Deference, Degree and Selfhood[1]

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The world we lost

The world we lost, and now barely understand, was one where everyone knew her place, and her attendant duties. Different castes and clans and classes, crafts, ages and genders had their own rôles, responsibilities and rights. Most of us were born to them, inheriting a status (however high or low) which specified what we should do, and what we should expect of others. There need be no significant difference between the sort of duties and rights prescribed for humans, and those of another species: dogs, horses and other cattle likewise had their place. Even those crafts and new identities that some of us might sometimes choose had their own, unchosen, rules and rites. Maybe we could become a clerk, a smith, a squire, even though we hadn't been born into that caste or clan, but what we then became was just as much a fixed identity as any knight's or serf's. And only the celibate classes were likely to recruit their members solely from those born into another class: the rest, even if they accepted some outsiders, could hope to raise their children in the craft. Deference is owed to the more experienced or better established or better connected members of the crafts or clans or classes.

In such a world it might still be true that everyone should do their duty, and *everyone* remember to respect the rights and duties of the other classes. But what those rights and duties, rites and expectations, were, depended wholly on class, caste, profession, species, age and gender. In some tongues even the manner of speech must differ, and there is no single thing that *anyone* can call herself (as nowadays we say 'I', or think of ourselves as 'people'). Even those words that we now translate as 'people' usually only meant 'free, native-born and male'—and 'free', in turn, meant only 'propertied'. The virtue of the freeman, *eleutheriotes*, is to make proper, *generous*, use of property[2], and 'generosity', in turn, is the virtue of those

[1] This paper is intended as a prolegomenon to a larger study of NeoPlatonist ethics. I am grateful for the Leverhulme Trust's support for this project.

[2] See Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1119b19ff.

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'with breeding'. The excellence of women is not that of men. The excellence of ordinary citizens is not that of the nobly-born. Clerics and smiths and farmers and farmers' wives and servants all have their own responsibilities, and need particular virtues to complete them. Good dogs do what dogs are required to do, and do it well. And most of us no more *chose* what we should be than dogs (hounds, mastiffs, sheepdogs, poodles) did. Sometimes there are also statesmen, with the job of interweaving all the virtues of the different castes and crafts and ages to the best effect. More often, there is no need of such a weaver, because the job was done before, by Manu[3] or the invisible hand of evolutionary adjustment. Without such order, it was argued, there could be no peace:

> Take but degree away, untune that string,
> And hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets
> In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
> Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
> And make a sop of all this solid globe;
> Strength should be lord of imbecility,
> And the rude son should strike his father dead:
> Force should be right: or rather, right and wrong,—
> Between whose endless jar justice resides,—
> Should lose their names, and so should justice too.[4]

Or as Johnson remarked, 'there would be a perpetual struggle for precedence, were there no fixed invariable rules for the distinction of rank, which creates no jealousy, as it is allowed to be accidental.'[5] This was the rule in almost every human group (which always included other domestic animals)—but *civilized* groups were the likeliest to insist on this diversity of rôle and rule. *Primitive* societies are, exactly, ones where there are rather fewer such distinctions. In primitive society almost any human adult can do almost anything that any member of the group can do. Only the bare divisions between male and female, initiate and child, freeborn and domestic beast, insider and outsider remind the 'uncivilized' of the rich array of rôles and rules their neighbours—or occasionally their own

[3] That is, by some legendary law-giver of the past. Manu's laws defined the Hindu castes, whereas those of Moses or Minos perhaps intimated some more egalitarian possibility.

[4] W. Shakespeare *Troilus and Cressida* Act. 1, Scene 3 (Ulysses speaks). Cf. C. S. Lewis *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press 1960; 1st published 1942), 75.

[5] Samuel Johnson (21 July 1763) in James Boswell *Life of Johnson* (London: Oxford University Press 1953), 317.

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ancestors—might boast. Amusingly, as Douglas has observed, it is the obviously *primitive* tribes whose form of life is most like that of would-be liberals in modern times, or most like what they would prefer to be[6]. *Civilized* peoples, until very recently, have boasted of their divisions.

Each rôle has its own particular honour. According to the code, a master who is too familiar with his servants offers *them* an insult as severe as they would offer him if *they* were too familiar. The hierarchy within a servants' hall may be more careful than amongst the gentry. An insult anywhere is an assault, and must be avenged. *Hubris*, in Greek circles, is more than violence: it is an attempt to demean and to humiliate, or to exalt oneself through a contemptuous assault. Betrayal—perhaps of the code of hospitality—is more than an inconvenience: it calls out to the gods for vengeance.

Life outside the Castes

Justice, in such a system, lies in knowing one's place, and claiming its due honour. But not everyone has an honourable place. Slaves stand outside the sphere of justice, and get no honour whatever it is they do. Slaves, so Patterson has argued, are the world's first individuals, dishonoured, alienated from all family connections[7]. Slaves have no one to count on but themselves, and are past caring about further shame. Serfs—though the term once meant the same as 'slaves'—have their own dignity as domestic beasts, with households and family connections.

But slaves are not the only ones to stand aside from honour. The origins of the market lie in reciprocal gift-giving (a process that seems to have begun far back in our primate ancestry)—and the givers are typically of different ranks. The higher ranks in any exchange give less—which serves to explain Aristotle's baffling account of justice in exchange[8]. Conversely, rank *is* the relative ability to elicit gifts. It does not necessarily follow that high rank goes with riches. It is also a mark of rank to give one's wealth away,

[6] Mary Douglas *Natural Symbols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973; 2nd edition), 57, 72.

[7] 'Slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons': Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Boston: Harvard University Press 1982), 13.

[8] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.1132b21ff; see Scott Meikle *Aristotle's Economic Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1995).

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either by ruinously expensive feasts or piecemeal gifts to clients[9]. Giving it all away is proof of status, and so encourages tribute. Tom, Dick and Harry each give more to Rex than singly they receive, but Rex dispenses gifts upon a larger scale to show his rank. Money perhaps began when Rex was willing to take back, as tribute, the beads and medals he had handed out as gifts.

The existence of money makes accumulation possible: high rank may itself become an effect of wealth, and purely 'economic' exchange is possible. The 'price' of goods will then be fixed by what they generally fetch, irrespective of the rank of customers. That market exchange in turn creates the idea of equality: if citizens don't have to give more in exchange for goods because they are of lower rank, perhaps they aren't. On the one hand, deference is owed to the wealthy, but on the other deference itself begins to die. 'The too rapid advance of men of low extraction tends to lessen the value of that distinction by birth and gentility, which has ever been found beneficial to the grand scheme of subordination.'[10] Nor does wealth itself reliably create any new order.

> Subordination is sadly broken down in this age. No man, now, has the same authority which his father had,—except a gaoler. … There are many causes, the chief of which is … the great increase of money. No man now depends upon the Lord of a Manour, when he can send to another country, and fetch provisions. The shoe-black at the entry of my court does not depend on me. I can deprive him but of a penny a day, which he hopes someone else will bring him; and that penny I must carry to another shoe-black, so the trade suffers nothing. … But besides there is a general relaxation of reverence. No son now depends upon his father as in former times.[11]

It may be true that 'market equality' is not entirely real: when looking askance at Aristotle's code we easily forget that prices are still pegged to rank. The higher ranks *are* paid more, on some entirely different scale, and often still themselves pay *less* for any particular goods they want than those of lower status do. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has demonstrated that poorer people pay more for goods and services because they have less choice, can't buy

[9] M. Mauss *The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, tr. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge 1990; 1st published 1925).

[10] Johnson (July 7 1765), in Boswell op.cit., 347.

[11] Johnson (10 April 1778), in Boswell op.cit., 796. See also Boswell's own judgment on the possibility of a 'new system of gentility' founded on commerce rather than land or title: ibid., 348.

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in bulk and so on. The higher cost of life in some deprived areas has been identified as an independent factor prolonging poverty and stopping people getting out. Perhaps this is no accident. What changes in a fully market economy is that accumulated wealth is spent in public service or long-term investment or conspicuous culture rather than simply trashed. The structures are not so different. Maybe anything, in principle, *could* be owned by anyone, but those who come to their wealth by chance are expected to waste more of it: witness the prurient pleasure that is taken in the misfortunes or incompetence of lottery winners.

Nonetheless, two types emerge as signs of a world where deference is dead: on the one hand, the slave; on the other, the merchant. Merchants trade in goods that signal other people's status, but don't use them for that purpose. Merchants, like slaves, can flatter or cajole or cheat without being dishonoured further by the lies they tell[12]. Nothing that they possess for trade is *theirs*. Accumulated surplus gives them a rôle, a status, they do not have by birth or personal charisma. Anyone—it is an article of faith—can rise to riches. Even a slave can sometimes start again. Emancipated slaves and merchant-princes may of course become unexceptional members of their class society—but the option is there, of a radically 'dishonoured', 'alienated', state. In Athens, and in Aristotle's own ironical commentary, merchants were mostly resident aliens, having no share in civic honour. The irony is that Aristotle chose to identify the higher, detached, contemplative life as that of the resident alien, not the citizen[13]. 'Here we have no continuing city.'[14]

The paradox has later echoes. The Stoic wise man, on the one hand, does without all normal signs of status: riches, fine clothes and titles. On the other, he is the real and only master and possessor of the world: owning them because he does not need to use them. Successful merchants are very often found amongst those ethnic and religious groups that have no honour in the wider state: the association of Jew and money-man is not an historical accident, and anti-semitism is, in part, a recognition of a tribe that supposedly 'has no honour'. Such groups do have their own internal orders, unknown to the crass outsider: what matters for my present analysis is the myth, not fact.

Merchants who 'have no honour' may acquire it—the honour of

[12] It is significant that Odysseus is insulted by the suggestion that he is a merchant, not by the question whether he is a pirate (Homer, *The Odyssey* 8.145ff).

[13] Aristotle *Politics* 7.1324a13ff

[14] *Epistle to the Hebrews* 13.14.

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outright honesty, fair weights and prompt payments. Slaves stripped, in their enslavement, of all former status and affiliation, may recognize themselves as individuals: having no honour from others, they make their own, turning slavish submission into deliberate service[15]. No honourable or decent person, Aristotle thought (and spoke for much of humanity) could ever live entirely 'for another', except at most for a friend[16]. Taking any chance-met stranger as one's 'friend' could be a piece of slavishness[17]. Even exchanging goods with just *anyone*, on the same terms as anyone, revealed a lack of honour and discrimination that was hardly more than slavish. Turning all this around, the slave and merchant discover a new life.

From the older point of view, the life of slaves and merchants is exactly what the 'liberal' ideal entails. No one can count on her connections; everything is up for sale; no one is dishonoured by the acts of friends or family. The only issue is to find a common price. 'Legal authority' can only be a device, invented and maintained to keep slaves' bargains honest. In the older system it was wrong to treat the free as slaves (that is, to assault and humiliate them—or to distrust their word). Occasionally it was even suggested that treating *slaves* as slaves was dishonourable as well. 'It is shameful and inhuman to use men as things for gain and to put no more value on them than what they are worth in muscle and energy.'[18] Now the point is only that no one likes to be humiliated, and we all agree (or say we do) to use no violence against each other. In the older system, we openly paid more for higher status goods: now (though we do the same) we must pretend that price is a reflection of

[15] See Rudyard Kipling 'Cold Iron' in *Rewards and Fairies* (London: Macmillan 1910), 1–26. All the stories in that volume are about people who do others service, and get no good of it themselves beyond that satisfaction: 'he [the Boy raised in fairyland] will get half he gives, and give twice what he gets, till his life's last breath; and if he lays aside his load before he draws that last breath, all his work will go for nothing' (23). He does have 'bushels of children'—so presumably there are lots of such folk around.

[16] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1129b31f (speaking of the *megalopsychos* or magnanimous man).

[17] See C. J. Cherryh's interesting *Foreigner* sequence, featuring aliens biologically incapable of personal friendship or any but hierarchical loyalties: *Foreigner* (New York: Daw Books 1994) *et al*. Humans, thrown into this society, create chaos by happily forming chance-met 'friendships' (as they suppose) across the lines of loyalty.

[18] Leo XIII (1810–1903): *Rerum Novarum* §20 (15 May 1891), taken from the Vatican website http://www.vatican.va. I would myself add that it is shameful to treat *any* of God's creatures as things for gain.

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objective quality, and that everyone seeks the cheapest they can get (which is still false).

The liberal ideal is not reality, and few of us are purely 'economic'. Individuals aren't equal before the law, nor yet in public perception. Johnson was right to observe that levellers usually 'wish to level *down* as far as themselves; but they cannot bear levelling *up* to themselves. They would all have some people under them; why not then have some people above them?'[19] 'Down-and-outs', dishonoured and disconnected, may be treated worse than slaves, as not being even an economic asset. Whereas all other civilized societies have made a place for 'holy men', 'philosophers' or friars, we take it for granted that all 'down and outs' are rogues or wretches. Modern egalitarians may mock traditional society, but it is very rare to find that they are themselves equally at ease in every company, or seriously think that 'down-and-outs', policemen and 'professionals' are equally deserving of their respect and friendship. Some modern societies have a more egalitarian *style* than others, but all actually give worshipful respect to the rich and famous, and demand behaviour appropriate to each class or craft or clan.

In brief: slaves and merchants, rogues and vagabonds, have no honourable place within *civilized* society as it has mostly been, though for different reasons and in different styles. Slaves create the fantasy of radically rootless individuals, having none to rely on but themselves. Merchants create, by their existence, the fantasy that everything is, potentially, for sale. Both groups, of course, may manufacture hierarchies for themselves, and recreate a social bond of deference. Both may find or invent strange deities to defend, in thought at least, their own self-respect. Merchants may hope that Hermes is on their side, and slaves that there is some God who willingly takes on their rôle and nature[20]. Human realities are always more diverse and complex than the systems human beings make to govern them. The dishonoured invent new honours for themselves, and sometimes force the honourable to concede them status.

New Worlds for Old

An orderly society contains and offers reasons for a finite set of rôles. Each such rôle embodies some notion of excellence, and a way

[19] Johnson (21 July 1763) in Boswell op. cit., 317, after recounting his dealings with Mrs Macaulay 'a great republican', by suggesting that her footman be invited to sit down and dine with her: 'she has never liked me since'.

[20] See Paul, *Epistle to the Philippians* 2.5–8.

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of rising in the esteem of those best qualified to judge. Even villains—people who pride themselves upon behaviour that is condemned by 'decent folk'—take pride, precisely, in the outward signs of their success (perhaps including public obloquy). And of course such villains have themselves a function: without them there would be no rôle for policemen, judges, prison-wardens and the like, and therefore be fewer things for people to do with pride. Even those whom 'decent folk' identify with excrement (and whose services those 'decent folk' require to *deal* with excrement) must take some pride in what they do, whether that pride results in rebellion or submission to the powers that be. By boasting that they are *not* Hindus, Untouchables establish their own dignity, and their concomitant contempt for 'higher castes'[21].

Is there any way of escaping all these patterns? On the one hand, the world we lost seems strange; on the other, a little attention shows us how its patterns are with us still. Maybe we no longer take such caste and class division for granted. Maybe we identify the good entirely with the objects of our natural desires. Maybe we have learnt from slaves, merchants and the 'dregs' of our societies to ignore the rules of purity and pollution. Or maybe all those rules and rôles have simply changed their names, and are all the more potent just because we have forgotten them. When the monarch washed the feet of her subjects, she was being reminded of an order different from the earthly (and notice that no modern monarch does the like). When St. Francis embraced lepers, or Gandhi dealt with his own excrement, they were attempting to create a new order (and notice how squeamish modern commentators are about it). Their efforts, and those of others through the centuries, are usually ineffective: either they are forgotten entirely, or they issue only in new ceremonials, ritual breakings of taboos that serve to reinforce those same taboos in ordinary life. Hedonism may do more than sanctity: creatures far apart in the primate hierarchies may still share bodily comfort[22]. The hedonic mode of interaction identified amongst bonobo seems more attractive now than the agonistic mode more common, for example, among rhesus monkeys[23].

[21] See Kancha Ilaiah *Why I am not a Hindu: a Sudra critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya 1996).

[22] Johnson (21 July 1763) in Boswell op. cit., 313: 'were we all upon an equality, we shold have no other enjoyment than mere animal pleasure'. Conversely, if such pleasure is what we mostly mind about, most of society's divisions do not matter (except the division between young and old, perhaps).

[23] On which see Frans de Waal *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Boston: Harvard University Press 1996).

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But both modes have a limited application: both are ways of discovering or creating a fairly stable relationship with particular others, as bed partners or known antagonists. Both consolidate small groups as fairly stable contexts. Neither give much opportunity to those who can't or won't play hedonic or antagonistic games—notably the old and the very young. So neither, it may be, is very helpful in a large-scale, open society—and that very fact may explain why hunter-gatherers can afford much simpler, less differentiated societies than the rest of us. Whether their small groups are held together by hedonic affections or by agonistic rivalries, no-one need trouble much about their relationships with *other* groups, and anyone can, if necessary, leave the original group and live alone or find another[24]. Our problems are different: on the one hand, we have to care about relationships with many other people than our immediate kin or friendship group; on the other, we cannot easily just *leave* a group with whom we find ourselves at odds, nor ever live alone. We need ways of locating ourselves among relative strangers, on the one hand, and of dissipating or resolving disputes even amongst our kindred or immediate friends. Knowing who we were, and how we naturally stood towards all others, was a sensible device, designed (it might almost seem) to save us trouble. There was no need to work out or create the best way to relate to random others: as members of particular genders, generations, castes, professions, we knew our rôles and status. Each of us had a limited range of options—and therefore each of us could know that all others had a similarly limited range: we were not faced by utterly open futures, and neither did we need to suppose that anyone we met might do and be just *anything*. If we really lived in an egalitarian society, would we even be able to sustain the economic and technological structures that enable us to live at all, or was Johnson right to insist, a little too complacently (but at least with his own experience of poverty) that 'it is better than some should be unhappy, than that none should be happy, which would be the case in a general state of equality'[25]?

Johnson, like other traditional thinkers, had one resource that modern egalitarians may have forgotten: a distinction between the

[24] See R. B. Lee & I. DeVore, (eds.), *Man the Hunter* (Chicago: Aldine Press 1968).

[25] Johnson (10 April 1776), in Boswell op. cit., 736. It is worth adding that on another occasion (23 September 1777) Johnson argued vehemently (and to Boswell's horror) against the institution of slavery, on the grounds that 'no man is by nature the property of another' (Boswell op. cit., 878), whatever the supposed advantages for humankind at large.

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self and the rôle and nature of an individual. Almost everyone really agrees that different rôles and natures are of different ranks and different importance. Almost everyone agrees that individuals may play their parts more or less well, and be more or less worthy of respect. It is true that a pluralist society may find itself unable to agree exactly what the better parts may be, or who has played them better. But this is only to say that pluralist societies will have a more varied array of stations: even in the world we lost it would be possible for individuals to have a higher standing in one sub-community than in another. Doubtless this is one fact that always made the status-society bearable. Those who were dismissed in one order might still gain respect in another. Conversely, the liberal egalitarian revolution may only succeed in obliterating the local hierarchies that once gave relief, while itself constructing a new order in which only the dishonoured thrive.

But pluralism provides another chance: the recognition, exactly, that *one and the same* individual may have different rôles and standings, and so that there is a difference between Self and Nature. Ancient moralists insisted that the wise would play the rôles allotted them: that is, there was something other than the rôles. So Johnson could agree that the existing ranks of civilized society should be respected, while also insisting that each human soul was equal 'in the sight of God'.

This notion is indeed embedded in our ordinary thought: it is possible for me to wonder how life would have been for me if I had been born or reared elsewhere. It is even possible to wonder how it would have been had I been female, Japanese or a ballet dancer. These imaginings are of impossibilities unless there is a real distinction between my being Me and my being the middle-aged, male academic that I—in some sort—'am'.[26] Older Platonists could easily add that I might even have been born a dog or a star or a spider. The more usual opinion nowadays is that that each of us is essentially human, or even essentially born of such and such parents on such and such a day. If this were true, I could not, without contradiction, even phrase to myself the thought of how things would be if I were anything but what I 'am'. And the effect of this would be a more than traditional fixity of caste, race and gender. Imagining myself as someone else would only be to imagine that there was someone else in place of me. In which case, no-one could be injured by being born and reared in one particular class or caste

[26] See also Geoffrey Madell, *The Identity of the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1981).

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or gender: all these would be the bare conditions of their being at all, and so no injury. The very foundation of the liberal agenda, on the other hand, is that it would be possible for any of us to live on other conditions, and so the conditions *should* be equal. The very foundation of morality is that, in acting on another, I should be willing to conceive myself being acted on in just that manner, and so to treat others as I would wish to be treated. Without those possibilities, what other recourse have we than the older regime of class, caste and gender? *My* duties cannot be the same as yours, since I could not be you (this middle-aged male academic could not instead be, for example, a young, female dancer, or whatever else 'you' are).

If, on the other hand, 'existence precedes essence', and I am other than the nature or the rôle I wear (a possibility revealed in moral imagination), it is possible to look beyond those natures without quite denying them. This is not the place in which to speak at greater length about the metaphysics of selfhood: maybe 'selfhood' is only a way of speaking, a declaration that we will recognize the same individual under many different descriptions, and acknowledge counterfactual possibilities. The ancients were right after all: each of us has many parts to play—and those parts may (though they need not always) show the order and degree that Shakespeare's Ulysses desired. It is only when we are identified too closely with those parts that the play becomes intolerable. When we recall instead that we might play other parts, and that the natures we now wear are only borrowed glories, it is possible to greet all others as the equals that they are. Because I know I *might have been* a tramp, a leper or a lord (or else a dog, a star or a spider), I know that the ones who variously *are* those things (who wear those natures) are greater than the parts they play. It is possible to believe both that the various rôles have their own duties, and are owed deference in the dance of time (as one dancer stands aside for another, or momentarily curtseys), and that the actual dancers have a worth that far transcends the dance. The error of the ancient hierarchs was not a belief in hierarchy, degree and established order, but in their forgetting that the self transcends that order. The error of modern liberals has been to forget the self while trying to construct a fully egalitarian order (always excepting 'animals', tramps, the disabled and the senile).

My argument has three aspects. First, it is a reminder of the 'world we lost', the actual context of many past moralities, and what liberal society looks like to a more traditionally minded moralist (namely, an alliance of slaves and merchants, without honour, roots

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or social feeling). Second, it acknowledges that the patterns of that world are not so easily abandoned: a realistic look at how people actually behave and reason shows that we are still in thrall to principles of purity and degree. Third, it points to an ancient distinction between self and nature that may help to keep us sane despite those principles. The metaphysics of selfhood is a larger question[27]: for my present, political, purposes, the self may be a fiction, but still an element in our continuing construction of a humane future.

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[27] See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1985).

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