

## Metaphysics and Epistemology: Question 1

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*Can the concept of knowledge be analysed in more basic terms?*

The question, I take it, is whether or not the concept knowledge is identical to some complex concept whose constituents are, in an appropriate sense, more basic. I will argue that it is not. I will do so by taking one candidate analysing concept, the concept justified true belief, and arguing that it and the concept knowledge are distinct. I will do so in a way that does not depend upon the choice of the concept justified true belief as the candidate analysing concept, and thus in a way that shows that the concept knowledge is distinct from *every* candidate analysing concept. The conclusion is that the concept knowledge cannot be analysed in more basic terms.

This is not to conclude that there is nothing interesting to discover about knowledge. It is consistent with the concept knowledge not being the concept justified true belief, for example, that knowledge is justified true belief, or at least necessarily coextensive with it, or at least actually coextensive with it. After all, many of us accept that the concept water is not the concept H<sub>2</sub>O but that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, that the concept triangle is not the concept trilateral but that necessarily all triangles are trilaterals, and that the concept renate is not the concept cordate but that actually all renates are cordates. And even if they are not identical or necessarily coextensive or actually coextensive, it may be that knowledge and justified true belief are extensionally similar enough for us to be able to explicate knowledge as justified true belief, and even for the concept justified true belief to go proxy for the concept knowledge, just as in many circumstances we can take the concept bachelor to be the concept unmarried man, even if it is not. To claim that the concept knowledge cannot be analysed in more basic terms is not to trivialise epistemology. It is merely to set one limit on it.<sup>1</sup>

### I

There is one fairly immediate argument for why the concept knowledge is distinct from the concept justified true belief. One way of coming to know that x and y are distinct is to come to know that x has a property that y does not, or that y has a property that x does not. If x and y are concepts, then one way to do that is to come to know that x and y are concepts of different things: if x is a concept of A and y is a concept of B and A is not B, then x has the property of being a concept of A but y does not. In this way, I can come to know that the concept knowledge is distinct from the concept justified true belief: I know, thanks to Gettier, that knowledge is not justified true belief, and thus that the concept knowledge and the concept justified true belief are concepts of different things.<sup>2</sup>

This argument, however, relies upon knowing that justified true belief is not knowledge - that is, that the candidate analysing concept is not a concept of knowledge. But for all I know there might be a candidate analysing concept that *is* a concept of knowledge, or at least of something necessarily coextensive with it, and to such a concept this argument will not extend. I need an argument that will. To this end, I will take it that for all we know knowledge *is* justified true belief. I will argue that, even so, the concept knowledge is not the concept justified true belief.

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<sup>1</sup> Wherever I use the expression 'the concept C' for some 'C' I mean the concept that 'C' expresses, and will assume that there is exactly one such concept. This is not to assume that there is only one concept *of* C. I will allow, for example, that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' express different concepts, so that the concept Hesperus is distinct from the concept Phosphorus, even though they are concepts *of* the same planet.

<sup>2</sup> The argument, here, assumes that a concept is a concept of at most one thing, but it can be modified to remove this assumption. Instead of showing that x is a concept of A and y is a concept of B where A is not B, I can show that x is a concept of A but y is not (although it may be a concept of something else).

It is not absurd to claim that we can have distinct concepts of identical things. On the contrary, many of us straightforwardly believe, and claim to know, that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct concepts of the same planet, and that Kripke's Pierre's concepts Londres and London are distinct concepts of the same city.<sup>3</sup> So it is not absurd to claim that the concepts knowledge and justified true belief are distinct concepts, even if they are both concepts of knowledge. And if we can know that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct, even if Hesperus is Phosphorus (as we claim to be able to do), then perhaps we can also know that the concepts knowledge and justified true belief are distinct, even if knowledge is justified true belief.

## II

How do we know that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct? There is something strangely difficult about trying to answer this question. It seems that if we entertain the concepts then we can just *tell* that they are distinct, in much the same way that if we have the experiences of how things look with and without sunglasses on we can just *tell* that the experiences are distinct. So too, there is something strangely difficult about trying to justify the claim that the concepts knowledge and justified true belief are distinct - it seems that if we entertain the concepts we can just *tell* that they are. This is an important point, and one to which I shall return.

For now, I offer the following argument:

1. If S understands 'A' and 'B' then she knows whether or not the concept A is the concept B.
2. TW understands 'knowledge'.
3. TW understands 'justified true belief'.
4. TW does not believe that the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief.
5. Therefore, TW does not know that the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief.
6. Therefore, TW knows that the concept knowledge is not the concept justified true belief.
7. Therefore, the concept knowledge is not the concept justified true belief.

I take it that line 1 is the most contentious step in the argument, and I will have much to say about it in what follows. I am assuming that 'A' means A and expresses the concept A, and that 'B' means B and expresses the concept B. By 'S knows whether or not p' I mean that if it is the case that p then S knows that p, and if it is not the case that p then S knows that not p. I would be happy to replace 'the concept A' by 'the concept expressed by "A"' (and similarly for 'B'), because if S understands 'A' then she knows that the concept A is the concept expressed by 'A', but for brevity I will use 'the concept A'. It may be better to say that if S understands 'A' and 'B' then she *is in a position to know* (rather than *knows*) whether or not the concept A is the concept B. But I will assume that for any S and p, if S is in a position to know that p then S knows that p, because she has done whatever it takes for her to come to know that p.

'TW' is short for 'Timothy Williamson', chosen to make lines 2, 3 and 4 are true. If anyone understands 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief' then TW does, and TW believes that the concept knowledge cannot be analysed into more basic concepts,<sup>4</sup> so, in particular, TW does not believe that the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief. Anyone else for whom lines 2, 3 and 4 are true would serve my purposes equally well. Line 5 follows from line 4 and

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<sup>3</sup> See Kripke (2001).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Williamson (2000), pp. 27-33.

from what I will take to be the uncontentious claim that knowledge implies belief (i.e. that if S knows that p, then it follows that S believes that p). Line 6 follows from lines 1, 2, 3 and 5. Line 7 follows from line 6 and from what I will take to be the equally uncontentious claim that knowledge is factive (i.e. that if S knows that p, then it follows that p).<sup>5</sup>

### III

The principle expressed in Line 1, call it the *principle of understanding*, is not meant to be new or surprising. Michael Dummett, for example, attributes to Frege an implicit appeal to something very like it, that “if someone knows the senses of two words, and the two words have the same sense, he must know that they have the same sense,” a principle that Dummett himself describes as ‘compelling’.<sup>6</sup>

It is, I think, a principle that we implicitly appeal to when deciding whether or not we understand a word. Suppose that I am listening to a group of people using the words ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ and that I am trying to understand what the words mean. Suppose that after some time I declare that I do, that you then ask me whether or not the concept Blim is the concept Blam, and that I answer that I do not know. Then I think it naturally and immediately follows that I do not understand ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’, or at least not one of them. Or suppose that initially I took ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ to be names of different things, believing therefore that they express different concepts, but eventually worked out from the conversation that they are names of the same thing - i.e. that Blim is Blam. I’m not sure whether or not the group realises it, so I ask them, ‘Are all Blims Blams?’, and they look at me with surprise and say, ‘Of *course* they are - that’s like asking whether or not all dogs are dogs.’ Then I will naturally conclude that ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ are just different words being used to express the same concept, not different concepts, and say something like, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I must have misunderstood,’ taking myself to have misunderstood ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’, or at least one of them, because I did not know that they express the same concept. Or suppose instead that I take myself to understand ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ and believe that they express the same concept. But then I hear the group telling of their surprise to learn that all Blims are Blims. Then I will naturally conclude that ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ actually express different concepts, not the same concept, and therefore that I misunderstood them, or at least one of them, because I didn’t know that they express different concepts. In each of these scenarios we can see the principle of understanding at work in what I conclude about my understanding.

It is not surprising that we expect understanding to be governed by the principle of understanding, because it is important for the truth of some of our judgments that we know whether or not two words express the same concept. Suppose that ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ express different concepts, but I believe that they express the same concept. Then someone in the group might consistently assert both ‘Blim is big’ and ‘Blam is not big’. But I will understand this as amounting to asserting both ‘Blim is big’ and ‘Blim is not big’, and wrongly accuse her of being inconsistent. Conversely, suppose that ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ express the same concept, but I believe that they express different concepts. Then I might consistently assert both ‘Blim is big’ and ‘Blam is not big’. But the group will understand this as amounting to asserting both ‘Blim is big’ and ‘Blim is not big’, and wrongly accuse me of being inconsistent. In each case an incorrect conclusion has been drawn about somebody’s logical consistency (or at least about their logical acumen). The mistake arises in the first case because I do not correctly understand what the woman is saying, and in the second case because the group does not correctly understand what I am saying, and in both cases because I have not correctly understood ‘Blim’

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<sup>5</sup> It is not inconsistent of me to claim that the concept knowledge cannot be analysed in more basic terms, and also to claim that knowledge implies belief and that knowledge is factive. See Williamson (2000), pp. 27-33.

<sup>6</sup> Dummett (1980), p. 95, and Frege (1997), esp. pp. 151-60.

and 'Blam', because I do not know whether or not the concept expressed by 'Blim' is the concept expressed by 'Blam'.

I think that we can read Saul Kripke's, 'A Puzzle about Belief', as a nice illustration of this point.<sup>7</sup> In effect, he asks us to imagine Pierre, who has two distinct concepts of London - concepts that he expresses using the words 'Londres' and 'London'. If we try to translate 'Londres' and 'London', two words expressing two concepts, as 'London', one word expressing one concept, then we are forced to say something false. If we translate Pierre's French utterance, 'Londres est jolie', as, 'London is pretty', then we will conclude that Pierre believes that London is pretty. If we translate his English utterance, 'London is not pretty', as, 'London is not pretty', then we will conclude that Pierre believes that London is not pretty. Thus we will attribute contradictory beliefs and accuse him of inconsistency. But Pierre is not being inconsistent, because his 'Londres' and 'London' express different concepts, and he does not realise that those concepts are concepts of the same city. So our claim that Pierre is being inconsistent is false. We are mistaken because our translation of 'Londres' and 'London' is mistaken, and it is mistaken because we have collapsed the distinction between the concepts that they express. We cannot correctly understand 'Londres' and 'London' if we believe that they both express the concept expressed by 'London'.<sup>8</sup>

We take understanding to be governed by the principle of understanding, and we have good reason to do so.

#### IV

I have used the principle of understanding to argue that since TW understands 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief' he knows whether or not the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief. But why can't someone turn this around and argue that since no one knows whether or not the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief (as is evidenced by the extent of the debate over the matter) nor does TW, and thus TW does not after all understand both 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief'. All that the principle of understanding tells us is that these claims are incompatible: (a) that TW understands both 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief', and (b) that TW does not know whether or not the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief. I have used this to reject (b), but why can't someone use it to reject (a) instead? This might be done by anyone who accepts the principle of understanding but thinks that we can just never know whether or not two concepts are identical, or at least thinks that at present no one knows whether or not the concept knowledge and the concept justified true belief are identical. Or anyone who thinks that some of us do indeed understand 'knowledge' and 'justified true belief' without knowing whether or not the concept knowledge is the concept justified true belief might use (a) and (b) to reject the principle of understanding, and claim that if we do appeal to it then we are wrong to do so. My argument is weak unless I can make it plausible that we *can* have knowledge of the identity or distinctness of concepts, at least in the case of the concepts knowledge and justified true belief, and other proposed analysing concepts.

How might we get such knowledge? One way is to be given it by someone who already has it. If you understand 'Blim' and 'Blam' then you know, according to the principle of understanding, whether or not the concept Blim is the concept Blam. So you can tell me that, and thereby give me knowledge of whether or not the concept Blim is the concept Blam. You might tell me explicitly, by saying, "'Blim' and 'Blam' express distinct concepts". Or you might tell me very subtly. You might, for example, tell me that when you first experienced Blam you had no idea that it was Blim (of which you already had a concept). Whoever first told me the story of Lois Lane told me in this kind of way that Lois has two distinct concepts of the same man, by telling

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<sup>7</sup> Kripke (2001).

<sup>8</sup> This is not a conclusion that Kripke himself explicitly draws.

me that when Lois first met Superman she did not recognise that it was Clark Kent, the man that she already knew from work. Kripke tells us in this kind of way that Pierre has two distinct concepts of the same city when he tells us that, “[Pierre] merely takes it for granted that the ugly city in which he is now stuck is distinct from the enchanting city he heard about in France.”<sup>9</sup> Or you might ‘tell’ me by the way you behave. If, for example, you find it a curiously obvious question when I ask you whether or not Blim is Blam then that might be enough to give me the knowledge that the concept Blim is identical to the concept Blam. Or if you seem to be wondering whether or not Blim is Blam then that might be enough to give me the knowledge that the concept Blim is distinct from the concept Blam. What you tell me or the way you behave might not be enough, in some cases, to give me knowledge of whether or not the concepts are distinct (for example, if you are insincere or deliberately misleading), but at least in some cases it will.<sup>10</sup>

If  $S_1$  got knowledge of the identity or distinctness of two concepts from  $S_2$ , then how did  $S_2$  get that knowledge? Perhaps he was given it by  $S_3$ . But then how did  $S_3$  get that knowledge? We cannot go on forever, at least not without circularity - there are and have been only finitely many people to pass along the knowledge. At some point we will get to someone who has not been given it by anybody else. How did *that* person get it?

Perhaps he gave it to himself. I mean, perhaps he created two new concepts, chose words such as ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’ to express them, and *declared* them to be distinct concepts. We seem to be able to do such things. I seem to be able to do it right now, sitting at my desk. I can imagine two tennis balls of which I do not already have concepts, and call those tennis balls ‘Blim’ and ‘Blam’. I can do so without believing anything about Blim and Blam. I know that the concept Blim, for example, is a new concept (i.e. distinct from each of my existing concepts), because if the concept O is a concept that I already have of an object, and if I believe that O is F for some F, then I can consistently believe that Blim is not F, something that I cannot do if the concept Blim is the concept O. And I know that the concept Blim is distinct from the concept Blam because I can consistently believe that Blim is F and that Blam is not F, something that I cannot do if the concept Blim is the concept Blam.

But this is not satisfying. How do I know that I can consistently believe that O is F but that Blim is not F, or that Blim is F but that Blam is not F? If the concept O is the concept Blim then I cannot, for in that case believing that O is F just *is* believing that Blim is F. Arguing that the concepts are distinct because the beliefs are consistent seems to be the wrong way around - we know that the beliefs are consistent because we know that the concepts are distinct. So how do I know that the concepts I have introduced are distinct from each other and from each of my existing concepts? And even if we can introduce new concepts in something like the way described, what if there are concepts that were not introduced in that way - perhaps concepts that were gained by perception or concepts that are innate? If there are such concepts, then how do we gain knowledge of *their* identity or distinctness?

## V

Consider, then, the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus again - concepts that many of us take ourselves to know to be distinct. Do we really know that they are? Can we justify this claim? How might we go about arguing for it?

One natural thought is to appeal to propositional attitudes, as I did just above. It is possible, for instance, for someone to be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus (the Babylonians were). But it doesn’t follow from this that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct.

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<sup>9</sup> Kripke (2001), p. 415.

<sup>10</sup> I argue in more detail for a similar conclusion elsewhere. See Me (2003b), pp. 8-10.

Perhaps she is surprised because she knows that it cannot be the case that Hesperus is Phosphorus unless there are such things, and she believes that there are not; this is consistent with the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus being identical (I, for one, would be surprised to discover that Pegasus is Pegasus). It is possible for someone to be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus, even when they believe that there are such things. But it doesn't follow from this that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct. Perhaps she is surprised because she believed that the relation of identity cannot obtain between planets;<sup>11</sup> this is consistent with the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus being identical. It is possible for someone to be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus, even when they believe that there are such things, and even when they believe that the relation of identity can hold between planets. But it doesn't follow from this that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct. Perhaps she is not surprised by *what* she discovered, but by the fact that it *could* be discovered, or perhaps she is just easily surprised; this is consistent with the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus being identical.

This doesn't seem to me like a promising way to argue that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct. Nor does the appeal to the fact that it is possible for someone to believe that Hesperus is not Phosphorus, that it is possible for someone to doubt that Hesperus is Phosphorus, that it is possible for someone to question whether or not Hesperus is Phosphorus, and so on. Each of these is consistent with the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus being identical, and a determined doubter is quite entitled to refuse to be convinced by any appeal to them.

Perhaps we can appeal to the fact that it is possible for someone to be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus and yet not be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Hesperus. From this it does indeed follow that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct. For if they were identical then saying that someone is surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus just *is* saying that she is surprised to discover that Hesperus is Hesperus; so if she can be surprised to discover that Hesperus is Phosphorus but not surprised to discover that Hesperus is Hesperus then the concepts must be distinct.<sup>12</sup> It is quite a natural thought to appeal to this and other similar facts: that it is possible for someone to believe that Hesperus is Hesperus and yet not believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus, that it is possible to wonder whether or not Hesperus is Phosphorus but not wonder whether or not Hesperus is Hesperus, and so on. From each of these it *does* follow that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct.

But I don't think that such an appeal is convincing, for a reason that I alluded to above. Anyone who doubts that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct may simply question whether or not the supposed possibilities are in fact possibilities - if the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are identical then it is simply not possible for someone to believe that Hesperus is Hesperus and yet not believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus: how do we know that this is a possibility, unless we already know that the concepts are distinct? If we don't, then to appeal to it to argue that the concepts are distinct would be circular. We need a way to argue that this is possible that does not appeal to the concepts being distinct. That is, we need a way to argue that believing that Hesperus is Hesperus is distinct from believing that Hesperus is Phosphorus. I think that this just amounts to arguing that the concept Hesperus is distinct from the concept Phosphorus. So I don't think that this is a promising approach.

And I don't think that appealing to behaviour is a promising approach either. We might try arguing that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct because someone might assent

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<sup>11</sup> I believe that it is possible to have the concept of identity and also maintain that on some domains identity is irreflexive.

<sup>12</sup> I am assuming here that two words that express the same concept can be used interchangeably without affecting what is said.

to the sentence 'Hesperus is Hesperus' in certain circumstances and yet not assent to the sentence 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' in those same circumstances, even though he understands both 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' and is trying to be sincere. But there are many possible explanations of this behaviour that are consistent with the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus being identical (perhaps this person has been told that he will receive an electric shock if he assents to any sentence containing the word 'Phosphorus'). Perhaps the best explanation of total behaviour will have it that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are distinct. But there will remain logically possible explanations that are consistent with them being identical, and a determined doubter may go on doubting in a way that we would like to argue is irrational but have not yet been able to do. We are intuitively more certain that the concepts are distinct than inference to the best explanation entitles us to be.

The experience of seeing things through sunglasses is distinct from the experience of seeing them without. How do you convince someone of *that*? Give them sunglasses and tell them to look, is the natural response - anyone who has the two experiences will see that there is a difference between them. Is there any other way? Perhaps we could appeal to the way that people behave (including verbally). But I think that approach holds as little promise, and for similar reasons, as the behavioural approach I just discussed. I *know* that the visual experiences are distinct. I know it because I have had the experiences and I have seen the difference. If you have not had the same experiences then perhaps nothing that I say or do will convince you that they are distinct. All I can really do is to give you sunglasses and tell you to look.

There is something similarly difficult about convincing someone that the concept Hesperus is distinct from the concept Phosphorus. We can just *see* it. Just as *something* changes when I put on sunglasses, *something* changes when I think about Hesperus rather than Phosphorus. What changes in the first case is the visual experience that I am having. What changes in the second case is the concept that I am entertaining. I suggest that we take this parallel seriously, and take ourselves to be able to see of some concepts that they are distinct. Perhaps 'see' is not the right choice of word - perhaps 'think' or 'entertain' or 'be aware of' would be better - but I will use the metaphor of seeing. I claim, then, that there are distinct concepts such that we can see that they are distinct, and that the concepts Hesperus and Phosphorus are two such concepts, as are the concepts knowledge and justified true belief. Anyone who has the concepts is able to see that they are distinct concepts. This is not to claim any kind of omniscience about our concepts. It is consistent with the claim that there are distinct concepts such that we cannot see that they are distinct, just as it is consistent with the claim that we can see a difference between some visual experiences that we cannot see a difference between them all.<sup>13</sup> It may be that we *can* always see that two distinct concepts are distinct. But I do not need to and am not making that claim here.

Just as our ultimate source of knowledge about the distinctness of visual experiences is our being directly and non-inferentially aware that they are distinct when we have the experiences, our ultimate source of knowledge about the distinctness of concepts is, I suggest, our being directly and non-inferentially aware that they are distinct when we entertain the concepts. This is, ultimately, how TW knows that the concept knowledge is distinct from the concept justified true belief.

## VI

It remains for me to extend the argument presented in Section II to any other proposed analysing concept 'ABC'. Suppose that TW already understands 'ABC'. Replace 'justified true belief' by 'ABC' throughout the argument. Then line 3 is still true, and since TW believes that the concept

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<sup>13</sup> I have argued elsewhere that we are not omniscient about our visual experience. See Me (2003a), esp. Ch. 3.

knowledge cannot be analysed into more basic concepts he does not believe that the concept knowledge is the concept ABC, so line 4 is also still true. Thus the premises are all still true and the desired conclusion follows. Since TW understands many candidate analysing phrases, including all of the current major contenders, this is already a strong result.

Suppose, instead, that TW does not already understand 'ABC'. We may assume that TW already has the concept ABC, because he already has the concept knowledge and if he does not already have the concept ABC then the concept ABC cannot be the concept knowledge and we have the result that I need. I think that to proceed I need to appeal to what we might call the principle of concept possession: that if S has the concepts A and B then she knows whether or not the concept A is the concept B. If we assume that one way to have the concept A is to understand an expression that means A, then the principle of concept possession entails the principle of understanding, and hence it is a stronger result. I think that much of what I have said in favour of the principle of understanding can be said, with appropriate strengthening, in favour of the principle of concept possession, but I will not do so here. If, in the argument, we replace the principle of understanding in line 1 with the principle of concept possession, and if we change lines 2 and 3 to 'TW has the concept knowledge', and 'TW has the concept ABC', then the premises are all still true and the desired conclusion again follows.

The concept knowledge cannot be analysed in more basic terms.

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