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## Time and Existence:

### A Critique of "Degree Presentism"

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One of the most fascinating and puzzling aspects of our ordinary language, thought and experience of time is its passage. In some sense, time seems to move from the future to the present and then from the present into the more and more distant past. We use tensed language to reflect this allegedly *sui generis* form of change. For example, it is now true to say that "I *will* retire within the next 10 years", and in a few years it will be true to say that "I *am now* retiring", and some years later it will be true that "I *have been* retired for *x* number of years". Furthermore, we think differently about events and experiences that appear to be moving toward or away from us. Thus, an unpleasant future event is thought of with *dread* whereas the same event when it becomes past is thought of with *relief*. Finally, there is some plausibility in the claim that we experience the passage of time since we seem to experience the present as having a reality that the past and future do not have. How, then, are we to understand this enigmatic feature of reality - temporal becoming or passage - in all its various manifestations?

To give an adequate answer to that question is one of the most fundamental problems in the philosophy of time. Minimally, an adequate answer to the question "What is temporal becoming?" must be able to specify what there is in reality that provides an ontological ground for those aspects of language, thought and experience that purportedly reflect the passage of time. B-theorists maintain that a logically coherent account of passage cannot be gleaned from a superficial examination of ordinary language, thought or experience. For, to suppose that our use of tensed *language* represents the non-relational temporal A-properties of *pastness*, *presentness* and *futurity*; or that our *thoughts* (and attitudes) about events reflect their movement through time, or, that our *experience* implies that the present has some special ontological status not bestowed on the past or future is, B-theorists allege, fraught with insurmountable

dialectical difficulties, such as McTaggart's paradox. (See McTaggart 1908.) A-theorists, on the other hand, maintain that a careful examination of our ordinary language, thought and experience is a sure path to the truth about time, and that B-theorists are mistaken in thinking that all A-theoretical accounts of temporal becoming are internally inconsistent. Although A-theorists universally agree that difficulties, such as McTaggart's paradox, pose no lasting threat to our so-called "intuitive" conception of time, they do debate amongst themselves over which version of the A-theory is best capable of avoiding the charge of incoherence levied against them by B-theorists.

In a recent paper, Quentin Smith puts forth a novel version of the A-theory of time he calls "degree presentism" that he believes is perfectly consistent and supported by experience. (Smith 2002) According to this view, there are tensed *facts* (specifying what is earlier/later or simultaneous with the present), but there are no tensed or *A-properties*. Although A-properties do not exist, Smith refuses to follow Prior in maintaining that the past and the future do not exist, or the B-theorist in maintaining that the past, present and future exist equally.<sup>1</sup> The past and future do exist, but to a lesser degree than the present. Accordingly, the present is not understood in terms of what exemplifies the property of *presentness*, but rather in terms of what exists to the highest degree, or as he puts it, what has "maximal existence". What is simultaneous with the present is maximally existent; what is earlier than the present is past and has a lesser degree of existence, and what is later than the present is future and also has a lesser degree of existence than the present. Temporal passage involves states or particulars gaining (as they approach the present) and then losing (as they recede from the present) varying degrees of existence. Smith maintains that "These *degrees of existence* are immediately given in our phenomenological experience" (Smith 2002, 120), and that "the intuitively plausible degrees of existence theory can be defended with respect to its logical coherency [ ... ]." (Ibid., 136) The aim of my paper is to argue, contrary to what Smith asserts, that degree presentism is not phenomenologically grounded and that its logical consistency cannot be defended.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior 1968. For recent proponents of the B-theory see Oaklander 2004, Mellor 1998, Beer 2008, Le Poidevin 1991, Mozerky 2006, and Dyke 2002, to name just a few.

I want to begin my critique of degree presentism by questioning the ontological principle upon which this new A-theory rests, namely, that reality or existence comes in degrees (of being more or less real). Smith claims that "Most (but not all) philosophers from Plato to Meinong have held doctrines of degrees of existence" (Smith 2002, 119) and that the difference in degree of existence is *not a different kind of mode of being* (such as subsistence, as in Meinong, the early Russell and the early Moore (see Russell 193 7, Moore 1993)) but of the relation of *one and the same entity* to the present. As he puts it, "The degree to which an item exists is proportional to its temporal distance from the present; the present, which has zero temporal distance from the present, has the highest (logically) possible degree of existence." (Smith 2002, 120)

I will deal with his phenomenological claim shortly, but it seems to me that the appeal to the history of philosophy to defend his theory of degreed existence is questionable at best. For there is an important difference between Smith's theory of degrees of existence and others who have held the doctrine of degreed existence, e.g., Meinong and Descartes (in Meditation III). For Smith, it is *one and the same entity* that differs in degree of existence as time passes, since, for example, it is the particular Socrates, or the state of Socrates' (tenselessly) being bald, that gains and loses degrees of existence with the passage of time. For others who have maintained that existence is a matter of degree, *different kinds of entities* have degreed being. I am not suggesting that simply because Smith's theory of degrees of existence is not isomorphic with Meinong's or Descartes' that it is mistaken, but only that his appeal to such theories as representative does not give his version of the doctrine a clear meaning or a defense.

Smith does give one argument for degree presentism, namely, that it is phenomenologically obvious that what is present has more reality than what is not. In other words, we experience those things that are present as having the greatest degree of reality, and as they become further and further past we experience them as being less and less real. To the extent to which it is true, and I shall argue that it is not true, Smith's point seems to me to blur a subjective feature of our experience of the world with an objective characteristic of the world itself. To use Hume's terminology, while it may be the case that our experience of events that are happening now sometimes appears more forceful, lively and vivid than our recollection of past events, or our anticipation of future

events, which are faint copies of them, it does not follow that the experience in question reflects an objective difference in the degree of existence of the events themselves.

Furthermore, Smith's phenomenological claims about degrees of existence seem to be mistaken. He claims that "we experience existence, as something with degrees, and thus that degree of existence = distance from the present accurately describes our immediate acquaintance with existence and time" (Smith 2002, 122), but this strikes me as false. For example, it seems clear that events which are further in the past than others can seem to be phenomenologically more real than events that are closer to the present. For example, an uneventful event that occurred one year ago can seem less real than an event that occurred 45 years ago if the older event had a greater emotional impact. For example, the experiences of being told of my father's death and later of my mother's death, events that each occurred 46 and 45 years ago, are more vivid and lively than an uneventful happening of one year ago such as giving a lecture in Philosophy 101. Thus, if our acquaintance with existence and time accurately reflected distance from the present, it would follow that events that happened 46 and 45 years ago are closer to the present and have more reality than an event that happened, say, one year ago. That phenomenological point contradicts the theory that "degree of existence = distance from the present" describes our immediate acquaintance with existence and time.

Of course, sometimes people say things like "It seems to me as if it happened yesterday", if they want to express that they have a very vivid and intense memory of a certain event that happened in the farther past. At first sight, it might seem as if this linguistic datum is a point in favor of my criticism of Smith's "degree presentism". But is it really? A critic could argue that utterances like this one reflect the conviction that there usually *is* a connection between distance to the present and vividness and intensity of memory (such that it is an exception if something that happened long ago is remembered in a vivid and intense way, an exception for which a particular explanation is needed). In other words, couldn't one interpret utterances like this as expressing the conviction that in certain cases our experience of vividness and intensity of a memory *deceives* us with respect to the temporal distance of the remembered event, and would that not imply that we assume that in normal cases there is a relation between the

phenomenology of our memories and the temporal distance of the remembered events?<sup>2</sup>

Of course, even if this was the case, that there is a relation between the phenomenology of our memories and the temporal distance of the remembered events, that would still not conclusively support degree presentism, but I don't think it is the case. Consider our experience of the future. We often anticipate events farther into the future with a greater vividness than those events that will occur much closer to the present perhaps because they are more important to us. Such experiences don't deceive us with regard to how close they are to the present or to their degree of reality but do demonstrate that there is no clear phenomenological correlation between distance from the present and degrees of existence. Although degrees of existence are not conclusively established by how we experience existence, one may still argue, as Smith in fact does, that "degree presentism is a logically consistent [ ... ] new version of the tensed theory of time" (Smith 2002, 122 and 126), clearly different from (Prior's) solipsistic presentism (according to which only the present exists, the past and the future are species of unreality), and the tenseless B-theory of time. In what follows, I shall argue that even this modest thesis cannot be sustained.

To help clarify the ontology of degree presentism, I want to distinguish it from Smith's earlier version of the A-theory, according to which there are A-properties and tensed exemplification ties. According to this earlier theory, it is *not* the case that, say, event *e* is (tenselessly or timelessly) past, present and future, but rather, *e* is past, was present and future, or *e* is present, was future and will be past, or *e* is future and will be present and past. On this view, "*e* is now past", for example, is analyzed as follows: "*e* exemplifies! *pastness*, and the exemplification<sub>1</sub> of *pastness* by *e* exemplifies<sub>2</sub> presentness, and the exemplification<sub>2</sub> of presentness (by the exemplification<sub>1</sub> of *pastness* by *e*) exemplifies<sub>3</sub> presentness, and so on *ad infinitum*". Similarly, "*e* was future" is analyzed as "*e* exemplifies! *futurity*, and the exemplification<sub>1</sub> of *futurity* by *e* exemplifies<sub>2</sub> *pastness*, and the exemplification<sub>z</sub> of *pastness* (by the exemplification<sub>1</sub> of *futurity* by *e* exemplifies<sub>3</sub> *presentness*, and so on *ad infinitum*". As I have shown elsewhere, and shall not repeat here, countenancing

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Maria Elisabeth Reicher for making me aware of this objection.

A-properties and tensed exemplification in this way leads to a contradiction unless one claims that a term can presently exemplify a property at a time at which it does not exist. In that case, however, one can neither provide an adequate ontological ground for past and future tensed states of affairs nor account for the direction of becoming and time. (See Oaklander 1996.)

Smith's new A-theory of degree presentism explicitly acknowledges these criticisms by abandoning the key ontological commitments that underlie them. According to degree presentism, exemplification is tenseless (not in the omnitensed sense that it was, is or will be present but) in the sense that it has no A-properties and stands in no B-relations of *earlier than/later than* or *simultaneity*. Furthermore, the monadic properties of *pastness* and *futurity* are eliminated.

What, then, is the degree presentist analysis of statements about the past (and future)? Smith sets forth the analysis of the past in the following passage that I shall quote at length:

Having been alive is analysable into the property of aliveness and the state S of the thing tenselessly being alive being earlier than the present time. It is the whole complex, the state S, that stands in this relation to the present, not the thing's tenseless *exemplification* of being alive. 'Pastness', 'was', 'have been', 'had been' and the like are analysable into the exemplification of the property F that the thing possessed at the time it was present, and the complex state S consisting of [the] thing's exemplification of this property being related to the present time by the relation of being earlier than it. [ ... ] Socrates' having been alive is analysable into tenselessly exemplifying the property of aliveness, such that the state of Socrates' tenselessly exemplify[ing] *this property* is over 2,000 years earlier than the present. (Smith 2002, 126f.; the last emphasis is mine.)

The point I want to highlight in this analysis, because it gets Smith into trouble, concerns the notion of "the whole complex state S". One obvious interpretation is that a "whole complex state" consists of a thing or a particular, (tenselessly) exemplifying a monadic property. Thus, the past tensed state of affairs of Socrates' having been alive is analysed in terms of the whole complex

state, Socrates' (tenselessly) being alive, standing in the earlier-than relation to the present. It is not the thing's *exemplification* (of being alive) that stands in relation to the present (since exemplification is tenseless, it does not have B-relations to the present), and it is not the thing or particular (Socrates) *per se* that has this relation to the present (since it is the *whole complex state* S (and not a particular constituent of it) that stands in the earlier-than relation to the present). Rather, a state is a particular exemplifying a *monadic* property (such as being alive), and the more distant a state is from the present (in either temporal direction) the less reality it possesses and consequently the further past (or future) it is. As Smith puts it:

The degrees of existence theory implies that no nonpresent items presently exemplify properties. Rather past or future items tenselessly stand in relations to the present of being earlier than it to a certain degree or later than it to a certain degree. (Smith 2002, 131)

My interpretation of a "complex state" and the analysis of statements about the past are reinforced by his account of the order of past tense facts, for example, of the fact that, say, Thales died *before* Socrates was born, which he expresses in the following passage:

The complication of the tenses still preserves this relatedness to the present. For example, if I say that Thales had been dead before Socrates was born, we have two past tense expressions, each of whose semantic content includes a relation of being earlier than the present time. The state S composed of *Thales' being (tenselessly) dead* is earlier than the present time and is earlier than the state S' composed of *Socrates' birth*; in addition, the state consisting of *Socrates' being born* is earlier than the present. (Smith 2002, 127; italics added.)

Clearly, Smith is claiming that *Socrates' (tenselessly) being born* and *Thales' (tenselessly) being dead* are each complex states that stand in temporal relations to each other and to the present.

Unfortunately, given this understanding of a "whole complex state", his analyses of the past and the order of past tense states are inconsistent with degree

presentism. For the essence of degree presentism is that what is present has maximal existence, but what is it about the present items that give them maximal existence? The answer is that present items have maximal existence because only *present particulars have non-relational properties*. As evidence, consider the following passages:

The fact that past and future individuals lack nonrelational properties reflects their ontological status as not fully real beings; in a sense, they are partial beings. (Smith 2002, 129)

[A past particular is partially nonexistent and] Its partial nonbeing consists in its lack of nonrelational properties and its lack of full existence. (Smith 2002, 133)

Or again,

So we have this result: maximal existents have nonrelational monadic properties and also stand in relations. But particulars that exist to less than the maximal degree *only* stand in relations. This is one sense in which they are partly real and partly unreal. Let us ask ourselves again; does it involve a logical contradiction? (Smith 2002, 132; italics added.)

Assuming the analysis of a complex state given earlier, an affirmative answer can be given to that rhetorical question. Since the complex state of *Socrates' (tenselessly) being alive* is earlier than the present, it *is past*, but since being alive is a *monadic* property of Socrates, and *only present particulars have non-relational monadic properties*, it follows that Socrates' being alive *is present*, given that a state that consists of a subject that (tenselessly) exemplifies a monadic property necessarily is a present state. Furthermore, in virtue of exemplifying being alive, Socrates partakes of maximal existence, but in virtue of being earlier than the present, Socrates partakes of existence to a lesser degree. Thus, on Smith's analysis, the complex state of *Socrates' being alive* is both past and present, and the particular Socrates both does and does not exist to a maximal degree.



Moreover, the order of past tense facts is lost. Since a state is a particular exemplifying (tenselessly) a monadic property, and given that all such states are present, they exist to a maximal degree, and for that reason Socrates' (tenselessly) being alive and Thales' (tenselessly) being dead are both present, and therefore one cannot be earlier than the other. Of course, one might then maintain, as some certainly have, that the ground of statements about the past and temporal relations between such states lies in the present. In that case, however, degree presentism reduces to what Smith calls "solipsistic or modal presentism", Le Poidevin calls "temporal solipsism" and Tegtmeier calls "Solpräsentismus", a view strongly rejected by each of those philosophers. (Smith 2002, 123f.; Le Poidevin 1991, 36-57; Tegtmeier 1997)

Alternatively, since one could say instead that since complex states, such as Socrates' being alive and Thales' being dead, and all other complex states, each have maximal existence and do stand in temporal relations to each other, degree presentism reduces to the B-theory. Each state is present and thus has maximal existence at the time at which it occurs, regardless of what time it is, and that is a B-theoretic conception of time. To say that a state stands at a certain temporal relation (or distance) to the present, i.e., from what exists maximally, is, on this analysis of a state and maximal existence, to say that states (tenselessly) exist in temporal relations to each other, and that is the B-theory since the resulting facts are B-facts and not A-facts.

There is a further problem with Smith's analysis that is closely related to the preceding. The degree presentist analysis of "Thales was dead before Socrates was born" involves the state or fact of Thales' (tenselessly) being dead being earlier than the state or fact of Socrates' (tenselessly) being born. Is that a B-fact or an A-fact? If it is a B-fact, then that contradicts Smith's claim that "there are *only tensed facts* (where 'tensed' now has the nonlinguistic, ontological sense of A-facts, as distinct from B-facts). Every fact includes a relationship to the present." (Smith 2002, 129; italics added.) On the other hand, if Thales' being (tenselessly) dead being (tenselessly) earlier than the state S' composed of Socrates' birth is an *A-fact*, then it must have a relation to the present. However, it is difficult to understand what that relationship could be. If it is earlier or later than the present, then there must be some time when it is simultaneous with the present. That is, if the complex state lacks a certain degree of existence (since it

is at a temporal distance from the present), then it must have had maximal existence at one present time or another. Since, however, both of the relata cannot have maximal existence at the same time, the entire relational complex could not be present with maximal existence at any time. Thus, the fact of a state being earlier than another state cannot be a tensed fact, since if it cannot be simultaneous with the present then it cannot stand in any other temporal relation to the present. If the complex state in question is a fact that has no relation to the present, it is a B-fact and not an A-fact. This criticism will emerge again later.

The objections I have been discussing rest on the assumption that a "complex state" is a particular (tenselessly) exemplifying a property, including monadic properties, and that it is complex states that stand in earlier/ later and simultaneity relations to the present. However, perhaps it is *particulars* (and *not states*) that stand in relations to the present and to each other. Perhaps it is particulars that undergo temporal becoming by changing their relation to the present by gaining or losing a greater degree of existence. There is some evidence that Smith holds such a view when he says:

The unusual feature of degree presentism is summarized as this: Past (or future) *particulars* do not have nonrelational, monadic properties, but only stand in relations or have relational properties. Thus they are 'bare particulars' in the sense that they *lack nonrelational, monadic properties*.<sup>3</sup>

And,

When the *particular* becomes past, it possesses an essentially relational property, one that is the past-time version of the presently possessed property. Instead of it being true that x has the essentially nonrelational property of being human, it is now true that x tenselessly has the

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<sup>3</sup> Smith 2002, 132; emphasis added. Of course this is a very unBergmann like use of "bare particular", since for Bergmann there are no bare particulars that lack non-relational monadic properties. Since, however, that difference makes no difference for what I am about in this paper, I shall ignore it.

essentially relational property of *having been a human over 100 years earlier than the present*.<sup>4</sup>

These passages support the interpretation that it is *particulars* and *not states* that stand in earlier/later-than relations to the present and that past and future *particulars* have only *relational* properties, and *not monadic properties*. Does that enable Smith to avoid any of the objections previously delineated?

In correspondence, Smith has pointed out that there is a difficulty with degree presentism even if "monadic predicates [ ... ] of past and future events are abbreviations of relational predicates" (Smith 2002, 126), and thus the proper reading of "the whole complex state S" is the *entire* fact consisting of the thing's exemplifying a property being temporally related to the present (and not a particular exemplifying a monadic property). For, he says,

You probably could refute [my criticism] by saying

- (a) Socrates (tenselessly) is alive is earlier than the present entails
- (b) Socrates is (tenselessly) alive

And we do not know whether it is true or false unless we value it with respect to a temporal circumstance of evaluation (to use Kaplan's terminology), such as 420 bce.<sup>5</sup>

If the proposition (b) does not possess a truth value unless it is evaluated with respect to some (B-time) circumstance of evaluation, for example, 1 June, 420 BCE, then we arrive at the B-theory. Certainly that is a difficulty with degree presentism, but in what follows I wish to attend to a different set of problems.

The first question to ask concerning this revised analysis of the past is, "What constitutes the passage of time?", or, alternatively, "What makes degree presentism an *A-theory* of time?" Suppose that *a* is present when *a's being F* is

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<sup>4</sup> Smith 2002, 135; first emphasis added. I will ignore the potential difficulty, that is, the circularity, of incorporating the tensed expression "having been" into this analysis of the past.

<sup>5</sup> E-mail correspondence from Quentin Smith to Nathan Oaklander on 11/10/2007.

simultaneous with the present, and that *a* becomes past when it exemplifies the relational property "being *F* earlier than the present". Presumably, in that case, *a* first has maximal existence and then has less than maximal existence. To see why this is problematic, I want to explore the following question: What is the ontological status of the fact (or complex state) that *a* (tenselessly) *exemplifies being F earlier than the present time*? In particular, how is *that* fact related to time and existence? Is it a timeless (atemporal, eternal) fact or a temporal fact?<sup>6</sup>

If the fact (call it "P") that, say, *a* (tenselessly) exemplifies *being F (one minute) earlier than the present time* is timeless, that is, it does not exist in B-time or A-time (and thus the proposition that expresses it is freely repeatable), then degree presentism is either contradictory or reduces to the B-theory. To see why, consider another timeless fact, (call it "Q"), that *a* (tenselessly) *exemplifies being F (two minutes) later than the present time*. "The present time" in P and Q denote the same present time or a different present time. If "the present time" denotes the *same* present time in P and Q, then *a* (tenselessly) exemplifies being *F* one minute earlier and two minutes later than the same present moment, and that is absurd, for then *a* would be past and future at the same present moment, and it would exist to different degrees at the same present moment.

On the other hand, if P and Q have different present times as constituents, then a contradiction is avoided, but then degree presentism collapses into the B-theory. Clearly, there is no contradiction in *a*'s tenselessly exemplifying being *F* one minute earlier than the "present" time  $t_1$ , and two minutes later than the "present" time  $t_2$ . However, in that case, there is no moment ontologically distinguishable as the present, and thus *a* never changes its relation to the present or undergoes temporal becoming. In short, if P and Q are timeless facts (and thus expressed by freely repeatable tenseless sentences) and the present denotes a *different* time in each such fact, then P and Q are really B-facts and not A-facts, and thus we arrive at a B-theory, not an A-theory.<sup>6</sup> To put the question linguistically, is the proposition that represents it freely repeatable, i.e., does it have an unchanging truth value, or does its truth value vary depending upon the time at which the proposition is expressed?

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<sup>6</sup> To put the question linguistically, is the proposition that represents it freely repeatable, i.e., does it have an unchanging truth value, or does its truth value vary depending upon the time at which the proposition is expressed?

Suppose we deny that P is timeless and maintain instead that P, Q, and all other facts of that form exist *in time*, then either a contradiction ensues, or statements about the past (and future) lack an ontological ground, or there results a vicious infinite regress. For if P (*a* exemplifies being F earlier than the present time  $t_1$ ) exists maximally at the present time  $t_1$ , then P is simultaneous with the present  $t_1$ . However, P cannot be simultaneous with the present time ( $t_1$ ), since it contains a constituent, *a*, that exists earlier than the present time  $t_1$ . Alternatively, if P, including *a*, exists maximally at the present time  $t_1$ , then *a* is simultaneous with the present time and *a* is earlier than the present time  $t_1$ , which is impossible. Nor can P (including *a*) exist maximally at some *other* present time  $t_1$ , since then it would not be the case that *a* exemplifies being F earlier than *the* present time  $t_1$ . Thus, P cannot exist maximally at any time, and thus cannot exist in time at all, and thus if we construe P, Q, and all other facts of that form as existing in time, then statements about the past (and future) do not have an ontological ground.

Moreover, to assert that P, Q, and all other facts of the same form exist in time gives rise to a vicious infinite regress. If P exists in time, and there is temporal passage, then (ignoring the preceding argument), P first exists to the maximal degree and then it diminishes in existence as it recedes from the present into the past. That is, P is first simultaneous with the present time (call this fact P'), and then P is earlier than the present time (call this fact P''). What, then, is the ontological status of P' and P''? Are they timeless or temporal facts?

I have already shown that if P and Q are *timeless*, then we can avoid a contradiction only by reducing this version of the degree presentist theory to the B-theory. And, if P and Q are *in time*, we can only avoid a contradiction if we fail to give an adequate ground of statements about the past (or future). What goes for P and Q goes equally for P' and P''; whether those facts are timeless or in time, the result is a contradiction, a reduction to the B-theory or a failure to ground statements about the past (and future). Hence the appeal to P' and P'' to provide an A-theoretical account of temporal becoming or passage will lead to a vicious infinite regress.

I conclude, therefore, that degree presentism is not grounded in the phenomenology of time and existence and that its logical consistency cannot be defended.<sup>7</sup>

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