

# Writing and Being Human

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## Abstract

Truth is as moral as political in nature. This relation must be asserted more than ever, especially when seen against the background of today's social media phenomenon, where people express their views about anything and anyone at an unprecedented speed and reach. Within the context of the academic world, the search for truth serves as the moral foundation of authorship and guides the practice of academic freedom. Teaching by writing affects the formation of fellow human beings for good or ill. Thus, every author must write only what is true, in view of communicating factual information, and not "fake news." Before a deluge of information on social media, academics must always ask the critical question: Is this true?

**Keywords:** *academic freedom, authorship, research, social media, truth-telling*

## Introduction

In his message on the occasion of the 2021 World Communications Day, Pope Francis has called attention to the following task: “All of us are responsible for the communications we make, for the information we share, for the control that we can exert over fake news by exposing it. All of us are to be witnesses of the truth.”<sup>1</sup> In today’s age of social media, the deliberate spread of disinformation to serve certain agenda threatens the norm of honest communication in society. It is then imperative to assert the need for truthful living as a condition for a more rational and responsible social existence. Moreover, against an emerging culture of “fake news,” we need to affirm the indispensability of truth-telling to ensure the future of education as an institution of character formation.

In view of such a goal, this paper deals with the question of the genuinely moral foundation of “authorship,” that is, of being a self in relation to the practice of academic freedom. At the outset, it must be asserted that academic freedom is rooted in truth and is never meant to be a license to express unverified, unfounded, and malicious claims.

Authorship is meant to be the writer’s personal responsibility for his expression of thoughts and ideas that he has willfully disseminated in print or in social media to

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 2021 World Communications Day,” January 23, 2021, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210123\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20210123_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html).

the attention of the reading public. Academic freedom, which emanates from the right to education, signifies the practice of creativity in teaching and learning.

Writing as a human activity bears a fundamental significance to the whole task of being human, let alone to the human person's search for meaning. In the Greco-Roman antiquity, self-writing together with listening and reading, were essentially linked to the cultivation of the self. Writing performed a creative function of self-knowledge in that it further constituted an exercise of critical spirituality. According to the ancient practice, spirituality vis-à-vis self-knowledge meant the activity of self-transformation through ascetic practices, self-examination, meditations, etc.

## Reclaiming the Originary Meaning of Writing

There is a hermeneutical opening in writing characterized by the unfolding of meaning that results in ethical transformation. Foucault, for example argues that writing “is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ēthos*.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Foucault significantly elaborates the historical significance of self-writing that is constitutive of philosophy: “Writing is of use for yourself; but of course it also has a

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “Self-writing,” in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault (1954–1984)*, Vol. 1: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New York Press, 1997), 209.

use, [that] is useful to others.”<sup>3</sup> The communicative function of writing lies in allowing others to learn from one’s account of thoughts and experiences concerning the struggle of being human.

Certainly, writing as a mode of being human reveals our fundamental inquiry into the possibilities of a meaningful existence. “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives,”<sup>4</sup> claims Viktor Frankl in his masterpiece *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

From this perspective we can broaden our understanding of the purpose of writing as a human activity. It is an activity that is deeply involved in the life of the society upon which it can exert a profound moral influence. And so, the writer, as an author of ideas, is called to think well for it is in thought that his dignity lies. More importantly, what the author writes about inevitably affects other readers. In the words of Blaise Pascal:

All our dignity therefore lies in thought. It is by thought that we raise ourselves, and not by space or time, which we could never fill. Let us apply

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France (1981–1982)*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 360.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 121.

ourselves then to thinking well: that is the first principle of morality.<sup>5</sup>

Thinking well is the primary principle of morality because it is an indispensable condition for living well. Foucault points out to the exemplary figure of Augustine through the following telling account:

Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. . . . It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*.<sup>6</sup>

Writing as a truly human activity implies the assertion of truth. To repeat: *writing is bearing witness to truth*.

The relation between justice and truth is an inextricable one in that what is right must be real. Otherwise, the purported presence of one while admitting to the absence of the other is a contradiction. This is what is at stake in writing. The writing of something presupposes a truthful accounting of that something and accordingly entails its just proclamation.

But in a digital democracy where people freely and conveniently take to social media their thoughts on

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<sup>5</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. Martin Turnell (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), 153.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 27.

anything, there is a clarion call for truthfulness. John Caputo captures this point of living in the world of social media with the following caveat: “The ubiquity of websites and blogs, which has enhanced communication, has also served to degrade it.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, making bold claims is one thing; making verified ones is another.

Put simply, what is expectedly just in writings is a truthful exploration of their contents. This is the function of research, whereby the writer honestly tries to arrive at genuine conclusions based on the incontrovertible facts at hand. Achieving factual incontrovertibility is the writer’s responsibility.

When is a fact incontrovertible in the first place? A fact is incontrovertible when after much dispute over its authenticity something yields as undeniably reasonable and acceptable at a critically given juncture. Martin Heidegger is most helpful in his analysis of research as a way to truth. For instance, in his *Basic Problems of Philosophy*, Heidegger claims: “What else is the seeking but the most constant being-in-proximity to what conceals itself, out of which each need happens to come to us and every jubilation fills us with enthusiasm.”<sup>8</sup> This reminds us of the joy that comes from finally knowing the truth. For the discovery of truth in

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<sup>7</sup> *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2018), 261.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Adré Schuwer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.

research results in happiness. The ability to realize that happiness born in truth in everyday life is wisdom.

Research implies a life of wisdom that recognizes and seeks truth as a key to genuine happiness. In short, truth is what comes out of a mutually engaged exchange of interpretations of a hermeneutic situation that is oriented toward the experience of the real. This process of mutual search includes the reflexive character of truth itself whereby the access to which is inextricably value-laden and time-bound. That is, truth lies in moments of highly spirited debates within the context of historicity. This makes the imperative of truth essentially discursive yet always interpretive, as well. This claim deserves a thorough analysis, no doubt.

## Truth, the Condition of Writing

Writing means the weaving of truth and subjectivity. The imperative of truth-bearing is what should constantly motivate the writer in his intellectual and professional pursuits. It is a moral truth: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). The scope of truth-bearing includes all human actions in the whole realm of human relations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In the ancient Greco-Roman tradition through the Patristic period, the word to describe every speaker’s relation to the truth of his utterance and to his audience at large is the practice of *parrhesia* understood as “(free-spokenness)” to quote Foucault (2011, 6) in *The Courage of the Truth*. Also, in

Writing about something or about someone to readers in mind demands a careful examination of elements composing the writing issue concerned. This requires commitment on the part of the author to bring out only what he can veritably present as intimately factual, that is, something that he can stand on with conviction. This makes writing a political exercise.

The quality of human interactions depends on people's discursive commitment to truth. Edward Said offers the following lucid point: "Speaking the truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most and cause the right change."<sup>10</sup>

The concern for truth is more than a theoretical luxury; it is a practical imperative for its effects on the human condition can be life changing. The poet Walter Lowenfels rightly asserts: "No matter what a writer says or doesn't say, he cannot help having political alignments."<sup>11</sup> It is the same political sphere involved in writing that makes the object of writing larger than the writer himself. Because truth in writing is when the author is "conquered" by what he has written as something that he cannot deny in the face of the gathered data. Whether this set of data is verified or not remains

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"Discourse & Truth, Problematization of Parrhesia" Foucault (1983, 2) writes: "'Parrhesia' is ordinarily translated into English by 'free speech'."

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 102.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Lowenfels, *The Revolution is to be Human*, (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 27.



something that is presumed in the process of its presentation. The discourse of truth demands a careful watch. As Foucault eloquently puts it: “Problematization and apprehension go hand in hand; inquiry is joined to vigilance.”<sup>12</sup>

The discourse that is truth comes from the depths of reality, which discussants must humbly recognize and accept. That truth is a product of a sustained discussion among different persuasions over an issue clearly suggests that truth is something whose lead thinking necessarily follows. That is to say, truth, as a discursive experience, fundamentally affirms the dialogical condition of its revelation through the honest exchange among interlocutors.

The plurality of ideas, sometimes conflicting, is not necessarily an obstacle to the attainment of truth. The knowledge of truth is discursively attained for it passes through the process of reciprocal truth-exchanging in the hope of arriving at a more acceptable interpretation thereof.

Truth is also interpretive, in that, in between unique views that it provokes, it proposes a singularly integrative idea. Therefore, to approach the question of truth is to understand it as a summons for rich and varied interpretations or inquiries into new meanings as it unfolds.

Hence, the look of truth is in the eyes of its beholders who, standing in their own historical vantage points from where they may initially see truth differently, actually get

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<sup>12</sup> *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 239.

themselves transformed, eventually. This is also true of scientific worldviews. Rahner's eloquence on the matter is inimitable. To quote him from his essay "Science as a 'Confession':

The human person's world-view is essentially historical. . . . This is equally true of the scientific world-view. . . . We can only discover what there is to be found in the direction in which the voyage of discovery set its course. The direction of the inquiring gaze, of the tentative sending out of feelers beyond the limits of the already known is not conditioned by the object (which is not yet grasped), that is to say not by the thing concerning which science discourses, but is determined by a previous decision which 'unscientifically' holds and upholds in its grasp the particular science and therefore cannot be made subject to critical examination by this science.<sup>13</sup>

Yes, the interpretation of truth from one's hermeneutic horizon of meanings forms a new humanity in everyone only by allowing oneself to be transformed by one's experience of the historicity of truth. The historicity of truth is *a priori* to every scientific inquiry, which is necessarily historically conditioned. To sum it up, the imperative of truth, which is simultaneously discursive and interpretative,

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<sup>13</sup> In *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl H. Boniface Kruger (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 386.

creates a moral being in the writer and in his or her readers, whether they are aware of it or not.

Truth then is the condition of writing; it is the ultimate issue *from* which and *to* which every writing as a free human activity must absolutely cling to. Upon the bedrock of truth, one writes to affirm one's perspective on the dimensions of reality that are unraveling before the inquiring mind. This implies the courage to seek out the manifestations of truth on a journey toward Being. For where truth goes the writer must freely go.<sup>14</sup>

### **Truth in Research as the Basis of Academic Freedom**

“All research—especially when it moves in the sphere of the central question of being—is an ontic possibility of Da-sein,”<sup>15</sup> writes Martin Heidegger. Anyone honest about the relevance of doing research as inquiry into the truth of things for the challenge of being human (Da-sein) cannot help assenting to this proposition. Research as a fundamental openness to the ways of truth implies a critical engagement with reality itself.

Research is the creative human capacity for the discovery of practical ideas in the unfolding of truth. When rightly understood, truth bears an impact upon the everyday lives of people. It is in this sense that truth transforms human

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<sup>14</sup> cf., “For where you go I will go” (Ruth 1:16).

<sup>15</sup> *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 17.

experiences. This certainly includes philosophical research in which the ultimate goal is the improvement of the human condition through an active recognition of truth.

Research in philosophy presupposes the most rational activity of investigating different claims to truth and of discerning their relevance to the human person. Its methods of investigation can be varied, yet they all depend on philosophy's age-old tradition of a loving search for wisdom. Whether it is dialectical, phenomenological, analytical, or hermeneutical, philosophy's literal method of taking cognizance of the path toward truth affirms the freedom of thinking. As Heidegger claims, "*The essence of truth is freedom.*"<sup>16</sup> By "essence" here is meant the ground from which truth arises and upon which truth it stands.

Correctly understood as proposed, the essence of truth is then that which enables truth to be itself. For Heidegger, this enabling essence of truth is freedom.<sup>17</sup> There lies therefore the indissociable relation between truth and freedom. In the words of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI): "The question of freedom is inseparably linked to the question of truth."<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, truth essentially leads to the freedom of thought.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 123.

<sup>17</sup> "The truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Approaches to Understanding Its Role in the Light of Present Controversy*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 35.

Freedom gives rise to truth in that it opens up truth to the horizon of meanings. This horizon of meanings is an open region against whose hermeneutical background truth allows itself to be richly interpreted within the context of the interpreters. Every truth then is meaningfully dynamic since it necessarily appears as something existing in an open field of interpretations or a universe of redescriptions of reality.

And so, truth as radically envisaged by Heidegger is more than a correctness of statements or mental correspondence with the world. It implies a free relation of thought to something other than itself. It is in freedom as the shifting ground of existence that truth reveals itself. As a shifting ground, freedom allows things to realize themselves.

Freedom is all about letting beings be as they are. To quote Heidegger, “Freedom now reveals itself as letting beings be.”<sup>19</sup> Freedom of thought, which is indispensable in the life of the writer or author, is essentially linked to the task of truth. Academic freedom bears the task of truth in writing. The task of truth consequently demands intellectual honesty from the writer. In view of the challenge inherent in the task of truth demanded from every writer or blogger (in today’s digital communication), we can learn from Zygmunt Bauman’s modest profession: “I admit: easier said than done. But I believe it to be worth trying. And needing to be tried.

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<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” 125.

Urgently. Just for the sake of recovering our trust in the possibility of truth . . . .”<sup>20</sup>

The writer’s whole research agenda therefore must consciously integrate the task of truth as a personal task. Accordingly, while writing as a scientist, with criteria of objectivity and universality, the moment the scientist is concerned with the question of the human person, the author becomes greater than himself. In the words of Karl Rahner, “The moment the author makes *the human person* the subject of his or her assertions he *ipso facto* passes beyond the limits of the purely natural sciences and the conclusions which they are capable of yielding, and becomes a philosopher, a poet, a visionary, a sage, a committed believer or a prophet.”<sup>21</sup>

In a word, every writing as a free human act engaging all other humanly qualities like intention, motivation, purpose, action, and relation is meant to become a living testimony to truth however and wherever this truth is found in its embodiment in the world. Research understood in its ultimate sense of being a pursuit of truth, involves a presentation of a synthesis of its findings. This synthesis is called for; insofar as the spiritual, that is, truth, also integrally reveals itself in the material world.

Truth is dialectically spiritual and at the same time material. Truth is necessarily an embodied truth! For which

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<sup>20</sup> *This is Not a Diary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>21</sup> “The Writer in Relation to Christian Living,” 117.

reason, research must be clearly dialectical in its attempt to construe a well-defined picture of truth since truth cuts through the spiritual and the material intersections of human existence. That the human person as the questioner par excellence is an embodied or an incarnated spirit is more than enough to inspire researchers to recognize that the truth of their subject matter inexorably possesses aspects of embodiment as well.<sup>22</sup>

No serious writer, therefore, can abandon the material or the empirical countenance of truth. For it is in and through these sensible forms that truth finds its dwelling in the world and accordingly communicates itself to human persons. Given this holistic dimension of truth, philosophical methods can understandably be unique attempts to make sense of every unfolding of truth. This is because no method can fully encompass the range of truth. Otherwise, truth becomes a slave of methods.

This is what philosophical research must always be on guard against. According to Gabriel Marcel, “A term such as search or investigation . . . is the most adequate description that can be applied to the essential direction of philosophy.”<sup>23</sup> Marcel goes on to explain, however, that “I think the philosopher who first discovers certain truths and then sets out to expound them in their dialectical or systematic

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<sup>22</sup> “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14)

<sup>23</sup> *Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, vol. 1, trans. G.S. Fraser (Chicago: Gateway Edition, 1970), 2.

interconnections always runs the risk of profoundly altering the nature of the truths he has discovered.”<sup>24</sup>

A method, therefore, no matter how reliably efficient it appears cannot be an alternative to truth. In relation to truth, a method stands as a threshold allowing the passage of new ideas in the elucidation of truth. In a way, truth finds expression in these different methods that frame it, giving it the needed intelligible shapes for comprehension. As such, research must be radically conceived of as being “on the way to truth.” Yes, research is a path that leads to the discovery of truth.

Hence, the viability of research is always bound up to its ability to handle the truth in the last analysis! This is because the journey toward truth is what motivates every investigative endeavor. For “research is intellectual adventure.”<sup>25</sup> This brings us to the topic concerning the academic freedom of the writer as a privileged site of the entire research project.

## Writing and Academic Freedom

“Academic’ freedom,” according to Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “is freedom for the *truth*, and its justification is simply to exist for the sake of the truth, without having to look back toward the objectives it has reached.”<sup>26</sup> Truth is

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<sup>24</sup> Marcel, *Mystery of Being*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 98.

<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 37.



realized in the practical field. It demands from its practitioners the commitment to translate it into reality. Truth is genuine if it is practical!

Academic freedom is concerned with the life of the professional intellectual, say, the writer, in his capacity to bring and justify the truth of his information to the consciousness of the readers. Since academic freedom flows from the writer's freedom of thought, his exercise of creative writing within the context of academic life must be truthful. As expected by virtue of his or her freedom, the academic writes to respond to the challenge of truth that is indispensable to the whole academic pursuit. Seen through the prism of civil liberties, Ranhilio Aquino thus correctly asserts: "Without a doubt the right to inquire is, like all other liberties, circumscribed by the latitude of equal liberties that must be accorded to others as well."<sup>27</sup> This brings to mind the social dimension of freedom where an authentic exercise of one's freedom must always respect others' freedom too.

Following this proposition, all learning involves an engagement with truth. Moreover, it implies the capacity to experience the ultimate ground of all knowledge. This point cannot be overemphasized insofar as knowledge without truth leads to relativity that denies the purpose of reason, namely, the attainment of truth, whereas truth without knowledge is incognizance.

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<sup>27</sup> "The Reach of Academic Freedom," *Manila Standard Today*, March 25, 2012, A4.

In other words, the knowledge of truth is the recognition and acceptance of what is objectively real. By “objectively real” is meant the assertion of being as that which confronts every searching; it means that there is something undeniably meaningful. From a clearly interpretive reading, the knowledge of truth is all about the fundamental thesis that the search for meaning, whether logically or phenomenologically, absolutely pertains to the search for being. Hannah Arendt clearly appropriates the fundamental ontology of Heidegger, her mentor, in her *Love and Saint Augustine*: “Human life exists in relatedness to Being.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, to conclude: *The search for meaning makes sense, precisely because there is Being that grounds, provokes, and sustains this search.* This constitutes then the “objectivity” of truth.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that authorship in the practice of writing bears a fundamental significance to the whole task of being human. There exists an inextricable relation between the question of the moral foundation of authorship and the practice of academic freedom. This relation must be asserted more than ever, especially when seen against the background of today’s social media phenomenon. Social media, celebrated as having opened up democratic spaces of ideas, has given people the capacity to express their views about

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<sup>28</sup> ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 53.

anything and anyone on a global information scale at an unprecedented speed. In essence, this relation behooves an interpretation of the moral responsibility of the writer before his readers within the academic world.

Moreover, teaching by writing is a mode of being that can surely affect others in their own formation of being for good or ill. This makes authorship, in the sense of owning up to oneself the veracity of the data that one writes about to the public, an importantly moral issue. As hoped for, every author must in truth write only what is true in communicating factual news and not “fake news.” Before a deluge of information and even beguiling stories on social media, one must always ask the critical question: Is this true? Professing or speaking the truth is as moral as political in nature.

Changing the minds of others is certainly more than a strategic goal. Its possibility gives rise to important moral and political concerns. Truth transforms—if by that we mean an exposure to and a life of truth can create a revolution—in the mindset and in the lifestyle of people. As Walter Lowenfels elegantly muses, “The revolution is to be human.”<sup>29</sup> This means looking at writing now as an important occasion of creating significant social changes through a renewed and relevant academic life. This means writing must be rooted in courageous truth-telling, especially

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<sup>29</sup> *The Revolution is to be Human* (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 35.

when seen in the context of today's communication platform afforded by social media.

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