty. Heteronomy in that sense is rightly denounced and resisted. But again and again the rhetoric of Cupitt's text smuggles in, or rather blatantly advertizes, a much more exciting and dramatic portrait of the Modern Person who creates his or her own moral rules – which, happily, coincide with those chosen by similar persons and thus it becomes possible to form "a liberal democratic republic, the best kind of society" (p x), but the individual's will alone is the source of all law.

Whether or not a liberal democratic republic is the best kind of society may be doubted, although for my part I don't expect to live to see anything better. But the Liberal idea of the autonomous individual has been in the air, as Cupitt says (p x), "for two centuries" – which takes us back very precisely to the year 1781, when Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* originally appeared, thus inaugurating that decade of publications in which he worked out the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Nobody has drawn out the implications of the Kantian doctrine of the Modern Person more effectively than Iris Murdoch: "Kant abolished God and made man God in His stead. We are still living in the age of Kantian man, or Kantian man-god ... How recognizable, how familiar to us, is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Grundlegung*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgment of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason ... this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of philosophy". And she goes on to say, in phrases that accurately capture Cupitt's dogma of the Modern Person: "The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. The sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possibly courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will, power ... Act, choice, decision, responsibility, independence are emphasized in this philosophy of puritanical origin and apparent austerity".[5]

This Kantian picture of the self-legislating individual retains its hold on the modern Liberal imagination, albeit in forms that would have horrified Kant himself. The person who prides himself on being Captain of his own Soul is the buccaneer of the free enterprise market economy, the freebooting entrepreneur in his privateer who imposes his own rules on the immense void of faceless sea. But for the past quarter of a century many of our best moral philosophers have been working to release us from the spell of this

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potent myth. Irish Murdoch has been in the van. In an important paper published as long ago as 1956 she argued that moral values are not our choices in the way that Cupitt seems to think: "moral values are visions, inspirations or powers which emanate from a transcendent source concerning which (one) is called on to make discoveries and may at present know little". What we have to see, so she argues there, is that "as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us" – and, so she adds, "moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes". She will have no truck with Cupitt's dogma of voluntarism: "a man's morality is not only his choices but his vision". She writes, of course, from an explicitly non-Christian position ("there is no God in the traditional sense of that term, and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense"). Her defence of a certain naturalism in ethics is continued in the moral realism or moderate ethical cognitivism now being worked out by a generation of philosophers who have no religious or theological interest whatsoever.[6] There is some irony in the way that Cupitt builds his "Christian Buddhism" on this dogma of voluntarism which post-Christian philosophers are now demythologizing. The myth of the Modern Person which Cupitt espouses is no basis for secular morality, let alone anything "Christian".

4 There is good reason to fear authoritarian and totalitarian moral systems: Catholics obviously have a great deal yet to learn on this score. But fears of heteronomy need not carry one into existentialist doctrines of pure will. We don't have to choose between heteronomy and autonomy, any more than we have to say that values are either all dropped from heaven (received) or brought up from within ourselves (created). Cupitt writes as follows: "All the sources from which our lives are inspired, guided and nourished ... come to be seen as welling up within us instead of being ... an objective pre-existent order into which we have been inserted. In the old world meanings and values came down from above, but now they come up from below. We no longer receive them; we have to create them" (p 3). In his haste and determination to destroy the idea that our moral system is a code of objective rules which we just have to read off Nature or Scripture or something else "external" to ourselves, Cupitt goes to the other extreme in his insistence that the moral system is to be seen as "welling up within us". It never seems to enter his head that it is the discontinuity between the moral agent and the world which requires to be properly located. We are, after all, part of Nature; and Scripture is a human creation. You can receive things from others without becoming their prisoners. There is a third position open all the time. Without bringing the question of God into it at all isn't it possible

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to argue that any rational moral system must be our creation all right – but our creation in response to, or in reaction against, that primary and irreducible "given", which is the world of which we are physically constituent parts? But Cupitt is determined to keep operating with the doctrine that what is not "objective" must always be "subjective", just as what is not "from above" must necessarily be "welling up within us".

What is so fascinating about Cupitt's book is that it might have been composed as a course of nine easy lessons in how to resist the seductions of the game of playing off outside against inside, institution against individual, objective against subjective, and so forth. How pervasive that set of dichotomies remains in our culture, and how slow the cure has to be!

It is no surprise to find Cupitt inveighing against "theological realism" and "objective theism". He writes as follows: "the God and the institutions of Jews, Christians and Muslims seem to be so uncompromisingly heteronomous – Christianity in particular seems almost to identify being a religious believer with assenting to a large body of highly implausible assertions about supernatural beings and events" (p xii). What is required is "a break with our habitual theological realism" – "for theological realism can only actually be *true* for a heteronomous consciousness such as no normal person ought now to have" (p 12) – an utterance which, somewhat irreverently, provokes the thought that Big Brother is ready to intervene to stop persons from being so heteronomous. Theological realism apparently involves the doctrine that God is part of the world (pp 6-8). It is certainly common enough to find Christians who think that God and the human individual are two beings in opposition to one another (cf p 5), so that the freedom of divine grace seems incompatible with the liberty of human will. It is equally common to think of God as the Supreme Being, on all fours with the rest of us, so to speak, but omnipotent, omniscient and suchlike. St Thomas Aquinas worked hard against those two mistakes, but they recur so frequently, among believers and atheists, that there must be no end to correcting them. (It might even be said that all that good theology ever achieves is to correct these two mistakes.) In his attempt to dispose of "God's spiritually crushing *over-againstness*" (p 8) Don Cupitt enlists "many of the best names" on his side: Tertullian, Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Barth (p 7). *Barth* ...! But it is fairly evident that the real problem is that Cupitt knows that "the correspondence theory of truth is a poor tool to use for assessing religious beliefs" – but, characteristically, he supposes that the only alternative is to say that religious language is "expressive rather than descriptive in force" (p 11). This leads him to claim, in agreement with "the

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tradition of Lutheranism, pietism, Methodism and Christian existentialism", that Christianity is "not a cosmic hypothesis nor a theory about the world but a categorical demand that one should change one's whole life" (p 57). By this time one is longing for a word from Aristotle, in whose pagan ethics the Kantian categorical imperative is so conspicuously absent.[7] But much of what Cupitt says in this chapter 5 ("Worship and Theological Realism") is valuable, as indeed much else in the book is (perhaps I am not making that very clear). There is a great deal of room in Christian worship for self-expression, and much to be gained from philosophical and critical reflection on the "expressive" side of liturgy, prayer, chant, gesture, and so on. It is also clear that a great deal of what Christians traditionally say is true (if it is true) because it fits in with a whole lot of other things that they say. The coherence theory of truth has a lot to be said for it. and some things may be taken to be true because they clearly work – so one may make space for the pragmatic theory of truth as well. But Cupitt's idea seems to be that, by the standards of theological realism, Christianity is a theory of the world which allegedly mirrors the reality of the world in the crudest possible form of the correspondence theory of truth. The propositions, beliefs and judgments that the traditional Christian makes are thought to picture or copy facts, or states of affairs or events "out there" in "supernatural space". This brings us to another dogma which is at the centre of the best contemporary philosophical exploration. Of course many Christians *do* entertain some such myth of how propositions picture the (other) world. And there are philosophers who have abandoned any attempt to link what we say or think to any part of reality – but Cupitt seems to think that the struggle is over. But it is by no means clear that if we can no longer suppose that propositions picture the world we have no alternative but to suppose that propositions are our imposition or projection on a radically unintelligible and unresponsive world.[8]

Thus Don Cupitt raises all the deepest theological questions; his dogmas lead him to give all the most inadequate answers, but demythologizing his dogmas is an exercise from which few could fail to profit.

1 A game in which I have to confess that I have played, cf my review in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, April 1980, pp 282-3.

2 Cf Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, no 382: "You mustn't *cut off* a disease of thought when you are doing philosophy. It has to run its natural course, and *slow* cure is all-important. (That is why mathematicians are such bad philosophers.)"

3 See "The Hermeneutics of Dogmatism", his brilliant critique of Lonergan, in *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 47 (1980) pp 96-118.

4 Cf David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p 222, and Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p 223.

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5 Cf Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p 80 ff especially. The *Grundlegung* is Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* of 1785.

6 Iris Murdoch's paper "Vision and Choice in Morality" is to be found in the supplementary volume for 1956 of the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society.

7 A landmark in this connection is the paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" by G.E.M. Anscombe in *Philosophy*, January 1958; but see also the beautiful paper "Virtue and Reason" by John McDowell in *The Monist*, July 1979.

8 One might hope that Michael Dummett's formulation could be extended beyond its original setting in a review of a book on the philosophy of mathematics, so that we could speak of "objects springing into being in response to our probing. We do not *make* the objects but must accept them as we find them ... but they were not already there for our statements to be true or false before we carried out the investigations which brought them into being", *Truth and Other Enigmas*, p 185.

Reviewing and Realising

Anne Primavesi

I was in Dublin a month ago when the city was galvanised by an exhibition of tableaux by Edward Kienholz. I use the verb deliberately. The tableaux were shocking, composed as they were in three-dimensional assemblages to present a particular concept, and that concept worked out to the smallest detail. One of the most shocking was 'The State Hospital', and the following extract from Kienholz's blueprint of the work gives some idea of the nightmarish experience undergone by the viewer, who has to peer in through a small grille:

> "This is a tableau about an old man who is a patient in a State Mental Hospital. He is in an arm restraint on a bed in a bare room. (This piece will have to include an actual room consisting of walls, ceiling, barred door, etc.) There will be only a bed pan and a hospital table (just out of reach). The man is naked. He hurts. He has been beaten on the stomach with a bar of soap wrapped in a towel (to hide tell-tale bruises). His head is a lighted fish bowl with water that contains two live black fish. He lies very still on his side. There is no sound in the room.
>
> Above the old man in the bed is his exact duplicate, including the bed (beds will be stacked like bunks). The upper figure will also have the fish bowl head, two black fish, etc. But, additionally, it will be encased in some kind of plastic bubble (perhaps similar to a cartoon balloon), representing the man's thoughts.
>
> His mind can't think for him past the present moment. He is committed there for the rest of his life."[1]

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