

At the Opening of Madness: An Exploration of the Nonrational with Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Kierkegaard

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ABSTRACT: This essay offers the beginnings of a taxonomy of madness through the analysis of three different approaches: the phenomenological, the historical-structural and the existential-religious. While there have been many avenues by which the Continental tradition has sought to counter the understanding that madness is inaccessible and unintelligible, these methods are often restricted to viewing madness from one particular angle. By using this tri-perspectival approach, I argue that insight into madness exposes the diverse forms of the nonrational, which I define as the prerational, the irrational, and the suprarational. Each of the forms reveals the reliance on the nonrational in several areas of the human condition, including displays of mental disorders, dynamic structures of society, and experiences of extreme faith. Through these descriptions, we see how expressions of madness immediately bring to the surface the way the nonrational plays an integral role in the common human condition.

KEYWORDS: madness, nonrational, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Søren Kierkegaard

Madness can be understood as something sealed off from the intelligible human world, a way of being that has been detached and isolated from the

essential elements of normative society. It can represent all that is contrary to what is rational, what is normal and even, what is human. By following this line of thinking, madness cannot be penetrated by the outside nor does it have an established internal structure, and yet it can be used to construct and form its opposite—the rational, normal human. Human rationality then becomes something that can be fully deduced, explained, and understood, and anything that contains mystery or ambiguity can be relegated to the realm of madness.

These are the common definitions of rationality and madness left to us by modernity: the rational as something totally coherent and devoid of mystery and ambiguity, while madness is whatever cannot be understood. There are many avenues by which the Continental tradition has sought to counter this understanding of rationality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for example, charges all those following after Hegel's tradition to "explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason."¹ In the spirit of this tradition, this essay uses an investigation of madness to explore the nonrational and, thus, to expand the notion of the rational. In contrast to madness as something "other," something separate from normal human society, I argue that madness provides an opening to the understanding of the relation between the rational and nonrational present in the human condition. To do this, I offer a taxonomy of madness by drawing on the phenomenological, historical-structural, and existential-religious perspectives of Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Søren Kierkegaard, respectively. More specifically, I compare and classify the different shades of madness that appear under each lens in order to expose the emerging forms of the nonrational. I limit the texts under discussion primarily to the *Phenomenology of Perception* of Merleau-Ponty, *History of Madness* of Foucault, and *Fear and Trembling* of Kierkegaard, although other works would certainly add to a more developed taxonomy of madness.²

In this essay, I use the term *madness* to mean roughly a *state of brokenness in mental and bodily capacities*. For the terms *rational* and *nonrational*, I start by seeing how they are linked: the rational, which according to the accepted modern understanding is derived from the Latin *ratio*, means something that has reason, explanation, or order; and, correlatively, the *nonrational*, is something deficient or lacking in reason, explanation, or order. To understand exactly how the nonrational lacks these qualities, I identify three forms of the nonrational: the prerational, irrational, and suprarational.³ As we explore the nonrational, we discover that madness

no longer acts as an aberration, but actually provides insights into human experience itself, allowing us to expand our initial conception of the rational. Notice that while we are expanding the rational, we are still using the terms, “rational” and “nonrational.” This language is for the sake of the discussion only; ultimately, I suggest that this dichotomy between the rational and the nonrational is untenable, for it is only in an integrated understanding of the rational and nonrational that we can gain a proper sense of their placement in the human condition.

The Prerational and Irrational Through a Phenomenological Lens

To begin a taxonomy of madness, I start with the phenomenological approach, which pulls on experiential phenomena in order to understand and classify madness. After carefully working through cases of phantom limb, schizophrenia, psychic blindness, hysteria, and other manifestations of mental disorders, Merleau-Ponty concludes that the idiosyncratic phenomena of these conditions are not self-enclosed but are intrinsic to the human condition because they can be related to and understood by others. He writes the following in his most explicit section on madness (*la folie*): “Mythical or dreamlike consciousness, madness [*la folie*], despite all their differences, are not self-enclosed [*ne sont pas fermées sur elles-mêmes*]; they are not islands of experience without any communication and from which one cannot escape . . . mythical consciousness opens onto a horizon of possible objectifications.”⁴ Although mythical, dreamlike, and hallucinatory experiences are different from normal experiences, they are not cut off from common human apprehension; *they are not closed on themselves* (as the French literally says). These experiences display a link among humans and make up a shared horizon of human experience. Just as the phenomenal field is open to natural thought, so madness is “present to [natural thought] as a horizon.”⁵ Jasper Feyaerts and Stijn Vanheule put this well: “Merleau-Ponty fulminates against reducing madness to the mere outcome of numerous causal factors that would determine its make-up. Rather than placing madness beyond human existence, he believes that madness reflects a state of subjectivity that can be comprehended in its own right.”⁶ Able to be understood on its own, madness, then, “gravitates around the world,” as Merleau-Ponty writes, and is not isolated from the rest of human experience, because it is part of the horizon of human experiences, part of the shared world of all humans.⁷

The phenomenological understanding of madness as a horizon can be illustrated through the reliance on non-objective space found in the experiences of homesickness and hallucinations. Merleau-Ponty chooses these two experiences specifically to demonstrate how the common human relation to space is not fully rational. In Merleau-Ponty's linking of these diverse experiences, I uncover a specific form of the nonrational, the *prerational*, which manifests in experiences that take place *before* or *prior to* the rational. The prerational can be seen as missing out on the order and clarity of the rational, not because the experiences are necessarily nonrational themselves but because in the moment, the person is not consulting the rational lens and is instead relying on initial feelings and sensations. It is only after a prerational experience that a rational reflection can take place. In both homesickness and hallucinations, the experience of space is based on a primordial connection to the world that can allow the feeling of being in or at least desiring to be in a space different from reality.

In homesickness, for example, when I feel far from a place or a person that I love, I am not truly living in my actual objective space, because I am longing to be somewhere else. Even though rationality would tell me otherwise, prior to any reflection I immediately feel somehow absent from my actual surroundings. Our body may be in one place, "but this landscape is not necessarily the landscape of our life. I can 'be elsewhere' while remaining here, and if I am kept far from what I love, I feel far from the center of real life."⁸ While experiencing a hallucination is a more extreme form of feeling far from the center of real life, it is similar in that I feel as though I am somewhere else, experiencing a different space than the objective space around me. In one particular study, for example, a patient has a hallucination that a brush that is close to a window comes and enters his head. The patient feels as though this is the reality of his space, even though in actuality the brush has not moved from the window. When one appeals to the rational fact that the brush is still over there, the patient argues that this "proves nothing against what he experiences"; the brush by the window is only a phantom, while the real brush has entered his head.⁹ Note that in both cases the prerational never entirely lacks the rational: in a hallucination, the person can still understand the reason for why the brush is not actually in his head, even while experiencing the presence of the hallucinatory object; in homesickness, the person's longing for a different space is based on the reason that the

current space feels foreign and uncomfortable. In these two examples of prerational experiences of space, we are also reminded of how the rational and nonrational must be integrated.

In addition to the prerational, the phenomenological account reveals another form of the nonrational through the opening of madness, the *irrational*. I describe the irrational as lacking rationality due to its being *contrary* or *opposed* to the rational. As with the prerational, the experiential phenomena demonstrate that the irrational is not restricted to experiences of the “mad” but can also be found in daily human behavior. Take, for example, the act of “talking to myself,” which can be irrational in a certain way since communication with the self usually happens internally. However, it is a familiar practice for many of us in an attempt to keep ourselves on task. This simple irrational behavior can be amplified under great mental stress where someone begins to talk to a nonpresent person and even may establish a relationship with this imaginary person. When we observe a man walking down the street talking or even arguing with someone who is not there, we, as outsiders, judge that his actions do not make sense because there is not an actual person walking and talking with him.¹⁰ While the man himself may feel subjectively that his actions do make sense, the external observer cannot call them rational. Both of these actions, talking to one’s self and talking to an imaginary person, demonstrate how the irrational allows a person to turn away from the rational or exterior world and, instead, act upon an imaginary or felt perception.

In summary, in experiences related to madness, such as hallucinations and imaginary relationships, as well as normal experiences, such as homesickness and talking to one’s self, there is a recourse to the nonrational. I have presented these examples of nonrational behavior as either forms of the prerational, where the experience takes place before rational action and also as forms of the irrational, where the experience flies in the face of the rational. By unearthing the nonrational character of these experiences, a phenomenological perspective reveals, first, that madness is not a separate, unintelligible experience and, second, that madness does not have a monopoly on the nonrational because these abnormal experiences follow similar nonrational-rational patterns as well. Thus, while the nonrational-rational relation will be broken in a greater way in cases of madness, the presence of the nonrational cannot be used to differentiate between the mad and the normal.

The Irrational Through a Historical-Structural Lens

While the phenomenological perspective points to the shared *phenomena* between madness and normal human behavior, the historical perspective approaches madness in a different yet complementary way. Drawing on Foucault's work on madness, we observe that the historical-structural perspective turns away from an analysis of experiential phenomena in order to capture the trends and structures of society. And yet, our taxonomy reveals how historical madness still opens up a way of understanding the relationship between reason and unreason, the rational and the nonrational. As we span the European history of madness and peer into the gaps, as Foucault encourages us to do, we find that madness is in fact what links together the perceptions of the rational and the nonrational. This link changes over time—sometimes madness forms a dynamic dialectic relationship between the rational and the nonrational, as in the sixteenth century; sometimes madness is conflated with the nonrational and placed in complete opposition to the rational, as in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries; and sometimes madness becomes merely an abnormal condition that can be fixed by the rational without considering the nonrational, as in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries—yet, in each case, madness always relies on the changing structures of the rational and the nonrational.¹¹ While we could extend our taxonomy of madness to each of these historical ages, for the sake of space we will look only at the second of these ages, madness in the classical age (roughly the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries), to see another aspect of the nonrational emerge.¹²

To examine madness in the classical age, Foucault begins by detailing the events surrounding the Great Confinement of the seventeenth century. During the Great Confinement, a large number of people in Europe were found “mad” and were consequently imprisoned. For example, in Paris, over one percent of the population in a period of just a few years was put into confinement. Foucault argues that behind these events we can locate a silent gap of history, a place left unexplored because of a “rupture in dialogue” between humans and madness.¹³ On the surface it would appear that the increase must have been due to a rise of madness during this time. By being willing to dialogue with madness he finds that what actually changed was not an increase in madness amongst the Europeans but a change in how madness was understood.¹⁴ Foucault writes, “What happened between the end of the Renaissance and the height of the classical age was

therefore not simply an evolution of the institutions: it was a change in the *consciousness of madness* [*la folie*], and thereafter it was the asylums, houses of confinement, gaols and prisons that illustrated that new conception."¹⁵ The changes in the institutions during the Great Confinement cannot be simply accounted for by new laws handed down by political authorities but rather, Foucault argues, must be seen as coming out of a deeper change in society which has altered its consciousness of madness.

In contrast to the consciousness of the sixteenth century, which saw madness as intertwined with the rational, the classical conception of madness severed the tie between madness and the rational, equating the former entirely with the nonrational. As a result, demonstrations of madness were highly stigmatized and kept hidden, separated, and unseen. Digging beneath the surface, Foucault finds that this abhorrence of the nonrational was due to the fact that any displays of the nonrational, as seen in mad behavior, were synonymous with displays of immorality. Mad conduct was increasingly viewed as morally wrong, and thus deserved confinement and correction. As Foucault observed, "Madness was seen through an ethical condemnation of idleness," so much so that "madness found itself side by side with sin."¹⁶ Immoral acts in general, such as idleness, homosexuality, and other disruptive behaviors, were only understood under the category of madness; those who gave in to such behaviors were following their passions to such a great extent that they had lost their rationality.

The lack of rationality due to moral failure, as held during the seventeenth century, brings to light another aspect of the *irrational* form of the nonrational. The irrational, as we discussed under the phenomenological lens, is something that runs contrary to reason: irrational actions, in contrast to prerational actions that are done prior to rational reflection, are performed in opposition to a present rational fact, like the man speaking to his imaginary friend even though in external reality there is nobody there. Yet another sense of the irrational is uncovered here by this historical lens, where actions are held to be in opposition to reason because they are contrary to the moral standards of a given society. In the classical age, transgression of the accepted moral standards violated the principles of the rational and, as a result, transgressors had to be locked up and hidden away. By seeing how the irrational has been conflated with the immoral, we can better understand this drive to rid society of all traces of madness.

The construction of the irrational is further seen in another aspect of the classical consciousness of madness. Because the irrational was

traditionally associated with the behavior of animals, it was thought that humans who act irrationally were giving into a kind of animality. This historical conception of the irrational saw mad behavior as an “enslavement to the passions” laying bare something “inhuman” in the human.¹⁷ For example, acts of madness, such as great fits of anger or other unruly behavior, were not only viewed as immoral, as we saw above, but were actually regarded as savage because they fell below proper human behavior by containing aspects of “animal violence.”¹⁸ Thus, as Todd May puts it, a mad person in the classical age was someone who has embraced the irrational and “has descended or regressed into an animal state,” showing the opposite of “what it is to be fully human.”¹⁹ Foucault describes the tension between the immoral and the animalistic notions of the irrational by stating, “Whatever ‘rational animal’ meant, confinement constantly stressed the *animality of madness*, while attempting to avoid the scandal linked to the *immorality of the unreasonable*.”²⁰ Concealing both signs of wickedness and expressions of the animal, the incarceration of the mad allowed society to ignore any darker element of humanity.

A historical dialogue with madness allows us to look under the surface and to “draw up the archaeology of silence” in order to see the role of the nonrational in human society.²¹ Through a brief examination of the Great Confinement, we found the linking of madness with the irrational, which opposes the rational in a moral sense and even connotes an association with the nonhuman animal. The point here is not to argue for or against this particular understanding of madness but to show the historical connection between madness and the nonrational found in the silent history of madness. The historical shade of madness compels us to recognize the dependence of human institutions on the tension between the rational and the nonrational and the way this false dichotomy continues to shape society today.

The Suprational Through an Existential-Religious Lens

To classify madness by our final approach, the existential-religious, we will reflect on the existential experiences of faith in relationships, and will realize again that madness must be drawn out of a space of silence. Under the historical perspective, as we saw above, we investigate the silent gaps in history in order to initiate a dialogue with madness. Now, correlatively, in the existential perspective, we expose the madness of an individual in

the performance of silent actions. In other words, silent spaces in history as well as silent acts of a particular individual provide a means of examining madness; here, by considering the silence in the speechlessness of Abraham, the tale of madness again opens a window to the role of the non-rational in the larger human story.

The existential-religious lens calls us to ponder acts of faith that appear to the outsider as nonrational and unintelligible. Kierkegaard examines the existential experience of Abraham who is willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in obedience to God. He writes that Abraham cannot explain to anyone his decision to take his son Isaac to be sacrificed—not to his wife, Sarah, nor to his servant, Eliezer, nor even to his son—thus, making his actions seem like those of a madman. Unable to understand him, Kierkegaard concludes, we can only perceive that “he is mad and [that he] cannot make himself intelligible to anyone.”²² Kierkegaard imagines what Abraham’s contemporaries might say to each other, knowing how he waited until he was a hundred years old for this promised son to be born: “There is an eternal procrastination with Abraham; finally he got a son, that took long enough, then he wants to sacrifice him—is he not mad?”²³ His long wait and his incredible love for his son make his action all the more unjustifiable and senseless.

Abraham’s decision, as depicted by Kierkegaard, represents another form of the nonrational, which I will call the *suprarational*. The suprarational lacks the rational, because it is *above* or *goes beyond* the rational. This form of the nonrational expresses itself in the pursuit of something higher, something greater that we cannot prove is there. The suprarational entails an element of faith that is needed to go beyond what reason may tell us is true. We can see two elements of the suprarational in Kierkegaard’s telling of the Abrahamic story.

First, his act goes beyond the rational because it must be done in silence; it is one of those silent acts, mentioned above, that reveals a space of madness. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham can utter no words, because there are no human words that can make his motives intelligible. Kierkegaard writes, “Speak he cannot; he speaks no human language. Even if he understood all the languages of the world, even if those loved ones also understood them, he still cannot speak—he speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues.”²⁴ Having the ability to speak all the languages of the world would still not be sufficient. The only words possible to describe his action are not human words, but divine words that can be spoken by angels and by God.

These divine words demonstrate the second element of the suprarational in Abraham's experience: the action itself lacks any rational basis in the aesthetic and ethical spheres. Kierkegaard painstakingly walks through how Abraham's act cannot be justified by a desire for pleasure (an aesthetic claim) nor by fulfilling a moral requirement (an ethical claim). If he was driven by aesthetics, he would only keep silent in order to secretly try and save Isaac so that he could satisfy his desire of keeping his beloved son alive. If he sought to justify his action by ethics, he would have to provide full disclosure, but he did not attempt to explain to anyone the need for the sacrifice. No, Kierkegaard writes, "I cannot understand Abraham" by any aesthetic or ethical means, but "I can only admire him" because his choice to sacrifice his son was due to his "private relation" to God.²⁵

Despite a lack of understanding, Kierkegaard, perhaps speaking especially here through the pseudonymous voice of Johannes de Silentio, cannot but praise the madness exhibited by Abraham: "Abraham was greater than everybody—great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is folly, *great by that hope whose form is madness*, great by that love which is hatred of oneself."²⁶ Even with this praise, Kierkegaard also recognizes the darker side of this madness, where those who claim to be going beyond the rational have the liberty to perform acts of great terror in the name of a religious calling: "there may be those who . . . if set at liberty, would like a wild animal give free rein to selfish desire."²⁷ No longer constrained by the rational and the ethical, the suprarational can open the door to unspeakable horrors committed under the guise of this spiritual madness.

In summary, this third perspective conveys how "mad" actions of faith seen experientially reveal the suprarational where a choice is made for something perceived to be higher than reason. As seen with Abraham, certain relationships may call the human to seek something beyond the confines of reason, even when others cannot understand it. It is in these silent actions of madness, stretching above the rational, where we gain a glimpse of the experience of faith in human relationships, especially relationships with the divine. While such radical faith can also allow justification for all kinds of action, even harmful ones, it does point to the human desire for something greater than human reason that may be sought in an encounter with the divine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen the beginnings of how a taxonomy of madness can open up a fuller understanding of the rational and the nonrational in the human condition. Beginning with the phenomenological lens, we considered madness as intrinsic to the human condition because it draws on common human experiences that can be understood by others. In these experiences, we discovered expressions of the prerational as something prior to the rational, and the irrational as something contrary to the rational. Moving from phenomena of experience to structures of society, we saw how a historical study of madness points to a particular social dynamic that links madness to the tension between the rational and nonrational. Here we found, in the example of the European classical age, another side of the irrational as something contrary to moral rationality and even animalistic. And last, the existential perspective shows how madness provides insight into the experience of faith in relationships, which expresses the suprarational as a way of acting in an attempt to move beyond the rational.

Although the method of dissecting the forms of the nonrational and viewing them in contrast to the rational is helpful for understanding each of these perspectives, it has been clear that in all of these cases the so-called rational is never entirely absent from the nonrational. The rational and the nonrational are and must remain in a constant dialectical relationship with each other. The prerational is always guided, although unconsciously, by the rational; the irrational goes after a "reason" even if that reason is contrary to external reality.²⁸ The suprarational sacrifices all in service of a particular relationship, even if there is no reason for the action itself.²⁹ Although this essay has focused specifically on the manifestations of the nonrational, we can clearly see how the nonrational is dependent on the rational and vice versa, revealing that only through an integrated understanding of these two threads in human experience can we see the depth of their complex role in the human condition itself.

It is this unique contingent relationship between the rational and the nonrational that unfolds through an examination of madness. We must push back against the modern notion that madness is something inaccessible, unapproachable, and incomprehensible by others. Rather, we can recognize that madness contains insights that cannot be found anywhere else, for it is in the very possibility of madness itself that we have the possibility

of the human. As Henri Maldiney, a friend and successor to Merleau-Ponty at the University of Lyon, writes, “Madness is a possibility of man without which he would not be what he is [*La folie est une possibilité de l’homme sans laquelle il ne serait pas ce qu’il est*].”³⁰ Foucault echoes this by claiming that madness is “linked to the possibility of history.”³¹ And Kierkegaard points to the capacity for radical hope, “whose form is madness,” that is possible for the human.³² In short, the opening of madness has a way of stripping away common assumptions about what it means to be human, thereby exposing the possibilities of the shared human condition.

NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Hegel’s Existentialism,” in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 63. This was originally published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946.
2. See, for example, Angelos Evangelou, *Philosophizing Madness from Nietzsche to Derrida* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), which conducts another kind of taxonomy of madness by looking at the relationship between madness and philosophy according to Nietzsche, Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida.
3. I would like to thank Emmanuel Falque whose questions on the nonrational helped me break down its different forms.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 305; translation slightly altered. See also Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 345.
5. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 24; translation slightly altered.
6. Jasper Feyaerts and Stijn Vanheule, “Madness, Subjectivity, and the Mirror Stage: Lacan and Merleau-Ponty,” in *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can’t*, ed. Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (London: Routledge, 2015), 161.
7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 306.
8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 299.
9. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 303–4. This study is taken from Ludwig Binswanger, a psychologist whom Merleau-Ponty frequently cites throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*.
10. This example does not include someone walking down the street talking on a wireless phone; we do not see that as irrational since there is an actual person communicating on the other end.
11. Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006), 181–82.
12. Furthermore, this is the age upon which Foucault primarily focuses, as the title of his first edition reflects: *Madness and Unreason: History of Madness in the Classical Age* (*Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*).

13. Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxvii.
14. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 54.
15. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 120; italics mine.
16. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 72, 86.
17. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 100.
18. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 147.
19. Todd May, *Philosophy of Foucault* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006), 31.
20. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 152; italics original.
21. Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxviii.
22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67.
23. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.
24. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 101.
25. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 99, 52.
26. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 14; italics mine.
27. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 66.
28. See Talia Welsh's example of how a person hallucinating can still experience a certain rationality in walking across a room by avoiding the furniture on the floor: *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and Primary Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Psychology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 43.
29. For example, if Abraham were asked, "Why should you kill your son?" he may respond with "I trust God" even though this does not directly answer the question. The reason for killing the son is still a mystery, but the motive for the action is clear: the priority of the relationship with God itself.
30. Henri Maldiney, *Regard, Parole, Espace* (Lausanne: Editions l'âge d'homme, 1973), 210.
31. Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxxii.
32. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 14.

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