During the last several years, philosophers of religion have witnessed a long-drawn debate between Nelson Pike and John Fischer on the problems of theological fatalism, Fischer claiming in his most recent contribution to have proved that even if God’s past beliefs are ‘nice soft facts’, still theological fatalism cannot be averted. Unfortunately, this debate has not – at least it seems to this observer – served substantially either to clarify the issues involved or to move toward a resolution of the question, but has instead confused matters by its use of misleading terminology and diverted the discussion into unpromising side roads.

On the basis of Hoffmann and Rosenkrantz’s analysis of temporal necessity, Fischer is now willing to concede for the sake of argument, at least – that God’s past beliefs are soft facts, but he argues that even so they are ‘fixed’ soft facts, so that divine foreknowledge still precludes human freedom. Fundamental to Fischer’s analysis is the distinction he sees between a fact’s


2 With regard to the terminological issue, a historical corrective is definitely in order here. For although Fischer claims to be discussing various versions of ‘Ockhamism’, it is clear that most of the positions he attacks only remotely resemble Ockham’s views, thereby promoting misunderstanding of Ockham’s important insights on this question. (For a more accurate exposition of Ockham’s views, see my The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez, Studies in Intellectual History 7 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), chap. 6.) To be specific, the view that we can act in such a way that were we to do so, God would not have existed (or the person who is God would not have been God) – a view Fischer calls one version of Ockhamism – would have been vigorously repudiated by Ockham. It resembles his view only in employing a back-tracking counterfactual; but to call it therefore ‘Ockhamism’ is a distortion of his position.

Similarly, to characterize the defender of divine foreknowledge and human freedom as a ‘compatibilist’ and his opponent as an ‘incompatibilist’ as Fischer does is to use those terms with a meaning almost diametrically opposed to their customary usage. These terms have an accepted meaning with regard to questions pertinent to the nature of human freedom, and to use them in a non-standard way in the debate over foreknowledge and freedom seems misleading. For virtually every thinker who defends God’s foreknowledge of future contingents is an incompatibilist, that is, a libertarian, whereas those who have employed the argument from divine foreknowledge to deny human freedom have often been compatibilists, that is, determinists. Given the roots of this debate in Greek logical fatalism, as it comes to expression, for example, in Aristotle’s De interpretatione 9, it is less misleading to characterize the argument Fischer defends as ‘theological fatalism’ and that of his opponent as ‘non-fatalism’.

On the terminological distinction between hard and soft facts, see the discussion in the text.

hardness and its fixity. The hardness of a fact has to do with whether it entails the future obtaining of a contingent fact which is, in some suitable sense, immediate at that future time; if not, it is a hard fact, but if so, it is soft.\(^1\) The fixity of a fact, on the other hand, has to do with whether it is susceptible to being affected by events which are within one’s power; if one is able to act such that a fact would not have been a fact, then it is not fixed, but if one cannot so act that a fact would not have been a fact, then the fact is fixed.\(^2\)

Utilizing this distinction, Fischer proceeds to argue that a past fact’s being soft does not entail its lack of fixity. A past fact may entail a future fact which I am powerless to affect and hence be both soft and fixed. God’s beliefs about future contingents are, Fischer contends, precisely in this class of fixed, soft facts. In this connection, Fischer distinguishes two types of soft facts: those which ascribe to an object a ‘hard’ property, that is, a temporally immediate, non-relational property, and those which do not.\(^3\) Now ‘having a belief’ is, according to Fischer, a ‘hard’ property. Due to His essential omniscience, this property, when ascribed to God, can result in a soft fact, namely, ‘God believes that \(p\),’ where \(p\) is some future-tense proposition. But the softness of this fact does not obviate the hardness of the constituent property. Fischer maintains that it is plausible that no human being can act at \(t_2\) such that some bearer of a hard property relative to \(t_1\) would not have possessed that property at \(t_1\). Hence, due to the hardness of the property ‘having a belief’, God’s belief that \(p\) is a fixed, soft fact about the past, or what Fischer calls a ‘hard-type soft fact’. It follows that if God has exhaustive knowledge of the future, then human freedom is precluded.

Now it seems to me that in Fischer’s analysis the distinction between so-called ‘hard facts’ and ‘soft facts’, which was originally introduced by Saunders and Pike,\(^4\) has gone out of control, so that we are now confronted with ‘hard-type soft facts’ and ‘soft-type soft facts’, which makes such terminology of questionable value. In fact, what has happened is that the meaning of these terms has been distorted in the literature published since Pike and Saunders’s contributions so that Fischer’s unseemly distinction results.\(^5\)

Originally the distinction was meant to capture the difference between facts which would have been otherwise were some future event not to occur

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\(^1\) Fischer, ‘Hard-Type Soft Facts’, p. 593.

\(^2\) Ibid. p. 595. Fischer does not seem to notice that his account here makes fixity person-relative, such that a past event may be fixed for some persons but not for other, more powerful persons, which seems not at all to capture our intuitions concerning the fixity of the past. Fixity ought not to be defined in terms of the power of agents at all, but in terms of whether some future event is the explanatory condition of a past or present reality. Where this is not the case, the past or present fact is fixed. Whether we can do anything to affect an unfixed fact will be a matter of what lies ‘within one’s power’ and will vary on a case to case basis.

\(^3\) Ibid. p. 597.


and facts which would have remained the same whether or not some future event were to occur. In other words, originally ‘hardness’ and ‘fixity’ were mutually entailing and virtually synonymous terms. Unfortunately, Marilyn Adams misconstrued this original distinction by defining a hard fact as the fact expressed by a proposition which is not at least in part about the future.\(^1\) Fischer himself helped to expose the inadequacy of this definition by showing its inability to deal with complex propositions like

\[
(1) \text{ Either Smith knew at } t_1 \text{ that Jones would do } x \text{ at } t_2 \\
\text{ or Jones believed at } t_1 \text{ that Jones would do } x \text{ at } t_2.
\]

For (1) entails nothing about the future and so on Adams’s definition expresses a hard fact. But suppose the second disjunct is false. Is it not then the case that (1) is soft, asks Fischer, since Jones could act so as to falsify the first disjunct and so render (1) false?\(^2\) Actually what Fischer’s argument showed is not that (1) is soft, for it is clearly hard under Adams’s definition, but rather that Jones could so act as to affect counterfactually a supposedly hard fact.

But instead of rejecting Adams’s definition as therefore altogether defective, Fischer retains the distinction between hardness and fixity and is thus forced, in order to recapture the original hard/soft fact dichotomy, into the unfelicitous distinction of ‘hard-type and soft-type soft facts’. And the end is not yet in sight: for while on Fischer’s analysis, all hard-type soft facts are fixed, it is not the case that all soft-type facts lack fixity, so that further distinctions may be anticipated.

One thus arrives at the following unwieldy classification of facts about the past:

\[
\text{Past facts} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Hard} \\
\text{fixed}
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Soft} \\
\text{Hard-type} \\
\text{fixed}
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Soft-type} \\
\text{fixed}
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Soft-type} \\
\text{unfixed}
\end{array}
\]

What Fischer ought to have done was to reject Adams’s implicit distinction between hardness and fixity and to stick by his own intuitive understanding of a soft fact in his earlier piece, namely, that a soft fact is a fact \textit{in virtue} of events which will occur in the future and therefore is not fixed.\(^3\) Any fact that

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is fixed is *ipso facto* a hard fact because it is not a fact in virtue of events which will occur in the future. Hardness and fixity are thus equivalent notions. What Fischer himself expressed as the ‘hardness’ or ‘softness’ of a fact would have been better expressed in terms of the ‘immediacy’ of that fact or of a proposition about that fact. Similarly, when Fischer speaks of the fixity of a fact, what he really seems to have in mind is whether it lies within one’s power to act in such a way as to affect that fact. Accordingly, the above classification ought to be recast as:

```
Past facts
    
Immediate
   (Hard)

Non-immediate
    
Hard
    
Soft
  
Within
one’s power

Not within
one’s power
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To retain the primacy of the hard/soft distinction, it would perhaps be preferable to rearrange the classification thus:

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Past facts
    
Hard
   
Immediate

Non-immediate

Soft
  
(non-immediate)

Within
one’s power

Not within
one’s power
```

What Fischer wants to say is that some non-immediate facts are still hard facts and that God’s beliefs belong to these. The Ockhamist’s point is that God’s believing *p* is a non-immediate, soft fact and that therefore we can in certain cases act in such a way that, were we so to act, God would not have believed *p*.

The Ockhamist’s point seems difficult to deny. For if God is essentially omniscient, then it seems undeniable that I can act in such a way that, were I to do so, God’s belief would have been different. For at issue here is a backtracking counterfactual, and while these often require a special resolution of vagueness in order to determine the most similar possible worlds, since some adjustment must be made in the past, in this case no appeal to a special resolution need be made. For there simply are no logically possible worlds in which God errs. Hence, even on the standard resolution of vagueness, it is necessarily the case that were I to do differently, God would have foreknown differently. Is it then within my power to do differently? well, why not? On the libertarian assumption, I am causally free to perform or to refrain from some action. So what constrains me?

In an earlier article, Fischer’s answer seems to come in the form of some
sort of ‘fixed past principle’ according to which there is no action which an
agent can perform such that if he were to do so, some past fact would not
have obtained. Suppose, he argues, that Smith knew at \( t_1 \) that Jones did \( x \)
at \( t_2 \). The same state of Smith’s mind will count as knowledge or not in virtue
of Jones’s act. Analogously, in God’s case, ‘... the only way in which God’s
belief at \( T_1 \), about Jones at \( T_2 \) could be a soft fact about the past relative to
\( T_2 \) would be if one and the same state of the mind of the person who was God
at \( T_1 \) would count as one belief if Jones did \( x \) at \( T_2 \), but a different belief (or
not a belief at all) if Jones did not do \( x \) at \( T_2 \).’\(^1\) But this is not at all what the
Ockhamist is committed to; rather he maintains that God would have had
a different state of mind had Jones acted differently.

Fischer does go on to acknowledge this response, but maintains that such
contention weakens the argument that God’s belief is a soft fact. For then
God’s case is different from Smith’s. The difference, however, is purely
incidental: the point remains that God believes what He does in this case in
virtue of events which will occur in the future. Therefore, His believing
something is just as much a soft fact as Smith’s knowing something. On the
Ockhamist view and Fischer’s earlier intuitive understanding, God’s belief is
not ‘fixed’, but is soft. Hence, any appeal to a ‘fixed past principle’ to deny
that it is within my power to act such that, were I so to act, God would have
believed differently becomes gratuitous or question-begging.

Now in his most recent contribution, Fischer says virtually the same thing
with respect to ‘hard-type’ soft facts (= non-immediate, hard facts). No one
can act in such a way that a hard property would not have been possessed
by the bearer of that property. And the reason ‘having a belief’ is a hard
property is because it is possible for a person to be in the same dispositional
state of believing whether or not that belief turns out to be true.\(^2\) But how
is this relevant to the question at hand? The issue is God’s believing that \( p \),
not just the isolated property of ‘believing that \( p \)’. So long as the fact of
God’s believing that \( p \) is a soft fact about the past, it seems irrelevant whether
the isolated property is hard or not.\(^3\) So long as the fact of God’s belief is a
fact in virtue of some future event, it is not fixed until that event transpires,
and if that event lies causally within our power, there seems to be no reason
for denying that we have the power to act in such a way that God’s past
belief would have been different, were we so to act.

In any case, even if one conceded that all past facts are ‘fixed’, it still does
not follow that all future facts entailed by them are similarly necessary.
Fischer must also assume the principle, ‘If falsifying fact \( F \) would require

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\(^1\) Ibid. p. 76.


\(^3\) Cf. the finest treatment of the notion of temporal necessity by the careful Ockham scholar Alfred J.
On his analysis, a proposition like ‘God believes \( p \)’ is not an ‘immediate’ proposition, since propositions
expressing propositional attitudes which are alethically qualified constitute exceptions to the general rule
that propositions involving present-time propositional attitudes are immediate. Since, ‘God believes \( p \)’
falsifying fact $F_2$ and one cannot falsify $F_2$, then one cannot falsify $F_1$. In other words, Fischer must assume that 'fixity' or temporal necessity is closed under logical entailment. But this has been denied, for example, by Molina, and is by no means obvious. Indeed, if the past is 'fixed', then it is obvious that temporal necessity is not closed under entailment, since fatalism is simply incoherent, positing as it does a non-causal constraint on my freedom which is altogether mysterious. If this is correct, then even if Jones cannot falsify God's belief, he can still falsify the fact that he will mow the lawn on Saturday.

Of course, Fischer recognizes that the Ockhamist will say that even if God's belief is a fact involving a hard property, it is nonetheless not a fixed fact about the past, as I have in fact contended. And Fischer concedes that '... I haven't established that no human can so act that some actual bearer of a hard property in the past wouldn't have had that property'. But he disclaims any need to do this because the Ockhamist has not offered any 'non-question-begging examples of hard-type soft facts (relative to certain times) which are, intuitively, not fixed at later times'. But whose responsibility is it to bear the burden of proof here? It is the theological fatalist who contends that divine foreknowledge of future contingents is impossible. It is he, therefore, who must demonstrate that impossibility if we are to reject this traditional doctrine as incoherent. The Ockhamist need only present his view as a refutation of the fatalist's argument that foreknowledge and freedom are inconsistent. The Ockhamist is under no obligation to furnish other examples analogous to God's foreknowledge; he could maintain that divine prescience is *sui generis*. It is Fischer or the fatalist who must prove some sort of 'fixed past principle' or temporal necessity's closure under entailment if his argument is to be successful. Since Fischer has proved neither of these, his argument for theological fatalism fails.

But is it in any case true that the Ockhamist is at such a loss for examples of soft facts which involve hard properties but which are nevertheless not fixed at later times? I think not. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of my own study into divine omniscience has been the parallel discussions to the foreknowledge and freedom debate that have taken place in other fields of philosophical inquiry, for the most part independently of the theological

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3 Ibid.  
4 Ibid.
debate. In the debates concerning the Special Theory of Relativity, retro-causation, time travel, precognition, and Newcomb’s Paradox, fatalistic positions have been advanced and, I think, effectively rebutted by thinkers working in those fields. Perhaps a brief word might be said about each of these examples.

I. The Special Theory of Relativity has been charged with being fatalistic due to its denial of absolute simultaneity in the universe. Certain thinkers, such as Putnam and Mellor, have argued that the relativity of simultaneity implies a B-theory of time, according to which all events—whether past, present, or future for us—are equally real and temporal becoming is not an objective property of the world. Any event judged to be future by some hypothetical observer lies in the present or past of some other hypothetical observer and as such is fully determinate and real. There is, therefore, no unactualized realm of potential future events which are being serially instantiated in reality; all events in the four-dimensional space-time manifold are instantiated and equally existent. This interpretation of the Special Theory has been labelled as fatalistic by both friend and foe alike. For if the future actually exists, is as fully instantiated and real as present and past events, then it seems no more within our power to affect it than to affect the past. Rietdijk, for example, envisions an event which lies in the absolute future of observer \( W_1 \) but is wholly past for \( W_2 \). In such a case, \( W_2 \) knows that ‘\( W_1 \) could do nothing at all to prevent event \( P \) in his absolute future’. Rietdijk claims that \( W_1 \) could even receive a photograph of \( P \) in his absolute future from \( W_2 \), if the latter alters his motion appropriately, making it evident that \( P \) is unavoidable for \( W_1 \). Accordingly Rietdijk concludes that the Special Theory proves that there is no free will and so spells ‘the definite end of indeterminism’.

But other philosophers of science have pointed out that Rietdijk’s reasoning commits a now familiar fatalistic fallacy. All \( W_2 \) has the right to conclude from his observation of \( P \) is that \( W_1 \) will not prevent \( P \), not that he cannot prevent \( P \). If \( W_1 \) were to act differently, \( W_2 \) would not have observed \( P \), but from his having observed \( P \) he knows that \( W_1 \) will not in fact so act. This example is especially interesting because, first, on the B-theory the future must be characterized by the same temporal necessity as the past, being equally existent, and yet this so-called necessity does not impose limits on

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4 Ibid. p. 343.
what is within our power; and, second, \( W_1 \)'s knowledge of \( W_2 \)'s future is a very interesting analogue to divine foreknowledge of the future.

Unfortunately, this example is not decisive, since the A-theorist can deny that the Special Theory implies a B-theory of time, either by relativizing becoming itself to reference frames,\(^1\) or, more plausibly I think, by positing a cosmic time relative to a universal reference frame and assigning a merely local role to the Special Theory.\(^2\) But the example is nonetheless instructive, for it shows that the very widely-held B-theory cannot be indicted with fatalism and, \textit{pari passu}, neither can divine foreknowledge of future contingents.

II. The debate over retrocausation goes back to a pair of seminal articles by Michael Dummett in which he argues that the logical objection \textit{against} backward causation is identical in form to the argument \textit{for} fatalism.\(^3\) The opponent of backward causation argues, for example, ‘Your son has either drowned or not. If he has not drowned, your prayer for his safety is superfluous. If he has drowned, your prayer cannot be efficacious. So either way, it is pointless to pray about the past.’ The fatalist argues, ‘Your son will either drown or not. If he will not drown, your prayer is superfluous. If he will drown, your prayer cannot be efficacious. So either way, it is pointless to pray about the future.’ If one responds to the fatalist that if one’s son will drown, it follows only that one’s prayer \textit{will} not be efficacious, not that it \textit{cannot} be efficacious, then Dummett will retort that from the fact that one’s son has drowned, it follows only that one’s prayer \textit{is not} efficacious, not that it \textit{cannot} be efficacious. Antony Flew proposed a ‘bilking experiment’ to invalidate retrocausation by preventing the retrocause after observing the effect. According to Flew, if after observing the effect we cannot prevent the cause, then fatalism ensues; but if we can prevent the cause, then we have the ability to change the past, which is impossible.\(^4\) The analogy to theological fatalism is obvious.

But Brier and others have pointed out the fallacy in Flew’s reasoning: from the occurrence of the effect, it follows that the cause will occur. We \textit{can} prevent the cause, but we \textit{shall} not. If we \textit{were} to prevent the cause, then the effect \textit{would not} have occurred. This is the ability, not to change the past, but to act such that the past would have been different.\(^5\) The failure of Flew’s objection is a vindication of the Ockhamist, for clearly the occurrence of an


effect of a retrocause is every bit as hard a fact as God’s belief, and yet from the effect’s occurrence one cannot conclude that the cause must occur.

III. In the field of time travel, contemporary discussions stem from the discovery by Kurt Gödel that in a model universe governed by Einstein’s field equations and possessing an absolute, cosmic rotation of matter there could exist closed, time-like loops so that by making a round trip in a rocket in a sufficiently wide curve, it would be possible for some observer to travel to any region of the past or future and to return.¹ Time travel raises a host of questions, and certain objections to time travel are closely analogous to the arguments for theological fatalism.² Gödel, for example, was troubled by his model because he believed that by means of such time-like loops someone might travel into the past and find a person who would be himself at some earlier period of his life, and he could do something to the person which he knows by his own memory has not happened to him. But the fallacy of Gödel’s reasoning, as Dwyer and Horwich point out, is that from the fact that the time traveller did not do something in the past, it does not follow that he could not have done it. All that follows is that the time traveller will not return to the past and do it, or else that he did do it and his memory is faulty on this score.³

A more subtle objection to time travel involves what Fitzgerald has called ‘a logically pernicious self-inhibitor’.⁴ Earman invites us, for example, to envision a rocket ship which at some space-time point x can fire a probe which will travel along a time-like loop into the past lobe of x’s light cone. The rocket will fire the probe unless a safety switch is on; but the switch turns on if and only if a sensing device detects the ‘return’ of the probe. Hence, the probe is fired if and only if it is not fired. Since such devices are possible in our world, it follows that time travel is impossible.⁵ Engaging as this reasoning is, it again commits much the same mistake as theological fatalism. As Horwich argues, Earman invalidly infers that since time-like loops and the various devices are incompossible and since the devices are possible, time-like loops do not, therefore, exist. But time-like loops can exist in any world in which such devices are possible, but never in fact exist or function properly.

If the devices were to exist or function properly, then the time-like loops would not exist.¹

Now obviously God’s foreknowledge of some event is analogous to the time-like loops, and what makes the time travel case so instructive is that the existence and proper functioning of the rocket and its equipment cannot in any way causally influence or affect the structure of space-time. The reason it is true that the loops would not exist if the rocket were to be built and function properly is that there simply is no logically possible world in which both exist. The existence of the loops in any world is a ‘hard-type soft fact’, and the time traveller is powerless to affect them; nevertheless, the back-tracking counterfactual is in order because there is no logically possible world in which the loops exist and the devices work. But in the same way, if God is essentially omniscient, then even if it is wholly outside our power to influence His beliefs, it follows that we can act such that, were we to do so, His foreknowledge would have been different.

⁴ IV. The fourth example comes from the realm of parapsychology, namely, human precognition. Despite the often very impressive experimental evidence for precognition,² some philosophers have sought to invalidate such a notion on purely logical grounds. Mackie objected to precognition of free decisions because in such cases the future event is not causally determined and could therefore be prevented. Hence, Flew’s bilking experiment is ‘fatal’ in such cases.³ But we have already seen the fallacious fatalistic reasoning that underlies this conclusion. As Scriven and Brier argue, if the predicted event is prevented, then genuine precognition did not occur. If one stipulates that genuine precognition did occur, then it follows that the precognized event will occur, but not that it must occur. If the event were not to occur, then the precognition would not have been made.⁴ This example is very analogous to God’s knowledge of future contingents, for ‘precognition’ is just the parapsychological equivalent of the theological term ‘foreknowledge’. The failure of the fatalistic objection in the realm of parapsychology is further vindication of the Ockhamist stance in philosophy of religion.

⁵ V. The final example comes from the field of decision theory and concerns the much discussed problem of Newcomb’s Paradox, with which I shall

assume the reader is familiar.¹ Certain thinkers, such as Locke, Bar-Hillel, and Margalit, have asserted that Newcomb’s Paradox shows the incompatibility of an infallible predictor and human free will, for since the prediction is fixed and unalterable it is impossible for the player to choose other than as the predictor said he would.² One-boxers like Horgan have, on the other hand, argued that the past-ness of the predictions is irrelevant to the problem; for due to our confidence in the predictor’s accuracy, a back-tracking counterfactual is in order here such that the closest worlds in which I choose differently than in the actual world are worlds in which the accuracy of the predictor is preserved. Therefore, were I to choose other than as I shall, the predictor would have predicted this and distributed the money differently.³ In this debate, there seems to be a consensus emerging that the puzzle conditions in the original Newcomb’s Paradox are too incomplete to decide whether a back-tracking counterfactual is warranted here.⁴ But if the predictor is essentially infallible, then there is no debate: the one-box choice is correct simply because there are no possible worlds in which the predictor errs and one winds up with $1,001,000. The choice is between receiving $1,000,000 or $1,000; and it takes no genius to make this decision. Newcomb’s Paradox is the final vindication of the Ockhamist, for the parallel between the predictor and God is patent and, indeed, in some discussions, the predictor is identified as God.⁵

In all these various fields – in which the discussions have for the most part been pursued independently of each other – fatalistic reasoning has been raised and rejected. The Ockhamist is therefore by no means destitute of examples of non-theological facts which Fischer would call ‘hard-type soft facts’. I hope that the theological fatalist would not take the easy and evasive route of claiming that such examples are ‘question-begging’, for then I simply do not know what he is asking for. Of course, in furnishing such examples at all the Ockhamist is performing an act of philosophical supererogation, since it is the theological fatalist whose burden it is to prove some incoherence in the traditional doctrine of divine foreknowledge and human freedom.

It seems to me, therefore, that despite the protracted discussion of ‘Ockhamism’ which has been heretofore pursued, genuine Ockhamism still emerges unscathed from the fray.

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