

MUTUALITY AND PLEASURE

A Discussion of the Female Orgasm in Contemporary Catholic Sexual Ethics

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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON CATHOLIC SEXUAL ETHICS HAS TRADITIONALLY PLACED MUCH FOCUS ON THE MALE EXPERIENCE. MAGISTERIAL TEACHING HAS OFTEN SUGGESTED A LIMITATION OF LICIT INTERCOURSE TO PENILE-VAGINAL PENETRATION THAT IS OPEN TO PROCREATION AND WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF MARRIAGE. HOWEVER, A CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEMALE ORGASM RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF MUTUALITY AND PLEASURE IN SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS. ACCORDING TO THE 1990 *KINSEY INSTITUTE NEW REPORT ON SEX* BETWEEN 50 PERCENT AND 75 PERCENT OF WOMEN WHO REPORT NO ORGASM AS A RESULT OF PENILE PENETRATION EXPERIENCE NORMAL ORGASMS AS A RESULT OF OTHER FORMS OF STIMULATION. IN LIGHT OF THIS STATISTIC, PENILE-VAGINAL INTERCOURSE MAY NOT BE SUFFICIENT FOR A GOOD SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP. THE WRITINGS OF CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGIAN OPEN UP CONVERSATION FOR A MORE EXPLICITLY JUST FRAMEWORK FOR SEXUAL ETHICS.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the male orgasm and ejaculation have been the focus of much of Catholic sexual ethics. First in the Judaic, and later in the Christian tradition, much time and effort has been devoted to regulating the “improper emission of seed.”ⁱ In both theological traditions, sex has often been framed and defined by of the male perspective: beginning with penetration and ending with ejaculation and withdrawal. Little attention has been afforded to the female orgasm, as until the 20th century little was noted about the female experience. However, a contemporary understanding of the female orgasm raises questions of the roles of pleasure, mutuality, and justice in a heterosexual relationship within the context of a Catholic sexual ethic.



RELIGIOUS SEXUAL ETHICS HAVE FOCUSED ON REGULATING THE “IMPROPER EMISSION OF SEED”

THE FEMALE ORGASM

A thorough discussion of the implications of the female orgasm in contemporary Catholic ethics must first begin with a basic physiological understanding of the female anatomy and orgasm. There are three regions in the female genital area that may be aroused to an orgasm.ⁱⁱ The clitoris, traditionally understood to be the primary area of sexual stimulation during intercourse, is composed of tissue analogous to that of the male penis, and is located above the opening of the urethra.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, two areas of sensitive spongy

tissue in the perineal area lead to similar arousal. The first, located between the anterior wall of the vagina and the urethra, is commonly known as the “G-spot.” The second is found between the posterior wall of the vagina and the rectum. Simulation of any of these three structures can lead to a pleasurable sensation and orgasm.^{iv}

As Mary D. Pellauer, points out, interpretive as well as phenomenological problems make the female orgasm elusive and hard to describe.^v However, certain generalizations can be made. Unlike men, women do not generally undergo a refractory period after climaxing and are capable of multiple orgasms. If they do experience such a period, it is a significantly shorter one. In 1976, sex educator Shere Hite reported as many as 48 percent of women required more than one orgasm to be sexually satisfied.^{vi} The William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson research team observed as many as 50 orgasms in women directly stimulating their clitoris by means of an electronic vibrator.^{vii} The existence of two different types of orgasm, clitoral and vaginal, is still debated. It is currently unclear whether these are two different states of arousal controlled by different neural pathways^{viii} or a subjective experience of two different orgasms.^{ix} Regardless, it is clear that the male and female orgasms, while sharing some commonalities, are two distinct experiences.

Due to its very nature, two aspects of the female orgasm become particularly challenging to contemporary theologians and ethicists. First, while the male climaxes and ejaculates to release sperm into the vagina which in turn fertilizes the egg, the female orgasm is not a precursor to reproduction. Secondly, according to the 1990 *Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex*, 10 percent of women do not experience any form of orgasm, a condition known as anorgasmia. Concurrently, between 50 and 75 percent of women who report no orgasm as a result of penile penetration experience normal orgasms as a result of other forms of stimulation.^x For more than half of women, additional stimulation during intercourse is needed to lead to orgasm. As the Catholic tradition has upheld the importance of both

the unitive and procreative nature of the sexual act,^{xi} the lack of fertility and need for additional stimulation during female arousal raises the questions of whether or not the female orgasm is hedonistic in nature. Additionally, as in most cases, excepting those of genital dysfunctions, human males must orgasm to ejaculate and reproduce. Therefore, a contemporary understanding of the female orgasm indicates a clear discrepancy between the experiences of man and woman, which beckons the question of the proper place of pleasure and mutuality in a good Catholic sexual ethic.

Pellauer offers a couple of points of reflection, based on her personal experience, of the female orgasm. As mentioned earlier, Pellauer explains there are difficulties in simply

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defining it.^{xii} The orgasm is something that does not come naturally to women as it does to men; rather the art of the female orgasm is something that must be learned.^{xiii} The sheer complexity of the experience, and the tendency to compare it to its male counterpart, leads to confusion among women as to what constitutes an orgasm. However, Pellauer indicates, “while orgasm is not a sufficient condition for good sex, it may be among the necessary ones.”^{xiv} Among the six characteristics that Pellauer delineates as an elemental part of her experience, four are especially significant for Catholic ethicists: the varieties of sensation, ecstasy, vulnerability, and power. “Varieties of sensation” refers to the richness of the experience that Pellauer recog-

nizes as more than pleasure alone. She entertains the notion that perhaps there is more to an orgasm than simply a burst of pleasure which leads to a state of self-described “ecstasy.” In her words, “standing outside the self is the closest word for this state [. . .] It is the most definite incarnation I know outside of childbirth, for in it I am most completely bound to the situation of my body.”^{xv} Pellauer describes how the experience is both transcendent and imminent, divine and human. Pellauer also explains the vulnerability and power relationships inherent in an orgasm with her husband.^{xvi} If an orgasm exposes women to such vulnerability, care should be taken that this not be an act of exploitation. However, if it is indeed such an essential part of the relational and spiritual experience, additional caution should be taken when considering denying women the experience on account of its potential dangers. Finally, Pellauer engages the framing of the question of the female orgasm. As sexual ethics has historically been a conversation dominated by men, Pellauer questions whether, “orgasm is a male-dominated standard for evaluating sex,”^{xvii} or whether it is in fact a legitimate understanding of the female experience. Her own experience points toward the latter, but nonetheless Pellauer opens the question for discussion.

Lisa Sowle Cahill, a professor at Boston College, corroborates Pellauer’s claim that sex is both relational and physical.^{xviii} Sex is a powerful experience which, when used inappropriately, may cause great harm. Moreover, Cahill’s reminder that morality is established to protect the life of the community and improve the community’s (and the individual’s) relationship to God stresses the importance of justice in the sexual relationship, and the imperative that no one party be taken advantage of.^{ixx} Due to importance and difficulty of the task at hand, Cahill establishes “four complementary reference points for Christian ethics”: scripture, tradition, the normative human experience, and the descriptive human experience.^{xx} Given the limits of scripture and of an understanding of tradition as a living part of the Catholic community encompassing everything from established dogma to general consensus among the

faithful, Cahill calls for a critical understanding of personal experience and the “experience of God in community as the beginning point of reconciliation of body and spirit, self and others, and humanity and God.”^{xxi} James Keenan, SJ, provides further insight into Cahill’s suggestion of an “ideal humanity”^{xxii} as a source for Christian ethics. Keenan writes:

Rather than first examining actions and asking whether we should perform them or not, virtue ethicists suggest that we ought to set ends for the type of people we believe we should become.^{xxiii}

According to this teleological approach, an individual becomes more virtuous as she exercises virtue for she constantly recognizes his limitations and grows in the virtues.^{xxiv} Virtue becomes both a means and an end. Thus, the normative understanding of what woman *should* be becomes a legitimate source of moral insight. Finally, Margaret Farley, professor at Yale Divinity School, provides two additional resources with which to construct a Christian sexual ethic. Although wary of moral relativism, Farley introduces cross-cultural studies as a legitimate means of discerning which norms and morals are “essentially human”^{xxv} and which are less important societal constructs. Farley also considers the secular disciplines a

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source for good Christian sexual ethics as well.^{xxvi} Although not all of these sources will be relevant to understanding the role of pleasure and mutuality, “success in judiciously [balancing these sources] is a standard by which we can measure the adequacy of various positions in the tradition, including our own.”^{xxvii}

Having discussed the basic physiological understanding of the female orgasm, Pellauer’s experiential narrative of the phenomena, and Cahill’s framework for Christian ethics, we move on to consider insights provided by contemporary Catholic theologians and the suggestions these provide on how to integrate the female orgasm into a good Catholic sexual ethic.

CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC SEXUAL ETHICS

James Keenan draws on traditional Catholic understanding of virtue to synthesize his own approach to good sexual ethics. In his “Virtue Ethics,” Keenan explores contemporary Catholic sexual ethics by means of several modifications to the four cardinal virtues as proposed by Thomas Aquinas: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Due to the limits of justice, the heuristic nature of Aquinas’ virtues, and the nature of the human as a relational being, Keenan instead proposes justice, fidelity, and self-care.^{xxviii} All three virtues are to be tempered by prudence. With the aid of justice, fidelity, and care, mercy allows individuals to understand chaos at a personal, interpersonal, and societal level.^{xxix} Although Keenan does not specifically address the question of pleasure, he considers “sexual relationships as goods to be pursued but precisely within a virtuous environment.”^{xxx}

According to Keenan, justice “is particularly relevant in promoting more egalitarian understandings in heterosexual relationships where, as elsewhere, women still do not enjoy the status of equality.”^{xxxi} The female orgasm seems to illustrate such a situation. Even though Pellauer questions the normativity of orgasm in the sexual act, a sexual ethic which systematically allows the male to climax, while

only allowing a female pleasure insofar as it conforms to the male experience and initiative, at the very least requires additional inquiry on grounds of justice as defined by Keenan. Regardless of the moral value assigned to sexual pleasure, it creates a situation of disparity that must be explored. If sexual pleasure is construed as a moral aberration, an undue burden is placed on the man during the sexual act; both partners are thus faced with the responsibility of feeling as little pleasure as possible, or at least not engaging in sexual intercourse simply for the pleasure of the act. On the other hand, if sexual pleasure is considered a moral good, as theologians Christine E. Gudorf^{xxxii} and Kevin T. Kelly^{xxxiii} suggest, there is an additional responsibility for partners to satisfy each other during the sexual act, even by forms of stimulation other than vaginal penetration, which may or may not lead to a procreative end. It seems that for a just and egalitarian sexual relationship to be upheld, both men and women are equally entitled to orgasm. Otherwise, a situation of power disparity that lends itself to abuse and injustice ensues.

In light of Pellauer's experience of the female orgasm, it seems mutual orgasms share many of the same ends as the virtue of fidelity Keenan describes. According to Keenan, fidelity in a sexual relationship deepens the bond between two people through intimacy.^{xxxiv} Sex serves as a means of communication that helps the relationship between partners grow. However, it seems that if only one person is experiencing ecstasy both parties are not completely open to one another, and the growth in the relationship is uneven. Pellauer describes the experience of increased vulnerability as a result of moments of ecstasy shared with her husband.^{xxxv} For Pellauer, being excited to the point of orgasm by her significant other led her to loving him in ways she had not perceived before. The fact that he persisted in arousing her, even though she was not easily stimulated, refusing his own release until she climaxed as well in a mutual experience, touched her as an intimate act of selflessness. She was deeply moved as she did not expect him to put her own pleasure before his own. Pellauer writes, "I experience [orgasm] as grace, an instance of his vulnerability-

to-me reaching out to meet my vulnerability-to-him."^{xxxvi} This mutual openness to the other would not be possible without the female orgasm. Furthermore, Keenan argues that the sexual relationship is a symbol of the love from which life is engendered.^{xxxvii} If, as Gudorf and Kelly suggest, sexual pleasure is good, and, as Pellauer reports, mutual orgasms lead to intimacy and means of relationships that cannot be expressed otherwise, then depriving a woman of orgasm during the sexual act will infringe on the "place where faithful love and procreativity concretely flourishes."^{xxxviii} Although the female orgasm itself is not procreative, it is life-giving, and strengthens "the bond into which a child is born."^{xxxix}

Finally, self-care suggests an additional argument for the necessity of female orgasm. Keenan writes:

THE SHARED EXPERIENCE OF ECSTASY CAN PROMOTE A POSITIVE AND RECIPROCAL GROWTH IN RELATIONSHIPS.



Self-care might also lead us to acknowledge that we have long been inhibited and fearful of intimacy, touch, or sexual expression. Prudential self-care informed by mercy leads some people to delay as precipitous sexual intimacy, but for others it gently prods them to seek sexual love that has, for long, been an object of fear and dread.^{xl}

Consequently, a mature understanding of self-care leads an individual to a responsible moderation of his own needs as a person. Guided by a search for virtue, the individual is empowered to make his own decisions and to actively engage himself or herself in a process of self-discovery. As Keenan explains, virtue ethics provide a forum in which to discuss normative ideals for the human being seeking a serious commitment to Catholicism.^{xli} Virtue ethics present a shift in the focus of the tradition's understanding of sexual ethics from one of means and acts to one of ends and the development of virtue. That is, whereas the tradition has at times held that sexual acts are illicit on account of the sinfulness inherent in the act, Keenan emphasizes on the ends of these acts, and makes the means of secondary importance. A discussion of ends serves as a framework to develop conversations on the morality of specific individual means. Thus, contemporary experience can be incorporated into the decision-making process. Ultimately, the individual woman must prudently balance justice, fidelity, and self-care to make her decision.

Christine Gudorf provides a more explicit description of the need for pleasure in a good sexual ethic. Like Cahill^{xlii} and Farley,^{xliii} Gudorf discards the dualism of the soul/body dichotomy as she understands it as contrary to the Incarnation, "the complete unity of human and divine natures in the fully embodied."^{xliv} Human beings are not bodies *and* souls; rather, they are the complex unity of the two. Gudorf too engages the Catholic tradition, questioning how a tradition so concerned with the embodiment has traditionally disparaged embodied expressions of love.^{xlv} However, ultimately, she appeals predominantly to experience in her understanding of a good sexual ethic. "Experience is always open to fallible interpretation, but the



THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA BY BERNINI

bottom line is that experience is, and always has been, the most reliable source for discerning God's will."^{xlvi} Gudorf explains she is "dissatisfied with the disproportionate weight given to the traditional Christian religious sources," tradition and scripture.^{xlvii} Consequently, she is more critical of scripture, explaining that internal contradictions in text force men and women to choose between one passage and another.^{xlviii} Similarly, she rejects tradition's position on sexual ethics. According to her, the tradition's contemporary understanding of sexual ethics is largely based on the erroneous assumption that this tradition is deduced from the communal reflections of the entire Catholic community, as opposed to the reflections of a select few

Catholics.^{xliv} Traditional Catholic sexual ethics also focus on specific acts, particularly those that deviate from the norm, rather than provide guidance and reflection on sexual virtue.¹ Thus, she echoes Keenan's call for a sexual ethic based on the ends not the means.

Because Gudorf separates herself from the tradition, she can endorse a much more positive appraisal of sexuality, and more specifically, pleasure. Yet Gudorf does draw on some aspects of the tradition to make her point. Because the creation in Genesis is good, and sexuality is part of creation, Gudorf understands that sexuality and sexual relationship are a good as well.^{li} Consequently, they are legitimate ways for human beings to relate to one another, ways that lead to a deepening of relational bonds that cannot be accomplished by other forms of interaction—a conclusion, in fact, very similar to the benefits Keenan perceives from fidelity. However, Gudorf explains that not only is the sexual relationship good, but sexual pleasure is good as well.^{lii} She appeals to natural law to argue that because the clitoris has been placed on the female body serving no other purpose than to pleasure the woman, it must be the divine will that women enjoy sex.^{liii} Additionally, Gudorf supports her claim with scientific studies of the dangerous effects of repression of the body's physical messages, especially in cases of illness.^{liv} Because (sexual) pleasure feels good and it is itself a good, she establishes it is a premoral good.^{lv} Her argument appears to border on hedonism, but she argues that while hedonism is part of man's nature, a mature Christian, will “discipline [her] pursuit of pleasure, and to induce a maximal number of others with [her] in that pursuit.”^{lvi} In effect she advocates a form of mature hedonism she calls “moral utilitarianism.”^{lvii} Even celibacy, Gudorf argues, is a form of giving up a physical pleasure to achieve greater emotional and spiritual pleasures.^{lviii}

Openness to the female orgasm is instrumental to Gudorf's understanding of a good sexual ethic. Not only does it help justify the innate goodness of pleasure, but it also functions as “an experience of divine reality.”^{lix} As Gudorf reports, an orgasm is for many the closest experience they have to the

divine.^{lx} Her experience coincides with Pellauer's personal understanding that she is most embodied and incarnate during moments of orgasm. And more than just the isolated incident of pleasure, an orgasm can permeate different aspects of a person's life and can change how he or she relates to the world. Moreover, mutuality is an essential part of the sexual act which Gudorf compares to the inclusiveness of Jesus and the kingdom of heaven.^{lxi} The lack of mutuality in sexual pleasure can lead to serious consequences. Such is the case when a sexual relationship is only open to the male orgasm at the expense of the female orgasm. If sexual pleasure is not mutual, the man objectifies the woman, falsifying her true identity.^{lxii} This exclusion is tantamount to excluding her from participation in God's reign.^{lxiii} Additionally, men who exclude women from sexual pleasure have a limited experience of sex as their relationship lacks reciprocity and vulnerability, leading the man to become an abuser.^{lxiv} Finally, the nature of the relationship between the two partners is altered as well. Not only is the bond between the two limited to a purely material one, but pleasure becomes dependent on a controlling/controlled dynamic which is harmful for both parties involved.^{lxv} Even if the relationship does not constitute rape, the lack of mutuality equates pleasure with dominance distorting the nature of sexual pleasure.^{lxvi}

A just love is the cornerstone for Margaret Farley's framework for sexual ethics. A love is just, explains Farley, when it does not falsify the reality of person loving, the person being loved, or the nature of the relationship.^{lxvii} Farley's paradigm for just love presents an interesting challenge to lovers, as both individuals and relationships are dynamic in nature consequently making it difficult to define and maintain the integrity of all three. Farley does not intend love to be postponed until individuals have achieved perfect understanding of the self and the other. Instead she writes: We can love someone beyond what we can know of him or her. This is true even of our love for God. For the union that is possible in love can exceed our knowledge of the beloved, although its direction and form remain subject to the knowledge we have.

This is the unconditional love all Christians are called to: a commitment to loving the other within the concrete reality of the relationship, even when knowledge of this reality is incomplete.^{lxviii}

38

In applying her framework of just love to a good sexual ethic, Farley devises seven norms, which are not absolute, but rather minimal requirements for a good sexual ethic. Farley stresses the importance of understanding that there are degrees in adhering to these norms, that is, a “minimal” and “maximal” justice.^{lxix} Just as the norms have minimum requirements, lack of prudence may also lead individuals to shy away from engaging in sexual relationships when it may be proper to do so, as described earlier by Keenan. Several of these seven norms are particularly relevant in understanding the role of the female orgasm. First is mutuality. Farley agrees with Gudorf in that “interpretations of heterosexual sex are steeped in images of the male as active and the female as passive.”^{lxx} She understands that to undermine this traditional framework, both partners must perceive themselves as both active and receiving during the sexual act, consequently leading to mutual sexual gratification. Mutuality leads the relationship to a foundation not only in pleasure, but in the “mutuality of desire and embodied union.”^{lxxi} Likewise an equality of power also complements and adds to mutuality. As previously noted, the orgasm of the man without openness to the orgasm of the woman leads to a disparity in vulnerability and objectification.^{lxxii} Although Farley admits perfect equality may never be possible (hence the need for degrees), a balance in power, vulnerability, and consequently pleasure are requirements for justice in sex. Finally, Farley introduces the concept of “fruitfulness”. As traditionally, “procreative” has been understood to mean open to reproduction, Farley proposes that “beyond the kind of fruitfulness that brings forth biological children, there is a kind of fruitfulness that is a measure, perhaps, of all interpersonal life.”^{lxxiii} It follows then that a sexual relationship is not only life giving when it leads to an act of conception, but when the fruits of this relationship “[nourish] other relationships; [provide]

goods, services, and beauty for others; [inform] the fruitful work lives of the partners in the relation; [help] to raise other people’s children; and on and on.”^{lxxiv} Consequently, while the female orgasm may not be a precursor to reproduction, it seems that it is in fact a precursor to fruitfulness.

CONCLUSION

James Keenan, Christine Gudorf, and Margaret Farley draw on different sources to construct their respective Catholic sexual ethics, but ultimately allow for very similar conclusions about the importance of mutuality and the openness to the female orgasm in a heterosexual relationship. While Gudorf is by far the most explicit in linking pleasure and mutuality, her lack of deference for the tradition raises the question of how “Christian” her sexual ethics are. If her framework for sexual ethics is to be examined in light of Cahill’s proposal for “complementary reference points”, it seems that Gudorf’s approach is disproportionately experiential. However, Keenan’s stress on the teleological approach and Farley’s understanding of just love grant their respective frameworks the flexibility to uphold the tradition while incorporating contemporary experience in the normative understanding of the female orgasm.

ENDNOTES

- i. Farley 1994 (56)
- ii. Tuana (8)
- iii. Tuana (6)
- iv. Tuana (8)
- v. Pellauer (153)
- vi. Hite (602-603)
- vii. Masters and Johnson
- viii. Tuana (20)
- ix. Pellauer (155)
- x. Reinisch and Beasley (203) as quoted in Pellauer; see above.
- xi. Pope Paul VI (II xii)
- xii. Pellauer (150)
- xiii. Pellauer (151)
- xiv. Pellauer (149)
- xv. Pellauer (156)
- xvi. Pellauer (157)
- xvii. Pellauer (152)
- xviii. Cahill (21)
- xix. Cahill (24)
- xx. Cahill (22)
- xxi. Cahill (26)

xxii. Cahill (22)
 xxiii. Keenan (184)
 xxiv. Keenan (186)
 xxv. Farley 2006 (5)
 xxvi. Farley 2006 (188)
 xxvii. Cahill (22)
 xxviii. Keenan (190)
 xxix. Keenan (192)
 xxx. Keenan (196)
 xxxi. Keenan (194)
 xxxii. Gudorf (81)
 xxxiii. Kelly (153)
 xxxiv. Keenan (195)
 xxxv. Pellauer (157)
 xxxvi. Pellauer (157)
 xxxvii. Keenan (195)
 xxxviii. Keenan (195)
 xxxix. Keenan (195)
 xl. Keenan (196)
 xli. Keenan (197)
 xlii. Cahill (21)
 xliii. Farley 2006 (118)
 xliv. Gudorf (11)
 xlv. Gudorf (11)
 xlvi. Gudorf (12)
 xlvii. Gudorf (6)
 xlviii. Gudorf (13); See Gal 3:28 and Col 3:18; Tim 2:15 and Luke 11:27-28.
 xlix. Gudorf (25)
 l. Gudorf (15)
 li. Gudorf (23)
 lii. Gudorf (89)
 liii. Gudorf (65)
 liv. Gudorf (88)
 lv. Gudorf (90)
 lvi. Gudorf (95)
 lvii. Gudorf (97)
 lviii. Gudorf (99)
 lix. Gudorf (109)
 lx. Gudorf (119)
 lxi. Gudorf (116)
 lxii. Gudorf (119)
 lxiii. Gudorf (119)
 lxiv. Gudorf (120)
 lxv. Gudorf (121)
 lxvi. Gudorf (123)
 lxvii. Farley 2006 (202)
 lxviii. Farley 2006 (203)
 lxix. Farley 2006 (215)
 lxx. Farley 2006 (221)
 lxxi. Farley 2006 (222)
 lxii. Farley 2006 (223)
 lxiii. Farley 2006 (227)
 lxiv. Farley 2006 (228)

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