

Uncovering the Planetary Ethic

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Abstract

There is increasing recognition of the need for a Planetary Ethic (for example, the urgent call by Paul Kurtz). Western civil society is based, it may be argued, more on consensus of behaviours than values. Appeals for behavioural outcomes (road safety, anti-violence campaigns) seldom explicate fundamental principles. Given this, even the partial success achieved in creating ‘decent’ society is striking. Reasons include common assumptions between Humanists, Jews and Christians; and widespread, though unarticulated, popular acceptance of some version of utilitarianism.

Increasing numbers in western nations from non-western religious backgrounds, and globalisation in general, are forcing cultures into closer proximity. Some seem able to co-exist more or less happily, whilst others raise major issues due to different world-views. We might reasonably suspect the western consensus is close to its limit in creating a harmonious civil society, let alone a global civilisation that respects contributions of all people.

Is it possible to find underlying principles that could serve as foundation for shared consensus on ethical virtues? We examine the Principle of Goodness as a possible candidate. Such a foundational principle would need, firstly, to relate positively to most people’s existing ideals and beliefs (although it might not be recognised as existing common knowledge for many); and secondly, would have to explain, confirm, correct, and enhance existing ethical understanding.

An earlier paper addressed the former requirement, showing that the Principle of Goodness is found in many major world religions and philosophies. This paper addresses the latter, taking test cases from the “Affirmations of Humanism”, and investigates its conformance with common expectations of ethical virtues, while being open to the possibility that it might add to or modify our intuitive expectations.

Introduction

There is increasing recognition of the need for a planetary ethic. [Kurtz] states, “it is urgent that we find a common ground to develop civic virtues for living on the same planet together.” In his own contribution, he calls for the development of a planetary ethic, and sets forth a vision derived from his Humanist background.

This paper is partly a response to Kurtz's call, partly a critique of his particular proposal. The central point is the need for ethical proposals to be more than a collection of assertions, however thoughtfully formulated and argued, and however morally appealing. This focus on Kurtz's work should be seen as the exact opposite of attacking a straw man: rather, it is an attempt to engage with the best, point to what still needs to be achieved, and attempt to provide the missing piece of the jigsaw, namely a fundamental principle by which the many particular assertions of such a manifesto may be tested and warranted.

Western civilisation is grounded in deep traditions and philosophies from which westerners consciously or unconsciously draw inspiration. However, these do not constitute an explicit and coherent common *weltanschauung* with which most or all will agree. Western civil society at a conscious level operates, it may be argued, more on consensus of behaviours and practical values than on any unitary philosophic or religious basis and corresponding deep values. Therefore popular moral argument in the west, although it relies on the deep fountain, cannot usually make it the basis of explicit argument and connected reasoning. For example, a common agreement that one should not steal might be variously based on religious, utilitarian, Socratic, or other grounds, including “just being decent”. Appeals for behavioural outcomes (road safety, anti-violence campaigns) seldom explicate from fundamental principles why the appeal should be accepted. Given this, the success achieved in the west in creating ‘decent’ society is striking, despite its defects. There is, or at least, has been until recently, sufficient common ideals, traditions, and understandings, for such appeals to make enough progress to be worthwhile.

The modern western outlook includes assumptions common to Humanists, Jews and Christians, and widespread, though unarticulated, popular acceptance of various versions of utilitarianism. Indeed, to the extent that any single doctrine has a claim in practice to serve as unifying ethical belief, it must be utilitarianism. One only need consider western institutional development since Bentham to see this. This is curious, because much religious philosophy (for example, obligations to obey the commands of a god) and secular philosophy (such as Kantianism) explicitly reject utilitarian values.

This paper investigates another contender for foundational principle: the Principle of Goodness ([House], [House & House]), and uses precepts from Kurtz's work as examples showing that an underlying foundational ethic is needed, and that the Principle of Goodness serves this purpose. The former goal must focus on some of the weaker sections of Kurtz's work, but this does not imply criticism of the merit of the project; on the contrary, a weak proposal could not act as a credible testbed to illustrate the usefulness of a foundational principle. Finally, we look briefly at a quite different ethical tradition, that of India, to see some confirmation that the Principle is not confined to the western outlook.

Foundations in Modern Western Ethics

There is a deep paradox confronting the idea of using existing western ideals as the basis of a universal ethic: Without an agreed deep principle, it would seem impossible to take any set of propositions about practical ethics and persuade the generality of humankind to accept them. But then, given such a principle, how does one build common ground with those who do not share the same assumptions without imposing an external value system? Can we, with the ethical resources at our disposal, offer the world a planetary ethic? Kurtz's writes:

"...ethical humanists argue that we should respect an ethic of principles. This means that the end does not justify the means; on the contrary, our ends are shaped by our means, and there are limits to what we are permitted to do. This is especially important today in light of the tyrannical dictatorships of the twentieth century, in which political ideologies held with near-religious zeal compromised moral means to achieve visionary ends."

This passage was selected almost randomly from Kurtz's long document, but it illustrates, as does the document many times elsewhere, its indebtedness to the long western ethical tradition mentioned above. In this short paragraph, we can discern Socrates' prescient humility ("I know nothing"), Kant's imperative to treat persons as ends rather than means, Christian and other teachings concerning limits to human power, and Aristotelian concern for overall well-functioning of society. (Others will probably recognise even more influences.)

Is all this apparent to others nurtured within different philosophical traditions? Can they understand us; and, indeed, are we in turn overlooking insights well-known to others, but which might be equally important if true synergy of cultures is to occur? If we admit that others might not discern the deep basis underlying western attitudes, or agree with it if it is discerned, what is left upon which to build a planetary ethic? Further, if there are indeed commonalities we all share (and this writer believes there are), what are they? This is a difficult point: on the conscious level, few basic beliefs or ideals are commonly agreed, even by westerners, let alone by the majority of members of all cultures; yet common feelings, inspirations, assumptions, values, do exist; but they are too imprecise for reliable moral reasoning that might hope for universal assent.

To understand this point and its importance, consider these example propositions from Kurtz:

"Eighth, it is the right of every person to be able to live a good life, pursue happiness, achieve creative satisfaction and leisure in his or her own terms, so long as he or she does not harm others. ... each person should be afforded the opportunity to realize ... personal fulfillment, concomitant with social resources, but this actual realization depends on the individual and not on society."

"Ninth, individuals should have the opportunity to appreciate and participate in the arts."

"Tenth, individuals should not be unduly restrained, restricted, or prohibited from exercising a wide range of personal choices. This includes freedom of thought and conscience — the unqualified right to believe, or not to believe, freedom of speech and freedom to pursue one's own lifestyle, so long as one does not prevent others from exercising their rights..."

"Every individual should be free from intrusive political or social coercion."

“Women should have the right to control their own bodies. This includes reproductive freedom, voluntary contraception, and abortion.

“Couples should have proper information for family planning and the ability to avail themselves of artificial insemination and biogenetic counseling.

“Adults should be allowed to marry whomever they wish... Same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples.

“Informed consent should be the guiding principle of health care.

... The right of free association must be respected.”

The above is only a small portion of the document, which is too large to consider in entirety here. It was chosen to illustrate the following:

- a) Many of the propositions are arguably admirable; but
- b) they are, nevertheless, expressed in the language of a particular culture, namely present-day western (perhaps even Leftist western) conceptual frameworking (choice of language, presuppositions, conclusions); and
- c) some propositions are disputable, or might be considered far from admirable, even by many westerners. For example, heated debates rage over abortion throughout the west, especially last-minute abortions, which one might easily argue are simply murder.

Clearly, such proposals (which, for simplicity, we might simply call “manifestos”) are intended to achieve their end by force of persuasion, in the best tradition of the enlightenment, but in reality they implicitly appeal to the reader’s existing culturally influenced preferences (including political preferences). A balancing act is conducted in which the implicit deep bases of the tradition are utilised to the greatest extent possible without committing to any fundamental principle on which the whole is argued. This leads to the unsatisfactory situation illustrated above, of a patchwork of good and bad pieces: the certain, the doubtful, and the probably false. What is going wrong, and can we do better?

The Missing Foundation

To illustrate the problem, consider the following, which is perhaps the weakest single part of Kurtz’s manifesto:

“...Now, more than ever, we are linked morally and physically to each person on the globe, and the bell tolls for all when it tolls for one.

“Second, we ought to act so as to mitigate human suffering and to increase the sum of human happiness wherever it is possible to do so...”

These adjacent statements contain a profound paradox. The second is an explicit statement of utilitarian belief. But the first recognises something with a resemblance to the principle advocated in this paper, namely the need to consider every single one, not just the sum total of happiness over

misery. But unless there is some hidden justice-preserving force, law, or supreme being in the universe (which, presumably, Kurtz as a humanist does not believe), then there is no reason to think that acting to mitigate suffering or increase the total of happiness will not toll the bell for one, a few, or even a great many.

Yet, despite the statistical impossibility of consistently maximising any chosen measure of well-being whilst not harming some, the utilitarian ethic is propounded, not just as one candidate for fundamental principle, but, indeed, as the only ethic reasonable people of good will can adopt, elevated almost to the status of logical truth, with the only issue being the extent of the concern:

“This principle” [i.e. mitigate human suffering etc.] “is recognized by both religious believers and nonbelievers. It is essential to the entire framework of human morality. ... The key question today concerns the range of the principle. We submit that this moral duty should be generalized: we should be concerned not only with the well-being of those within our community or nation-state but also with the entire planetary community.”

These are strange statements from one who must be aware of the multitude of criticisms of utilitarianism and of the many contrary ethical views going back as far as Socrates’ refusal to help arrest Leon of Salmis, when this would not help Leon and the only effect could be to add Socrates himself to the list of victims. And yet, it is all too easy to find western thinkers whose basic outlook is universal care accepting utilitarianism in unguarded moments; even when, as with Kurtz, they have immediately previously proclaimed a superior, more caring principle. And yet critiques of utilitarianism abound (for example Rawls), as do critiques of the critiquers (Arneson).

We need to be clear about this point, how strange and unlikely it is that some ‘cosmic glue’ ensures that the two ideas (“the greatest happiness of the greatest number” and “the bell tolling for one is tolling for all”) are equivalent or even compatible, so it is worth dwelling upon a little longer.

There is one possibility, which has been advocated historically, that might provide the ‘cosmic glue’: the ‘force of history’. The idea, made familiar through Marxism (the withering of the state) and through religion (a future millennium, apocalypse, etc.), is that some kind of law of history impels human development in a certain direction; certain stages are inevitable on the way to a glorious and happy future. If this idea is false, we might reasonably expect that the “force of history” will tend to be used, not to promote care for each individual, but to excuse outrages against multitudes. It may be more than a coincidence that the Communist Manifesto contains the same paradox: throughout the document an unarticulated, but easily detected, presupposition of some utilitarian type of ethic (e.g. *“...increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible...”*) but also unsubstantiated faith that this somehow protects individuals (*“...we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”*).

In view of this fact and the history of communism, one might be wary of introducing the same paradox into a planetary ethic. The crucial point is that, if the idea is to be credible, it requires an ideology, a purported explanation for the asserted pattern of historical events. Accepting both these moral propositions is either unfounded or a declaration of faith in such an ideology.

Can Consequentialism be Saved as a Foundation?

This writer believes that it can *not*. It is impossible here to consider every variant, but we must examine at least a few obvious candidates in order to clarify the problem. Two variants that address the gap between bulk outcomes and individual concern are rule utilitarianism and negative utilitarianism.

Rule Utilitarianism

This asserts that we should select, not individual acts, but rules, that maximise benefit over harm. Perhaps rules like “Protect every single one from the tolling bell” will find their way into the ethical corpus, even though this does not maximise the effects of every individual act. Given the complexity of the world, one could be forgiven for suspecting that the only way one could ever ‘prove’ such a thing would be by some form of begging the question.

At any rate, the onus is clearly on the rule utilitarian to provide proof that something like this is a valid RU rule. One suspects it is unlikely to be provided, because one of the basic motivators for utilitarianism is precisely the perceived impossibility of increasing the happiness over misery of absolutely everyone. In other words, why be content to merely maximise the total or the average (depending on the utilitarian variant being argued), if there is some omnipotent force or being guaranteeing that we can individually benefit literally everyone? Either rule utilitarianism doesn’t provide protection for individuals, or it is pointless as a means of deciding action, as its goal is achieved simply by taking care of everyone in the here and now.

Therefore, consequentialism, even of the ‘rule’ variety, either denies the moral need to care for individuals or it asserts an unprovable and, noting that even most theists deny that any god tinkers to the required degree, unlikely claim that it does provide such care indirectly. But this is the very reason for ethics at all: the world isn’t perfect: justice, concern for the powerless, stopping to help one in trouble, these things do not necessarily feed back into benefit, or even probable benefit via some average or total, for ourselves. Ethical problems are hard precisely because all the things we would like do not always align; asserting that they do is to avoid seeing the hard part of human moral behaviour: giving up a benefit for ourselves to obey a higher principle of loyalty to other sentient beings.

Negative Utilitarianism

Negative utilitarianism (NU) ([Popper] V.I ch.5 note 6) is an attempt within the consequentialist framework to account for concern for individuals. It changes the utilitarian calculus to ignore happiness and only account for misery. Thus, it is not valid, under NU, to outweigh causing of misery for some by adverting to happiness for billions. [Smart] attempts to rebut this theory by suggesting that it necessarily requires the destruction of all sentient life, as otherwise misery will inevitably accumulate and in time outweigh misery caused by the destruction of the present generation. I do not believe this attempted rebuttal is successful. One could easily argue to discount future misery due to its uncertainty: we might at some point become so successful at preventing suffering that the total amount to be suffered in all of the world’s future is less than the undoubtedly huge amount involved in destroying all sentient life. (An infinite sum might have a finite total.) Further, the argument is not successful against NU variants arguing to minimise averaged suffering.

NU cannot, therefore, be trivially dismissed; and one may applaud the compassion that inspires care for the suffering of the unfortunate over the bliss of the fortunate. But for the present argument it suffices that it is not immune to the previous criticism. Provided the discussion is restricted to removal of misery, it must at the minimum assert that causing misery for a few is justified in order to remove similar misery from many more. (If it doesn't assert at least this, it cannot plausibly be called utilitarianism.) Any appeal to long-term consequences in order to regain justice and other individual-respecting caring ideals necessarily entails the tinkering force or god discussed above.

Therefore, unless proved otherwise (and we must suspect such a proof will be a long time coming), we must recognise that there is a dissonance between max/minimising any measure of benefit/harm (except perhaps one 'cooked' to secure the desired result) and caring for each individual.

Consequentialism destroys the basis for almost every statement in manifestos such as Kurtz's, inspired by the admirable ethic of respect for the individual that has developed in the west and is manifested in the adherence to secularism.

Proposing a New Ethical Basis

The ethical basis proposed here is the Principle of Goodness:

*Goodness is to attempt to benefit everyone;
evil is to attempt to harm even a single innocent one.*

The Principle of Goodness addresses the recognition that we must care about the bell tolling for as few as a single one. It can be proposed as a candidate for fundamental basis for a planetary ethics because it does not suffer from the paradoxes that result in combining utilitarianism with this realisation, and it is not "preloaded" with an ideology. We must now examine these claims.

The Principle avoids the Utilitarian Paradox

Absent some continually tinkering, omnipotent force or being, or some 'law of history', utilitarianism, concerned with bulk measure, cannot accommodate the evolving modern concern for each individual. The Principle of Goodness can, because it does not refer to the result, but to the intention of the moral actor: one must not attempt to harm an innocent. Although there is an outcome involved (the not harming of an innocent), the Principle refers to the mind of the actor: their willed intention and choice. But the choices need not actually maximise anything over the collection of all who are affected.

Even someone who is fortunate to have no evil choice to avoid, and who is concerned with the positive (good) aspect of benefiting everyone, might not thereby choose a course to maximise any measure of benefit. For example, someone might have two options available, one which benefits everyone concerned to some degree (not necessarily equally), the other which benefits just a few to a huge degree, outweighing in total the benefits of the former. In such cases, the choices of a moral agent following the Principle of Goodness will probably differ from the choices of a utilitarian.

Are there other foundational principles that avoid this paradox? Perhaps, but this paper only considers consequentialisms because they are the ones that find their way in practice into ethical manifestos, and for good reason. No pure deontology is likely to serve because reconciling the entire

world, by definition, means engaging with the many divergent sources of deontologies already at large, and asserting one would also effectively assert its underlying justifying ideology, which would be psychologically unacceptable as it would mean defeat for the others.

The Principle of Goodness, however, is not based on an ideology.

The Principle is not Ideologically Loaded

Clearly a planetary ethic cannot be conditioned upon the ideology of any one segment of humanity, whether political, religious, cultural, national, or any other. The Principle of Goodness is not such an ideology; in fact, it is the very antithesis of one. It is a deeply sceptical approach to doing harm. The Principle demands of every causer of harm: “By what right, by what theory of morality, do you justify deliberately causing harm to innocents?” And no matter what the answer might be, whether refined (a subtle new variant of utilitarianism, the ‘veil of ignorance’, etc.) or crude (“Progress!”, “Science!” etc.), we can be sure of one thing at absolute minimum: the innocent being deliberately harmed need not accept it. Unity (of individuals, communities, nations, races) will be destroyed, and with it, any hope of gaining assent to a universal planetary ethic. Seen in this light, it would appear that the real question is: what else *except* the Principle of Goodness has any chance of being the foundational principle for framing a full-blown exposition of moral statements that could serve as a universal ethic?

Framing a Manifesto

Anyone of good will is safe from deliberate harm by others adhering to the Principle of Goodness. This surety is not grounded in specifically western assumptions. Although differences between individuals and peoples can arise by different understandings of benefit and harm, one would not normally object to being benefited or not harmed according to another reasonable person’s definitions of the terms, even if one thinks one’s own is the higher ideal. Thus, if one thinks that supreme benefit is to understand the laws of the universe, one will probably not object to being benefited by one who thinks it is to become rich. Clashes of goals can still happen, but ground-shifting is by no means as dangerous, whereas the use at different times or by different persons of different maximands in a utilitarian theory can produce consistent bias in allocation of advantages. Advertising campaigns (especially in elections) illustrate this nicely.

This means that the differences in philosophies (religious, political, etc.) of various peoples and groups will be less provocative of defensiveness and mistrust when one knows that the other is firmly committed to the Principle.

In fine-tuning an ethical manifesto, then, one would audit the proposal as follows:

- a) (on the harm avoidance side) modify or remove any item that promotes, or permits, deliberate harm to even a single innocent; and
- b) (on the benefit promotion side) modify items that promote sectional or increasing average benefit, or include fresh items, to promote universal benefit.

For illustration, let us examine the above-quoted part of Kurtz's manifesto. It must be stressed that the Principle, like any really broad basis, is open to various (but not infinitely variable) interpretations, and so the following is only one opinion of its application. Others may wish to argue for alternatives at the controversial places.

- (Eighth to tenth points, up to "free from intrusive political or social coercion") These proposals are clearly supported by the Principle of Goodness.
- ("Women should have...") The Principle tells us to broaden this: "Everyone should have...".
- ("abortion") There is potentially another sentient being involved here, and the Principle tells us to consider it. A fully-formed foetus five minutes before being born does not differ on any grounds relevant to the Principle from a baby five minutes after. Whatever moral considerations apply to the one apply to the other. On the other hand, a fertilised single cell is not a sentient being (even if it has the potential to become one) and it is not even an individual, as it has the potential to divide into twins. So there is a relevant distinction between the application of the Principle to early and late stages of pregnancy. This entire ethical subtlety is missing from claims for rights to abortion without qualification. Unless these relevant facts are addressed, no such claim on anyone's part to a right to kill a foetus can be incorporated into a statement of adult rights.
- (The remainder, except "Same-sex couples...") These are also obviously supported by the Principle of Goodness.
- (Same-sex couples...") The right claimed here is the right to raise a family, and again, another party (the child, with first claim to be the innocent who must not be wilfully harmed) exists whose rights must also be addressed. Do children raised by same-sex couples do as well (or perhaps better) than those raised by normal families? Let the relevant research be done; it is easy to show that getting the full facts is recommended by the Principle in order to make the best moral decisions. In the meantime, and in view of the huge damage that can be done by social experiments, a good argument can be made for a cautionary approach.

We leave it to the reader to consider other ways to address these questions (and the rest of Kurtz's proposal).

Bearing in mind the rights for each individual that must follow, along with the vast divergence of individual values, it is difficult to see how any society organised to respect the Principle can be anything other than secular, where this implies lack of required belief *and lack of required disbelief* in any ideology. (Thus, an officially atheist society is, by this definition, as non-secular as a theocracy.)

The Indian Experience

Is the above, despite its universalist terminology, merely westernism in disguise, based as it is upon a strong sense of the individual? India provides a contrasting case of a society which, although heavily influenced by British, and therefore western, ideals, has successfully held its own religious and philosophical roots modified but intact.

There is a clear mutual reinforcement between the Principle and the Gandhian conception of nonviolence. Although Gandhi's specific formula is modern, it is unfair to dismiss it as nothing more than a late western philosophical import. Gandhi followed the teachings of both Mahavira (founder of Jainism) and Buddha, both of whom taught non-harm in antiquity ([Raju] pp546-549), and he interpreted Krishna's teachings to Arjun as symbols of overcoming self. ("...it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts mankind." ([Gandhi] Introduction)) And the Hindu conception of the immanence of God naturally requires that any 'chosen people' must embrace all of mankind ([Radhakrishnan] p331).

Thus, at least one non-western culture affirms the spirit of universal concern that also appears in a modified form in the Principle of Goodness. India has maintained a secular society for almost sixty years, whose constitution ([India]) guarantees equality before the law, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, freedom of speech, assembly, association, movement, and residence ([India] 14, 15, 19), . But any assumption that secularism is in any way akin to atheism is dispelled by life in India, for unlike the west, the assumption of the existence of a spiritual world (God, or gods, transmigrating spirits, etc.) is as close to universally accepted and expected as the opposite assumption is in the west. ("[religion]...the essential motive of Indian life." ([Radhakrishnan] p58))

Open discussion of philosophical questions is as expected as the avoidance of them is in the west. The Constitution itself contains explicit appeal to ideals, but perhaps not entirely the ones we might expect: "*promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities*"; "*develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform*"; and "*strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity*". ([India] 51A) Such rhetoric is in striking contrast to typical western legal documents, and yet the ideals expressed must surely seem familiar and congenial to western thought. Throughout, the animating impulse must surely be the motif "the bell tolling for one tolls for all."

Secularism, then, is something quite different from mandated rejection of theological assumptions. Concern for each individual is widely recognised as amongst the highest ethical ideals.

Conclusion

All ethical systems must come to terms with the fact that we do not live in a perfect world. In general, we cannot benefit everyone and we cannot always avoid causing harm.

Utilitarianism solves this problem by changing the goal: If we cannot benefit everyone, benefit as many as we can (or maximise the average, or some such).

The Principle of Goodness negotiates the difficulty in a different way: If we cannot benefit everyone, we can at least try to benefit everyone; if we cannot avoid harming anyone, we can at least try to avoid it.

Any ethical principle that accounts for the imperfect nature of this universe is at least workable; the question is, what do we think of its recommendations?

Policies in accord with the Principle are easily demonstrated to be practical. A business, for example, cannot choose the goal “make as much profit as possible”, but it could choose the goal “Try to develop good products of genuine use to customers, and sell at a profitable price that allows for care for the environment and fair remuneration to staff and suppliers.” The latter company might not make as much profit as the former (or it might build such a high reputation that it gets greatly expanded custom). But whatever our specific goals, when dealing with others who honour the Principle, a level of trust and security is possible that we can never have when interacting under consequentialist assumptions, as someone might (we can never be sure) decide that we need to be sacrificed for some ‘greater’ reason. Also, faking ethics is much harder under this Principle, because doing harm is likely seen here and now, and cannot be excused by appeal to unclear and unverifiable “larger picture”s.

Similar considerations will apply in other cultural, political, and religious dealings amongst peoples. Detailed examination of real-life scenarios is a matter for future research. Briefly, all manner of practical situations must be considered and the way to handle them according to the Principle contrasted with solutions according to other ethical systems. We have focussed on contrast with utilitarianism here, but other kinds of deontology, and other theories such as Rawls' version of social contract theory, also need to be considered fully.

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