

Life Purpose and Spirituality: An Overview

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Introduction

The search for meaning and purpose is one of the great human quests, undertaken by every individual in one way or another. Some turn to religious traditions for a sense of purpose and the ultimate. Others turn to intellectual development. Still others work in business, and others merely exist the best they can day in and day out. Traditionally, spirituality is the realm of the world's religions, while purpose is often considered in terms of practical work. In more recent times, Western philosophers and psychologists have united the two, where spirituality and purpose form a unity of human daily existence. I accept the view that a mature conception of life purpose and spirituality unites the two in daily living. This paper provides a survey of the philosophical and psychological traditions in which a person's life purpose and spirituality are integral to daily human existence.

First is a summary of existential philosophy and its emphasis on individual choice and freedom begins to show how people are responsible for their own life purpose and spiritual development; people make their own world. An overview of the individual psychology of Alfred Adler is next. In the Adlerian perspective, humans are purposive by nature; they act in accord with a purpose, even if they are not conscious of that purpose, and strive for perfection, even if they are not aware of that striving. The Adlerian view of striving manifests itself directly in the human potential movement, which places emphasis on the individual person and views the development and actualization of human potential as an individual's highest purpose: human development in and of itself is spiritual development. But human development progresses through a multiplicity of stages, both socially and individually, according to the developmental psychologists. People progress in their search for purpose and meaning, propelled with an initial focus on physical needs, with an ultimate emphasis on the transcendental.

Existentialism

The heart of existentialism lies at the beginning of the word: exist. Existentialism provides a framework and, in its psychological manifestations, a method for explaining the rawness of human existence. To take the point a little farther, existentialism starts with existence. Humans exist and make choices to create their existence as they go. In that basic sense, existentialism shares one trait with most religions: creation. Most religions traditions start with a myth that explains the creation of humankind. Existentialism, by the very way it postulates the mechanism of human consciousness, is a philosophy of continual creation, and its view of life purpose and spirituality lies in that continual creation and the principles of choice, freedom, and responsibility that it implies.

In philosophical terms, existentialism is a phenomenological philosophy and method. Phenomenology, from the Greek words *phainómenon*, meaning “that which appears,” and *lógos*, meaning “study,” is the study of consciousness and experience. Developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early part of the 20th century, phenomenology studies how a person experiences the world. It is subjective in nature, given that experience is interpreted by a person who directs his intention to experiences in the world and creates meaning from those experiences.

Existentialist philosophers, in essence, view the “being” of human beings as the flow of experience through time. A person’s conscious experience comes first, before anything else. Nothing exists but experience, and what experience means is up to the person doing the experiencing. “Truth exists only as the individual himself produces it in action,” wrote Danish philosopher and existentialist thinker Søren Kierkegaard (May, 1958, p. 12). Heidegger described this as “being in the world,” using the German word *Dasein* as his key concept for describing existence.

Being in this sense is not a static state but an active creation, according to existentialist psychotherapist Rollo May. In his introduction to existentialist psychoanalysis, May wrote that *Dasein*, “Being,” should be understood as referring to

potential, which implies a future state toward which an individual can be. A person is being *something*, May suggested, and that something implies a process of choice.

Perhaps, therefore, *becoming* connotes more accurately the meaning of the term (*Dasein*) in this country. We can understand another human being only as we see what he is moving toward, what he is becoming; and we can know ourselves only we “project our *potentia* in action.” The significant tense of a human being is thus the future (May, 1958, p. 41).

In this sense “being” takes on a more profound meaning. To think of *potetia* or potentiality implies that human existence has more possibility than a sentient being experiencing a stream of sensations—the only reality a person really knows, in the view of 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. The future orientation of “potential” implies a possibility that life is greater than the individual experiencing, for there is a “something” that an individual is experiencing toward, and that “something” is chosen by the individual, on whatever basis and toward whatever purpose the individual wants.

This view has become a generally accepted view of existentialism, and to me it contains the essence of spirituality and life purpose to the existentialists. The implication is that people create their own existence and meaning, and therefore they create their own life purpose and their own sense of spirituality, by making meaning out of the infinite. As Golomb put it: “Becoming what one is involves an incessant yet indefinite process which cannot be unequivocally characterized. It is an ever-present happening without any causally determining past or rationally defined future” (Golomb, 1995, p. 21).

At this point, understanding how spirituality and life purpose plays a role in existentialist philosophy requires understanding another key existentialist concept: choice. In the existentialist way of thinking, choice is inevitable. Existentialist thought begins in this regard with the Kierkegaard, who wrote of human existence as an unending series of choices. People have no choice but to choose, for to not choose is itself a choice not to choose. The meaning of existence is not given. If the individual is only aware of a stream of sensations, then it is up to the individual to make some sense of those

sensations—or not. People learn as children how to interpret the sensations that they experience, and most of us accept those lessons or conventions as truth or reality. Whether a person accepts the meaning placed on their stream of experience by others, however, is a matter of choice.

Choice in existentialist thought leads to or implies responsibility. To illustrate that point, many of the French existentialist writers explained their philosophical outlook in novels as well as in philosophical books. They saw literature as a way to dramatize the existentialist quandary more distinctly, especially when it came to demonstrating the individual's responsibility in making choices to create reality beyond or in opposition to a society's status quo. Albert Camus, for example, used the novel to dramatize the individual's responsibility for his choices in *The Stranger*, in which Mersault, his main character, gladly faces death as the consequences for his actions:

[Mersault] affirms his life and does not flee from immanence at its end to embrace the chaplain and shield himself in God's embrace. Thus Camus is describing an inner journey of one who achieves authenticity in the face of death (Golomb, 1995, p. 184).

Humans live under the compulsion of brute fact, Marjorie Grene wrote, whether of death, as in Heidegger's conception of existence, or absurdity, as in Sartre's. Accordingly, people are free to choose their actions and beliefs, to shape their world as they see fit. "And in shaping our world, we succeed or fail. To succeed is not to escape compulsion but to transcend it—to give it significance and meaning by our own projection of the absurdly given past into a directed future" (Grene, 1952, p. 51). This is possible *only* through recognition of the meaninglessness and nothingness that underlines our lives, she wrote.

Conceiving of human existence as a process of becoming, of creating meaning in the face of nothing but a stream of sensations, the individual's responsibility for acting with purpose is even greater. For if the only thing that exists is the present, as philosopher Alan Watts argues, then what a person is always changes, at every moment, and each

individual faces the responsibility of success or failure in shaping their worlds constantly. Creation is a series of continual acts, not something a person prepares for and does but something a person does and takes the consequences for.

Life purpose and spirituality from the existentialist perspective is an individual decision and creation. Life may be inherently meaningless and purposeless, but an individual does not have to live without purpose or meaning unless that individual so chooses. In fact, existentialism goes farther than that. If an individual must choose, then an individual also must have a purpose or direction as a result of choosing, a conception of humanity developed by Alfred Adler, as described below. In terms of existentialism, however, the choice of whether a person experiences spirituality in terms of that definition is up to that person throughout life. As Grene put it, “freedom is never finished. Indeed it is that openness to the future which most deeply marks our being in the world” (Grene, 1952, p. 105).

Purpose may be to serve humanity on a grand scale or it may be simply to survive from one day to the next. The individual can choose to live life toward a purpose no matter what the circumstances. That was especially demonstrated in the inspiring story of psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl, who chose to create meaning in life even while interred in a Nazi work camp during World War II:

In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious “Yes” in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose (Frankl, 1959, p. 51).

Adlerian

Alfred Adler wrote that all people live according to a lifestyle that they create, a lifestyle that is uniquely their own. They may or may not be aware what that lifestyle is and may or may not make conscious choices toward that lifestyle. Choice is critical in this regard,

as people make practical choices to support their chosen life style. “Out of the fullness of his experiences a person will make only a very specific practical application which, upon closer investigation, can always be shown to be such as somehow fit his life line and reaffirm him in his life schema [style of life]” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 211). The Adlerian perspective compatible with the existentialist perspective: people choose their lifestyle. In the same way, they also choose their spiritual beliefs and orientations. They may not be aware of it, but they have made a lifestyle choice when it comes to their religion and what they believe or do not believe about God.

To see how this works from an Adlerian perspective, it’s important to understand how Adler views reality and its human perception. Adler suggested that cognition is based on “apperception,” a philosophical term that refers to a mind perceiving itself and its own actions. Adler uses the term more broadly to refer to all human perception as nothing but a representative analogy for the real thing. In this phenomenological view of perception, the human mind does not perceive things in and of themselves but creates a representation or copy of the real thing; what we perceive is an analogy. As Adler put it:

All cognition is the apperception of one thing through another. We are always dealing with an analogy in perception and we cannot imagine how otherwise existence can be understood (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 79).

Adler referred to apperception as a “symbolic (analogical) fiction.” This is another way of saying that people do not perceive a thing in and of itself but a perceptual copy of a thing. In writing about neurotic individuals, Adler said that they have an “antithetical mode of apperception.” A neurotic individual has a:

sharply schematizing, strongly abstracting mode of apperception. Thus he groups inner as well as outer events according to a strictly antithetical scheme, something like the debt and credit sides in bookkeeping, and admits no degrees between. This mistake in neurotic thinking, which is identical with exaggerated abstraction, is also caused by the neurotic safeguarding tendency. This tendency needs sharply defined guiding lines, ideals, and bogeys in which the neurotic believes, in order to choose, foresee, and take

action. In this way he becomes estranged from concrete reality, where psychological elasticity is needed rather than rigidity, that is, where the use of abstraction is needed rather than its worship and deification. After all, there is no principle to live by which would be valid to the very end; even the most correct solutions of problems interfere with the course of life when they are pushed too far into the foreground, as for example, if one makes cleanliness and truth, the goal of all striving (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 248).

To me, that quote is critical in terms of religion and how many people think about spiritual and religious questions. Most religions have “sharply defined guiding lines, ideals, and bogeys” that their followers believe in order to “choose, foresee, and take action.” This leads to the conclusion, from an Adlerian perspective of neurosis, that most followers religion are neurotic—mindlessly deifying and worshipping religious abstractions.

That may be a logical Adlerian description of what I see as the general mindlessness of the beliefs and position of the vast majority of religious followers. Yet what does it say of spiritual development? In terms of Adler’s view of human perception and his view of what a healthy individual would do, how should one view God from an Adlerian perspective? In general, it suggests that conscious understanding of goals and purpose constitutes a healthy spirituality. I presume that Adler would suggest that a healthy spiritual pursuit would include “elasticity. . . rather than rigidity” and include an appropriate “use of abstraction.”

Solving life’s problems often takes the form of striving. The human need to strive for power and perfection form a key element of Adler’s thought, one of the defining elements that led to his famous split from Freud. People naturally strive for power and superiority, an idea he based on Nietzsche’s idea that people have a “will to power.” Under the assumption that becoming the most perfect being a person can become is spiritual, then spirituality to Adler consists of the human drive to strive for perfection, to meet an ideal. It is in terms of striving for an ideal that Adler wrote of God. God is

manifest only within thought processes that move toward quality and greatness (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 460).

Individuals may not know what their purpose is, and the purpose they pursue may what Adler termed “fictive,” but the behavior follows a purpose all the same. Clues to an individual’s purpose and goals lie in behavior. A girl who wants to be a mother, Adler wrote, will play with dolls because that’s practical, a logical way of training herself for the tasks of motherhood. To put it in terms of baseball, an individual who plays the game as a child may find that it’s a way to overcome their sense of inferiority in intellectual pursuits or, put more positive, finds that it’s a way to project their will in the world and strive toward superiority. As an individual progresses with the game, he may find that in striving for superiority that he feels a sense of mastery over himself (or others).

When striving is integrated with social interest, a purpose larger than the individual emerges. Adler also believed that humans are social, and all problems are ultimately social problems. Baseball is a team sport that, on the field, requires nine individuals striving for superiority to work toward a common objective. Adler believed that striving was healthy when done in consonance with society and community and became anti-social or neurotic when done out of relationship to others. In a winning baseball team, all individuals are in tune with one another. Players anticipate how to make the best play, to take into account the lay of the ball and the runners on base. If a player’s actions are not connected to those of his teammates, bad plays result. That person’s striving and power is not projected to the same ends as his teammates—generally winning the game. That person is antisocial in terms of the team and won’t last long in the job, putting his ultimate purpose and mastery in question because part of mastering baseball is cooperating with other team members in order to achieve the goal of the game: to score more runs than the other team at the game level and win more games than any other team at the season level.

Players on the team must be “in tune” with one another. This sense of community and “oneness” is a critical spiritual concept; one commonly appreciated aspect of

spirituality is a feeling of the sense of the whole. The communication between members of a tightly knit team has a spiritual flavor to it. It involves a flow of experience and power shared by a group of people in a way that unites them for a common purpose: to perform well in order to win the game. All actions should be in consonance with what's required to win the game and, by extension, the season.

From an Adlerian perspective, then, purpose is “baked in” to human existence, and spirituality concerns the human will to strive for perfection. Adler's view of purpose is pragmatic. All human behavior is purposive, guided toward an individual's goals, whether known or unknown. “We maintain that the ideal, the typical, ultimate purpose of a human being, irrespective of health or sickness, is to solve life's problems,” Adler wrote (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 251).

Human Potential

The Adlerian suggestion that humans strive for perfection manifests itself specifically in the human potential movement, which reached its height in the 1970s in the United States. As its name implies, the human potential movement put the human being first and celebrated the ability of humans and learn and grow. Human potential is infinite and its imperative is the unleashing of that potentiality in and by every individual person. Therein lies the ultimate quest of humanity and personhood at this highest.

Human potential developed as an academic discipline from the work of Abraham H. Maslow and as a psychotherapeutic methodology from the work of Carl R. Rogers. By the 1960s and 1970s, their work had blossomed into what Maslow wrote about as the Third Force in psychology, a positive psychology focused on the potentiality of the healthy human rather than the normalization of the neurotic individual. Maslow recognized that psychology was excessively focused on behavior and on neurosis. People were generally patients that psychiatrists sought to cure, often by modifying their behavior.

To the humanistic psychologists, the starting point was not an ill patient but a person seeking to learn and grow, who wanted to overcome blocks, and who had within the knowledge and ability to overcome those blocks—a person need only be drawn out by another person. Humanistic psychology starts with the premise that people are whole and complete. In therapy, for instance, Rogers summarized his view of people as follows:

that the human organism is, at its deepest level, trustworthy; that man's basic nature is not something to be feared, but to be released in responsible self-expression; that small groups (in therapy and classrooms) can responsibly and sensitively build constructive interpersonal relationships and choose wise individual and group goals; that all of the foregoing will be achieved if a facilitative person assists by creating a climate of realness, understanding and caring (Rogers, 1977, p. 17).

The person in and of himself is enough and needs nothing else, and the outcome of that view is the creation of “person-centered” organizations and individuals. Like the existentialist heroes, these individuals chose the meaning and values by which they live and rely on their own experience and interpretation to inform their actions, likes, and dislikes, not the dictates of others, society, or the status quo. Person-centered people are revolutionaries, anti-authoritarian. “These new persons have a trust in their own experience and a profound distrust of all external authority,” Rogers wrote. They are “willing to obey some laws and disobey others on the basis of their own personal moral judgment, and living with the consequences of their choice” (Rogers, 1977, p. 274).

As with the existentialists, life purpose to the humanists is a matter of individual choice. Maslow, for instance, wrote in 1968 that all values outside of the individual's own values had collapsed and that existential psychology, with its “radical stress on the concept of identity and the experience of identity as the *sine qua non* of human nature,” provided a basis for a psychology rooted in human potential. With a primary focus on the human and a belief that humans are enough in and of themselves, the psychology of human potential provides a new lens through which to view life purpose and spirituality. Rather than viewing purpose and spirituality through the dogma traditional religions,

Maslow suggested that the light of purpose and spirit shown through the person and his or her potential.

Maslow described a human potential framework for growth that clearly outlines growth and development as the ultimate purpose of human activity and suggests that human development and psychological development are one and the same thing. The purpose of humanity is to grow and develop, and an individual's highest purpose is to reach or actualize his or her potential. This requires a healthy sense of self, an identity as an independently acting and choosing individual responsible for making choices that determine actions, the highest of which move toward a future potential. "Healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs for safety, belongingness, love, respect, and self esteem so that they are motivated primarily by trends to self actualization" (Maslow, 1968, p.25).

As for the spirituality from a human potential perspective, it concerns an individual's awareness and expression of the truth to their highest vision, according to Dr. Robert Wright (MORE Life Weekend), as in Christian tradition, in which Christ is the WAY and TRUTH and the LIGHT. Truth is not an abstract concept, but a moment-by-moment operant reality. "Truth is being current and up to date in an intimate way that helps us be nourished," Dr. Robert Wright said. "If you want to maximize your potential you must learn to challenge the unconscious contract that you make with people" (Wright, R., 2009, June).

This means being honest with others is a method of growth that takes place in any interaction between people. If spirituality in the human potential tradition is telling the truth, then spirituality is a moment-by-moment, daily act. Telling the truth about the resentment you feel in a meeting becomes a profoundly spiritual act, Dr. Robert Wright said, a necessary risk that leads toward achievement of potential. It is also an act of love between one human being and another. As Dr. Judith Wright summarized it, "Truth clears away the barriers to true love." In the human potential tradition, then, the power of purpose, spirit, and love lies in the individual and requires nothing else but the dedication

of individuals to pursue their potential to the fullest, without need for religious or other intermediaries (Wright, J., 2009, June).

Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology provides a view of how humans get from one point to another, how they grow from one stage of life to another. Indeed, the basic assumption underlying all developmental theories is that individual people and humanity as a whole change and grow as they get older. In a purely physical sense, for instance, people grow from babies to adults. Growth is physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual. How growth is characterized and what drives growth development is one thing that differentiates one theory from another.

Developmental theorists proceed from two primary perspectives. First, some developmental theorists take an individual approach. They look at how an individual develops from infancy, to childhood, through adolescence, and on to adulthood. At each stage of life, people face different primary challenges in how they relate to the world and to other people. The Wright Model of Human Development describes stages of physical and emotional development from birth to adulthood. The primary challenges change accordingly. For babies, the primary challenge is mastery of the world. For adolescents, it may be relationships with other people and the opposite sex.

Second, developmental theorists can take a broader, social view and describe how humanity develops throughout history. These views concern the social and economic development of people, with an emphasis on what their overall societies were organized and how those societies supported themselves and their individual members. For instance, in the Spiral Dynamics model, which is based on the developmental work of Clare Graves, humans live through a continuum of eight stages of development, beginning at level one with a sense of survival. Societies in which survival needs are

increasingly met begin to band together and identify with a tribe and the spirits of nature, at level two.

Whether the lens is individual or social, the developmental perspective presumes growth toward a higher level of functioning, or at least a different and more evolved or complex level of functioning. One of the issues in developmental approaches that has been refined over the years is the value judgment placed on a level of development by the writer or theorist; development is neutral and what is “good” for one person or society may not be “good” for another. Dr. Don Beck takes this point of view in his Spiral Dynamics model, in which he terms different development levels “adaptive intelligences.” As life conditions change, societies progress to other levels that adapt to the conditions of the previous level, often with more complex systems driven by the conditions of life (Beck, D., 2009, April).

Developmental views are based on the assumption that individual humans and social systems are purposive. They seek to grow and move forward, whether forward means mastering the slide on a playground, finding an additional spot in a river where fish are plentiful, or becoming more productive and efficient in manufacturing electronic circuit boards. In all of those examples, people are acting with the purpose of developing something better in the future to meet the conditions of the present.

Moreover, the sense of purpose behind human activity so completely unites individual and social perspectives that both views can contain the other. Fromm (1947) and Wright (2008) suggest that individuals reflect the society in which they live, and a society as a whole reflects the attitudes, judgments, and experiences of the individuals that make them up. Character is a dynamic concept for an individual point of view, yet “social conditions make for the dominance of one or the other nonproductive [character] orientations” and a person’s character reflects a “person’s relatedness in the world” (Fromm, 1947, p. 332).

Fromm's developmental model serves as an example of how developmental psychology explains spiritual growth and development. To Fromm, individuals have two positions by which they relate:

1. acquiring and assimilating things,
2. relating to people (including to themselves).

Fromm breaks down human development into nonproductive and productive orientations. Nonproductive orientations consist of these:

- Receptive Orientation, in which all things come from the outside or God and not individual action
- Exploitive Orientation, in which all things come from the outside but are taken from others
- Hoarding Orientation, in which things are hoarded and saved
- Marketing Orientation, in which economic exchange, personality, and material measures of success are the source of all things

The highest level for Fromm is the Productive Orientation, in which the growth and development of human potential is the ultimate aim, regardless of success. He does not quite go so far as say this is the ultimate spiritual state of humanity, but he wrote that "freedom and blessedness consist in man's understanding of himself and in his effort to become that which he potentially is" (Fromm, 1947, p. 351).

On a scale from lowest to highest, in terms of need and fulfillment, developmental psychologists tend to see individual transcendence as the highest in human spiritual development: developmental models suggest that an individual and a society must meet basic human needs and desires before experiencing and expressing spiritual values in anything other than a superficial way. Like Fromm's model of character development, the Wright model concerns itself with generally accepted as spiritual principals—love, compassion, forgiveness, grace, and the like—only at its highest level. In the framework of the Wright model, for instance, love is not true love if an individual is expressing it in order to meet the hunger to be seen and feel affirmed at level two; it's more of a request

to be seen and liked. Similarly, the Graves-Beck developmental framework places concerns like belief in a spirit world and religious development toward the lower levels of social development. Those concerns do not recede at higher levels, but the social order tends to concern itself with problems of a higher order, given that basic physical and psychic needs have been met.

Indeed, both the Wright and Spiral Dynamics models provide a framework for continual development: individual personal development, in the case of the Wright Model, and ongoing social development, in the case of the Spiral Dynamics model. Both assume that the lower or more basic levels of development are always present in the higher or more complex levels of development. Both also imply that people are dynamically driven by a purpose to grow, whether that means to reach their potential or become better and more satisfied, whatever that means at the particular level on which they exist. Finally, both the individual and social views are united by one key element: purpose.

Fromm, on the other hand, provides a more moralistic hierarchy, a developmental projection from lower to higher, worse to better. Fromm provides a critique of and obvious disdain for the materialistic pleasures of American life in his description of the nonproductive market character orientation, in which shallow consumers are alienated and trapped by their own consumption and superficiality. I believe that the emptiness Fromm saw in the marketing-oriented society is a necessary condition for development to individuals and society to develop more purposeful or spiritually fulfilling modes of existence. It can be an overall feeling of emptiness and purposelessness that propels a person or a society as whole to seek more satisfying alternatives.

Even so, Fromm's moralistic view adds an element missing from the more objective, analytical and neutral developmental models, namely their lack evaluation on what is good and right or what is healthy and unhealthy. All actions are not OK. In that sense, I agree with Fromm that the productive orientation affords greater pleasure because it more

completely serves the purpose of achieving growth and development toward individual—and by extension social—potential and even perfection, to use Adler’s characterization.

From a developmental point of view, humanity has developed from primitive societies and their emphasis on the satisfaction of basic physical needs to a concern for ultimate questions. In the same way, individuals develop from dependency on others for the fulfillment of their physical needs, to a concern for their own growth and development. In both cases, humans move toward a concern for ultimate questions once their basic needs for survival have been met.

Conclusion

To some people, human existence is a journey to some ultimate understanding of one’s place in the grand overall scheme of the universe, which is not revealed here on Earth but after death, in another more purely spiritual plane of existence. To others, human existence is simply chance, a random series of events that they deal with as they come and make the best of or not. The common element in those two extremes is human existence, individuals living and experiencing and making choices along the way, solving the problems presented by life on Earth in one way or another.

In the existential, Adlerian, human potential, and developmental psychology traditions, individuals ultimately create meaning and pursue purpose for themselves. They may follow religions traditions, or they may not. They may rely on others to provide meaning and direction, or they may not. Yet in the end, it’s the view of those philosophical and psychological traditions that life purpose and spirituality are profoundly personal, to be chosen consciously or not but always chosen by the individual who ultimately lives with the consequences.

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