

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY BETWEEN IBN KHALDUN AND VICO: JUDGMENTS AND CONCEPTIONS

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Abstract:

The term ‘philosophy of history’ has received considerable attention from researchers and scholars, especially in the fields of philosophy and history. This highlights the relationship between these two prominent terms, the former carrying abstract meanings that may seem far removed from the realistic trajectory of thought associated with the concept of history. Ibn Khaldun and Vico, through their broad intellectual scope in their respective research paths, confirmed this notion. This critically reflective study reflects a distinct perspective on the philosophy of history, both ancient and modern, encompassing the principles, foundations and methodologies of thought. It calls for the unveiling of numerous issues that require a transformation of human history, given its diverse and varied nature in conveying the stories of humanity.

Keywords: History, Philosophy, Ibn Khaldun, Vico, Humanity.

The philosophy of history between Ibn Khaldun and Vico: Judgments and Concepts

Western philosophy has witnessed the circulation of new concepts and terms that have been engraved in the history of thought. Most scholars believe that Voltaire was the first to use the term “philosophy of history” in his writings. However, it was not intended to establish a separate branch of philosophical or historical study in terms of its subjects and components. Rather, as Collingwood notes in his book *The Idea of History*, Voltaire’s aim was to alert historians to the need to apply rational philosophy to the study of history. This is to criticise historical narratives and to purify them of myths and legends and of everything that does not correspond to the judgement of reason and reality.

This does not mean, however, that the principles on which the philosophy of history is based did not exist before the term appeared in Voltaire’s writings. In fact, philosophical reflection has long been present in human thought. It is rare to find a historian or thinker whose works are entirely devoid of philosophical

reflections on the purpose, course or critical observations of historical events. For this reason, some scholars have pointed to several figures who made contributions to the philosophy of history before the emergence and widespread use of the term¹.

Among the prominent figures, both ancient and modern, we find Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, John Locke, Vico, Montesquieu, and others.

Given the national link between ideas, both ancient and modern, and between East and West, we have chosen to focus on two exemplary scholars in the philosophy of history in order to understand their intellectual and epistemological implications. These scholars are Ibn Khaldun from the Arab side and Vico from the Western side. Before delving into the definition of the concept of history and its relationship to philosophy, let us examine the question: What is history?

1- History:

The question of history presents a clear paradox in terms of the common understanding of history. History is defined as “the science of human past events through the study of documents and artefacts”. So how can the future, which is linked to things that have not yet happened or been historically verified, become part of history? The sharp paradox inherent in this question did not arise in the light of the religious changes in history in antiquity and the Middle Ages. For these changes did not limit history to human action alone, but incorporated the divine will into history. History was seen as a manifestation of divine care. God created the first man and placed him on earth at the beginning of time, and that was the beginning of history².

Returning to the concepts of the Arabic language, we find that the word “tareekh” means “timing”. Ibn Manzoor says: “Tareekh means time. The book is dated to a certain day, which means its time. The history of the Muslims is dated from the time of the migration of our Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Ibn Khaldun did not limit the concept of history to this, but he made it clearer and more detailed. He says: “History informs us of the conditions of past nations in terms of their ethics, of prophets in terms of their lives, and of kings

¹ - Al-Hassari, Saadi, *Studies in the Introduction of Ibn Khaldun*, translated by Muhammad Abdul Rahman Baraj, Cairo, 3rd edition, 1967, pp. 171-172.

² - Hashim Yahya Al-Mullah, *Philosophy of History*, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 1971, p. 37.

in terms of their states and policies. This enables us to benefit from their examples in matters of religion and secular affairs¹.

In Western dictionaries and studies, the most famous definition was given by the Greek historian Herodotus, known as the “Father of History”, who said: “History is the study of past events, which includes all that has happened as a result of human action in its various forms and various fields, and which can be known through documents and artefacts”².

The relation between history and philosophy:

Given that philosophy is the contemplation of society and the study of its sciences, it is constantly engaged with the events of the times and cannot transcend them. Philosophy has been linked to history not only in the sense of the history of philosophy, which is the observation of the history of human thought and its fluctuations, but also in the sense of the philosophy of history, which is the contemplation of the development and movement of history and the attempt to find a law that governs this development and describes this movement. In fact, the history of philosophy itself is not merely a lifeless record of philosophical doctrines and theories throughout history, without reference to their historical conditions and expression of the spirit of the age. It is the knowledge of the individual, social and historical human experiences out of which these philosophies emerged. The history of philosophy is the history of the human mind as it confronts reality and traverses history. Therefore, there are two types of history of philosophy: the first is a quantitative record of the history of ideas without perspective, law, or meaning, and the second is an attempt to delve into the depths of history and go beyond ideas to understand their meaning in their eras, the circumstances of their emergence, and the living experiences behind them, connecting them to the preceding stage and preparing them for the subsequent stage.

The first type means the death of philosophy, the second its life. Philosophy has always been the product of its time, expressing the crisis of its time and trying to offer solutions that also reflect the vision of its time and transcend it towards what is to come. Philosophy was born in history and emerged from a particular point of view, but it was lost in the hands of philosophers and professionals who uprooted it from its roots. They presented it as a bird in the air with no stable place or position. The connection between philosophy and history is inherently

¹ - Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *The History of Ibn Khaldun, Book of Lessons and the Collection of the Beginning and News in the Days of the Arabs, Persians, Berbers, and those who contemporaneous with them of the Great Sultan's*, Vol. 1, Beirut, p. 362.

² - Nouri Jaafar, *History: Its Fields and Philosophy*, Zahra Printing Press, Baghdad, 1955, pp. 30-33.

clear, and its life or death depends on it. When philosophy is connected with history, it grows, flourishes and lives. If it is separated from history, it fades, shrinks and dies¹.

Philosophy of history:

Philosophy of history is a branch of philosophy that focuses on the study of history from a philosophical perspective. It is known as the theoretical study of the foundations of practices, applications, and social changes that have occurred throughout history. Philosophy of history, like other philosophical disciplines such as philosophy of science and philosophy of religion, has been explored by philosophers such as the German philosopher Hegel and the Western philosopher Foucault. In the Arab world, Ibn Khaldun is one of the philosophers who showed interest in this field.

The difference between a historian and a philosopher of history can be understood as follows: The historian is a scholar who studies the circumstances of human phenomena, the subject of historical action or the historical event to be documented. The historian attempts to interpret that event, or the specific events that make up a larger event, by understanding the cause of that event, whether it is a simple or complex part. This process involves collecting historical material, examining documents and reaching the stage of interpretation where the cause of the event is discovered and explained. On the other hand, the philosopher, the philosopher of history, does not stop at these specific historical events, but is more concerned with trying to understand the entire course of human historical events as a whole and to arrive at a comprehensive and holistic cause.

Therefore, the historian's starting point is the specific event, while the philosopher's starting point is the comprehensive trajectory of events². In its simplest definition, philosophy of history can be understood as the consideration of historical facts from a philosophical perspective. It is a discipline that can be awakened in certain aspects from within assemblies, organisations and parties.

The philosophy of history according to Ibn Khaldun:

Many prominent thinkers consider Ibn Khaldun to be the founder of this discipline, although Ibn Khaldun himself did not use a specific term for its study. He called it "human civilisation" to make it clear to those who study Ibn

¹ Hassan Hanafi, *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 2, in *Modern and Contemporary Western Philosophy*, Hindawi Foundation, 2020, p. 68.

² Mustafa Al-Nashar, *Philosophy of History*, Hope Printing and Publishing Company, 1st edition, 2004, pp. 24-25.

Khaldun and try to understand it. It has been written about him that he was one of the Arab thinkers who enjoyed an immense amount of diverse qualitative studies, and perhaps this diversity is attributed to the various aspects of Ibn Khaldun's thought. Our philosopher delved into the philosophy of history, the science of history and various disciplines such as economics. Ibn Khaldun is a pioneering philosopher with his feet firmly on the ground.

From the perspective of the science or philosophy of history, Arabic literature is exemplified by one of its brightest names. This is not an exaggeration or an enthusiasm, but a radiant truth, that Ibn Khaldun is the creator of the science of history based on a specific philosophy governed by general laws. The philosophy of history is a point of view committed to presenting scientific concepts in terms of their historical development throughout history. It asserts that social events are dependent on a specific historical context. From this perspective, social laws are characterised as historical, and we find that the term "philosophy of history" encompasses the qualities sufficient to define the term, in addition to the meanings that it logically entails.

Ibn Khaldun, the founder of the branch of philosophy of history, believes that research in this field aims to uncover the influential factors that shape history in order to understand the nature of history in its past and future dimensions. These factors are the sufficient forces within society and its spatial and temporal circumstances, meaning that historians can achieve a more accurate understanding of history by consciously acknowledging them¹.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the primary aim of the study of the philosophy of history is to uncover the factors that shape history in order to understand its nature in its past and future dimensions. He defined these factors in their general framework as a set of latent forces within society in its spatial context. These forces are based on the conditions of the days and generations that preceded us and those that will come after us, considering that historical knowledge is determined by two fundamental aspects: the understanding of the essence and the precision of the method used to uncover it. Through these aspects, a precise understanding of history is achieved, and historical knowledge is formed and constructed.

¹ - Faisal Salah Al-Rashidi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, Contemporary Philosophy Department, 2016, p. 05.

Ibn Khaldun's Methodology of History and its Relationship to Philosophy:

In the Introduction, Ibn Khaldun states: "As for the art of history, among the arts that have circulated through nations and generations... it is, on the surface, nothing more than accounts of days, states, and precedents from the early centuries, where statements are developed, examples are cited, and assemblies discuss them. It includes the celebration and shows us the nature of creation, how circumstances have changed and the scope and range of states have expanded... In its essence, it involves the observation, study and representation of entities and their precise principles. It is a profound science of the realities and causes of events. It is therefore rooted in profound wisdom"¹.

He thus distinguishes between the knowledge of history or the art of history, as he calls it on the surface, and the art of history in its essence. The first type is the narration of past events and the discussion of different states, how they came into being, how they persisted and how they finally disappeared. This is history in the general sense. The second type is a branch of wisdom or philosophy, because it deals with the causes of events and the laws that govern them. This is the other aspect of the art of history, which we now call the philosophy of history. There are other texts in the Introduction that further clarify this matter. For example, it says: "The knowledge is that the reality of history is a narrative about human society, which is the construction of the world, and it presents the various conditions that occur in this construction, such as savagery, social cohesion, conflicts, and the different types of transformations among humans, and what is associated with it in terms of governance, states, their hierarchies, and what humans adopt in their actions and endeavours in terms of income, livelihood, knowledge, industries, and all the conditions that naturally arise from this construction"².

Accordingly, it can be said that Ibn Khaldun studied the works of earlier historians and benefited from their experience. However, he did not hesitate to correct the inaccuracies and errors he saw in their writings. His aim was to lay a new foundation for the science of history so that historians, if they followed him, could avoid these mistakes. This aspect of Ibn Khaldun's thought is also a facet of the philosophy of history. Like any other science, it is in the nature of philosophy to explore the foundations of the science of history. This raises a new and important question: "Did Ibn Khaldun apply this precise, rational historical methodology that he discussed in the introduction when he wrote his

¹ - Ibn Khaldun, The Introduction, n.d., pp. 03-04.

² - Same, p. 31.

historical work ‘Al-‘Ibar’? We have read ‘Al-‘Ibar’, which is a massive six-volume book, and we have found that it is a response to the narratives of prominent historians such as Tabari, Mas’udi, Ibn Hazm, al-Jurjani, Ibn Sa’id and others, without critically examining or applying the methodology he talked about extensively in the introduction. Ibn Khaldun is therefore, as Dr Abdulwahid Al-Wafi has argued, “a unique theorist of history, surpassing many historians”¹.

One of the errors into which Ibn Khaldun fell was to accept some weak historical narratives that did not stand up to social criticism.

For example, he falsely claimed that the Caliph Harun al-Rashid drank alcohol because he was pious, prayed a hundred voluntary units of prayer daily, and engaged in military campaigns one year and abstained from them the next. He said: “As for the fabricated story that associates Harun al-Rashid with drinking wine and links his intoxication with the intoxication of remorse, God forbid! We have not heard anything so bad. Where is this in the character of al-Rashid and his fulfilment of the religious and righteous duties of the Caliphate? Tabari and others narrated that he used to perform a hundred voluntary acts of worship every day, and that he would engage in military campaigns for one year and abstain from them for another year”².

Whatever is said, it is undeniable that Ibn Khaldun is known for his interest in the philosophy of history. In fact, many prominent thinkers believe that Ibn Khaldun is the founder of this branch of philosophy. One such thinker is the famous contemporary British historian, Toynbee, who is also a proponent of a theory in the philosophy of history. He referred to it in his monumental work “A Study of History”. Similarly, Flint, a professor of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, gives a more detailed account of the philosophy of history in his book “The Philosophy of History”. Taha Hussein believes that Ibn Khaldun did not introduce sociology, as many, including Ferro, claim. Instead, he laid the foundations for a philosophy of society without reaching the level of an established science. He supports this claim by stating that Ibn Khaldun studied society in order to interpret history, with the aim of studying the laws of human development in general. The introduction to his work bears a striking resemblance to Montesquieu’s ‘The Spirit of the Laws’, and we cannot claim that ‘The Spirit of the Laws’ is a book on sociology, but rather, like the introduction, it is a philosophical work. Ibn Khaldun’s aim, similar to Vico’s,

¹ - Ali Abdul Wahid Wafi, Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, Amma Al-Arab Series, 1963, p. 227.

² - The Introduction, n.d., p. 15.

was to study historical events in order to extract general laws that govern the course of these events through time. He claimed that this new science he was creating would allow him to predict the future¹.

Ibn Khaldun did not explicitly use the term “philosophy of history” to describe his study. Instead, he referred to it as “human civilisation” or “human social organisation”. In his introduction he states that “human civilisation is nothing but human social interaction”. What exactly does Ibn Khaldun mean by “human civilisation”? Many scholars agree that he refers to it as “civilisation”, including Nicholson in his book “The Literary History of the Arabs”, Toynbee in his book “A Study of History”, and Rosenthal in his book “Ibn Khaldun: Thinker of North Africa in the 14th Century”. Many Arab scholars who have studied Ibn Khaldun also agree, such as Professor Saati Al-Husri, Dr Abdul Rahman Badawi and others². Therefore, “human civilisation” is essentially the field of knowledge that studies the philosophy of history. Mohsen Mahdi clarifies this in his book “Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History”, stating that the aim of this new science is to search for the external and internal aspects of historical events. History and the science of civilisation study two facets of the same reality. While history focuses on the superficial events, the science of civilisation elucidates the nature and causes of these events. Logically, the study of civilisation must precede the study of history³.

Vico’s philosophy of history:

Vico introduced a new way of looking at history. Whereas history had previously focused on political events, military battles and the deeds of heroes, Vico shifted the focus to the origins and formation of civil society. He examined the cultural structure of human society, including its political, economic, artistic, legal and linguistic organisations, as well as other social structures.

The starting point of Vico’s philosophy was his critique of Cartesian epistemology. He presented a new theory that directly challenged Cartesian epistemology and criticised Descartes’ disregard for humanistic studies, particularly languages and history. His opposition to Descartes’ theory of knowledge can be seen in his works such as “The Method of Study” and “The New Science”, which he first presented in an inaugural lecture in 1708 when he took up a teaching post at the University, entitled “A Comparison of Ancient

¹ - “The Social Philosophy of Ibn Khaldun,” pages 77-79.

² - Rateb Mahmoud Al-Khudairi, Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History, Dar Al-Thaqafa for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 2007, p. 69.

³ - Ibid, p. 69.

and Modern Educational Methods”. He published these ideas in 1809 in his book *On the Methods of Study of Our Time*.

Vico argued that while the modernists brought about significant reforms in the natural sciences, they undermined the importance of studies based on human nature, such as languages, poetry, rhetoric, history, law and politics. They attempted to apply mathematical and engineering methods to disciplines that were not suited to such approaches. These initial seeds of criticism developed into a comprehensive theory of knowledge, which he set out in his book ‘*The Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*’ in 1710. From there he launched his attack on Cartesian epistemology, especially its treatment of history as a collection of confused facts and a series of absurd stories¹.

Origins and principles of the new science according to Vico:

In the light of the evolving concept of the philosophy of history, which encompasses a meaningful expression of the development of human thought through the ages, we turn to Vico’s philosophy of history, which offers an independent interpretation of the critical ideas concerning the concept of history itself. This interpretation follows an analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s view of history. So what are the main origins and principles that form the basis of Vico’s philosophy of history?

Vico’s philosophy, as highlighted in his major work, *The New Science*, focuses on the theoretical aspects of science. It comprises three main themes: origins, principles and methodology. One might confuse the terms “origins” and “principles” because of their semantic proximity. In reality, however, origins consist of a set of assumptions or intuitions that researchers must adhere to or impose when studying the history of the development of societies in general and ancient societies in particular. These origins are the ground rules on which the historical structure must be built. On the other hand, the principles refer to “what the new science has discovered in all human societies” and they are represented by three elements: religion, marriage and the burial of the dead.

In terms of methodology, Vico defined the method of historical science in relation to the methodologies of other sciences. He attempted to establish the foundations of the new science, in a form reminiscent of Euclidean geometry in establishing the principles of engineering. Vico presented a collection of philosophical and linguistic assumptions, 114 axioms in all, which included various sources and definitions. These axioms cover a wide range of topics, branching out, often intertwining and occasionally entangling with each other,

¹ - Atiyat Abu Al-Saud, *Philosophy of History in Vico*, Hindawi Foundation, United Kingdom, 2021, p. 29.

sometimes shrouded in ambiguity. Perhaps this ambiguity was one of the reasons why Vico was not well understood and overlooked for a considerable period of his life¹.

According to Vico, history revolves in an ascending and perpetual spiral. Human societies, in his view, pass through certain stages of development that eventually lead to dissolution or barbarism, only to begin again with higher stages that surpass the previous ones. Historical cycles are thus intertwined. For Vico, progress is not a law in the natural course of history, since what one generation gains can be lost by the next. In addition to the above points, Vico establishes the principles of his new science by assuming the absence of any existing books, rejecting the ideas presented by linguists and philosophers as confusing and disturbing for two reasons:

1. The arrogance of researchers, who assume that everything they present has been known since the beginning of time, which is why Vico cannot rely solely on the research of philosophers.
2. The arrogance of peoples who believe that everything they know has been known since the beginning of time, which is why they cannot rely solely on what linguists have written about the history of these peoples.

But amidst the darkness and ambiguity surrounding ancient societies, the light of eternity shines. The historical world is a creation of man, and this is the main idea of Vico's philosophy. History is not the work of fate, but of the mind. Therefore, we must find the principles of history in the transformations of our own human intellect. Vico is very surprised at the tendency of serious philosophers to study the material world of nature, which is God's creation and which only He can fully know, while neglecting the study of the human historical world. They are like eyes that see everything outside themselves and need a mirror to see themselves².

In the light of these principles, Vico presented the theoretical aspect of his philosophy of history, including the elements of the new science and its origins. But what about their respective methodologies in comparison with Ibn Khaldun's methodology in the philosophy of history? What are the intellectual and epistemological dimensions of each?

¹ - Same reference, pp. 27-28.

² - Ibid, p. 68.

Is there a connection between Ibn Khaldun and Vico in the philosophy of history?

Ibn Khaldun was not, it would seem, pursuing a religious goal in his research. He undertook these studies to seek the truth itself. On the other hand, Vico explicitly had a religious purpose in his research, since he undertook these studies with the intention of proving the divine care in historical events, as he explains in his own words. Vico begins the first chapters of his book by presenting the most important historical events from the cycle of the world to the Second Punic War, based on his assertion that “the Hebrews are older than the Egyptians, the Chinese and all other nations”. This is a secondary point in Vico’s view, which cannot be refuted by the argument that non-sacred ancient histories do not mention the Hebrews until a relatively late date. Furthermore, Vico claims that the Chaldeans, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans and others were inspired by the Hebrews. Nevertheless, Vico states that the Egyptians made a great contribution to history by leaving two important historical truths, no less significant and magnificent than their mighty pyramids. The first important truth is that they divided their history into three periods and roles: the role of the gods, the role of heroes and the role of men.

The second important truth is that they believed that people in each of these three roles spoke a language specific to that role: the hieroglyphic language in the role of the gods, the symbolic language in the role of the heroes, and the vernacular language in the role of the humans¹. This is the starting point of an attempt to narrate events as they are in Vico’s historical thought, as opposed to what human civilisation represents in Ibn Khaldun’s perspective. Despite the significant difference between them in terms of the philosophy of history and its realistic expression, it is possible to overcome this difficulty, as Professor Saad El-Husseini states in his book,

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¹ - Saadi Al-Hassari, *Studies on Ibn Khaldun’s Introduction*, n.d., p. 170.

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First: To look for common themes in both books, no matter how few, and to examine the issues they both addressed simultaneously, regardless of their limited scope.

Second, to compare the two books in terms of the methodology used to carry out the research.

Third, to compare them in terms of the breadth of perspective and the depth of research and thought.

1- One of the most prominent common themes: "It is known that the belief in the enormous size of the body of the first man and his tall stature has been widespread among people since ancient times. Ibn Khaldun does not believe in the tales of the giants and refutes them openly and forcefully in several chapters of the Introduction... Vico, on the other hand, believes in the tales of the giants, with all their flaws, and not only believes in them, but shows great interest in them and bases a considerable part of his opinions and theories on them. The second point is the relationship between sociology and religion: Ibn Khaldun considers human beings to be naturally social and claims that human society is necessary and does not agree with those who claim that society cannot exist without religion... On the other hand, Vico claims that social life is based on religion in general and categorically states that "without religion there would be no society at all"¹. So what about the methodology and the way of thinking

¹ - Same reference, p. 181.

between Ibn Khaldun and Vico? It seems that “Ibn Khaldun relies on facts in his opinions and theories in general. He does not overlook the errors and illusions that often creep into the transmitted news... As for Vico, he is not overly attached to facts and events, and is generally aloof from inductive research.

Ibn Khaldun, like Vico, believes in God and acknowledges His power and care, regarding the order of the universe and the social system as divine laws. However, Ibn Khaldun’s approach in this regard is completely different from Vico’s, since Ibn Khaldun’s thinking and justification proceed independently of religion... whereas Vico fully integrates the idea of God into his research¹. So what are the existential dimensions, and which of them preceded the philosophy of history according to Saat al-Husri?

It is known that “Ibn Khaldun’s Introduction was written in 1377, while The New Science was published in 1725, which means that the Introduction is logically 348 years older than The New Science. It should not be overlooked that these three and a half centuries between the writing of the two books were among the most fruitful periods of human progress and richest in intellectual, scientific and political revolutions, due to the emergence of the Enlightenment in Europe... Robert Flint had previously stated that Ibn Khaldun’s claim to the honour of being called the founder of the science or philosophy of history is proven and stronger than the claim of any writer before Vico... As for myself, Saat al-Husri says, on the basis of the above-mentioned researches and comparisons, I have no hesitation in saying that Ibn Khaldun’s right in this field is stronger and more established than Vico’s right, not only because he was much older, but also because, despite this antiquity, he was closer to the modern scientific spirit”.

The conclusion:

The philosophy of any science consists of its general principles, and as the science itself changes, so does its philosophy. The study of the philosophy of history is considered an important subject to which researchers and scholars have attached great importance because it is based on the foundations of human thought, both ancient and modern. It explores the temporal and spatial dimensions in which human beings move and delves into the mysteries of the universe, existence and life. This is what famous Arab and Western historians, such as Ibn Khaldun and Vico, have tried to establish by linking the question of history to humanity. This is the most important aspect in dealing with the philosophy of history, despite its complexity and the different and divergent

¹ Ibid, p. 185.

approaches between Arab and Western intellectual motivations. The ultimate goal is to find the common ground between them in shaping the present and future of humanity.

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