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Teleology and Utopia in Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics and Politics

Santrauka: *Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Alasdairo MacIntyre'o politinė filosofija, pabrėžiant jos glaudų ryšį su MacIntyre'o filosofine modernybės ir Švietimo projekto kritika. MacIntyre'o politinė mintis anglų-amerikiečių akademinėje terpėje dažnai redukuojama į moderniosios nacionalistinės valstybės kritikos kritiką. Ši redukcionistinė interpretacija – kritikuojama. Teigiama, kad MacIntyre'o modernios liberalios demokratijos kritikos nesuprastume neatsižvelgdami į MacIntyre'o teleologijos ir utopijos sampratas.*

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *liberali demokratija, legitimacija, teleologija, utopija, metafizinė biologija, Apšvieta, Aristotelis.*

Keywords: *liberal democracy, legitimacy, teleology, utopia, metaphysical biology, the Enlightenment project, Aristotle.*

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre has long been known as a critic of modernity[1]. Ever since *After Virtue* he has repeatedly claimed that modern administrative bureaucracy, whether private or public, is Weberian and Nietzschean in character. The failures of Enlightenment moral philosophy have led to the embodiment of emotivism in our moral culture when moral debates between different moral positions become irresolvable and interminable. These moral utterances can represent any arbitrary position or can be used at the service of anyone's arbitrary will. MacIntyre claims that modernity, and the Enlightenment project in particular, fails on its own terms (1985). He is one of the rare contemporary political philosophers who extends his philosophical critique of the Enlightenment not only to the sphere of political theory but also to contemporary politics, and thereby rejects contemporary liberalism and the liberal democracy of the modern nation-state. This rejection is partly presupposed

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[1] For a convincing account of MacIntyre's critique of modernity see Peter McMylor (1994).

by MacIntyre's belief that philosophical thought has a practical relevance – it represents, embodies and is embodied in social practices. Thus liberalism on this account is the dominant theory of modernity whereas the liberal the liberal nation-state is the paragon of modern social order. In this paper I want to explore some of the philosophical implications of this rejection. I will focus on MacIntyre's teleology arguing that apart from Aristotelian teleology (a metaphysical biology of some sort) there is also a utopian element in it. If politics of the liberal nation-state cannot embody an Aristotelian politics of common good, then MacIntyre's conception of politics of small-scale local communities can be seen as having a utopian element. Thus understood politics have to do with the best life possible which is unattainable without a strong and substantive conception of political community.

Practice and Theory

What distinguishes Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy from the majority of contemporary Anglo-American philosophers is his emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice. As early as *Marxism and Christianity* MacIntyre has been interested in political philosophy as having an intimate link to our social lives and as something which is relevant to our social practices. Philosophy, especially moral and political philosophy, is important in as much as it is able to raise those important questions which any plain person is able to raise. Commenting on the encyclical

Fides et Ratio MacIntyre claims that the first task of philosophy is "to articulate and to pursue answers to questions posed by human beings in general, and not only by professional philosophers" (2006: 198). Christianity and Marxism have been dominant traditions of moral thought enabling ordinary people to ask fundamental questions such as 'what is our ultimate good?' Christianity and Marxism, although in different ways, have been embodied in and shaped our social practices and institutions. Both of them can be seen as traditions in MacIntyre's sense of this word. They combine rational enquiry and social practice in the way that practice and rational enquiry furnish and reinforce one another. Both Marxism and Christianity offer competing interpretations of "human existence by means of which men may situate themselves in the world and direct their actions to ends that transcend those offered by their immediate situation" (MacIntyre 1968: 10).

MacIntyre's position vis-à-vis Marxism and Christianity has changed several times since *Marxism: An Introduction* was first published in 1953. What has not changed is his belief that theory and rational enquiry are intimately linked to our social practices and moral traditions. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre provides his conception of a tradition-constitutive and tradition-constituted rational enquiry. He argues that philosophical enquiries start from the reflections and interpretations of certain local practices and canonical texts. These texts structure local communities and form their traditions. One of the tasks of

those who are engaged in rational enquiry is to realize that their philosophical work is tradition constituted as well as commit themselves to a tradition. MacIntyre claims that a person outside all traditions lacks rational standards to judge social reality: "to be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution" (MacIntyre 1988: 367).

My intention here is not to explain the complex relationship between practice and theory in MacIntyre's thought, but to lay the ground for his claim that liberalism has become yet another tradition. It is also to illustrate MacIntyre's approach to social philosophy enabling us to understand his critique of the Enlightenment project. Thus philosophical arguments about the nature of morality and politics are important not merely because they enhance our rational abilities, but because they can help us to shape our social practices and institutions in the way that the achievement of our individual and communal goods becomes possible. Of course, there are cases when philosophical arguments obscure our understanding of the human good and, if repeated and continued further on, they become institutionalized within our social practices which then preclude us from achieving our goods. This is precisely what happened, so MacIntyre argues, with the philosophers of the Enlightenment. MacIntyre goes so far as to claim that "the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place" (MacIntyre 1985: 118). The consequences of this failure are institutio-nalized in our highly bureaucratized social order where morality can be used to disguise almost any position and where the difference between manipulative and non-manipulative relationships is blurred.

MacIntyre's critique of liberalism

Mark Murphy has argued that MacIntyre's political philosophy is first of all concerned with the issue of political justification (Murphy 2003). According to this interpretation, MacIntyre rejects the liberal nation-state because of the fundamental inconsistencies of the neutralist state's arguments for the justification of political authority. First of all, it is based on too thin a conception of public interest. That is, it requires individuals' allegiance to the state on the basis that the state provides necessary goods (e.g. security) which help people to achieve their own individual goods. The first problem with this, as Murphy sees it, is that of *free-riders* (i.e. if my contribution to the public interest is minimal, I might as well suspend it without refusing to reap its benefits) and *dangerous jobs* (the state provides us with dubious services, but occasionally asks from some of its citizens, e.g. soldiers or policemen, to die while providing these goods) (*ibid*: 154-155).

Although Murphy's argument is broadly correct, we have good reasons to think that MacIntyre's political philosophy, in particular his rejection of the modern state, should be understood within the broader context of his philosophical critique of the Enlightenment project. Thus I want to argue that MacIntyre's conception of te-

leology is essential not only to his moral philosophy but also to his political philosophy. Therefore MacIntyre's rejection of the liberal nation-state as a legitimate political authority has to do with his rejection of the Enlightenment project. It has also to do with his critique of the socio-political order of advanced capitalism.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre argues that liberalism should be understood as yet another intellectual and moral tradition. Liberalism, at least as a social theory, has a long history which starts roughly from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Through the course of its history liberalism has shaped and has indeed become embodied in the social practices and political institutions of modernity. Liberalism promotes freedom of choice; it favours universal human rights, while its moral culture is based on the maximization of individual preferences and irreducibly heterogeneous goods. Furthermore, it is the successor of the philosophical debates which constituted the Enlightenment project. In this MacIntyre is consistent with his earlier argument developed in *After Virtue* where he claimed that "all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity is an illusion" (MacIntyre 1985: 127). One of the most important characteristics of liberal moral culture is its inability to provide its members with a coherent account of the human good. There is a variety of different and often competing conceptions of the good and so

the primary concern of political philosophy, looked at it for a liberal point of view, is to come up with a procedural and formal conception of justice able to accommodate these different conceptions of the good. The problem with this is not so much the fact that liberal theorists are unable to reach a more or less conclusive philosophical agreement as to what justice is. Rather, the instrumental character of liberal politics and justice, on the one hand, and the multiplicity of preferences and goods pursued by individuals, on the other, presuppose and foster the social order of capitalism. The plurality of individual goods, preferences and whims can be best satisfied by consumer capitalism. Furthermore, capitalism benefits from the multiplicity of conflicting preferences and thus fosters and produces them (Bielskis 2005). However, the satisfaction of our fake needs and whims together with the commodity fetishism of market capitalism comes at a price. MacIntyre argues that there are several reasons for the injustice of capitalism:

> [The] source of injustice arises from the gross inequalities in the initial appropriation of capital whatever point in time is taken to be initial point – an appropriation that was in significant part the outcome of acts of force and fraud by the appropriators. This inequality in the relationship of those with capital to those without it is much more than the inequality between rich and poor that is to be found in the vast majority of societies. (…) [T]relationship of capital to labor is such that it inescapably involves an entirely one-sided dependence, except insofar as labor rebels against its conditions of work. The

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more effective the employment of capital, the more labor becomes no more than an instrument of capital's purposes, and an instrument whose treatment is a function of the need of long-term profit maximization and capital formation (MacIntyre 2006b: 147).

Of course, the liberal state seeks to minimize the inequalities and injustice of capitalism. MacIntyre acknowledges the importance of the organized class struggle through labour movement which gradually became institutionalized within the parliamentary politics of western liberal democracies. Furthermore, he acknowledges the achievements of the welfare state enabling workers to have a share in capitalist prosperity (*ibid*: 153). However, the European liberal welfare state is bureaucratic in its nature; it is based on instrumental rationality and has long become the instrument of capital formation. In this MacIntyre is similar to Jürgen Habermas. Habermas too warns us against the dangers of both subsystems – the state and the market – and argues that they function according to the same principles of instrumental rationality and efficiency (Habermas 1987: 365). In aiming to reform capitalism the modern welfare state, to a large extent produced by labour movement, has gradually became domesticated by capitalism. It has now become the essential element in promoting and sustaining capitalism – trade unions have been incorporated in parliamentary politics and in so becoming gradually lost their political power. Furthermore liberal politics has become professionalized as well as depends and coexist with capitalism:

[It] requires financial resources that only corporate capitalism can supply, recourses that secure in return privileged access to those able to influence political decisions. Liberalism thus ensures the exclusion of most people from any possibility to active and rational participation in determining the form of community in which they live (MacIntyre 2006b: 153).

If then liberalism together with its embodiment in liberal democracy lacks legitimacy, what kind of political life and political institutions do MacIntyre envisage as legitimate ones? To answer this question we first need to look at his conception of teleology.

MacIntyre's teleology and utopia

MacIntyre's affinity to Aristotle's metaphysical biology has been emphasized a number of times (MacIntyre 2007, Knight 2007, D'Andrea 2007). The differences between Aristotle's metaphysical biology and MacIntyre's teleology are evident. In *Physics* and elsewhere Aristotle provides the theory of four causes to explain change in nature. The four causes are: material, efficient, formal, and teleological. It is on the basis of this theory that Aristotle's metaphysical biology is constructed (Aristotle 1996). Human life has a distinctive *form* and a distinctive *telos* and it is precisely because of them that it differs from the life of other non-human animals. Aristotle believed that animal species, including human beings, are eternal and beyond change. Change in life happens only within species. What distinguishes us from

other animals is our distinctive human flourishing. Therefore human flourishing is not and cannot be accidental (that is, it cannot be radically relative to different individuals and different communities) as it is inscribed in the form of our existence *qua* human existence. The peculiar type of human flourishing – *eudaimonia* – defines our humanity. *Eudaimonia* can be achieved or, to be more precise, actualized only if we fully exercise our peculiar faculties. The most essential human function – *ergon* – is reason since only reason, according to Aristotle, distinguishes us from other non-human animals. The activity (*energeia*) due to which humans can fully exercise their reason is *theoria* – philosophical contemplation.

MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's conception of metaphysical biology in *After Virtue*. There he does not specify what he means by 'metaphysical biology' and which part of Aristotle's elements of teleology he rejects. Thus the question of the exact meaning of 'metaphysical biology' in *After Virtue* is, to a certain extent, open for debate. However, it is clear that one of the reasons why MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's metaphysical biology is because of its exclusivist and/or elitist character. MacIntyre certainly does not accept Aristotle's assertion that human *telos* can be fulfilled only if we systemically engage in philosophical contemplation. There is no hierarchical list of practices/activities in MacIntyre's thought. He also does not accept Aristotle's notion that our understanding of human nature is possible outside history despite the fact that in his

later work he moves closer to Thomas Aquinas's conceptions of the human good and human nature. In the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue* MacIntyre states:

> In *After Virtue* I had tried to present the case for a broadly Aristotelian account of the virtues without making use of (…) what I called Aristotle's metaphysical biology. And of course I was right in rejecting most of that biology. But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding (2007: xi).

So how does MacIntyre understand the ultimate human good which should direct our lives and our practices? The formal answer is that it is a revised Aristotelian notion of human flourishing. In *Dependent Rational Animals* he attempts to spell out the conditions of human flourishing (MacIntyre 1999). The most essential condition of a flourishing life is our ability to develop and practice moral and intellectual virtues. This is the underlying motive in the whole of MacIntyre's moral and political philosophy. It is important to note, however, that the conception of virtues in *Dependent Rational Animals* has a different emphasis compared to the previous MacIntyre's accounts of virtues in his earlier work (notably *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*). Through the account of virtues of acknowledged dependence MacIntyre wants to illustrate the

vulnerability of human life and hence our dependence on one another. To put it bluntly, I cannot develop essential human faculties on my own, thus the help and care of others are already inscribed in me becoming a full human being. Therefore MacIntyre postulates the intersubjectivity of virtues and of the human good. There are already the structures of common good inbuilt in my ability to achieve even my own individual good. MacIntyre argues that this is especially the case with the most essential human faculty, namely practical rationality.

Only an independent rational agent can be a flourishing human being. Since human life is essentially teleological – we aim at different ends and goods through engagement in different practices – practical rationality is important because it enables us to evaluate and choose goods rightly. MacIntyre demonstrates how the relationships of giving and receiving, which are impossible without such virtues of acknowledged dependence as just generosity, are essential for us to become independent practical reasoners. He also convincingly shows that the structures of common good and the relationships of giving and receiving are based on virtues such as just generosity and our unconditional giving. That is to say, I am called to give not as much as I want or as much as I have received but unconditionally – as much as a particular human being needs. So the social relationships are not based on the principle of bureaucratic ethics – I owe only to those who gave me and as much as I received (Bielskis 2005: 142). The properly

structured social relationships and institutions should be based on asymmetrical giving and receiving.

To sustain these types of social relations, according to MacIntyre, it is possible only politically. These relationships cannot be accidental if we want to flourish; to flourish both as individuals and as communities. Hence the question about the political structure – the *polis* – becomes essential. It is precisely here, I want to suggest, utopian aspect of MacIntyre's teleology comes in. MacIntyre distinguishes between the utopianism of the future and that of the present. The first is directed towards a long term future and hope to establish just social order globally (MacIntyre 2008). Such utopianism requires sacrificing the present in the name of utopian future which I probably never see. The utopianism of the present is different. It is based on the notion that it is hardly possible collectively to realize the genuine human good in the present sociopolitical order of liberal capitalism and the liberal nation state. There is no *topos* of just social order and thus we are called to resist the current institutional order through a systemic attempt to create an alternative *polis* here and now.

But there is another aspect to *utopianism* in MacIntyre's thought. It seems that accepting Aristotle's teleology MacIntyre accepts Aristotelian notion that to realize the human good is rare and difficult. And it is especially true in the present capitalist social order. The end of human life, whether communal or individual, is to aim at the *best*

life. In this sense Aristotle's claim that the best *polis* with the best constitution does not happen very often is instructive. Hence another aspect of utopia can be put as follows: we strive for the best life possible even if we fail to achieve it.

In this respect liberalism, whether in theory or in practice, is different – it settles for the minimum. As John Locke put it, the sate should only aim to secure "life, liberty and estate". Accordingly, one can live and treat others as instruments to achieve his or her private goods or pleasures, but it will not be a flourish life because, looking at it from an Aristotelian point of view, humans can flourish only by *sharing* their lives with others. And it is possible to live the flourishing communal life only within a type of local community which is different both from the family and the state:

> Neither the family nor the sate then is the form of association whose common good is to be both served and sustained by the virtues of acknowledged dependence. It must instead be some form of local community within which the activities of families, workplace, schools, clinics, clubs dedicated to debate and clubs dedicated to games and sports, and religious congregations may all find the place. (…) [I]n a community in which just generosity is counted among central virtues the established norms of justice will have to be consistent with the exercise of this virtue. (…) Between independent practical reasoners the norms will have to satisfy Marx's formula for justice in a socialist society, according to which what each receives is proportionate to what each contributes. Between those capable of giving and those who are most dependent and in most need of receiving – children, the old,

the disabled – the norms will have to satisfy a revised version of Marx formula for justice in a communist society, 'From each according to her or his ability, to each, so far as it is possible, according or her or his needs' (MacIntyre 1999: 135, 130).

Alternative Politics

In 'The *Theses on Feuerbach:* A Road not Taken' MacIntyre argued that Marx stopped philosophy at the point where he should have provided a philosophical account of ethics in order to furnish the practice of emancipation. It can be argued that MacIntyre in *Dependent Rational Animals* offers precisely what he asks of Marx. That is, he provides a philosophical argument in support of alternative ethics which rejects the predominant forms of modern morality as the means to justify the symbiosis between the market and the state. The question then we have to pose is the following. If the modern state cannot be the locus of Aristotelian politics, what is the political agency which can accommodate such conception of the human good?

Kelvin Knight has argued that MacIntyre's withdrawal from the politics of liberal nation-state should not be seen as a pessimistic resignation vis-à-vis the systemic injustice of capitalism. On the contrary, MacIntyre has "always exemplified the virtue of hope" (Knight 2007: 187). MacIntyre's emphasis on local communities and his Aristotelian teleology provides us with a possibility to argue that such an alternative polity can be a Christian *Ekklesia*. As this argument has been once made I will not repeat it again (Bielskis 2005). Instead I

would like to address two additional issues which were not yet addressed. The issue of trust, emphasized by Stanley Haeurwas, is especially important for an Aristotelian politics:

> The church, according to Hauerwas, then should be seen as an alternative polity whose individuals are able to form an opposition to the world through its commitment to non-violence. Paradigmatic to such commitment is the concept of trust: the church is a community where "trust rules", when individuals do not fear one another and thus are able to withstand the general threats of violence, through faith in God and his promises. An implicit Hauerwas's insight is that to practice peace and trust in our daily lives in the Foucaultian world of manipulative discursive wars, competition, and ever-increasing striving for self-expression would be impossible alone and without an alternative narrative that would promise that the truly *best* life is possible to those who dare and have courage to live their lives in peaceful cooperation and sharing rather than competition. That is why the church as *polis* is needed, for without edifying and educating its members in virtues of courage, charity and hope through an alternative story of God's ultimate love, it would be impossible to live the life of radical non-violence (Bielskis 2005: 157-158).

The theological aspect of trust is important politically because of the existing inequality of power, of statues, and of money in any capitalist society. It is well known that inequality between the rich and the poor has grown considerably over the past three decades (MacIntyre 2006: 155). Political life, as it is understood by MacIntyre, is impossible without citizens' ability to participate in deliberation about the common good. Inequality prevents citizens rationally to deliberate about the common good because of the divisions and their sectional interests which preclude them seeing their common interest (MacIntyre 2008). In this sense an authentic and socially sensitive Christian community, a community which teaches its members to regard money, status and wealth as secondary as well as encourages sharing of these resources with others, can be one of the forums where rational deliberation about the common good can take place.

At this point an objection might be raised. Kelvin Knight, for example, has argued that my interpretation of MacIntyrean political community in terms of Christian *Ekklesia* misinterprets MacIntyre's political thought. He argues that it does not suffice to treat religious affiliation as the basis for a wider community and quotes MacIntyre's claim that a comprehensive community can be based on a shared allegiance to a common good rather than on shared ethnic, religious or any other cultural inheritance (Knight 2007: 185). To this the following can be replied. It is to a certain extent true that a political community, based on a shared ethnic or religious inheritance, cannot be the fully rational polity that MacIntyre has in mind. MacIntyre states that an Aristotelian *polis* thus understood is always 'a society of rational enquiry, of self scrutiny' whereas the 'bonds of a *Volk* by contrast are prerational and nonrational' (MacIntyre 1998: 241). This, so it seems, is true about religious commu-

nities as well – the allegiance to these communities are not rationally determined and it is especially the case with Christian communities. St Paul, in the letters to Romans and Ephesians, argues that the Church is the body of the followers of Christ who are called by God through his grace. Thus it is not up to one's rational decision that his or her belonging to *Ekklesia* is realized. However, it is important to note that our belonging to a political community of rational enquiry, i.e. be it an Aristotelian *polis* or any other political community, is not fully rational in this respect either. A fully rational commitment to a group will be based on peoples' rational consent to belong to it, that is to say, I choose to be a member of this community because I have good reasons to do so. An allegiance to a political community, e.g. to a sovereign nation-state or to an Ancient *polis*, cannot be of fully rational in as much as we cannot choose the place of our birth. Hence the rationality of political community rests not in the fact that our belonging to the community is realized in terms of the rationality of our choice. If this was the case, then the only rationally justified allegiance to a group would be that of a social club (e.g. chess club, fishing club, hand-gliders' club). Rather the rationality of political community first of all means that it is open to rational criticism, self-scrutiny and, more importantly, it is based on a shared allegiance to a common good. There

is no good reason to believe that a community of honest and socially sensitive Christians, who aim to be true and faithful to the Gospels, would *a priori* fail in rational criticism and self-scrutiny as far as its own community is concerned. A more important issue, however, is that the realization of common good[2] is far more feasible in a community where its members see their social lives in terms of the theology of God's ultimate love and grace. The theological aspect of trust is especially relevant within the sociopolitical order of capitalism not only because of the aforementioned social inequalities. It is also because today people live in a social environment where the manipulative relationships and economic insecurity are so prevalent that people do not feel economically and psychologically safe and thus are far too often unable to see their interests as intimately linked to and part of the common good. Thus theological virtues of hope and trust are prerequisites for a community to realize its common good.

Conclusions

Alasdair MacIntyre's political thought should be interpreted in the wider context of his philosophy. MacIntyre's philosophical critique of the Enlightenment project and his rejection of modern emotivist moral culture are conceptually linked to his rejection not only of liberalism as a tradition of political theory, but also of the dominant

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[2] Broadly speaking, the common good may be defined as follows: it is the social conditions of the good life created by the social networks of giving and receiving without which neither individual nor communal flourishing would be possible.

political institution of the liberal nation state. The modern symbiosis between the market and the state – the two subsystems, as Habermas called them – makes both the state and the market instrumental and bureaucratic. Thus the liberal nation state can not be reconciled with the Aristotelian conception of political community. And although MacIntyre argues that those who practice the virtues of acknowledge dependence will not despise the resources of the liberal nation state, he also warns us against its corrupting power. The alternative politics and alternative forms of political community should take place within small scale local communities. It has been argued that a local Chrsitian church can be understood as such a political community of the common good. The theological virtue of trust can help the members of a socially sensitive Christian *Ekklesia* to focus on and realize the common good. However, this claim should be understood not as an empirical or dogmatic one, namely that the best communal life can be realized only within a specific empirical church. Rather it is a utopian and teleological claim that the best life is not only *yet* to be achieved, but that it is up to us here and now to strive towards the best communal life possible.

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ABSTRACT

TELEOLOGY AND UTOPIA IN ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S ETHICS AND POLITICS

The paper explores Alasdair MacIntyre's political philosophy vis-ą-vis his critique of the Enlightenment project and of modernity. MacIntyre's political thought in the Anglo-American academic world is often reduced to his critique of the critique of the institution of modern nation state. The paper provides a critique of such reductionionist interpretation. It argues that MacIntyre's critique of modern liberal democracy will not be properly understood without taking into account his conceptions of teleology and utopia.

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