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Reconceptualizing the Philosophy of Penal Legitimacy: Human Dignity and an Integrated Theory of Criminal Justice

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ABSTRACT

Criminal punishment represents an ongoing challenge to normative justification because it involves the state's use of coercive power against people who are believed to be guilty of misconduct. This study explores how the concepts of retributivism, consequentialism, communicativeness, restitution, rehabilitation, dignity-based methods, and free will skepticism may be combined to form a single theory of criminal justice legitimacy. The Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Justice (DCIMCJ) is developed using a qualitative, conceptual, and normative approach to philosophical analysis, as well as a jurisprudential review of doctrine. The model has three functionally connected dimensions: justifiable punitive intervention, human dignity as a limitation to penal power, and social justice as a norm of institutional legitimacy. Culpability and proportionality serve as safeguards against unreasonable and disproportionate punishment, whereas prevention, rehabilitation, communication, and restoration constitute valid criminal justice aims or approaches. This paradigm also integrates free will skepticism since it allows reasons for preventative actions and rehabilitation without requiring basic moral deserts in all cases of punishment. The use of preventative detention, automated decision making, and corporate and environmental criminality demonstrates how vital this approach is. It is concluded that the legitimacy of criminal justice requires not only legal authority to punish, but also justifiable, proportional, dignified, and institutionally impartial action.

Keywords: Criminal Justice; Philosophy of Punishment; Human Dignity; Criminal Responsibility; Proportionality; Social Justice

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1. Introduction

Punishment for crime poses a distinct moral and political justification challenge, since it involves the state's purposeful exercise of coercive power over those held accountable for criminal actions. The central philosophical issue raised by criminal punishment is not whether certain actions have been declared illegal or whether a court has the authority to sentence the offender, but rather under what conditions the state is justified in imposing any burden on an individual as punishment for criminal wrongs. Hart's well-known analysis is still relevant since he distinguished between the general justification of punishment and the distribution of punishment, i.e., the question of why one is authorized to punish and the question of who and under what circumstances [1]. Modern retributivism emphasizes accountability, responsibility, and proportionality, whereas consequentialism focuses on future goals like deterrence, incapacitation, and rehabilitation [2,3]. However, rather than reflecting a dichotomy of consequentialism vs. retributivism, contemporary philosophy of punishment is starting to recognize that such strategies are components of a broader range of alternative reasons. In addition to examining potential justifications for punishment, contemporary research continues to examine the relationships between accountability, proportionality, sentencing, and state coercion [4,5]. Contemporary studies demonstrate that proportionality cannot be defined without regard for equality and needless criminal harm [3].

The philosophy of punishment in modern times cannot be reduced to a binary dichotomy of retributivism against utilitarianism. Retributive philosophy varies based on how people perceive and value desert. Consequentialist philosophy varies based on what types of outcomes might justify coercion [2]. The communicative nature of punishment adds another level of complication to the situation. Punishment can have the sense of condemning illegal action but also participating in a moral discussion in society about responsibility and participation in the political community [6]. The emphasis on restorative justice adds another layer to this discussion by highlighting the victim and other facets of the criminal process [7,8].

This plurality, however, raises the issue of normative ordering. It is quite simple to assert that accountability, proportionality, prevention, rehabilitation, restoration, dignity, and equality are all important. However, it is considerably more difficult to determine how to apply these concepts when they conflict. The penalty may be proportionate to the offense; yet, its preventative effect will be insignificant. The measure may reduce the danger, but it limits the freedom of action of the individual who has not done anything to deserve it yet. The process of restoring justice may motivate accountability and reparation, but it is insufficient to represent the severity of the crime. A formally equal sentencing procedure may result in inequity among persons from very diverse backgrounds [3,7,9,10]. Therefore, the most difficult challenge for philosophy is to comprehend their functions and limitations.

The concept of human dignity adds another dimension to this discussion. Criminal conviction offers justification for limitations on individual liberty, but it does not invalidate the convicted person's moral standing or rights [11–13]. Therefore, from the perspective of dignity, the question is whether the grounds, severity, and application of punishment are commensurate with this moral position. Dignity is particularly important in prisoner treatment, victim participation, rehabilitation, proportionality, and prohibiting any degrading or excessive use of state power [11–13]. However, it should be noted that dignity cannot be used as an absolute standard to evaluate all of the purposes of the criminal justice system. Criminal justice has the ability to limit individual freedom in the event of a crime. What is more acceptable is the concept that the purposes of the criminal justice system must be achieved within the constraints imposed by the dignity of those whose acts are susceptible to state intervention.

The study therefore looks at dignity more as a constitutive limitation of penal power. It does not disprove accountability, proportionality, prevention, or rehabilitation, nor does it address every concern that comes up with punishment. Rather, it establishes boundaries within which these variables must operate their role. When someone violates a criminal standard with culpable behaviour, punishment may be justified. Punishment may even serve valid purposes in terms of rehabilitation and prevention. However, there must also be proof that it is proportionate, compassionate, non-arbitrary, and in line with the offender's human position [3,11–13].

The uncertainty surrounding basic-desert moral responsibility and free will is another issue. The rationale for punishment in retrospect is less convincing since humans lack

the kind of control necessary to make them genuinely guilty or punished. The assumption that people have the ultimate control to justify fundamental desert is called into question by hard incompatibilism and free will skepticism [14,15]. This does not necessarily mean that there are no more criminal justice initiatives available. The fundamental question is whether measures like protection, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and prevention can be justified without relying on the notion that criminals should suffer [14,15].

The practice of criminal justice is greatly impacted by this discussion. A paradigm in which retributive suffering serves as the only justification for punishment will be in jeopardy if the concept of fundamental desert is philosophically dubious. On the other hand, when desertion is given up, it would lead to a model in which preventive control is unrestricted; if future danger becomes significant, individuals can then be subdued by force because they are potentially dangerous rather than because they have actually committed a crime.

The existing literature contradicts the naive assertion that no integrative ways to punishment exist. This is because Hart's work demonstrated the necessity to distinguish justificatory concerns in punishment [1]. Recent literature has looked into proportionality, retributive value, responsibility, restorative justice, dignity, and what makes criminalization legitimate [7,8,11,16]. Contemporary research also recognizes pluralism. Ryberg specifically shows that a variety of perspectives, including retributive, consequentialist, communicative, restorative, rights-based, and others, offer different explanations for the use of state punishment [17]. In a similar vein, Husak asserts that there are several reasons why punishment is appropriate [2]. The current literature on criminal justice legitimacy emphasizes the importance of fairness, procedural justice, equality, and institutional legitimacy in criminal justice institutions and governed communities [18–20]. The research question of this study, therefore, addresses a much narrower gap in current literature, particularly that current strategies fail to give an effective normative ordering of the various bases of legitimacy.

This study introduces the Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Justice (DCIMCJ) model in light of the above considerations. Regarding proportionality, prevention, rehabilitation, restorative justice, human dignity, or social justice, the model makes no new assertions. Instead, it presents its own interpretation of each principle's potential role. Therefore, the question of whether there is sufficient justification for the state to inflict coercive punishments on the individual is the first aspect of the justification of punishment issue [1,3]. Second, human dignity serves as a check on the authority of the criminal justice system, meaning that no one should be subjected to harsh, excessive, or instrumental punishment [11–13]. Third, social justice is institutional in nature, meaning that it takes into account things like equality and fair distribution of the penal burden [3,18–20].

The primary research question is: When retributive responsibility, consequentialist prevention, rehabilitation, human dignity, restorative justice, and social justice produce potentially conflicting normative demands, how can the legitimacy of criminal punishment be justified?

This research employs a doctrinal approach to law with philosophical analysis using a qualitative and normative methodology. Analytical reconstruction is used to theories of punishment, accountability, proportionality, prevention, rehabilitation, restorative justice, dignity, and institutional legitimacy. The DCIMCJ model is developed as a normative approach rather than as a model grounded on empirical study. Its philosophical paradigm does not attempt to build an actual hierarchy of punishment outcomes; rather, it reconstructs the justificatory linkages between responsibility, prevention, proportionality, dignity, rehabilitation, restoration, and social justice. Such an approach aims to give a systematic strategy in which social justice evaluates the circumstances for the administration of criminal justice where proportionality limits harshness, accountability serves as a reason for involvement, and dignity limits the exercise of penalty.

2. Methods

This research is qualitative in nature and approaches the question at hand from both a normative and philosophical perspective. It does not quantify the practical efficacy of any particular sentencing or correctional program, nor does it test any hypotheses. Instead, it looks at both the boundaries of criminal punishment's power and the prerequisites for its justification.

There are four steps that constitute the analysis. First of all, it makes an effort to reconstruct several theories of punishment, including the retributivist, consequentialist, com-

municative, restorative, rehabilitative, and dignity-based views[1–5]. By doing this, the objective is to underline the distinct moral issues that each of these theories presents rather than assuming that they are inherently at variance with one another. The purpose of this step is not to develop a new substantive theory of punishment, but rather to determine the justificatory function that each system may play within the proposed normative framework.

Second, the study distinguishes between restrictions on criminal penalties and justifications for them. Consequentialist logic is associated with acceptable future goals, such as prevention, deterrence, and rehabilitation, whereas retributive rationale is primarily examined in relation to guilt and proportionality[1–3]. Condemnation, accountability, victim participation, repair of the harm done, and reintegration are examined in relation to communicative and restorative rationales[6–9]. The concept of dignity is mostly utilized as a constraint on the type and severity of criminal penalties[11–13].

Third, the discussion examines barriers to punishment based on accountability because of determinism and doubt about free will. The objective here is to find out if the framework can maintain its validity even when basic-desert retributivism is excluded, rather than to resolve the philosophical question of whether free will exists[14,15]. Responsibility is distinguished from fundamental desert by recent studies. The ongoing philosophical challenge of basing punishment on desert-based responsibility is emphasized by Menges and McKenna[16,21]. This is an important DCIMCJ test since a responsibility model predicated on the ultimate moral desert will simply fail to pass it.

Lastly, doctrinal and institutional factors are considered in the normative assessment. They include terms like proportionality, legality, equity, compassionate treatment, legitimacy, prison conditions, restorative accountability, sentencing disparities, and algorithmic decision making[3,11,18–20,22,23]. To demonstrate its feasibility, the normative evaluation refers to contemporary research on sentence inequalities, predictive technologies, prison rehabilitation, police and judicial credibility, and restorative justice. The model recognizes that justifying punishment must take into consideration how coercive power functions in real institutions. This is significant in non-ideal situations, when uncertainty, institutional practices, and criminal implications can all have an impact on justification[20].

The DCIMCJ is subsequently evaluated using three functionally independent dimensions: (1) justifiable penal intervention, (2) human dignity as a substantive constraint, and (3) social justice as a measure of institutional legitimacy. The model is neither described as a mathematical formula nor an empirical prediction tool. Rather, it is a systematic normative framework designed to discipline reasoning when competing considerations arise.

3. Results and Discussion

The methodological and theoretical analysis presented above serves as the framework for incorporating conflicting criminal justice norms into an ethical paradigm. The analysis begins with a rethinking of the main philosophical justifications for punishment, followed by a consideration of human dignity and responsibility in the context of penal power, before proposing and applying the Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Justice (DCIMCJ) to current criminal justice challenges.

3.1. Reconsidering the Philosophical Grounds of Criminal Punishment

Criminal punishment cannot be justified just on the basis of the crime committed or the existence of laws that provide a specific punishment for such a crime. Punishment is a deliberate burden imposed on someone by a public institution, necessitating explanation not only for the wrongdoing but also for the exercise of state power[1]. Hart's distinction between the justification of punishment in general and the administration of punishment is particularly relevant since it demonstrates that various difficulties must be addressed at different phases of justifying punishment[1].

The theory of retribution is an important starting point since punishment is related to the offender's guilt for past misconduct. In contemporary society, retributivism may not always involve punishing those who have caused harm to others. The idea behind retributivist philosophy is that criminal punishment should be commensurate with the guilty conduct performed and the offender's responsibility[2,14,24]. The criterion of proportionality consequently places major constraints on state action. Given that diverse viewpoints emphasize responsibility, just desserts, proportionality, and

the morality of burdening the offender, it is clear from current perspectives on punishment theory that retribution is not an undifferentiated attitude [16,21]. Since the DCIMCJ limited its independence to form coercion rather than opposing retributive thought, it is vital to separate this in our current approach.

Contemporary philosophy also demonstrates the difficulties of proportionality to be understood as a simple mechanism involving the severity of the offense and the duration of the punishment. Pre-existing societal disadvantages can have an impact on the actual effects of a standardized penalty, undermining equality and creating unnecessary bad repercussions [3]. This suggests that proportionality has two aspects: retributive and protective of the individual's rights. The matter concerns not only the harshness of the sentence, but also the burden itself.

Retributive reasoning does not provide all of the answers for determining which type of criminal justice is most appropriate. It cannot assist in determining which type of punishment is preferable—jail, community service, rehabilitation, treatment, or anything else. It also does not explain how criminal justice should address the conditions around crime. The findings of contemporary life span criminology reveal that crime develops through a series of processes, including a variety of interconnected risk variables [25]. They do not reject individual responsibility, but they caution against reducing criminality to the simple exercise of human choice.

The difficulty with consequentialist reasoning is distinct because it presents the following question: What are the legitimate future goals that criminal justice could fulfil? Deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and prevention could provide a foundation for state intervention, particularly when criminal justice authorities must protect potential victims as well as society at large [1,26]. The same is true of Hart's approach, which allows for the separation of punishment and justification [1]. Recent research on punishment studies emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between the desirable outcomes and the ethical soundness of the coercion employed to achieve those outcomes [27]. As a result, the DCIMCJ recognizes the legitimacy of these goals while ensuring that their desired outcomes do not eclipse proportionality or dignity.

However, consequentialism presents a considerable normative challenge. Once the expected societal benefit is sufficient to justify punishment, an individual may suffer severe restrictions because officials believe that punishing him or her would prevent more harm. This difficulty is notably visible in predictive policing, algorithmic sentencing, and risk assessments, in which statistical projections are used to make choices about persons based on predicted rather than actual conduct [19,20,23]. The legitimacy of prevention is thus contingent on evidential, proportional, procedural, and individual constraints.

Another perspective is a communicative approach. Punishment may indicate public disapproval of illegal behaviour and address the complicated connection between the perpetrator, the victim, and the political society as a whole [6]. Punishment may evolve over time, altering during various phases of criminal procedure such as sentencing, detention, and release, demonstrating that punishment does not consist only of misery imposed on the guilty by the justice system [6].

Restorative justice provides on this idea by concentrating on harm, accountability, participation, restoration, and reintegration [7,8]. Restorative methods allow victims to participate in selecting how the harm should be handled and recognized, while offenders might be forced to confront the consequences of their actions and accept accountability [7–9,27,28]. Restorative justice does not disavow blame or censure. Instead, restorative justice challenges the notion that inflicting suffering is always the greatest form of accountability.

The four perspectives have distinct normative questions to answer. Retributive theory examines the reasons for a proportionate response to culpable wrongdoing; consequentialist theory considers valid future goals; communicative theory focuses on public disapproval and moral communication; and restorative theory addresses harm, participation, repair, and reintegration [1–3,6–9]. The distinction between these viewpoints is significant because an integrated theory does not have to see these many ideas as competitors.

However, there are still conflicts. A penalty can be appropriate, but it is not required for deterrence. A preventative approach may be socially beneficial yet inappropriate in light of the existing wrongdoing. Restoration can help with accountability, but it may not always fulfil the community requirement for censure. Social disadvantage can make determining responsibility harder without exonerating

the individual[3,25,29]. As a result, it is necessary to establish which principles serve as the foundation for intervention and which serve to restrict involvement.

The DCIMCJ responds to this challenge by functional differentiation. Punishment is justified by essential requirements such as guilt and proportionality[2,3]. Prevention and rehabilitation become forward-thinking objectives[1]. Communication and restorative justice demonstrate how accountability, condemnation, victim inclusion, and repair will be achieved[6–9]. The concept of human dignity determines how these objectives are realized[11–13]. Social justice assesses institutions that follow the aforementioned principles for any inequalities they may include[18–20].

Thus, the model does not advance to any of these two extremes. First, the model does not believe that an unconstrained version of retributivism should be used, in which the merited penalty is sufficient regardless of the consequences or style of delivery[30]. Second, the model rejects the notion that an unconstrained form of consequentialism should be adopted, in which anything with sufficient social benefits is acceptable.

3.2. Human Dignity as a Constraint on Penal Power

The concept of human dignity holds a special position in the DCIMCJ because it is concerned with the circumstances under which punishment can be inflicted lawfully, rather than the question of what punishment should be used for. While a criminal conviction might justify certain restrictions on freedom, it cannot deny a person's claim to be recognized as a member of humanity[11–13]. The distinction is important because it keeps the state's ability to punish from being detached from the punished person's dignity.

A dignity-based approach therefore calls into question not only the validity of the punishment, but also whether the form, magnitude, and manner of the punishment are consistent with the reality that the offender is still a human. Thus, the human rights concern extends beyond punishment to include prisons and treatment facilities while inside[11–13].

DCIMCJ views dignity primarily as a restricting concept. Proportionality, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, and restoration are some of the justifications that might be used to support certain acts within the criminal justice system, but their availability does not imply that all methods of achieving them are appropriate. The state cannot justify degrading a person just to dissuade criminal behaviour. Protection of society does not imply preventative control[12,13].

The relationship between dignity and proportionality is particularly important. There must be a proper balance of misconduct, culpability, and punishment imposed[2,3]. Thus, a disproportionate penalty is unacceptable not only because it violates the norm of sentencing uniformity, but also because the burden imposed is insufficiently justified in relation to the individual bearing the burden. Brown Coverdale's research is particularly relevant in explaining how this condition might encompass the superfluous damages caused by normal sanctions[3].

Dignity has consequences for prison. Loss of freedom can be the penalty being served, but any extra suffering caused by humiliating and degrading treatment cannot be acknowledged as an unavoidable aspect of fulfilling one's due sentence[11–13,31]. Studies on perceptions of imprisonment and prison life highlight the need to investigate imprisonment in terms of public health, justice, and institutional treatment[10,32]. The relevance of rehabilitation stems from the knowledge that imprisonment has the potential to either exclude or reintegrate individuals into society.

The dignity-oriented argument for rehabilitation differs from any argument based just on utility. While rehabilitation may assist in discouraging future criminal acts and keeping society safe, it also acknowledges the nature of criminals as individuals who can develop and change themselves[32]. Recent research on prison rehabilitation indicates the importance of offenders' attitudes toward their rehabilitation and incarceration[32]. As a result, rehabilitation cannot be reduced to just behavioural training.

However, dignity does not preclude the potential of severe punishment in all cases. In some circumstances, substantial wrongdoing might justify restrictions on liberty if there is culpability, proportionality, and a legitimate cause for protection. The DCIMCJ, on the other hand, upholds the more restricted claim that the gravity of the act does not diminish the wrongdoer's dignity. This permits both the victim's and society's interests to be recognized without making the penalty absolute.

The same principle applies to technological decision-making. Algorithmic technology might possibly benefit the criminal justice system; however, statistical prediction does

not lend itself to the normative reasoning required to legitimize coercion [19,20,23]. Algorithmic discrimination studies show that automated technologies can be as discriminatory as traditional decision-making technologies, whereas predictive policing studies show that the efficacy of algorithmic technologies is dependent on evidence and institutional legitimacy [4,5]. Sentencing algorithms also pose normative concerns regarding how performance metrics should be calculated given the costs of liberty [23].

As a result, the DCIMCJ advocates for technology to always be second to human legal reasoning. In circumstances when an algorithm has an influence on someone's liberty, individuals making judgments should be able to examine the information, its trustworthiness, potential discriminatory consequences, and provide explanations that may be reviewed [19,20,23]. This notion does not condemn technology, but rather the replacement of statistics for normative human judgment.

Human dignity serves three purposes in the model. First, it does not prohibit justified punishment. Another purpose is that it guarantees that punishment is reasonable in both intensity and method. Finally, it preserves the possibility of rehabilitation. Dignity, therefore, is not only an addition to the notion of punishment, but a vital component of it.

3.3. Responsibility, Free-Will Skepticism, and Social Context

The justification for criminal punishment is also related to the issue of responsibility. How much can someone be held accountable for their acts given their biological, psychological, developmental, economic, and social background? Contemporary criminology emphasizes that criminal conduct is influenced by a variety of risk factors throughout one's life [25]. However, this does not imply that persons who commit crimes lack free will; rather, it complicates the understanding of accountability because crime is considered only as the product of personal decision.

This philosophical paradox is exacerbated when examining the ideas of free will and basic desert. Free will skepticism argues that humans lack the necessary control to carry out fundamental desert responsibilities [14,15]. Pereboom's theory of hard incompatibilism challenges the notion that ordinary people have free will, which makes them morally accountable [15]. However, Caruso's theory of free-will skepticism raises the question of whether basic desert is sufficient punishment [14]. All of these criteria are key tests for the DCIMCJ. If the basic desert is philosophically contentious, a theory focused just on merited pain will not hold up. As a result, the DCIMCJ does not need the metaphysical debate to be resolved between libertarians, compatibilists, and determinists. The contemporary literature distinguishes basic-desert responsibility from other forms of responsibility and attribution. Menges argues that the concept of basic desert must be viewed as an independent concept that cannot be considered equivalent to responsibility in all possible legal or normative cases [16], whereas McKenna demonstrates that the interconnection of responsibility, desert, blame, and punishment remains contentious [21].

This does not imply that criminal law must abandon all distinctions of accountability. Hart demonstrates that responsibility for illegal conduct can be recognized using legal distinctions between guilt, purpose, carelessness, and justifications without compelling criminal law to address the philosophical difficulties surrounding free will [1]. Similarly, the DCIMCJ distinguishes between legal responsibility and the ultimate metaphysical desert. Accountability is more concerned with the institutional allocation of responsibility and reaction than anything else. This does not imply that pain is always justified, independent of other circumstances. Morse's theory of responsibility and various defenses is important because the concept of responsibility is embedded in a wider framework of justification, mitigation, and the legal allocation of criminal sanctions [27]. As a result, the DCIMCJ maintains the responsibility's legal significance but does not see it as the primary reason for punishment.

According to DCIMCJ, responsibility is a type of attribution that is both legally mediated and normatively restricted, distinct from basic desert and causation. Attributions of conduct can be made by meeting specific legal and procedural standards, but it is not necessary to demonstrate that the individual should be punished because they deserve it [17]. Responsibility serves as a type of threshold justification, but not an unrestrained one. It is up to the intervention's aims—whether punitive, preventative, or rehabilitative—which must remain reasonable, dignified, and procedurally and institutionally justified.

This distinction allows the framework to include pre-

ventative and rehabilitation concerns. Even if basic desert is insufficient to justify punishment, there may be justifiable grounds in criminal law for protecting the would-be victim, preventing harm, rehabilitation, and limiting incapacitation where appropriate [14]. However, free will skepticism cannot validate unrestrained preventative control. On the contrary, it emphasizes the need of tying punishment to certain public purposes.

The social setting is yet another factor. Poverty, social disadvantage, marginalization, and other factors can all have an impact on the social circumstances that lead to offending [3,25]. However, they do not relieve persons of criminal liability. Nevertheless, considering offenders to be fully isolated from their social environment may result in an overly personalized interpretation of crime.

The DCIMCJ distinguishes between responsibility excuses and responsibility contextualization. The social conditions may not always provide a complete defence, but they might be considered in sentencing, proportionality, rehabilitation, and selecting between more and less restrictive forms of punishment. The DCIMCJ acknowledges that responsibility is context-dependent but not context-determined. Various factors, such as socioeconomic level, development, violent experiences, and exclusion from institutions, may impact questions of guilt, other alternatives, rehabilitation, and punishment, but they do not prevent legal proceedings. Thus, accountability is both context-dependent and context-undetermined, without succumbing to excessive individualism or determinism. Brown Coverdale's theory of proportionality in punishment is particularly relevant in this context since it demonstrates how socioeconomic deprivation may impose additional moral duties on a person [3].

This approach also has significant consequences for social justice. Equality does not necessitate treating all persons the same. Research on sentencing has found ethnic and racial differences in criminal justice systems, notably in sentence results among courts [19,20]. Legitimacy studies demonstrate that different racial and ethnic populations have distinct perspectives of legitimacy, highlighting the need for justice [18]. The validity of the criminal justice system should thus be evaluated not only on the basis of individual culpability, but also institutionally.

Social justice is not a substitute for personal accountability; rather, it requires determining whether the institutions that decide these obligations and punishments can work in ways that promote equitable treatment and rights. This is especially important when disparity in enforcement, punishments, or even historically uneven data is part of the process [18–20,22,33].

Therefore, free will skepticism serves as a stress test for the DCIMCJ. While culpability and proportionality remain important legal safeguards in the theory, the DCIMCJ is not required to adhere to any particular metaphysics of the basic desert. If the moral rationale for desert fails, there are additional bases on which to act: prevention, rehabilitation, protection, and well-qualified incapacitation. All of those justifications for action, however, are nonetheless controlled by dignity and proportionality.

This viewpoint is thus neither completely retributive nor entirely consequentialist. It recognizes guilt despite doubt about actual moral value; it acknowledges prevention while rejecting compulsion in the face of endless danger; and it acknowledges society while not equating social handicap with a lack of capacity.

3.4. The Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Justice

According to the preceding discussion, modern theories of punishment provide distinct but potentially complementary grounds for evaluating criminal justice. Theories of retribution account for culpability and proportionality, theories of consequentialism provide future-oriented goals, theories of communication account for condemnation and the penal message, theories of restoration emphasize responsibility, participation, reparation, and reintegration, and theories that question free will challenge the notion of justification of punishment through basic desert [1–3,6–9,14,15]. Human dignity adds another viewpoint by setting restrictions on the legitimate goals of punitive policy [11,12].

While pluralist and integrative theories acknowledge numerous punitive rationales, they do not explain their aim or ordering [2,26,27]. The DCIMCJ overcomes this challenge by distinguishing between reasons for intervention, limits, and institutional factors. That means deterrence will not take precedence over proportionality and dignity, and responsibility will remain without the need for basic desert. As a result, pluralism becomes a well-organized justification theory [27].

The Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Jus-

tice (DCIMCJ) is proposed as the normative framework for arranging these relationships. The novelty of this approach does not stem from the claim that any of these ideas are new. It appears in their functional distinction and normative ordering. The model has three interconnected aspects: justification of the use of penal powers, which explains why state intervention may be justified; human dignity as a substantive restriction on penal powers, which explains what the state cannot do, even if the intervention is justified; and social justice and institutional legitimacy, which evaluates the fair distribution of powers.

The ordering represents different normative functions, not a hierarchy of moral value. First, the model determines if there is a need for criminal action at all, ensuring that state coercion is not used to legitimize itself. Second, proportionality limits the extent of intervention by requiring a relationship between the harshness of the punishment and its legitimate aim and accountability. Third, human dignity restricts the methods of intervention by guaranteeing that strategies for intervention that cannot be justified purely by their outcomes are not supported. Finally, social justice assesses how consistently these standards have been implemented.

3.4.1. Justified Penal Intervention

The first dimension addresses the rationale for state involvement. Criminal conduct would be an appropriate reason for a reaction to that activity since it would constitute a culpable violation of a criminal law. The retributive justification presents the concepts of guilt and proportionality[1–3]. The consequentialist justification incorporates desirable prospective goals like deterrence, prevention, therapy, and incapacitation[1]. These factors should not be compared. No individual shall face harsher punishment on the grounds that enhanced punishment will have a better deterrence impact if it becomes excessive[2,3]. Proportionality should not be seen as a responsibility to always imprison when the offense is significant. If less restrictive measures can properly serve the goals of prevention, rehabilitation, and restoration, they should be regarded as normative.

3.4.2. Human Dignity as a Substantive Constraint

The second dimension is that of dignity. While a criminal conviction may result in the restriction of liberty, it should not render the individual in question an object of state control[11–13]. Thus, the idea of dignity limits how punishment is delivered. This implies that deterrence can never be an explanation for abuse of individuals; public safety cannot be an automatic license to prolonged incarceration; and rehabilitation can never be an argument for practices that disregard the humanity of criminals[11–13].

3.4.3. Social Justice and Institutional Legitimacy

The third dimension concerns the institution through which criminal justice is carried out. Even if a sentence is theoretically justified, it may contribute to the perpetuation of institutional unfairness if comparable persons are treated differently or criminal justice expenses are divided unfairly[18–20]. Thus, social justice encompasses policing, prosecution, sentencing, imprisonment, rehabilitation, and justice delivery. Equality cannot be defined solely by the presence of equal norms, because proportionality may require the assessment of constraints that are unnecessarily imposed by earlier disadvantage[3]. The example of sentencing inequalities demonstrates that legitimacy must be viewed beyond the context of individual instances[18–20].

3.4.4. Normative Architecture of the DCIMCJ

The DCIMCJ distinguishes itself by organizing the numerous normative aspects according to their respective roles, rather than providing yet another independent rationale for punishment. As a result, the three elements outlined above—legitimate penal intervention, human dignity, and social justice—form the foundation of the proposed framework. They are connected but have different normative positions. The first pertains to the validity of state intervention; the second limits it; and the third concerns the justice of the institutional arrangements within which it takes place.

This structure also helps in the identification of the many theories involved within the framework. Retribution offers the reason for state action via responsibility and proportionality, but consequentialism provides forward-thinking objectives such as prevention, rehabilitation, and protection[4–6]. Other potential reactions to crime include condemnation, admission of harm, accountability, repair, and reintegration. Finally, free-will skepticism qualifies the basic assertion of moral desert as an independent ground for punishment. As a result, rather than being viewed as competing complete theories, various ideas are integrated into the framework based

on their respective roles.

The nature of the interrelationship between the three parts will therefore be characterized as one of justification, limitation, and institutional evaluation. A justification of purpose will not remove the constraints imposed by proportionality and dignity, and a legitimate individual action will not always imply an appropriate institution to enforce that activity. As a result, the model rejects both the notion that any aims that can be justified inevitably justify whatever means are used, and the notion that institutional justice would compensate for the ends' lack of substance.

This structure cannot be defined just as a retributive or consequentialist paradigm. Although there will always be parts of retribution based on responsibility and proportionality, there is no need to view the penalty as a form of merited suffering. Similarly, consequentialist reasons can support preventative or rehabilitative intervention, but they are still constrained by proportionality, dignity, and institutional fairness.

In this context, DCIMCJ proposes an integrative architecture for punitive legitimacy, arguing that every kind of state coercion must have a legal reason, function within defined bounds, and be carried out by institutions capable of treating people with respect. In other words, the architecture establishes the framework for demonstrating how the model's components interact with one another.

3.4.5. Philosophical Basis of the Normative Ordering

While moral values are not ranked in the DCIMCJ's ordering, their respective roles are clearly distinguished: human dignity limits the use of coercion; proportionality limits the scope of the intervention; legitimacy of the purpose and responsibility justifies the intervention itself; and social justice evaluates the consistency of these criteria. This makes it possible to reject the notion that all the factors that go into the application of criminal penalties should be treated as equally important balancing principles. While Husak and Ryberg demonstrate that it is feasible to have reasons that play non-identical functions simultaneously, recent pluralist research identifies a number of punitive reasons without providing an explanation of their order[2,17,24]. Specifically, the DCIMCJ is predicated on the notion that increased deterrence does not justify disproportionality, and increased public safety benefits do not justify degradation[3,11,12]. Therefore, the first section of the standard takes into account the legality of the intervention itself, as well as its legal and normative justification—that is, the presence of a legally traceable violation and the intervention's legitimate goals, including prevention, rehabilitation, or restoration[1,7–9,14,32].

The last dimension focuses on the fair application of justification, proportionality, and dignity across persons and groups and addresses social justice and institutional legitimacy[10,18–20]. As a result, the entire system is intrinsically unequal, with explanation being necessary but insufficient, proportionality limiting intensity, dignity limiting methods of coercion, and social justice evaluating the question of institutional legitimacy. This framework thus precludes both unfettered retributivism and consequentialism[2,3,11,12], and requires that challenges be handled by considering each step individually rather than aggregating contradictory arguments. The three elements of the framework of justified intervention, human dignity, and social justice should be distinguished from its four-stage framework, which includes issues about whether the intervention is justified, proportionate, dignified, and institutionally acceptable.

3.4.6. Restorative Accountability

Restorative justice is incorporated into the framework as an important form of accountability when applicable. Restorative justice can help facilitate victim engagement, recognition of harm, restitution, and reintegration[7,8]. Research on accountability in the context of restorative justice emphasizes the need to ensure that repair is not separate from responsibility[8].

As a result, the DCIMCJ does not propose that restorative justice should always be used instead of punishment. Certain types of wrongdoing may need formal denunciation and punishment. Nonetheless, restorative approaches should be explored when they might help to bring about responsibility without imposing disproportionate penalties.

3.4.7. Free-Will Skepticism

The model also stands up to the rejection of basic desert retributivism. If persons lack the total control required for basic desert, the DCIMCJ can use prevention, rehabilitation, protection, and suitable limited incapacitation[14]. Nonetheless, such aspirations must be balanced by proportionality and dignity. The outcome is a significant asymmetry: even while concerns persist about ultimate desert, there is still a

need for legal accountability but none for the justification of suffering solely on the basis of desert. The concept, therefore, provides for a criminal justice system that maintains legal accountability while avoiding metaphysical desert.

3.4.8. Operational Framework for Assessing Penal Legitimacy

The DCIMCJ's normative architecture can be used to examine a proposed criminal justice intervention. It cannot be viewed as a predetermined legal test or an automated mechanism for judicial decision-making. Instead, it may be used as a normative inquiry approach to consistently assess the validity of an intervention.

When carrying out the assessment, there are at least four connected questions to be analyzed. First and foremost, is there a compelling argument for intervention? This entails identifying the grounds on which state compulsion can be justified, namely established wrongdoing or, in a preventative scenario, a valid and justifiable public interest. As a result, the debate hinges on the existence of a compelling basis for the state's intervention.

Second, is the proposed intervention proportionate to the reason? Once the reason has been identified, assess if the measure's character, weight, and intensity exceed the reason. Culpability and proportionality serve as check factors, particularly when punitive and preventative measures compete.

Third, is the intervention consistent with human dignity? This part of the evaluation determines whether the proposed measure is consistent with human dignity and fundamental rights, regardless of its rationality. This phase ensures that, while the validity of the aim justifies the use of the means to attain it, such justification and legitimacy is never a license to use any methods to achieve the stated end.

Fourth, does the intervention follow institutional fairness? This question is decided based on equality, impartiality, the lack of arbitrariness, and the balanced distribution of coercive obligations. In other words, the evaluation extends beyond the specific case to include the institutional contexts under which criminal justice authorities might be implemented.

The questions above are not mechanical, but rather interrelated. Failure at one level will not be remedied by success at another: a socially advantageous action cannot become legal without a solid base of compulsion, and a justified intervention cannot become legitimate unless it is rational and consistent with human dignity. However, a contextual approach is also required for similar reasons.

This framework can thus be viewed as an operational interpretation of the model's structure: justification establishes the grounds for intervention, proportionality limits its scope, dignity governs its permissible implementation, and social justice governs its institutional implementation. This framework is not a replacement for the individual aims and approaches described above—retribution, prevention, rehabilitation, communication, and restoration—but rather serves as the normative framework within which these goals might be effectively achieved.

What are the implications of this framework? It helps to discern conflicts between multiple grounds for criminal justice without pushing them into a single controlling reason. Its application to preventative detention, algorithmic reasoning, and commercial and environmental wrongdoing demonstrates how these issues might be utilized to assess punitive authority today.

3.5. Application of the DCIMCJ to Contemporary Criminal Justice Problems

The DCIMCJ's value might be judged by how its normative framework applies to current issues in which the traditional reasoning for punishment may conflict with one another. There are three significant examples: preventative detention and risk-based punishment, algorithmic choices in criminal trials, and large-scale corporate and environmental misconduct. Such examples demonstrate that the new theory is more than just an attempt to codify existing standards; it is also a framework for evaluating competing rationales.

3.5.1. Preventive Detention and Risk-Based Punishment

Preventive detention is a particularly challenging instance since there is a clear distinction between forced intervention and outright criminality. In the case of retribution, there is a link between previous responsible behaviour and punishment[1,2]. However, consequentialism may only be justified if it avoids future wrongs.

The DCIMCJ does not oppose all ways of prevention. The protection of potential victims may be a justified public goal. However, preventative action must distinguish between

guilt and predictability. Predictability does not inherently imply guilt.

Therefore, each preventive action must have a strong legal foundation, attempt to accomplish a reasonable goal of protection, be proportionate to the recognized hazard, and go through an appropriate procedural assessment [1,11–13]. When preventative actions are equated with punishment for projected conduct, questions of dignity and proportionality become more important.

Skepticism about free will only strengthens this mentality. Insofar as desert is not an independent cause of pain, prevention may be more important; nonetheless, a lack of desert does not grant unlimited control over individuals seen to be a threat [12,14].

3.5.2. Algorithmic Risk Assessment and Criminal Justice Technology

Algorithmic tools have become relevant in policing, sentencing, and risk assessment. Some of their capabilities include the capacity to manage large amounts of data and identify patterns that might aid organizations in decision making [4,5,23]. Some of its flaws include the possibility of algorithmic discrimination, opacity, historical biases, and an overreliance on statistical classification [4,5,23].

The requirement of DCIMCJ does not mandate the exclusion of technology. In the sphere of law, however, algorithmic procedures must be subordinate to human judgment. Statistical inference alone cannot make conclusions about punishment or limitation of liberty. The ability to examine all relevant data is critical.

The dignity principle is particularly important in this context. Consideration of a human primarily as a risk prediction may neglect the individual's individuality and agency. Social justice is also critically important since institutions can perpetuate existing imbalances using biased data [4,19,20].

Algorithmic efficiency cannot be employed as proof of its legitimacy. The question now is whether technology can still be employed in a proportionate, dignified, equitable, transparent, and responsible manner [4,5,23]. The DCIMCJ therefore distinguishes between predictive reliability and normative legitimacy: even an effective algorithm cannot justify constraining liberty on its own. Any intervention must meet rationale, proportionality, dignity, and institutional justice on its own, while also distinguishing between expected danger and permitted state coercion.

3.5.3. Corporate and Environmental Wrongdoing

This model is also applicable to corporate, environmental, and organizational crimes. In complex organizational structures where duties are shared by many persons and groups, grave social injustices can occur. In a criminal justice system that prioritizes social justice, it is vital to establish if duties are equitably distributed in various types of social wrongs.

This model does not imply that corporate or environmental offenses should always result in greater punishment. Proportionality continues to need a focus on the gravity of the harm and the accountability of those responsible [2,3]. The social justice dimension makes a unique contribution by ensuring that the criminal justice system does not focus solely on clearly identifiable types of offending while ignoring forms of organized or systemic wrongdoing that cause significant harm.

A space might also be created for rehabilitative measures. When there are genuine victims and community-wide losses caused by corporate and environmental misconduct, traditional punishment can be supplemented by compensation, remediation, restoration, institutional reform, and acknowledgment [7–9]. These restorative approaches do not exclude the use of punishment in circumstances with evident fault; rather, they can fill gaps that punishment cannot.

When combined, such situations demonstrate the DCIMCJ's practical value. The case of preventive detention emphasizes the importance of distinguishing blame from risk; the case of algorithmic decision-making exemplifies the values of technology, efficiency, dignity, and equality; and the case of corporate or environmental crime demonstrates the difficulties of responding to widespread social harm. In all of these circumstances, the DCIMCJ categorizes several moral concerns based on their functions: accountability and legitimate aim justify intervention, proportionality establishes its bounds, dignity limits its way, and social justice ensures equal application.

4. Practical Implications

DCIMCJ has various implications for legislators, courts, penal institutions, and criminal justice policymakers.

To the legislator, the model serves as a reminder that criminalization and sentencing laws should be evaluated not only for their capacity to dissuade criminal conduct, but also for their proportionality, wrongfulness, equality, and alternatives[3,17,34,35]. Criminalization should not be separated from incorrect behaviour, and punishment must take into account disproportionate punitive costs.

For courts, the model provides a methodical framework for distinguishing between the appropriate goals of punishment and any arbitrary restrictions. Judges might methodically recognize the aspects of guilt, justifiable public purpose, proportionality, dignity, and equality rather than engaging in an unstructured balancing act of punishment. Contemporary philosophy associates responsibility and defenses with proportionality and the appropriate scope of criminal action[3,16]. As a result, the DCIMCJ views culpability as a threshold prerequisite for legal action, rather than an absolute basis for intentional suffering.

For correctional facilities, the notion of dignity implies compassionate treatment and recognizes the individual's capacity for rehabilitation. Therefore, in prison management, security considerations must be supplemented with attempts to rehabilitate, educate, and reintegrate inmates, as well as to avoid unneeded demeaning experiences[11–13,32]. A justifiable conviction may limit liberty without changing the person's moral standing or the limitations on their treatment[11–13]. Rehabilitation should therefore be regarded not just as lowering future offending, but also as acknowledging the offender's ability to change.

For restorative justice institutions, the paradigm promotes victim engagement and accountability by recognizing that repair cannot be separated from accountability[7,8]. Restorative measures may thus augment formal punishment in cases where they may address harm, participation, restitution, and reintegration while upholding the standards of accountability and proportionality[7–9].

In terms of criminal justice technology, the paradigm calls for human oversight, openness, accountability, and protection from prejudice[4,23]. Technology should help, not replace, legally accountable decision-makers. While an algorithm can find important trends, prediction alone cannot justify forced action. When technology impacts liberty, its use must meet independent standards of proportionality, dignity, procedural fairness, and institutional legitimacy[4,11,18,23].

Lastly, in terms of criminal justice policy, the paradigm suggests that institutional legitimacy should be assessed in addition to crime control outcomes. The sense of procedural fairness and validity, which includes inequalities in race and ethnicity, is linked to the legitimacy of criminal judicial systems[18–20]. Institutions should also evaluate sentencing disparities[19,20]. The larger philosophical importance is that modern punishment theory increasingly needs attention not only to why punishment is justified, but also to how responsibility, defenses, proportionality, and other limitations influence the allowable distribution of penal burdens[3,27].

The practical implication is not the establishment of a rigorous DCIMCJ sentence mechanism. Instead, the model gives a framework for addressing four questions before forceful action is considered legitimate: Is it justified? Is it proportionate? Does it respect human dignity? Is it institutionally fair? These questions operationalize the model's normative architecture without converting it to a mechanical sentencing formula.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study include the fact that DCIMCJ is merely a conceptual framework with no empirical evidence of its actual implementation to create results. This suggests that using DCIMCJ does not guarantee decreased recidivism rates, increased victim satisfaction, public safety, or institutional trust. The contribution of this study is normative and theoretical, rather than empirical. The model should be viewed as an attempt to systematize the link between existing reasons and restrictions in criminal justice, rather than an empirically verified sentencing or correctional solution.

Second, the model does not settle the debate over how to balance retributive and consequentialist arguments. The philosophical debate about the basic desert is ongoing, and the DCIMCJ model is purposefully not based on an answer to the free will dilemma[14,15]. Recent research isolates accountability, free will, and basic desert from the larger issue of justifiable legal responses[14–16,21]. Morse, Menges, and McKenna demonstrate that these links are still debated. As a result, the DCIMCJ does not answer the metaphysical dispute and continues to work even if basic-desert retributivism is rejected[16,21,27].

Third, social fairness cannot be reduced to a one-size-fits-all standard. Equality may entail equality in certain contexts while creating disparity in others. Proportionality may also need to be examined to ensure that it does not cause undue harm[3]. As a result, the model lacks a predetermined formula. This limitation reflects the belief that proportionality cannot be reduced to a mechanical match between offense and punishment[3,10]. The model, therefore, provides normative ordering rather than numerical weighting.

Fourth, there should be an empirical investigation of how the algorithmic system actually works. While the DCIMCJ establishes some normative concepts such as transparency, human involvement, equality, and proportionality, further study is needed to understand how to implement these principles[4,18–20,23,32]. Future research should look into whether algorithmic and institutional decision-making can meet these requirements in practice, and whether implementation results in measurable changes in sentencing disparities, procedural fairness, rehabilitation, or institutional legitimacy.

Future study on the DCIMCJ should be comparative in character and look at how its principles might be implemented in sentencing policies, correctional practices, restorative justice measures, and governance frameworks for criminal justice technology. Further study should examine whether legally mediated responsibility may maintain criminal accountability in the absence of greater retributivist assumptions[16,21,27]. Comparative empirical research might then determine if the model's ordering (justification, proportionality, dignity, and institutional fairness) promotes consistency and legitimacy in criminal justice decision-making.

6. Conclusions

The philosophical justification of criminal punishment is an important challenge since it involves the state's coercive use of power against individuals. The current study indicates that no single theory can adequately explain and justify the criminal justice system. Retributive theory explains the importance of culpability and proportionality; consequentialist theory explains justifiable purposes such as prevention, deterrence, rehabilitation, and incapacitation; communicative theories explain condemnation and the penal message; and restorative theories emphasize accountability, victim involvement, repair, and reintegration[1–3,6–9,14].

The key contribution of this research is the Dignity-Centred Integrated Model of Criminal Justice (DCIMCJ). The model makes no independent claim for the uniqueness of its ideas. The key contribution of the model is its functional connectedness. It distinguishes between the reason for criminal intervention, human dignity as a substantive constraint on the power of punishment, and social justice as a measure of institutional legitimacy. This is an organizational rather than encyclopedic contribution: the model does not claim to have developed retribution, consequentialism, restoration, rehabilitation, proportionality, dignity, or social justice, but rather suggests a structured link between them.

Within this framework, culpability and legitimate purposes provide justification for intervention, proportionality restricts the intensity of intervention, dignity limits the use of coercive power, and social justice governs how these norms are applied in a balanced manner within the criminal justice system. Within this wider framework, rehabilitation, restoration, prevention, and communication are all viable goals or approaches to intervention. The model addresses an important issue in pluralist punishment theory: various penal reasons do not establish their normative function or priority[10,29]. The DCIMCJ resolves this by differentiating between justifiable grounds and restricting principles and institutional standards.

Human dignity is an important notion since it is more than simply another objective that must be prioritized alongside public safety. It is acceptable for an individual to lose his freedom as a result of a conviction, but criminal culpability does not diminish a person's moral being or entitlement to be treated with dignity[11–13]. This is particularly significant in cases involving imprisonment, preventative detention, algorithmic reasoning, and other similar related issues. Dignity, therefore, functions within the model as a substantive limitation rather than just another factor to weigh against the expected benefits of punishment.

The theory also explains why some people are skeptical about free will. If basic desert cannot be invoked to justify purposefully causing someone to suffer, the criminal justice system can nevertheless utilize prevention, rehabilitation, protection, and limited incapacitation[14,15]. However, merely because desert is not accepted does not result in endless explanations.

Social justice extends the notion of legitimacy even farther. Criminal justice institutions are impacted by social injustice, prejudice, disparities in sentencing, and differing perspectives on legitimacy[18–20]. A system may therefore be legally lawful while posing difficulties concerning the fairness of the institutions. Social justice under the DCIMCJ does not absolve personal responsibility, but rather makes it necessary to carry out tasks within institutions that promote equality and legitimacy.

The model's application to preventative detention, algorithmic decision making, and corporate and environmental misconduct demonstrates its practical significance. The approach is useful in preventative detention because it distinguishes between proven guilt and expected danger. Algorithmic decision making requires technological support to ensure proportionality, accountability, and equity. Corporate and environmental misconduct must focus on specific sorts of societal harm. Across various contexts, the model is consistent: intervention must be justified, appropriate, dignity-respecting, and institutionally fair and legitimate.

The DCIMCJ must be viewed as an approach to robust normative reasoning rather than a solution to the philosophy of punishment. It is unattainable to overcome every obstacle between desert and social environment, protection and freedom, rehabilitation and autonomy, and form-substance equality. Instead, the DCIMCJ brings such disputes to the forefront and provides a normative framework for addressing them. The principal theoretical assertion of this study is therefore concise but specific: competing punitive concerns should not be aggregated as comparable values, but rather assigned discrete normative roles.

The legitimacy of twenty-first-century criminal justice is founded, above all, on the state's ability to respond to crime, but more importantly, on how this ability is exercised. This implies that any valid criminal justice system should be able to impose responsibility and safeguard society while still respecting the fundamental human dignity of individuals compelled by the state. This means that the DCIMCJ has made a relatively modest but significant claim: the legitimacy of criminal punishment will be determined not only by the state's authority to punish, but also by whether it is justifiable, moderate, humane, and institutionalized in terms of social justice. In this regard, the model aims to shift from simply acknowledging variety in punishment theory to a normative architecture in which justification, proportionality, dignity, and institutional fairness serve unique but interrelated functions.

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