NEW DIMENSIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY:

Part II

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IN THE REMAINING pages of this essay we shall trace some of the history of the ideas presented thus far and then consider some ethical and moral imperatives appropriate to the nature and present condition of man.

Others have been over much of this ground before. George Gaylord Simpson, Julian Huxley, O. H. Mowrer, William Glasser, C. Judson Herrick, and others have raised powerful voices urging the assumption of individual responsibility in the conduct of human affairs. Herbert Spencer, who preceded these men by one hundred years or more, belonged in this company. George Sarton, the eminent late historian of science, wrote of Spencer that his published volumes contain an enormous amount of material and deserve greater recognition than they have ever received. John Fiske, Spencer's chief American interpreter, went beyond Spencer and contributed magnificent insights of his own. Other names could

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be added to this distinguished group, including certainly Alfred Korzybski, whose work is little known and has been greatly misunderstood and oversimplified by some of his self-anointed followers.

Over one hundred years ago Herbert Spencer described with extraordinary clarity the uniqueness of the human class of life that sets it off from all other living forms, and in so doing he gave us the basis for an evolutionary ethic:

This higher order of correspondence in Time, scarcely more than foreshadowed among the higher animals, and definitely exhibited only when we arrive at the human race, has made marked progress during civilization. [Italics mine.] . . . Hardly worthy to be defined as creatures "looking before and after," their actions [earliest men's] correspond to few if any sequences longer than those of the conspicuous and often recurring phenomena of the seasons. But among semi-civilized races we see in the building of permanent huts, in the breeding and accumulation of cattle, in the storing of commodities, that longer sequences are recognized and measures taken to meet them. And when united in higher social states, men show, by planting trees that will not bear fruit for a generation, by the elaborate educations they give their children, by building houses that will last for centuries, by insuring their lives, by struggling for future wealth or fame, that in them, internal antecedents and consequences [these, it should be noted, are representational] are habitually adjusted to external ones which are extremely long in their intervals. Especially is this extension of the correspondence in Time displayed by progressing science . . .

When as in these cases the sequences exceed in length the lives of individual men, the correspondence is effected by the agency of many men whose actions are coordinated. An astronomer who computes the elements of a comet of brief period, and who, after the lapse of certain years, months, and days, turns his telescope to that region of the heavens in which the expected
body shortly makes its appearance, shows in himself the entire correspondence between an internal series of changes and an external series. But when centuries pass between the prediction and its fulfillment, we see that by the help of written symbols, the proceedings of successive men are united into one long sequence, displaying the same adjustment to an external sequence as though it had occurred in a single man surviving throughout the interval. Perhaps nothing more strongly suggests the conception of an embodied Humanity than this ability of Humanity as a whole to respond to environing changes which are far too slow to be responded to by its component individuals.15

With this magnificent generalization Spencer differentiates sharply between the human class of life and all other living forms. Interpreting Spencer in America, John Fiske added additional insights:

Hardly any fact is more imposing to the imagination than the fact that each generation of civilized men is perceptibly more enlightened than the preceding one, while each generation of brutes exactly resembles those which have come before it . . .

The progress of mankind is like a geometrical progression . . .

[The] entire intellectual superiority of the civilized man over the savage, or of the modern man over the primeval man, is summed up in his superior power of representing that which is not present to the senses. . . .

[When] the pain occasioned by the sight of another's suffering, or by the idea of suffering and wrong when generalized and detached from the incidents of particular cases, becomes so strong as to determine our actions, then the chasm is entirely crossed which divides us psychically from the brutes.

Manifestly, therefore, the very state of things which made physical variation more advantageous to the progenitors of mankind than physical variation, this very
state of things conspired to enhance the progressiveness of primeval man and to prolong the period of his infancy, until the plastic or malleable part of his life came to extend over several years instead of terminating in rigidity in the course of four or five months, as with the orangutan. Upon the consequences of this state of things, in gradually bringing about the capacity for progress which distinguishes man from all lower animals, I need not further enlarge.

We note in passing that the generalizations of Spencer and Fiske were reinstated almost verbatim in some respects nearly a century later by Loren Eiseley. Korzybski preceded Eiseley by a matter of a quarter of a century, although he did not, apparently, sense the significance of a greatly extended infancy in man, an evolutionary development recognized by Fiske as the biological basis for a new kind of organism that had never before appeared on earth—an organism that makes deliberate choices and that can become aware of the consequences of choices it has made. These are also the kinds of organisms on whom can be impressed both survival and nonsurvival generalizations.

If this brief consideration of the history of a few generalizations brings to the reader a depressing awareness of how slowly knowledge diffuses throughout the human family, this has not been my purpose. Rather I choose to call attention to the fact that knowledge is transmitted, even though slowly. Animals have no biological structures that permit the dissemination of knowledge in the animal world.

The mathematical zero was invented four different times. It was not until the fourth invention (circa 700
A.D.) that it finally caught on with widespread consequences. Without the zero, modern medicine and computer science would be impossible. What tremendous consequences flowed from the choices of a few men to keep alive the knowledge of that zero!

It may be useful to recall that the outlines of Spencer’s system were written some years before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin, in his zeal to demonstrate man’s evolution from lower forms, looked for behavioral manifestations in animals that we see in humans. He professed to find them, as do others to this day. However, Darwin’s lifelong preoccupation with jawbones and skulls and missing links led him into the grave error of concluding that man is nothing but an animal. He overlooked the obvious fact that no animal could possibly make such a statement. The search for similarities between human organisms and animals encouraged those who followed Darwin to espouse a tooth-and-claw model of fitness. This unfortunate choice gave justification to a large element in the human population for animalistic acts of every description, despite the fact that it should have become apparent long ago that the human class of life simply cannot survive by following animal models of behavior. We cannot keep over three billion people alive without agriculture and, like squirrels, by living on nuts. Rats and pigeons do not maintain supermarkets. Only humans have agriculture, which ultimately depends on the exercise of a great variety of representational functions of the human brain, and not on teeth and claws. The early Darwinians, like present-day Freudian mythologists and so-called animal psychologists, looked to the animals for their models for human behavior, and extraordinarily grave consequences still flow from this choice.

Spencer did not commit this error. Somehow, his approach to evolutionary processes took an entirely different
His system resulted from his observations regarding the nature of the interactions of organisms with the environmental surround. This led him to realize that "fitness" manifests itself in many ways. He was concerned with internal correspondences organisms can effect under the impact of surrounding conditions. He observed that the simplest living forms can effect internal correspondences only with environmental factors with which the organisms were in physical contact. He further observed that as organisms appeared with more complex structures, such as eyes, ears, and nose, such organisms could effect internal correspondences with environmental factors with which they were not in contact. In short, they can effect correspondences in space.

Finally, with the evolutionary development of still more complex biological structures, organisms could effect correspondences in time. Such organisms are able to perform representational functions. Such organisms constitute a unique class, differing from all others. Indeed, language, if nothing else, may be regarded as the supreme evidence that man can operate in time. Without awareness of a time dimension, language is impossible. Spencer was the earliest writer of whom the writer is aware who formulated a system based upon such evolutionary insights. Later Korzybski described man in essentially Spencerian terms, although he did not indicate in any of his writings that he was acquainted with more than one of the twenty or more volumes written by Spencer. It is of interest to note that Korzybski refused to call man an animal.

Later Simpson, Theodosius Dobzhansky, Eiseley, Herrick, and others arrived at conclusions all similar in some respects to the formulations Spencer made over one hundred years ago, and all differing in certain respects. Quite recently Simpson stated:
Language is also the most diagnostic single trait of men: all normal men have language; no other organisms do. . . . Audible signals capable of expressing language do not require any particular phonetic apparatus, but only the ability to produce sound, any sound at all. Almost all mammals and a great number of other animals can do that. . . . Given any method of sound production, the capacity for language depends not on characteristics of the sound apparatus but on the central nervous system. . . . Normal men speak completely; other animals, whatever the relative size of their temporal lobes, do not speak at all. . . . Along with other peculiarly human capacities, it [language] is involved in what I consider the most important human characteristic from an ethical point of view: foresight.

Further documentation in support of the obvious is unnecessary. One of the impressive conditions of existence of this creature we call man is that his very existence depends on innumerable creations that are his, and his alone. From the time he awakens in the morning until he sleeps again at night, his every moment is occupied with the manipulation of those creations. His house gives him a controlled environment — heat in winter and refrigeration in summer. He has available controlled fire for his cooking and his lighting. No other organism has ever controlled fire. All over his abode he has clocks — representational artifacts that maintain correspondences with earth's position in relation to the sun.

This man grows no food; indeed, he consumes little that he produces himself, even if he is a farmer. In the United States only a very small, gradually diminishing, percentage of all the people in it produce one bit of the food they consume.

Throughout man's house are devices for transmitting representations to him — representations that originate at
any point of the globe or from the neighborhood of Mars, millions of miles away, or from the back side of the moon, which his eyes have never beheld. These devices — newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television — are so much a part of his life that he could not live without them.

Leaving his house, his feet no longer contact the soil. He climbs into his automobile and is propelled on wheels by controlled fire — both wheels and fire being creations transmitted to him by means of representational forms that link him over thousands of years with ancestors whose names no one even remembers. He can travel from one end of the continent to the other in that vehicle without once touching the soil with his feet. Every part of that vehicle was constructed in accordance with representations — blueprints, plans. Every foot of the highway was first cast in representational forms.

Arriving at his place of work in the business community, he finds himself daily in activities that depend on networks of inconceivable complexity that weld him inseparably, through systems of representation, with the entire globe. The banks on which he must rely cannot exist without systems of representation. His telephones, telegraphs, teletypes, credit systems, intercontinental transportation, legal systems — local, state, national — water systems, sewage systems, trash-collecting systems, innumerable service systems necessary just to keep the building operating, postal systems, social security systems, taxation systems, systems for protection of his health, civil-defense system, fire-protection systems, and countless others all depend on systems of representation that man has created.

Despite the incontrovertible data of our daily experience, the voices of the pundits, gathered as in days of old around the wailing wall, solemnly intone, "We are alien-
ated.” Such shallow invitations to resignation and irresponsible behavior could come only from those who have spent too many hours contemplating their own navels. Only a brief, lucid interval spent in considering the facts of human existence leads to the unavoidable conclusion that the fate and fortune of every living human being is caught in the same web with the fate and fortune of every other. The driver of every automobile in Iowa is inextricably linked with the digger of ores in Venezuela. No dog in China can commit a single act that will have the slightest consequence for any dog in Pennsylvania.

Unless we face these undeniable facts of human existence—all of us—and quickly make commensurate choices and act correspondingly, we will be dead, dead, dead—the pundits, the alienated, and the unalienated included. No one can count himself out.

Every one of the linkage systems we have mentioned is a consequence of long chains of choices and appropriate actions that have been taking place over the ages. Every bite of food we eat is now the feedback of choices an earlier forebear made that led to its discovery. The electric light is the feedback from which we now all benefit in consequence of choices made and actions taken by James Clerk Maxwell, Thomas Edison, and many others. Can anyone doubt the part that responsible representation played in making these benefits available to us all?

When we consider the extent to which the entire human family is literally knit together with a representational fabric, it is frightening to realize how few recognize it. Humanity’s chief creation—its systems of representation—must be regarded as the most important part of the human environment. No living forms persist independently of the environments in which they live. The first ag-
griculturalists were perhaps the first human beings to discover this. Farmers have to understand organism-environment relations. Psychologists in the main do not, although John Fiske clearly understood the importance of such relationships nearly one hundred years ago. It is practically impossible to find a psychology book that says anything about language-as-environment at all; yet, textbooks in psychology uniformly assert that psychology is a study of behavior. Can anyone conceive of any behavior more important to the human class of life than language? We would die like flies if the representational capacity should suddenly go out like a light; yet, the various schools of psychology are strangely silent on such issues. Amid all the discussions that are now taking place about the environment, it is almost unbelievable, if one considers it only a little, that the voices of few, if any, psychologists are heard. Even so important a figure as a former president of the American Psychological Association was quoted recently (Science, 12, September 1969, 1103) as saying: "How can we keep it [psychology] a science if we try to solve everybody's goddamn problems?" Perhaps one question should be asked at this point: Whose problems are they?

Many biologists understand the importance of organism-environment relations. However, I know of no biologist today who clearly recognizes that language (including our premises and assumptions) comprises the most important part of the human ecosystem. Psychologists I have known are in the main ignorant of ecosystems.

Psychologists for the most part simply make no statements about responsibility. Pick up any psychological journal or book, and the odds that it will contain a single statement about behaving responsibly are nil.

The publications media agitate constantly for freedom of the press, but rarely does one ever find anyone cru-
sading for a *responsible* press. Newspapers are filled with examples of irresponsible behavior, mainly fighting in one form or other: war, capital and labor, divorce, murder, highway slaughter, fights in Congress, etc. A visitor from Mars would conclude after one look at a typical newspaper that all we do is fight. The Freudian would be quick to say, "See, I told you so." But the countless transactions of man necessary to our daily existence are never headlined. Such transactions are not fights and, for this reason, not news. If the communications media, including books, magazines, professional journals, television, and radio are interested in behaving responsibly at all, it is practically impossible to find evidence to support such interest.

A few years ago a Supreme Court decision on sending questionable material through the mail was roundly denounced in the prints as an infringement on a supposed freedom to circulate anything to anybody. Let it never be forgotten that any freedom anyone has comes by the consent of others. Throughout all the angry denunciation, few voices spoke for responsible behavior. No one has any "rights" one minute longer than his neighbors decide he shall have them.

As Herrick put it: "Men have a wider freedom of choice about what they may do than any other animals have, but we pay a high price for it: The freedom to select what is good for us necessarily carries with it the freedom to go to perdition if we choose unwisely." Right now, it would appear we are going there fast. Indeed, we are going at headlong speed, and unless we can quickly make some choices appropriate to our particular circumstances and to the conditions of human existence in general, we might as well resign ourselves to ultimate self-destruction. Among these choices, we would include the following:
1. Every individual must accept personal responsibility for extending his own knowledge. We belong to a class of life that cannot sustain itself without knowledge. By knowledge we do not mean schooling. We have deluded ourselves too long into believing that the acquisition of knowledge is something that can be prescribed. The facts are that many of the holders of the highest degrees, be they in law, psychology, medicine, physics, or what not, are often as uninformed about the facts of human existence as the village barber, and no insult to barbers is intended. My present barber is an unusually perceptive human being. Many lawyers or doctors or chemists or psychologists are no more aware than the most ignorant people that south of the Mexican border there are only two nations where the average per-capita annual income is as high as $300; in all the others it is less. No more than an illiterate person will many of the holders of our highest degrees know that the life expectancy among nearly two-thirds of the people of the earth is less than forty years; that these people live in perpetual semistarvation; that they will never own an automobile or even a bicycle; that they sleep on earthen floors in huts in which we would not even house our pedigreed dogs.

Far too many of us are stupid — abysmally stupid — about even such simple facts of human existence. What is more, such people do not care, are not concerned — many psychologists and so-called educated ones included. Indeed, the writer has often seen them raise eyebrows of synthetic superiority when discussions of such matters came up. The most serious threat to our continued existence today is ignorance — sheer stupidity on the part of sophisticated nitwits who, in thinking themselves wise, are in utter ignorance of how the telephone on their desk operates. In this respect, they are in precisely the same
class as their sleeping cat. They don't know and they don't give a damn. This refusal to learn and contempt for learning, this utter lack of conscience on the part of too many of those of us who have been fortunate for those who have not, may be our last fatal choice. How, in the complicated net of circumstances in which we are all caught, can we ever hope to make intelligent choices if we do not inform ourselves?

2. We must quickly make some choices that will enhance the chances for sheer animal, biological survival. The pollution of the atmosphere and of the water are cases in point. The profligate destruction of natural resources is another. In the past several decades, some of the giant coal corporations, and small ones, have ruthlessly destroyed land in the United States that would be the equivalent of a mile-wide strip extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and beyond. This land has been plundered—almost utterly destroyed for every human purpose. It has been destroyed because irresponsible, arrogant humans acting like animals decided to destroy it, and the rest of us decided we didn't want to think about it.

This may ultimately prove to have been a deadly choice with the growing pressure for food. Already the output of one out of every four acres harvested in the United States is being exported. Estimates have it that the American farmer will have to double his present exports in the next ten years if we are to deal with projected population increases at all. Our own projected population explosion will require a production expansion of one-third in the next ten years.

In the face of this, sleek, animalistic predators have ravaged nearly two million acres of soil, every square inch of which will be sorely needed to feed people in the fore-
seeable future. In the face of this, few of us even react with more than a yawn. These are choices from which there will follow certain and terrible feedback that will not be stopped by the sacrifice of goats. If we ultimately die from starvation, from poisonous fumes we put into the atmosphere, or from poisons with which we steadily contaminate our water supplies—these are choices, and the objects of ultimate destruction will be us, those who are living now. A decision to sit still and do nothing about such matters is a choice.

3. Every individual must assume responsibility for ruthlessly rooting out and rejecting models of behavior that push us in the direction of animality. Psychiatry and animal “psychologies” present a model that encourages us to view ourselves as animals when they insist upon descriptions of the human class of life in terms that emphasize sex and hostility exclusively. It happens that these are not the only expressions of human beings, despite the teachings of a mythology that never was so. Sex and hostility are not even the only expressions of animals.

Verbalizations asserting that it is human nature to fight can be made only by ignoring the fact that it is certainly as appropriately human in nature to have plumbing in our houses, banking and credit systems, highway systems, mathematical systems, systems of communication, and countless others—none of which could possibly be operated by fighting. Indeed, to operate any of these man-created systems requires the negation of fighting—that is, it requires cooperation. Ultimately, psychiatry and animal “psychologies” must bear a heavy responsibility for distorted, misrepresentational utterances of this kind. If we survive at all, the statement “it is human nature to fight” will be recognized as the product of only the most diseased of diseased brains.
Other behavioral models that urge us in the direction of animality are assertions made by many television producers that programs must continue to be geared to the ignorant apes that the programs help to produce. Where is responsibility? The ignorant ape who faces the great glass eye as he munches his chips and drinks his beer while he watches idiotic, uninformative trivia has a voice at the ballot box and will make decisions that may lead to the eventual destruction of all of us if every television producer does not squarely face the fact of his own personal responsibility. Edward R. Murrow did so. The fact that we must earn dividends, if it is a fact that our present programming practice is the only way to earn them, makes no difference in the long run. No dead stockholder has ever been known to collect dividends. Morons did not produce the sciences that led to television. Those who choose to prostitute the fruits of science by pandering to the tastes of idiots will ultimately reap an awful feedback. There is no way of escaping the consequences of choice or of mitigating the consequences by sacrificing a goat.

4. We must make choices that will enhance sociality. The supreme fact of the interdependence of the individuals constituting the human class of life means that every social function that will contribute effectively to man's humanity must be strengthened. We must take giant strides to strike down the barriers that separate the human family. Every resource must be committed that will unite members of this family. The best brains in the entire human family must be subsidized now to devote their total time to work out ways and means for doing this. This is not a task for that category of self-aggrandizing, pork-barreling, loathsome politicians, but of politicians in advance of their constituents working with the finest brains mankind can assemble for such a task.
Part of this task, paradoxical though it seems, must also involve choices that will enhance individuality. The total advantages that grow out of sociality (and here I must not be understood as advocating socialism, communism, or any other “ism”; I am concerned only with steps that will lead us in the direction of eventual humanity for the entire human family) rest, in the final analysis, on the achievements of individuals in consequence of their interactions with other individuals. All knowledge comes from individuals. Someone, perhaps Ibsen, once said, “Before everyone can see a thing, one must see it.”

One must see it. One had to see a microbe; now all can see it. One had to see how to control fire; now all can see how. One had to see how to use electricity to light a house; now all can see. Both are important—sociality and individuality. Neither can exist without the other.

5. We must choose to examine every certainty we hold. Brock Chisholm has for some years now been traveling all over the earth giving people his “prescription for survival.”2 His prescription in effect holds that any belief that cannot withstand critical analysis is not a safe one to hold.

6. Finally, we must take immediate far-reaching steps to halt the linguistic pollution, which has reached proportions that may be too big to do anything about. If we can do nothing, then in my considered judgment, we might just as well kiss ourselves goodbye.

If anyone should set about to deliberately pollute a city’s supply of drinking water, he would be locked up. Yet we permit anyone to enter our home through the medium of a television set and engage in the most unconscionable acts of pollution by misrepresentation, distortion, double-talk, half-truths, and downright lies. Nicholas Samstag has commented at length on this recently.11
A few years ago, J. Bronowski set forth with tremendous clarity the requisites for a science. One of these he called the "habit of truth." We cannot have a science without the habit of truth. The scientist is not truthful because he wants to be good or because he is afraid of an angry god that will punish him if he is not. On the contrary, the scientist tries for, above everything else, truthful representation, for if he does not, he has no science. We can imagine what would happen if those scientists who are engaged in assessing the effects of new drugs on human organisms, for example, should be discovered as habitually falsifying or telling half-truths about their experiments. If this were to happen, no one could safely take medicine. No one would dare to touch it.

The necessity for a habit of truth is equally valid in the conduct of all other human affairs. To demonstrate this, we have only to ask what would happen if every bank check that is issued from now on were to have no funds to support it? Bank transactions would quickly come to a halt. What would happen if, from tomorrow on, no debtor would ever pay an obligation again? What would happen if, beginning tomorrow, no insurance company would ever again pay a claim? Or our government (which is us) would redeem no more bonds, pay no more claims, or issue no more social security checks? Suppose an Iowa farmer could not trust the Chicago packer to pay him for his truckload of hogs when he delivered them? How many hogs would he deliver? If he delivered no hogs, how would the rest of us eat bacon?

What we have tried to show is that the entire human enterprise depends ultimately on the habit of truth. Let us repeat, this entire human representational complex, not just science, upon which the lives of every one of us depends becomes a giant trap that will throttle all of us if
it becomes untrustworthy beyond a point. John Fiske saw this many years ago when he wrote:

No amount of repentance for lying can deprive lies of their tendency to weaken the mutual confidence of men and thus to dissolve society. The lie once told must work its effects, as surely as the stone dropped into water must give forth its arrested motion in rippling circles. No penance or priestly absolution can do away with the persistence of force.5

In another vein, Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed the same thought:

There’s not a crime 
But takes its proper change 
out still in crime 
If once rung on the counter 
of this world.

Even few children do not realize the tremendous advantages that would follow if men could trust other men; yet, in every culture, we routinely teach innocent children to lie. This seems almost inconceivable, but Brock Chisholm amply documents the facts.2 No nation today trusts any other nation. We do not trust even our own espionage; we set up systems of counterespionage.

Certainly it must be recognized that the equilibrium of the entire human enterprise rests on mutual confidence in the integrity and representations of man. Frequent comments in the press about various “credibility gaps” point instead to the steady erosion of the mutual trust we must have to maintain ourselves.

Moreover, we buy the instruments in substantially every home through which the more irresponsible of the giant organizations on Madison Avenue pipe studied mis-
representations, half-truths, and distortions of every description at five-minute intervals. Young children are brought up to believe what honeyed voices falsely proclaim as highly important, whereas against the backdrop of the human enterprise, what is proclaimed as of great importance is of no importance at all. What is more terribly important is that children learn that the representations of men cannot be trusted. We buy instruments that a sane society would use to enlighten the inhabitants, but we — most of us — choose differently.

The proponents of older evolutionary theories had high hopes for the survival of the “fittest.” The avaricious, the “educated,” the fat, animalistic, unscrupulous wielders of power through the lie have briefly achieved, here and there, the illusion of fitness and decided they were the fit. But despite the promises of domed savants to produce a superior man in a test tube, the atmospheric, water, and linguistic pollutions, the poisons and radiations are not respecters of persons. Men choose. Unless we choose quickly to stop avarice and self-aggrandizement at the expense of our fellows, we are all dead ducks. Unless we choose to be truthful in all of our human relationships, we will all be strangled by networks of lies and distortion and deceit that we have woven around our own necks. Questions about who are the “fit” have become academic; all will die if we continue to make the choices we are now making. Unless we decide quickly to choose and act in accordance with the present condition of men, it is almost certain that one awful nuclear flash in the sky will give us the final reminder of the alternatives upon which we refused to act. Then, a million years later, if the trees again cover the earth, and after the ruins of the artifacts of man have been buried deep under successions of plant
forms, there will, in all likelihood, be no more statements about responsibility. Man, like the dinosaur, will have had his day.

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