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# Ethical and Deontological Challenges in Exercising the Functions of Higher Education Teachers: Perceptions of Teachers at the School of Management, Science and Technology (ESGCT)

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## Abstract

Ethics as a science has principles that help to guide the individual's behavior within his social context, in order to ensure his high-level socialization capability in inter and intra-personal relationships. This article aims to analyze teachers' perceptions about ethical and deontological challenges in the framework of their functions in higher education. To achieve that objective, a qualitative research was performed, to better understand the ethical and deontological challenges in higher education, from the perspective of teachers' perception. The data collection process was made possible from a semi-structured interview. The research results lead us to reflect on the teacher's role as an ethically consistent professional, with a high sense of responsibility and whose main mission is to prepare the individual for society and for life. They also show us that there are recurrent cases of academic fraud, psychological and cultural immaturity of the student, which makes difficult the action of the teacher, although it is also possible to speak of the lack of professionalism in some teachers.

**Keywords:** Ethics; deontology; higher education; teacher; professional.

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## Introduction

Ethics is indispensable for the exercise of any profession, especially for those who have the unique mission of training future professionals, it being essential in the lives of all citizens. Ethics and deontology are a space for reflection on human action, in the relationship with oneself, in the relationship with others and in professional exercise and performance. According to Vasconcelos (2005, p.280) “reflection on the ethical values that make up teaching is essential for good practice, for the training and improvement of teachers, rescuing teaching from the cycle of improvised practices, the technique of universal value transposed for any situation, and technology based on external scientific laws”.

It is in this context that the present study aims to analyze the teachers' perceptions about ethical and deontological challenges in the exercise of their functions in higher education, namely at the School of Management and Technology (ESGCT).

This is a qualitative study with a descriptive and exploratory approach, as there is still little information available on the subject. It is hoped that the results of this study can be a contribution to a reflection on the educational process and on the ethical challenges experienced today.

The exercise of teaching in higher education requires an ethical stance due to the interrelationship between the teachers and their students, which implies a double commitment: between the teacher with the action of teaching and the student with the action of learning. This interrelation promotes the dignity of the person who acts, as well as that of others, resulting in correct social conduct. As also stated by Vasconcelos (2005, p.282), “the ethical dimension is inseparable from the work of teaching, since the directions given in the teaching process are on an ethical level because they involve decisions with a political-ideological content that can affect the student’s concept of life and the world”.

Higher education should provide the student with knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow his participation in the socialization process, as well as the promotion of healthy coexistence (learning to live in a community), education (rigorous and plausible knowledge), as well as, as well as his emancipation, realization and humanization (learning to be).

Rethinking the ethical challenges in higher education implies multiple issues that involve the action of the teacher, as a professional, to be aware of the distinction between a professional and a good professional, as well as the analysis of curricula and the quality of students entering and leaving after training.

## Ethics and Deontology and the challenges in higher education

According to Monteiro and Ferreira (2014, p. 7), “ethics is a word that comes from the Greek “ethos” which means character, way of being, but also home or dwelling. This meaning applies to both individuals and social groups”.

Higher education integrates citizens who belong to a society that should be characterized by the experience of ethical values that aim to promote good coexistence, since, according to Ricoeur (2007, quoted by Monteiro & Ferreira, 2014, p.7) ethical values “reflect the intention of a good life, with and for others, in honourable institutions. Ethical thinking concerns a human reality, which is historically and socially constituted, based on the collective relations of human beings in the societies where they are born and live”.

In the educational process of higher education, the teacher, when carrying out a responsible action, adopting or defending an attitude, or failing to do so, highlights his way of thinking, his

values, his principles, his habits and his choices, which are based on the values or ethical principles that guide his conduct.

In view of the current technological challenges, demographic and economic imbalances, ethics cannot remain alien, especially in the face of its chosen territory, which is education. Ethics must find a space in the educational field to promote debate.

Higher education, in the process of transmitting knowledge, skills and attitudes, should provide students and teachers with experiences that promote the maturation of citizens. In this sense, ethics is of prime importance given its practical character, as it is a normative discipline, whose function is to indicate the best behavior from the moral point of view.

Thus, (Vázquez, 1990, quoted by Pizarro, 2017, p.203) speaking of the concept of ethics and morals, states that “the relationship between these terms occurs since ethics is based on the moral fact; and morality is characterized by a set of norms, rules, conduct and/or behavior that aim to regulate social relations”.

Therefore, ethics promotes the moral development of individuals within their social context. “Ethics thus becomes a kind of legislator for the moral behavior of individuals or the community” (Vazquez, 2005, p. 20).

Deontology, as a branch of ethics, is a normative discipline, that is, it conveys principles of human conduct, guidelines in the exercise of a profession and stipulates duties that must be followed in the performance of an activity. For Monteiro and Ferreira (2014, p.13), “the term deontology arises from the Greek words *déon*, *déontos*, with the meaning of duty, and *logos* which means discourse, or treatise”. The term deontology has a more specific scope and is often used in the field of professions.

The codes of ethics do not establish rules universally, but only for those who are part of a certain profession. The professional must respect the rules related to his activity, and has the duty to observe the social and legal rules that govern the community in which he operates. “According to the ethical doctrine of a deontological nature, human action is valuable or not, whether or not it is in accordance with the moral rule linked to this behavior and depending exclusively on the moral acceptability of the principle that underlies the rule” (Rocha, 2010, p. 239). Professional excellence requires as a necessary condition, even if insufficient, the development of all human virtues experienced, precisely, in the exercise of the profession.

We can better understand the concept of deontology if we know the deontological principles that, among other principles, according to Luka Brajnovic (1978), are the following: 1. loyalty to the chosen profession; 2. adequate preparation; 3. competent and honest exercise; 4. delivery of professional work; 5. realization of the benefits resulting from this work, in favor of the common good and at the service of society. These principles should guide all professionals in the exercise of their activity. For those who practice it, they will be contributing to their prestige and good reputation, as professionals who exercise their vocation. We can also mention the principles of: 6. ongoing training; 7. fair demand for professional prestige and a decent life; 8. loyalty to true opinion, even in contrary and contradictory circumstances; 9. moral right to remain in the chosen profession; 10. constant effort to serve others, fully preserving their personal freedom.

In these ten points of Brajnovic, just mentioned, are aspects of the ethics of any profession, including that of teaching.

A profession is not just about knowing how to do something. It is also a way of knowing how to be in the relationship with others and with society, in which the professional is committed to evolving and improving according to the new challenges that face him. Every good profession is built on permanent and continuous training. It is expected that the teacher seeks continuous training in the exercise of his profession, always updating his knowledge and investing in research. Education professionals must be exemplary, because their words are replicated in their students, as teachers are considered as role models.

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Professional ethics must always accompany the teacher's activity. Santos (2019, p.266) "points out that in whatever profession, especially teaching, ethics must be understood as something that goes hand in hand with technique and practice." In other words, we would say that the teacher's conduct should be guided by ethical principles and be centered on promoting the student's ethical and moral development. For Rocha and Correia (2006, p.3), "it is not enough to know ethics, first, it is necessary to believe in ethics and live ethically".

The teaching profession values society for the quality of the staff that form and serve it. In turn, society itself should value the teaching profession, as being the most fundamental for its construction and development. Several other professions are born from the hands of an education professional, and it is important that this same professional, in the exercise of his profession, knows that his mission is of the noblest.

For Delors (1998), "the contribution of teachers is crucial to prepare men and women, not only to face the future with confidence, but to build it in a determined and responsible manner". It is possible to notice, from an early age, from primary education, the role of the teacher as an educator, because the task of educating the citizen so that he can be inserted in society, thereby contributing to its harmonious development is up to the teacher. Therefore, "teachers have a determining role in forming attitudes - positive or negative - towards the teaching and learning process. They must arouse curiosity, develop autonomy, stimulate intellectual rigor and create the necessary conditions for the success of formal education and permanent education" (Delors, 1998, p. 152).

### **Role of higher education institutions in the training process**

University education and teaching is the highest level of education system. It usually refers to the teaching carried out in institutions that confer the highest academic degrees or professional and specialization degrees at the highest level.

The university as a higher education institution is a place of culture and study, open to all. In addition to the task of preparing men and women for research or for qualified jobs, the university must remain the source capable of quenching the thirst for knowledge of those who, in increasing numbers, find in their own curiosity a means of making sense of life.

"Universities have certain peculiarities that make them privileged places to perform these functions, they are generally multidisciplinary, which allows everyone to exceed the limits of their initial cultural environment. In general, it has more contacts with the international world than any other educational structures"(Delors, 1998, p. 144).

Universities, whose prestige has been undermined in terms of an intellectual and moral order, cannot ignore this movement of concern and ethical reflection.

### **The professional ethics of the teacher**

"When discussing the issue of ethics, it is necessary to be aware that no matter how much ethics is reflected in the professions, these reflections never exhaust the meaning and depth of ethical actions" (Vasconcelos, 2005, p. 278).

In the analysis made by Delors et al (2000), in the report to UNESCO, cited by Rocha and Correia (2006, p.3), the importance of a cordial relationship with the student is highlighted when he states:

The teacher must establish a new relationship with the one who is learning; move from the role of a soloist to a companion, becoming no longer someone who transmits knowledge, but one who helps his students to find, organize and manage knowledge, guiding, but not shaping spirits, demonstrating great firmness as to fundamental values that should guide through one's whole life.

Then, together with scientific knowledge, the teacher offers students ethical knowledge that will enable them to become respected professionals of impeccable conduct. It is possible to maintain a degree of promising relationship with the student without, however, ignoring the limit that there must be in that relationship. In this light, the mission of the teacher, as an educator, is not to always try to please students, but rather to help build a solid educational substratum that allows them to reach human, intellectual and moral maturity, for their better insertion in a world that is increasingly demanding.

From this it appears that it is only through the critical self-assessment of teaching practice that educators will be able to reflect on the firmness of their own ethical concepts, and thus articulate them in their daily action. In this way, the teacher can permanently transform the social process and the educational system, always looking for a greater meaning for his work and for life. Rios (1997, p.38) notes that "it is often perceived that educators themselves are not clear about the political dimension of their work".

As for teaching, the intention is to transcend technical training, favoring active, critical-reflexive approaches, in order to provide students with the construction of technical, ethical, political and social knowledge. Teaching is anchored in a set of knowledge that makes up a universe of meanings and senses. The teacher's work is based on differentiated knowledge, which is revealed in his daily exercise, which includes experience, personal aspects, and feelings that are discovered and built in his own work.

## **Methodology**

As for the research theme, a literature review was conducted based on dissertations and published scientific articles, available in electronic journals, which served as the basis for the theoretical framework. The literature review was indispensable for carrying out the research.

The study was based on a qualitative approach using a case study; for this reason, the results cannot be generalized. However, the data collected, being qualifiable, permitted the achievement of the objective, which was to analyze the teachers' perceptions about a society that experiences a loss of ethical and moral values. This problem also affects higher education. "The qualitative approach to a problem, in addition to being an option for the researcher, is justified, above all, because it is an adequate way to understand the nature of a social phenomenon" (Richardson, 1999, p. 79).

To carry out the qualitative research, a descriptive analysis was chosen. This had as main support the knowledge generated from the review of the literature. It allowed for a greater description of the teachers' perceptions about the challenges they are faced with in the exercise of their functions. According to Triviños (1987, cited by De Oliveira, 2011, p.22; Da Silva, 2014, p.22) "the descriptive study aims to accurately narrate the facts and phenomena of a given reality. The researcher's intention is to get to know a certain community, its characteristics, values and problems".

In addition to being descriptive, the study can be considered as exploratory, due to the fact that, according to Aaker, Kumar and Day (2004, cited by De Oliveira, 2011, p.22), "it involves a qualitative approach, such as the use of discussion groups; generally, it is characterized by the absence of hypotheses, or poorly defined hypotheses". "It is done especially when the topic is little explored and it becomes difficult to formulate a hypothesis" (Gil, 1999; Cervo; Bervian, 2002, cited by Da Silva, 2014, p.21).

## **Data collection technique**

The research was based on a literature review, because, according to Lakatos & Marconi (2001, cited by De Oliveira, 2011, p.40), "support and foundation based on a review of the literature is

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recommended, so that time is not wasted on a problem that has already been solved and innovative conclusions can be reached”.

In addition to the review, the application of semi-structured interviews was extremely important for data collection, as it allowed for the capture of perceptions about the challenges in the exercise of the teaching function. Thus, 10 interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured script used for data collection. The researcher had contact with the research participants via the open interview. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, and they were asked to authorize the recording of their responses, in order to guarantee the accuracy and greater conservation of the original content.

For Flick (2004, cited by Da Silva, 2014, p.30), “interviews with semi-structured scripts compared to standardized interviews or questionnaires facilitate the process of obtaining information, from the point of view of the interviewed”. Based on the responses of the interviewee, it is possible to adjust the course of the interview, as it can include or exclude certain questions.

For data analysis, the interviews were transcribed and coded; likewise, the content categorization technique was applied, which allowed for the description of ethical and deontological challenges. For the creation of categories a constant re-reading was done. The categories were grouped, according to the purpose of the study, and according to their pertinence and objectivity.

## **Research participants**

Study participants were chosen by convenience sampling, not probabilistic, based on the availability of respondents. Respondents who taught the School of Management Sciences and Technologies (ESGCT) and who indicated an awareness of the concept of professional ethics were selected for interview. Ten participants were interviewed, all male. Among them, two have a doctorate degree, seven have masters degrees and one has a licentiate degree, trained in different areas, namely, Medicine, Economic Sciences, Business Administration and Management, Civil Engineering and Computer and Telecommunications Engineering. These are teachers with experience ranging from 12 to 40 years of teaching, aged between 38 and 70 years. The selection was made with a view to collecting the teachers' perceptions, based on their experiences on the ethical challenges they experience in the teaching process.

## **Analysis and discussion of results**

We started from the assumption that, in order to participate in the interview, it was necessary to have a valid concept of ethics, even if it had not been formally stated. The interviewees were unanimous in stating that they know the concept of ethics and that of professional deontology. They consider ethics as a set of norms, values and standards of conduct that correspond to society's expectations. In the words of our interviewees, ethics is “The set of behaviors that characterize the good person, individuals with moral values” (EV 10). Another interviewee considers ethics to be the manifestation of behavior according to society's expectations. “Ethics is to behave according to the demands of society, to do what is considered normal. What corresponds to society's expectations is ethical” (EV3). This concept converges with the opinion of Vazquez (2005, p.23). The author considers “ethics as a science of the moral behavior of men in society”.

It is clear from their words that the interviewees had a concept of ethics and this is the result of the general culture, as none of the participants had had any formal training on the topic. It appears that the participants in the study learned the concept through the transmission of knowledge, general culture and even through self-training, in the process of preparing their classes.

As for the concept of deontology, their definition differed from that of their understanding of ethics, since in the opinion of the interviewees, deontology is the “set of rules and principles that must be complied with in the performance of a given profession” (EV1), or it can be considered as “set norms that govern a particular profession, especially the liberal professions” (EV10). Deontology allows for establishing guidelines for a good performance of the professional within his area, that is, “... do exactly what the profession requires.” (EV4).

The existence of a code of ethics and the knowledge of it is relevant to the exercise of all professions, as it allows for the standardization of the behavior of professionals, making them adopt an appropriate attitude in the exercise of their functions, which will guide conduct and good relationships. The interviewees were unanimous in stating that the entire profession must be guided by ethical and deontological principles: “Teachers must have deontology. Knowing how to do what you set out to do is the limit. We are trainers of minds” (EV4). All actions must be based on policies and standards established by the institution, “in order not to act arbitrarily, institutions must create standards to guide the conduct of their employees.” (EV8). Deontology allows teaching to be carried out within principles that are accepted by society. Every professional has an identity that defines their profile for a particular type of work. Thus, we can also find in the teaching professional an identity that expresses their attitude. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance that the teacher sees himself as an agent of transformation, so that he can consciously intervene in the training of students under his responsibility.

The teacher's attitude is relevant to the transformation of the student and society. In this sense, it is important to mention that education professionals must be exemplary, because their actions and words are replicated in their students and in society. Hence the relevance of implementing pedagogical intervention programs that guarantee an adequate training of teachers, aiming at ensuring the development of their skills, aptitudes and technical and professional competences.

The university professor, first of all, must address his ethical and deontological stance. Teaching practice, therefore, is part of a complex social activity that combines different arts, knowledge, attitudes, expectations, actions and strategies, according to his view of the world.

The teacher must be committed to the knowledge of ethics and must know how to transmit it to his students, always illustrating with his own example, through attitudes that must be in accordance with the general principles of ethics. “Thus, it is believed that the teacher needs to be as good a technical professional as he is ethical, one cannot function without the other, he needs to make himself respected by his students, always maintaining a balanced behavior in relations with his students, respecting the individuality of each one” (Santos, 2019, p.267).

Respondents in their relationship with students claim to be guided by the following ethical principles: responsibility, honesty, fairness, rigor, respect, transparency, integrity. “Being fair is a quality of the teacher who, in the face of any incorrect behavior by the students, does not lead him to judge the student based on his background, but based on the current facts.” (EV1). The principle of honesty leads the teacher to “act in such a way that there is no doubt about his good conduct; he must be trusted in his relations with everyone.” (EV10).

Thus, for our interviewees, the ethical dimension is manifested through the principles they experience in their relationship with the different actors in the educational process, especially with students. Teachers with a conduct based on ethical and deontological principles contribute to a good reputation and prestige of the class.

Teaching activity is influenced by the institution's culture and by the established norms, which guide its conduct. The rules of conduct of the teacher are reflected in normative documents of the ESGCT. The ESGCT, in its different documents, seeks to standardize the conduct of its users, in this specific case, the teachers and students. These standards can be found in documents such as evaluation regulation, employment contracts, teaching career regulations, teacher conduct rules, circulars, among others. These documents recommend the expected behavior and mention

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integrity, exemplary behavior, assiduity, punctuality, professionalism, among others. In the classroom, this behavior must be present in the highest degree.

The study revealed that the promotion of ethical values in higher education should not be just a mission of higher education. Basic education on ethical principles is extremely important as it will lead to a harmonious coexistence of society. The student and the teacher in their relationship learn to differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong.

Our interviewees highlighted the following activities as important for the promotion of ethical values: Conducting lectures, introducing the subject of ethics into the students' training curriculum.

“It is important that the lectures are given at least once a year. .... Hold debates where everyone participates, and discuss aspects related to ethics. It is important to carry out these actions which help to prevent unpleasant situations from occurring.” (EV2)

Another interviewee further proposes that:

“The teaching of ethics should be transversal to all courses. Right from enrolment, students should be made aware of ethics and at the end of their training the same should happen once they go to the job market ” (EV 10). The interviewee recommends the “Introduction of the subject of ethics into 1st semester of the curriculum, so that students learn to know how to be and to know how to be” (EV5).

### **Teachers' perception of ethical and deontological challenges in higher education**

From this study, three major challenges were identified. The results found in the present study suggest that the first challenge is to look critically at the conditions of transmission of knowledge to students. The reality reveals that some teachers do not have the necessary psychopedagogic preparation in higher education teaching. “Communication in the classroom, how a teacher should be, how he presents information and provides the means to facilitate the learning process” (EV3). This indicates that “although higher education teachers have significant experiences in their field of action, or have a great theoretical knowledge, in general, there is a preponderant lack of preparation for assuming the role of teacher and even a scientific lack of knowledge of the teaching-learning process” (Pimenta, 2002, p.37).

The minimum experience level of our interviewees is 12 years in the teaching area. But, even so, they feel the need for a psycho-pedagogic training that allows them to deal better with the art of teaching. Teachers understand that the quality of their performance has to do with their degree of satisfaction in teaching, but not everyone thinks so, as there are cases of: “Teachers who do not value their profession, which is affecting the image other teachers” (EV6). On the other hand, “there are teachers without mastery of their teaching area” (EV5).

It is possible to confirm that the second challenge is related to the attitude of students who present poor academic performance, which requires the teacher to adopt methodologies that arouse interest in the student in the learning process, as it seems that some students are more concerned in obtaining the degree certificate than acquiring knowledge. “The student's own attitude is a challenge. Some students try to benefit by harassing the teacher. The teacher, in turn, has to know how to position himself, to have an appropriate attitude, to be firm, because the student wants to have an easier life, without any effort. ” (EV2). This shows that the level of preparation of students when entering higher education can be considered as having a high degree of psychological immaturity, reflected in the lack of interest in learning. This situation makes the activity of the teacher very difficult. This lack of interest is associated with a lack of honesty and a tendency to corruption. “There are cases of students who, because they have poor academic results, try to entice the teacher into corruption. Frauds are recurrent situations that we have to avoid” (EV3).



“The level of maturity with which many students enter higher education is the same with which they started secondary school. There is no clear definition of objectives and aspirations, there is insecurity and irresponsibility in their attitudes” (Keller, 2004, p.17). “Students take the easiest routes, by copying, using cheat sheets and always trying to make life made easier for them by the teacher” (EA10).

The teacher has the task of supporting his students. Students bring their own vices with them and seek to discover the weaknesses of teachers in order to get grades to pass.

“There is an example of some students who are employed full-time and who don’t have much time available to dedicate themselves to their studies. For that reason, they try to solve their situation illegally. For example, the existence of sexual harassment is a fact that we cannot deny, I was never a victim, but I have observed situations of this nature”. (AI1).

It can be noted, from the interviewees' responses, that teachers have the challenge of making progress in knowledge transmission, as well as humanizing and preparing students for a healthy society, so that they are people with values, in the face of the current challenges of a society in which they are lost, where the immoral becomes normal.

It is up to the teacher to transform the classroom into a real stage for debating ideas and a laboratory for analyzing the problems that affect society, such as: corruption, violence, lack of honesty and professionalism. The teacher needs to teach the student.

The third challenge is related to the attitude of some teachers who in their activity show “lack of professionalism, intellectual dishonesty” (EV5), that is, “there is plagiarism on the part of the teacher, when he takes as his own the knowledge he provides to students in the form of study materials, without clearly citing the sources, as if they were his own” (EV4). This attitude tarnishes the prestige and impeccable conduct of other respected professionals.

Often the teacher tries to establish a good relationship with the students. However, this does not imply that he must be a permissive trainer.

“The teacher must be consistent. For example, I make a commitment [to my students], but at the end of the day, I make an agreement with the students and I do not teach all the planned material for that lesson. Or, on the other hand, I shorten the lesson: the students appear to be tired and I do not teach the all the lesson so that the students can leave early.... There are teachers who sign the class attendance register without even having given their lesson. This reveals a lack of honesty.” (EV3)

The good professional reconciles, in his actions, professionalism, humanism and rigor. He teaches and involves students in a commitment to perform their tasks well. Students need to feel committed to social and cultural development and social change. This being so, Bawden (2009, cited by Ribeiro 2013, p.31), "warns that students are facilitators of the improvement of the human condition, through intellectual, ethical, aesthetic and even spiritual development". Therefore, teachers must be able to lead students to act ethically in the search for autonomous and quality learning, so that they can be exemplary citizens in society.

## Conclusion

Higher education is considered to be the formally conceived space for the exercise of the teaching profession, in its relationship with students and with all other actors in the educational process. Thus, in its curricular component, higher education must reflect the training needs of citizens in the areas of technical knowledge and ethical training, so that teachers, researchers and students develop skills in order to solve, in general, their personal, professional and national challenges.

With respect to the objective of the study, the research allowed for the following conclusions to be reached: (i) currently, teachers experience several challenges. These are faced with the

challenge of psychopedagogic training so that they can professionally develop their role, adopting methodologies capable of stimulating and adapting to the student's new interests through the teaching-learning process; (ii) another challenge is related to the fact that there are teachers who do not respect the deontology of the profession, which makes students generalize the discredited image of such teacher to all the teachers in the institution.

Some of these challenges have to do with changes in society that result in the loss of ethical values. Schools or higher education institutions are seen as places where knowledge is sought, to better serve society. In higher education, know-how, how to be, and life-long learning in society are improved. The acquisition of know-how requires the student's commitment to learning, and the teacher's commitment to the art of knowing how to teach according to the demands of contemporary times.

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