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To cite this article: Christopher Cowley (2017) Regret, Remorse and the Twilight Perspective, International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 25:5, 624-634, DOI: [10.1080/09672559.2017.1381410](https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1381410)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1381410>



Published online: 06 Oct 2017.



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Regret, Remorse and the Twilight Perspective

Christopher Cowley

School of Philosophy, University College, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

I examine the ‘momentous’ choices that one makes early in life – about career or spouse, for example – and I ask what it means to regret such choices at the end of one’s life (in one’s twilight). I argue that such regrets are almost meaningless because of the difficulty of imaginatively accessing a much earlier self. I then contrast long-term regret to remorse, and argue that the two are qualitatively different experiences because remorse involves another person as victim.

KEYWORDS Regret; remorse; imagination; end-of-life perspective

People regret lots of things in lots of different contexts. I want to focus on a relatively narrow context, someone looking at the world from a perspective informed by what she considers to be the end of her life. I do not want to call it the ‘deathbed’ perspective, because she may not be physiologically dying, and she may not anticipate dying any time soon. Or she may be physiologically healthy, but contemplating suicide. The important point is subjective: she considers herself to be without a future (and no afterlife), so she is preparing for death, perhaps saying goodbye, perhaps putting her affairs in order, but above all reviewing her life. As part of the life-review she will come to experience regret and remorse about certain choices, and this is what I want to examine.

Some people might describe regret and remorse as having an educative ‘function’, but this presupposes a future within which to make up for the mistakes, to compensate the victims, and to improve one’s behaviour. So my broader question is: in the absence of such a future, what do regret and remorse *mean* when they cannot serve this educative function?¹

Since I want to avoid the usual philosophical resonances associated with the term ‘end of life’ (and the debates around euthanasia, suicide, withdrawal of treatment etc.), I will call this period her ‘twilight’. I want to explore the twilight *perspective* on the world, on herself in that world, on her ongoing relations and projects, and on her biographical past. I am taking ‘perspective’ here to include those structures of value, partly chosen, partly unchosen, which govern

CONTACT Christopher Cowley  christopher.cowley@ucd.ie

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the way the person deliberates, remembers, feels and acts during the twilight. Again, the emphasis is subjective; it is less about what happened, or about the objective significance of what happened, and more about the significance that the twilight agent finds in or attributes to the past events.²

To simplify the discussion, I will invent a hero. Stephanie is 80 years old, and in poor health. She has been a successful businesswoman for all her adult life, but now, during her life-review, she has come to regret that career; she feels she would have had a richer life pursuing her teenage passion in drama. My choice of a career as businesswoman is to keep it morally neutral. There would be complicating moral implications if she regretted her career as a mafia don. And if she regretted her career as a medical doctor, she might be able to 'silence' the regret by reassuring herself of the indubitable good she has done in the world.

Regret

Let me first discuss regret, and later turn to remorse. Regret is such a heterogeneous term that I will stipulate a narrower conception to keep this paper manageable. First, in contrast to its broad use in ordinary language, I want to take regret as essentially referring only to *voluntary* choices in the past. The guiding thought of regret is: 'how I wish I had chosen otherwise.' I had options A and B, I understood enough of what A and B were, and I was self-consciously free to choose either. I chose A, and now I believe that if I had chosen B instead, I would have been better off now. In contrast, I *lament* things that were unfortunate but not in my control, things relating to my life, or to other people's lives, or to events long ago in the past; here the thought is 'how I wish things had been otherwise.'³ There are also choices about matters that were *partly* in one's control, or under one's indirect control, such as one's character. In reviewing her life, Stephanie might say 'I regret not having been more generous when giving people the benefit of the doubt'. (Perhaps she regrets her career partly because of the sort of person it has turned her into.) At a particular past moment, her character was determined enough that she could not be more generous than she was; but over the longer term, she could have actively cultivated generosity until her character changed.

Second, I am taking regret to be a *judgement* rather than an *emotional state*. The judgement is about my specific past choice, and about the counterfactual life I should have led in the light of that alternate choice. Clearly the emotional aspect of the experience will be relevant to my and others' understanding of the regretted object, i.e. in some cases, if I do not *feel* the regret, then other people could plausibly doubt my sincerity or doubt the depth of my professed regret. More broadly, we can say that the 'cash value' of the regret is revealed not only in lingering feeling, but also in subsequent compensatory action. Stephanie's lack of a future is what might make the declaration of regret problematic.

The paradigm of a regretful judgment of a voluntary past decision is when I bet on the wrong horse. I place the bet on Abigail at 10 am, the race is at 12,

Brutus wins the race by 12.30 and I start huffing and puffing in bitter regret. Following a conception by David Velleman (2008), we can say that my regret involves a U-shaped imaginative journey into the past and then back into the counter-factual future, back to the present: I return to the moment of the 10 am decision, where I imagine myself putting the same money on Brutus, then moving forward in time, watching the same race, watching Brutus win as before, whereupon I imagine myself going to collect my winnings. This is an easy example, not only because I can quantify precisely how much I would have gained in the counter-factual present; in addition, it concerns a decision that is trivial, where neither winning or losing affects my life much, and where only a short span of time has passed between choice and regret.⁴

Assuming I am *not* in my twilight when placing the bet, this trivial regret case is clearly of instrumental value. Even if I cannot go back in time to place my bet on Brutus, I have learned something from my loss; I know a little more about Abigail and Brutus as I follow their racing careers, but I also know a little more about myself, e.g. part of my regret was for having placed the bet in a moment of rashness and ignorance, and I now commit myself to doing my homework before future bets.

Third, I am assuming that Stephanie's regrets mainly concern 'momentous' choices (I borrow the term from William James). Part of the twilight perspective is an appreciation of the difference between the momentous and the trivial. While she may have been deeply concerned with fashion or institutional gossip or (non-addictive) horse betting in her day, she naturally finds that these issues trouble her less as she gets older and as her future contracts. More specifically, therefore, I want to concentrate on her regretting her career. The distinctive thing about such a momentous choice (or series of choices) is not only that it consumed a major chunk of Stephanie's life, but that she also came to *identify* with her career, for better or worse: she became a manager in spirit as well as in fact, to the point where her friends would tease her by saying 'you would say that, you're a manager!'

Let us say that her decision to embark on a business career began when she started studying business at university at the age of 20. She was passionate about drama at the time, but had been persuaded to see a career in drama as impoverished and reckless. Obviously the choice to study business did not *determine* her subsequent choices – I am assuming she remained free throughout her life – but it certainly steered her in certain directions, toward certain kinds of people, and toward certain opportunities. Combined with her natural abilities, each step offered more money, more responsibility, or more prestige, and a certain momentum started to build up, combined with a reflectiveness about the career, but not about the bigger picture. Thus, by the time we reach Stephanie at 80, and she is regretting the series of choices that added up to her business career, we have a very different kind of regret to that experienced by the unlucky horse-better. The timespan makes all the difference.⁵

Momentous Regret and the Problem of Personal Identity

Recall Velleman's imaginary U-bend journey into the past to the moment of choice, and then back into the future counter-factual for comparison. If the regretter attempts the same imaginary journey across decades, indeed across a life-time, she will encounter three major conceptual problems.

Stephanie regrets choosing (and re-choosing) a career in business rather than in drama. Her regret is the thought 'how much better my life would have been, how much better off I would be now, if I had chosen (and re-chosen) a career in drama'. Of course, the contingent problem for the 20-year-old Stephanie was precisely that the drama career appeared too risky, and this also makes it difficult for her to imagine, at 80 years old, what the successful drama career would have been like – it might have been a disaster for any number of obvious reasons. But I think there are more interesting problems, and so shall stipulate that she had the diligence, talent, and charm to make a success of her dramatic efforts, and that at 80 she can confidently imagine how it might have gone.

The first problem has to do with regretting any momentous choice made long ago. The changes to *Stephanie* (i.e. to her values) brought about by the intimate identification with the actual career choice may have been more or less predictable, to her or to others, at various stages of the journey. It could therefore be said that her choice to study business at university was not sufficiently informed to be autonomous, and therefore less a matter of *choice* and more a matter of *drifting*. This concern is compounded by the thought that she was attracted to business and away from drama because of her *unchosen* desires for money and certainty. Under my voluntaristic conception of regret, this unpredictability would make her university studies less a matter of regret and more a matter of lament, something that, at 80, she ought to accept just as much as she ought to accept her height and skin colour.

Second, Stephanie's 20-year-old self is effectively a *different person*, to the point of her being unable, at 80, to imaginatively access that past self as required by the Velleman U-bend. Let me qualify this right away. I am not advancing a metaphysical thesis about personal identity: of course it is the same person who made the momentous choice to study business 60 years ago, she remembers making the choice, and she would accept to be bound by e.g. the mortgage contract she signed at the same age. My emphasis is on the difficulty of an 80-year-old's 'imaginative access' to this long-ago person, a difficulty revealed by the *perplexity* of reading 'her' diaries of the time: 'what on earth was I thinking? Who is this little bimbo?' Stephanie says to herself now.

Third, part of the distance between Stephanie's 80-year-old and her 20-year-old self also stems from the fact that in the intervening 60 years she has been deeply shaped by the momentous decision that she made, she has 'grown into' the business career. Not only has this taken her away from the 20-year-old in a determinate direction, but it has taken her even further away from the

80-year-old she would have become had she chosen a career in theatre at 20. This is not only a point about identity, about who she is, was and would have been; it is also a point about the perspective she has now, had then, and would have had. She cannot sufficiently get ‘out of’ her 80-year-old perspective, with all its determinate values, experience and knowledge, and ‘into’ the innocent perspective of her 20-year-old self.

Meaningful regret requires imaginative identification with the choice-maker, and with the person who would have benefitted, forward along the U-bend, from the ‘better’ choice made in the past. This is straightforward when the decision is trivial and short-term, as with the horse-bet. However, insofar as the past self and the counterfactual selves are too distant for reliable imaginative access, and therefore for reliable identification with those selves, then the articulations of regret (in thought or in utterance) have become almost meaningless. Stephanie can of course *lament* the situation she finds herself in at age 80, just as she can lament the path her life has taken. She can speculate about many ways in which her present life could be better – but none of this is close enough to regret.

Despite her lament over her career choice being closer to her lament over her height than to the regret at betting on the wrong horse this morning, there is still a difference. For she never had *any* say in her genetic inheritance, and the only alternative was non-existence. In that sense her genetic inheritance is not really hers for she never had the chance to *make* it hers: instead it provided the structure within which her identity developed. In contrast, even if her 20-year-old self’s lamentable choice to study business is imaginatively inaccessible to her, it was – and *is* – still her choice, and very much part of her life. In addition, she was evaluating her options all through her life: at each stage, she weighed her options and she chose something which, even if it did not ‘satisfy’ her, at least fulfilled some sort of deeper need, and that has unregrettable value. It is almost ingenuous for her to claim, at 80, that she was on the wrong track all along: why should the later Stephanie take priority over the earlier one? Why not say that she was living a rich, even authentic life between 20 and 65, and only after reaching retirement did her boredom and frustration cast a shadow over her previous professional life? On the other hand, the working businesswoman Stephanie is no more; all that remains is the 80-year-old Stephanie in her twilight. It’s all very well saying that the younger Stephanies (plural) were getting enough out of their careers at the time; what matters to the 80-year-old Stephanie is to find meaning in her life *as a whole*.

The Role of Fate

I am going to suggest that the concept of *fate* can be useful at this point. Fate is a bit of a dirty word in philosophy, since it suggests determinism or pre-ordination or divine caprice, all of which undermine familiar notions of agency

and responsibility. In my example, I am definitely taking Stephanie to have been free at the time of making the momentous choices in her youth, and indeed free throughout her life, however much her options might narrow over time. With each choice, she remembers feeling free at the time she made it, and her impulse to regret certain choices presupposes her belief in her own lingering freedom. In that sense regret is a 'reactive' attitude, as Strawson (1962) famously described in his own discussion of freedom.

However, once she has 'arrived' at her 80-year-old perspective, I have argued that she cannot meaningfully regret the momentous choices that helped to shape that perspective. Not only were those decisions too far away to be sufficiently imaginatively accessible, but the very perspective from which she attempts the imaginative access presupposes the robust influence of those momentous decisions. Not only she, but above all her perspective, have been transformed, and transformed irreversibly.⁶

Therefore her past is fixed, not only in the sense of being past (the milk being spilt), not only in the sense of her genes (e.g. her height) and early childhood being determined, but also in the sense that her free choices – *given* her determinate 80-year-old perspective – could no longer have been otherwise. If the 20-year-old Stephanie had made a different momentous choice, then this 80-year-old before us would be someone else. Many contingencies in 80-year-old Stephanie's life could have been different, but there was only one life-path through the various momentous decisions.

As a similar example of a non-metaphysical non-deterministic fate, Robert Solomon (2003) considers the example of a long (and unregretted!) marriage. The husband and wife can recall the first time they met, and they can both accept that it was a complete accident; each of them might have been somewhere else that day, each might have been otherwise betrothed or uninterested; any number of contingent obstacles might have come between them to prevent the wedding, or to terminate the marriage. However, once they *do* meet, and once so much follows from that meeting over so many years, once their individual perspectives have been so shaped by the events that began on that meeting, then it makes sense to describe their meeting as fated.

I stress that I am taking Stephanie to be in the twilight of her life, when it is too late to seriously make a new momentous choice. Insofar as a person who sees herself in the middle of her life is willing and able to use her regrets as a springboard, then she is not in her twilight by definition. Our Stephanie is winding down, and part of the process will be not only to accept the past facts as immutable, to accept the educational pointlessness of regret, but above all to accept the near-meaninglessness of regret articulations – in short, she must accept her fate. I realise that this might be easier said than done in psychological terms, and she may find herself assailed by her regrets into a position of despair and bitterness. Resisting the temptation to despair need not involve ignoring the past, with all the risks of losing her moorings and roots, but rather

cultivating a 'serious ironic' stance toward the lamentable momentous choices of the past. The notion of serious irony is meant to allow something like the correct 'distance' from the past choices; just as it is unhealthy to be too close to the choices and succumb to bitter regret, it is just as unhealthy to cut oneself off entirely from the past, even if one can do so as glamorously as Edith Piaf.

What more can be said about this cultivation of the serious ironic stance? First of all, it means facing the regret, and the object of the regret, head on; refusing the temptation to ignore it, refusing self-consoling fantasies, refusing to blame others, refusing to declare regrets pointless. Importantly, *accepting* fate is to be distinguished from *resigning* oneself to fate: in normal contexts, one speaks of resigning to a superior external force which one then cannot help resenting, and of accepting a duty or a role in the spirit of a more constructive engagement, however onerous the duty. Resignation keeps the superior force outside, whereas acceptance brings the duty inside. I would not go so far as to say that the healthy approach would be to 'embrace' or 'affirm' the regret, perhaps in a Nietzschean spirit; that would come too close to self-deception. But one can accept the momentous decisions even when mistaken, one can accept them as ineliminable parts of one's being, and thereby reduce their sting a little, so that they do not distract the twilight person from the more urgent business of closing up the shop.

For some the process of cultivation will be difficult, and it will be hard to know when they get it right. A 'spiritual helper' might be necessary. I have in mind not only a professional of some sort – psychotherapist, chaplain, palliative care nurse etc. – but also a close friend of family member, someone who has known the person for a while, someone who already has a sense of who they are, where they come from, and therefore who has the personal authority to warn the person against evasion or self-deception when it comes to facing their past and future.

Remorse

One general point about all the regrets I have been considering so far, short and long-term, trivial and momentous, is that they are essentially *non-moral* phenomena; they are concerned essentially with oneself, with one's own interests, one's own flourishing. The thought behind an articulation of regret is that I would have been better off now – in any number of non-moral ways – than I am. In accordance with the horse-bet paradigm, I regret betting on the wrong horse because I am not as rich as I could have been.

Remorse is a sub-species of regret, and remorse is very much a *moral* phenomenon, because it directly concerns the harm done intentionally, recklessly or negligently to another person. Like regret, remorse might be short term or long term, and might be more or less serious, depending on the degree of harm. As Gaita (2004) puts it, the experience of remorse is akin to being

haunted by the reality of one's victim, even if the victim is dead. Unlike regret, then, remorse is essentially directed not at the self but at the other, and will therefore resist the re-interpretation that I have offered in the case of regret over momentous choices.

With regret, it makes sense for an observer to say 'there is no point to regret, try to ignore it'; or 'Brutus won the race, learn from that'. With regret over long-term momentous choices of career, I have been arguing that the regret should be leavened with 'serious irony' in order to accept the fatedness of the choices. With remorse, the situation is very different. If harm has genuinely been done by an agent, then painful remorse *ought* to be felt by that agent: that is the morally appropriate response to the harm and to its doing. It may also lead to further morally appropriate steps, such as an apology and compensation – as with regret, the 'cash value' of the remorse will be revealed not so much in contrite utterance by in contrite action. But the first stage will be the affectively-loaded judgement that 'I harmed you'. Sometimes I will resist the thought, particularly if I am vain or I am personally irritated by you: I might seek around for some excuse to reduce my responsibility, or some justification to reduce the wrongness, but if I find none, then I cannot avoid the moral burden.

What of Stephanie, aged 80; what do her articulations of remorse amount to when she has no future? First, she might have enough of a future to apologise and compensate the victim. However, if this is impossible because Stephanie really is on her deathbed, or if her victim is himself dead, then it remains important to lucidly experience the remorse as a sign of recognition owed to the victim's harm. In this respect remorse is closer to the long-term mortgage contract than to the regretted career choice; whatever Stephanie might think about the bank, whatever her own wealth, and whatever distance there might be between the 20-year-old Stephanie who signed the mortgage contract and her 80-year-old present self, she still owes the bank the mortgage repayments that she freely promised to pay.

Regret and Despair

In this final section I want to consider two forms of despair arising from particular kinds of exaggerated regret. The first involves *wallowing in excuses*; the second arises from a *global, nihilistic regret*.

Jean-Paul Sartre best captures the idea of wallowing in excuses, and is worth quoting at length, since he also provides a powerful response to it. Under my voluntaristic conception of regret, the search for excuses is not actually regret; however, the search for excuses is so obviously self-deceiving and self-exculpation that it can only be driven by a deeper, inarticulate regret not to have made more of one's life. Perhaps this kind of self-deception is more common than the honest articulations of lucidly regretted career choices.

For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, 'Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions.' But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art. The genius of Proust is the totality of the works of Proust; the genius of Racine is the series of his tragedies, outside of which there is nothing. Why should we attribute to Racine the capacity to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he did not write? In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait. (Sartre 1946)

As an example of global or nihilistic regret I will take Ivan Ilych, from the short story by Leo Tolstoy (1886). Ilych had a successful career as a legal bureaucrat and eventually a judge in nineteenth-century Russia. He was effective enough to be promoted, not evidently corrupt, and well-liked by colleagues. If he was an ambitious social climber, and delighted in institutional intrigue and gossip, these sins seem venial. He had a wife and family, but was not much interested in either, as was not uncommon among professional men at the time. He develops a mysterious debilitating disease, which confines him to bed and then causes him great suffering; finally he becomes aware that he is going to die, and begins to review his life. Rather than regretting specific choices, the general thought that he 'might not have lived as he should have done' occurs to him; but he quickly dismisses it, reminding himself that he did everything 'correctly' and 'in accordance with the values of the highly-placed people in society'. Slowly, however, the 'should have done' thought grows more and more persistent, but without it being clear *how* he should have lived. For while he was good at being a judge, enjoyed being a judge, and was a useful member of society as a judge, it is never clear what else he 'should have done'. Part of his spiritual epiphany is not only to recognise his vague career mistake, but also to properly recognise his wife and son for the first time, and to feel sorry for the suffering that his sick behaviour is causing them.

For these reasons, I find the short story problematic as a cautionary tale about the perils of conventional ambitious bourgeois egotism. Indeed, I take an opposing cautionary tale from it: one should beware of falling into a twilight where one comes to reject *all* one's previous life; without any constructive thought for what one should have done differently; without any attempt to distinguish the healthy from the unhealthy values of the highly-placed people in society; without any appreciation for the independent goodness of one's job performance and job enjoyment.⁷ One's twilight years are already at great risk

of depression due to one's declining faculties, prestige and opportunities. It is even worse to be tempted into uncritically undermining all one's real achievements over a lifetime. There can be no despair more soul-destroying than that.

Notes

1. One recent important book about regret is Wallace 2013. However, it is interesting that Wallace's two central protagonists, the painter Gauguin and the teenage mother, do *not* in fact regret their lives. They might 'regret' having done something that they could not 'justify' at the time (abandoning their family and keeping their child, respectively), and Wallace is interested in precisely what these terms in scare quotes mean in the context of their lives. Wallace takes the Gauguin example from Williams 1981.
2. In calling it *subjective*, I am not calling it *merely* subjective. I am not claiming that it is entirely up to the agent declare what is valuable or not valuable in her life, as the popular image of existentialism would have it. Hence my use of the word 'find' in this sentence. Even though I will avoid talk of a singular realm of objective value, her life-review search and her disagreements with friends are guided by a certain kind of objectivity.
3. Williams (1981) has a more capacious definition of regret, including 'agent-regret', where the non-negligent lorry driver regrets accidentally killing a child. Insofar as (i) the killing was not in the driver's control, (ii) there was nothing that the driver could have done to avoid recklessness or negligence, e.g. slowed down, stayed sober, had his brakes checked, then I would say that the driver could only *lament* the killing, not regret it. Gaita (2004, ch. 4) actually calls the driver's experience *remorse*, precisely because of the harm caused to another. It is true, as Williams emphasises, that the driver had a direct causal relation to the killing, and that separates the event from other regrettable events over which he had no influence at all. That is an important distinction, but one which will not concern me here.
4. It might be argued that the gambling example is possibly inaccurate, because some gamblers enjoy the thrill of the gamble without looking backward in regret or forward in newly-educated planning.
5. A similarly momentous choice would be the choice to marry a particular person, followed by a series of choices, made at moments of tension, to remain with him, all the way through to twilight regrets. The wedding choice is different from the career choice because of the explicit promise that many couples make to remain together for their whole lives, the resolve to 'make it work', come what may. Whether such a promise is foolish or irresponsible, or whether it can even be meaningful, is a question I shall not pursue.
Another momentous choice would be a woman's choice to have a child, which will almost certainly amount to a radically unpredictable life-long change. In normal circumstances a woman in her twilight might come to regret her decision to have a child, but this has much deeper and more complex implications than regretting a career or a marriage, since the desired counterfactual would be the non-existence of the child. (This is one of the central examples discussed by Wallace 2013.) For the sake of simplicity I shall assume Stephanie to be childless, without any regrets about the childlessness.
6. This idea of 'transformation' is taken from Paul (2014). The transformation is doubly irreversible: first, because she is in her twilight and so there is no time

for further reversals; second, because living a life and accumulating all that baggage is itself irreversible. (The one, pitiable exception would be the senile and demented, who resume a second childhood, although one very different from the first.)

One familiar version of this irreversible transformation would be the loss of innocence, not just in the sexual context, but more broadly construed to include the various maturation processes leading to an independent adult professional and social life, including the assumption of managerial responsibility, where one inevitably cannot please all one's subordinates and one has to develop the appropriate thick skin. Once the innocence is lost, once the hands get dirtied, once the shabby compromises are made in order to get on, one can no longer re-enter the innocent perspective from which certain ideals were cherished and pursued.

7. Ivan feels sorry for them *in the present*. Never does he become aware of the suffering he caused them *in the past* due to his neglect as a husband and father. This is very real harm, and warranted proper remorse as a pre-condition for the spiritual epiphany.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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