

# Authentic Intervention in Information Systems Practice

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**Abstract-** In this paper the philosophical concept of authenticity is used as a framing device for providing an interpretation of aspects of both ethical and practical action on the part of information systems (IS) professionals. It is argued that ethical codes and IS methods may be of limited value in IS work. Both ethical codes and IS methods are complicated by the need to adopt positions on, and give recommendations about, IS practice. One key problem here is that IS analysts and designers have to intervene in organisations (and thereby intervene in the lives of the members of those organisations). It is argued that an important issue for IS research is whether they do so in (what will be characterised as) an authentic manner, or in sincere adherence with either a code of professional ethics or with a series of methodological precepts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Participants in information systems development can expect to have their professional judgement tested in a variety of ways, many of which are catalogued in Codes of Practice issued, for example by the ACM and BCS. Such codes are concerned with guiding action and are normative in character, generally described by deontological or consequentialist theories of ethics. In strict deontological ethics certain standards of conduct should never be broken; in consequentialism the ethics of any action can be evaluated according to particular criteria, usually well-being, happiness or the greater general good. Ethical codes, however, are notoriously difficult to apply and enforce. Because such codes necessarily theorise ethical issues in gross and abstract terms, identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas is ultimately dependent on the probity of those involved. The type of professional know-how required for identifying problems and concerns not previously envisaged differs markedly from that required for the mastery of skills for the prosecution of pre-specified goals and objectives. Walsham identifies this with the idea of a virtuous practitioner [1].

Although it is common to treat ethics as a system of rules forbidding us to do things, the topic may be treated as the basis for thinking about how we are to live [2]. Because of the impossibility of pre-specifying ethical issues and relating them faithfully to actual contexts (for example, when is “whistle-blowing” justified?), the limitations of ethical codes

may be succeeded by a concern for *personal authenticity*. Authenticity is usually defined as that which is achieved when people take hold of the direction of their own lives without the direction being determined for them by external factors [3]. The virtuous practitioner has responsibilities of interpretation and application, choices that may not be very comfortable, but which may be evaded by appealing to some external authority. Such elision of authenticity may be countered with appeals for reflective evaluation, but many accounts of the ‘reflective practitioner’ remain highly instrumental in their prime focus on mundane ‘knowing how’ or craft aspects of the profession.

The philosophical concept of authenticity represents a focal point for this paper’s authors who are pursuing distinct – but related research themes: philosophical critique and clarification of IS, and dialogical aspects of IS. The concept of authenticity presented here is informed mainly from the work of Nietzsche and Bakhtin [4,5]. It is hoped that problematizing the issue of authentic intervention represents a contribution not just to current IS ethics debates, but also to contemporary concerns on the relationships between theory, practice and teaching, and the role and authority of methodologies.

In this paper authenticity is used as a framing device for providing an interpretation of aspects of both ethical and practical action on the part of information systems professionals. One key problem here is that IS analysts and designers have to intervene in organisations (and thereby intervene in the lives of the members of those organisations). It is argued that an important issue for IS research is whether they do so in (what will be characterised as) an authentic manner, or in sincere adherence with either a code of professional ethics or with a series of methodological precepts. We shall begin by canvassing the idea of authenticity, before assessing methodological and theoretical precepts, as well as reflective practice.

## II. AUTHENTICITY

Ironically, although many philosophers held that authenticity could provide a viable ethical norm, the idea exists in tension or even contradiction to the imposition of

codes of practice, “The concept of authenticity is a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values.” [6]. Because of the very nature of the concept, authenticity denies any rigid a priori essence and resists the compliance of given standards. Indeed, the key to authenticity is in the understanding that any such compliance would be to abandon one’s own responsibility for freely forming one’s selfhood and values. Authentic agents are obliged to create values and patterns of behaviour from their own mental resources; to invent their *own* way and pattern of life. Trilling takes authenticity to be an ontological claim about humanity; for a human being to be authentic means to be treated by others like a human being and not like a machine or a sub-human [7]. Importantly, it means to be attributed epistemic responsibility, and to be deprived of authenticity means not to be able to function as a human being with respect to things that matter. For example, if a culture values privacy or free expression, to be deprived of these things would mean living an inauthentic existence.

Ontologically, authenticity expresses a complementary self/other relationship which presupposes recognition of the self by others and vice versa. The ethical consequence is that in order to acknowledge our own authenticity, then we must respect the uniqueness and authenticity of others, and therefore acknowledge that the self/other relationship will be one of difference; a relation which must be respected and sustained in ethical practice. The possibility of ethics therefore, also depends upon a community, the members of which are sufficiently authentic themselves to distinguish the authenticity of others. If an ethical norm is appropriate here it would be Kant’s aphorism that morality is primarily concerned with treating others as ends in themselves rather than as means to ends.

Given that there is a lack of *absolute* guidance as to how one is to act in any given situation, the question of “what should one do...?” raises severe difficulties. Some sorts of authenticity questions may be familiar to the readers of this paper. The authors have experienced several authenticity problems; a few are given as example questions here:

1. Should I use a methodology which has embedded values that I do not agree with?
2. Should I use a methodology, which, in my judgement, is wholly inappropriate to the circumstances pertaining in the organisation?
3. Should I attempt to improve organisational performance by introducing greater accountability in a low-wage organisation?

These are difficult ethical questions, and whilst some of these may be covered by the codes of conduct and practice of professional IS bodies, others may not be [8]. Also, such decisions require degrees of interpretation, and therefore judgements about such matters are likely to vary from person to person. In any case, not all IS professionals are members of professional societies, and not all those members may be aware of the codes of conduct and practice, and no doubt

some will choose to ignore such things. More importantly, adherence to any such code is unlikely to be practically *enforceable*; adherence will therefore have to be “granted” voluntarily by the IS professionals concerned:

“In the scientific community the medical specialist has better defined ethical codes than most other groups... They are also enforced by powerful sanctions such as expulsion from the medical profession if serious infringements occur. Many other professionals, including the British Computer Society, have also drawn up ethical codes but these are often vague and difficult to apply and enforce... Ethical responsibilities will also vary both with the nature of work that is being carried out and the nature of the social environment where the work is conducted.” [9].

The concept of authenticity is often primarily connected to considerations put forward by Nietzsche (1844-1900):

“There is a term Nietzsche himself rarely employs, but which is the most suitable label for a constant object of his philosophical concern - ‘authenticity’... Nietzsche’s question could now be posed as follows: ‘How to live authentically?’ ... comfortable acceptance of inherited values, or comfortable evasions of questions of value, will both do the trick. But these are not authentic alternatives...” [10].

Nietzsche’s statements and concerns about such issues are a constant theme in his texts [11,12]. Cooper elaborates the concept of authenticity via some examples from teaching. He explicates the problems thus:

“A familiar disturbance felt by the teacher arises when some of these [educational] policies, values, or whatever, are not ones to which he can subscribe... The disturbance produces a problem of authenticity, for unless the teacher resigns or is willing to invite considerable friction at work, he must simulate agreement to views that are not his. [Alternatively] ... The thought which may strike the teacher is not that he cannot subscribe to, or authoritatively transmit, various beliefs and values, but that he has slipped into, fallen into, unreflective acceptance of them. They have become part of the school’s furniture; they go with the job like the free stationery.” [13].

Such questions are intensely personal, and researching how IS professionals deal (or should deal) with such questions as arise in IS practice will be necessary if real progress is to be made towards the aim of improving IS practice, because slavish adherence to externally imposed codes of conduct is not necessarily a guarantor of ethically proper behaviour (it has been argued).

### III. AUTHENTICITY AND METHODOLOGICAL PRECEPTS

An example of a tension between methodological adherence and authentic systems development practice can be found within the ubiquitous concept of the *systems development life cycle*. This was originally derived from an empirical study by Barry Boehm [14]. The consequent life cycle model has been absorbed into nearly every structured IS method propounded ever since; if it is criticised, it is

criticised as being a *prescription* that does not “work” in practice (whatever the precise form of the criticism takes). The usual criticism runs along the lines that the longer one takes to “get the requirements right” the longer it takes to develop a system at all - and the greater the likelihood becomes that the requirements are “out of date”:

“[T]he development life cycle concept relies heavily on the initial definition of the problem being complete and correct and that the users’ requirements will not change in the time taken to progress to final implementation. In the case of modern complex information-systems neither of these assumptions can safely be made ...” [15].

Nevertheless the widespread use of life cycle methods for IS developments continues relentlessly (although numerous alternative approaches are often propounded). A recent UK survey was conducted to investigate the use of systems development methods (amongst other things). This survey indicated, “Within systems development, 57% [of systems development staff] claim to be using a systems development methodology.” [16]. The effect of the widespread adoption of structured methods is to remove personal authenticity from the systems development personnel. Lewis argues:

“The legacies of hard systems thinking, such as the idea of the development life cycle, have become so deeply ingrained in IS thinking that only rarely is note taken of the constraints that they impose upon the way we view the development of information-systems.” [17].

Now, as received wisdom becomes a guiding force for decision making, so the possibilities for making any *genuine* decisions tend to evaporate. As Golomb argues:

“In the context of our everyday humdrum lives, it is hard to know what we genuinely feel and what we really are, since most of our acts are expressions and consequences of conditioning, imitation and convenient conformity.” [18].

Adherence to methodological prescriptions may provide systems development staff with a convenient set of reasons for not doing what they (truly) feel that they *ought* to do. The point to stress here is that these motivations (to do what one ought to do on authentic versus methodological grounds) are not identical – they are very different. Indeed, Wastell has pointed out the degree to which the adherence to methodological prescriptions has a value as a defence mechanism for systems development staff. Although the main focus of Wastell’s paper is to demonstrate how it comes about that methodology gets used as a social defence mechanism he also argues that what is actually needed in systems development situations is quite different:

“[M]any analysts apparently developed a fetishistic dependence on methodology. They appeared to withdraw from the real job of analysis, of engaging with users in an open and frank debate about system requirements. Instead they withdrew into the womb of security provided by the method. They worried about details of notation, of whether the method was being correctly implemented and of the need

to press on and fulfil deadlines rather than ensure that they had really understood what the users wanted.” [19].

This can be interpreted as a failure of authenticity on the part of the systems development staff encountered by Wastell,<sup>1</sup> and begs the question of the relation between methodology, theory and practice. That theories should guide practice in some way, and by implication, that theorists and policymakers should guide practitioners are deeply entrenched ideas, particularly - but not just - in IS. Projects in IS typically combine complex technical challenges, often poorly understood or ambiguous organisational practices with the need to efficiently co-ordinate the work of all who contribute to, or have vested interests in, the development. By providing a set of techniques to support analysis and design, and a model of project development which prescribes an explicit task structure, methodology may promise amelioration of these difficulties. Furthermore, methodologies may facilitate learning and co-operation in the provision of a common language and cognitive structure. However, as we have seen, the verity of methods lies in the transition from the normative realm of methodological theory to the messy world of practice.

The IS profession is characterised by specialised technical training and circumscribed theorising [20]. Therefore, it is not surprising that most methodologies only treat technical and rational issues [21]. This perspective may be defined as ‘technicism’, i.e. the presumption that good practice is equivalent to efficient performance which achieves ends that are theoretically prescribed for analysts [22]. Technicism holds that all practice is like production or service industry, that quality may be guaranteed through standardisation of the development process, and that ultimately professional practical judgements are suspect. This may delude practitioners into thinking that they are less free to act than they actually are, and ethical responsibility for an action may be evaded by appeal to a theoretical imperative (such as the laws of nature or the market).

For technicians, general theories can be set out to guide particular practices, but the narrower technical education may be supplemented with sociology, psychology and organisational studies to produce students better equipped to evaluate ethical and moral issues. The sort of criticisms levelled at this academic model are that theoretical studies are insufficient to guarantee effective IS professional practice, or that their relevance to practice is not at all clear, or indeed, that theory construction has become a barrier to real world understanding [23]. Both theory-construction and the direct technical application of theories to practice can be challenged by directly applying to IS an argument made by Carr in teacher education [24]:

1. The discovery of truths about the world or the construction of theoretical explanations are not the principal goals of IS enquiry, deliberation or endeavour. In this sense,

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<sup>1</sup> In the case study discussed herein, the method used was the UK’s SSADM.

at least, IS theorising does not (paradoxically) appear to be primarily theoretical.

2. The precise relationship of such undeniably theoretical forms of enquiry as psychology, sociology, cybernetics and so on to the processes of practical deliberation about organisations, the workplace and people is inferentially complex, value-laden, contingent, and by no means straightforwardly construable in terms of direct application.

3. Although IS discourse is primarily practical and therefore concerned with the achievement of certain sorts of goods, it differs from technical deliberation in not being exclusively or even primarily concerned with questions of efficiency and effectiveness in the course of such pursuit. IS problems therefore cannot be solely construed in technical terms.

4. Therefore IS discourse is evaluative or moral rather than solely theoretical or technical. Evaluative arguments, unlike theoretical arguments are defeasible, and, unlike technical inferences, means are invariably related to ends *internally* or *constitutively* rather than externally or causally (as theory demands).

This is not to deny the importance of theoretical studies, truth, technique or efficiency, but merely to affirm where the logical centre of gravity about IS discourse and enquiry should be located. The information and evidence supplied by theoretical research may indeed be indispensable for deliberations about what is to be done in the interests of good practice; but - because there can be no direct ethical derivation of an ought from an is - such information cannot directly dictate the course of our practical decisions where these have a moral or evaluative focus and implications [25].

Carr further identifies this perspective on professional development and education with a Cartesian interpretation of rational conduct; i.e., as a behavioural event preceded by an episode of theorising. The error of this view has long been exposed, and many non-Cartesian studies of human conduct are available within the general IS corpus, e.g.[26,27,28,29,30]. The unreflective or blind application of theories or methodologies is incompatible with authentic existence, but some may find comfort where theoretical prescription appears to limit their freedom to choose and offers them a way of opting out of a moral requirement to think and justify in particular contexts.

#### IV. AUTHENTIC INTERVENTION

Many models of authenticity have been propounded, but in the remainder of this paper we will only consider those proposed firstly by Nietzsche, and secondly by Bakhtin [31,32].

Structured / life cycle methodological precepts make little allowance for the influence of choice on the part of the IS professionals - who will be (methodologically) guided to investigate practically everything relevant in a particular study. Of course, such detailed and thorough investigations are not only difficult to achieve practically, but run counter to

the actual social-psychological conditions in which analysts operate. Firstly, on organisational (*social*) grounds:

“The modern organisational environment is a far cry from the well-ordered world of the classical bureaucracy, with its elaborate hierarchical division of labour and highly routinized procedures. The modern organisation, in contrast, is characterised by constant innovation, by flux and fluidity [which] presents a potent challenge to the social defences that characterise the traditional organisation, such as the bureaucratic ritual, which contain anxiety by narrowing attention and by defining rigid roles. The new demands require a broadening of rules, wider boundaries, increased integration and interdependence.” [33].

Secondly, can the concept of Nietzschean authenticity help us to understand the *psychological* demands placed on contemporary IS professionals? Nietzsche’s arguments on such issues can be found in Book Five of *The Gay Science* [34]. However, his style of writing makes no concession to the reader and does not lend itself easily to the discourse of IS development! Golomb makes the following points – concerning how Nietzsche conceptualised the relationship between authenticity and epistemology - in a contemporary manner:

“An individual’s life comprises a boundless number of experiences and notions, including a tremendous amount of superfluous information. Through awareness of one’s authentic needs one may organise and refine this chaos into a harmonious sublimated whole. Initially the self is a bundle of conflicting desires and an array of contradictory possibilities. The self’s unity is a function of its own decisions and creations. The search for authenticity is seen as the wish to reflect one’s own indeterminacy by spontaneous choice of one of the many possible ways of life. The individual is a kind of artist who freely shapes his self as a work of art.” [35].

*Prima facie*, a great deal of systems development work in a turbulent organisational environment can – indeed must – depend on the authenticity of the development staff if good systems are to be developed. Slavish adherence to methodological prescriptions can only serve to deny the insights and wisdom attained by systems development staff (about the actual needs of the organisation) over many years of experience. Moreover, it can be conjectured that the widespread use of contract IS/IT staff – often with disastrous consequences – may be indicative that insufficient attention has been paid, by IS managers, to the role that authenticity plays in good systems development [36].

#### V. AUTHENTICITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A basic difference between technical and moral reasoning is captured by repeating Kant’s aphorism that morality is primarily concerned with treating others as ends in themselves rather than as means to ends. Schon associates the former with an epistemology of practice derived from positivist philosophy, which he terms technical rationality.

This demands practitioners be instrumental problem solvers who select technical means best suited to reaching appropriate decisions. Rigorous professionals solve well-formed instrumental problems by applying theory and technique derived from systematic, preferably scientific knowledge. He maintains that real world problems do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures, indeed, they rarely present themselves as problems at all, but as messy, indeterminate situations [37].

The contrast to technical rationality appears in the idea of reflective practice where ends and means are continually reformulated by practitioners, and professionals' own authentic insights are preserved. Theory and practice are constantly reinterpreted within particular contexts that can be described in both moral and technical ways, and more elusive agendas such as emancipation and democracy may be considered. However, Monach *et al.* found that although design engineers may produce extensive socio-technical analyses, they were not usually detached from practice or ever returned to and reflected upon *post hoc* [38]. But more importantly, ethical issues or issues of authenticity that escape reflective practice entirely are again likely to occur in situations where one is confronted with the ethical question of “*what should one do...?*”, because as Nietzsche astutely observed, life is lived forwards, but understood backwards. In other words, the person is participating in an event, and with others is already the architect of its meaning, before the ‘reflective practice’ of contemplating the significance of that event.

As IS professionals often acquire a fairly detailed knowledge of organisational and working practices the predicament of “*what should one do?*” may not be unusual. Examples from the authors' experience include process controllers who release dangerous toxins to the environment at times when they could not be detected, and insurance actuaries who actively discriminate against certain categories of people. Neither of these practices would be publicly defensible but were deemed economically essential (and therefore practices technology should not disrupt). The practitioners' immediate response to these dilemmas may serve to either legitimate or condemn such practices, but in all cases will contribute to the valorisation of these acts as ‘normal’, ‘necessary’, ‘clandestine’, ‘improper’ and so on.

The sociological concept “articulation work” is at issue here [39]. Articulation work refers to the continuous efforts required of people to assemble discontinuous elements into working configurations appropriate for the activities at hand. This intellectual, moral, social and tactile ‘spadework’ is necessary to craft the ambiguity and openness of such things as organisations, professional practices, materials and technologies into integrated working systems, and repairing these systems when they are seen to breakdown. Accordingly, the ethical and moral dimensions of the situations described, or what ‘ought’ to happen or ‘ought’ to be the case, are articulated by participants *in situ*. Practitioners will be

‘thrown’<sup>2</sup> into ethically ambiguous or dilemmatic situations by and with participants on the spot. It is possible to reflect on these situations at will, but the ethical moment, as it were, is at the point of the articulation of the meaning and significance of those events and actions, where the rights and wrongs (the ‘oughts’) are resolved, or not. One fundamental error or vulnerability of reflective practice then, as Nietzsche's dictum suggests, and the earlier classroom example endorses, is that it is simply wrong placed.

Nietzsche's observation of life being lived forwards has been explored as the ‘world-as-event’ by Bakhtin, who maintains that there is a disjunction or gap between immediate experience and symbolic representations of this experience [40]. Bakhtin's version of authenticity is associated with his attempt to reconcile prosaic life (bound to our physical bodies) and cognitive or theoretical thinking (free to move as it pleases) in a concept of the *answerable act*, where ethical responsibility arises out of the actualisation of both the repeated and the unique in specific social events. Bakhtin finds both aesthetic and theoretical thinking problematic precisely because they abstract what they imagine to be ‘important’ from actual events located within real time and space, and gain life of their own within this abstract realm of thinking. In doing so they deny a dialogical (answerable) relationship with the concrete other who is displaced by an abstract category within a monologic theoretical framework. In contrast, properly formed dialogic contexts will exhibit a ‘surplus of vision’ between users and designers that facilitates the effective learning processes upon which systems development depends.

Retrospective mediation, such as reflective practice, employing aesthetic intuition or theoretical thinking divide the content of an act (its product) from the act itself (or its actual historical performance); the plurality of life as *event* is removed from its dialogic context and the subjective or theoretical singular moral consciousness is imposed in favour of the differentiated consciousness of otherness. Indeed, from this perspective, reflective practice entrenches technicism's Cartesian egological reason by denying the significance of the other in the construction of ethical judgements. This fragments responsibility, and further violates Kant's axiom by encouraging a purely cognitive relation to the other. Accordingly, the other is related to not as another subject but as an object. Zuboff has identified exactly the same egological imperative in the way that technology transforms the management function from acting with people to acting on them [41]. Not surprisingly, in some cases reflective practice may function as if it were just another technique for the improvement and assessment of IS, rather than for ethical or moral evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup> This term is derived from Heidegger who held that a human being is ‘thrown’ into an already existing world and thereafter has to be responsible for itself and involve itself in a concerned or caring way in the world it finds.

Bakhtin makes a special effort to reunite the aesthetic (the shaping of meaning in action) and the ethical (a cognitive element of the act itself) into one unified event, and suspects Kantian transcendental *a priori*s such as deontological and consequentialist ethics cannot address actual ethical problems and dilemmas as they emerge within the everyday lifeworld:

“Man-in-general’ does not exist; I exist and a particular concrete *other* exists. If I remain in communion with immediate experience and the concrete other, then I can maintain a relation of *answerability* to other selves and the world at large, and can accept full responsibility for my actions and words. Because my participation in the world is unique and non-recurrent, shared by no other person, no one else can accept responsibility on my behalf.” [42].

This explains Bakhtin’s forthright defence of personal authenticity: there is no ‘alibi’ in Being. In justifying our deeds by recourse to an abstract ideology or a sociopolitical imperative, we are provided with just such an alibi for evading our responsibility, in which case ‘what we have is not an answerable deed but a technical or instrumental action’. If we act purely out of obligation to such abstractions or rationalised expediencies, then we ‘turn into impostors or pretenders’, and abrogate the onus of answerability [43].

Authenticity is a predicate of acts rather than character or self, but refers to the integrity an innermost self, free of dogmatic beliefs, and the external manifestations of the self [44]. Bakhtin’s ethical norms (the norms of answerability) are articulated from inside the act, as the answerable act, not from an external belief system or discipline that places it into context. However, when subjected to the instrumental rationality and the bureaucratic structures that characterise many IS developments and applications, the viability of this sphere of sociality is seriously threatened, and with it the continuity of human responsibility and ethicality itself.

Ironically, for technicism and reflective practice, as in most analyses, no particular individual ever has to exist, any abstract person will do. Yet the authenticity of the ‘moral agent’ has to be underwritten in the concrete ethical act, or the person need feel no responsibility for their own lives or acts. Privileging the abstract and theoretical essentially leads away from responsibility and ethical action, instead of towards it. Theoretical thinking limits the degree to which individuals act responsibly because it locates the most important aspects of an act outside the responsible self participating in the event itself. This may be a grave failing, for it allows individuals to displace their unique responsibilities through appealing to a categorical ‘good’ posited by theoretical thinking.

‘Located accountability’ may make professionals answerable for their actions, but the ethics of answerability remains provocative for IS because of an acquired mandate to contain the world within immutable, unified systems of concepts and categories [45]. The normalising of events, the displacement of acts from actions, and the inevitable separation of the prosaic and aesthetic involved in work

textualization, conspire against Bakhtin’s ethical, authentic self maintaining a relation of answerability with a non-abstract other.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has reported work on the philosophical concept of authenticity as providing both a better way of understanding the role played by ethical codes and IS methods, and as way of characterising actual IS practice, in modern organisations. Clearly work needs to be done in organisations to investigate how authenticity is actually mobilised (or not as the case may be) in organisations. Furthermore, the beneficial and/or detrimental affects that authentic activities have on the systems development process should also be investigated.

Although the two versions of authenticity have been characterised (very basically, given space constraints), other philosophers and authors of literature have made important contributions to the debate – including Heidegger. Further research would need to investigate these views also. Finally, it should be noted that Adorno provides a powerful critique of the whole notion of authenticity [46]. This critique is mainly directed against the Heideggerian version of authenticity. Suffice it to say here that such a critique needs to be taken seriously and warrants further research.

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