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15. Augustine and the Anthropocene

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Abstract

The term "Anthropocene" has recently emerged as part of an effort to name the geological impact of modern humans. For some, this "recent human age" is a "Good Anthropocene," an opportunity for humans to finally assume their place as masters of this world. For others, the Anthropocene is bad news, and efforts to call it "good" are profoundly misguided. This essay brings theological insight to this tension by placing it in dialogue with the thought of St. Augustine. From an Augustinian perspective, the idea of a "Good Anthropocene" is just another example of the human capacity for delusion.

Keywords: good Anthropocene, Neo-Materialism, Augustine, Bruno LaTour, eco-theology

Introduction

In his article “Against the Anthropocene: A Neo Materialist Perspective,” philosopher Timothy LeCain argues forcefully against hubristic overconfidence in human achievement. Rather than discerning in the Anthropocene age a dire warning that humans are drawing ever closer to crossing real and actual planetary boundaries, some wish to celebrate it as *the* triumphant human moment, an apotheosis of humans, who are now finally assuming their rightful place as masters of this world. For LeCain, this view could not be more mistaken. Rather than revealing our power, the Anthropocene actually exposes our weakness and our utter dependence on the world that we dominate only in our fantasy. In this essay, I propose to put LeCain’s warnings about hubristic interpretations of the Anthropocene in dialogue with the theology of St. Augustine in an effort to tease out an outline of one Christian theological reaction to this new age of human power. Augustine, I will suggest, has much to teach us about humanity’s unfortunate tendency to live in delusion.

But first, I should take a moment to explain the idea of the Anthropocene, the meaning of which may be fuzzy to some readers because it has not yet entered fully into our general vocabulary. The word “Anthropocene” was probably coined in the 1980s by biologist Eugene Stoermer (1934–2012), who was looking for a way to capture how humans were systematically altering conditions on the earth that had been relatively stable since the last ice age. Stoermer used the phrase “the Anthropocene” in contrast to “the Holocene,” which is the term that geologists habitually use to describe the current geological epoch in which humans have lived for 15,000 years. The term itself would have probably remained local to Stoermer had not “the Nobel Prize-winning chemist and climate scientist Paul Crutzen adopted it in [the year] 2000” (LeCain: 5). Since then references to the Anthropocene have steadily increased, even entering into the popular press. For example, in May 2011 *The Economist* ran a cover story entitled “Welcome to the Anthropocene.” Similarly, since 2011 *The New York Times* has run at least twenty articles referencing the Anthropocene. In addition, the community of ecological theologians, philosophers, religionists, and ethicists are rapidly embracing the term because of its ability to name precisely and quickly the breadth and depth of the changes that humans are causing on the earth.

More specifically, the word “Anthropocene” represents an effort to capture in a focused way what humans have done to the world, at least since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Some thinkers want to push the origins of these changes back to the invention of agriculture, when humans first began experiments in radical environmental transformation. However, most would trace the beginning of the Anthropocene to the first coal-fired industries that began popping up in England at the turn of the nineteenth century. Since then human activities have been leaving behind a trail that future geologists will be able to easily follow, a trail marked by carbon deposits, acidic oceans, and rapid extinction, changes not seen on a similar scale for millions of years.

Of course, the word “Anthropocene” is not without controversy. It has not, for example, been formally accepted by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (a subcommittee of the International Union of Geological Sciences) (LeCain: 6). Before the term could be adopted, that group would have to give its approval as a formal recognition that we have indeed moved out of the Holocene into the Anthropocene. Such approval could take some time. Shifts in

geological epochs are measured by changes in sedimentation that occur over eons. Geologists, like the earth processes they track, do not move swiftly. While we wait for geologists to make up their minds, it seems abundantly clear that something major is happening to the earth that needs to be named, and “the Anthropocene” is rapidly emerging as the top candidate to be the bearer of that burden.

Now, back to LeCain and his essay. For LeCain, the arrival of the Anthropocene is bad news, both actually and terminologically. It is bad news because the reality it describes – the reality of climate change, ocean acidification, deforestation, and mass extinction – is quite terrible; indeed, it is at times almost unbearable for any rational human to face. So, the actual events overtaking the earth and eventually our lives are both really massive and not very good. However, what worries LeCain perhaps more than this actual bad news is the way in which some people are trying to turn the Anthropocene into good news, with some authors even writing openly about the “Good Anthropocene.” LeCain says that these authors misunderstand the Anthropocene to mean “age of humans” rather than the “the recent human epoch,” which is the more accurate scientific meaning. If we understand it to mean the former – that is, the “Human Age” – then we might be tempted to think that the arrival of the Anthropocene is the arrival of maximal human power to shape, mold, and direct our own destiny. In other words, LeCain worries that the idea of a “Good Anthropocene” actually upholds the worst aspect of modernity’s assumptions about human exceptionalism when in fact the reality of the Anthropocene is in the process of revealing these assumptions as yet one more example of humanity’s capacity for delusion (4).

LeCain resists proponents of the “Good Anthropocene,” who think we will be able to solve the problems we face through bioengineering, terra forming, and technology. Instead, LeCain calls the reader to engage in the philosophical equivalent of rending our garments and repenting of the massive arrogance that has delivered us to this challenging moment. In order to avoid the temptation to celebrate the Anthropocene, LeCain prefers other terms to name this age, such as the *Carboncene* (the recent age of carbon) or, more grimly, the *Thanatocene* (the recent age of death) (23). LeCain is a realist who has deep concerns about humanity’s powers of self-deception and overconfidence. He is, in short, a person with an Augustinian temperament.

LeCain and Bruno Latour

LeCain’s primary dialogue partner here, however, is not Augustine, but the French philosopher/anthropologist Bruno Latour. So, before turning to Augustine, let us explore just a bit LeCain’s use of Latour to finish out our sketch of his materialist perspective. Here LeCain draws upon Latour’s “actor network theory,” which is featured in the acclaimed work, *We Have Never Been Modern*. In that book, Latour theorizes that non-conscious objects possess agency in human social networks. For example, humans may have created smart phones, but now smart phones have become *agents* and are *acting* on human culture and shaping it in a way that parallels human agency. Although it has been the habit of modernity to distinguish rigidly between the human social world and the non-human natural world, Latour argues that this distinction is untenable, and that the modern habit of thinking this way is under so much stress that we should abandon it. For Latour, the material world changes us as much as we change

the world. We are creatures of this world, subject to it really, and very far from being its masters.

LeCain goes on to connect Latour's actor network theory with what he calls the "Neo-materialist Flip" in philosophical discourse. "Matter is back, and it's back in a big way," he says, "perhaps as big as the cultural turn it in some ways seeks to replace" (12). LeCain goes on to argue that from the perspective of Neo-materialism, we should recognize that the material world and the earth systems have actually caused the Anthropocene at least as much as, and perhaps more than, the humans who think they are in control. Specifically, LeCain suggests that the agency of things like coal, and the particular fiber structure of the cotton plant – which could withstand industrial processing better than other fibers – set in motion the unleashing of forces that would eventually re-shape the entire planet. In a way, the humans and their cultures are ecological phenomena (16) carried along in the stream of active matter.

LeCain points out that we humans have intended none of the changes that are now happening to the planet. The planet, he explains, did this to us rather than the other way around. For example, we entered into a Faustian deal with coal to increase our power, but over time coal has had its ways with us, and we incurred a debt that now must be paid. "Coal shaped the humans who used it," LeCain writes, "far more than humans shaped coal" (21). Now coal and fossil fuels subjugate us and force us to do their bidding. Proponents of the "Good Anthropocene" live in delusion about the nature of our relationship to this world.

Rather than provoking arrogant over-confidence of the sort typified by the idea of the "Good Anthropocene," LeCain sees the actual Anthropocene as a direct challenge to human hubris and arrogance. We are, it would seem, tiny, limited, and relatively weak creatures. "If this age has anything to teach us," LeCain concludes, "it may well be that humans are not in control, that we do not create our world in any conscious sense but are swept along by powerful material things that we only partly comprehend" (23). We need to wake up, he thinks, to the reality of our situation.

I am reminded in some ways of the film *The Matrix*, in which the newly liberated Neo looks for the first time upon the devastation of the world, which had been destroyed in some unexplained apocalypse. At this moment of realization, Neo's liberator Morpheus gestures broadly while declaring, "Welcome to the desert of the real." Waking up to the real is almost always a painful experience, even if that reality is not an apocalypse like the one depicted in *The Matrix* or a potential apocalypse like that described by many environmental activists. "The real" is simply reality as it actually is, rather than reality as we would like it to be in our fantasies. Thus, LeCain resists efforts to recast the Anthropocene as somehow "good"; such recasting strikes him as a retreat from the actual reality of the Anthropocene that limits our ability to engage the world as it is and, perhaps, navigate the new complexity in a meaningful way.

I recently wrote an essay on the topic of Augustine and the environment in which I proposed that we should not attempt to enlist Augustine in the ecological cause by mining his corpus for romantic, eco-friendly tidbits that affirm our vision of the world that we want. Rather, we should learn from the way that Augustine came to embrace the world that he actually had and, by means of this, to inhabit with some measure of grace the creation that God was actually disclosing to him (O'Keefe). While not immediately evident, it seems to me that LeCain's efforts to face rather than sugar-coat the hard reality of the Anthropocene

parallels in striking ways Augustine's effort to come to terms with being a limited creature in a material creation in which he lived inescapably and over which he had no control. In definitively rejecting Manichaeism, Augustine came to accept the limitations of creaturehood. By following this example, perhaps we too might learn to accept these limitations.

Augustine's Turn to the World¹

In an essay published in *Augustinian Studies*, Charles Mathewes writes thoughtfully about Augustine's turn away from delusion toward reality. For Mathewes, one of Augustine's great achievements was coming to understand that through the Church and the Christian life we can learn to embrace the "world as it really exists, not as we would like it to exist." "The distinction," Mathewes explains, "between what we would like to exist and what in fact does exist is a profound one for Augustine." Recovery from our misguided ideas about reality "involves us coming ever more fully to see the world for what it is, to live in the world as best we can, for our healing is essentially a matter of coming properly to inhabit this creation" (335).

Such an assessment of Augustine might sound counter-intuitive, or even wrong. Was not Augustine a Platonist, and is it not the case that Platonism is by definition anti-worldly? Indeed, accusations that Augustine was hostile to this world are easy to find. As Mathewes notes, this "long-standing charge" lies behind "accusations of the sort flung by Julian of Eclanum in the fifth century and Elaine Pagels in the twentieth, that Augustine was, in the end a Manichean" (333-34). However, I think it is possible to make a strong case that it was in fact Augustine's encounter with Plotinus, and the Christianity influenced by him, that finally allowed Augustine to break free from the anti-materialist fantasy of the Manichees – the world he thought he wanted – and to accept the essential goodness of the entire creation, including its broken material aspects – the world God actually gave him.

John Peter Kenney has noted that before his encounter with Neoplatonism, Augustine did not have at his disposal a functioning concept of transcendence. To modern theological readers, steeped as we are in centuries of intellectual discourse that takes such a concept for granted, it can be difficult to imagine what it would be like not to understand the meaning of transcendence. But apparently Augustine did not understand it until he read the "books of the Platonists." According to Kenney, "the key idea supplied by Platonism and thereafter discoverable in Scripture was spatio-temporal transcendence; a notion that Augustine maintains was entirely foreign to him until his thirties according to the *Confessions*" (2017: 241). Expressing a similar idea, Carol Harrison notes that "the revolutionary thing about the Neoplatonists was that they taught that true reality was spiritual." She goes on to explain that "this insight alone enabled [Augustine] to break free from the philosophical materialism which characterized most thinkers of his day" (14). It also introduced him finally to a version of Christianity that was much more intellectually sophisticated than the anthropomorphizing religion of his mother and his childhood, a religion that imagined God as a material being presiding over the cosmos from the far high heavens, understood as a literal place (8-9). As Augustine himself notes in Book 5, he thought an anthropomorphized and materialist view of God was wrong, but he knew of no way of imagining God except as physical, "nor did [he]

¹ Some of the content of this section was published in my earlier essay.

think anything existed which is not material” (*Conf.* 5.10.19; Chadwick: 185). Neoplatonism helped Augustine to envision a God who was fully transcendent of the material world and the source of it. From this vantage point the intellectual incoherence of the Manichees was exposed: they were both overly materialist in their understanding of God and anti-materialist in their understanding of the lower creation.

Modern readers tend to forget that ancient people had a very different spatial imagination about the structure of the universe. Indeed, if we want to grasp how Neoplatonism might actually help a person make peace with the material creation, we need to think more carefully about ancient cosmology. We think of ourselves as living on a planet orbiting the sun in a solar system of the Milky Way galaxy, which is itself one of billions of such galaxies in the universe. The ancients, in contrast, thought of the cosmos as a place arranged from high to low, with heavy (and opaque) material beings at the bottom, and light (and luminous) material beings at the top. So, heaven was understood not as a state of being, as it is for many modern theologians, but as a literal place on high. Many people thought of God as a physical being up there in the heavens. The philosophical materialists referenced above by Carol Harrison may have escaped from the crudest anthropomorphisms, but they still tended to think of God as substantial in some way. As Peter Brown observes, “most thinkers in the ancient world . . . were materialists . . . For them the divine was also an ‘element,’ though infinitely more ‘fine,’ more ‘noble’ and less ‘mutable’” (75).

Classical Platonism imagined a hierarchically ordered cosmos stretching from the rarified intellectual and immaterial world down to the thick and dense materiality of the earth. However, it seems that even Plato did not imagine the existence of a reality transcending the cosmos in the way the Christian God would later be understood. In the *Timaeus*, for example, he has no interest in the source of the cosmos, only its ordering by the Demiurge, which is not a transcendent source of all things.

It is also likely that Plato’s radical dualism has been overstated. In his book, *The Corinthian Body*, Dale Martin argues that modern scholars interpret ancient discussions of the cosmos through a Cartesian filter. In his view, this causes them to see the presence of radical dualism where no such dualism is present. Martin says that in Plato, who seems to “anticipate Descartes in advocating a radical dualism between body and soul, the material and the immaterial” (11) there is no trace of a full Cartesian rupture. In the *Timaeus*, Martin points out, “the divinities are material” and “Plato can call the entire universe a single, living, visible creature and god” (11).

Plato may not have loved the earth in a way that would satisfy a deep ecologist, but he did not necessarily hate it in a Gnostic or Manichaean way. We need to keep in mind that his discussion of the cosmos was more descriptive of the actual geography of reality than we usually take it to be. For Plato to write about matter’s distance from mind is analogous to the modern astronomer noting that Neptune is far from the sun and therefore less likely to be able to sustain life. Neptune may be an interesting place, but living on earth is better for humans. Thus, for Plato, the intelligible world is a better place than that material world, but both are a part of the same cosmic reality.

Kenney explains that Plotinus modified standard Platonic cosmology by opening a space for the idea of transcendence (2014: 17-26). For Plotinus, all reality emanates from a single

principle, which he called the One. Early Christian theologians found this idea very helpful in their own efforts to understand the nature of God who, they were coming to understand, was a being who transcended the cosmos and had created it from nothing. However, for many ancient Christians, even smart and educated ones like Augustine, these ideas at first seemed alien, esoteric, and even implausible. The idea that the cosmos was created from nothing by a God who dwelled eternally outside of it, instead of presiding over it from within, emerged slowly and not everywhere at the same time (Kenney 2013: 130-37).

Thus, even though at the time of his first reading of the “books of the Platonists” Augustine was already a well-educated man, he had never before encountered these ideas. However, once he did encounter them, they allowed him to see the cosmos and God in a radically different way. As a Manichee, Augustine had imagined that universe was caught in a struggle between the darkness of the evil material world and the light (as both not heavy and luminous) of the spiritual world. This spiritual world was not the pure a-material reality of Neoplatonism, but more like a “light material,” characteristic of the higher cosmos which exists in opposition to the wicked and thick “dark material” of the lower cosmos. For the Manichees and for pre-conversion Augustine, our world is an evil prison from which we need to escape. That is, the actual world they lived in, the lower material world, was not the world they wanted or thought they deserved.

Carol Harrison points out that the young Augustine found Manichaeism to be attractive because it offered what he perceived to be a more sophisticated religious vision than that preached to him as a boy in his native North Africa. The Christianity of his mother was both literalist in its reading of scripture and materialist in its understanding of the world. Manichaeism helped him with the former by offering a mythological, non-literal interpretation of texts, but it did not help him deal with the actual reality of the material creation in which he lived (8-9). Augustine felt the failure of Manichaean doctrine especially acutely when he contemplated the problem of evil, a problem he wrestled with throughout his life and which surfaces in all of his major theological projects. Augustine was especially unsatisfied with the Manichaean idea that the evil material world was able to challenge the authority of God. The Neoplatonic correction allowed him to see the entire created world, including the lower material world, as one great project of the one God who transcends that world and is the source of it.

To return to Mathewes point for a moment, we can say that Augustine’s Neoplatonic turn allowed him to embrace the creation as it is, including its materiality, even though it was a creation filled with suffering, death, and decay. As Mathewes explains,

[Augustine’s] thought is intended not to turn us away from our existence in the created order, but, rather, to reveal to us his diagnosis of our condition as turned away from Creation – a turning which was an intrinsic consequence of turning away from our Creator – and, for our healing, to prescribe turning in the right way, in Christ and through the Spirit, toward Creation, so that we can see it for what it is (334).

In waking up to the creation, as it actually exists, Augustine came to understand his own creaturely alienation from God’s creative project. “When I first came to know you,” Augustine wrote of his inward encounter with God, “you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight . . .

And I found myself far from you ‘in a region of dissimilarity’” (*Conf.* 7.10.16; Chadwick: 123). The dissimilarity here is not just an ontological one, a distinction between our created contingency and divine self-sufficiency, but the dissimilarity of our delusional vision of reality and God’s providence. Augustine came to realize that the source of this alienation was in himself, not in the world, and that he was powerless to do anything about it. He awoke, finally, to the full reality of his condition, a condition of being what Carol Harrison has called “a fractured self.”

Here Augustine’s re-reading of Paul in the 390’s was decisive (Harrison: 27-29; Markus: 48-51). The Platonists showed him how to escape from Manicheism and opened a space in his imagination for a concept as radical as transcendence. Augustine also learned from them how to follow the path of interior contemplation through which one comes eventually to the true source of reality itself. However, while Plotinus found on that path an inner person marked by its ontological kinship with the divine, Augustine encountered through Paul not a divine spark but only his broken self, a creature alienated from both creator and creation and at war with itself. No longer could he blame the material world for the existence of evil and suffering; when he traveled the inward journey, Augustine found only his utter dependence. Through Paul and Plotinus, Augustine awakened to the true poverty of his condition, to his own powerlessness and need for God’s grace and mercy; in short, and to repeat, he awakened to the world as it is, rather than the world as he would have liked it to be. Only by waking up to the real and actual creation could Augustine go on to live well as a creature of God within that creation. He came to understand that he was fundamentally a material man, tied to this world and destined to wait for redemption, both his own and the world’s.

Living “Augustinian” in the Anthropocene

There is, of course, no organic connection between LeCain’s world (and ours) and Augustine’s. Nor is there any exact parallel between the challenges facing fourth-century North Africans and twenty-first century “Anthropocenic” humans. That ancient world existed entirely within the *Holocene*, a geological age which is, lamentably, passing away. Yet placing LeCain’s robust critique of the idea of a “Good Anthropocene” in proximity to Augustine’s willingness to embrace both creation and creaturehood has the potential to help us navigate the Anthropocene more wisely. I conclude, then, with some reflections on living as an Augustinian in this “recent human age.”

First, it seems to me that although Augustine was certainly a Platonist and assigned high value to spiritual and a-material existence, he still found a way to affirm his identity as a creature of the material world. I may be stretching Augustine here, but I think that, were he alive today, he would be sympathetic to LeCain’s materialist arguments because they implicitly affirm that humans belong in this universe and are subject to its limits. We are not and never have been star people; we are earthlings. From this point of view, the arrival of the Anthropocene, which includes the very real threat of our own demise, underscores our dependence and powerlessness far more than it reveals our godlike destiny. Thus, Augustinian critics of the “Good Anthropocene” know that we will only be able to fix what is broken by accepting our limitations and working from a place of poverty rather than power.

Somewhat counter-intuitively we might even say that proponents of the “Good Anthropocene” resemble Augustine’s Manichaean foes. By this I do not mean, of course, that

these contemporary defenders of human planetary domination think of themselves as fallen spirits trapped in matter. They obviously do not. The resemblance, rather, is more formal, in the idea that somehow humans are not really of this world or ultimately subject to it. To these the idea that coal is having its way with us would make no sense at all, because, they think, we are so much more powerful and glorious than coal.

But, like the ancient Manichees, proponents of the “Good Anthropocene” are almost certainly wrong about human nature, and they are deeply mistaken about humanity’s ability to save itself in the face of epochal geological change. They have, in short, become delusional, overconfident, and proud. The Augustinian corrective is to remember that we are limited creatures and that no amount of effort on our part will change this. These limitations are part of God’s design. If we survive this moment – and I hope we do – it will not be because we are great, but because God is merciful.

The Augustinian perspective – which I think is implied, or at least intuited, in LeCain – is always anti-utopian, preferring instead a steely realism. One need not venture far into the writings of advocates of the “Good Anthropocene” before encountering utopian overreaching. Consider the following from the work of Andrew C. Revkin, a leading proponent of the “Good Anthropocene.” “Is this the beginning of our end, as some have argued, or the turbulent beginning of a potential new age of enlightened cultural and physical evolution? Can the Anthropocene, or Anthropocene, be good?” For Revkin, the answer is clear:

Lately I’ve come to realize that my lifelong beat, in essence, has been one species’ growing pains. After tens of thousands of years of scabbling by, spreading around the planet, and developing tools of increasing sophistication, humans are in surge mode and have only just started to become aware that something profound is going on. The upside is astounding.

We Augustinians, in contrast, are pretty sure the Anthropocene will not be that great and that what surges upward eventually collapses downward.

Reading the Anthropocene through an Augustinian lens, then, can help us to see in this age not evidence of humans finally coming into possession of their own great power, but one more chapter in the long narrative of human self-delusion, hubris, and alienation from both God and the actual creation in which we live.

Although I have read Augustine for many years, it never before occurred to me to look to him for inspiration about how to live a Christian life during a difficult moment in history. Augustine, for me, has always been someone I went to for insight into questions about grace, free will, and original sin. I read him when trying to understand the Trinity or to probe the character of western Christology. In short, for me Augustine was a theological resource rather than an actual man with an actual life. But, my recent study of Augustine has surfaced very clearly his courage to live within reality in a way that is authentic. Augustine rejected a life of secular privilege and worldly fame in order to live a life committed to building his monastic community and to serving the people of Hippo as a skilled and compassionate pastor. That life was filled with many losses, the loss of his only son, the loss of his mother, and the loss of many friends. It also included, as Peter Brown points out, the loss of the future life that he

imagined for himself as a young man. It even included, at the end of his life, the loss of his civilization. As Augustine lay dying in the year 430, the Vandals were in the process of destroying forever the only world Augustine had ever known. Those are hard things for any human to face, and by all accounts he faced them with courage and grace.

Finally, Augustinian realism also includes the recognition that the human experience is fraught with impenetrable ambiguity. In *The City of God*, Augustine tried to make sense of the political catastrophes of his age by creating a comprehensive political theology. In essence, he reminded himself and his readers of both the fragility of human projects and the reality that God is in charge of the future. This leaves us in a perpetual season of Advent, waiting, looking, paying attention, loving our friends, caring for the poor and the world, but secure in the knowledge that we are not in power. If we follow Augustine, we should not attempt to resolve the ambiguity by fostering delusion; that is a sure recipe for even deeper disaster.

Reading LeCain and others who write about the Anthropocene can be profoundly disturbing. Like Augustine's North Africa in the fifth century, the Anthropocene is a hard reality to face. However, encountering this reality through an Augustinian lens can give us courage to face it for what it is without resorting to utopian pipe dreams or falling into hubristic delusion. For the Augustinian, facing the Anthropocene requires both facing our own complicity in creating this "recent human age" by our lifestyles and choices and, paradoxically, by accepting that in significant ways we are simply being swept along by forces completely beyond our control. The future may turn out to be fine, and our worst fears may not be realized. However, such an outcome is far more likely if we recover our smallness rather than continue to celebrate our greatness. For the Augustinian, living well in the Anthropocene means embracing humility, asking for mercy, walking gracefully, and pondering once again and more deeply the mystery of being a creature in a creation that has always belonged to God.

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