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HARDING
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THE JUSTICE OF WAR

A Term Paper

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Harding School of Theology

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Course 5550

Ethics and Character Formation

By Scott McFarland

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Introduction: War is Terrible, but Just

“War is a terrible thing.” I will never forget hearing those words repeatedly from my grandfather throughout my youth. Often, the reminder came at the end of looking through his memoirs of service in the Army while in Korea. My grandfather had enlisted in the Army in 1952, was shipped to Basic Training in early 1953, and was on the troop ship heading to Korea when the armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. He missed combat duty by mere weeks, and I believe that while willing to fight if needed, he was always grateful to have served in peacetime. “War is a terrible thing,” he would always remind me.

War is a terrible thing and has been a subject of debate for millennia. And yet most commonly, man has concluded there are times when war is necessary—even just. The focus of this paper will be to present a rationale for why war is at times necessary from a Christian perspective, give space to common objections to these arguments, and provide rebuttals to those objections.

War and the Church: A Brief Overview

It is no secret the early church was staunchly against military service.¹ This fact is often used by pacifists to argue for the questionable morality of military service for Christians. This should not, however, deter those who might consider military service today. There are many differences between the early church’s context, which prompted

¹ For a more in depth reading on various Early Church Fathers and their writings on the subject, see David W.T. Brattston’s “No ‘Just War’ in Early Christian Ethics,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 92-97.

them to reject military service, and ours. In the first century, service in the Roman army entailed more than just serving one's government and defending neighbors. Roman military service was both an acknowledgment of "Caesar as Lord" as well as emperor worship, replete with all of the commitments and responsibilities of the cult of emperor worship.² Explained in this context, it becomes obvious why early church leaders were adamant in their objections to military service. Present day scenarios are different, however. No one joining the United States military has ever been asked to engage in worship of the president, or even of the country. In fact, embedded in our nation's system of checks and balances are requirements from military personnel to intentionally disobey an unlawful order if given, even from the president.³ The early church was also facing the difficulty of justifying service to an oppressive regime which had conquered and subjugated most of the known world at the time, a far different matter from defending one's country in service to the military.

The early church evolved greatly in the first several hundred years of its existence on its position of war and violence.⁴ Beginning with Augustine and continuing to present day, the church has moved toward a position of allowing military and violent

² "Military officers were expected to make sacrifices to the emperor, and soldiers were expected to participate in that worship." In Daniel M. Bell Jr, *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church Rather than the State* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 24.

³ Jennifer Rubin, "Memo to Trump: The military will not follow illegal orders," *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2017, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2017/11/20/memo-to-trump-the-military-will-not-follow-illegal-orders/>.

⁴ For a brief history of the shift from early church rejection of military service to Augustinian Just War Theory only a few hundred years later, see Bell, 23-32.

intervention, under certain very specific conditions. These conditions have become known as the Just War position. The basic tenets of Just War Theory include: having just cause, being a last resort, being declared by a proper authority, possessing right intention, having a reasonable chance of success, and the end being proportional to the means used.⁵ This position so solidified itself in the church after Augustine that 1,000 years later, John Calvin claimed someone who refused to use violence for a just cause would “become guilty of the greatest impiety.”⁶ Why would Calvin state his position so strongly? The background lies in a millennium of thought concerning the need for and means of achieving justice in a broken world.

Arguments for War: Scriptural and Ethical Considerations

Both pacifists and just war thinkers alike have used Scripture to defend their positions. The Bible can be confusing when it comes to understanding what God desires of his people on the issue of war and violence. On one hand, there are the commands by God to the Israelites to conquer and kill in the Old Testament. On the other hand, Jesus seems to give a vastly different message in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “do not resist the one who is evil” and “love your enemies.”⁷

⁵ See Bell, 39-69 for a more complete history of Just War Theory. See also Alexander Moseley, “Just War Theory,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/justwar/> for a full explanation of the tenets of Just War Theory.

⁶ John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion,” ed., John McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1498. IV 20.10.

⁷ Matthew 5:38-48. All biblical references in this paper are taken from the English Standard Version.

One could write an entire book on the different biblical passages available for the debate of just war vs. pacifism, so I will only attempt to bring up a small number here. One of the significant differences between pacifism and just war is the presupposition by pacifists of the capacity for humans to live at peace with one another. Jeremiah 17:9 gives us a glimpse into the condition of the heart of mankind: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it?” Just war advocates acknowledge man is fundamentally wicked and even at times inherently bent on evil. The only way to deal with this is through forceable measures.

Our responsibility as followers of God demands we follow God’s character of justice and equity. Micah 6:8 calls us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” As such, if we are to walk with God, we will love the things he loves and hate the things he hates. Hence, the call for justice. One of the debates between pacifist and just war advocates is the nature of violence used for penal measures in the Old Testament. God often uses war and violence in the Old Testament—both for and against Israel—as a means of enacting justice. Although there are many differences between Israel’s context and ours (one should be careful when and how the Old Testament battle narratives are used in this debate), the fact that violence is used to bring about justice is significant. This reality does not stop in the New Testament, however. In Revelation, numerous references are made to Jesus as conquering king. In 6:2, allusion is made to Jesus riding a white horse with a bow, “and he came out conquering, and to conquer.” Later in the book, a fuller description is given to Jesus in chapter 19: “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule

them with a rod of iron.”⁸ Whatever the intent of these descriptions of Jesus, this is hardly the picture pacifists paint from Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. This is not to discount Jesus’ statements in the Sermon on the Mount, but it is to say there must be some consistency between a Savior who could say “love your enemies” and at the same time be pictured as a conquering king riding a war horse.

The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are often a hotbed of disagreement in discussions on war and pacifism. I would like to examine several of these texts, and while time does not permit us to delve into discovering all the meaning behind Jesus’ statements, I hope to present a way of placing these passages contextually within the broader scope of Scriptures surrounding this issue. In order of appearance, we must first remember Jesus’ words of peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.”⁹ One might fairly ask, what does it mean to be a peacemaker? What constitutes making peace? Surely, it cannot always mean being compliant, talking things out, or offering alternatives to forceful measures, because this is not the way the world and evil work. Evil is hostile to holiness, seeking to destroy the lives of others by any means possible. It is often belligerent in the face of those who would confront it, and at times will not be persuaded into compliance or peace. Sometimes, making peace means using forceful measures. Any law enforcement officer will tell you there is a reason they wear handcuffs, carry a gun, and at times use a taser or pepper spray. Sin and evil are often violent, and to make peace at times means bringing evil into subjection. Concerning government authority, a

⁸ Revelation 19:15.

⁹ Matthew 5:9.

brief insertion of Paul's words in Romans 13 may be helpful here:

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.¹⁰

Jesus continues in the Sermon on the Mount with admonitions which are more difficult for us to understand:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...¹¹

How do we reconcile Jesus and Paul? Is Jesus suggesting that when one becomes a follower of Christ, they can no longer be involved in governmental office or regulate evil by force? We have little space to discuss this, but I would like to offer some possibilities for understanding Jesus' words on the Sermon on the Mount.

It seems that Jesus' words to his listeners in the Sermon on the Mount are meant to regulate interactions between individuals, not interactions between governments or official bodies of people. Studying the Sermon on the Mount, one quickly notices that Jesus is mostly concerned with an improper interpretation of the Law—which governed interpersonal actions—and is speaking in that context. To extrapolate his words into an

¹⁰ Romans 13:3-4

¹¹ Matthew 5:38-44

overall ethic to be universally applied in all interaction and public policies is to miss Jesus' intent, and to put him at odds with other significant portions of Scripture, even other texts in the New Testament such as Paul's words in Romans 13.¹²

Also present in the Sermon on the Mount is the use of hyperbole—exaggeration for the sake of making a point. When Jesus says earlier concerning lust: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away,”¹³ most commentators do not believe Jesus is literally talking about cutting out one's eye, but is making a point that one should go to great lengths in removing stumbling blocks when dealing with sin. Could Jesus also be using hyperbole to suggest going the extra mile in attempting to make peace when he admonishes his listeners to “turn the other cheek” and “let him have your cloak as well?” Could it be that Jesus is not ruling out defending oneself, defending someone else, or making peace through violent coercion, but that force should be a last resort when all other methods (even “turning the other cheek”) have been exhausted?¹⁴ Paul Ramsey says it well: “Jesus better said: Blessed are the peace makers. To the end of the earthly city of patient endurance, and of wars and rumors of war, blessed are the peace

¹² Better still might be the question: If the Sermon on the Mount was intended to correct misinterpretations of the Law (as it was), and if the Sermon on the Mount is meant also to guide a God follower in public policy between governments (debatable), why did God not choose to deal with Israel's enemies in the Old Testament under these guidelines?

¹³ Matthew 5:29

¹⁴The positive and negative obligations of a command may be helpful here, as well. A mother's command to her son: “Don't hit your sister” usually does not also mean “let her beat you up if she starts hitting.”

makers.”¹⁵ These are textual questions too difficult for adequate space here, but it seems that this interpretation of Jesus’ words may better align with other passages in Scripture.

In his book, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World*, John Stackhouse remarks,

Yet I have found it (pacifism) difficult to square with the whole Bible as the Word of God. The Old Testament presents a God who resorts frequently to violence to accomplish his purposes and who calls his people to do the same—not always, but often. What about the New Testament? Well, what is one to make of the cleansing of the Temple in Jesus’ earthly ministry, an act of violence by any serious reading? What is one to make of God telling the church to obey and pray for those who wield the sword in the interest of justice (Rom. 13:1-7; I Pet. 2:13-14)? What is one to make of the apocalyptic Jesus riding in triumph over his enemies on a field of blood? Jesus is both the Lamb of God and the Lion of Judah, bringing Old and New Testaments together. He is the Prince of Peace, who makes peace “by the blood of his cross” but also by the strength of his right hand, the sword that proceeds from his mouth, and so on. Are such martial images best explained in pacifist ways?¹⁶

Arguments for War: Ethical Considerations

Now that we have briefly covered some of the Scriptures involved in the debate between war and pacifism, I would like to turn to a discussion on some of the ethical considerations for the reasoning behind a justification for war. As before, the expanse of this topic has been covered in many books, so our focus must be limited. In this case, it will be solely upon the ethical reasons for engaging in war, and not the ethics of conducting what one might call a “just war.”

¹⁵ Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), 180.

¹⁶ John G. Stackhouse Jr, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 245-246.

The Ethic of Love

It seems odd that we might begin an argument for war using an argument from love. And yet, most just war thinkers begin here, with an understanding of the command of “extreme love” for neighbor. God commands us to love our neighbors—in fact, Jesus says this along with the command to love God is what all the Law and the Prophets depend on. Practicing “extreme love” for our neighbor means we go to extreme lengths to love our neighbor—even the unjust neighbor. In his book, *Just War as Discipleship*, Daniel Bell explains the paradox of loving our neighbor—even in war—like this,

The difficulty of understanding just war as a form of love is resolved by acknowledging that we are called to love everyone but that we are not called to love everyone the same. In other words, there is a hierarchy of love and this hierarchy explains how just war can be a matter of love even as it favors some neighbors over others. Establishing a hierarchy or preferential ordering of love accounts for how we can love our enemies and still wage war against them. We love the innocent more than the guilty, and therefore we will take up arms to defend the innocent and kill the guilty.¹⁷

Love for one’s neighbor is what allows for as well as limits war and violence in situations of oppression and injustice.¹⁸ When discussing Just War Theory, the limitations of war are expressed in the principles of discrimination and proportionality.

¹⁷ Bell, 159. Reinhold Niebuhr explains this further in *Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist*, taking the position that while the “Law of Love” rules all, the manner of working it out is contingent on context. He also makes note that the final result of this working out of love should not be considered normative in the here and now. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist*, 2nd ed. (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940), 15-17.

¹⁸ James Childress speaks of these components of Just War Theory as “positive” (legitimization) and “negative” (limitation) functions. James F. Childress, “Just War Criteria,” in *War or Peace? The Search for New Answers*, ed. Thomas A Shannon, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980), 52.

Discrimination is limiting war only toward combatants; proportionality is limiting the force applied only to what is necessary for victory. Ramsey explains how love places limitations in war this way:

Love for neighbors at the same time required that such force should be limited. The Christian is commanded to do anything a realistic love commands (and so sometimes must fight). But this also prohibits him from doing anything for which such love can find no justification (and so he can never approve of unlimited attack upon any human life not closely cooperating in or directly engaged in the force that ought to be repelled).¹⁹

The Ethic of Justice

The ethic of justice might be as important as the ethic of love in the argument for engaging in war. Most just war advocates point out the need for justice in a world replete with oppression and unfairness. While it is not possible for governments to police the world for every unjust scenario, as co-inhabitants in the world we have a moral obligation toward one another's justice and to seek it when it is grossly violated. In his book *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*, Paul Ramsey spends a great deal of time discussing the ethics of the war effort in Vietnam. In debating the justice of that war, he brings up the parable of the Good Samaritan from the gospels, and reimagines it this way:

We might reformulate that question to read: What do you imagine Jesus would have had the Samaritan do if in the story he had come upon the scene when the robbers had just begun their attack and while they were still at their fell work? Would it not then be a work of charity to resort to the only available and effective means of preventing or punishing the attack and resisting the injustice? Is not anyone obliged to do this if he can?²⁰

¹⁹ Ramsey, 144-145. This principle has been the reason for much debate in military decisions. Arguments over the decision to bomb the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima toward the end of WWII largely centered around the principles of discrimination and proportionality. The discussion over whether the United States should have dropped the atomic bomb on these cities continues today.

²⁰ Ibid, 501.

The obligation Ramsey suggests brings us to our final ethic: responsibility.

The Ethic of Responsibility

“Standing aside and letting others kill innocent civilians is refusing to take responsibility for helping other people.”²¹ There is a sense in which we are responsible for each other, especially in the increasingly global economy where we now live. We have a responsibility to help each other achieve justice as well as a responsibility toward peace. Peace is not always the absence of conflict, however. Sometimes to achieve peace one must bring about a just order.²² Reinhold Niebuhr lamented: “It has become almost a universal dogma of American Christianity that any kind of peace is better than war.”²³ False peace can be just as damaging as outright war. When dictators are allowed to continue oppression of their citizens for generations in the name of world peace, the casualties of lives, well beings, and economies in their countries are untold. When possible, we have a responsibility to defend those unable to defend themselves against such tyrants, thereby achieving a more just peace.

There are many other ethical considerations when discussing the ethics of war and pacifism. Although not the primary focus of this paper, let us turn to a brief discussion on the issue of pacifism.

²¹ William J. Abraham, *Shaking Hands with the Devil: The Intersection of Terrorism and Theology* (Dallas: Highland Loch, 2013), 114.

²² “For just war thinkers, peace is not the absence of conflict, but the existence of a just order.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Just War and Politics,” *The Christian Century* (Jan. 1992): 41.

²³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 42.

Pacifism: Objections and Rebuttals

The subject of pacifism is worthy of another paper itself, so I will not attempt to cover in detail the position of pacifism here except to use it as an opportunity to voice a few legitimate objections to the position being presented concerning the justice of war.

Objection: Violence “stills the imaginative search for nonviolent ways of resistance to justice.”²⁴

For pacifists, a resort to war is something of a dulling and short circuiting of the mind. There is always a better way to resolve a crisis, they argue, and allowing war and violence to remain options will nearly guarantee that those become the end results. At first glance, this seems to be true. The world is rife with conflict, and it does seem this often becomes the “go-to” option for resolving conflict. However, this objection borders on dismissiveness concerning the great pains governments and entities must take to enact war using Just War Theory. The requirements for a “just war” (having just cause, being a last resort, being declared by a proper authority, possessing right intention, having a reasonable chance of success, and the end being proportional to the means used²⁵) virtually guarantee that all resources for conflict resolution will be explored before war is undertaken. However, to believe there will always be an alternative to war is unrealistic and “ignores the radically contingent activity of human behavior.”²⁶ In an article written

²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 114.

²⁵ Moseley.

²⁶ Abraham, 108-109.

on the eve of World War II, Reinhold Niebuhr warns against the “perfectionism” sought by pacifism. Niebuhr argues the pacifist’s desires are ultimately unrealistic and “wrong about the whole nature of historical reality.”²⁷

Objection: War makes witnessing to non-believers difficult.

Indeed, war makes difficult the task of fulfilling the Great Commission. It is hard to play witness to the love of God while at the same time being involved in violence, even in the name of justice. On the contrary, however, not engaging in forceful action to remove evil and fight injustice can be every bit as dangerous to the Christian witness as committing violence. Speaking about fellow pacifists working with nations and governments, Hauerwas admits:

In other words, we have to make clear how far they can trust us, as we may not always be the ideal ally. For example, we may well join hands with others to secure a greater justice or at least to limit an injustice, but our non-Christian friends must know that they cannot trust us if they decide that ‘justice’ requires violence.²⁸

I would humbly ask, what kind of a witness is this? What kind of a witness avows to fight injustice but stops short of eradicating it, leaving the hard work of sacrifice for the cause to those outside the kingdom of God?²⁹ It seems odd that this would be a better

²⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “If America is drawn into the war, can you, as a Christian, participate in it or support it?: Third in a Series of Ten Answers, *The Christian Century* 57, no. 51 (Dec 18 1940): 1579.

²⁸ Hauerwas, 133.

²⁹ On this problem, Paul Ramsey quotes Professor Helmut Gollwitzer at the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society: “The answer given by Christian pacifism...leaves to non-Christians that very secular task which requires the greatest love and unselfishness, namely, the use of force; and the answer given by the great churches involves Christians so deeply in the conflicts of the world and in the settlement of these

alternative, to conveniently bow out of conflict when it is deemed necessary to begin using force.

Objection: The gospel is about overcoming violence.

In his last work, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, John Howard Yoder makes the case for pacifism by declaring the gospel is about overcoming violence:

But the gospel is not about delegitimizing violence so much as about overcoming it. We overcome it partly by demythologizing its moral pretensions, partly by refusing to meet it on its own terms, partly by replacing it with other humane strategies and tactics of moral struggle, partly by innocent suffering, and partly by virtue of the special restorative resources of forgiveness and community...At bottom violence is judged—critiqued in the deep sense of the verb—because of the passion events.³⁰

While Jesus' words to Peter: "...for all who take the sword will perish by the sword"³¹ may also be invoked here to support the objection, Yoder is perhaps overstating a point. Jesus came primarily to bring about victory over sin and death, and the eventual casualty of that struggle will be violence. However, violence alone is not to be critiqued. If it is, how does one reconcile the images in Revelation of a conquering Jesus bearing a sword "with which to strike down the nations"³² Rather, it is sin and death that is to be critiqued, which Jesus defeated (ironically) by taking on sin and dying.

conflicts by the use of lethal forces, that it is almost impossible for Christians to bear witness to the joyful message of Christ to their adversaries." Ramsey, 501-502.

³⁰ John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 41.

³¹ Matthew 26:52

³² Revelation 19:15

Objection: Jesus was a pacifist because he laid his life down to defeat sin and death.

In the above quote from Yoder, he alludes to the idea of Jesus being pacifist in eschewing violence and laying his life down at the cross. At face value, this claim appears plausible. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was hailed a king and expected to overthrow the Roman government even by his own disciples. In a confusing twist at the end of the story, the very Roman government which he was supposed to rid the Jews of ends up executing him, with Jesus going willingly to his death without resistance.

To understand the cross however, and the events leading up to it, is to understand that it was a requirement for Jesus to willingly give up and submit to death. His death was out of necessity to erase the sin debt of the world, and it could only be erased in this way. Jesus could not have fought back. It would have compromised the entire mission of what he came to do, and his sacrificial death would never have taken place. His perceived pacifism was not a statement; it was a reflection of a need. If Jesus' death was the ultimate proof of pacifism, what does he mean in John 15 when—alluding to himself—he says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,” and effectively calls his disciples to do the same? What kind of laying down of life can one possibly perform, except to do so in a struggle for the justice of another?

Conclusion: Just War as Christian Discipleship

We have not here talked much about the details of Just War Theory, except to define it briefly and occasionally reference it. Most of the discussions concerning Just War Theory take place in the context of what is correct and moral public policy.

However, Daniel Bell in his work *Just War as Christian Discipleship*, reframes the discussion of violence and war making as a discipleship issue for Christians. One of the claims of men like Stanley Hauerwas is that nonviolence serves as a silent witness to God's ultimate power to redeem the wickedness of man—a witness of the coming Kingdom as the sole provider of that reality. Those of Hauerwas and Yoder's mind criticize violence and war-making as a poor witness to the coming Kingdom of God. Bell proposes a different perspective of Just War entirely, one that he calls Christian Discipleship (CD):

Just War (CD) is ultimately a form of witness. It is a way of pointing to the One who desires all to share in the common good, to receive the blessings of a just peace, and who will one day break the bow, shatter the spear, and beat the sword into a plowshare. Just War (CD) rests on the truth of the claim that Jesus is Lord of history even now and not just in the future. Just War (CD) stands or falls on the truth of the claim that we are not alone, even now. God is with us. For this reason and this reason alone Christians can shoulder the burdens of Just War (CD). Because God in Christ is active here and now, Christians are able to love and take risks for their neighbors, even their enemy neighbors, in accord with the discipline of Just War (CD).³³

Framing the discussion in this way, rather than it being primarily about public policy, enables believers to understand better how something as terrible as killing and violence can ultimately serve for the greater good of humanity and point others toward the just God who promises that one day he will enact justice forever, beating swords into plowshares.

³³ Bell, 242.

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