

Common Ground Between Social Ontology, Conceptual Engineering, and Conceptual Ethics

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Abstract: Social objects have become common subjects of interest to both social ontologists and conceptual engineers, but up to this point there have been fewer self-conscious efforts to bring the two fields together than one might expect, given the common interests shared between these two fields. I show how these prolific research fields—social ontology, conceptual engineering, and conceptual ethics—can mutually benefit each other through a unifying model I propose called the *2D-CE model* that shows the dependence relations between a given concept, its instantiation conditions, and whatever language represents such devices. This model combines a model from social ontology with insights from conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics into a powerful metaphilosophical tool that highlights the role of social agents for metaphysical and metalinguistic explanation. A major benefit of the model is its utility for not only social philosophy, but for other areas of research beyond the social world.

Keywords: Social Ontology, Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Ethics

10.25365/jso-2023-7439

Published online April 25, 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social objects like groups of people, money, institutions, and other objects are subjects of ongoing study from philosophers across several sub-disciplines. In social ontology, many social ontologists believe that objects like a dollar bill exhibit characteristics that uniquely depend on social communities, unlike other objects like rocks and trees. What sets the class of *social* objects apart from other classes of objects remains an ongoing discussion,¹ but part of the project of social ontology involves attempts at explaining the unique characteristics of objects from the social world. To name only a few examples: Fine (2020) applies his general metaphysical theories to the identity of social groups, Korman (2020) examines metaphysical puzzles involving social objects like establishments and institutions, and Kane (2021) examines how expectations function for social groups like a family or a group of friends.

Meanwhile, the projects of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics (hereafter termed together as “CE”) also examine social objects like groups of people (among other things) and their respective concepts, like the concept RACE or GENDER. (Concepts and kinds will be represented here by terms in all caps.) To name just a couple recent examples of how conceptual engineering applies to groups: Podosky (2022) explores the task of engineering a social concept like GENDER in the context of promoting justice for social groups, Cantalamessa (2021) applies conceptual engineering to the concept DISABILITY, and Ball (2020) critically discusses ways in which conceptual engineering can be applied to WOMAN.

One motivation for social ontologists and conceptual engineers to study such objects may be that many objects from the social world, including groups of people, money, and institutions have moral value, financial value, and so forth, so the stakes for explaining their characteristics can often be greater than whatever stakes there might be in explaining characteristics of other objects like rocks and trees. While these valuable objects from the social world have become common subjects of interest to both social ontologists and conceptual engineers, up to this point there have been fewer self-conscious efforts to bring the two fields together than one might expect, given the common interests shared between these two fields. One of the primary aims of this paper is to show how these two prolific research fields—social ontology and CE—can mutually benefit each other through a unifying model I propose called the *2D-CE model*. This model combines a two-dimensional model of kinds from

¹ See Khalidi (2015) and Passinsky (2016) for representative examples of views that attempt to account for what sets social objects apart from other objects.

social ontology (explained below) and insights from the project of CE into a powerful metaphilosophical tool that can be applied to the kinds of social objects mentioned above that have seen so much attention, but also to many other areas of research beyond the social world.

I argue for the *2D-CE model* in the following way. I briefly describe the two parts of the model: (1) Epstein's two-dimensional model for social kinds and (2) the project of CE. I then argue that the aims of the two-dimensional model and the aims of CE both depend on engineering linguistic, representational devices such as concepts and words.² Words are *social* objects, so the two-dimensional model for social ontology is uniquely positioned to model not only the *common social subjects of study* in both fields that exhibit such value, but importantly it can also model our *social representational devices* that are used by CE to represent such valuable objects. The payoff of the paper gives us a useful model that can unite much of the work done in both social ontology and CE towards broad application across many sub-disciplines within philosophy.

Two preliminary points before I move on to the next section. First, in making CE central for the model, I wish to remain as neutral as possible regarding particular versions of CE and some of the choice points within CE that are made in the literature. I assume here that (some version of) CE is a helpful metaphilosophical tool, but in making that assumption I also acknowledge that there are several ongoing discussions and debates about CE.³ In fact, in their (2020) introduction, Cappelen and Plunkett acknowledge and catalog several issues and questions that remain within the literature on CE. For example, they ask, "How much practical import does conceptual engineering have?" and "How much revision is too much? When is a revision a complete change of topic? When would it be okay to change the topic, including perhaps completely abandoning the old topic in doing so?" (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 12) The 2D-CE model may function differently depending on one's answers and commitments in response to those questions.

Second, the argument relies on the somewhat controversial but (I think) reasonable assumption that a given *kind* and its analogous *concept* are

² Though see Isaac (2021) for a helpful discussion of what the representational devices in CE should be.

³ An anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out further issues beyond the implementation challenges for CE: (1) whether CE is a tool limited just to philosophers, and (2) how CE may differ from "metalinguistic negotiation". (See Thomasson 2017) The 2D-CE model does not necessarily take a position on either question in any prior sense. As I say above, the CE part of the model may differ in its application, depending on one's commitments and preferences regarding the many choice points available.

extensionally equivalent, abstract universals that have all and only the same instances. The kind TABLE, for example, will have all and only the same instances as its analogous concept TABLE. I assume the extensional equivalence between kinds and concepts merely to streamline the argument and show the similarities between the two-dimensional model and CE, which make up the 2D-CE model.

In the next section I describe the two parts of the 2D-CE model, before demonstrating its application to the social world and to other topics more broadly.

2. EPSTEIN'S TWO-DIMENSIONAL MODEL FOR KINDS AND THE PROJECT OF CONCEPTUAL ENGINEERING AND CONCEPTUAL ETHICS

Though objects in the social world like groups of people and institutions serve as motivators and entry points for work in social ontology and CE, much of the work in both fields is intended to be applied more broadly to objects beyond the social world. For example, in his defense of the *anchoring* relation as part of his model for social ontology (discussed below), Epstein (2019) explicitly indicates that his model can be extended beyond the field of social ontology:

[A]nchoring is not limited to social facts or “social construction” [...] Because I focus on social kinds in much of my work, I sometimes speak as though “anchoring” and “social construction” are interchangeable. But that is mostly so as to explain anchoring in the context of social ontology. Thus it should not be thought that the anchoring relation is “obscure” in its “invocation of a *sui generis* relation known only to social ontology.” The anchoring relation is not limited to social ontology, nor is it “*sui generis*” in any sense that grounding is not. (Epstein 2019, 780-1)

The model of kinds that Epstein puts forward is in the context of his work on social kinds, but the model could extend to other kinds as well, perhaps to natural kinds like biological species and chemical compounds.

Cappelen and Plunkett also intend for their work in the field of CE to be applied broadly, beyond the social world:

A case can, however, be made that conceptual engineering is prior to or more fundamental than all other philosophical disciplines. The argument is simple and obvious: reflection and argumentation in any part of philosophy must rely on concepts (epistemology relies heavily on,

e.g., KNOWLEDGE and JUSTIFICATION; ethics on, e.g., OUGHT and BAD, and so on for each branch of philosophy.) (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 4)

Here we have another case where much of the work that is done on social objects and concepts can extend well beyond the social world. Just as Epstein's model can be applied beyond social kinds, CE has also been applied to concepts beyond the social world. If the aims for this paper are successful, not only will we have a powerful, combined model from both fields that can be applied to the kinds of valuable *social* objects mentioned above, but the combined model can capitalize on the breadth of application mentioned above for both projects and can extend to many sub-disciplines within philosophy.

I will only briefly summarize each part of the combined model before putting the parts together. Summaries of Epstein's two-dimensional model for kinds can be found elsewhere in the literature: I refer the reader to Epstein (2019), Brouwer (2022), and Oliphint (2022) for helpful summaries and discussions of the model. Briefly, Epstein observes a difference in explanatory roles between two kinds of facts: the fact that some object like a dollar bill is a member of a kind like DOLLAR BILL is grounded by some set of facts about that object, like the fact that it originated at a government-approved mint. But the fact that a dollar bill must originate at a government-approved mint needs to be explained as well, and facts about the dollar bill itself (e.g. its material, its serial number, its causal history, and so forth) are not the kinds of facts that explain *why* such conditions must hold for a given kind like DOLLAR BILL. We need a relation between facts about objects and facts about the conditions for that object to be a member of some kind. So Epstein has defended his novel *anchoring* relation between facts about an object like a dollar bill and facts about the conditions for an object to be a member of a given kind like DOLLAR BILL.⁴ Importantly for his model, the conditions that determine kind membership for social kinds will (in part) involve social agents.

The project of CE is more difficult to summarize than a model of kinds like the one above because of the broad, metaphilosophical nature of CE. Even the terminology for the project is disputed; Cappelen and

⁴ As one reviewer helpfully points out, Epstein's work on the grounding and anchoring relations could be an instance of conceptual engineering for GROUNDING and ANCHORING, where grounding emphasizes more of a descriptive side for a concept and anchoring emphasizes more of the normative side for that concept. One could ask whether the dispute over whether anchoring is different in substance from grounding, found in Epstein (2019) and Schaffer (2019) (among other places) is in some ways a verbal dispute that could be clarified by the 2D-CE model.

Plunkett acknowledges the messiness of the terms “conceptual engineering” and “conceptual ethics”:

We don't think these expressions come with fixed meanings...when they are given more precise definitions by philosophers, these definitions often contradict those given by others [...] That's how it should be given that this is currently a fast moving literature involving philosophers from many different background [sic] and sub-fields. (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 2)

We can expect such messiness when working in a broad, metaphilosophical field like CE.

But it will be helpful to capture at least *some* of the fundamentals of CE here, recognizing that even the most basic points within the project are disputed. Cappelen describes conceptual engineering this way:

Conceptual engineering = (i) The assessment of representational devices, (ii) reflections on and proposal for how to improve representational devices, and (iii) efforts to implement the proposed improvements. (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 3)

He goes on to say that these representational devices might include concepts, lexical items, semantic values, and so forth. If we can assess these representational devices and find that they need to be improved in some way to fit our goals, there will be an ethical or normative element to the project. Crisp (2022) highlights this *ethical* component of conceptual engineering:

[I]t is a peculiarly ethically self-reflexive area of philosophy. The aim of most areas of philosophy is to provide us with the truth about some particular domain: the mind, the nature of reality, truth itself. Conceptual engineers seek to do that with concepts, and if necessary to propose reforms to our conceptual scheme which will enable us to understand the world better. (Crisp 2022, 2)

So we can think of CE generally as the assessment of some set of representational devices, where those representational devices may each exhibit normative value, depending on a range of aims and goals. Those aims and goals may then motivate whatever work can be done to engineer the representational devices that have been assessed.

For more detailed explanation of the kinds of topics and questions within the project of CE, I refer the reader to more thorough summaries and

descriptions in Cappelen (2018), Burgess and Plunkett (2020), Cappelen and Plunkett (2020), and Isaac et al. (2022). The summaries above of both Epstein's two-dimensional model and of the project of CE should be sufficient to get the argument below off the ground. In the next section I link Epstein's model with the project of CE, yielding the 2D-CE model.

3. THE 2D-CE MODEL

To make my argument below, I will assume that at least some of the representational devices that we assess are *concepts* like the concept TABLE, and that *words* like "table" and *phrases* like "war criminal" are also representational devices that we can assess. In some cases we may want to keep the word or phrase fixed while (intentionally or unintentionally) engineering the concept, and in other cases we may want to keep a given concept fixed while engineering the word or phrase.⁵ I will give just a couple of examples of each kind of engineering to illustrate what I mean.

Take an example of a word like "computer." Prior to the age of computing machines, the representational device "computer" referred to a *person* who computed mathematical problems. Call the concept of a person doing mathematical computation "COMPUTER₁." When machines came along that could do mathematical computations far beyond the ability of any person, the representational device "computer" eventually referred to the *machines* that did mathematical computations. Call the concept of a machine doing computation "COMPUTER₂." In this case, the representational device that is the *word* stays fixed while the *concept* associated with it changes (i.e. is engineered), or perhaps takes on a new, additional concept.⁶

The engineering can run the other way as well. Take another example from the tech world: in 2012, a handful of thinkers convened in Sydney, Australia with the purpose of creating a new representational device—a word—that could represent the concept of ignoring someone in favor of one's

⁵ In this paper I will attempt to remain neutral regarding the nature and extent of an individual or group's role in fixing or determining concepts and words in relation to the external, metasemantic factors that might also influence meaning. Cappelen and Plunkett (2020, 8) flag the internalism/externalism distinction as an important issue within CE, but I will not attempt to address those specific issues here. (See Pinder 2021 as one example that highlights some of the externalist considerations for CE. I thank an anonymous reviewer for urging me to make this point more explicit.

⁶ I speak loosely here of concepts changing, but note that another way of talking about conceptual engineering, without being committed to whether concepts can change, is selecting whatever concept is most appropriate for some word or phrase.

phone. (“Macquarie ‘Phubbing: A Word Is Born’ // McCann Melbourne (Youtube Video)” 2014) The group had observed the pervasive and rude social phenomenon of ignoring others while being distracted by one’s phone, and the thought was that giving this type of act a singular name would help identify when such ignoring was taking place. They hoped that identifying and naming the phenomenon would contribute to stopping it from occurring on such a frequent and widespread scale. After a few word candidates were considered, the group landed on the word “phubbing,” combining two prior representational devices: “phone” and “snubbing.” In this case there is a fixed concept PHUBBING that needed some device to represent it, so a word was engineered and implemented into the English vocabulary (at least for some).

While some within the project of CE have wanted to avoid talk of concepts,⁷ I will simply assume here that we can manage talking about concepts without having to first give an elaborate account of their metaphysical profile and a defense of our epistemic access to them. The concepts I have in mind are like universals, in that they have instances, like this table in front of me and the table in my office as both instances of TABLE. And as I mentioned in the introduction, my argument relies on the somewhat controversial claim that kinds and concepts are *extensionally* equivalent, abstract universals that have all and only the same instances.⁸ So the kind TABLE will have as instances (i.e. members) this table in front of me and the table in my office, just like the equivalent concept will have as instances those same objects as well.

Now consider the following illustration from Epstein (2019) that highlights the marquee feature of his two-dimensional model: the important differences between the grounding relation and the anchoring relation. The example is worth quoting in full:

Suppose you are a judge at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and Ratko Mladic is brought before you, accused of war crimes. The prosecution argues that Mladic is a war criminal, in virtue of (among other atrocities) having ordered the

7 Cappelen (2018, 4), for example: “I’ve settled on ‘conceptual engineering’ though it is far from ideal. It’s important that readers don’t take that name as a description: on the view I defend in this book, the project isn’t about concepts and there isn’t really any engineering.”

8 I am *not* making the strong claim that the concept TABLE is *identical* to the kind TABLE; only that they are extensionally equivalent in the way I describe here. To anticipate a worry, you might think that what I am really talking about here are *properties*; maybe. But again, what I am after is extensional equivalence between these abstract universals so that they have all and only the same instances, and an interesting but lesser concern is whatever identity there is between extensionally equivalent universals. I think it’s important to retain the terminology of “concept” and “kind” for continuity with the literature that uses both.

massacre in Srebrenica in 1995. Consider some claims Mladic's lawyers might make in his defense: (G1) There was no 1995 Srebrenica massacre. (G2) Even if the massacre did take place, Mladic did not order it. (G3) Even if Mladic did order the massacre, he was a soldier following the orders of higher-ups. [...] These are claims the defense might argue to persuade the court that Mladic is not a war criminal. If one or more of these claims were true, the argument would be, Mladic does not meet the conditions for being a war criminal. (Epstein 2019, 768-9)

The purported facts (G1)-(G3) are meant to ground the fact that Mladic is not a war criminal. If these purported facts hold up, so the illustration goes, Mladic does not satisfy the conditions above to be an instance of the kind in question. But there is more to say about the conditions for someone being a war criminal:

There is also a different strategy the defense might pursue. In addition to arguing that Mladic fails to meet certain conditions, the defense could further argue over *what it takes* to be a war criminal. His lawyers might argue: (WC1) Perpetrating such a massacre is not a war crime. (WC2) Ordering such a massacre to be perpetrated is not a war crime. (WC3) If a soldier performs an action following orders from higher-ups, that action is not a war crime. [...] This second set of claims are about what it takes—that is, what the conditions are—to be a war criminal. They are not more general or “structural” than the previous set, but are claims about the boundaries of *war criminal*, as opposed to claims about whether Mladic's actions fall within those boundaries. (Epstein 2019, 768-9)

The first set of claims involves the question of whether some object (Mladic) satisfies the conditions for being an instance of some kind (WAR CRIMINAL). The second set of claims is quite different, assessing *what the conditions are or should be* for some object to be an instance of that kind. That set of claims is about WAR CRIMINAL itself and its “boundaries,” as Epstein puts it. The assessment of those conditions for some kind or concept that involve the anchoring relation are, I claim, central to the very tasks of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. What takes place in this example in the case of the second strategy is the kind of task Cappelen and Plunkett (among others) have in mind when describing the project of CE, if we substitute the *kind* in question with its extensionally equivalent *concept*. The concept WAR CRIMINAL could include any combination of (WC1)-(WC3), depending

on how we want to *engineer* the concept. If the kind WAR CRIMINAL is extensionally equivalent to the concept, then assessing the conditions for something to be an instance of WAR CRIMINAL is an example of conceptual engineering. And there will be good and bad ways to engineer the concept WAR CRIMINAL; assessing what the concept *should* be, given whatever aims and goals we might have, is an example of conceptual ethics.

Now we can generalize from Epstein's example of WAR CRIMINAL: given some concept or kind, there are conditions we could assess for something to be an instance under that concept or kind. (I will simplify things from here on by referring only to concepts rather kinds.) For many concepts like WAR CRIMINAL, TABLE, RACE, and so forth, agents play at least the following essential roles: (1) engineering what the *conditions* are for some object or objects to be instances of a concept in question, and (2) engineering which social, *representational device* (e.g. a word or phrase like "phubbing") should represent an optimal concept, and (3) establishing the normative and functional goals for the concept. The first two roles more explicitly involve conceptual *engineering*, while the third role more explicitly involves conceptual ethical components.⁹ The conceptual *ethical* component is important because in many cases like the ones above there will be better and worse conditions for some concept to have instances: if there is a concept that is defective in some way and needs improvement, the normative, ethical component of CE is positioned to help highlight the normative and evaluative issues at play for a given concept like WAR CRIMINAL. Whatever the preferred representational devices turn out to be for a given concept, the fact that some set of instantiation conditions (like (WC1)-(WC3)) are in place for the concept in question is anchored in part by facts about social agents.

So social agents will play an essential role in engineering the optimal words or phrases that represent some concept. Again, words and phrases are *social* objects, just like dollar bills, groups of people, and perhaps war criminals. As Oliphint (2022) has shown, Epstein's two-dimensional model is uniquely positioned to give an account of the role that social agents play in determining the conditions for words, because the two-dimensional account includes the important anchoring relation that explains the conditions for words. Just as agents play a role in assessing the conditions for someone to instantiate WAR CRIMINAL, agents play a role in how the social object "war criminal"

⁹ Cappelen and Plunkett (2020) highlight several questions and issue related to the normative component of CE: "What are the norms, goods, values, etc., that determine the normative/evaluative facts in conceptual ethics?" (2020, 9); "What are potential defects and virtues of concepts?" and "How much do aims matter?" (2020, 10).

represents that concept. For any concept in question that is engineered by social agents, social agents will also have a key role in how the concept is represented by words or phrases.

Consider the following example from epistemology that helps illustrate the role social agents play in the 2D-CE model. In the chapter “Against ‘Evidence’” in (Wedgwood forthcoming), Ralph Wedgwood argues that “‘evidence’ is a dangerous word to use in epistemology.” For present purposes, I am not interested in the truth or falsity of that particular claim. Instead, I am interested in what Wedgwood is doing when he examines the *concept* EVIDENCE and its anchoring conditions. He states his purpose in the beginning of the chapter as follows:

I shall investigate the concepts that the word ‘evidence’ can express, on the assumption that it stands for something with the kind of normative significance that epistemologists are interested in. We shall find that although we can stipulate technical senses for the term ‘evidence’ which will allow it to play this sort of normative role, it is doubtful whether the term has any such sense in everyday language. (Wedgwood forthcoming)

Note that neither the term “conceptual engineering” nor the term “conceptual ethics” appears in the chapter. But we can assess whether Wedgwood is (perhaps unintentionally) engaging in the activity of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics. I claim he is doing just that, for the following reasons.

Among the concepts that the representational device “evidence” can express, Wedgwood distinguishes between *technical* senses or concepts on the one hand, and senses or concepts of the word in *everyday language* on the other. If conceptual engineering assesses the best possible anchoring conditions for representational devices, and in turn highlights which conditions are defective or less than ideal in some way, then Wedgwood is assessing such conditions for the concept EVIDENCE. Just like (WC1)-(WC3) above for WAR CRIMINAL, he considers a few candidate conditions for the concept EVIDENCE. I’ll put the conditions this way to show the similarity between Epstein’s illustration and what Wedgwood is doing:

(E1) what is “given” epistemologically for someone who believes some proposition p , (E2) “what is evident” to a believer, or (E3) a Bayesian conception where a proposition p is evident if it has a probability close to 1. (Wedgwood forthcoming)

He finds that all these conditions for EVIDENCE run into problems. For Wedgwood there are several related conditions for the concept, represented

by the word “evidence,” that all turn out to be defective.

The fact that many proposed conditions for the concept are defective in some ways carries with it normative implications, according to Wedgwood. I mentioned above that he believes using the term “evidence” in epistemology is dangerous, because the use of that term “continually makes highly questionable assumptions seem much more plausible than they should [...] Epistemologists would do well to be much more wary in their use of this term than they have typically been.” This normative claim is a paradigmatic example of a conceptual ethics claim, given Plunkett’s description of the ethical element in conceptual ethics:

The use of the term “ethics” here in “conceptual ethics” is meant very broadly, to cover “both the study of what one should or ought to do (dually, what can permissibly be done) as well as the study of which actions and outcomes are good or bad, better or worse.” (Cappelen and Plunkett 2020, 4)

Wedgwood is explicit about what one should do regarding the term “evidence”: epistemologists *should* (“would do well to”) avoid talk of evidence because of all the defects he has assessed. Here Wedgwood’s conceptual ethics claims follow from the conceptual engineering work he has done for EVIDENCE.

I mention this example from Wedgwood as merely one illustration where conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics are not *explicitly* mentioned in the argument but are nevertheless covertly present. The 2D-CE model distinguishes and identifies the various representational devices that are used in arguments like the illustration with WAR CRIMINAL and the real world case from Wedgwood. The model applies to objects and concepts from the social world (e.g. war criminals), but it also applies to objects and concepts beyond the social world, like in the case of EVIDENCE above.

The 2D aspect of the model gives philosophers working in CE an additional tool that highlights the socially dependent factors in assessing and improving representational devices like words and concepts, likewise for kinds and kind membership conditions. For example, Cappelen and Plunkett (2020, 7) raise a fundamental question for the project of CE: “What are the objects being assessed and improved (and do they exist)?” If at least some of those representational devices are social objects (words, for example), the 2D aspect of the model will be quite helpful for explaining the dependence relations between facts about agents who use those social devices and facts about the devices themselves. For those philosophers working in social ontology, the

CE aspect of the model can highlight ways to assess and potentially improve whatever representational devices and kind membership conditions are socially dependent in some way, and therefore have the capacity for improvement.

4. CONCLUSION

The valuable, ongoing project of CE, combined with Epstein's 2D model, can clarify how social agents can engineer the instantiation conditions for several concepts, and assess the many normative and evaluative considerations when engineering those concepts. Aside from concepts that Cappelen and Plunkett mention above like KNOWLEDGE in epistemology and OUGHT in ethics, or the examples of WAR CRIMINAL and EVIDENCE considered here, we could consider other examples across several disciplines, like considering the concept REASONS addressed in Schroeder (2008), or the concept OBJECT in the work of Korman (2015). For these concepts and others, the combination of the 2D model with the project of CE—the 2D-CE model—allows us to take into account the role that social agents play in giving conditions (i.e. *engineering*) for a concept to be instantiated, and the normative considerations (i.e. *ethics*) involving which conditions for a concept should be preferred, if any.

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