Dialogue II

Simplicity for Simplicity and Complexity for Complexity: A Response to "Middle Management as a Calling"

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Introduction

For the young believer seeking God's vocational calling in the world of business, Klay, Lunn, and TenHaken's article provides an admirable starting point. The authors provide a very real service, and the discussion in this response is not intended to dispute their points. However, Klay and colleagues did skim over one important point. The economic changes that have occurred since Luther and Calvin's day make the task of seeking a vocational calling more difficult than the article suggests. Middle managers in many industries face ethical dilemmas that Luther never dreamed of.

Luther said that a Christian could find God's blessing in any "lawful and moral" occupation. It is easy enough to determine legality, but in this paper I will argue that much of our contemporary economic system is too complex for the "moral" restriction to be readily discernible. What is needed is a more nuanced way for the Christian to determine his or her vocation in an increasingly complicated world. In the following pages, I will:

- Discuss the reasons for taking a more complex approach to filtering potential vocations in the search for calling.
- Develop a system that will help the Christian seeking his or her calling to think through the issues.
- Consider a biblical way of dealing with this type of complex situation.

The Problem: A More Complex Economy

The 16th Century Economy: Relatively Simple

Luther and Calvin developed their ideas regarding calling in the relatively simple economic system of the 16th century.[1]

In Europe, cities were just starting to emerge (Reformation, 2003). Most people still lived in small villages or towns, and people did business with those they had grown up with and had known all their lives (Tawney, 1926). The business community of Luther and Calvin's day was made up of people who had grown up together, played together, worked together, and gone to church together. People knew who was a skilled workman and who was not. There was no widespread need for contract law yet, since economic participants knew which other participants they could trust.[2]

The second indication of a simple economic system was that the power of merchants was just beginning to be felt — the Industrial Revolution was still in its very early stages (Reformation, 2003). There were relatively few occupations, and those occupations tended to be general rather than specialized (Heilbroner, 1980). Occupations typically focused on the necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter. Production was relatively simple, and one person or family usually performed the entire production process, from raw materials to finished product. People tended to go into their father's trade. Contrast this with the vocational reality for our students today. Many of them will work in four or five different occupations in their lives, and at least two of those occupations do not yet exist. The economic world is vastly more complex than in Luther or Calvin's day, and the likelihood is that the complexity will continue to increase.

21st Century: Two Forms of Complexity

Unlike the economic system in the 16th century, the economic system in the 21st century is filled with complexity. This directly affects the calling of the Christian into middle management or any other vocation or occupation. In the following section, we will examine two forms of complexity: complexity resulting from increased specialization of work, and complexity resulting from changes in the types of products and services that are now produced.

Complexity Due to Specialization

Increased specialization is the first complexifying factor for the Christian trying to find his or her calling in today's society. A great deal of the complexity in our economic system has come

through job and worker specialization. Klay and colleagues expressed this issue by the example of providing milk to the people who need it. Luther could say, "God Himself will milk the cows through him whose occupation that is" (as cited in Klay et al.). But, today we need people to make milking machines, dairy farmers to milk the cows, truckers to transport the milk, milk processors to process and bottle it, and grocery stores to sell it. Most things that are produced in our economy today have been made by large corporations with highly specialized jobs. Klay and colleagues correctly say that this complexity makes it more difficult for workers to see how the tasks they perform help others.

Complexity due to job specialization is important to our discussion, but first we need to identify another significant factor that adds complexity to our economic system.

Complexity Due to Increasingly Non-Essential Products

In Luther's day, most occupations were closely connected to the basic needs of life — food, clothing, shelter, basic tools for working, and such. As the standard of living has increased, however, society has demanded more and different goods and services, which have been provided through market segmentation, and in some cases, the creation of totally new industries.[3] Many of these new goods and services are only loosely connected to the essentials. For example, we need clothing, but clothing today is more often a status symbol than a basic need. In fact, it often seems that the more the clothing costs, the less real protection from the elements it provides.

Compared with Luther's day, relatively little of our income is needed to provide us with essentials. Therefore, more of the products and services provided exist to deliver short-term satisfaction[4] rather than the necessaries of life, and they fulfill, at best, wants rather than needs. This again adds complexity to the system and makes it difficult for the Christian seeking his or her calling to know if the product or service he or she labors to produce is always helpful, if it can be misused in ways to harm others,[5] or if it is actively designed to harm others.[6]

For an example of this change in complexity, take the farmer of Martin Luther's day.

Farmers produced basic, plain crops of vegetables and fruit or raised grass and hay on which animals used for meat could graze. It was very obvious for the farmer that the products raised on the farm and sold to the village were necessary — if the farms had a bad year, people starved. It was therefore no great conceptual jump to conclude that being called by God to be a farmer was a good vocation.

Compare that with the farmers of today. They still have the satisfaction that they are meeting a basic need for food, but they also have to contend with potentially harming people through increasing use of fertilizer, additives put in the food by the companies that buy the raw produce from them, or controversial biologically enhanced crops. Some of these factors are under the farmer's control, but many are not. If the food that the farmer produces will eventually harm the end consumer, even if it isn't the farmer's fault, how does that affect the calling to the vocation of farming? At the very least, the moral issues become much more complex. Thus, an increase in market complexity tends to bring with it a host of potential ethical issues.

Model: The Forms of Complexity

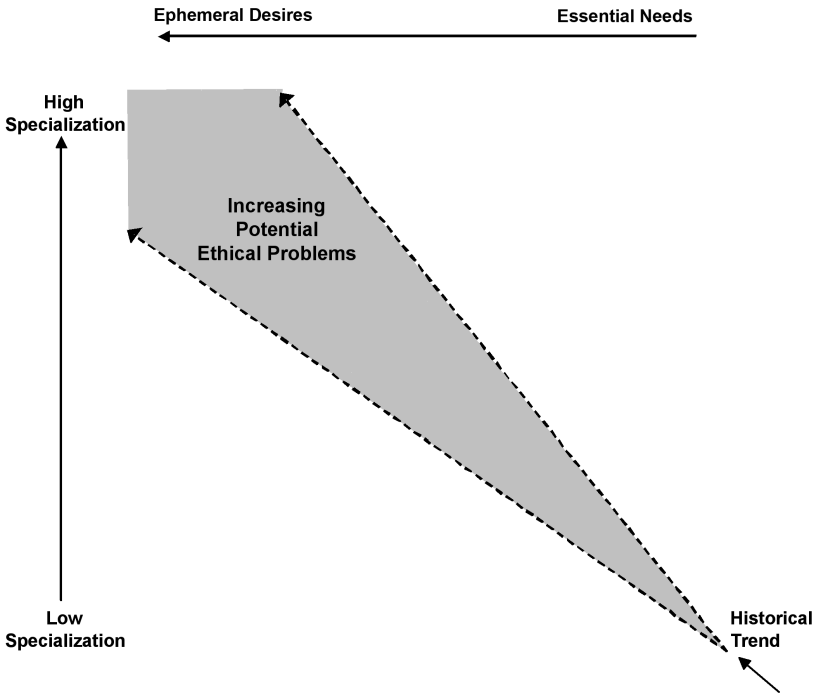
So, the complexity is twofold. First, there is complexity that has come about because of job specialization, and second, there is complexity that has come about because of the proliferation of products and services — many of which are non-necessities, essentially ephemeral, or even negative to the well-being of the end consumer.

Figure 1 illustrates this twofold complexity. The vertical axis shows the historic progression of occupations from low specialization to high specialization. The horizontal axis shows the historic progression of kinds of products and services created: from products which meet essential needs on the right to those that meet ephemeral desires on the left.

Ephemeral, as I am using the word, refers to fleeting pleasure or feeling satisfied for the moment. Many products sold today are not designed for genuine needs, rather they are items that make life more comfortable or more entertaining. Increasingly, products and services are marketed in the form of experiences — "selling the sizzle not the steak." That is,

Figure 1

Historical Changes that Affect Calling



even if the new good is a product, what is sold to the consumer is the experience they can have with the product. There exists an entire range of experiences that we can partake of today that Luther never dreamed of (bungee jumping in South America anyone?).

Sometimes the product is purchased in order to have the satisfaction of having something nicer than someone else. That satisfaction is also fleeting since all "someone else" needs to do is get another product or service that is better than yours and the feeling is lost. For example, the great satisfaction of getting a new car only lasts as long as it takes to see someone with a better one or to have a parking lot ding put in it — about two hours, 13 minutes, six seconds at last count. Some experiences can be justified for

their educational value,[7] but most experiences are fleeting and do little in the long run other than create a desire for ever-more exciting experiences.

Historically, most growth in the economy has tended to move up the diagonal lines in Figure 1, from less specialized essentials in the lower right corner toward highly specialized ephemerals in the upper left corner (ultimately to end in designer experiences?). Both types of complexity have made it harder for the Christian to seek his or her calling — specialization complexity makes it hard to see the end good or to feel like you have much of a part in producing it, and ephemeral complexity makes it difficult to determine if the end product or service actually has any value (or if it actually is likely to harm the end user).

Increasing Economic Complexity Brings Increased Moral Complexity

Klay, Lunn, and TenHaken have examined biblical calling for the businessperson in one of the most challenging positions in the modern organization — middle management. In essence, what they have done is bypass a portion of the complexity by focusing middle managers on the people they directly serve inside the organization.[8] This is of value and can be a useful tactic, but it does not mean you can ignore the fact that your company's product or service does nothing good for the end consumer.[9] The argument of Klay et al. helps the Christian seeking his or her vocational calling deal with the complexity from not being able to see the end result of his or her labor very well (the complexity that comes from high specialization). However, this argument doesn't do as well in dealing with the complexity that comes through the historic movement to more ephemeral products and services. Treating our co-workers well cannot overcome the fact that what we are producing does no one any good or perhaps even harms them.

Luther understood the possibility that a Christian's work could be used for negative good or immoral purposes. For example, he tells soldiers that they should not obey a prince who commands them to fight in an unjust cause (Kolden, 2001). To some extent, this is similar to the kind of ethical decisions that today's believers must face when seeking a calling, but the problem is that a more complex economic system causes there to be many

more of such kinds of ethical decision. Besides that, the complexity of the economic system causes the ethical problems to become extremely complex as well. For the believer today, seeking a "pure" vocational calling, with no possible ethical problems, probably is not feasible.[10] Let me provide an example of the type of thing that commonly happens.

A friend recently told me about a quandary he was in. He is a plant manager for a printing company that specializes in advertising supplements and brochures. He heard from the owner of the company that there was a possibility they would be signing a contract with a new customer. This customer was a magazine publisher who had his own presses, but his presses were beginning to reach capacity. The deal was that my friend's company would pick up the overload, which would be approximately five percent of my friend's company's total business. This was very doable, and at first my friend was positive about the opportunity. As the discussion progressed, however, a new fact emerged. The new prospective customer specialized in publishing pornography magazines. Now, what should my friend do? Before the potential new customer arrived, he was convinced that his occupation was also his vocational calling. Would it still be if his company took on the new business?

Happily, in this case several of the other top managers in my friend's company had a problem with this customer also, so they asked for a meeting with the owner, explained their problems working for this kind of client,[11] and the owner agreed not to go ahead with the contract. As we saw above, with Luther's admonition to soldiers not to obey a prince's command to fight for an unjust cause, the issue of having a legal and moral occupation was not completely black and white even in Luther and Calvin's day, but it is certain that our modern economic system is primarily one of complicated ethical issues, like this example. As in my friend's case, ethical issues may crop up at any time, in any line of business, and may deal with all or only a portion of a business' output.

A System to Deal With Moral and Economic Complexity

Since Luther was dealing with a simple economic system, his advice regarding selection of possible occupations was

probably adequate in his day. However, are his limiting factors of "legal and moral" still adequate?

The Law of Requisite Variety

The Law of Requisite Variety (Ashby, 1991) argues that, in order to have an effective system, the complexity (or variety) of a system's inputs needs to be matched by a corresponding complexity (variety) in the system itself. This would argue that a more complex economic system than existed in Luther's day requires a more complex process than that provided by Luther. However, we need to be careful to remain biblical in our search for factors that allow us to match complexity with the system. Also, in order to create a system that truly meets the needs, we must re-examine the purpose for the original system, in order to make sure that our new system does not stray from that purpose.

Our purpose for vocation is so that we may love our neighbors.

Our Calling to "Serve"

In the first section of the paper, Klay and colleagues make an important point about Luther's view of calling that deserves to be reiterated here. Luther asserted that the primary reason for entering into our calling is that through it we might serve others and demonstrate love to our neighbors. If we need to make a system more complex to match its environment, we need to clearly keep in mind the system's purpose. Otherwise, we might complexify the system in such a way that it works at cross purposes. In other words, if we understand the purpose of being called to a vocational station, it helps direct our thinking regarding the choice of that station. Our purpose for vocation is so that we may love our neighbors.

The complex 21st century economic system may cause problems when we attempt to follow Luther's admonition that we serve God through serving others and thereby love them through our occupations. What Luther is talking about is *agape* love. According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, "Love [*agape*] can be known only from the actions it prompts. Love seeks the welfare of all, and works no ill to any; love seeks opportunity to do good

to 'all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith'" (Vine, 1985). This is a description of what we want our vocations to look like if we are seeking the vocational calling of God.

Since occupations in Luther and Calvin's day were more "basic," it was fairly easy to see how one could serve people through most occupations. If you thatched roofs, it was fairly easy to see that people needed thatching on his or her roof to keep the rain out and that you could provide a service of love to them by doing this, notwithstanding the fact that you were being paid for it. A person would only hire you to thatch their roof if they believed the thatching job to be worth more than the money they were paying for it. Your job then, as a Christian, was to show love to them by giving over and beyond what they expected; to offer greater value because you saw their needs to be at least as important as your own.[12]

Our modern economy often makes the "service" of an occupation less obvious. Take, for example, the advertising executive discussed in the paper. When the advertising is designed to create a perceived value in the eyes of the customer based upon brand image, is the executive serving customers by seeking their best welfare, or is the executive just getting them to believe hype because he is concerned about his own income?[13] Informational advertising can be of great service to customers, but is that service still there when the advertising supports multiple lines of almost identical products, differentiated primarily by the advertising each receives? It is not uncommon to go into a factory and see a product coming off an assembly line with a brand name label. Further up the line the labels are being changed to a store brand or generic label — the underlying product is identical even though each label receives its own price point and advertising campaign. If you are working in that plant, can you really believe that you are loving and serving each customer as God would have you do? Or, do you feel like the customer is getting ripped off because of what they don't know?

We need a system of vocation that allows us to deal with all of the complexity that is found in our economy. At the same time, we need a system that lets us pursue the core goal of being able to serve people and thereby love

them through vocational calling. To do this, we can begin with Luther's structure of "legal and moral," but we need to expand on the "moral" or "ethical" portion of it in order to provide some guidance for the complex ethical situations found in our economy today.

Dealing with Moral Complexity Biblically

There are several things to keep in mind as we do this. First, the Christian seeking a godly vocation today needs to keep the vocation separate in his or her mind from a specific job in that vocation. For example, it is perfectly possible to serve people in love through an advertising career, but it is also very easy to find positions within the advertising industry where serving the customer in love is made extremely difficult because of the constraints inherent in the position.

Second, we are all unique individuals who are gifted by God in specific ways. One Christian looking at a specific advertising position might not see any way he or she could serve people through love, but another might find the task to be challenging but not overly difficult morally. There are certain occupations that God does not want any Christian to pursue,[14] and there are also occupations that may be perfect for one Christian but inappropriate for another. This potentially sets up a dilemma, but the reality is that God has given each of us a conscience and desires that we develop it to aid in just such situations. Conscience is the way that we can fine-tune God's call to vocation.

What is meant by "conscience"? Essentially, it is that little voice inside us that provides a stab of guilt if we start to do something that is sinful or provides a voice of assurance when we are doing that which God asks of us. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (1985) discusses how "conscience" is used in the Scripture.

> CONSCIENCE. lit., "a knowing with" i.e., "a co-knowledge (with oneself), the witness borne to one's conduct …, that faculty by which we apprehend the will of God, as that which is designed to govern our lives;" thence (a) the sense of guiltiness before God (Heb. 10:2); (b) that process of thought which distinguishes what it considers morally good or bad,

commending the good, condemning the bad, and so prompting to do the former, and avoid the latter (Rom. 2:15).[15]

God designed our consciences to be used to deal with exactly this sort of indecisive moral problem. We find an example of this in Romans 14.[16] In this chapter Paul turns to what was apparently one of the great ethical dilemmas faced by the first century church — whether or not to eat meat offered to idols. The early Christians could not figure out if it was wrong to eat meat offered to idols, since the apostles and elders initially accepted the non-Jewish Christians into the church with the proviso that they abstain from food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood.[17] However, "offered" meat was commonly sold and was not always clearly marked.

Paul recognized that requiring the new Christians to abstain from eating meat offered to idols was, in essence, a return to the Law, so he reconstructed the issue as one of faith. By doing so, he indicates to us that for the Christian not all sin is absolute or objective. This does not mean we should fall into relativism and say that there is no absolute sin. Scripture gives us numerous lists of actions that are clearly sin, such as fornication (I Corinthians 6:18), idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness (Galatians 5:19-21), and favoritism (James 2:9).

However, some things fall outside of clear scriptural guidelines — decisions like which vocation to follow[18] or whether to eat meat that has been offered to idols. So, while there are many actions and attitudes spoken of in the Bible that are always sinful, here we are discussing things that the Scripture does not directly mention as sin. In fact, Paul tells us that anything we do that is against our conscience is sin (I Corinthians 8:10-13). So, we could take the same piece of "idol-offered" meat and cut it in half. One Christian could eat it and by eating it, sin. Another Christian could eat it and not sin. While Paul's main point is that we sin if we do something that encourages another person to do that which is against his or her conscience, it is clear that the act against the conscience is also a sin for the person doing it. God speaks to each Christian's heart,

and if I do not feel something is right, it does not matter how many other Christians are doing it with clear consciences, for me to do that would be a sin. So, we can use our conscience to tell us whether a certain job is OK or not or even whether a certain action within a job is OK or not.

There is an important caveat to this. We need to be careful when applying the conscience to our vocational calling, particularly if we do not have substantial experience intentionally using the conscience. This is because the conscience can be seared if we continue to do things that it is telling us are wrong. On the other hand, through a regular, systematic time in the Word of God we can hone and train our conscience to recognize good and evil.[19] If we have not done this consistently as a life pattern, our consciences might be difficult to hear and might be easily dissuaded from the right course. However, if we are regularly training our consciences by being immersed in God's Word, and if we listen to it, instead of regularly acting against it,[20] our consciences can provide much help as we seek God's vocational calling. Since we each have different strengths and weaknesses, different backgrounds, and have learned different things in our struggle to be conformed to the image of Christ, God can use our conscience to fine-tune both long-term vocational calling decisions and short-term immediate workplace difficulties.

It is also important to remember that our vocations may change as the economy changes. It is quite possible that God may use new, unsolvable ethical problems to indicate that the time is right for a change in vocations. If, after seeking the wisdom of God, we cannot deal with these new problems, and if it seems they will continue in the future, the time may well be ripe to seek God's will and consider the possibility of another vocational calling. Or, he might guide you into another job in the same vocation that does not have those intractable moral problems. In either case, a well-formed, God-directed conscience will guide the way.

Conclusion

Luther restricted vocational calling to those vocations that are "legal and moral." While that was sufficient guidance to believers seeking God's vocational calling in the 16th century, it is not

sufficient in the 21st century because of the much greater complexity found in our modern economic system. Besides the complexity brought through specialization, which makes it difficult for a person in today's large organizations to see how their work affects the end consumer, there is more complexity brought about through hundreds of years of market segmentation in industries as well as new industries coming on the scene. Because of our much higher living standards, we are able to supply what were the necessities in Luther's day with a small portion of our earnings. Most products that have come along for us to spend our excess earnings on are of a more ephemeral nature than the necessities of Luther's day, and they often end up being short-lived experiences that cater to our whims and egos. Often the only value of these experiences is to allow us to better play the one-upmanship game.

The issue for vocational callings is that our purpose to love others through our calling becomes much more difficult and complex when many of the possible vocations do not exist to meet real needs, but simply pander to ephemeral wants. Moreover, the ephemeral wants can get mixed in with the needs. That is, one customer may really need a product, but other customers may only want it to build their egos. This makes it very difficult for the Christian seeking a vocational calling to determine the "moral" side of Luther's restriction. The Law of Requisite Variety tells us we must complexify the system laid down by Luther to allow it to deal with our more complex economic system. We can do that through reliance on a fully alive, biblically constrained conscience. Klay et al. say that Luther indicated, "So long as a station is lawful and moral, the Christian can participate in it." Using the discussion here, we would modify that to state: "So long as a station is lawful and moral" and does not present a problem to the biblically formed, tender (unseared) conscience, "the Christian can participate in it."

... God can use our conscience to fine-tune both long-term vocational calling decisions and short-term immediate workplace difficulties.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Luther was born in 1483 (November 10) and Calvin in 1509 (July 10).
[2]Contract law was developed largely as a substitute for trust so that transactions could happen on a wider scale between participants who were strangers to each other (Arrow, 1974; Galbraith, 1983; Smith, 1999).
[3]In most cases, the demand had to be paired with an enabling technology for a new industry to come about (Drucker, 1985). Sometimes these new industries replaced existing ones, such as when the automobile industry replaced the buggy and whip industries, and sometimes the new industry was entirely original, as when the computer was invented.
[4]Mostly in the form of pleasurable experiences.
[5]Printing, an industry that started in Luther's day, was probably only used for necessities at first, but it soon came to speed the delivery of indulgences, one of the primary problems Luther had with the Catholic church. Today, along with helpful uses, the printing industry helps to stuff our mailboxes with ads we do not want and allows the spread of pornography.
[6]For an example, consider the tobacco industry and the resulting health concerns or the oil industry, which creates both convenience and pollution. Even the food industry has its examples of companies that load food with sugar and thereby may harm people.
[7]Including a college education — particularly a Christian college education.
[8]Incidentally, this is the same thing that several different management theories attempt to do, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) with its emphasis on "internal customers." The understanding is that it is much easier to comprehend serving the people who take your output inside the plant than it is to comprehend seeking to please some ill-defined "customer." Of course, these theories also seek to have the worker gain a reasonable idea of what kind of person a "customer" is and then seek to make connections between that ideal and what the worker actually does on the job. In a sense, modern management theory should be very much in favor of vocational callings.
[9]Or perhaps is outright harmful to the end consumer. That harm could be physical, spiritual, or emotional.
[10]And, if they can't find any possible ethical issues in a vocation, let them talk to their teachers and parents. Anyone who has spent much of his or her life thinking about these kinds of things can find possible ethical problems anywhere.
[11]Most of the other managers were not Christians, but their wives and children came down to the plant from time to time, and they didn't want their family members to see that kind of printed material lying around.
[12]This would mean, perhaps, to do a better job than they expected, or to throw in something extra, or to continue to keep the roof in good repair in years ahead, or any other thing that would fulfill the law of love. If all Christians did this, and were known for it, imagine the witness!
[13]This is very similar to a basic management quandary, wherein we have to wonder if we are motivating our employees or just manipulating them.
[14]While Scripture condemns a number of actions, I could only find one vocation that is condemned outright — that of slave trader, in I Timothy 1:7-11. Of course it is easy enough to extrapolate from some of the actions that other occupations would not be good. For instance, since fornication and adultery are some of the most common sins listed in Scripture, a job in the pornography industry would surely be against God's will and thus sinful.
[15]For various descriptions of "conscience," see Acts 23:1; 24:16; I Cor. 8:7; I Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; II Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:15; Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 13:18; and I Pet. 3:16, 2l.
[16]Paul provides some further insight in I Corinthians 8-10.
[17]See Acts 15:20; Acts 15:29; and Acts 21:25.
[18]With the exception of those jobs that require us to participate in sin. See footnote number 14.
[19]The Puritan authors developed a complete theology of the conscience and discussed its

use regularly in their writings. If you are interested, pick up something by Richard Baxter, William Law, John Milton, etc.
[20]Both of these are more likely to be the case with a Christian who is concerned about finding God's perfect vocational calling.

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