AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

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Fecha de recepción: 9 de octubre de 2018
Fecha de aceptación: 19 de mayo de 2019

Abstract: By general consensus, there is a presumption against coercion: Only in a relatively narrow range of circumstances may an individual or group deploy physical force, or threats of physical force, against other individuals or groups. However, these circumstances do not include most of the circumstances in which governments actually deploy force. In other words, the typical behavior of governments is behavior that would be considered unacceptable, if adopted by any non-governmental person or group. This happens because the government is thought to have a special kind of authority (political authority), which private individuals and groups lack. The central contention of this paper is that there is nothing special about the state that explains why it would have authority over everyone else. The state, therefore, has only political power, not political authority. That is, it has the ability to coerce other agents and to take their resources, but it has no more moral right to do so than any other agent has. This view leads to a libertarian political philosophy.

Keywords: political authority, political legitimacy, political obligation coercion, libertarianism

JEL Classification: D63, D74, Z18

Resumen: Por consenso general, existe una presunción contra la coerción: sólo en un rango relativamente estrecho de circunstancias puede un individuo o grupo desplegar fuerza física, o amenazas de fuerza física, contra otros individuos o grupos. Sin embargo, estas circunstancias no incluyen la mayoría de las circunstancias en las que los gobiernos realmente implementan la fuerza.

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En otras palabras, el comportamiento típico de los gobiernos es un comportamiento que se consideraría inaceptable si fuera adoptado por cualquier persona o grupo no gubernamental. Esto sucede porque se piensa que el gobierno tiene un tipo especial de autoridad (autoridad política) de la cual carecen los individuos y grupos privados. El argumento central de este artículo es que no hay nada especial en el estado que explique por qué debería tener autoridad sobre todos los demás. El estado, por lo tanto, sólo tiene poder político, no autoridad política. Es decir, tiene la capacidad de coaccionar a otros agentes y de tomar sus recursos, pero no tiene más derecho moral de hacerlo que cualquier otro agente. Esta visión conduce a una filosofía política libertaria.

Palabras clave: autoridad política, legitimidad política, obligación política, coerción, libertarianismo

Clasificación JEL: D63, D74, Z18

I
THE FOUNDATIONAL PROBLEM OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

All governments engage in widespread, severe coercion on a regular basis, for a wide variety of reasons. Governments do not, for example, merely deploy force in self-defense, or to protect innocent third parties from coercion. They issue a wide variety of commands and prohibitions governing nearly every aspect of human life. When individuals disobey these commands, governments attempt to take those individuals captive and imprison them. Should the individuals resist capture, governments will injure or kill them. In exchange for their services, governments demand a portion of their citizens' income, again under threat of imprisonment or physical injury. These are not ideological opinions; all this is simply factual description of one important aspect of how government works.

For most agents, this type of behavior would be considered wrong. By general consensus, there is a presumption against coercion: Only in a relatively narrow range of circumstances may an individual or group deploy physical force, or threats of physical

force, against other individuals or groups. These circumstances do not include most of the circumstances in which governments actually deploy force. In other words, the typical behavior of governments is behavior that would be considered unacceptable, if adopted by any non-governmental person or group.

For example, suppose that I as an individual were to declare a list of chemical substances forbidden for human consumption, on grounds that I consider these substances unhealthful and "immoral" to ingest. Suppose that whenever I find anyone ingesting these substances, I kidnap them at gunpoint and then hold them prisoner for months or years in a cage. This would be widely and rightly regarded as morally unacceptable, not to mention insane, behavior on my part, and few if any of my neighbors would feel obliged to obey me.

Or suppose that a charity organization, say, Oxfam, were to declare mandatory donation amounts for all individuals. If anyone fails to give the required amount, Oxfam sends armed men to their places of residence to take them prisoner. Again, this would widely and rightly be regarded as completely unacceptable behavior for Oxfam.

Yet the analogous behavior is *not* usually regarded as morally unacceptable for governments and their agents. When the government prohibits recreational drugs, or collects tax revenues for social welfare programs, most do not find this unacceptable or insane. Nor do we view government agents as kidnapers, thieves, and extortionists. Indeed, many view themselves as morally obligated to obey the government's commands.

Why is this?

The short answer is: because the government is thought to have a special kind of *authority* (*political* authority), which private individuals and groups lack. Only the government has the authority to tax, not Oxfam. This notion of political authority contains two important components:

i. *Political Legitimacy:* The state's entitlement to force individuals to obey its commands, in situations in which private agents would not be ethically entitled to force others to obey their commands.

ii. *Political Obligation:* The obligation on the part of individuals to obey the state's commands, in circumstances in which individuals would not be ethically required to obey similar commands given by private agents.

Those who believe in political authority hold that the state's authority is (to some degree) *content-independent*. What this means is that the state's authority does not only extend to laws that are really beneficial, wise, or otherwise objectively correct. Rather, the state is normally entitled to enforce the law, even when that law is ill-chosen, simply because it is the law. Individuals, likewise, are thought to be obligated to obey the law, even a bad law, simply because it is the law. For example, even if the tax rates are unfairly high, it is generally held that individuals are morally obligated to pay their taxes, and that government officials are morally permitted to deploy force to collect the required taxes.

Defenders of political authority, however, do not in general take an absurdly extreme view: they need not claim that *all* governments have authority, or that it extends to all laws, or that no other obligations ever outweigh the obligation to obey the law. They might hold, for example, that only reasonably democratic, reasonably effective governments have authority, that it only extends to laws that are made by the right process, or with appropriate purposes. They might also hold that the duty to obey the law, which holds in normal circumstances, can be outweighed in sufficiently extreme conditions (so that, for instance, no one would be required to obey a law that required them to commit murder). That is to say, a variety of conditions and limitations could be accepted by advocates of political authority.

That being said, political authority remains a striking and, on its face, quite puzzling moral status. Why should any agent *ever* be entitled to force others to obey commands that are not objectively good? Why should anyone ever be required to obey such commands? So far, we have said nothing to answer that. We have only put labels on what needs philosophical explanation.

My central contention in political philosophy is that there is no satisfactory answer to these questions: there is *nothing* special about the state that explains why it would have authority over

everyone else. The state, therefore, has only political *power*, not political *authority*. That is, it has the *ability* to coerce other agents and to take their resources, but it has no more moral *right* to do so than any other agent has. This view, as I shall explain, leads to a libertarian political philosophy.

II
THEORIES OF AUTHORITY

1. **The Social Contract Theory**

Political philosophers have devised a variety of accounts of the basis for the authority of government. The most famous of these accounts is the Social Contract Theory (Locke, 1980 [1690]; Hobbes, 1996 [1651]).[2] The Social Contract Theory holds that government's authority is established by a kind of contract between the state and its citizens. The state agrees to provide protection, law, and order; in return, the citizens agree to obey the laws and pay taxes. The contract permits the state to enforce its laws coercively and obligates citizens to obey them, even in cases where the laws may appear foolish or harmful.

As with many philosophical theories, this theory suffers from one small problem: it is factually false. No such contract was ever signed in reality.

Defenders of the social contract theory, when confronted with this unfortunate detail, usually resort to the notion of *implicit agreement*. This is the idea that an individual can communicate agreement to some arrangement *implicitly*, through their behavior, rather than directly by the spoken or written word. For example, when I order food in a restaurant, I imply (unless I say otherwise) that I agree to pay for the food when the meal is over, since this is understood to be how restaurants work in our society. (I never actually say, "I hereby agree to pay for this food.")

[2] The version of the theory discussed in the text is based on Locke.

How, then, might citizens have implicitly communicated their acceptance of the social contract? The most popular suggestions are (i) that individuals implicitly accept the social contract by residing in the geographical area controlled by a particular state, and (ii) that we implicitly accept the social contract by voluntarily making use of government services, such as roads, schools, or police protection. Let us address these possibilities in turn.

(i) *Agreement through residence:* Sometimes, indeed, a person implicitly commits himself to some arrangement by choosing to be in some area. If I declare that everyone who comes to my house must remove their shoes, and you come to my house, then you are obligated thereby to remove your shoes, even if you never actually said that you agreed to this.

But as this example illustrates, this form of "implicit agreement" depends on property rights: If I *own* a house, I may impose conditions on all who use the house. Of course, I may not similarly impose conditions on those who enter or remain in *someone else's* house, or in some area that no one owns.

The question, therefore, becomes whether the state legitimately *owns* all the territory over which it exerts political power. And here, there is simply no reason to think that it does. Might does not make right, nor does merely holding power in some region give one a property right to all the land contained therein. On the contrary, the various parcels of land constituting a given state's "territory" are usually owned by particular individuals or corporations, not the state.

If we already accepted the authority of the state, then the state could simply pass a law stating that it owns all the land; then it could demand that all who use "its" land agree to pay taxes and obey all the other laws. But this evidently requires circular reasoning: the state needs property rights over all the land *in order* to establish its authority; we cannot therefore assume the state's authority in order to establish the state's rights over the land.

(ii) *Agreement through acceptance of benefits:* Nearly everyone at least sometimes voluntarily uses government-provided benefits. For example, most families send their children to public schools, and nearly everyone sometimes drives on public roads. One might think that in doing so, one implicitly accepts the obligation to

sustain the costs of government. And these costs, one might think, include general obedience to the law and payment of taxes.

There are two problems with this argument. First, the government commonly coercively prevents other agents from providing services competing with those of the government. For instance, non-governmental organizations are not permitted to start private police forces to provide protection to individuals. In general, if I am selling a particular service, and I coercively prevent you from obtaining that service from any other provider, I will become ethically obligated to provide the service to you, whether or not you agree to my terms. If the reason you choose to buy my product is that I forcibly prevented you from buying it from anyone else, then your "agreement" to buy that product is not a genuinely voluntary one. As a result, you will not be obligated to obey the terms of that agreement.

Second, in general, the "social contract" is imposed on individuals *regardless* of whether they consume government services or not. Those who send their children to private schools do not get a tax break, nor are they exempted from any other laws. Even if you somehow avoided ever consuming any government service, the government still would not exempt you from any of the laws. You would still have to pay the same taxes (if you had any income), and in general obey the same rules and restrictions, as everyone else. Because of this, your use of government services cannot be taken as indicating agreement to the "social contract".

There are other, more general problems with the social contract theory. In other contexts, it is generally accepted that if a person explicitly states that they do not agree to some arrangement, then they do not agree; one cannot continue to claim that they "implicitly agreed". For instance, if I enter a restaurant, inform the server clearly that I will not pay for any food, but that I would like a meal anyway, and if the server proceeds to bring me some food, she cannot later claim that I "implicitly agreed" to pay for it. But the government does not recognize this: however clearly and explicitly you inform the government that you do not agree to be subject to their authority, they will not refund your taxes, and they will still impose all the same laws on you.

In other contexts, contracts are taken to impose mutual obligations on the parties: each party must undertake an obligation to do

something for the other, and if one party fails in its duty, the other party is released from theirs. For example, if I hire someone to paint my house, and he fails to do so, then I have no obligation to pay him for the job. But the government recognizes no such obligations: even if the government fails to protect you (be this failure however negligent or intentional), the government will still consider you to be subject to precisely the same taxes and other laws.

In short, the "social contract" does not satisfy any of the rules that apply to legitimate contracts in other contexts. So it is not a legitimate contract.

2. **The Authority of Democracy**

Another popular idea is that the democratic process confers authority on the outcomes it produces. Provided that one lives in a democratic nation, it is said, the laws reflect the will of the people. It would therefore be arrogant and unfair to others to refuse to obey these laws merely because they do not accord with one's own personal judgment (Christiano, 2008; Bork, 1999).

The assumption here, that democratic nations always follow the will of the people, is naive. There are many cases of unpopular laws that nevertheless get passed. In most cases, average members of the public have very little idea of what the laws are, who voted for them, or what else their political representatives are doing. Because of this, political leaders often find it convenient to pass legislation that serves wealthy and well-organized special interest groups. Besides this, there is the fact that most of the laws, even in a democratic society, are not made by elected officials but by bureaucrats.

There are a number of other reasons why laws in a democratic nation may fail to reflect the public will. But we need not go into further detail on that front now, for there is a more simple and fundamental moral question that confronts us about the democratic theory of authority.

The question is whether the mere will of a larger group of people should suffice to suspend or override the rights of a minority. Suppose that I go out to dinner with several friends. At the end of

the meal, upon receiving the bill, one of my friends proposes that I, individually, should pay the entire bill for everyone. I decline, but the friend insists, even going so far as to take a vote of those present. To my consternation, all my "friends" want me to pay for the dinner. Am I now obligated to pay? And are the others entitled to *force* me to pay, *merely because they have the greater numbers*?

Surely not. Yet this seems to be just what the democratic theory of authority would have us accept.

You might be tempted to protest that most government policies are more socially beneficial and less obviously unfair than the demand that I pay for everyone's meal in the above example. (Though in truth, the actual distribution of tax burdens in American society is not so far from what that example depicts. See Huemer (Forthcoming)) But that is not the issue. The issue is not how wise or just government policies are. The claim of the democratic theory of authority is that *the democratic process* confers authority, that is, that the mere fact that *the majority desires* some arrangement makes it permissible for the state to coercively enforce that arrangement and obligatory for the individual to accede to it. A fair test of this principle is to imagine an arrangement that is not independently morally justified, and suppose that a majority of some group supported it. As we see, this does not confer any special right to coerce, nor does it suspend the rights of the individual.

Defenders of democracy appeal to the admirable way in which democracy treats all citizens as equals, or in which it relatively reliably produces decent outcomes (Christiano, 2008; Estlund, 2008). Much the same could be said of hypothetical cases like the restaurant case above. When the restaurant-goers all vote on who should pay for the meal, everyone is treated as an equal (I am accorded one vote, just like everyone else), in the same sense as voters in a democratic society are treated as equals. Likewise, it could be said that the collective judgment of my friends is, as a general rule, more reliable than my individual judgment.

All that may be true, yet it does not cancel my property right in my own money, nor my right not to be coerced by my friends. Nor, then, should the analogous claims about a democratic society be taken to suspend the rights of individual citizens against coercion or seizure of property.

3. A Utilitarian Defense of Authority

Some urge that we should recognize state authority because of the large benefits produced by the state (Hume, 1987 [1777]).

Consider an analogy. We are all at sea in a lifeboat. The boat is taking on water and will sink unless we bail it out. It is not necessary that every single person bail water; if a few slack off, the others can still bail fast enough to keep the boat afloat. But it is necessary that *the great majority* of passengers help bail water, otherwise the boat will sink and all will drown. In this case, surely, you *should* bail water out of the boat. Furthermore, if not enough passengers are willing to bail, it would be permissible to *force* other passengers to bail water, using threats of physical harm if necessary.

Just as bailing water is necessary to keep the lifeboat afloat, paying taxes and obeying the law is necessary to maintain government and social order. Not everyone need do these things all the time, but the great majority of citizens must obey and pay taxes, or the government will collapse and social order will break down. So, just as you should bail water from the boat, you *should* obey the laws and pay taxes. And just as it would be permissible for you to force recalcitrant passengers to bail water, it is permissible for the state to force recalcitrant citizens to pay taxes and obey the law. Or so one might argue.

The main shortcoming of this argument is that it is not, in fact, an argument for authority. Political authority is a content-independent moral entitlement to force individuals to obey the law simply because it is the law, along with a moral power to create content-independent obligations for citizens to obey the law simply because it is the law. No such moral status is established by the lifeboat example: the need to save the boat from sinking creates a content-*dependent* entitlement to coerce others, namely, an entitlement to coerce passengers to bail out the boat, because that is the rational or objectively beneficial course of action. After you have done this, you do not thenceforward have some general moral entitlement to force passengers to do whatever you say, whether or not what you say is actually a good idea. If you proceed to forcibly stop passengers from drinking alcohol, you will be a criminal. If you go

on to coercively "redistribute" the passengers' money, you will simply be a thief. What this shows is that the entitlement to coerce extends only to the minimal coercion necessary to keep the boat afloat.

Similarly, then, the state might be morally entitled to exert the *minimal coercion necessary* to prevent the breakdown of social order. It would not thereby acquire a general entitlement to force people to do whatever it (the state) commands in a wide range of areas regardless of whether those commands are beneficial. We have not seen any reason why, for example, the state may tell individuals what substances they may consume, how much they may pay their employees, or how much they must give to charity.

4. **Other Theories of Authority**

Other theories of authority have been developed by political philosophers. Some believe that we are obligated to obey the state out of fairness to our fellow citizens (Klosko, 2005). Others hold that we must obey out of a sense of gratitude toward the state (Plato, 2000). Still other philosophers believe that the state has authority because individuals *would* agree to establish a government in a hypothetical situation of ideal reasoning (Rawls, 1999).

For reasons of space, I shall not attempt to discuss in detail these other theories of authority; they are discussed at greater length elsewhere (Huemer, 2013, part 1). Here I can only briefly summarize my main contentions in this area:

In general, no theory of authority succeeds. All accounts of authority so far developed require either clearly false factual assumptions, or moral assumptions that would not be taken seriously in any other context. For example, in the case of the social contract theory, the theory could be maintained by adopting the clearly false assumption that there was an actual historical event in which all the members of some society gathered together, wrote out a contract describing a system of government, and signed that contract. Or the theory could be preserved through the equally absurd moral assumption that whoever physically has the power to take over some area has the moral right to impose demands on

all those living in that area, and individuals are obligated to either obey the powerful agent or abandon their own property. Such theories would not be taken seriously if we weren't searching for a rationalization for government authority.

The factual and moral assumptions of other theories of authority are different from those of the social contract theory, but in no case are the required assumptions dramatically more plausible.

The best explanation for this situation is that government in fact has no authority. No one has been able to explain why the state is morally different from a kidnaper or extortionist, because the state is not, in fact, morally different from a kidnaper or extortionist.

III
CONSEQUENCES OF NON-AUTHORITY

I did not just defend anarchism. I argued that no government has genuine authority; I did not argue that no governments should exist. To do the latter would require far more extensive discussion (see Huemer, 2013, part 2). That discussion would have to include comparison of the alternatives to government and detailed examination of possible objections to these alternatives. That is beyond the scope of this paper.

What, again, is meant by the absence of "authority"? Note that "authority" is not a synonym for "government", nor is it a synonym for "right to exist" or "justification for governing". The term "political authority", as I use it, refers to the hypothesized moral feature described in section 1 above: a combination of political legitimacy and political obligation. To review, the existence of political authority would mean that states are ethically entitled to deploy coercion in circumstances or for reasons that would not justify coercion on the part of private agents. It would also mean that individuals are obligated to obey states in circumstances in which they would not be obligated to obey similar commands given by private agents.

In other words, the denial of authority is a denial of a *special* right to coerce, or a *special* obligation to obey. It is not the case that the state has no right to use coercion for any reason; the case is that

the state has the right to use coercion for those reasons, and only those reasons, that would justify a private agent's use of coercion. For instance, I may, ethically, use force to stop a murderer from roaming free, possibly to kill again. And so the state may do likewise.

I may *not*, however, use force to punish other individuals for consuming unhealthy substances. And so the state may not do so either. Of course, the state has the *power* to do this, and most in fact do so. But when they do so, they act wrongly and in violation of the rights of individuals, in exactly the same way that you or I would be acting wrongly and in violation of the rights of other individuals. It just happens that states commit this sort of wrong much more often than individuals do.

As these examples illustrate, the natural consequence of the rejection of political authority is a libertarian political philosophy. This political philosophy rests on three broad premises:

1) *The Presumption Against Coercion:* It is wrong to use force against others, except in a relatively narrow range of special circumstances, such as for purposes of self-defense, defense of innocent third parties, or where the use of force has been consented to.
2) *The Coercive Nature of Government:* Nearly all laws and government policies are implemented through coercion.
3) *Skepticism of Authority:* The same moral standards that apply to private agents apply to governments; governments have no special entitlement to coerce.

Principle (1) is part of common sense morality. We need not attempt to enumerate all the permissible conditions for the use of force, because (a) there is widespread agreement on particular cases in common sense morality, provided that we consider only interactions between private agents, and (b) the cases of coercion that libertarians object to are generally cases that would be uncontroversial examples of wrongful coercion, *if* the agent of the coercion were a private party. That is to say, the disagreement between libertarians and non-libertarians does not concern (1); it concerns (3). In developing a political philosophy, we should rely on as few

controversial assumptions as we can, compatible with successfully developing a substantive view. Since we don't need to further specify (1) in order to address the core debates over libertarianism, we should not do so.

Above, I have used drug prohibition as an example of a government policy that is morally wrong, assuming there is no authority. The same point applies to other policies on which libertarianism takes a controversial stance.

Thus, for example, it would not be morally permissible for me to kidnap and imprison a neighbor merely because the neighbor owns a certain kind of gun, or the neighbor failed to give me detailed information about his guns. Therefore, it also is not permissible for the state to prohibit ownership of certain kinds of guns, or to require firearms registration.

It would not be permissible for a charity organization to force individuals to donate to the poor on pain of kidnaping and imprisonment. Therefore, it is not permissible for the state to operate wealth redistribution programs.

It would not be permissible for an individual to threaten a neighbor with violence because the neighbor purchased an hour of someone's labor for $4. Therefore, minimum wage laws are also impermissible.

Notice that in none of these cases is principle (1), the Presumption against Coercion, in dispute. All of my claims about what would be impermissible for a private individual to do are consensus moral views in our society. Hardly anyone would think it permissible to kidnap and imprison other people for the reasons mentioned. And this is not merely because we already have a state to do it; if no one was imprisoning people for those reasons, almost no one would consider it permissible for a private individual to start such a program of kidnaping and imprisonment.

What is controversial is my next move: the claim that *therefore*, it is impermissible for the state to imprison people (a) because they have ingested unhealthy substances, (b) because they own a certain kind of gun, (c) because they have failed to donate money to the poor, or (d) because they have bought labor at a low price. If we reject the doctrine of political authority, all these conclusions go through, along with the rest of the libertarian political program.

IV
REASONING ABOUT POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

There are other ways of arriving at libertarian conclusions. One way is to appeal to economic arguments showing that most government intervention decreases total social welfare (see, for example, Friedman, 1989). Another is to appeal to a more general, metaethical theory, one that tries to tell us the fundamental nature of all ethical truths, and to derive libertarian conclusions from this theory. The general metaethical theory might be, say, the theory that morality arises from a social contract, or the theory that morality arises from the need to take voluntary actions to sustain one's own life (Narveson, 1988; Rand, 1964). Yet another approach is to start from a general, absolutist moral theory and deduce libertarian conclusions therefrom. For instance, one could assume that individuals have absolute property rights which it is always wrong to violate for any reason, show that any government activities beyond those of the minimal state must violate individuals' property rights, and deduce that only a minimal state, or perhaps no state at all, can be justified (Nozick, 1974; Rothbard, 1978).

I cannot discuss these other approaches in detail here. Here I will only briefly indicate why I favor the approach of questioning authority, as a way of defending libertarianism.

First, my approach does not require readers to fundamentally alter their whole belief system or their basic moral values. My approach appeals to common sense moral judgments, which are shared by nearly everyone, whether liberal or conservative or libertarian, whether religious or atheist or agnostic. In this way, my argumentative approach is more realistic. It is more realistic to attempt to persuade people of a controversial political view by appealing to moral judgments they already accept, than to attempt to persuade them of a controversial political view by appealing to an even more controversial, sweeping philosophical theory.

Second, because of this, my argumentative strategy leaves the burden of proof where it should be: on the defenders of state intervention. If I advance a comprehensive philosophical theory, I have the burden to demonstrate the truth of that theory. But when I merely appeal to common sense moral judgments about

interactions between individuals, it is the burden of statists to explain why the ethical principles that apply to all other agents should not apply to the state.

Third, my approach does not require any extreme premises. Of course, my political *conclusions* are extreme relative to the current range of political opinion, but my *premises* are not. We need not claim, implausibly, that it is always wrong to violate any person's rights, e.g., that it is wrong to steal a loaf of bread to save one's family. We need only claim that stealing and other rights violations are wrong in the circumstances in which almost everyone already thinks they are wrong.

Finally, my central line of reasoning is easy to understand, with a minimum of data or theoretical apparatus required. I need not explain price theory, or the Austrian theory of the business cycle, or even the principle of comparative advantage. I need not debate details about recent policies or historical episodes. Since almost everyone already thinks it wrong for anyone *other* than the government to do the things that I am saying the government should not do, I need only challenge interlocutors to explain why the government should be subject to different rules from everyone else. This challenge is easily grasped by nearly everyone, and most quickly see that they have no good answer to it.

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