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TWO WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING PERSONS: A HUSSERLIAN DISTINCTION

abstract

This paper clarifies the distinction that Edmund Husserl makes between two different ways of understanding other persons, their actions and motivations: the experiential or empirical way, on the one hand, and the genuinely or authentically intuitive way, on the other hand. The paper argues that Husserl's discussion of self-understanding clarifies his concept of the intuitive understanding of others and allows us to explicate what is involved in it: not just the grasping of the other's actual motivations of action but also the grasping of her motivational possibilities. The paper ends by discussing the dynamic character of the personal subject.

keywords

understanding others, empirical, intuitive, possibilities, person

Husserl's mature ethics is personalistic in the sense that it ties the categorical imperative to individual persons (Hua37, 162, 246; Hua27, 31, 45; cf. Melle 2007; Hart 2006; Trincia 2007; Donohoe 2010; Siles i Borràs 2011; Beyer 2012; Heinämaa 2014; Crespo 2015). More precisely, Husserl defines the imperative, not in relation to types of actions or acts, but in relation to whole persons, their personal capacities¹ of acting, valuing and thinking and their ways of being motivated. In his late lectures on ethics, he formulates the imperative as follows: "Do from now on and without hesitation always the best, *your best*, grasp it in norm-cognition and will it in norm-conscious volition" (Hua37, 253, emphasis added). He explains:

What I must is determined by the 'I can', and what I can differs from what any other can [...] My best is, more precisely, determined by my past and my present, and my future is not totally without preference. My whole life lies in front of me, and in front of me lies the surrounding world that extends itself around me. What I can accomplish there operates as the basis for my deliberation, and the best that I can accomplish there now and in the future is my obligation [*Gesolltes*], the obligation of an individual (Hua37, 252–253; cf. 162; Hua4, 268/280).²

In the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl gives murder and theft as examples of practical possibilities that are relevant in moral and ethical considerations, and he distinguishes two ways of considering such actions. Only one of these ways touches upon the person as an individual and belongs to ethics.

On the one hand, I can represent myself as committing an act of murder or a theft, but, on the other hand, such a representation is inauthentic if it lacks intuitive evidence concerning my

1 In paragraph §59 of the second volume of his *Ideas*, Husserl defines the person as a system of spiritual faculties and abilities (*Vermögen*) of the form "I can" (Hua4, 253–257/266–269). He develops this conception in his working notes and manuscripts on intersubjectivity published in the three volumes of his completed works, *Husserliana XII–XV*. In the following I will call these volumes "the Intersubjectivity Volumes" and distinguish between the first (Hua13), the second (Hua14) and the third (Hua15).

2 In the second volume of *Ideas*, we read: "A human being, however, has an individual kind [Art], and each human being has a different one. According to the universal [*dem allgemeinen nach*], she is a human being, but her kind as her character, her person, is a unity, constituted in her course of life as a subject of position-takings, a unity of multifarious motivations based upon multifarious presuppositions" (Hua4, 274/286–287, translation modified; cf. Hua4, 270–271/283–284, 278–279/290–292, 297/311; Hua15, 118).

personality as a subject of actions, motivated by experiences and experienced objectivities. I can imaginatively represent myself as killing somebody or taking his or her possessions, but in so far as the motivations for such actions contradict my personality, my personal ways of being motivated and being able to become motivated, the reflection is abstract and proceeds in isolation from my motivational grounds and does not concern me as a person. Such possibilities are merely verbal or imaginary constructions and not my genuine possibilities of action. What is lacking is “the original [*ursprünglich*] consciousness of being able to do this action or of having the power for this action” (Hua4, 265/277).

In this context, Husserl points out that even in case of fictitious action self-consciousness is always “an originary [*originär*], non-neutralized consciousness” (Hua4, 265/277). More precisely, the consciousness of who I am, that is how I let myself be motivated, is not neutralized in the fantasizing self-inspection but, on the contrary, guides my imaginative variation of my behavior, my past deeds and my forthcoming actions and all other practical possibilities.

This means that our possibilities of conducting ethical lives or shaping our lives as ethical subjects depend on our capacities of understanding ourselves and others as persons, that is as subjects of motivated actions. More concretely, our possibilities of living ethical lives and judging ethically depend on our understanding of persons, their lived environments, their abilities and faculties and practical possibilities, their ways of acting and being motivated. We find these concepts – the concepts of person, motivation and understanding – developed by Husserl in the second volume of *Ideas* and related manuscripts. In this paper, I confine myself to the task of explicating Husserl’s concept of understanding persons as he uses it in these texts.

In the second volume of *Ideas* and in his working notes on intersubjectivity, Husserl distinguishes between two different ways of understanding persons, their actions and motivations: an experiential or empirical(-inductive) way, on the one hand, and the genuinely or authentically intuitive way, on the other hand.³

In paragraph §60 of the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl asks: “What is happening when the character [*Charakterartung*] of a person suddenly lights up for us through some one or other of his glances, positions, or expressions; when we, so to say, ‘gaze into an abyss;’ when the ‘soul’ of the person suddenly ‘opens itself up,’ when we ‘fathom wondrous depths;’ etc.? What sort of ‘understanding’ is that?” (Hua4, 273/286).

The metaphors of depth and abyss are repeated in many other contexts that deal with the task of understanding ourselves and others.⁴ In the later work *The Crisis*, Husserl cites Heraclitus’s

1. Empirical Understanding of Others

3 In the first Intersubjectivity Volume (Hua13), Husserl uses the term “empathetic reflection”.

4 Husserl uses the metaphors of surface and depth for two purposes, one constitutional-analytic and the other motivational-descriptive. In the analysis of the constitution of the ego as a person, these two senses combine. By the constitutional-analytical context, I mean Husserl’s discussion of the constitution of sense and his analyses of the dependency-relations and layers between different senses. This involves descriptions of levels of constitution as differing in depth and being in relations of one-sided and/or mutual dependency (e.g. Hua6, 96–97/94, 118/116, 121–123/118–120). By the motivational-descriptive context I mean Husserl’s discussion of motivations, that is the ways in which experiences are motivated by other experiences and what Husserl takes to be the kernel or core of personhood (the ego). Here the point is that we are motivated by our previous and present experiences and also by our perceptions and understanding of others. Husserl makes clear that whatever has motivational power over us must be experienced by us in one way or other: “What [...] does not stand over against me in my lived experiences, in my representing, thinking and acting, as the represented, perceived, remembered, thought etc., does not ‘determine’ me as a spirit. And what is not intentionally included in my lived experiences, even if unattended or implicit, does not motivate me, not even unconsciously” (Hua4, 231/243, cf. 185–186/195). Husserl does not reject the idea of unconsciousness but sets out to redefine the concept by horizontality, anonymity, association, striving and drives (e.g. Hua6, 240; Hua4, 222; Hua11,

famous statement: “You will never find the boundaries of the soul, even if you follow every road; so deep is its ground,” and he elaborates on this by characterizing the abyssal depth of the human soul as follows: “Indeed, every ‘ground’ that is reached points to further grounds, every horizon opened up awakens new horizons, and yet the endless whole, in its infinity of flowing movement, is oriented toward the unity of one meaning” (Hua4, 173/170).

So, in Husserl’s descriptions of the personal self and its motivational structures, the metaphors of wells and sources parallel and also substitute the epistemologically motivated metaphors of solid grounds. Whereas the former suggests stability and firmness, the latter suggests dynamic movement and transformation. I will argue that we must take seriously this switch in Husserl’s formulations and rethink the person and relation to its egoic kernel or core as essentially dynamic and developing.

But how can such endless totalities be understood? In his manuscripts, Husserl’s answer comes in two steps. These are sometimes presented as two aspects of one and the same process (e.g. Beyer 2012, Rinofner-Kreidl 2018), but I think that Husserl is actually describing two different ways or attitudes in which we can study the other person. On the one hand, we can study the other person – human or non-human – empirically as a psychophysical unity, but on the other hand, we can also study her as an ego with a comprehensive and dynamic ego-life. Both considerations have an empirical indication as their starting point (cf. Hua4, 276/288; Hua13, 444–445), but they proceed differently from this common point of origin, with two different thematic foci and two different sets of thematic positings, one focused on thingly objects and their causal and functional relations and the other focused on meanings and expressions and their mutual relations.⁵

So, an empirical apperception of the other, an experience of the other, is indispensable for both approaches, but whereas the former approach, the empirical, continues proceeding on this level, the latter approach, the intuitive-spiritual one, involves a change of attitude which eventually opens a dimension of depth. My experience of the other – of her behavior, glance, position or gesture – gives me, so to say, an “access” to her ego-life or refers me to this life. However, in order to study the other’s ego-life as such, as a life of an ego with its peculiar motivational nexuses and dynamic and open-ended structure, I must bracket the indicating reality, the behavior, and focus on the indicated alien ego-life. More precisely, my experiences of her ways of behaving function as indications of her ego-life, but when I have discovered this “access,” I have to suspend it and take as my theme her motivated life as such (Hua13, 445). In the latter case I study the alien life as a variation of my own ego-life: It is given to me in empathy as an unrealizable modification of my own I-live, I-suffer, I-do, I-sense, I-feel, I-have-such-and-such-appearances, I-decide (Hua13, 455).

In the second volume of his *Ideas*, Husserl uses the term “intuition” in quotation marks (“*Intuition*”) to characterize the empirical understanding of others, and its holistic character, but he points out that a better term for this type of understanding would be “premonition” (*Vorahnung*) or “pre-seeing without seeing” (Hua 4, 286/273–274). The premonition of the other person is a special kind of ability to anticipate (and predict) the other’s behaviors and actions on the basis of our prior experience, including our experience of her as an individual and of other human beings in general (Hua4, 274/287). Such empirical understanding resembles genuine intuitive understanding (*Anschauung*) in that it is comprehensive and

154; cf. Bernet 1996; Mishara 1990; Depraz 2001; Bernet 2006; Smith 2010).

5 The fifth Cartesian Meditation makes clear that an indicative phenomenon is merely needed as a starting point of, or “access point” to, empathetic exchange. In order for a proper empathetic experience to be constituted, the experiencing subject has to capture the body over there as expressing the inner life of another subject and not merely as indicating someone’s existence (Hua1, 150/121, 151/124).

holistic. But it is not genuine insight since the actual motivational relations crucial to the other person remain obscure to me; they are not brought to full intuition (Hua4, 273/286) or clear insight by me (Hua4, 274/286), even if the general outline of the other's motivational nexuses is disclosed to me.

So, what is at issue is a “presentiment”, rather than a proper insight: “a pre-seeing without seeing, an obscure, more specifically symbolic, often ungraspably empty, premonition (*Vorauserfassen*)” (Hua4, 274/286).

The emptiness of this type of understanding means that the actual (*wirkliche*) motivational connections and nexuses of the other person's life are given to us merely as a *goal in anticipation*. They are determinate, however, in the sense that we can *follow* a clearly directed tendency and acquire a *chain* of actual (experiential) intuitions (Rinofner-Kreidl 2018). In so far as we have experiences of other people in general and of this person in particular, we can first grasp emptily the complex unity of the person's life, and then in the course of our own continuous experience of her we can fulfill this empty intending in insightful intuition, by means of the analysis of the *actual* nexuses of her motivational life, action and behavior (Hua4, 275/287). Husserl writes:

[T]his (...) premonition ought not to be confused with actual intuition. What we have here is the success of a more precisely determining apperception, which, like any apperception, offers a guiding line for the confirmation, in the course of experience, of the intentional nexuses, often extremely complex (Hua4, 275/187).

This type of understanding is processual and synthetizing; it proceeds step by step and by links and chains of experiences with mutual references. It consists of (i) an empty intention of the motivational nexuses that characterize and make up the other person's life, (ii) a guiding line (*Leitfaden*) based on experience of other people and this one in different situations, and (iii) the intuitive fulfilling of the intention by analysis of actual motivational nexuses.

We do not, and cannot, anticipate exactly, but we see the direction or know the “arsenal” of the other person's responses.

Husserl argues that even if empirical understanding of others often is mixed or confused with genuine intuitive understanding, these two modes of understanding must be kept conceptually separate.

[N]ot every judgment about the other is based solely on the, as it were, external style of his life, abstracted out of experience, for which I would not have to penetrate [*eindringen*] into the interior of her motivations and to represent [*vorstellen*] them in a fully lively way [*voll lebendig*]. I learn, however, to peer into the interiority of the other and to come to know inwardly the person herself, the motivational subject, which is precisely what bursts into view when I represent the other ego in the way it is motivated (Hua4, 273/285–286, translation modified).

Genuine or authentic understanding⁶ is not a series of apperceptions but is a form of reflection that concerns the motivational structure of an alien ego-life and the ego as an inexhaustible source of activity. The actions of the other, when considered in this way, are not given to me

2. Towards Genuine Understanding of Others

⁶ In the first Intersubjectivity Volume, Husserl calls “authentic empathy” the genuine or authentic form of understanding of others in intuition.

as mental properties belonging or attached to some psychic or spiritual substrate; the whole model of substance is inadequate here. Rather the other ego is given as another spring or source of originary activity. In the first Intersubjectivity Volume, Husserl explains:

The relation between the self and its acts is specific; to be sure, it resembles the relation that a real substrate has to its features, thing and properties etc., but on the other hand it is very different. The self is not ‘substance’ in this sense, it is not an identical concrete that includes acts and states in itself as its features, that could provide an explication. Neither is the soul, the stream of the ego-life, such a substance [...] The self is no substratum, no ‘carrier’, but the self, a spring [Quellpunkt] [...]" (Hua13, 457)

In genuine understanding, the other is not posited as a psycho-physical reality but is posited as an ego with an ego-life, with her own ego-activities and passivities. To be sure, her ego-life is beyond my originary, direct intuitive reach, but, Husserl argues, I can go into a specific fantasizing as-if mode of reflection and thus *accompany* the other in her actions and motivations. I can co-act with her, co-suffer her inclinations and co-decide with her, and so intuitively understand what she does and why she does so:

I not only empathize with his thinking, his feeling, and his action, but I must also follow him in them, his motivations becoming my quasi-motives, ones which, however, motivate with insight in the mode of intuitive fulfilling in empathy. I co-share in his temptations, I co-participate in his fallacies; in the “co-” there lies an inner co-living of motivating factors (...) that carry their necessity with them (Hua4, 275/287, translation modified).

In the Intersubjectivity Volumes, Husserl explains the nature of this quasi-life in greater detail, and points to a specific *duplication* of the self that it involves. He does this by comparing empathy to the relation that we have to our own past: We can return to our past life and go through our own motivations and actions in the past environment in an as-if mode. When we do this, we live in two different ways: we act *in the present* by inserting ourselves in the past and thus we, at the same time, as-if-feel, as-if-decide and as-if-operate *in the past*. Husserl's point about authentic empathy is that it has the same structure as this self-inspection: we can insert ourselves in the lives of others in the same way as we can insert ourselves in our own past lives. The first option is based on recollective de-presentation, and the latter on empathetic de-presentation:

Empathy as act is of course not living-in-my-past, but [it] is something similar: it is living-in-a-present or rather living-a-present-ego-life but in the modus of *quasi-life*, so that the self to which I empathize is not mine. And at the same time I am the actual, non-modified self that, transferring herself into the other, is living ‘as if’ [*gleichsam*] in the other (Hua13, 456; cf. Hua1, 145/115–116; Hua6, 189/186).

The as-if mode allows a special form of reflection: like non-modified feelings, decisions, and actions, also quasi-feelings, quasi-decision, and quasi-actions can be reflectively studied and evaluated. The other self is thus thematized in reflection as an alien ego-life, but it is not objectified in apperception:

[I]t allows a reflexion, a reflexion in respect to me, the non-modified, the empathizing self, and another reflexion in respect to the emphasized [other self] (Hua13, 456).

3. The Task of Self-Understanding and its Implications to our Possibilities of Understanding Others

Husserl's explications of self-knowledge and self-understanding further illuminate the task of understanding others. The illumination comes from two arguments that we find in Husserl's exposition.

First, he distinguishes between two types of self-comprehension: mere empirical self-apperception that concerns myself as a unity of actual experiences and genuine self-understanding that also includes my *possibilities* of change and becoming over and above what I am and have been.

Second, Husserl argues that our understanding of alien motives is based on our self-understanding. In *Ideas*, he states: “[t]he underlying basis upon which is built the comprehensive motivated spiritual life of the other, and in conformity to which that life runs its course in an individual typical way, present themselves as ‘variations’ of my own” (Hua4, 275/288). In the first Intersubjectivity Volume, he writes: “Genuine empathy [...] is a modification of my own I-am and I-live, I-suffer-it, I-do-that, I-sense, I-feel, I-have-such-and-such-appearances, I-decide” (Hua13, 455). Thus, there is a crucial connection and analogy between self-understanding and the understanding of others.

We saw above that by introducing the concept of quasi-life, Husserl is able to argue that that the proper, genuine understanding of others does not have to remain at the level of empirical apperception of their observed deeds and behaviors in comparison to other similar actions and similar actors.

But the parallel between self-understanding and the understanding of others suggest more than mere quasi-life. Since self-understanding essentially covers my *possibilities* of living and not just my actual life and its actual moments – experiences, motivations and actions –, also reflection on others can extend beyond the actual. Thus, it is not enough to study the other's actual motivations and deeds in the as-if-mode; we must also reflect on her possibilities of acting and being motivated, and so perform an *eidetic* reflection that is analogous to the one that we can perform in our own case. In the first Intersubjectivity Volume Husserl states: “The absolute self-experience (non-experiential, non-apperceptive) is the self-experience of the experiencing self. To it corresponds the absolute empathetic knowledge” (Hua13, 445).

The question then becomes how these foreign possibilities can be given in any intuitive way. I believe that we find an answer to this question by combining (i) Husserl's remarks about the quasi-motivations by which I can accompany the other's actual motivations and decisions for action and (ii) his discussion of the imaginary variation that allows me to study my own possibilities of being motivated.

My account here is based on the textual material that we find in the second volume of Husserl's *Ideas* and in his intersubjectivity manuscripts but the framing of my discussion is in Husserl's argument that ethical life is a life for the *best possible* in a person's life. This argument strongly suggests that reflection on human persons, on their actions and motivations, can and must – like self-reflection – extend beyond actualities and proceed in the sphere of possibilities. In Husserl's introductory lectures to ethics from the 1920s, we read:

[R]ather the moral self, the self of permanent and unceasing self-cultivation [*Selbsterziehung*], is the self that wants to make itself better, wants to change himself (as self) so that it can *eo ipso* [by this change] be only goodwilling as an ethical self (Hua37, 162).

Mere empirical self-understanding is not sufficient for ethical self-shaping, nor for the proper understanding of other persons as open developing wholes. What is needed is an understanding of the motivational *possibilities* of the person in question.

Husserl describes a man who is known for his good heart but who in hurry acts without

clear understanding of the condition of a person who appeals him for help. We tend to say: “He would have been charitable (...) if he had clearly understood the need of the one who appealed to him for help”. But this is far from proper consideration of the man in question, his character, for it is based on a superficial (contingent) truth about him, lacking consideration of his personal capacities, possibilities and potentialities. What is needed is a critical examination of the motives which are in operation as well as their alternatives, and all the intentional implications of these motives. The question is not just how he acts or would act in this or that situation, or who he is and has been thus far; the question is also about his possibilities of becoming *other* than he is and has been (Hua4, 252/264, 266/278).

In paragraph §60b in the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl distinguished between empirical self-knowledge that is founded on the positing of the world and the self in the world, on the one hand, and the understanding of the motivational possibilities of oneself as a person, on the other hand. The former concerns the self as a posited unity of the manifold of position-taking acts and habitualities and faculties of acting; and the latter concerns the possibilities of the self and its capabilities of becoming, developing and changing.

Empirical self-consciousness is not limited to mere actualities. On the basis of my experience and knowledge of myself, I can also imagine myself in various situations and ask how my inclinations, affections and capabilities would direct my actions in these phantasized circumstances. This kind of knowledge is not confined to my actual deeds or performed actions and it is not a mere abstraction from them, but it also includes reflections on possible actions. But what remains constant, what is not varied, is the self as a subject of experiences and interests that is imaginatively inserted in different situations (Hua4, 265–266/278). Thus, this kind of self-comprehension is empirical in the sense that it is founded on the positing of the self as an already constituted unity of experiences and does not question or neutralize this posited whole. Husserl explains:

If I now phantasize, if I settle myself (as the one I am) into a phantasized actuality or into the world given in the neutrality modification, into the familiar world transformed in phantasy some way or other, then I am judging how such and such motives (more precisely: the quasi-motives of this phantasized environment) would affect me; how I, as the one I am, would act and could act, how I could, and how I could not, judge, value, and will. In that way I judge, or I can judge, empirically, *on the basis of my experiential knowledge of myself*, with respect to myself, with respect to the *ego constituted for me in empirical apperception as experiential ego* (Hua4, 265–266/278, emphasis added).

But there is another mode of self-reflection that is not, and cannot be, based on previous experiences of oneself since it concerns oneself in the constant process of becoming and developing. Husserl states:

Thus, the substrata of motivation, the orientations and the powers of the motives are different. How do I come to know them? I do so, as the one I am, by means of phantasizing presentification of possible situations, in which I ‘reflect’ on what kind of sensuous or spiritual stimulation would affect me [...] Upon reflection I could [...] say that I, as I used to be, [...] would not have been able to do something or other. But at present I can act in that way and would do so. When I say this, I am not basing myself on experience but on the fact that I can test my motives at the very outset (Hua4, 267/279–280).

In this context, Husserl emphasizes that the unity of a person is fundamentally different from the unity of a thing (Hua4, 266/278–279, 274/286–287). Unlike a thing, a person can change in

radical ways without losing her identity as the ego subject of the original faculties and powers (*Urvermögen*) of willing, valuing, and thinking. The whole complex of motivations can change as well as their directions and powers (Hua4, 254–255/267, cf. Hua27, 30–32; Husserl [1923] 1997, 207–208). Latent motivations can emerge and potent motivations may retreat (Hua4, 252/264; cf. Hua6, 240/237–238).

The difference between persons and things includes three crucial and related structural features.

First, the thing is predictable; it cannot really surprise us by disclosing completely unexpected aspects. Husserl writes: “In the apprehension of a thing there is nothing that, in principle, is new. If there were, then it would already be the start of the constitution of a new stratum of unity” (Hua4, 266/278). The person, on the contrary, can always act and react differently than expected without losing her identity – not just in the other’s eyes but also in her own.

Second, things come in kinds but persons are given to us as unique individuals. Husserl explains: “Each thing is of a certain kind. If one knows the kind, the rest can be dispensed with” (Hua4, 274/286). The person, on the contrary, is an individual ego of intentional activities and passivities and of position takings and can actively change the course of her own life (Hua4, 277–278/289–290). Even more: the ego, and only the ego, is the unit that is absolutely individuated (Hua4, 299–302/313–316; cf. Heinämaa 2018).

Finally, a person is a dynamically developing unity (Hua4, 251–253/263–265; cf. Hua3, 132–141/184–193). In the third volume of *Ideas*, Husserl emphasizes the fact that persons as spiritual units differ from things primarily in that their moments and states are non-recurring (Hua5, 17, cf. 44). Moreover, Husserl’s concepts of motivation and willing imply the idea of a motivational change, that is the idea that we can be motivated to abandon, not just our formed ways of acting, but also our former ways of being motivated to act and thus become different in our motivational nexuses. Thus, position in a historical setting or membership in a community – professional, social, or natural – does not limit or exhaust the person’s possibilities of change and development. Husserl explains:

Originally, I am actually not a unity of associative and active experiences (if experience means the same as it does in the case of the thing). I am the subject of my life, and the subject develops in living [...] The ego does not originally stem from experience – in the sense of an associative apperception in which are constituted unities of manifolds of a nexus – but from life (it is what it is not *for* the ego, but it is itself the ego) (Hua4, 252/264, translation modified).

I have argued that if knowledge of self and understanding of others is to serve ethical reflections, and ethical self-shaping and ethical judgment of others, it must not be confined to the actual but must involve reflection on the other’s possibilities. It concerns the other not just as an actual agent in apperception, anticipation and extrapolation but also as a possible agent. Understanding of the other person means that I – the one who aims at understanding – live through her life in the modality of as-if, I live through her actions and motivations in the quasi-mode. But for ethical reflection to be possible, quasi-life must cover not just the other’s actual, past and present, actions and motivations but also her possibilities of becoming different and renewing herself. The analogy is not just between myself as I am and have become at the present and the other as an actual person but is between two individual essences: myself as I can be, as I can act and be motivated, and the other as she can be.

4. Summary

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