

Critical Notice: Lackey on *The Epistemology of Groups*

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Introduction

Traditionally, since at least Descartes, the theory of knowledge has focussed on the individual subject, asking what he can know, using his own cognitive powers and resources.² But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, philosophers began to recognize that knowledge and belief ultimately subserve action (both causing and rationalizing it – cf. Davidson, 1963). Accordingly, there was a shift in focus towards the individual *agent*, rather than Descartes' pure subject – in short, towards pragmatism (about the attitudes).³ More recently, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there has been a similarly profound shift in focus in philosophical reflection in this area – this time towards a specifically *social* epistemology (Goldman, 1999). There are (at least) two aspects to this social turn (cf. Zollman, 2013): first, there is an increasing recognition that much of what a given individual knows and believes depends heavily on what others tell her; and second, there is growing interest in exploring the knowledge and beliefs of groups of individuals, and not just those of the individuals themselves.

Jennifer Lackey's (2020) *The Epistemology of Groups* explores areas involving some overlap of these two aspects of social epistemology, investigating both group attitudes and group testimony. It also nicely incorporates the pragmatist insight mentioned above, by treating groups as agents - stressing for instance, that they can make assertions, engage in bullshitting (cf. Frankfurt, 2005), or even lie. This orientation is extremely valuable, in my view, since it both accounts for our willingness to attribute attitudes like belief and knowledge to groups in the first place (they subserve group actions, just as individual attitudes subserve individual actions), and shows the broader importance of understanding these states, and how they relate to both group acts, and to the acts and states of the individuals that comprise those groups.⁴ On this second point, Lackey's introduction points to two real life cases – the Volkswagen emissions scandal of 2005, and an earlier, 1984 case involving National Semiconductor – in which, on the face of it, a corporation lied, with very serious actual or potential consequences (air pollution and climate change in the one case, nuclear weapons malfunction in the other). As Lackey stresses, it is crucial to determine who or what is responsible (causally, morally, and legally) for the actions undertaken by the groups involved in such cases. While in the first case, it was argued by Volkswagen that the group was not responsible, but only certain individuals who engaged in the deceptive behaviour, in the second, National Semiconductor argued the exact opposite, conceding that the group was responsible, but being unwilling to blame any particular individuals. Lackey's guiding thought is that a middle ground is needed between these two inadequate positions: the responsibility of the group must be acknowledged; and it must be recognized to depend in some way on that of group members, and their roles in producing the deceptive action. Whether or not

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² Yes, traditionally, the subject was male.

³ This pragmatic outlook is manifested in contemporary philosophy in such claims as that knowledge is the proper basis of action (Hawthorne and Stanley, 2008), and that to believe something is to take it for granted in one's practical reasoning (Williamson, 2000). It derives from Ramsey's work (cf. Setiya, 2021).

⁴ Lackey says, 'A central aim of this book is to make progress in understanding these crucial notions in collective epistemology—group belief, justified group belief, group knowledge, group assertion, and group lies—so as to shed light on whether it is groups, their individual members, or both who ought to be held responsible for collective actions.' (2020: 3) As we'll see, in my view this quote conflates group and collective phenomena; but the aim articulated here is a very worthwhile one.

Lackey's view here is ultimately correct (see Pettit, 2007 for a dissenting view), simply drawing attention to this issue of responsibility is hugely important; and accordingly, Lackey's book makes a very valuable contribution to the literature, with theoretical significance within the discipline of philosophy, and the potential for practical import beyond.

The remainder of Lackey's book can be broadly divided into two parts. The first deals with group attitudinal states that, on Lackey's analysis, are not under their direct voluntary control – group beliefs (chapter 1), justifications thereof (chapter 2), and knowledge (chapter 3). The second is concerned with the testimonial acts of groups – assertions in general (chapter 4), and especially lies (chapter 5) – which clearly are. In what follows I will discuss each of these parts – though I obviously cannot do justice to all of the fine detail of what they contain in this short space. I begin with the way in which Lackey frames the discussion, and suggest an alternative approach, before offering some assessment of her account of group belief. I then discuss the crucial bridge to group speech (the group lie desideratum), before engaging with her positive proposals in that area, and briefly concluding.

Framing the Discussion

Lackey's aim in the first three chapters is to stake out and defend her own original position, or collection of positions, on the group attitudes under discussion, and to criticize alternatives. I will focus primarily on the case of group belief (chapter 1). Following Lackey's lead, we can say that eliminativists are those who think that groups do not really have beliefs – that although we say such things as that Volkswagen believed, in 2005, that its diesel vehicles were emitting up to 40 times the American legal limit of CO₂, these attributions are not literally (but only, perhaps, metaphorically) true. Lackey assumes, with much of the philosophical literature in this area, that this view is mistaken, and that realism about group belief is correct. She discerns two camps within this broad consensus: roughly speaking, there are those who regard group beliefs as simple aggregations of individual members' beliefs; and there are those who hold that something more than this is required for a group to believe something. In particular (and still very roughly), according to the influential (Lackey says 'orthodox') Joint Acceptance Account, a group believes a proposition if and only if (enough of) its operative members openly endorse it. This, however, treats group belief as too directly under the group's voluntary control.⁵ Moreover, this problem of voluntarism also afflicts related accounts of epistemically *justified* group belief, allowing groups to engage in the illegitimate manipulation of evidence, for instance, by jointly endorsing (or refraining from endorsing) – and so, on the accounts in question, believing (or failing to believe) – some proposition, thereby ensuring that they do (or do not) justifiably believe certain (potentially inconvenient) things (chapter 2).⁶ At the same time, Lackey wishes to avoid certain problems she points to in connection with more aggregative approaches, and to articulate and defend a middle ground, which she calls the 'Group Agent Account' (see below).

The discussion is framed from the outset in terms of what appears to be an important distinction: '*deflationary* theorists hold that group phenomena, such as group beliefs, can be understood entirely in terms of individual members and their states' says Lackey, while '*inflationary* theorists, maintain that group phenomena are importantly over and above, or otherwise

⁵ Officially, Lackey stays neutral about this objection – but the worry appears to underpin her own central objections from group lies and bullshit (see below), as well as the concern that the account fails to deliver the correct direction of fit for group belief.

⁶ As Lackey stresses, such things matter: 'if the Bush Administration justifiably believed that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, then not only did the Administration lie to the public in saying that it did, but it is also fully culpable for the hundreds of thousands of lives needlessly lost in the Iraq war.' (2020: 55) We would not want to let the Administration off the hook if it turned out that there was a meeting in which its officials cynically refused to jointly acknowledge the relevant evidence at their disposal!

distinct from, individual members and their states.’ (2020: 1) Unfortunately, this distinction is not entirely clear, even on its own terms. What does it take, for instance, for a phenomenon to involve something over and above individual members and their states? And what individual group member states can a deflationist legitimately appeal to? Is the answer relative to a particular group phenomenon, so that group belief must be understood in terms of individual belief, group justification in terms of individual justification, and so on? Or can other (non-corresponding) states be appealed to? And while the deflationist surely cannot appeal to relations individual members bear to the group itself, can they appeal to relational states that involve other group members? Or are only intrinsic states permitted? And do individual acts (e.g. of acceptance) count as ‘states’?

To make matters worse, the distinction does not figure centrally in the discussion of group belief (‘deflationism’ and its variants do not occur at all in chapter 1, and ‘inflationism’ occurs only once, in the chapter abstract), where the contrast between ‘summativism’ (‘group belief is understood as nothing more than the “summation” of the beliefs of the group’s members’ (Lackey, 2020: 12)) and ‘non-summativism’ (‘groups are regarded as entities with “minds of their own”’ (Lackey, 2020: 12)) takes centre stage. Yet it is not entirely obvious what the relation between the two distinctions is meant to be. (For instance, Lackey says, ‘the received view... is that group belief must be understood in non-summative or inflationary terms’ (2020: 12). Are the disjuncts here to be thought of as equivalent to one another or not?) Moreover, Lackey says that her own ‘view is neither strictly summative nor non-summative’ (2020: 20), raising the question of how a middle way can be found between a thesis and its negation! In fact, non-summativism as Lackey understands it is not the negation of summativism - it involves (is to be understood as the conjunction of?) a negative thesis (‘group belief cannot be understood, even in part, in terms of the beliefs of individual group members’ (Lackey, 2020: 12)) and a positive one (‘group belief should be characterized in terms of something that the members *do*’ (Lackey, 2020: 12)). Yet that in itself is confusing, and constitutes a poor terminological choice in my view. Unfortunately, such confusion surrounding the fundamentals of what is at issue in the debate infuses the entire discussion.

A Proposal for Reframing

It may be helpful to back up. How shall we understand the group phenomena in question? Lackey contends that groups are ‘collective entities’ (2020: 19) - by which I take it she means that they are things that have members. This seems right: perhaps not all things that have members are groups – maybe sets are not; but groups (as they will be understood here), like sets, are individuals that are distinct from their members. Notice, crucially, that this does not prejudge the (admittedly still somewhat vague) question of inflationism, since these collective entities might or might not be metaphysically independent of how things are with their members. In particular, groups might be either Cartesian substances, capable of existing independently of anything else (except God), or Aristotelian substances, which are simply subjects of predication, the existence of which might be entirely dependent on that of the existence and condition of their members. On this (collective entities) approach, groups will be (paradigmatically) referred to using singular terms such as ‘the jury’, while their members are (collectively) referred to using plural expressions, e.g. ‘the jurors’. And we can use this test to isolate the relevant group phenomena: for instance, we can say that the (grammatically singular) sentence ‘the jury believes Chauvin is guilty’ attributes a group belief to a collective entity, the jury; whereas ‘the jurors believe Chauvin is guilty’ (which employs grammatically plural forms) does not – it attributes belief to some individuals, the members of the jury.⁷

⁷ Admittedly, Lackey sometimes takes herself to be talking about groups when using bare plural expressions such as ‘women’ or ‘left-handed Northwestern students’. But such expressions are semantically subtle (figuring e.g.

Given this framework, we can regard the dispute between realists and eliminativists as concerning the truth *values* of simple (e.g. unnegated) group belief attributions: the former will allow that some such claims are true; while the latter will deny that any are.⁸ By contrast, we can characterize the dispute between deflationists and inflationists as concerned with the truth *conditions* of these claims: deflationists, we might say, are those who hold that group belief claims (e.g. about juries) are equivalent to the corresponding *plural* belief claims about group members (jurors); while inflationists are those who deny this, allowing the truth values of the two sorts of claims can come apart.

This approach has the consequence that inflationism and deflationism are not two species of realism, as Lackey would have it (she speaks of ‘the *deflationary* view..., according to which it is *literally true* that groups believe things, but such claims are made true entirely by individual members of the groups believing things’ (2020: 4; the first emphasis is hers, the second mine)). A deflationist as understood here (under the reframing) could deny that plural belief attributions are ever true - in which case they would be an eliminativist; and so would an inflationist (on the current conception) who insisted that the demanding (non-plural) truth conditions of group belief claims are never met.⁹

The approach also leaves open two distinct sorts of reason for being an inflationist. On the one hand, an inflationist might think that a given group phenomenon depends only on the states of individuals, but that the conditions of non-members are at least sometimes relevant – a strategy which, arguably, Lackey herself exhibits in connection with group assertion (see below). On the other hand, an inflationist of a primitivist bent might hold that group belief is a phenomenon which cannot be fully accounted for, or explained, in terms of individual states at all, even if we include those of non-members - that to understand it properly, one must avert to features of the group itself. (It might be views of this sort that license talk of groups having ‘minds of their own’ – see above; though this too is a subtle issue – maybe such talk is only appropriate for those who regard groups as metaphysically independent Cartesian substances, as well as ideologically primitive.)

We can further clarify matters, on this approach, by appeal to a well-known distinction from plural logic. If I say ‘they lifted a piano’, what I say is ambiguous between two readings: on the *distributive* reading, what I have said is true if and only if the people in question *each* (separately) lifted a piano – which is unlikely to be true (unless they are very strong); whereas on the *collective* reading, what I have said is true just in case they did so *together* – which might well (even if they are not). Summativism, then, appears to be the view that group belief claims are equivalent to distributive plural belief claims. This will leave room for in-house disputes (e.g. between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ summativists - cf. Lackey, 2020: 21) about whether all, most, or some members must believe something for the plural (hence group) claim to be true.

in generic claims, such as that platypuses lay eggs, which are notoriously difficult to theorize); and while it seems right to say that e.g. women form a group (though maybe not that they *are* one), it is less obvious that ‘left-handed Northwestern students believe that the campus is not suitably sensitive to their particular needs’ (cf. Lackey, 2020: 10) reports a group belief rather than individual ones. So perhaps we can set these expressions aside, and focus on more canonical linguistic representations of groups and their members.

⁸ In the case of individual belief, eliminativists will also typically hold that the attributions in question are not useful, while instrumentalists may say that the claims in question are useful despite being untrue. We can set aside such refinements here.

⁹ Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining the ambivalence of some theorists towards whether groups have beliefs (cf. Lackey, 2020: 4): they may be sure about what conditions are met, metaphysically speaking – not those required by the inflationist! - while being indifferent about what the truth conditions (and therefore truth values) of group belief claims are.

Group Belief: Structure Matters... But How?

With summativism so understood, Lackey's view is straightforwardly non-summative: for while she thinks that individual belief amongst (operative) group members is necessary for the truth of the group belief claim (and so, perhaps, that some plural claim about group members believing p must be true), she denies that this is sufficient for group belief. 'A group, G , believes that p ,' according to her Group Agent Account, 'if and only if: (1) there is a significant percentage of G 's operative members who believe that p , and (2) are such that adding together the bases of their beliefs that p yields a belief set that is not substantively incoherent.' (2020: 48-49) We can wonder whether clause 2 should be included in an account of group belief (are there no foundational group beliefs - ones that have no bases?) – but the present point is that it introduces (a) states other than individual beliefs, and indeed (b) states involving relations between group members into the mix, when it comes to evaluating group belief claims. Thus, Lackey is committed to group belief involving an irreducibly *collective* plural character.¹⁰ (Her account is also non-voluntarist, so she rejects the positive thesis she associates with non-summativism; but as we have seen, this thesis is best separated from non-summativism itself.)

Is the view deflationist? This is a delicate matter. On the one hand, Lackey seems to think that whether the group believes something depends just on how things are with the members (including relational ways for them to be). But on the other, she does not specify which group members are crucial to determining whether the group believes the thing in question in ways that are both precise and independent of the group itself. For instance, the notion of an operative member that Lackey borrows from Tuomela (1992) is understood in terms of occupying a position *within the group* (cf. Lackey, 2020: 26-27): thus, the account of group belief appeals to features of the group itself – which might be thought to be part of what makes (Tuomela's version of) the Joint Acceptance Account inflationary!¹¹

The distinction between operative and non-operative members seems crucial - it allows sensitivity to the fact that some members are more influential than others in causing (and therefore being responsible for) group actions. If the operative members of a company are those on the Board, and others are mere employees with little power, then (arguably) the former's views are more important in determining the group's beliefs. This can be seen with a simple thought experiment: imagine two possible worlds w_1 and w_2 , each containing a group G with precisely the same members, and in which those members have precisely the same beliefs. Nevertheless, what the group believes might differ between w_1 and w_2 : for suppose that individual a , who believes p is the CEO of G in w_1 , while b , who disbelieves p , is a lowly employee, yet in w_2 , it is a who occupies a lowly position and b who is the CEO; then it might turn out that G believes p in w_1 but not in w_2 . Group belief, then, does not depend on individual beliefs alone – group *structure* is also relevant (cf. Ritchie, 2020 for an account of the metaphysics of groups, though not their attitudes, that is sensitive to network structure).

¹⁰ Speaking about the relations between bases of belief, Lackey says they 'arise only at the level of the collective, and are crucial especially insofar as the group is able to function as an agent' (2020: 20). I agree on the first point. The second point, however, seems misplaced: the relations between the bases of the beliefs of individual members are likely relevant to how readily the group will abandon its belief; but it is not these relations per se that determine the group's ability to function as an agent as encoded in its beliefs. Accordingly, I am relatively unmoved by the considerations Lackey adduces around (both base and judgment) fragility.

¹¹Indeed, we might contrast Gilbert's (1989) version of the view in this respect – since it draws no distinction between operative and other group members, it is ultimately *deflationary* (in my estimation), despite its voluntarism. Or at least, it is so, if we allow that acts of acceptance can be amongst the states of individuals that are admissible. The fact that these acts are in some way relational – the acceptance must be overt, i.e. recognizable by *other* members of the group - only shows that we are not talking about a summative, or other form of distributive/individualistic view; it does not tell against the position being collectivist but deflationary.

Lackey might appeal to a purely causal (rather than role filling/positional) account of the difference between operative and other members, if she wished to maintain a deflationist position. The viability of doing so might be particularly apparent in the cases of animal groups, such as flocks or birds, and packs of dogs, which engage in group actions (e.g. migrating and hunting), but which have no formal, institutional positions.¹² But it is not clear that such a causal account of differential positions within a group would vindicate a distinction of kind between operative and non-operative members, rather than one of degree (between the more and less influential members).

Is there an argument to be made for an inflationist account of group belief – one on which a group can believe something though none of its members do? Perhaps. Lackey criticizes Bird's (2010) view of social knowledge (chapter 3), which allows for the analogous case of group knowledge in the absence of individual member knowledge, stressing that it conflicts with her view of group justification – though of course it also conflicts with her view of group belief, via the principle that knowledge entails belief. But rather than engage with the details of her discussion, let me simply suggest the kind of case that might motivate a pragmatist interested in group agents to embrace inflationism. Suppose we take seriously that beliefs are states that play a certain sort of causal role in producing actions (even if they cannot be functionally defined). Now consider an organization which needs to take an action in relation to a situation that has arisen, of a kind that occurs infrequently. Members of the organization may simply consult their policy on what to do about the case, and then act accordingly. The policy may have been written by someone who is no longer a member of the organization; and perhaps, prior to consulting the policy, no member had a view on what to do in such specific circumstances. Still, after the departure of the policy's author, and prior to its being read by current members, the organization was in a state (that of having a relevant policy) that was poised to cause action in the right way to count as its having a belief on the matter in question. (Indeed, it might be said that the organization then *knew* what to do in such cases, though none of its members did: consulting the policy might be for groups like the individual act of recalling something; and of course, what one recalls is something one knows.)

Transition: The Group Lie Desideratum

Let me begin to transition to a discussion of group speech/testimony. One of the central arguments for Lackey's brand of realism about group belief is presented in the introduction as follows:

1. *Groups lie.*
2. *Group lies cannot be understood without groups having genuine beliefs.*
3. *Therefore, groups have genuine beliefs. (2020: 5)*

One might expect that premise 2 could be recast as a conditional: if groups lie, then groups have genuine beliefs. This would make the argument clearly valid. But commenting on the argument, Lackey says, 'a lie... is an assertion that one does *not* believe oneself that is made with the intention to be deceptive' (2020: 5; my emphasis), and this suggests that lying requires only the *absence* of belief – a commitment which singularly fails to support the conditional version of premise 2. In fact, Lackey's own account of lying (in chapter 5 – see below) involves the claim that the speaker believes

¹² Lackey might maintain that she is not interested in such group agents, since her focus in the book is on those groups that are 'subject to normative evaluation' (2020: 12). But it seems to me that a univocal account of group belief that applies to both human and animal groups would be preferable if possible.

that the asserted proposition is false – which of course would verify the conditional rendering of premise 2. In any case, I find the reconstructed argument compelling.

But Lackey later presents a related argument, not in favour of the generic claim that groups have beliefs, but in support of her own account of group belief in particular, and against alternatives. More specifically, she articulates what she calls the:

Group Lie Desideratum: An adequate account of group belief should have the resources for distinguishing between, on the one hand, a group's asserting its belief that p and, on the other hand, paradigmatic instances of a group's lying regarding that p. (2020: 31)

Again, this seems right. And Lackey claims that her Group Agent Account meets this desideratum – as well as the related 'Group Bullshit Desideratum' (2020: 34) - while rival theories do not. Without engaging in detail with these further claims, allow me to simply note that Lackey says, 'condition (1) [of her account of group belief above] ... enables my view to satisfy the Group Lie and the Group Bullshit Desiderata' (2020: 49). And yet if we look at what that condition says (above), we see that it requires that (at least some) group *members* believe a given proposition, in order for the group to believe it – and this allows her to say in a particular case which she regards as causing problems for alternative views that the group does not believe the proposition at issue. Yet it is worth noting that it is possible to satisfy the desiderata in question without this commitment – an inflationist, for instance, could at least in principle do so (even if Lackey's arguments against specific versions of this view are successful).

Group Speech: Assertions and Lies

Let us turn now, more briefly, to the second part of Lackey's book, concerned with assertions and lies, which are under direct voluntary control. It takes a similar shape to the first. In chapter 4, Lackey criticizes (the relatively few) existing accounts of group assertion, and offers her own account: though in this case she is clear that her view is inflationary; in particular, she 'holds that a group can assert a proposition even when not a single member of the group does' (p.138). Central to her defence of this claim is the idea that a group can make an assertion through a spokesperson, who may not be a member of the group – as when a company hires a lawyer to stake out its legal position. Thus, the group can assert that p though none of its members do – a conclusion which seems to me well taken.

There are various niceties along the way. Lackey distinguishes coordinated and authority-based group assertion; she criticizes status function accounts of proxy agents such as spokespersons (cf. Ludwig, 2014), favouring a pluralist account instead; and she draws a distinction between rogue vs bad spokespersons, which serves to explain why in some cases in which someone appears to assert something on behalf of a group of which the group disapproves, it might be appropriate for the group to disavow the statement (claiming the group never made that statement - a rogue did), while in others retraction will be necessary (because it did make the assertion, despite disagreeing with it – the group has a bad spokesperson). Some of this strikes me as needlessly complicated: for instance, the first distinction seems to me to arise at the level of *how* the group manages to express a content in a locutionary act, not *what* they have done at the illocutionary level in doing so; thus, it is not ultimately a difference in kind of assertion. This does not, however, affect Lackey's main conclusion: what matters is only that *some* group assertions are effectuated by spokespersons who are not group members; this suffices to establish her inflationist claim.

In chapter 5, Lackey discusses group lies. The discussion is, to my mind, disappointing. Lying is just intentionally saying something false. Given the work done on group assertion in chapter 4, one might

have expected Lackey to recognize this piece of common sense, clarify it - 'saying' in this context means specifically (the illocutionary act of) *asserting*, not just (the locutionary act of) *articulating* - and then apply it to the case of groups, yielding an account of group lies as intentionally false group assertions. Instead, Lackey offers the following theory: 'A group, G, lies to B,' she says, 'if and only if (1) G states that p to B, (2) G believes that p is false, and (3) G intends to be deceptive to B with respect to whether p in stating that p ' (p.186), where one is deceptive with respect to whether p if one (does not merely withhold but actively) conceals information regarding whether p . Unfortunately, this account is formally incorrect: the propositional variable 'p' needs to be either existentially quantified on the right-hand side, or else parametrized on the left-hand side; but let's set aside this worry, as it is clear enough what is intended.¹³ Is it materially adequate? A problem may arise from clause 2. Clearly, (individual and group) agents can have *false* beliefs - including about whether p is false. Thus, on Lackey's account, a speaker lies if she erroneously believes that p is false and states (truly) that p while intending to be deceptive to her audience on this matter. The common sense account above, by contrast, regards such a speaker as having tried, but failed, to lie. This is, of course, consistent with her having been dishonest on this occasion - which is, no doubt, morally relevant; but it should not be confused with her having lied.

Conclusion

I have made a number of criticisms of detail above, arguing for a reframing of the debate around group attitudes, the importance of a graded account of the influence of structure in such matters, and the desirability of appealing to speech act theory when discussing group assertion and lies, amongst other things. These should not, however, be taken (individually or collectively) to detract from the value of the work Lackey has done in drawing attention to the importance of understanding group attitudes, such as belief and knowledge, and acts of assertion, including bullshit and lies, and in guiding theory in this area away from mistaken (e.g. voluntarist) approaches, and towards an action-oriented pragmatism that allows for attributions of responsibility. Her book provides an invaluable prompt for further work in this area, and will be essential reading for interested researchers.

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¹³ There is, however, a second formal worry. Can you really state something *to* someone? Isn't the verb 'to state' transitive, rather than ditransitive (when accompanied by a that-clause)?

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