

# COMMUNITY AND PLACE

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The overall ambition of this paper is to reflect on the relationship between the human community or society in a place and that place itself. Our understanding of this relationship is necessarily bound up with our understanding of what a place *is*, and, for that matter, what a community is. My discussion will, initially at least, focus on the concept of place rather than that of community, but I hope it will be clear that what I have to say about the former has important implications for the latter.

The paper is divided into three parts. I will start by making some preliminary points and distinctions, points which will have a bearing on what I'm going to say later on. In the second part I will be concerned with the idea of place as a *lived space*, and more specifically with a constructivist version of that idea. In the third part I will sketch what I take to be the implications of a constructivist position for what it is to be together in a place, for our sense of communality.

## Preliminaries

Place is a term which mediates between *the given* and *the made*. As something given, the place is integrated in the natural world. As something made, the place is a result of human effort. The paper will be an attempt to understand this mediation between the given and the made in a place. In this first part of the paper I will focus on the role of human presence in the emergence of places. That is, the discussion will focus on these efforts and activities, but the point of the discussion will be to show that their nature is properly understood only when seen in relation to those aspects of place which are beyond those efforts, in relation to place as something given.

The human presence in a place is an integral part of the place, and is thus a fact of it. The place becomes a different place if the human presence is withdrawn or disappears. Human presence in a

place, no matter how brief or transitional, is a part of the (physical) place, for the time that it lasts. The humans that are *there* are part of the contents of that "there," part of the furniture of the place. Aristotle sees place as a container, and human beings who are in a place are part of what it contains. In this sense human beings are in a position that is not much different from that of trees, houses, flowers, animals. We may be more mobile and less permanently present than some of these, but as long as our presence lasts, we are part of the contents of the place. (And: the place itself cannot be grasped in isolation from its contents.)

But human beings in a place are also a fact of the place in another sense. Human life being what it is (human bodily needs being what they are), a place will be marked by the human presence provided it is not completely transitional. Human beings need shelter, water, heat, food etc, and these needs, and the activities that are tied to the meeting of these needs, have unavoidable consequences for the place.<sup>1</sup> This point can be put in ecological terms: the human community in a place forms part of its ecology.

We may, however, wish to go further than this and say that human presence is not only a fact of the place, it is also a condition of it. Without human beings there is no question of some patch of the earth being seen as a place. The concept of place belongs within the human form of life, it makes sense within the human way of being in the world, and the human way of being in the world is partly characterized by the role places play in this form of life. It is for the human eye that some patches of the earth (some geographical sites) appear as places. With no human beings in the

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<sup>1</sup>One may think that for this to be true it is essential that the human beings in question lead a sedentary life in the place. However, the vital distinction here is not that between nomadic and sedentary forms of life. Also nomadic forms of life become an integral part of the ecology of the places between which the nomads move, or rather the landscape which these places are places in. Sedentary forms of life further involve human place-building activities, long-term usage of the natural resources of the place, and other activities and efforts which have both foreseen and unforeseen consequences for the natural world of the place. (For the place as part of the natural world.)

world the human form of life within which the concept of place makes sense would no longer exist. Thus places would no longer exist. In this sense human presence is a condition of the existence of the place. (Or rather: human beings in the world is a condition of there being places in the world.)

One can, I think, hold the view that human presence is a condition of place without endorsing the following view, namely that places owe their existence to human beings' projecting the concept of place onto the physical world. According to this view the concept of place is something that human beings bring to the physical world, we shape the world by the concepts with which we see the world. This view, which seems to me a revival of philosophical idealism, holds that places, even if they are unmarked physically by human presence in the place, are human constructs, produced by the cognitive efforts of human beings. One can hold that the human cognitive effort is essential to the existence of places (places depend for their existence on the human way of cognitively receiving the world), without accepting this view of what role the cognitive effort plays in bringing about places. Indeed, the philosophical importance of the notion of place may be to remind us that the human form of life within which the concept of place makes sense is embedded in a world that is not of our own making, a world which we receive. The very notion of place may be seen as a recognition of that embeddedness. So, the concept of place must be understood with reference to the human sense-making activity, but stay clear of an understanding of that sense-making activity as a production of the phenomena which we (as human beings) make sense of.

I said a little while ago that the philosophical importance of the notion of place may be to remind us that the human form of life within which the concept of place makes sense is embedded in a world that is not of our own making, a world which we receive. I take this to be true of the human condition, whether or not we think it is true: we *are* embedded in a given world in this way. Our *reception* of it, however, may be more or less wholehearted. Or, to put it in other words: our practical activities and efforts in the world to make ourselves at home in it may be more or less marked

by a recognition of this more profound embeddedness. On this basis we may distinguish between communities that are more and communities that are less deeply embedded in the place in which their life unfolds. The human community is deeply embedded in the place if the form of life of this community is marked by an acceptance of the specific living conditions that this patch of the earth offers, i. e. by an acceptance of the place as something given. Similarly the community may respond to the natural surroundings by rejecting them, i. e. by making its way of life as independent as possible of the living conditions that the place offers, and thus seek to make the place into something wholly made, or man-made.<sup>2</sup>

The degree of such embeddedness may be taken as an expression of our understanding of and valuing of the place as part of the natural world. We may relate to the place in our practical building of it and in our living- making (productive) activity in it in such a way that we express a recognition both of its independence of us (me), and of our (my) dependence on it. Likewise, our practical dealings with and in the place may be lacking in such an understanding or recognition. When we evaluate a human form of life (that of a particular culture, our own or that of other people), we may take such a lack of recognition to be an expression of ignorance with respect to a fundamental feature of the human condition: our dependence on a natural world that is not of our own making, and our being an integral part of that world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Whether one accepts or rejects the given living conditions may not be a matter of choice; the tone of volition here is unfortunate, and perhaps a reflection of a rather shallow understanding of the modern situation.

<sup>3</sup>Our awareness and recognition of our embeddedness may be articulated in words or in practices or in both, and it may not be possible to understand any of them (our words, our practices) in isolation from each other. A thought may be expressed in a practice, and words may form part of that practice. The thoughts our words express, on the other hand, may not be comprehensible unless we see them in light of the practices they are embedded in.

### Place as lived space

In the following I wish to discuss the relationship between the human community in a place and that place itself in less abstract terms. I will do that by picking up a notion that is often used to distinguish a place from any accidentally delineated patch of the earth, the notion of *lived space*. There is in the idea of place as a lived space a tension which I want to highlight, a tension between on the one hand the role of the community in bringing the place into existence, and on the other, the role of the place in bringing about the community.

The idea of place as lived space is inspired by phenomenological thinking, and Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt*, or life-world, is heard in the background. A place is a lived space is a life-world. This way of thinking obviously takes the human presence in a place as a condition of it. It is the human presence on this spot (and all the practical and social and symbolic activities that this human presence involves) that lifts the spot out of the dead masses of undifferentiated land and turns it into a place. As lived space or life-world the place is imbued with meaning. It is in virtue of being imbued with meaning that it is a place. As a lived world a place makes sense. Thus, the idea of place as a lived space turns the notion of place into an experiential notion: whether or not any particular spot of the earth is a place cannot be settled independently of people's experience of it. On the contrary people's experience of it is *the* route into its placeness, its character of being a place.

This experiential character of the notion of place makes any particular place vulnerable to differences in people's experience of it. Not everything that comes across to me as a place will necessarily come across to you as a place. One place (a house, a village, a mountain) may mean different things to two different people, or two different groups of people, or, for that matter, two different peoples. Since human life is essentially a communal life, and sense-making activity in a profound sense is a communal activity, the sense a particular place makes is dependent on what human community those for whom it makes sense are integrated in. In Tromsø, where we are now, there is a mountain called

Tromsdalstinden. For the Sami people this is a holy mountain. To understand how it is perceived and received within the Sami culture, one needs to know Sami religious life. This in turn must be comprehended within the framework of the broader form of life of the Samis, their being a nomadic or semi-nomadic, reindeer-herding people, the way their way of life is developed through an intimate exchange with the particular and rather marginal living-conditions of this area.

Tromsdalstinden is not a holy mountain in any comparable sense for the Norwegians here. First of all it doesn't have one fixed, shared meaning, which may be taken as an indication that it isn't particularly central to the Norwegian community here. It could however, also be taken as an indication that the Norwegians don't form one homogeneous community. Among us it is a mountain you walk to get away from town, to get a marvellous view, in order to test your fitness or to prove it, in order to deserve your dinner all the more when you get home. Or it is an object of contemplation, something that you marvel at from your window in town, a mountain that captures the light of the different seasons, the first light when the sun appears at midday in January, after having been hidden behind the horizon for two months, and it is the mountain that captures the last sunrays of the midnight sun in July. Or it is just one mountain among many in this area, none of which you care much for anyway. It annoys you when you drive those long-winding roads around it: if it was blown to pieces, your trip would be only one fifth of its length.

My point here is very simple: if we think of place as lived space, and explain the notion in the terms I have used above, Tromsø is not one place, but several, and so are most others, at least potentially. Two people can be in the same locality (within the same geographical boundaries), e.g. of a village or a city, and still be in different places. That is, they may not be part of the same community that defines the place. Two different communities may

define two different places on this same spot/site. Or the same spot may form part of the place that two different communities define.<sup>4</sup>

According to this line of thought, what place or places we live in here depends on what community or communities we are integrated in. As human life is essentially communal, "lifting the spot out of the dead masses of land" is essentially a communal effort. It seems that we are mediated to the place through the community of which we are a part. Consequently, one's sense of belonging to the place is concordant with one's sense of belonging to the community of the place. In being brought into the community one is also brought into and becomes a participant in the place as a lived space or life-world.

This way of connecting the notion of place to human communal life has the immediate appeal of giving at least a preliminary account of what it means to belong to a place, and thus to explain how one can be in a place and still be out of place there. This seemingly paradoxical way of talking depends on our employing the word "place" in two senses, first meaning the geographical spot itself, then meaning place as it is defined by the community. We are out of place in a place when we have no ties with the community of the place. Indeed one possible interpretation of the notion of exile, which according to some, at least, is central to the modern experience of the world, and perhaps a privileged position from which to see the world, seems to spring from this way of understanding the connection between community and place.

In the following I will not pursue this notion of exile, but rather return to the tension I mentioned earlier which I take to be inherent in the idea of place as a lived space; the tension between on

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<sup>4</sup>The same geographical site may contain several life-worlds. One person may belong to several communities. These different communities, and the life-worlds they constitute, may be set in the same geographical site. So, one person may move within one geographical site but between different life-worlds that co-exist within this site. Likewise, the site may contain more life-worlds than the one(s) this person belongs to. She may thus move within the same geographical boundaries of her own life-world(s), but outside her own, in life-worlds in which she is alien, in which she does not belong.

the one hand the role of the community in bringing the place into existence, and on the other, the role of the place in bringing about the community.<sup>5</sup> The account I have given above seems on the surface, at least, to give the constitutive power to the community. My account seems to favour the view that a place is a culturally (communally) constructed phenomenon, something that owes its existence to the human community that is situated in this particular location. To say that the community is constitutive of the place is to say that the way we are bound together in a place defines the place, turns these dead masses of land into a place. The life it has as a place it owes to us. It is our ties with the community of the place that tie us to the geographical spot.

I take this to be a quite widespread view of the relationship between the community of a place and the place itself. One may call it a constructivist view/concept of place: places are essentially human cultural constructs. My own attitude to this constructivist view is ambivalent. On the one hand I disagree with the constructivist view as I formulated it just now. On the other hand I hold most of the points about place that led to this conclusion to be right, at least as far as they go. In the following I wish to highlight one feature of the line of thought that I have just outlined that I think is simply mistaken, or at least is formulated in such a way that it is easy to mistake the truth it contains.

The idea in the account just given of place as a lived space that I wish to focus on is the idea that the human presence on a particular location lifts the spot out of the dead masses of undifferentiated land and turns it into a place. In particular I think it is the view of the earth as "dead masses of undifferentiated land" that invites the constructivist conclusion. If it is the case that places emerge for the human eye out of such dead and undifferentiated masses of land, whatever life the place has, it has been given by the human eye. An Orkney author, George Mackay Brown, formulates in a story what I take to be an ethics of giving and receiving in Orkney: "I give what I give, and I take what I get." In contrast to

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<sup>5</sup>This tension is related to the two senses of "place" that we oscillate between when we talk of being in a place and being out of place there.

this, the giving and taking between human beings and their places as the constructivist sees it takes the form "I give what I give and I take what I give." In other words, in our relation to places there is no room for getting, for receiving; the given aspect of place is blurred or rendered as insignificant. Whatever I see in the place, its very placeness, springs from me, from the eyes with which I see it.

In my opening remarks I made a point of distinguishing between the view that the concept of place depends on the human form of life and the idealistic view that human beings project the concept of place on to the physical world. There is, I think, a tendency to take this latter view to follow from the first. The confusion involved here may be described as a running together of the conditions which are necessary to a certain perception and the content of the perception that is conditioned in this way. Seeing and valuing a geographical site as a place depends on the form of life within which it is seen and valued in this way. In this sense the human presence, and the form of life of this particular human community, is a condition of its being perceived in this way. But my perception of it as a valuable place is not a perception of just those conditions. The seeing of it as a valuable place may depend on me, but what I see may be quite independent of me. Indeed when I perceive it as a valuable place it may be exactly its independence of me that I value.

The constructivist idea that the human eye, and particularly the culturally varnished human eye, turns the undifferentiated land into a place is, I think, guilty of running these two together. The conditions of seeing Tromsdalstinden in the way the Samis do are certainly given by the Sami form of life. Grasping their perception of it when they see it as a holy mountain requires familiarity with their form of life. But *what* they see when they see it in this way (the content of what they see) is not identical with those conditions. *That* they see Tromsdalstinden in this way is an upshot of their culture/community/way of life, but *what* they see is not. What they see is something that is not of their own making. To see Tromsdalstinden as a holy mountain is, perhaps, to recognize their own (form of) life and all that is a result of their own individual and

communal effort as ultimately dependent on a natural world that is not.

Perhaps we can use Bateson's formula "a difference that makes a difference" to disentangle the constructivist knot here. The human eye does not produce all the differences that it sees. The human eye does not produce Tromsdalstinden. The human eye sees (receives through the senses) Tromsdalstinden. The difference between Tromsdalstinden and any other lump of land or patch of the earth is nature's work. The significance of this difference, or the lack of it, springs from us. The differences between us that I mentioned earlier with respect to what Tromsdalstinden signifies to us, may themselves be expressive of differences between us in the sense we make of our relation to the natural world.

I said earlier that this sense-making activity is a communal effort, but also that the sense Tromsdalstinden makes within the Norwegian community isn't a homogeneous one. This may be because the Norwegian community itself isn't homogeneous, or it may be because responses to Tromsdalstinden don't figure prominently in the sense of communality among the Norwegians. Responding to Tromsdalstinden rests with the individual rather than with the community. Taken together the various Norwegian responses to Tromsdalstinden that I mentioned above are indications of an urban community whose form of life is far less embedded in the natural surroundings than the Sami community. However, if we look at each of the responses and see what they individually express, we find that they differ significantly in their recognition of this more profound embeddedness of human life in the natural world. By seeing Tromsdalstinden as the keeper of the light of the season, one turns it into an object of contemplation by which one measures the patterns of seasonal change and repetition, and by the perception of which one improves one's awareness of these patterns of change and repetition. This contemplation may be seen as, and I think it is correctly seen as, a recognition of our more fundamental embeddedness in the natural world. Such a response is far removed from perceiving it primarily as an obstacle to straight roads and efficient transportation, and it is in spirit a lot closer to the Sami perception of it as a holy mountain. This is so

even if it springs from an urban form of life that in its big outlines, at least, doesn't exhibit a recognition of such embeddedness.

**Sense of communality: Towards a poetic response to place**

So far in this paper I have been concerned with what I take to be a problem in a constructivist conception of place, first in general terms, then by way of an example. My example was concerned with the different senses which different communities may ascribe to a place, in this case a mountain. I questioned the constructivist position by questioning the implicit idea that responding to the physical world is simply responding to our own culture's or our own community's demands. There are such cultural demands on us, our responses are culturally shaped, and I am sure this symposium will give us ample examples of such shapings. I would like to maintain, however, that not everything that enters into our response to the place comes through the communally constituted and maintained discourse, and that not all the power to constitute and maintain places is in the hands of the community. A place is also something that is given, and as something given, it is something we find ourselves embedded in. Different cultures and communities may differ in their recognition of this embeddedness, and their sense of place may be an expression of such a recognition.

In this last part of the paper I wish to pursue this criticism of a constructivist conception of place, but I will do it by shifting the emphasis of the discussion slightly. While I have been concerned with communal senses of place, I will in the following be concerned with the sense of communality in a place, that is, the way we relate to others in a place. In the constructivist version of what a place is, the way we are together in a place defines the place. This implies that we are in the same place by virtue of being bound together in this way. Those who are not within our social boundaries are not in the same place as we are. They may be within social boundaries that define a different place in this spot. Then they are outsiders in relation to us, but insiders in relation to some other community that coexists with us in this patch of the earth. Or they may be outside social boundaries that define a place here altogether. Then they are outsiders in every cultural context here, and simply out of place.

I wish to question this conception of what it is to be together in a place by invoking some ideas that Seamus Heaney has expressed primarily in his critical work. I think, however, that these ideas also inform his poetry, even though I will do nothing now to show that that is the case. Heaney's writings spring from a place in which this contest between communities that define different places in the same geographical area has taken the form of war. His situation leaves no comforting gap between philosophical reflections and political realities, a fact that gives a certain urgency to his reflections.

Heaney is possibly the most acclaimed poet of place writing in the English language today. Both his poetry and his critical works are informed by an understanding of what poetry is that makes place central to poetry. However, his conception of the poetic is also a conception that seeks to account for the role of the poet in society, his or her responsibility towards his or her community. In his most recent collection of critical essays, *The Redress of Poetry*,<sup>6</sup> he locates the responsible poet at what he calls "the frontier of writing." The military metaphor here is no accident. It is hardly suggestive of a view of the poet as an aggressor, but rather a vision of the poet as someone who is situated in a contested field. He defines this frontier as a dividing line, "the line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature, and divides also the world of social speech from the world of poetic language." (p. xvi). This definition aligns "the actual conditions" with "social speech" on the one hand, and on the other hand it aligns "the imaginative representation of those conditions" with "poetic language." If we wish to cash this point out in terms of responsiveness to place, we get a picture of a poetic sense of place that is not indifferent to the communally mediated sense of it, but that is nevertheless different or at least distinguishable from it. And it is the work of the imagination that provokes the difference. In the poetic response we see "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality," as Heaney says.

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<sup>6</sup>Seamus Heaney: *The Redress of Poetry*, Faber and Faber, London 1995.

In *The Redress of Poetry* Heaney tries to define what he one place calls a "totally adequate" and somewhere else a "fully realized" poetry. This poetry is one which achieves this balance between the pressures of reality and the pressure of imagination. The fully realized poem notifies the ordinary scheme of things. "But in the end, the poem is more given over to the extraordinary than to the ordinary, more dedicated to the world-renewing potential of the imagined response than to the adequacy of the social one." (p. xvii). In another passage he describes the achievement of this kind of poetry as

a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. *The Divine Comedy* is a great example of this kind of total adequacy, but a haiku may also constitute a satisfying comeback by the mind to the facts of the matter. As long as the co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. (p. 8.)

The ideas of redress, of counter-weighting function, of inclusive consciousness and world-renewing potential all contribute to a picture of poetry as responsible by being responsive to a *totality* of some kind. This totality may be out of focus in our daily life. The poetic vision both brings it into focus and proves it indispensable, as if our daily life was out of focus without it. Heaney formulates this sense of totality in terms of temporality as well. Reading a fully realized poetry of this kind,

There is the sensation both of arrival and of prospect, so that one does indeed seem to "recover a past" and "prefigure a future," and thereby to complete the circle of one's being. When this happens, we have a distinct sensation that (to borrow a phrase from George Seferis's notebooks) poetry is "strong enough to help"; it is then that its redress grows palpable. (p.9).

Poetry that aspires towards this kind of totality is up to a hard test in Northern Ireland, a place marked by divisions more than anything, and a place "invoked under two different systems of naming." (p. 188). Heaney describes the situation as one in which "the whole population are adepts in the mystery of living in two places at the same time." (p. 190). This bilocation, the plurality of the place, is a fact of place in Northern Ireland, and as such it is an example of how deep the communal definition of place runs in a place. The two systems of place-names are invoked by two different communities that define two different places in the same geographical spot. The poetry that Heaney hails as adequate in these circumstances is a poetry that articulates an awareness of this plural-place-situation, in such a way that its response to the place is not circumscribed by one (or the other) community's definition of it. This isn't a poetry that is written from the outside, but from the complexities of the inside. It is a poetry that is written with both systems of naming in mind, knowing that the system of naming that belongs to the community of which you are not a part, is still a fact of this place, envisaged as a unity.

To make one place out of Northern Ireland, or rather out of the Irish Isle, one has to be in two minds, according to Heaney's line of thought. In a partly autobiographical paragraph towards the end of the book he says:

There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant English culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances. The British dimension, in other words, while it is something that will be resisted by the minority if it is felt to be coercive, has nevertheless been a given of our history and even of our geography, one of the places where we all live, willy, nilly. It's in the language. And it's where the mind of many in the republic lives also. So I would suggest that the majority of Northern Ireland should make a corresponding effort at two-mindedness, and start to conceive of themselves as within -

rather than beyond - the Irish element. Obviously, it will be extremely difficult for them to surmount their revulsion against all the violence that has been perpetrated in the name of Ireland, but everything and everybody would be helped were they to make their imagination press back against the pressure of reality and re-enter the whole country of Ireland imaginatively... (p. 202).

This is a very rich paragraph, which invites a variety of comments. I wish to finish this paper by focussing on one of the central thoughts here, namely that the British dimension is a *given* of Irish history and geography. This thought connects up with a point I made in my preliminary remarks, the point that human presence in a place is a fact of this place, it is part of what the place contains, part of its furniture.

The poetic response to place that Heaney outlines, takes seriously the thought that the other community is part of what is given in a place, whether or not the presence of the community is acknowledged by one's own community's definition of this place. Rather than assuming that the way we are bound together defines the place, a poetic response acknowledges the pressure on us from the place itself, as the shared ground that we are embedded in and that our lives unfold in, to see the other as a fellow human being. From the very fact that we are in a place together a sense of communality may emerge, a sense of communality that transcends the confines of our community.

One may ask what makes this response into a poetic response to place. (What is so peculiarly poetic about it.) It would take another paper to account for that. But a crucial feature of Heaney's poetics of place is that he sees the poet as both a materialist and a visionary. The poetic sense of place latches on to a response to place that is more primordial than, and in a sense prior to, our full knowledge of the communal definition of place in words and practices. It is also a sense of place that reaches beyond this definition in words and practices. Thus the poetic sense of place has the potential to disturb our conception both of place and community. And the relationship between community and place that we arrive at, is one which has shifted the constituting balance

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between them: rather than we constituting the place that this is, the place contributes to constituting the "we" that we are.

To sum up: the poetic vision of place is a vision of this human life being grounded in a world that is not a result of human effort. This is not a vision that ignores the human effort, or the communal bonds, but one that sees beyond these social bonds to something non-human as that which ultimately holds the human community together (or has the potential of holding the human community together.) Rather than being a product of man's meaning-making effort, the place provides a horizon of meaning that gives sense to this meaning-making effort. This is one way in which the concept of place may be said to mediate between the given and the made.

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