

## Perception and Concept A Phenomenological Argument for Non-conceptual Content

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### Abstract

The relation between perception and concept is a traditional philosophical topic which has repeatedly been discussed in the history of philosophy. Recently, there is a remarkable controversy as to whether the intentional content of perception is conceptual or non-conceptual. Only very few philosophers, however, have attended to this debate from a phenomenological perspective. My aim in this paper is to develop an argument against John McDowell's conceptualism, which is a position to claim that perceptual content is thoroughly conceptual, from a phenomenological standpoint, especially depending on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. First, I'd like to introduce McDowell's conceptualism and check out the main points of his claim. Subsequently, I will make it clear that McDowell's conceptualism has unreasonably taken no account of *the need of shifting our attention* in making perceptual judgments. Then, in section three, I will carry out a phenomenological reflection on the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. I'm going to argue that, in order to understand the need of shifting our attention in making perceptual judgments, we have to recognize the ambiguity of our attitude towards perceptual content. Unfortunately, it is impossible to understand this ambiguity from McDowell's perspective, for he describes our attitude towards perceptual content alternatively as something determined or undetermined. According to conceptualists, however, intentional contents mustn't include any non-conceptual element in them from the very beginning. So, in section four, I will show that non-conceptual perceptual experiences, which present something indeterminate to us, do commonly have intentionality, by making a phenomenological reflection on an instance of everyday illusions. In the final section, I'll point out a relation between non-conceptual content and motor intentionality (*intentionalité motrice*), which suggests the significance Merleau-Ponty's body schema theory might have for the inquiry on the relation between perception and concept.

### 1 Introduction

The relation between perception and concept is a traditional philosophical topic which has repeatedly been discussed in the history of philosophy, for example, between empiricists and rationalists.

There also have been a lot of debates in the tradition of phenomenology, for example, about the interpretation of the status of the perceptual noema in Husserl's phenomenology or about how to characterize circumspection (*Umsicht*) in Heidegger's philosophy. Furthermore, recently we can find a remarkable controversy mainly entertained among analytic philosophers as to whether the intentional content of perception is conceptual or non-conceptual.<sup>1</sup> Then, it might be natural to expect an active interchange between the two traditions, analytic philosophy and phenomenology, on this problem. The situation, however, is not like that. Only very few philosophers have attended to this debate on the character of perceptual content from a phenomenological point of view.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this paper is to find out what kind of contribution we can make to this discussion from the phenomenological perspective.

What I am going to do in the following is to develop an argument against John McDowell's conceptualism from a phenomenological standpoint, especially depending on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. As there are only very few interchanges between the two traditions, however, I thought it wouldn't be clever to make an argument largely dependent on non-analytical concepts. So, in this paper, I will start from an issue which was first taken up by analytic philosophers, and then go on to describe some phenomena from a phenomenological standpoint.

My argument will develop in the following way. In section one, I'd like to introduce McDowell's conceptualism and check out the main points of his claim. In section two, I will take up one issue which was raised against conceptualism, namely, the fine-grainedness of perceptual content. In this section, I will make it clear that McDowell's conceptualism has unreasonably taken no account of *the need of shifting our attention* in making perceptual judgments. In section three, I will carry out a phenomenological reflection on the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. I'd like to make it clear that, in order to understand the need of shifting our attention in making perceptual judgments, we have to recognize the ambiguity of our attitude towards perceptual content. Unfortunately, it is impossible to understand this ambiguity from McDowell's perspective, for he describes our attitude towards perceptual content alternatively as something determined or undetermined. According to conceptualists, however, intentional contents mustn't include any non-conceptual element in them from the very beginning. So, in section four, I will show that non-conceptual perceptual experiences, which present something indeterminate to us, do commonly have intentionality, by making a phenomenological reflection on an instance of everyday illusions.

## 2 McDowell's conceptualism

John McDowell is one of the key figures involved in the controversy over (non-)conceptuality of perceptual content. He is a representative conceptualist on perceptual content, who claims that

<sup>1</sup> See the articles collected in Gunther (2003) for more information about the debate.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2008) is the representative of the phenomenological approach to the debate. Further we can find a few philosophers like Dreyfus (2001), Calabi (2005), Siewert (2005) referring to the debate from phenomenological standpoints.

perceptual content must be thoroughly conceptual. This claim is a consequence of a transcendental argument concerning the possibility of empirical thoughts. For a thought to be empirical, it must be directed towards the world which is accessible through experience. That is, it must be right or wrong according to the way the world is experienced. Therefore, as long as our thought aims at making correct judgments or fixing our belief system, empirical thoughts must be *answerable* to the experienced world.

Our empirical thoughts are answerable to the experienced world when our belief system could be revised according to the ways things get experienced. Suppose you're reading a book in your room, and that your friend told you that it's raining. Then, you come to believe that it is raining now. But, suppose when you go outside it becomes clear that it is not raining anymore. Now, it is also clear that it is wrong to believe it is raining. Then you will revise your belief system by giving up your belief that it is raining now. If you couldn't revise your belief system in this way even if it contains something empirically incorrect in it, your thought wouldn't be recognized as directed towards the experienced world.

This means that if our empirical thoughts are answerable to the experienced world, our experience must have the power to prompt our belief system to revise itself. This is why McDowell borrows the famous phrase "the tribunal of experience" from Quine. Our experience plays the role of a tribunal by delivering a (true or false) verdict to our thought, and our belief system undergoes some revision according to the given verdict. Therefore, for empirical thoughts to be possible, our experience must be able to give justificatory reasons to our thought when it is correct and also must be able to give reasons to reject a thought when it is incorrect. In short, our experience must be able to stand in rational relations to our thought.

McDowell claims that this means that our perceptual experience must be conceptual, because rational relations are usually thought to hold only between things which have conceptual content. Thus, he argues, "[W]hen we enjoy experience conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity, not exercised *on* some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity,"<sup>3</sup> and declares his conceptualistic idea on perceptual content.

Although McDowell considers both thought and experience to be products of our conceptual capacity, it would be wrong to think he has assimilated one to the other. As is well known, thought is active while experience is passive. That means, while we can decide what kind of judgment we are going to make on our own, we cannot decide what kind of perception we are going to enjoy on our own. McDowell takes this difference into account by distinguishing two different ways in which our conceptual capacity operates. According to his picture, while our conceptual capacity is actively exercised in thought, it is only passively actualized in experience.<sup>4</sup> The difference consists in whether any attitude is determined towards a presented conceptual content or not. In brief, McDowell considers perceptual content to be *a kind of conceptual content which is merely passively given without any actively determined attitude* towards it<sup>5</sup>. Hence, while we can give up a belief by actively

<sup>3</sup> McDowell (1996), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. McDowell (2000), pp. 9–13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. "One can have an experience that reveals to one that things are thus and so without coming to believe that things are thus and so" (McDowell (2005), p. 6).

changing our attitude towards its content, we cannot throw our perceptual experience away by changing our attitude towards its perceptual content. For example, we cannot avoid experiencing illusory figures in illusory ways however strongly we deny the illusory content presented in the perception of the figures. Furthermore, McDowell thinks we make perceptual judgments by taking the attitude of endorsement towards the perceptual content given in experience.<sup>6</sup>

Now, we have seen the main points of McDowell's conceptualism. What is peculiar about his arguments is that he makes almost no reflection on perceptual experience itself though he is making a bold assertion about perceptual content. In the next section, I will take up an argument concerning the character of perceptual content itself, which was raised against conceptualism from the non-conceptualists.

### 3 The fine-grainedness of perceptual content and demonstrative concepts

There have been a lot of objections against McDowell's conceptualism from the non-conceptualists' side. Most of them address whether perceptual content is *actually* conceptual or not. Let me take up one feature of perceptual content which often appears in this context, namely, the fine-grainedness of perceptual content.<sup>7</sup> To say perceptual content is fine-grained is to say that perceptual content is more fine-grained than the concepts needed to describe it. Suppose we've bought a pack of strawberries. It would not be so difficult to distinguish perceptually the different shades of red each strawberry has, but it is not likely that we possess concepts corresponding to the different shades of red each of them have. It is quite clear that we do possess the color concept "red" and that therefore we could always judge anything in front of us whether it is red or not. If we do possess the color concepts corresponding to the different subtle shades of the strawberries, we must be able to make the same kind of judgement about those subtle shades. We cannot, however, always judge if anything in front of us has a particular shade of red or not. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the subtle shades in our perceptual content are not represented conceptually.

Nonetheless, McDowell maintains that fine-grained contents of perceptual experiences are also conceptually represented. According to him, when we think it impossible to capture fine-grained contents with our conceptual capacities, we have in our mind only the sort of conceptual capacities associated with verbal expressions like "red", "green", or "burnt sienna."<sup>8</sup> There is, however, no reason to restrict our conceptual capacity to concepts expressible in words and phrases like those. McDowell finds no difficulty in making explicit the exact concept representing the fine-grained content presented in experience. You only have to utter "this shade" pointing your finger towards the shade. In other words, McDowell thinks fine-grained perceptual contents are repre-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. McDowell (1996), p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> A representative non-conceptualist Gareth Evans claims as follows. "[N]o account of what it is to be in a non-conceptual informational state can be given in terms of dispositions to exercise concepts unless those concepts are assumed to be endlessly fine-grained; and does this make sense? Do we really understand the proposal that we have as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can sensibly discriminate?" (Evans (1982), p. 229).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. McDowell (1996), p. 56f.

sented by demonstrative concepts which could be verbally expressed only by using demonstratives such as “this” or “that.” In fact, it seems possible to judge whether something in front of us has that particular shade or not, exactly in the same sense as we can judge whether something in front of us is red or not, at least for a short time after we have pointed at a particular shade as “that shade.”

But are these fine-grained conceptual contents *actually* represented in the initial perceptual experience? In effect, we can judge “Every strawberry in the pack is red,” building on the perception of the strawberries, and also can judge “This strawberry has this shade,” pointing at a particular strawberry. There seems, however, no need to think we have experienced both of these contents in the first perceptual experience at once. McDowell assumes that we could reasonably ascribe the content of perceptual judgment to the perceptual experience which it is based on. He doesn’t take into consideration at all, however, the fact that we couldn’t make perceptual judgments about the shade of a particular strawberry without shifting our attention to that particular strawberry in question. In other words, although we couldn’t make such perceptual judgments by just vaguely looking at the presented scene, McDowell completely ignores this point. McDowell’s argument would be reasonable only if it is appropriate to suppose that both the first perception before shifting our attention and the second perception after the shift of our attention have the same perceptual content.

This supposition seems to be inappropriate for me. The very fact we need to shift our attention seems to suggest that the two perceptual experiences before and after shifting our attention have something different in their contents. If they have the same conceptual content, why do we have to shift our attention? Conceptualists are responsible for accounting for the need of shifting our attention, in order to make it reasonable to ascribe the conceptual content of perceptual judgment to the perceptual experience which it came out from.<sup>9</sup>

McDowell may answer to this question in the following way: we have to shift our attention in making perceptual judgments because we determine our attitude towards a presented perceptual content in doing that. That means that the difference between the two perceptual experiences before and after the shift of our attention lies in whether our attitude towards the content is determined or not, but not in the contents itself. For example, we are not able to judge the shade of a particular strawberry just by vaguely looking at the pack as a whole, not because the shade of the strawberry is not presented in experience, but just because we haven’t yet endorsed the content already presented in experience. Therefore, it might seem as if the problem of explaining the need of shifting our attention raises no serious problem against conceptualism. In the next section, I’d like to discuss the phenomenological accuracy of McDowell’s view.

#### 4 The ambiguity of our attitude towards perceptual content

We need to shift our attention to a particular part of our perceptual field in order to make perceptual judgments. According to McDowell’s framework, we have to understand that we have to do

<sup>9</sup> Prinz (2006) points out a similar problem with McDowell’s argument. According to him, “the pointing [to a subtle shade of color] seems to be a separate mental act that occurs after the color is already being perceived. If so, perception of colors must initially be unmediated by concepts.” (Prinz (2006), p. 14.)

this because thereby we determine our attitude towards a presented perceptual content. According to Merleau-Ponty, however,

To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. [...] Thus attention is [...] the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon.<sup>10</sup>

This is to say that in shifting our attention we not only determine our attitude towards perceptual contents but that we actually determine the content itself in doing so. In this section, I will make it phenomenologically explicit how the attentive element of perceptual content is determined and consequently maintain that it is phenomenologically inaccurate to try to explain away the need of shifting our attention by identifying it with the need of the determination of our attitude. I will point out that our attitude towards perceptual contents is so ambiguous that we often can't say they are either determined or undetermined. This point cannot be captured by conceptualists who understand our attitude towards perceptual contents alternatively as something determined or undetermined.

Let me take up the phenomenon of perceptual constancy. This is the phenomenon whereby I experience a particular property of an object to be the same in various observation conditions even though those conditions make the way we experience the property change. At first glance, this phenomenon might seem to give empirical evidence to conceptualists. Since the way we experience the property changes, its sameness might be thought to be warranted by our conceptual capacity. Let's make a more detailed examination by taking up a case of color constancy. Suppose the wall of your room is white. Then usually the wall looks white even though each part of the wall shows up in different ways according to the way it is lit. By shifting your attention to each part of the wall, however, you can notice their having subtly different shades. Therefore, conceptualists should say that there were a lot of conceptual content besides "white" represented in the first experience of the white wall. Furthermore, in this case, it would be natural to suppose you could immediately judge "This wall is white," whereas you need to shift your attention to judge what subtle shade each part of the wall presents. Therefore, conceptualists should also say that you have determined your attitude only towards one part of the whole perceptual content, namely, "white."

Nevertheless, this kind of interpretation captures only one half of the phenomenon. We cannot follow conceptualists in claiming that we take no attitude towards the inattentive parts of perceptual content. According to Merleau-Ponty, "the decisive factor of the phenomenon of constancy [...] is the articulation of the totality of the field, the wealth and subtlety of its structures."<sup>11</sup> For example, when a wall is experienced to have one particular color, the structure of the whole field of vision is already taken into consideration, which includes the lighting condition, the spatial configuration of the wall, and the different shades of color presented in each part of it. Hence, if the

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), pp. 54–55/p. 35. (The page number before the slash is for the original French text, while the second page number is for the English translation by Colin Smith.)

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 362/p. 358.

perceiver took any of these factors in a different way, the phenomenon of constancy would occur in a different way, i.e., the white wall might not look white. This is to say that whenever we endorse the attentive part of the whole perceptual content, the inattentive parts are also already endorsed in a certain way. Therefore, it is phenomenologically inaccurate to claim, following the conceptualist framework, that we don't determine our attitude towards inattentive perceptual contents.

We mustn't think, however, that inattentive contents are endorsed exactly in the same way with attentive contents. If we think so, we are again in trouble with explaining the need of shifting our attention in making judgments. Furthermore, more importantly, if we suppose every part of the perceptual content to be endorsed exactly in the same way, we will not be able to capture "the articulation of the totality of the field" which is inevitably implied in the phenomenon of constancy. It is true that we have to take inattentive contents into consideration to experience the wall to be white (or of any other particular color), but this is not to say we have to make an inference to experience the white wall. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty describes, "a certain patch of light is taken as lighting instead of in its own right"<sup>12</sup> in the phenomenon of color constancy. Suppose there is a white wall which is as a whole appropriately lit but that one part of it is *apparently* in shadow. In that case, color constancy does not occur in the apparently dark area of the wall. Color constancy happens only when the part of the wall not well lit is not apparently dark but is so slightly darker than other parts that we can first notice it being dark only if we are told so. As Merleau-Ponty reasonably argued, "Lighting and reflection [...] play their part only if they remain in the background as discreet intermediaries, and *lead* our gaze instead of arresting it."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is also phenomenologically inaccurate to claim that all parts of perceptual content are endorsed in the same way, without considering the difference among the attitudes we take towards them.

Now it seems reasonable to conclude that conceptualists cannot give a phenomenologically accurate account to the need of shifting our attention in making perceptual judgments. Hence, it is unreasonable to claim perceptual contents are thoroughly conceptual because we can make perceptual judgments about fine-grained perceptual contents. Therefore, there is a good reason to think inattentive perceptual contents to be non-conceptual. They are "presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon" as Merleau-Ponty describes them. In the next section, I will discuss the intentional character of non-conceptual perceptual experience.

## 5 The intentionality and indeterminacy of non-conceptual perceptual experience

I claimed inattentive perceptual content is non-conceptual. Conceptualists would say, however, that we cannot include non-conceptual elements into perceptual content from the beginning. Any perceptual content must be intentional. In other words, it must be correct or incorrect according to the way things show up in experience. Nonetheless, it is usually thought that rational relations, in which one term is determined to be right or wrong depending on another term, hold only between

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 364/p. 360.

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 364/p. 361.



conceptual elements. Therefore, conceptualists would argue, there is no possibility for such a thing as a “non-conceptual perceptual content” to exist. Supposing this kind of objection from conceptualists, I’d like to show in this section that non-conceptual perceptual experience is a common phenomenon in our everyday life.

Let me take up a case of everyday illusion to which Merleau-Ponty gave a detailed description in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Suppose you’re walking in a forest and vaguely sensed a broad flat stone some distance away. Then, you approach the stone to make sure what you have sensed, which revealed to you that you have just mistaken a patch of sunlight for a broad flat stone. In this case, we can see a kind of rational relation between the two perceptual experiences before and after approaching the illusionary stone. Since it becomes clear that the first experience was wrong according to the second experience, there is a rational relation in which the latter gives a good reason to deny the former. Therefore, there is no doubt these experiences are intentional. Hence, if we can make it clear that, at least, one of the two experiences is non-conceptual, we can argue that there actually are some non-conceptual perceptual contents.

If this case of everyday illusion is counted as an instance of attention shifting, we can regard the first experience as non-conceptual. That is, if we regard the process of approaching the stone as a process of shifting our attention, we can consider the broad flat stone vaguely sensed in the first perception to be an instance of inattentive perceptual content which is non-conceptual. From the conceptualist point of view, however, both experiences must be conceptual simply because they are rationally related to each other.

In fact, there is one apparently good reason to suppose that the subject in this hypothetical case already had recognized the broad flat stone conceptually in the first experience. Think about the way the subject approaches the flat stone. Here, his gaze and even his whole body are coordinated to the stone in front of him. For example, the muscles of his eyes would be adjusted to focus on the stone, or Merleau-Ponty even says “already I prepare to feel under my foot this smooth, firm surface.”<sup>14</sup> To make these kinds of bodily preparations, it seems, we have to possess conceptual contents not only about the existence of the flat stone, but also about some of the properties the stone has. For example, it seems impossible to expect a smooth and firm feeling under one’s foot without believing the stone to be smooth and firm. Therefore, there might seem to be no problem at all in supposing the first experience to be conceptual.

Nevertheless, according to Merleau-Ponty, it is phenomenologically inaccurate to understand the first experience in that manner. He describes the phenomenon in the following way.

If, on a sunken path, I think I can see, some distance away, a broad, flat stone on the ground, which is in reality a patch of sunlight, I cannot say that I ever see the flat stone in the sense in which I am to see, as I draw nearer, the patch of sunlight. The flat stone, like all things at a distance, appears only in a field of confused structure in which connections are not yet clearly articulated.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 350/p. 346.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 349–350/p. 346.



Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, what appears in the first experience is not an articulated content which is verbally expressible, like “there is a flat stone over there.” Rather, what is presented there is a confused structure which can never be conceptually represented. In other words, the broad flat stone in the first experience is only vaguely sensed as “the indeterminate (l’ indéterminé).”<sup>16</sup> In fact, this description seems to be adequate. Suppose a situation in which, contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s description, both the broad flat stone in the first experience and the patch of sunlight in the second experience appeared in a clear structure as something explicitly determinate. A phenomenon experienced in this way would rather be an unordinary supernatural phenomenon in which a broad flat stone suddenly disappeared in front of you. Hence, it seems that the phenomenon of everyday illusion occurs only when something indeterminate is presented in the preceding experience. Therefore, whatever kind of conceptual capacity we presuppose, we couldn’t consider the preceding experience in an everyday illusion to be conceptual. It is impossible in principle to capture indeterminate contents conceptually, since concepts, by definition, only have determinate features as their contents.<sup>17</sup>

Now it is clear that there are non-conceptual perceptual experiences with intentionality in our everyday experience. Actually, we can also find inattentive perceptual contents, which I took up in the last section, to have intentionality too. I hope you still remember the case of color constancy in the perception of the white wall. As we have already seen, the attentive perceptual content “white” is presented only in relation with the inattentive contents. In other words, the attentive content “white” is presented with the lighting condition, the spatial configuration of the wall, and the different shades of color presented in each part of the wall taken into consideration. Hence, if, in a more attentive observation, it afterwards becomes clear that the wall actually is not white, this means that those inattentive contents have been revealed to be incorrect either. Thus, a perceptual experience as non-conceptual intentional state is not something peculiar to the phenomenon of everyday illusion. It is a common aspect of our everyday life. Therefore, we can conclude the objection from conceptualists is not valid.

## 6 Non-conceptual content and motor intentionality

We now have a good reason to conclude conceptualism is phenomenologically inaccurate. What I want to argue in this paper, however, is not that at least inattentive perceptual content is non-conceptual. As it is clear from the cases of both perceptual constancy and everyday illusion, there is a certain kind of rational relation between attentive and inattentive contents of a perceptual experience. Now that it became clear that one of the two terms involved is non-conceptual, it seems to me, that we have to admit the relation fails to be rational in the normal sense (although there undoubtedly is a lot to discuss about what “normal rational relation” means). As Merleau-Ponty

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 28/p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Although there possibly are some ways to understand concepts as something without determinate criteria, at least, they are traditionally understood in this way. So long as McDowell sees concepts to be something typically available in explicit thought, it seems quite reasonable to ascribe this traditional view to him. See the articles collected in Margolis and Laurence (1999) for more information about discussions over concepts.

claimed, there seems to be “a perceptual syntax constructed according to its own rules.”<sup>18</sup>

It seems important to make explicit what a perceptual syntax exactly is, and in this last paragraph I'd like to present some clues to solve the problem. As we have seen in the case of everyday illusion, although inattentive perceptual contents do not enable us to make perceptual judgments, they have the power to enable us to make bodily preparations towards a perceived object. Merleau-Ponty classifies this kind of activity into a new category called “motor intentionality (intentionalité motrice).” In motor intentional activities, a perceiving subject's body is adjusted to a perceived object even though s/he has no conceptual grasp of the object in question. In other words, the subject's conceptual capacity is not the spring of intentionality in these cases. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty imposes the role to achieve intentionality on the body itself which is in activity. From this point of view, the movements of our gaze or our whole body which necessarily accompany the shift of our attention would be counted as typical examples of motor intentional activities. Thus, while McDowell supposed perceptual content to be the counterpart of a conceptual schema which reflects the subject's thinking capacity, Merleau-Ponty seems to suppose it to be the counterpart of a body schema which reflects the subject's motor capacity. Therefore, I anticipate Merleau-Ponty's body schema theory would give us important clues to the problem of making explicit the relation between perception and concept. That's, however, the subject for my future inquiry.

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<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), p. 61/p. 42.

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