

The Virtue of Generosity

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Generosity is a complex and often misunderstood virtue. Its complete meaning is rarely fully explored in the literature which leaves one to make simple assumptions about its parameters and depth. This article offers a fuller description of the virtue, tracing its history and meaning from the 16th century to today. It also explores differing views of the virtue and challenges with it. The article suggests three practices that flow from the virtue of generosity and discusses how these practices might change one's approach to his/her work as a Christian social worker. Ethical issues related to the virtue of generosity and the three suggested practices are also explored.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 2011, A REMARKABLE STORY WAS FEATURED IN *Parade Magazine* (Braestrup, 2011). The story highlighted Deb Shearer, a mother who lost her son in an accident and wanted to donate a kidney as an act to help her family and herself heal from this terrible loss. What resulted from her gift was a chain of kidney donors all donating to other strangers, thereby called a living donor chain. The chain was named George's Chain of Life after Deb's son. What motivates someone to be part of a living donor chain? Many of these donors had loved ones who were in need of a kidney but they themselves were not a match. What caused these individuals to go a step further and donate to a complete stranger who was a match? Is this, as indicated in the story, an act of generosity?

Though the act of donating an organ to a stranger seems pretty remarkable, there may be countless examples of ways people engage in acts of generosity. For example, there is renewed interest in "suspended coffees," the idea of which centers around "paying it forward" by paying for a cup of coffee to be given to someone, sometime who needs it. On a small scale, it allows people to practice acts of generosity to those who are unknown and unseen. (See <https://www.facebook.com/SuspendedCoffees> for more information).

This article explores the virtue of generosity by tracing the history and conceptions of the word from the 16th century until today. We present specific actions which we believe are connected to early Christian understandings of the word and discuss how these actions are part of one's character. We also consider how these actions might contribute to professional social work practice.

Defining Generosity

Collett and Morrissey (2007) state that generosity can be conceptualized as the “disposition of freely giving ones’ time, talents, and treasures to others” (p. 23). Generosity is more than just pro-social behavior, which is behavior that benefits others and has as its primary goal the well-being of others (p. 4). Generosity has connotations of “noble and magnanimous motivations... freely giving assistance to others” (p. 23). Generosity can be helpful to groups or individuals and may foster “reciprocity, cooperation, and benefit the common good” (p. 23). For our purposes, we want to keep as broad a definition of generosity as possible. This is due in part to what we believe today is a very narrow view of generosity, usually conceptualized as being solely about giving away money. Furthering this point, the theologian Martin E. Marty claims that generosity as a term is not in most theological dictionaries. Most dictionaries include the word *stewardship*, which is a “useful term” in Marty’s words, but mainly is used in an attempt to “pry ‘time, talents, and treasure’ from believers who are believed to be stingy” (p. 13). Marty is uneasy with what he claims is a narrow understanding of *stewardship*. The biblical story shows the generosity of God who “created the cosmos out of chaos—something God did not have to do but chose to do as a generous expression” (p. 13). Thus, we prefer Spencer’s (2010) broader definition of generosity as “the predisposition to love open-handedly” (p. 158).

The Story of Generosity

Conceptualizing “generosity” and gift giving is not an easy task; though it might appear so on the surface. After all, isn’t it obvious what a gift is? Moreover, though generosity is usually seen as a good thing, has being generous always been perceived as positive? How have people thought about generosity over time? Is it something that we as human beings must do or is it an act to which only truly remarkable people can aspire, such as the ones mentioned in the opening story?

Philosophical and Theological Conceptions of Generosity

The question of how to live faithfully and generously with one’s possessions is more ancient than Christianity, arising from what Wheeler (2010) calls the “origin of all religion, rooted in the human sense of dependency and awe” (p. 85). This sense of awe and gratefulness begs Christians to consider what God asks of us in terms of how to relate generously with God and others.

From the perspective of the Christian tradition, generosity is the crux of the Gospel message, as Christ freely gives His life so that others might be saved (Wheeler, 2010). Christians in turn must grapple with this gift and find a way to practice within their own lives what God’s generosity

means. But, that is also the paradox; this “free gift” does not obligate the receiver so much as draw us into goodness, “to fall in love with grace and thus to delight in sharing its work” (Wheeler, 2010, p. 88). Consequently, how can generosity be internalized and sustained without it becoming an obligation? Throughout history Christian scholars have tried to address this paradox of the gift. They have been aided by a rich scriptural tradition that suggests that giving is a central part of discipleship from the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to the admonition in Acts that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). In addition, early Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas tried to illuminate how generosity is an integral part of human flourishing. The following paragraphs summarize some of their work while also tracing the origins of the word “generosity” and how we have come to understand it today.

According to the *Science of Generosity Project* at the University of Notre Dame, the modern English word “generosity” stems from the Old French word, *genereux*; this definition is part of the root genus meaning “kin” or “clan.” Most recorded English uses of the word generosity up until the 16th century reflect an aristocratic sense of being of noble birth or lineage (University of Notre Dame, 2009, “An Etymology of the Word”, para. 1).

During the 17th century, however, the word became more strongly associated with character traits assigned to the ideals of the noble class, such as “gallantry, courage, strength, richness, gentleness, and fairness” (University of Notre Dame, 2009, “An Etymology of the Word”, para. 2). Later, during the 18th century, the definition of generosity evolved to its common interpretation today, meaning “open-handedness and liberality in the giving of money and possessions to others” (University of Notre Dame, 2009, “An Etymology of the Word”, para. 3).

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle suggests that to lead fully human lives, human beings need opportunities to activate their generosity. Generosity frees one to be magnanimous. Aristotle emphasized the importance of having some sort of “external good” in order to be able to give through one’s own initiative. He described the “magnanimous man” as one who is happy to help others and takes risks for good causes. Aristotle concluded that a generous person does not give indiscriminately, but gives in a way that is “good and fine;” this requires giving to the right people, in the right amounts, at the right time with pleasure and without looking out for oneself (Irwin, 1987).

Aquinas furthers Aristotle’s work by focusing on how the freedom from attachment to money and possessions makes possible the good use of those external goods. Because Aquinas relates generosity to charity and magnanimity, his account of magnanimity in *Summa Theologica* is an important place to start in explicating his thoughts on generosity (Pegis, 1997). The heart of Aquinas’ account of generosity is found in his discussion of outward acts of charity and magnanimity. These acts are significant because they are a way of being conformed to God; human beings are called to respond in gratitude to God’s

love by loving God and one another. In acts of giving and charity, we seek to do good to others to emulate the good that God has done for us (Keys, 2006).

While he was influenced by Aristotle's work, Aquinas's work is differentiated slightly from Aristotle's characterization of magnanimity. In Aristotle's view, the magnanimous person's signature virtue is an "excellence that disposes a person to do good [to others] on a large scale" (Keys, 2006, p. 146). Yet Aristotle is preoccupied with nobility and honor that makes complex the motivations for being a magnanimous person. One's generosity thus flows from that magnanimity. Aquinas' account differs in that he judges that the magnanimous person's "whole attention is taken up with the goods of the community and with God" (Keys, 2006, p. 149) and less concerned with honor and nobility. While Aquinas' account gives us reason to believe that generosity is a virtue to which one should aspire in order to contribute to human flourishing, others find the concept of generosity complicated and perhaps impossible to internalize as a character trait.

Post-modern French philosopher Jacques Derrida provides another perspective on the notion of gifts and generosity. Derrida asserts that giving is *impossible* (Diprose, 2002). As soon as something is recognized as a gift, it obligates the receiver in some way and thus collapses and changes the act of generosity into a relationship of economy and exchange. According to Derrida, a gift is *aporia*—confusing and conflicting in nature. Derrida furthers this idea with the notion that the gift is only possible if it goes unrecognized by the donor and person doing the giving. He questions whether giving, in some ways, is even possible without entering into a circle of exchange that turns the gift into a debt to be returned (Freibach-Heifetz, 2008).

In contrast to Derrida, philosopher Emanuel Levinas offers a critique of dominant paradigms of generosity that suggest that generosity is impossible. He states that these paradigms are insufficiently unconditional and betray expectations of reciprocity. Levinas insists that true generosity does not differentiate between more or less deserving recipients nor does it give in the expectation of return. It is an "unconditional open-ness" to the other. In fact, Levinas's work on exile, hospitality, and welcoming the other touches implicitly on the act of generosity and its power to provide "the other" with a home. An encounter with the poor, destitute—or anyone constituting "the other"—can move a person out of their self-absorbed world and expel them from their "at-home-ness" in the world (Doukhan, 2010, p. 243). One sees their responsibility for their brother and their position vis-a-vis the other. This dislocation or "exile" can be an opportunity for courageously acting generously to welcome the other.

Finally, Spencer (2010) suggests that we can love well by keeping gifts in motion, a type of circular generosity (p. 165). We need compassionate imagination and empathy to be generous towards people we do not know. It is easy to love and give to our friends and family. However, practicing loving open-handedly with strangers or the other is different, a true test

of generosity. Spencer's conceptualization is similar to other paradigms that suggest that generosity is not necessarily based on reciprocity or an economy of exchange but based on an open-ness to others.

Generosity and Its Relationship to Other Virtues

According to Spencer (2010), love is the parent virtue of generosity (p. 160). Generosity is also connected to other virtues such as charity, liberality, magnanimity, and hospitality (Frank, 2004; Comte-Sponville, 2002; Pegis, 1997). Comte-Sponville (2002) describes generosity as the "virtue of giving" and defines it as being at the "crossroads of two other Greek virtues, magnanimity and liberality" (p. 93). According to Konyndyk DeYoung (2009) "magnanimous people concern themselves with achieving great and hard-won acts of virtue as something which God has called them...magnanimous people radiate God's beauty and goodness in the world" (p. 65). Liberality is freedom and specifically "freedom from attachment to money and whatever money can buy" (Konyndyk DeYoung, 2009, p. 101). Therefore generous people are those who act freely according to God's call to pursue goodness.

In contrast to Aquinas, Machan (1998) argues that charity should be distinguished from generosity because it is something that is brought about from a sense of duty. He goes on to say that "a duty is an action that is morally prescribed, a matter of a rule of law that one must explicitly know before one can follow it" (p. 2). Generosity, on the other hand, is something that comes out of our character and is therefore spontaneous (p. 2). It is not "calculating" and does not expect a gift in return (p. 3).

Historical Institutionalization of Generosity

A good place to start in examining the historical significance and understanding of generosity is Veyne's (1990) book, *Bread and Circuses*, which explores the role of generosity in Greek and Roman society and more narrowly the concept of Euergetism, or the giving of an individual to a community. Veyne (1990) asks why gifts to the community and acts of patronage towards the city have such a large life in the ancient world. For example, in Roman culture, every local notable was required in some way to show generosity to the people. The senators of Rome provided games to the people; their practice of gift giving to their supporters and their soldiers effectively became an open form of early political corruption. The emperor himself guaranteed cheap bread and gladiatorial games to the people. The extent of such gifts comprise a "confused mass of miscellaneous forms of behavior" (Veyne, 1990, p. 5) that included presents in the form of games, parties, community banquets, mentioning one's servants in one's will, or constructing buildings, many of which still stand today as records of the "importance" of public acts of generosity towards "the people."

The giving of gifts was popular and institutionalized in other ways in Roman society. Gift giving could also include pious and charitable works, redistribution through taxation, aid to the poor, and material goods, services, and forms of entertainment. Indeed, the Emperor gave circuses to the people partly to keep the people's loyalty. Thus, the motives for this "generosity" included careerism, paternalism, and corruption. It could also stem from a fear of hostile demonstrations, or in its purest form, of course, actual generosity.

The "free" born rich were naturally required to do more than the others, not only because they had the means but also because their "quality as men who were completely human" imposed on them a duty to be responsive most to human need (Veyne, 1990, p. 7). Thus, both the culture of the time and institutionalized policy deemed it necessary to share with others who were "less fortunate." Clearly, generosity as a virtue and accompanying actions had a place in the Roman and Athenian context, though the individual motivations for such actions might be in dispute.

To further this idea that within ancient cultures, generosity to the poor was a public endeavor, Ierley (1984) explores the beginnings of "welfare" in Athenian and Roman culture. As early as 400 BC there is documentation that Athenian society had a system in place for providing for those who were indigent through age or infirmity. Some of the institutionalized forms of aid included public pensions granted to veterans and publicly subsidized work programs. Under Themistocles, there came about an ancient version of work relief, which helped with rising unemployment rates and rates of poverty. Pericles, who succeeded Themistocles, also enlarged upon this process, institutionalizing various forms of supporting the poor. He used public works on a massive scale which thus secured his power and the loyalty of indigent groups. In spite of this care and generosity extended to the poor, Ierley writes that *who* was eligible for aid was also simultaneously contested, with the welfare rolls being "thinned" to include only citizens and others who were proven to be truly "indigent." Again, the critique of outdoor relief in the Athenian context was that it obligated the receivers to those in power, thus securing the power and authority of those making the laws.

Similarly, Ierley contends that up to the Middle Ages, England had some sort of procedure in place to deal with the poor. For example, the feudal system obligated landowners to care for those in their stead, providing help in times of need and caring for people who were ill or aging. However, with the loosening of feudal law, the beneficiaries also became victims because they lost any security against indigence, aging, or infirmity since there was no longer any obligation of the landowner to care for people working their land.

Moreover, after the plague, laborers became scarce and had a stronger bargaining position, thus changing relationships between workers and owners. However, as these relationships evolved, policy was passed to try to control labor's power. A group of 1351 ordinances was the first step

toward the English welfare system that attempted to deal with vagrants and the poor. Those who tried to scam the state were dealt with harshly.

During the Elizabethan era, some provision was made to put the poor to work in their homes as payment for their “welfare.” This era appointed the most comprehensive policies to date, appointing overseers of the poor, putting poor children to work as apprentices, making the adult poor work and providing care for the aged and infirm.

Modeled on English poor laws, local and some state governing bodies created early policies to deal with poor people living in their communities. One means was to push them west where land was cheap and plentiful. Some communities only took care of people from their jurisdictions; others paid people to care for the aged and infirm and poor no matter who they were. The United States also established outdoor relief (payment directly to) and indoor relief (almshouses, poorhouses, etc.). During the 19th century, there was a growth in indoor relief, with almshouses being established in various areas. However, most closed in the early part of 20th century, with the advent of the New Deal and development of the modern social welfare system. While this history might remind us of the virtue of charity, these examples speak to how systems of giving and sharing were in place throughout early western civilization.

As described in the above examples, generosity can shape the structure of social relationships, between senators and citizens, between owners and laborers. Contemporary philosophical discussions of generosity were sparked by Mauss (1967) in his examination of the giving customs of “ancient” societies and how these exchanges shape relationships. In his work, Mauss (1967) concluded that giving and gifts actually imposed a system of exchange on communities. Gifts are exchanged in a context where accepting gifts and reciprocity are conceived as commitments that clearly establish relationships and even hierarchies between actors. Mauss’s discussion of the nature of gifts and giving prompted interdisciplinary discussions of the gift’s nature, with anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and economists weighing in on giving and the nature of generosity. As mentioned earlier, though the definition of a gift might seem self-evident, it has not always been that simple. Thus, it is helpful to understand how these conceptions have changed over time and influenced our current practices of giving and sharing.

Generosity in Social Work Practice

As social work professionals we must consider whether and how the virtue of generosity and the actions we describe below could shape our work. According to Frank (2004), generosity is integral to the practice of medicine in the 21st century. He states that relationships between “people who are suffering bodily ills” and others who “have the skills to relieve this suffering and the grace to welcome those who suffer” are fundamental to

medicine, the latter being at the heart of “medical generosity: the grace to welcome those who suffer” (p. 1). The profession of social work is similar in its call to help those in need and this calls us to explore how we, too, demonstrate generosity in our work. Frank (2004) goes on to say that beyond new treatments and medical technology, “medicine is people in a room together, acting toward each other with varying degrees of generosity” (p. 2).

Frank’s framing of the practice of medicine as being fundamentally rooted in the virtue of generosity is similar to how we are framing our understanding of generosity as integral to the practice of social work. It is one rooted in welcome, forgiveness, and a giving of one’s self. Thus, in this section we explore three practices for social work that flow from the virtue of generosity: hospitality, forgiveness, and the giving of material aid. We have selected these practices based on our understanding of generosity through the broad definition in which we have chosen to frame this article.

Hospitality

Scholars have begun the work of re-examining traditional Christian understandings of hospitality and how these understandings are different from how hospitality is often understood today (Koenig, 1985; Nouwen, 1975; Oden, 2001; Pohl, 1999; Russell, 2009; Sutherland, 2006). Oden (2001) defines hospitality as “the welcoming of the stranger” (p. 13). This definition mirrors biblical understandings of the practice (Deuteronomy 1:16-17, NIV). This “stranger” is key to our understanding of the practice and how it connects to the virtue of generosity as the people and situations in which we are called to practice hospitality involve sharing and connecting apart from the terms we usually set (Burwell & Huyser, 2013). This is also very similar to how Arber and Gallagher (2009) describe generosity, “(it) is not about the needs and interests of the host but rather it is about responding to the needs of the guest” (p. 778). It requires coping with individuals, “including guests who may disrupt and demand” (Frank, 2004, p. 2). This can be challenging but encourages us to rely on generosity as a practice of loving with “the extension of an open hand” (Spencer, 2010, p. 163).

The action of hospitality also clearly aligns with how we think about generosity as a spontaneous act flowing from one’s character. Oden (2001) states, “hospitality is not so much a singular act of welcome as it is a way, an orientation that attends to otherness, listening and learning, valuing and honoring” (p. 14). This “orientation” is part of who we are and how we act when we are generous people practicing hospitality.

Forgiveness

Frank (2004) states that generosity at first is about “welcome: a hospitality that offers whatever the host has that would meet the need of the

guest” (p. 2). Yet, because what one offers is always inadequate and can never completely meet the person’s needs, the generous welcome always “contains a plea for forgiveness” (p.2). The basic concept of forgiveness, the sharing of love among those who have been forgiven themselves, not only marks how we as Christians are called to live through a life of gratitude but also how we are called to live generously because we have been given so much through the gift of Christ. Nouwen (1997) especially focuses on the connection we make between forgiveness and generosity in his meditations calling for us to accept forgiveness so we can in turn give it to others and grow together in love. Feenstra (2002) says, “just as persistent refusal to forgive others shows that we have not been forgiven by God, so too willingness to forgive—or at least to work toward forgiveness—is a good indication that God’s forgiveness has taken root in us” (p. 5). This notion of generosity taking root in one implies a strong connection to our earlier discussion on forming a person, as Aristotle states, to act from, not simply according to, virtue. As mentioned earlier generosity sits at the crossroads between magnanimity and liberality. Magnanimous people are those who “radiate God’s beauty and goodness in world” (Konyndyk DeYoung, 2009, p. 65). The same can be said for generous people in their expressions of forgiveness.

Giving

While we suggest that generosity is not only about giving away money or time or assistance, the giving of material aid is still integral to the concept of generosity. Giving involves a sacrifice on the part of the giver. This means giving something away that one possesses; it also means as the giver, not setting the terms of the generous act. We might not want to give certain things away, but those might be things that the receiver needs and part of acting generously is allowing the recipient to determine part of the gift. We do not set the conditions for release or return of the gift; we give where we see a need.

As mentioned earlier, in the Christian context the word “stewardship” is often used to encourage Christians to share their resources. However, this practice is not as easy as it might seem. In a recent study on the giving trends of American Christians, researchers Christian Smith and Michael Emerson conclude that as a group, American Christians are less generous than some other groups and that they give away relatively little money to religious and/or other purposes (2008, p. 3). Yet, as a group, American Christians have a lot of money and many belong to churches that stress tithing (giving away 10% of one’s income) and express a desire to see the “hungry fed, the church strengthened, and the poor raised to enjoy lives of dignity and hope” (Smith & Emerson, 2008, p. 3).

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus discusses the importance of generosity, and acting generously relative to the resources that one possesses. In the parable

of the poor widow who gives her last remaining coins as an offering, we see that Jesus prefers her gift, though it is a pittance, over that of the rich man who gives much, but not as much as the widow relative to her poverty. He uses this as an example of the true nature of generosity (Luke, 21:3-4).

Spencer's (2010) reflections on giving can provide some direction for putting giving into action. He suggests that true generosity is similar to the "gift economy," an economic cycle that sets gifts in motion without knowing if they'll be reciprocated. Spencer challenges the giver to let go and trust God to complete the circle once we give something away. An important element of giving is to allow the receiver to decide if the "generous gesture feels generous" (p. 165).

Implications for Christian Social Workers

So what implications does generosity have for Christian social workers? How might generosity be evident in our practice and how might we be the recipients of this generosity? What ethical issues or dilemmas might generosity raise in our professional practice? This section will explore these questions and implications.

Christian social workers who show acts of generosity through the practices noted above—hospitality, forgiveness, giving—may be motivated to do so as a result of their faith. Just as Aquinas argues that human beings respond in gratitude to God's love by loving God and loving one another, Christian social workers may show love God and one another—clients, co-workers—in response to our gratitude for God's love. For the Christian social worker, this response of gratitude may fundamentally shift how we view our work. If we are responding, for example, out of gratitude to God's love it may undoubtedly impact how generously we interact with the client that frustrates us or takes up more hours in the day than we had planned. It may also impact how we communicate with our co-workers in times of stress or disagreement. Finally, it may impact the approach we take to navigating the systems and structures that we deal with each day, whether that is with more patience or more persistence to create change. If, as Aquinas argues, our "whole attention is taken up with the goods of the community and with God" (Keys, 2006, p. 149) it will quite likely impact examples like these and more in our professional work.

In addition to how Christian social workers might practice differently in response to our gratitude to God for God's generosity to us, we might also practice differently when we have a deep sense of receiving someone else's generosity. Perhaps we have received generosity in our personal lives, through our educational training, through the actions of a supervisor, or even a client. Christian social workers who themselves have been on the receiving end of an act of generosity and have reflected on this as such may also practice generosity differently. Christian social workers who have experienced the

power of forgiveness may practice forgiveness in their professional lives more readily. Or Christian social workers who have received deeply hospitable welcome may do more to create hospitable places in their practice settings.

As Christian social workers consider the ways we might be changed as a result of our response to God's generosity to us or as a result of receiving another's generosity, we may face ethical issues or dilemmas. As we consider the virtue of generosity in our professional practice it is necessary to consider how this virtue may conflict with our professional commitments to appropriate boundaries and use of power.

Machan (1998) states that generosity ceases to be a virtue when appropriate boundaries are not placed around it (p. 13). This concern may be especially important for social workers to consider in their practice. The challenge becomes how to set boundaries when something is truly part of your character. Think back to the actions we described above, hospitality, forgiveness, and giving. Social workers are taught how to set appropriate boundaries in service. Social workers would not, for example, invite a client into his/her home if he or she needed a place to stay. A hospitable person might, however. Can one turn on or turn off a generous character if it is truly part of who he or she is? This could pose some challenges for social workers if we intend to pursue the development of a generous character or seek to offer this as a gift to the profession.

In a similar way we need to explore the question of power and power dynamics with client groups. Again, as social workers we are placed in positions of power when we work with our clients. We take a number of steps in our practice to bridge this power differential but still need to recognize that it does exist. Even if we are practicing the virtue of generosity through our formed character the client systems we encounter may not be doing the same. This could result in a number of ethical issues, including, but not limited to, imposing generous behavior on our clients which results in an obligation to respond, acting generously toward our clients without actually offering them what they need, or having clients become dependent upon us or feel shamed by what we offer through what we consider to be generous actions. Christian social workers must consider and explore these complex ethical issues related to issues of power especially if we believe we are called to be generous people through our social work practice.

Finally, scholars have not ruled out that the giver could receive something from giving (Machan, 1998; Smith & Hill, 2009) and some, in fact, have linked tangible benefits to practices of generosity including increased prosperity and numerous psychological benefits (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2007; Brooks, 2007). Not only are these challenges present in the practice of giving, they are also present in the practice of forgiveness. Yancey (1997) points out that "we forgive not merely to fulfill some higher law of morality; we do it for ourselves" (p. 99). Social workers must be mindful of how these intrinsic rewards could impact the ethics of our practice.

The virtue of generosity is rich and complex. Evidence of it is found in profound acts of giving, as shown in the story of Deb Shearer and the living donor chain, with deep underlying meaning. These acts are significant yet carry implications when applied to our work as professional social workers—implications which must be weighed based on our commitment to ethical practice. ❖

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