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Analysis of faith

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Abstract

In recent years, many philosophers of religion have turned their attention to the topic of faith. Given the ubiquity of the word "faith" both in and out of religious contexts, many of them have chosen to begin their forays by offering an analysis of faith. But it seems that there are many kinds of faith: religious faith, non-religious faith, interpersonal faith, and propositional faith, to name a few. In this article, I discuss analyses of faith that have been offered and point out the dimensions along which they differ.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Faith is a central component to many religions and is a common concept outside of religious discourse as well, so it's no surprise that talk of faith is enjoying a resurgence in contemporary philosophy. Because faith is a part of so many religious traditions—and is ubiquitous outside of religious contexts as well—it's worth trying to analyze.[1] But because faith is a part of *so many* religious traditions and shows up in a wide variety of non-religious contexts as well, there is some reason to be skeptical that an informative analysis that captures all the cases is possible. Someone who's concerned primarily with giving an analysis of faith that describes her own religious faith may not realize that some of the features she builds into that analysis are particular to her religious faith and aren't shared by others' religious faith or by non-religious faith. Someone who's concerned with making sense of claims about faith in a particular religious text might not realize that faith as described in other religious texts doesn't have the features that faith seems to from her religious text.

In this essay, I point out the different dimensions and features of faith that show up in recent analyses of faith and discuss some entailments of those analyses. The wide variety—of cases of faith, faith locutions, and analyses—seems to suggest a pluralism about faith.

2 | THE METHOD

Two methods one might adopt when beginning to give an analysis of faith find a parallel in what Chisholm (1982) calls "the problem of the criterion":

> First, we want to find out which are the good beliefs and which are the bad ones. To find this out we have to have some way—some method—of deciding which are the good ones and which are the bad ones. But there are good and bad methods—good and bad ways—of sorting out the good beliefs from the bad ones. And so we now have a new problem: How are we to decide which are the good methods and which are the bad ones? (p. 64)

We must start with either cases or methods—but which? *Particularists* say that we ought to start with our intuitions about the good (justified, warranted, true, etc.) beliefs and the bad (unjustified, unwarranted, false, etc.) beliefs. That is, we ought to assume we're right about which of our beliefs are good and which are bad. If we do that, we can look for methods that sort them that way and adopt one that does. By contrast, *methodists* say that we ought to start with our intuitions about which method is the right one. That is, we ought to assume we're right about which method sorts our beliefs into good beliefs and bad beliefs correctly. Once we do that, then the method tells us which are the good beliefs and which are the bad beliefs.

2.1 | Particularism

One might start to give an analysis of faith by considering a particular case of faith, or some particular cases of faith. As Lance (n.d.) puts it, "... the paradigm case can be identified, and we recognize other cases inasmuch as they are similar to the paradigm" (p. 5). For Lance, the paradigm case of faith is Rick and Victor's faith in each other in *Casablanca*. Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (forthcoming) say something similar: "It is worthwhile to attend carefully to paradigms of faith. By our lights, Saint Teresa of Calcutta is such a person" (p. 7).

Of course, there is disagreement over paradigm cases of faith. Whereas nearly all of us agree about paradigm cases of knowledge (we know that we exist, we know that 1 + 1 = 2, we know what our names are, we know that we are standing, and so on), there is not similar agreement about the paradigm cases of faith. For some, religious faith is their paradigm case, while for others (e.g., non-religious people), religious faith is *misplaced* faith, and faith in a spouse or other human person is a paradigm case. And even those who agree that the paradigm case of faith is to be found in religious faith might disagree about which particular cases are cases of faith. For example, some think Abraham's interaction with God in the Isaac sacrificing case (Genesis 22) is a case of faith, but others disagree.

So, one choice to make is whether to start with a paradigm case. If so, then the next choice to make is which case is the paradigm cases; presumably one will want to make sure that her analysis counts it as a case of faith.

2.2 | The breadth

Suppose one starts with a paradigm case, and, focusing on the features of the case, offers an analysis of faith. She must decide whether she thinks that her analysis captures all cases of faith, or just some. If it just captures just some, which ones and why those? And she must also decide whether she cares that it doesn't capture all of them. She might think it's impossible or unimportant to give a fully general analysis of faith—or at least less important than giving analyses of faith that handle groups of cases that are somehow unified and in which faith is important.

A person might decide to offer an analysis of *a particular kind* of faith. She might be interested in her own religious faith, do some introspecting, and come up with an analysis of what is going on in her own particular case.[2] When presented with a counter-example, she could quite reasonably respond that the kind of case in question must be different from hers and leave it at that; she might not care about those cases if she is only trying to analyze what was going on in her religious faith. She might notice that the word "faith" is used in a variety of religious contexts, but there is also a great deal of talk about faith outside of religion. We have faith in spouses, sports teams, even airplanes. We have faith that we'll make it up mountains and that the addition of Gylfi Sigur∂sson will help Everton contend for a Champion's League place. These uses of faith seem both importantly similar and importantly different. Does she want to capture both? Or perhaps there are more than two; perhaps faith that one will make it out of the woods alive is quite different from faith that that the addition of Gylfi Sigur∂sson will help Everton contend for a Champion's

League place. They're both things one would hope for, and they're both non-religious faith. But only one of them is something one can do anything about; and one is important for survival, and the other is not.

So perhaps we have a fourfold division, as in Kvanvig (2013): religious faith (faith in God), non-religious faith (faith in Everton or a spouse), important faith (faith in God, or a spouse), and mundane faith (faith in Everton).[3] And perhaps the necessary and sufficient conditions for each are different. Or perhaps there is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that applies to each, but it's significantly more broad and therefore much less informative than each individual set; perhaps giving a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that captures all of them will be much less informative than giving necessary and sufficient conditions for just one of them.

This relates to the previous section. After one has chosen a paradigm case or paradigm cases (if she starts that way), then she must decide what other cases she wants her analysis to cover (if any). Or she might decline to choose a paradigm case, instead starting with an entire domain.

3 | THE COMPONENTS

Let's turn our attention from approaches to the analysis of faith to the analyses themselves. Generally, analyses are given of open sentences.[4] For example, when giving an analysis of parthood, we analyze the open sentence "x is a part of y = df _____". In the right-hand side—whatever fills in the blank—only x and y can appear free; any other variable must be bound by a quantifier. When giving an analysis of parthood at a time, we analyze the open sentence "x is a part of y at t = df _____". In the right-hand side—whatever fills in the blank—only x and y and t can appear free; any other variable must be bound by a quantifier.

This method of giving analyses by using open sentences seems to raise a problem for giving a fully general analysis of faith. According to Howard-Snyder (2016), "There is objectual faith ('faith in'), propositional faith ('faith that p'), and allegiant faith ('keeping faith' with another, 'being faithful' to them). Furthermore, there is 'being a person of faith', that is, a person of affective or global faith" (p. 2). So which open sentence should be analyzed? Is it "S has faith that p," or "S has faith in x," or "S has faith in x to φ," or "S is a person of faith," or something else? Given that the sentences and the relata are different, it seems the analyses will also be different.

3.1 | The relata

So there is a variety of faith locutions, and, corresponding to them, a variety of faith properties or relations. One choice to make is whether these are (a) wholly unrelated, (b) unified by family resemblance, or (c) ultimately reducible to exactly one faith property or relation. This, again, has a correlate in epistemology. We have many knowledge locutions that seem to take different kinds of relata: "S knows that p," "S knows how to φ," "S knows x," "S knows Fs." Some people think that all of these are reducible to one—usually "S knows that p."[5] But many think that, while these are importantly related, they are not analyzable into each other.

It seems sensible, and perhaps obvious, to think that one side of every faith relation—or the property-bearer if faith is a monadic property—is a person.[6] For the monadic faith property, we can move on to analyzing the property. But if faith is a relation, there are different options for the other relatum. Candidates for the other relatum of the faith-in relation (or at least the relation referred to by the words "faith in," which may be the one and only faith relation) include another person, God, and ourselves, and maybe chairs (faith in them to hold us up) and dogs (faith in them to get help and bring it back), and the government (faith in them to provide for those who need it or to keep us safe). Presumably, the other relatum for the faith-that relation (or the relation referred to by "faith that") is a proposition.

3.2 | The relation

One option is that faith is a monadic property (i.e., not a relation), presumably of a person. The faith property, on this view, is of the form "S is faithful," or alternatively, "S is a person of faith."

Kvanvig (2013) offers an analysis of this kind of faith. On this view, faith is "an orientation of a person toward a longer-term goal, an orientation or disposition toward the retaining of the goal or plan or project in the face of difficulties in achieving it …" One way of cashing this out is as a relation between a person and a goal. But another way is that, in virtue of bearing a number of other relations toward goals and difficulties, one simply has faith.

Byerly (2012) also identifies (religious) faith with a disposition. For him, it's an epistemic disposition—a disposition to hold religious beliefs and perhaps other doxastic attitudes toward propositions of religious significance in the presence of certain mental states. West (2013) also construes faith as a disposition. On his view, which he attributes to Kierkegaard, (Christian) faith is an emotional disposition—the disposition to have certain proper emotional responses to certain situations.

Descriptions of someone as faithful—or as a person of faith—are familiar. But one might think that someone is a person of faith *in virtue of* having faith either very strongly in something or in a number of things, or in virtue of having faith very strongly that a proposition is true or that a number of propositions are true. Of course, one could also accept the reverse: someone has strong faith in something, or in a number of things, *in virtue of* being a person of faith. On this view, being a person of faith is a character trait, and results in bearing the faith relation to something or some things. If one thinks that the fundamental faith property is monadic, one will hold something like this latter view. If one thinks that there is a monadic faith property, but it's not necessarily the fundamental one, then one could hold either of the views.

3.2.1 | Relation: Person–person

One might take the person–person faith relation expressed by "S1 has faith in S2" to be constituted by other properties. Clegg (1979) takes it to be at least in large part, if not wholly, constituted by trust. Of course, just as there is debate over what faith is, there is debate over what trust is, so one might worry that this isn't very illuminating. But as long as the proponent of this kind of view doesn't analyze trust in terms of faith, she is free to characterize faith in terms that she can't give an analysis of—after all, something's got to be primitive. McCraw (2015) also takes the idea of (the epistemic aspect of) faith as being partly constituted by trust, but argues that faith isn't *just* trust; it is trust that involves attitudes towards propositions that are "deeply entrenched"—central to our belief system. Kvanvig (2016) gives several arguments against faith being identical to trust.[7]

Preston-Roedder (2013) thinks that the person–person faith relation involves two components, one cognitive and one volitional. The cognitive component is the tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt when evaluating their actions or motives or character. The volitional component is the tendency to encourage and help others to live well and to set a good example for them by living well.

4 | RELATION: PERSON–PROPOSITION

Much of the recent discussion of faith has been concerned with the person–proposition faith relation expressed by "S has faith that p." For Howard-Snyder (2013), it incorporates three things. One is a positive evaluation; S must think that p's being true is a good thing. Another is a positive conative stance; S must want p to be true, or S must desire that p be true, or hope that p is true. The third is a positive cognitive stance; S must believe that p or trust that p. The exact nature of the positive cognitive stance has been the subject of much debate.

4.1 | Doxastic component

There is substantial debate about whether the faith relation has a doxastic component, and if so, what that component is.[8] Some say that faith *just is* belief—full stop.[9] Some say that faith is a belief formed in a particular way. One way is testimony—faith that p is a belief that p formed on the basis of testimony that p.[10] Another is that faith is belief formed by response to the *sensus divinitatis*—faith that p is belief that p formed on the basis of the *sensus*

divinitatis.[11] Some say that faith is a special kind of belief, maybe belief plus hope or belief plus some sort of positive affective stance.[12] Some views don't analyze faith in terms of belief, but think that faith entails belief.[13] There are a variety of ways this entailment can go. One is that faith that a proposition is true entails belief that the very same proposition is true.[14] Another is that faith that a proposition is true entails some other kind of belief—perhaps that the proposition is probably true, or epistemically possible for the person—or entails belief in some other proposition.

Some deny that faith entails belief but think that faith does require some other positive cognitive stance—but it's one that does or could fall short of belief.[15] These other cognitive stances are not as widely discussed as belief, but proponents make it clear that they are positive, but not as positive as belief. One candidate is acceptance, where to accept p is "to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p—i.e., of including that proposition or rule among one's premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that p."[16] Another candidate is beliefless assumption, where assuming that p is (a) not disbelieving p, (b) acting as if p, and (c) using p as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning.[17] Finally, one can have a disjunctive account like Howard-Snyder (2013) or Buchak (2014) or Buckareff (2005), where faith that p just requires *some positive cognitive stance or other* toward p.

Finally, there are those that think that faith lacks any sort of truth-related cognitive stance whatsoever.[18] On this family of views, faith may be related to some cognitive stances, but those stances are not related to the truth of the object of faith. On the view of Kvanvig (2013), propositional faith is a commitment to act in service of an ideal. For Buchak (2012), faith that p is a commitment (a) not to search for more evidence for or against p and (b) to acting on p. For Pojman (1986), faith is profound hope, the only doxastic components of which are lack of certainty about the proposition and the lack of epistemic impossibility of the proposition for the person.[19] For Matheson (forthcoming), faith is a kind of grit, where grit is "passionate perseverance to obtain long term goals."[20] None of these analyses seem to require any positive cognitive stance, and they certainly don't require a particular cognitive stance.

So, on the one hand, we have views of faith where it is identical to or constituted by full-on belief. On the other hand, we have views of faith where faith is not even partly related to belief or any other doxastic attitude. And many views require something in between. We turn our attention next to control. If faith *just is* belief, then we have exactly the kind of control over faith that we have over belief. If faith is partly constituted by belief, then we only have as much control over faith as we do over belief, and perhaps much less (if faith is partly constituted by other things that are only partly under control). If faith is not even partly constituted by a cognitive relation that is even partially out of our control, then it seems faith is under our control to the same degree that action is.

4.2 | Control

Perhaps faith is entirely voluntary: S can have faith that p as the direct result of an intention to have faith that p. But if faith entails belief or includes belief as a component, then this is problematic, since most agree that doxastic voluntarism is false.[21] So those who think that faith is entirely voluntary will either have to accept doxastic voluntarism or deny that faith entails belief.

Another option is to say that faith is wholly involuntary. We just find ourselves having it or not having it. Perhaps it's a gift, perhaps a curse—to say that it's wholly involuntary isn't, of course, to make any claim about whether it's good or bad. But thinking that faith is involuntary while also thinking that sometimes people ought to have faith violates the reasonably intuitive "ought implies can" principle; if S ought to have faith (in God, that God exists, in one's spouse, or what have you), then S can have faith (in God, that God exists, in one's spouse, or what have you). We also must find some way of making sense of our hurt feelings when someone lacks faith in us, if we don't think it's at all up to them. This suggests that faith is at least partially, if not fully, under our control.

The final option is to say that faith is partly, but not completely, voluntary. For Rettler (2018), we have the same kind of control over faith as we do over belief: indirect reflective control. We can influence whether we have faith that p in the same way we can influence whether we believe that p: by focusing on evidence for p or on the normative outcomes of having faith that p.

4.3 | Action versus state

Another theoretical choice point is whether one thinks faith is an action or a state. If one is analyzing an activity when she analyzes faith, presumably, the analysis will involve other activities; and if one is analyzing a state when she analyzes faith, presumably, the analysis will involve other states. Of course, the analysis of an activity may include being in certain states; for example, the analysis of forgiving a person may well involve having certain attitudes toward the person. And the analysis of a state may include doing or having done certain actions; for example, the analysis of being married may well include having made some sort of commitment.

Falk (2005) has it that two components that partly constitute faith are actions. The first is the "decision to convert mere belief to religious faith," of which Falk declares "it's a voluntary action" and that "it's analogous to wagering." For Falk, having faith starts with belief, so one can't manufacture faith just by intending to have it. Whatever is required for first having belief will be required for having faith. The second is what he calls "Abrahamic steadfastness," which is "that the personalising of the belief results in a long-standing activity. The initial act of faith becomes the habit of faith through constant trials" (545). So on this view, while faith isn't solely an action, it is partly an action. Bishop (2002) agrees, saying that faith is an active venture that involves believing beyond the evidence.[22]

Buchak (2012) thinks that faith is *expressed* by an action. Her analysis of faith is of the open sentence "S has faith in X expressed by action A." This suggests (though does not entail) that if there's no action, there's no faith. Buchak says that the action A must be one that involves a risk, and one that the person prefers to perform despite the risk rather than wait to perform until she's gathered more evidence about X.

For Page (2017), faith (or at least the noncognitive component of it) is a posture—the posture of leaning in. Faith is "a positioning of oneself towards the object of faith and an increased motivation towards this object as a result" (p. 24). On this account, faith is an action, it is voluntary, and it can increase belief.

Some analyses of faith do not seem to take a stand, because they appeal to other relations of which it's an open question whether they are states or actions. Cullison (n.d.), for example, suggests that "X has faith that P = df. X believes or accepts that P on the basis of a non-empirical seeming that P, or X has faith that P = df. X believes or accepts that P, but not on the basis of empirical evidence that is sufficient to justify belief that P." Both of these involve believing or accepting, and it's an open question whether those are activities or states. Most people seem to think that belief is a state, but acceptance—due to it being somewhat more voluntary—might be more like an action.

How one answers this question will have implications, presumably, for the way one answers the question of voluntariness. If faith is an action, then that makes it far more likely that faith is at least partly voluntary, since actions are generally taken to be voluntary. (It would be odd, anyway, if you could have or express faith by performing an involuntary action like breathing or sneezing.) If faith is a state, then that makes it more of an open question whether it's voluntary.

And if faith comes in degrees, then understanding it as an action makes less sense. Actions don't come in degrees. One either performs an action or doesn't. There's no "sort of" performing an action—at least, not a typical action, like raising your hand or sitting down. You can raise your hand halfway up or almost sit, but in both of those cases you haven't performed the action—you've performed a different action, and you've done it fully. Perhaps there are actions that can be performed in degrees. For example, if trusting S that p or accepting that p are actions, then since they seem to be able to be done in degrees, maybe some actions can be. Or maybe the fact that they come in degrees is good reason to think they aren't actions.

4.4 | The aim or function

Another feature that affects one's analysis of faith is what one takes faith to aim at. There are a number of plausible contenders: proper belief, proper action, proper emotion. Or maybe just proper faith; maybe faith's aim is distinctive

and *sui generis*. One's answer will say what sorts of norms she thinks faith is subject to. If faith aims at epistemic propriety, then it is subject to the norms of rationality.[23] If faith aims at a certain type of action (right, moral, permissible, reasonable, morally appropriate, supererogatory), then faith is subject to moral norms and/or the norms of practical rationality. If faith aims at a certain emotional state—contentedness, peacefulness—then it's subject to whatever norms emotions are.

Faith's aim might be partly determined by its function—the role that it plays in the lives of those who have it. Howard-Snyder (2016) takes the function of faith to partly determine what faith is: "the function of faith is, among other things, to keep us firmly grounded when counter-evidence assaults the object of our faith, evidence enough to knock the wind out of assurance and assertion, yet not enough to buckle the knees of a rich variety of faith-fostered behavioral, affective, and volitional responses" (p. 154). For Howard-Snyder, faith's function guides his analysis of faith. There are two ways to one could go about this. The first way is to say that faith *just is* whatever, for example, keeps us firmly grounded when counter-evidence assaults the object of our faith. This is defining faith in terms of its functional role—similar to giving a definition in terms of a Ramsey sentence—and then seeing what, if anything, satisfies it. The other is to say that whatever faith is, it must have as its function, for example, to keep us firmly grounded when counter-evidence assaults the object of our faith. That leaves it open for faith to be belief, or belief plus something else, or something else entirely—as long as that is the thing that, for example, keeps us firmly grounded when counter-evidence assaults the object of our faith.

4.5 | Static or dynamic? Purely present or forward-looking?

The final question one ought to ask is whether she thinks that faith is static or dynamic. This the question of whether past and future facts partly determine whether a person has faith. If we knew every present-tensed fact about the state of the world at the present time, do we have enough information to determine the present faith-facts?

This might seem a bit elusive. Recall the view of Howard-Snyder (2013). One's positive evaluation, conative, and cognitive stances toward p are all something that she has at the present moment; none of them involves any past- or future-looking notions. So this is an example of what I'm calling the static view. Presumably, one's past somehow affects how she stands with respect to them, but whether she has faith isn't even partly determined by any of those past facts. A person who popped into existence, existed for one second, and then ceased to exist, could have faith on this view.

But others disagree. McKaughan (n.d.) has it that "Faith is an act of trust understood as an ongoing voluntary commitment to rely on someone." The use of "ongoing" implies that faith is something that looks forward to some future state or action, and maybe back at a past state or action as well. If one's commitment isn't ongoing, then one doesn't have faith.

Some analyses are difficult to classify. The view of Kvanvig (2016) is that "Faith is a disposition to act in service of an ideal." Whether one has a disposition at a time may just depend on the state of the world at that time; alternatively, whether one has the disposition might depend on how one actually has acted or will act. The more opportunities someone has to act in service of an ideal in which they don't so act, the less reasonable it seems to be to describe them as having such a disposition (to act in service of that ideal). And one prominent view of dispositions is that counterfactuals partly determine dispositions; if that's right, then on Kvanvig's view, we must look at other possible worlds in order to determine whether someone has faith.[24]

5 | CONCLUSION

With all these choices to make and several answers to each that seem reasonable, one might well wonder whether an analysis of faith is possible. It certainly does seem possible to give an analysis of faith if one restricts the scope of the

analysis; it might be possible to give an analysis of one's own religious faith, or faith in a spouse, or faith in human-ity.[25] One could also be a pluralist about faith, disentangle different kinds of faith, and give an analysis for each.[26] These strike me as more promising projects than giving a fully general analysis of faith.

ENDNOTES

[1] I'm using "analyze" and "analysis" very loosely, so that any attempt to say what faith is counts as an attempted analysis of faith.

[2] See Eklund (2016) for a survey of analyses of religious faith.

[3] Or perhaps a seven-fold division, as in Audi (2011).

[4] For reasons why we should give analyses of open sentences instead of abstract nouns like "faith," see Inwagen (2008).

[5] See Williamson (2000). And see Hetherington (2006) for an attempt to reduce knowing-that to knowing-how.

[6] Of course animals might have faith, as when a dog jumps out of a burning building into the waiting arms of his owner. So maybe anything capable of thought can have faith.

[7] For an overview of the literature on trust, see Wanderer and Townsend (2013).

[8] For a taxonomy of some analyses of faith along the lines of their doxastic commitments, see Buchak (forthcoming).

[9] Swinburne (1981) calls this "The Thomistic View."

[10] See, for example, Zagzebski (2012).

[11] See Plantinga (1991). The *sensus divinitatis* is the sense of divinity that, according to Plantinga (1983), is "a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God" (p. 66).

[12] Howard-Snyder (2016) calls these "belief + models."

[13] See, for example, Falk (2005) and Bishop (2002).

[14] Buchak (forthcoming) calls these "doxastic accounts."

[15] Nobody seems to think that faith requires a *stronger* positive cognitive stance than belief, like knowledge or certainty.

[16] This is the understanding of acceptance of Cohen (1992; p. 4), which Alston (1996) uses in his analysis of faith. See also Alston (1996), Howard-Snyder (2013), and McKaughan (2013).

[17] See Howard-Snyder (2013), Howard-Snyder (forthcoming), McKaughan (2013), and McKaughan (2016). For a critique of beliefless assuming as the potential cognitive stance, see Rea (n.d.).

[18] Buchak (forthcoming) calls these "practical accounts."

[19] Malcolm and Scott (2016) give several arguments against theories of faith that don't require belief.

[20] Matheson borrows the notion of grit from Duckworth (2016).

[21] Though see Howard-Snyder (2016).

[22] See Buckareff (2005) for a critique of the view and Bishop (2005) for a response to the critique. See Bishop (2007) for a fuller defense of faith as an active venture. Compare also the non-doxastic venture model proposed by Schellenberg (2005), p. 138–139.

[23] Discussion of the aim of belief can be found in Chan (2013).

[24] See, for example, Choi (2008), though some say the opposite—that having certain dispositions grounds the truth of counterfactuals.

[25] As in Preston-Roedder (2013).

[26] As in Preston-Roedder (forthcoming).

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