

Getting Clear About Human Nature: Young's Dilemma and the Need of Science and Ethics

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Abstract. Human nature is a difficult philosophical concept. Normative theories, the humanities, and the social sciences all accept that talking about human properties and behaviors is meaningful and relevant. All of these methods of investigation take humanity as one of their objects, as a phenomenon that admits of classification and analysis. While some of the descriptions that emerge from these fields are highly constrained by their specificity, claims about humanity as a whole—claims about *human nature*—also emerge. Iris Marion-Young has stated that there exists a dilemma regarding theoretical conceptions of human nature: a theory of human nature seems necessary to provide a substantial ground for normative theories on the one hand, but such theories may also be inherently oppressive instances of reification. I argue that a theory of human nature is necessary for not only normative claims, but the social sciences as well, and—drawing upon Rousseau and J.S. Mill—go on to develop a thin theory of human nature in terms of needs and the actions we take to fulfill them. I explain how such a theory offers us a way of resolving Young's dilemma and go on to point out its similarities with the ideas of Alasdair MacIntyre.

I. Introduction: Young's Dilemma

Human nature is a difficult philosophical concept. Normative theories, the humanities and the social sciences in general—and some areas within the natural sciences—all accept that talking about human properties and behaviors is meaningful and relevant. All of these methods of investigation take humanity as one of their objects, as a phenomenon that admits of classification and analysis. While some of the descriptions that emerge from these fields are highly constrained by their specificity, claims about humanity as a whole—claims about *human nature*—also emerge. To say that humanity inevitably takes an interest in itself and seeks to obtain knowledge about human nature is a claim that already presumes some truths about what we are and do. The converse, the idea that we have no innate nature or that our behavior is infinitely plastic, also already presumes something about ourselves and our capabilities. For this reason, we may be bound to make claims about human nature. But there are serious reasons to doubt the possibility of such knowledge. First, wherever humans are living and making claims about human nature,

they do so in situations internal to a culture. Every human activity relies upon social norms and evaluative standards that frame and define the object of the activity. The possibility of acquiring knowledge about ourselves, as simultaneously the subjects and objects of investigation, is complicated by the fact that our methods of inquiry are subject to both the contingencies of culture and the subjectivity of the investigators. Besides this "epistemic burden," various conceptions of human nature have been used repressively and the very idea of "human nature" may be reactionary or oppressive. Racism, sexism, and the statements of totalitarian governments are a few examples of claims regarding human nature that have been used to justify violence and domination. One might argue that such forms of oppression just got human nature all wrong, but, insofar as there is any immutable aspect of human existence, something about ourselves is posited as a static truth. This is rarely so minimal and banal as claims that we all need food and sleep.

Philosopher Iris Marion Young has formulated this tension as an explicit dilemma:

On the one hand, we express and justify norms by appealing to certain values derived from a conception of the human good life. In some sense, then, any normative theory implicitly or explicitly relies on a conception of human nature. On the other hand, it would seem that we should reject the very idea of a human nature as misleading or oppressive. (Young 36)

In the face of Young's dilemma, I argue that we are in fact bound to make claims about human nature, but that those claims must begin with a recognition of humanity's essential dynamism. This dynamism is foundational to a thin conception of human nature which identifies said nature as lying within the movements and inextricable structural components of a changing, historical process. Human nature is both an inescapable attachment to material and social needs and our freedom—as individuals living within cultures—to shape and rearrange the relations between those needs. I advance a theory of human nature in terms of needs and the actions we take to fulfill or satisfy them, ultimately suggesting that this is a subject always open to some amount of inquiry.

To develop this theory, I draw upon earlier conceptions of human nature offered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, two thinkers who recognize various difficulties with reaching an accurate and justified account of human nature, but who nevertheless proceed to advance their own theories on the subject—theories which fail to escape the horns of Young's

dilemma. Nevertheless, the ideas of Rousseau and Mill are useful for developing a theory of human nature which successfully resolves the dilemma. Both men recognize the "epistemic burden" mentioned above and some aspects of the "oppressive" component of the dilemma (e.g. the divine right of kings, the strength of societal prejudices, etc.). Their awareness of the possibility of erroneous social viewpoints and unquestioned assumptions about "the way things are" finds voice in their liberal political philosophies, with Mill seeing society as something to be primarily resisted and Rousseau claiming that society and the individual are fallen but have the potential to be restored. Because of their condemnation of certain baseless prejudices and their mutual failure of upholding still other prejudices, both philosophers help to develop the historical underpinnings of the dilemma. Furthermore, Rousseau and Mill forge ahead in the face of those aspects of the dilemma they understood in their own era. This is the correct move to make, because we *do* need a theory of human nature.

A cursory familiarity with the themes of Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin of Inequality and the positions formulated in his broader philosophical work might suggest that Rousseau considers the collective formation of society to be nothing more than a burden upon man's natural isolation and freedom. In other words, Rousseau is often seen as advancing a deep antagonism between nature and culture and then favoring the former over the latter. Culture represents the continual corruption of man's natural state, with the natural state in turn representing the proper form of human social organization. Although Rousseau's social contract theory does use the state of nature to illuminate what he takes to be man's current fallen and unequal state, Rousseau is significantly more complicated a thinker than such a cursory treatment portrays him. In the preface to the Discourse, he immediately expresses his awareness of the difficulty involved in reaching an accurate picture of our nature:

And how will man be successful in seeing himself as nature formed him, through all the changes that the succession of time and things must have produced in his original constitution, and in separating what he derives from his own wherewithal from what circumstances his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state? (Rousseau 10-11)

Rousseau's presentation of the problem explicitly acknowledges the possibility of imposing social contingencies upon the essence of humanity. This awareness finds further expression in his condemnation of natural law political theories:

Writers begin by seeking the rules on which, for the common utility, it would be appropriate for men to agree among themselves; and then they give the name *natural law* [emphasis in original] to the collection of these rules, with no other proof than the good which would presumably result from their universal observance. Surely this is a very convenient way to compose definitions and to explain the nature of things by virtually arbitrary views of what is seemly. (Rousseau 13)

This condemnation is directed at the manner in which presumptions about human nature and human ethical life can be used to prop up or reify what is simply socially convenient. However, this falls short of suggesting that Rousseau has wholly abandoned the idea of human nature. Rousseau is indicating the difficulty of reaching an accurate account of human nature and rejecting certain attempts to provide such an account as false. Thus, Rousseau clearly acknowledges that specifying human nature is problematic, but then boldly launches into his own theory of our nature.

Early in On Liberty, John Stuart Mill articulates his own familiarity with the epistemic burden involved in accounts of human nature, writing that "[t]he rules which obtain among themselves [the people of any given age and country] appear to be self-evident and self-justifying. This all but universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature but is continually mistaken for the first" (Mill 5). Like Rousseau, Mill mentions this difficulty and then comfortably makes use of the concept himself.

In the following sections, I explain how Rousseau and Mill proceed to advance their ideas on human nature, pointing out the insights offered by those ideas, but also how both philosophers fail to resolve Young's dilemma. I then utilize Rousseau and Mill's ideas to develop a thin account of human nature, which I claim adequately handles the dilemma. This account shares some similarities with Alasdair MacIntyre's ideas of flourishing and

practices. But before any analysis of Rousseau and Mill, I want to use the next section to make the necessity of a theory of human nature a little more explicit.

II. A Theory of Human Nature: An Exigent Need

I began the first section with the claim that a wide range of academic and scientific fields rely upon the assumption that they can produce genuine knowledge about human beings. At first glance, the specific nature of this assumption is unclear. Are these areas of research generating knowledge about human nature? If so, how are we to treat the claims of one discipline rather than another? Given the sheer diversity of information available to us about human beings, how do we arrive at those pieces of information that should be integrated into a vision of what is fundamental? How do we go about building a theory of human nature? Young, of course, in her statement of the dilemma, mentions the importance of such a theory for justifying our norms and values. Can such a theory be offered by the various sciences? If something like the infamous “is-ought gap” prevents this, what further implications are there?

In *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Alison Jaggar considers the importance of scientific knowledge to political philosophy, asserting that political philosophers depend upon scientific knowledge about the world. Political theories must be capable of being implemented and practiced; constructing them in this way requires a close familiarity with human motivations, human desires, technology, the mechanisms of social change, and actual political situations. She writes:

An intimate relationship exists, then, between political philosophy, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, such sciences as psychology, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, and even biology and the various technologies. [...] A knowledge of many sciences is necessary to give substance to the philosophical ideal of human well-being and fulfillment, to add trenchancy to philosophical critiques of oppression and to avoid idle speculation by setting limits to social and political possibility. (Jaggar 17-18)

She then turns to the problem of arbitrating between such findings. Many of the human sciences involve disputes that lack any clear criteria for evaluating competing claims and establishing a final resolution. Jaggar views this absence of conclusion as the result of competing ideas about human nature. One example she provides is how disputes in

psychology involve differences in what behaviorist, Freudian, cognitive, and humanist models of research assume about human nature. She also cites classical and Marxist economics as differing in the same way, with the first assuming that we are primarily individuals with our own selfish interests and the latter beginning with the assumption that interests are shared by members of the same class and ultimately all humans (Jaggar 18). It is these very problems that have historically been the interest of philosophical examination, whereas empirical fields, largely unknowingly, *presuppose* things about human nature. The human sciences are "grounded on conceptions of human nature that are not straightforwardly empirical, both because they presuppose certain very general features of what it is to be human and because they rest on certain normative assumptions. The presuppositions of the human sciences, in fact, constitute varying answers to what the western tradition has taken to be the central problems of philosophy" (Jaggar 20).

This claim about the human sciences being the empirical application of the Western philosophical tradition argues for the primacy of conceptual approaches to human nature, but this in no way contradicts or undermines Jaggar's earlier claim about the importance of engaging with the empirical sciences.

If Jaggar is right, there are important implications related to Young's dilemma. First, there is no way to abandon normative conceptions of human nature because their guiding role in the human sciences is inexorable. If we want to engage in these types of sciences, we need a theory of human nature. Secondly, it shows that, because of the importance of the interchange of philosophy and science, getting clear about human nature can have an important bearing on empirical science. We can use a theory of human nature in helping us to understand and weigh the methodologies of particular fields; such a theory provides us with one vital conceptual resource for explaining and assessing their relative merits or errors. Lastly, ideas of human nature are also receptive to the findings of the sciences; there is mutual feedback and dependency between the two. Just as the sciences are always open to revision, so are our ideas about human nature. Human nature is contestable and we should admit this fallibility and keep it in mind.

This viewpoint amounts to a denial of the is-ought gap because it states that what *ought* to be the case is a result of what we in fact already *are*. Additionally, insofar as the sciences offer any elaboration contributing to a description of what we *are*, they already presume an *ought*, a normatively-laden portrait of humanity. Maintaining an attachment to the is-ought gap must involve offering an alternative account of what appear to be "thick descriptions," descriptions which Jagger believes are presumed by incommensurable paradigms within the social sciences. But accepting the dissolution of the gap, an acceptance I believe reasonable, means getting clear about how fact and value are blended in the idea of human nature. Empirical science and moral philosophy must be provided with a theory of human nature. With that said, I now turn to an examination of Rousseau and Mill.

III. Rousseau and Human Nature

Rousseau struggled against the supposedly divine role of the French monarch by appealing to a "state of nature." Describing this original natural state allowed him to establish a theoretical model of how society would have originally formed and then juxtapose that model against the social actualities of his time, revealing them as contrary to the structure of a just political arrangement. As mentioned earlier, Rousseau objected to natural law political theories and their tendency to reify merely transient cultural norms. This is Rousseau's central thrust against the pretensions of universal reason and the monarchy: false theories of human nature rest upon an *ideological* basis. Yet Part One of Rousseau's Discourse is built around a speculative description of human nature that is no less ideological than the divine right of kings. For example, Rousseau blatantly uses his own description as a bludgeon against tyranny and wealth, portraying the rich as "ravenous wolves which, on having once tasted human flesh, reject all other food and desire to devour only man" (Rousseau 55).

The clue to why Rousseau might think this acceptable is a seemingly hasty transition after his comment about natural law:

Leaving aside therefore all scientific books which teach us only to see men as they have made themselves, and *meditating* on the first and most simple operations of the human soul, I believe I perceive in it two principles that are *prior to reason* [...]

[and from which] all the rules of natural right appear to me to flow [emphasis mine].
(Rousseau 13-14)

Rousseau identifies this "meditation" as his method of reaching two basic principles about human nature. Rousseau appears to be claiming that reason and culture are false to the degree that they either corrupt or fail to offer us knowledge of what we are. Our most basic form of self-knowledge is attained only through an intuitive kind of meditation.

But Rousseau's view is nuanced. It is possible to see Rousseau as bemoaning society as a limitation upon the freedom possessed by individuals in the state of nature. While it is true that Rousseau has an individualist ontology of the self—finding its best expression in his portrayal of human mating in the state of nature as a result of "chance encounters" that end in "nonchalance"—and that he claims it is through society that man becomes "weak, fearful, and servile," this individualism carries some important qualifications (Rousseau 29-30, 23). Rousseau actually identifies the "happiest and most durable epoch" of human history with a stage that lies intermediate to the state of nature and society's inevitable decline into the "petulant activity [...] of egocentrism" (Rousseau 50). This form of society is designated as that of "savages," and is different from the "primitive state," or the state of nature (Rousseau 50). At this point, humans have formed nations of shared customs, established families, developed speech, acquired an appreciation for beauty, and developed a concern for public esteem that leads leads to both civility and vengeance/punishment (Rousseau 47-49). All "subsequent progress" from this savage state represents "so many steps toward the perfection of the individual" in appearance, but is in fact the "decay of the species" (Rousseau 50).

From this, it is clear that Rousseau's conception of the "happy society" is one in which humanity has already left the state of nature and entered the bonds of relationships and communities. Further departure from this savage state, far from being the denigration of the individual, is actually an apparent improvement for the individual (or at least certain individuals, i.e. the rich). But such a departure is an unequivocal disaster for the collective whole. Rousseau's legacy of mankind's despair is tinged with more ambiguity than if he were merely claiming the

state of nature as the highest good. Rousseau's concerns about society are centered not on the limitation of individual freedom, but society's tendency to obscure or alter our former instinctual reaction to the pain of both ourselves and others. As society and reason increase our interdependency *in fact*, they simultaneously mask that dependency:

[...] all the subsequent progress [from the savage state] has been in appearance so many steps toward the perfection of the individual, and in fact toward the decay of the species. (Rousseau 50)

[...] although man had previously been free and independent, we find him, so to speak, subject, by virtue of a multitude of fresh needs, to all of nature and particularly to his fellowmen, whose slave in a sense he becomes even in becoming their master; rich, he needs their services; poor, he needs their help. (Rousseau 54)

Leaving the savage state has the deceptive appearance of being an improvement for the individual, when it is actually harmful to the both the individual and the species. A masked interdependence is also at work in the life and needs of the rich man, who has the surface level appearance of being a "master" relative to the poor man, but in reality depends upon the existence and actions of the poor man for his own status and mode of life. Furthermore, interdependence is not something Rousseau castigates in itself, but because it gives rise to industry and leads to the rational/productive aspects of man's existence drowning out less rigid and more sentimental forms of human association:

[...] as soon as one man realized that it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property came into existence, labor became necessary. Vast forests were transformed into smiling fields which had to be watered with men's sweat, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops. (Rousseau 51)

When Rousseau refers to the horrors of interdependence, he is not talking about communal living and reliance on others so much as patterns of shared specialized, mechanized activity (Rousseau 51). The development of an awareness of the other and a concern for public esteem (forms of dependence) within the savage state is portrayed as the "first step toward inequality," but it is not yet inequality (Rousseau 49). Rather, inequality arises from the coordination of such concern with "natural inequality," and so concerns about public esteem, added alongside natural inequality, are the preconditions of "moral or political inequality" (Rousseau 16). Natural inequality manifests

itself as differences in the ability to perform kinds of manual labor and couples itself with the results of the socialization process, leading to an exacerbation of man's needs, which are now both material and social in nature (Rousseau 53-54).

The cultivation of land on the level of mass agriculture and the utilization of other natural resources heighten inequality because they are the result of the replacement of sentiment with reason. Rousseau refers to this as "reason rendered active" (Rousseau 53). As man's biological development grants him higher thought, a culture of sentiment and localized usage of the land becomes replaced by a culture of reason oriented primarily towards material acquisition. Culture serves to direct calculative reason towards exploitation because of man's existence as an embodied being with needs:

As long as men were content with the rustic huts, as long as they were limited to making their clothing out of skins sewn together with thorns or fish bones, adorning themselves with feathers and shells [...] as long as they applied themselves exclusively to tasks that did not require the cooperation of several hands, they lived as free, healthy, good and happy as they could in accordance with their nature; and they continued to enjoy among themselves the sweet rewards of independent intercourse. [...] as soon as one man realized it was useful for a single individual to have provisions for two, equality disappeared. (Rousseau 51)

The biological capacity *to* reason is thus wholeheartedly embraced and emphasized by a social culture of material needs, creating a cycle of possession and dominance over the earth, eventually leading to the dominance of some people over others. The origin of inequality is completed by the formation of the state, which solidifies both property and inequality, and finally the development of arbitrary state power (Rousseau 56-57).

Rousseau sees reason as not only unable to aid in the discovery of human nature, but as the source of sorrow when embedded within a culture that takes such reason to be the primary mode of understanding and interacting with the world and one another. The capacity for calculative reason is designated as a natural result of man's biological development, but its combination with social dependence and the need for the esteem of others creates an amplified social/rational consciousness that is unnatural and corrosive. Reason—not social dependence—is the aspect of this combination which Rousseau attacks. He attacks it because he thinks it leads to

suffocation and isolation. It is reason that "turns man in upon himself [...] isolat[ing] him and what moves him to say in secret, at the sight of a suffering man, 'Perish if you will; I am safe and sound'" (Rousseau 37). But as the unifying force that leads to humanity banding together into groups and eventually forming small societies, reason can be beneficial. It allows humans to recognize one another as similar and determine when cooperative action is in the self-interest of all (Rousseau 45-46). Nature, by contrast, offers "little [...] prepar[ation] [...] for becoming habituated to the ways of society." Instinct allows human beings to live in the state of nature, but reason allows humans to live in society (Rousseau 34). Reason, as a product of nature, grants access to society and culture, thereby producing something wholly different from the state of nature. It then has a continuing influence within society, guiding society down a mad road of power and slavery. Reason is largely a villain within Rousseau's philosophy, secondary only to property in its role of creating suffering.

Rousseau is more equivocal in his evaluation of culture. Because the savage state of social organization (as opposed to the primitive state) is treated as ideal, it is clear that Rousseau sees society as admitting of at least some substantive good. It is when society is used to bolster calculative reason and direct it towards harnessing land, labor, and capital that culture becomes corrupted as a consequence. Society is co-implicated every step of the way in the gradual process of inequality's birth and securance: (1) the distinction among family members and outsiders, (2) mutual dependency and a realization of the material benefit of technical knowledge, (3) the cultivation of land and the concretization of labor, and, (4) the establishment of the state by the wealthy (Rousseau 47, 51, 52-53, 56-57). Above all, society is cast in terms of dependency. As people gathered, they came to "look at the others and to want to be looked at [...] [and realized] that public esteem had a value" (Rousseau 49). Such dependency is not entirely negative. Rousseau seems to believe that as long as this dependency is recognized and controlled by natural human sentiment and compassion, it is a good. Reason is what distorts our understanding of our dependence and makes us think of ourselves as independent even after we have left the state of nature. These are the reasons why Rousseau does not identify the state of

nature with the ultimate good and why he insists upon the "isolating" function of reason that results in a condition where "[n]o longer can anything but danger to the entire society trouble the tranquil slumber of the philosopher and yank him from his bed. [...] [he can now] argue with himself a little in order to prevent nature, which rebels within him, from identifying [with victims of violence]" (Rousseau 37-38). Society is desirable over the natural state, but should remain as close to such a state as possible while still retaining the benefits engendered by its differentiation. This entails that society uses reason to utilize resources in order to transcend the state of nature, but subordinates this faculty to natural sentiment. Reason's isolating function can be reconciled with its role in the formation of society so long as it is understood as allowing us to recognize one another according to our relational properties, but falling short of forging social bonds of commitment.

Finally, this brings us to Rousseau's depiction of human nature. His pre-rational meditation on humanity's essential being leads to two theses: (1) we are concerned with our own "well-being and self-preservation", and (2) we have an equal "natural repugnance" for the suffering of other creatures, namely human beings (Rousseau 14). The elaboration of these theses throughout the Discourse illustrates the importance of embodiedness to Rousseau's philosophy. Human nature is linked to our material bodies as a desire to avoid pain and an empathetic understanding of pain in other bodies. Our human nature means we are fragile creatures with an instinctive, non-cognitive sense of this fragility in ourselves and others. Fragility, conceived primarily in terms of a need to sustain our own existence, is the factor Rousseau deems responsible for the genesis of reason. We begin as simply "animal[s] limited at first to pure sensations [...] [b]ut difficulties soon presented themselves [...] [and] it was necessary to learn to overcome them." This leads to "bodily exercises" that train humanity in overcoming the threats of the material, natural environment (Rousseau 45). With the growth of societies as well as this capacity for instrumental reason, a system of complex labor relations tied to the earth develops. Because Rousseau identifies this systematic use of the land as a step in the establishment of property and sees this system as dulling natural tinges of empathy, the system of direct labor relations represents a form of

displaced consciousness that begins to see the body solely as tool for gathering and maintaining resources (Rousseau 52-53). Calculative reason focuses human efforts on insensate material bodies that are readily controlled and manipulated, leading to a reconceptualization of humanity as independent subjects possessing objects. The impetus behind the creation of this system, the body's original state of connection to the earth and vulnerability in the face of this connection, is consequently lost. Our nature is animal, sensory, and constrained by biological needs in a vital sense, but gets confused as something rational, independent, and immaterial.

In addition to coupling a physiological description of man with a broadly phenomenological picture of physical vulnerability, Rousseau adds two other aspects of human nature: freedom and what he calls "perfectibility." Freedom is identified with the "power of willing" and is conceived of as a "purely spiritual act" entirely unexplainable by physics (Rousseau 25). Just as the natural world stands in a limiting relation to us as a source of threats and the satisfaction of inevitable needs, our nature is also understood as in some sense limitless. Freedom, rather than rationality, is what distinguishes us from animals, but this freedom is always taken as externalized rather than originating from anything like an immaterial mind. Rousseau contrasts human freedom with animal instinct in the example of pigeons and cats rejecting food that he believes could nourish them, associating freedom with "desiring" and "fearing," states that rely upon external objects of those fears and desires (Rousseau 25-26). Reason arises from freedom just as much as it is a product of fragility. Rousseau directly subordinates reason to freedom, stating "it is impossible to conceive why someone who had neither desires or fears would go to the bother of reasoning" (Rousseau 26). Perfectibility, ironically termed, is the human capacity to change and adapt to exterior circumstances. Because this capacity means that behavior can be altered by reason and culture--and is held to be "almost unlimited"--it is called "the source of all man's misfortunes" (Rousseau 26).

So for Rousseau, human nature is not only multifarious, but deeply paradoxical. It is a matter of freedom and simultaneous constraint. The state of nature is depicted as mostly good: people are free, empathetic, and largely adapted to the world and capable of tending to their

needs. The existence of these needs is something humans understand by instinct alone; reason does not yet cloud awareness of this dependence. Rousseau's inclusion of perfectability is the central complicating factor. Perfectability links freedom with reason, thereby suggesting that human freedom itself in the state of nature had the latent potential to morph the human condition into one of enslavement. This is succinctly put in Rousseau's phrase: "They all ran to chain themselves, in the belief that they secured their liberty"¹ (Rousseau 56). In a way, this suggests that our nature is precisely the lack of any concrete nature, because perfectability means a virtually unlimited number of ways in which humans can exist. As James Miller writes, "the uncertain power of freedom has turned the human being into an animal destined not to contemplate eternal truths, but rather to grapple in ever-changing ways with ever-changing circumstances, in time producing a unique and potentially agonizing *history* [emphasis in original]" (Miller xv). What Rousseau offers to the dilemma of human nature is an image of our nature as uncertain, malleable, and fused with culture. History "simultaneously realize[s] and pervert[s], reveal[s] and distort[s]" our nature (Miller xv). Rousseau's evaluation of this propensity for change is ambiguous. It is treated negatively as the source of our downfall and the beginning of inequality, but is positive insofar as it leads to the community found in the savage state. In any case, human nature is intrinsically historical in Rousseau's account. It is the product of constraint and freedom, the melding of the exigencies of a concrete material situation with the ever-present ability to reshape those circumstances in radically different ways. Human nature inescapably contains the certainty of our animality and the uncertainty of how that animality is understood and situated within culture. Freedom is the link between nature and culture.

The second important contribution Rousseau makes is that of a non-rational/non-discursive method. His meditative method for uncovering the two theses of human nature is questionable, but at least grants an additional option for attempting to understand ourselves which might have gone unnoticed. Two immediate objections to Rousseau's meditative methodology are that it

¹ I am aware that this statement does not refer to man in the state of nature, but I think it still expresses an intrinsic potential.

seems to rely on nothing more than introspection and that it is incomplete. Introspection does not allow of pure, unmediated knowledge and is still subject to the "convenience" charge Rousseau levels against natural law theories. Rousseau may have simply reasoned that the theses were plausible assumptions in light of the social circumstances that surrounded him. If this is true, it is especially troublesome because, according to Rousseau's own philosophy, the society of his time should have corrupted natural sentiment. Secondly, all that is said about the meditation in the *Discourse* itself is that it divulges two principles of human nature that are prior to reason. This is not a sufficient description of the allegedly non-rational methodology employed. The meditation also seems to fly in the face of Rousseau's own elaborate theory of the development and ceaseless modification of human nature because it assumes two essential truths about humanity in its original state. Rousseau uses these two purported truths as an ahistorical ground for his historical account of humanity's changes. While that account includes an irrevocable connection between historical progression and its material preconditions, the two theses are unjustified riders produced by speculation about a particular state of affairs assumed to have existed in prehistory.

IV. Mill and Human Nature

Within On Liberty, Mill scarcely uses the phrase "human nature" half a dozen times. Despite this, two direct references in particular are enough to begin an analysis of Mill's ideas on the subject. The first instance is Mill's use of a metaphor comparing human nature to a tree rather than a machine:

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of inward forces which make it a living thing. (Mill 56-57)

This metaphor reveals that Mill's conception of human nature, like Rousseau's, is a *dynamic* one. Rather than beginning with a few principles or a statement of man's essence that determine a particular pattern of behavior, Mill advocates pluralism. Due to the complexity of individual human desires and interests, there can be a variety of appropriate means for the growth and development of human happiness. Just what the "inward forces" of human nature are is left ambiguous from

this statement alone, but a second mention of human nature shows that these forces are primarily the desires and principles that motivate any particular person. Mill refers to the man who is "eminent in qualities conducing to his own good" as "nearer to the ideal of the perfection of human nature" than others (Mill 75). On Mill's account, there exist a wide variety of such qualities, but all must aim towards an individual's own unique good.

Two immediate objections come to mind. First, this might imply that there are as many different "human natures" as there are people and is therefore hardly a theory of human nature at all. Besides the existence of a variety of means to reach the end of happiness or fulfillment, this account also admits of a variety of different ends. Man's "good" is left entirely up to his own decision, so that Mill ultimately admits of so much pluralism here that he presents nothing resembling an identifiable human nature at all. Of course, this is the main thrust of On Liberty anyway: the individual is best able to determine his or her own good and society is at least just as fallible as the individual when it comes to such decisions (Mill 80-81). So maybe Mill is comfortable with this weak description of human nature. The second objection identifies a way in which Mill might be making *too strong* a claim about human nature: those who possess the qualities necessary for the attainment of their own good are nearer to an "ideal" of a perfected human nature. This is worrisome because it lends itself to the idea that some people are more "perfectly human" than others, which clearly ties in to fears about human nature being an inherently dangerous or reactionary concept. And in fact, despite his progressive political projects, Mill does not escape from holding on to a belief analogous to Nietzsche's will to power, writing: "To say that one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of another, is merely to say that he has more of the raw material of human nature, and is therefore capable, perhaps of more evil, but certainly of more good" (Mill 57). Of course, Mill thinks it "necessary to prevent the stronger specimens of human nature from encroaching on the rights of others," but it is still questionable that he uses the language of "strength" here and associates such strength of desire with a closer resemblance to true human nature (Mill 60).

Understanding what relevance this has to Mill's ideas on human nature requires turning to Mill's ideas on society. For Mill, human social custom is a mystifying force that passes down sets of irrational practices and emotive sensibilities hindering access to reason. Reason, in turn, is chiefly identified with the establishment of principles. Mill takes liberty to be a principle established by reason, namely the principle of "pursuing our own good in our own way" (Mill 12). This principle is then associated with Mill's "harm principle," which states that social coercion is only permissible if it prevents someone from harming others, and the stronger principle that a person can only be subject to coercion to prevent them from violating the rights of another (Mill 53, 79). From this, the connection between liberty and human nature is clear. Liberty allows us to pursue our own good in a negative fashion, preventing unwarranted external coercion, whereas human nature is a person's individual ability to attain that good.² This means that liberty allows human nature to manifest itself. Society chiefly has a dampening effect on individual liberty, and therefore has a similar effect on human nature. This oppositional relationship between our nature and society is explicitly linked to Mill's racism:

The progressive principle, however, in either shape, *whether as the love of liberty or of improvement*, is antagonistic to the sway of Custom, involving at least emancipation from that yoke; and the contest between the two constitutes the chief interest of the history of mankind. The greater part of the world has no history, because the despotism of Custom is complete. This is the case over the whole East [emphasis mine]. (Mill 67)

The customs of society are a force constraining the individual and, because Mill assumes such customs predominate in the East, the people of Eastern countries are considered to be lacking in the actualization of full human nature. This justifies coercion directed at improving their situation.

The notion of a fuller expression or embodiment of human nature is connected to Mill's notorious apologism for British imperialism, whereby "England had a right to rule despotically because it brought the benefits of higher civilization" (Sullivan 611). Mill falls into traditional imperialist stereotypes of non-Europeans several times in On Liberty, his worst offense being his nonchalance over coercive dictatorships in foreign societies. He writes:

² This is conceived in terms of the previously mentioned "inward forces."

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne if they are so fortunate as to find one. (Mill 10)

Another example is his claim that China has been culturally stagnant "for thousands of years," and that if they are to overcome this state, foreign involvement is necessary (Mill 69).

If this explanation of Mill's tolerance for imperialism and despotism is correct, there is a glaring inconsistency in Mill's picture of human nature. Human nature is supposed to represent "good" in a broad, individualistic sense associated with the principle of liberty, which leads to "improvement" or "progress." What qualifies as "good" is left virtually empty, yet Mill manages to use the concept in a way that excludes entire cultures from consideration of goodness and its relation to human nature. Mill's likely response to this objection would be that this is justifiable precisely because individualistic goods are not recognized within such societies and so the existence of such goods is already precluded. He is therefore simply describing a state of affairs, not "using" the idea of human nature in an exclusive way. Looking to the East, Mill may have seen nothing but totally collective societies bereft of anyone worthy of being deemed an individual. Not only is this an important illustration of the dangers involved in alleged "descriptions" that rely upon the concept of human nature, but this defense cannot rescue Mill, especially considering his ideas on British society and what he believes to be the role of reason.

According to Mill, "the likings and dislikings of society, or of some powerful portion of it, are thus the main thing which has practically determined the rules laid down for general observance" (Mill 7). This is not only applicable to foreign countries; the corrupting influence of custom is portrayed as equally malignant in British society, wherein there has been "no recognized principle by which [the] propriety of government interference is customarily tested" (Mill 8). Mill uses "reason" in a thinner sense than Rousseau does, usually mentioning "reasons" in the plural as principles used for discussion and justification. Reasons are offered by individuals and are used to critique other reasons in an attempt to reach the truth, or true principles. Because reasons are the

products of individual people, they admit of fallibility and so Mill encourages everything to be open to discussion. In this way, the most reasonable principles are determined (again by individuals) and adhered to. Society generally serves to protect certain principles from criticism or produces behavior with no guiding principle behind it at all, preventing individuals from reflecting on their motivations and beliefs. Indeed, the average citizen of Mill's Britain is described as only capable of offering "his own preference [...] [as] not only a perfectly satisfactory reason but the only one he generally has for any of his notions of morality, taste, or propriety" (Mill 6). The common man is ruled over by social norms and is given no chance to exercise his own capacity for critical thinking, and so Europe is in danger of becoming another China (Mill 69). What is not clear is exactly in what respects Britain and the rest of Europe differ from China when it comes to the domination of society over the individual. It appears as though Mill lacks any principled reason for his own divergent opinions when it comes to the relative benefits of liberty for the British citizen versus the Chinese or Indian citizen. He states that liberty, as a principle, is not applicable until man can benefit from discussion (Mill 10). Given his harsh opinions of the ordinary British subject, it is not clear how liberty can benefit them. Mill seems to resort to untrammelled optimism here instead of providing a clear principle, but he immediately withholds such optimism when it comes to foreigners. He fails to realize that rulers and politicians within his own society might just as easily fail to extend such faith to their own subjects, the British "masses."

Mill's comments here are probably not to be interpreted as simply stating that the people of foreign countries are oppressed by custom and poor rulers, finding themselves powerless to do anything about the situation. Mill believes that the relevance of liberty for an individual depends upon that individual's ability to "benefit from discussion," a troublesome phrase that carries a lot of weight when it comes to understanding the force of Mill's dismissal. Because of the political nature of the text, and because Mill writes in defense of free speech and the ability to choose one's own life, there may be a temptation to regard these putatively racist statements charitably. On such a reading, Mill doesn't regard Indians or the Chinese as intrinsically deficient, only dominated and controlled. While it is true that Mill mentions their potential for "improvement" and that a dynamic

understanding of human nature makes change possible, I believe that Mill is saying that— relative to his own historical time point—the East has only a nascent and backwards culture. The individual citizen of an Eastern country is directly compared to a child:

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine [the harm principle] is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. (Mill 9-10)

Furthermore, Mill's individualistic bent leads him to an understanding of liberty that begins with a kind of pure individual consciousness:

This, then, is the appropriate region of human liberty. It comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness, demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense, liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. (Mill 11)

This is the liberty Mill is denying to the citizen of the East: that of inward consciousness. Such consciousness cannot avoid expressing itself externally, of course. In fact, it must, due to its own internal momentum. Human nature is, after all, a growing tree. But the growing tree is taken as ontologically prior to its environment. The citizen of the East is like a frustrated sapling, oppressed by the external force of custom, but also malformed and diminutive itself.

Building on the lack of a clear principle offered for the difference between British society and the custom-ruled East, there are a number of other questions that can be posed to Mill. (1) In the case of the East, how is the potential for a liberated society advanced by denying the relevance of its application to begin with? In other words, might some degree of societal liberty have to come prior to the possibility of a benevolent dictator? How does the benevolent dictator promote liberty from a role antithetical to liberty (i.e. a case of "false consciousness")? Likewise, why is colonial rule permitted when Mill believes "it can never be in the interest of the individual to suppress the exercise and development of his or her own faculties of critical choice?" (Rapaport xix) How exactly do dictators or colonialists serve the interests of immature peoples? (2) Is

Mill's optimism regarding the British simply a result of society clouding his own ability to form rational principles? He appears to privilege his own culture merely because it is that culture he lives in and he therefore accepts the notion of the civilizing character of Britain. (3) There is an apparent need for culture to fill in other "blanks" within the doctrines and principles Mill advances. For example, it is society that must determine what behaviors constitute violations of our obligations, as well as what these obligations themselves are. Can this all be made explicit in the form of principles? Orienting society so that it is, by its nature, locked into direct confrontation with reasoned principles leaves little room for the tacit, the implied, or the socially/conventionally understood.

V. A New Conception of Human Nature

When it comes to getting clear about human nature, both Rousseau and Mill fail. However, regardless of this failure, they both have something to add to what an account of human nature must look like. Rousseau's insights in this area are more insightful than Mill's. From Rousseau, we gain a rather paradoxical view of human nature as a simultaneous matter of constraint and freedom; human nature is to be found dynamically shifting along that axis. Humans are not to be identified with rationality, but with freedom, which is a force that has developed into how we structure society around our material needs as embodied beings. There is something gripping about the paradox embedded within Rousseau here and this is probably because it reflects the heart of the dilemma Young proposed: We seem relegated to relying upon an idea of what we are, but yet we have an equal need for some amount of fluid interpretation on the issue--that is, we demand the freedom of shaping what we are. Young's own answer to the dilemma is to try to keep ideas of human nature deliberately broad and continually open to challenge (Young 37). This is good, but Rousseau is helpful in sketching out some additional components of the formal structure of claims about human nature. Rousseau is right to see a complicated interchange between society and reason and to locate his more robust account of reason within society. This "robust account of reason" refers to reason as explicitly experienced, emphasized, and self-consciously directed. This

is opposed to reason as a mechanical and unreflective recognition of basic spatial properties and the like. Rousseau is also right that knowing our human nature is a non-rational process; that is, it comes before any discursive articulation.³ But Rousseau goes wrong in using ahistorical principles describing psychological dispositions to try to ground his historical account. In fact, these principles often lead him into lapsing into the same kind of idolatry over social contingencies that he set out to challenge. This is most obvious in his unrestrained sexism in describing human mating in the state of nature (Rousseau 39-41). In other words, he slips up on both the epistemological and sociopolitical difficulties involved in asking about human nature.

Rousseau and Mill are both right that our nature is dynamic rather than static: Rousseau shows that this dynamism is a result of our shifting histories, freedoms, and embodied needs; Mill is right that all of these must be appropriated by the individual and used in an outward organic growth. Mill's central error is that he poses a stark contrast between reason and society, which develops into an excessive methodological individualism wherein the individual must independently analyze everything society offers and then establish his own set of explicit principles.

One of the important lessons from Rousseau is that we are needful animals, dependent beings within a world of material necessities. But Rousseau also notes the importance of social needs, mainly in his discussion of the need for public esteem that develops within the savage state. Of course, a conception of human nature in terms of needs has to offer some sketch of the content or substance of those needs. Rousseau offers a starting point for spelling out those needs. Our needs are both material and social and the difference between these two types of need can be blurred. This blurring is exemplified in Rousseau's discussion of a societal emphasis upon certain types of material goods as key to the establishment of property. Our nature is dynamic to the extent that social needs can change and that they can be oriented around or even accentuate our material needs.

³ Of course, this does not mean that we are unable to discuss our nature discursively at all after this discovery. This will be addressed in more detail later.

A good example of this is employment. In contemporary American society, most people rely upon having an occupation in order to sustain themselves. For these people, employment is a clear social need. It happens to be a social need because society is organized in such a way that employment is taken as the chief means to obtain one's material needs and a certain portion of one's other social needs. One could even be employed in a line of work that helps to provide others with their own material needs (e.g. agriculture, medicine, construction, etc.) or in a way that one's own material needs are attained by helping others with their social needs (e.g. clinical psychology, social work, education, etc.). Is this to claim that the need for employment is a part of human nature? It might make sense to talk about employment this way, if we understand such talk as implying that our society considers employment something that people should typically have and that it occupies their time and serves as a means to handling their other needs. Employment is considered a part of human nature in the sense that our society sees it as an activity suited to our needs. It must also be added that this does not imply anything *essential* about employment; we could certainly live in a society in which employment is understood to mean something different than receiving a salary from an employer or in which there is nothing even resembling employment. Furthermore, as we learn from Mill, any particular type of employment must be something an individual participates in and has integrated into their life and their other needs. This helps us begin fleshing out what is meant by saying that human nature is understood in terms of "needs and the actions we take to fulfill those needs," with the actions being social roles and recognizable behaviors.

Earlier, I praised Rousseau for offering us the possibility of a non-rational method for discovering human nature. This is because our most basic encounter with our needs is in our social actions, or through participation in those activities made possible by the society we find ourselves living in. In a certain sense, these activities can be considered quite rational. Continuing with the example of employment, it might be considered highly rational to make one's living as a lawyer, for instance. Part of what makes the activity of participating in court cases rational is that it is widely recognized as useful and is a definite means of making a living. An individual lawyer might

consider their profession rational in other ways; maybe it fits with her understanding of social justice or seems a good fit for her personality type. In these ways, being a lawyer just makes sense. But there have surely been societies in which being a lawyer could have never made sense. Viking or Aztec societies may have had some designated social role that functioned in resolving disputes, but they by no means had lawyers. None of this is to assert that lawyers, through simply carrying out their profession, acquire a better understanding of human nature. What I am attempting to illustrate is the character of the relationship between society and reason as found within Rousseau's *Discourse* to explain what I consider to be, in some sense, a "non-rational" method for discovering human nature. For Rousseau, reason created society and then society, as an independent phenomenon, exaggerated reason's expression in outward activity. This social "exaggeration," or a system of social values and practices, is what I want to identify as our non-rational method for determining human nature; just as the absence of Viking lawyers is only made coherent by appeal to Viking social values and practices. We discover human nature in the process of assuming social roles and making sense of them for ourselves in relation to our needs.

This can be understood by examining another part of human nature: our freedom. Freedom is related to our agency as humans, which in turn corresponds with a fundamental uncertainty. Again, Rousseau shows that freedom is not only paradoxical itself, but that it can have paradoxical consequences. To be able to exercise our freedom requires a certain amount of constraint, just as freedom within Rousseau's state of nature is predicated upon a dependency on the material environment; a dependency that is dampened with the beginnings of society and the process of establishing property. Similarly, Rousseau sees our eventual enslavement as a paradoxical consequence of freedom, demonstrating the uncertainty involved in human agency. Freedom and uncertainty allow for not only agency, but a wide range of decisions about who we are and what we should be and do. But this freedom is grounded on a necessary element of both social and material constraint. Constraint limits our agency in three ways: (1) we are only free relative to socially available roles (e.g. no Viking lawyers), (2) we are limited by the material

interactions within the roles themselves (e.g. there are certain material resources involved in the practice of being a lawyer), and, (3) only certain roles are materially possible within a given society (e.g. no Viking astronauts). Mill rightly stresses our individual involvement in being, choosing, and doing with his metaphor comparing human nature to a tree, but sees this as oppositional to, rather than dependent on, culture. Rousseau is not oblivious to this individual element—it is a part of our nature to be free—but he does pay closer attention to society's role in *both* nourishing and warping our freedom than Mill does. So, combining Mill and Rousseau leads to a picture of human nature wherein we act to affirm our own nature and realize a purpose; that is, insofar as it satisfies our needs. Because our actions rely upon a social context, affirming our nature means we also affirm particular social roles and their relation to our needs. Of course, if the role is experienced as arbitrary or useless and we find no meaningful action available to us, we feel frustrated and aimless. When we cannot act in a way that makes our lives *materially and socially effective*, we experience ourselves as acting and living contrary to our nature. Understanding our nature is primarily non-rational in the sense that it is gained by *carrying out* the actions themselves and having a cognitive awareness of them secondarily. Philosophy may be vital in clarifying this understanding, but our first awareness of our nature is found through practice.

To finally make our specific needs explicit: our highest need is for engaged action within a role that is simultaneously personal and social. All of our basic needs are things that serve as preconditions for such action. In this category, we would include needs like food, shelter, physical intimacy, a body that allows us to feel comfortable and efficacious, the material resources treated as necessary within a society (e.g. clothing, insurance, transportation, etc.), social intimacy (e.g. the care relationships emphasized by some feminist ethicists), dignity, civil and political rights, etc. All of these are material and social needs necessary for us to function as beings that organize our own particular set of material and social relations.

One possible objection to this portrait of human nature is that it conceives of human nature within a particular social context or society, and therefore it seems too narrow to be a theory about universal human nature. The response to this objection is that the above description of human

beings as needful and free social actors assumes at least three universals that apply to all human beings at all times: (1) the existence of material and social needs, (2) some degree of agency and freedom, (3) existence as a social animal within cultural processes. The exact content and specification of these three characteristics will vary, but they will always be applicable. They are sufficiently broad and dynamic so as not to pin us to a static "image" of human nature, and they acknowledge a wide degree of self-determination and the role of mutable social processes.

Describing human nature in a way that is less forceful and absolute is the way to resolve Young's dilemma. We obtain a theory that avoids the oppressive aspects of earlier theories and yet we also retain the ability to make normative claims by further elaborating upon these universals. For instance, as stated in Jaggar's earlier claim, concretely identifying human nature requires us to identify our needs, and the identification of our needs is in turn connected to an idea of human well-being. She continues: "What constitutes flourishing and well-being, however, is clearly a question of value, both with respect to the individual and with respect to the group" (Jaggar 20).

Alasdair MacIntyre has proposed understanding human flourishing as the ability to be an autonomous practical reasoner, or a creative and free agent (Dependent Rational Animals 77), and this is essentially the position advocated here. Affirming ourselves as individuals means the affirmation of social structures and roles that we identify with. These social structures qualify as what MacIntyre has called "practices." A practice is a complex cooperative activity that posits certain standards of excellence, identifies particular goods to be realized or gained, and progressively extends human powers (After Virtue 187). In other words, a practice designates certain behaviors as good or appropriate, identifies goals, and puts the behaviors into action in order to continually move toward the goals. It does all of this not at the level of the individual actor, but collectively. Examples of practices include physics, painting, games, and family life (After Virtue 188). Individuals labor, fit into, and participate in these practices in order to find and understand their own personal purpose. This continues the practice and establishes a historical tradition. Practices, as laid out by MacIntyre, are an integral part of human nature because of the role they play in establishing what it means for a human being to *flourish*. Insofar as we

participate in practices, we gain epistemic access to human nature, so long as "human nature" is understood in a deflationary sense (i.e. as an accidental instance of the three universals listed above). Practices allow us to better identify the *good*, for ourselves and, to a less definable degree, for others. This is to say that practices allow us to understand our needs and they constitute a vital part of human freedom. Human freedom is expressed and measured through practices.

But we must take our dependency into equal consideration: all human agency is possible on the basis of education received from a culture and the ability to sustain our fragile material bodies. MacIntyre is aware of this and, because we often depend on others directly for education and sustenance, and primarily act as agents within practices, he says that we "pursue [...] [our] respective goods in company with and in cooperation with each other" (Dependent Rational Animals 61). By realizing that our highest form of flourishing lies in the choice to become participants in practices, we overcome the "supposed opposition of individualism and collectivism" and achieve a vision of individual rights that translates into free and uncoerced collective activity⁴ (After Virtue 34). Human freedom must presume a body of interpersonal relationships; the existence of such relationships serves as a necessary condition for satisfying human needs. Individualism and collectivism are defined in opposition to one another, but they support one another by understanding human nature as either free or controlled, unruly or orderly. But human nature is actually autonomy realized within an enveloping social network; an autonomy directed at meeting needs on the precondition of having other needs met.

VI. Conclusion

Human nature is freedom in shaping the structure and character of social relations as they pertain to our sociomaterial needs; a freedom in generating action and giving meaning to that action. Our nature is one that is historical and dynamic, but is also constrained by the same forces that grant it fluidity. This account refuses to hold up a frozen image of what we are, insisting instead that we are to be found within ongoing processes. Other consequences include the

⁴ Making these practices available in a stronger sense than they are currently is a key part of MacIntyre's philosophy.

awareness of our dependency and its physical and cultural sources, our freedom in changing the forms in which our dependencies manifest themselves, and the collapse of a hard distinction between individual and collective interest. This view is broad enough not to be oppressive or a source of constraint, yet is detailed enough to ground robust normative theories. It provides a clear picture of the general form of human flourishing and a host of needs implied by this form. We are not only justified in talking about human nature, but *must* do so. The method for resisting stultifying theories of human nature is to point out their incompatibility with the transformative powers of history and culture, not to abandon theories of human nature entirely. Good theorizing about human nature entails describing the changes and conditions of these social powers. Normative theories are then understood as adaptive responses to the ever-shifting content of our dependencies and needs.

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