

«...THIS PHENOMENON, WHICH IS NONE TOO HAPPILY DESIGNATED AS “EMPATHY”»
MARTIN HEIDEGGER’S CRITIQUE OF EMPATHY

Abstract:

Martin Heidegger offers an original and valuable contribution to the debate around empathy. In what follows I am going to provide an account of his critique of empathy in terms of mental transposition or projection, drawing on the resources from the early Freiburg courses, *Being and Time* and the *Zollikon Seminars*. This critique of the notion of empathy is rooted in an account of subjectivity conceived not as an isolated self, but rather as a *Dasein* ecstatically open, embedded in the world, and grounded in the ontological structure of *Mitsein*, and, more in general, in Heidegger’s critique of western metaphysics, especially the notion of the isolated ego as the foundational point of western philosophy. Finally, I will show how the intersubjective nature of *Dasein* as *Miteinandersein* is related to the issue of authenticity and has important consequences in our social life.

Keywords: Empathy, Ethics, Heidegger, Intersubjectivity, Medicine

1. *Empathy in Heidegger’s early writings*

In the field of Heidegger studies, the issue of empathy is very rarely addressed, mainly due to the scarce interest the author himself has shown in this theme. In what follows, I am going to provide an account of Heidegger’s critique of empathy in terms of mental transposition or projection and to show how Heidegger’s understanding of this theme underwent to decisive changes: from an early positive consideration of empathy (1919-1923), to a negative one (1925), and finally till arriving to a milder but critical position in *Being and Time* (1927).

Empathy was only of tangential interest in Heidegger’s early thought, among many others themes of Heidegger’s early thinking. If we go back to his lectures during his Freiburg period (1919-1923)¹, generally speaking we can say that the concept of empathy was considered in a positive way. As it has been underlined², his first philosophical confrontation with the issue of empathy dates back to the Winter Semester course 1919/20 entitled *The basic problems of phenomenology* and precisely in relation to his explanation of the concept of “manifestation” (*Bekundung*), considered as one of the basic structures of factual life: «Conceiving of empathy as a form of *Bekundung* is in perfect agreement with Husserl’s own interpretation of empathy as an appresentation of the alter ego grounded on the immediate givenness of his expressive body as such»³.

Another work in which we can trace his considerations on empathy occurs in the Winter Semester course 1920/21, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, where he raises the issue of understanding Saint Paul’s situation after his arrival in Corinth in writing the letters to the Thessalonians: «Now we [...] see the situation such that we write the letter

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¹ As it is well-known, during these years the debate around the notion of empathy was vigorous in Germany. Coined and initially used in 1873 in the domain of aesthetics by Robert Vischer, the notion of *Einfühlung* was later taken over by Theodor Lipps (1851-1914), who introduced it into the field of social cognition to designate our basic capacity for understanding others as minded creatures. After Lipps’ death, Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein and Max Scheler provided a critical account of Lipps’ notion of empathy, underling its limits through different perspectives. The English translation “empathy” was coined by Wilhelm Wundt’s student Edward Bradford Titchener.

² Ferencz-Flatz (2015).

³ Ivi, p. 484.

along with Paul»⁴. How can we experience Saint Paul’s condition and disposition? In other words, how can we empathize with him? Heidegger writes:

The problem of empathy does not budge as long as one grasps it epistemologically. But the motive of the problem of empathy is not epistemological at all. Empathy arises in factual life experience, that is to say, it involves an original-historical phenomenon that cannot be resolved without the phenomenon of tradition in its original sense. Today the environment of Paul is entirely foreign to us. But what is crucial for us is not the material character, the ideational of his surrounding world. This moment falls away entirely; the environment first gains its sense out of the understanding of the situation⁵.

A bit further, Heidegger states that the empathy problem is posed, for the most part, epistemologically, and is therefore misguided in its starting point⁶. It seems that he finds on the side of epistemology the weak point of any discourse on empathy, since the way of access to others’ experiences is posed from the side of epistemology and not from a phenomenological perspective: «Epistemology falls prey to an endless quibbling over the relations between the “subject” and the “object”, consecrating a schema of thought which Heidegger considers the chief obstacle preventing the phenomenological reflections of his day from gaining true access to factual life by constantly throwing pseudo-problems in its way»⁷.

This epistemological framework is also at the core of his strong critique of empathy in the lecture course of the summer semester 1925, entitled *History of the Concept of Time*. Here, Heidegger does not hesitate to state that the problem of empathy «is just as absurd as the question of the reality of the external world»⁸. In this context, he is still dealing with the dualism between object and subject, now conceived in terms of the others and the environing world in which they are embedded. This dualism collides with the structure of *Dasein* especially when it is required to know the world and to get access to it: «How does knowing, which according to its being is inside, in the subject, come out of its “inner sphere” into an “other, outer sphere”, into the world?»⁹. To avoid any confusion as if there are these two distinct spheres (inner and outer), Heidegger states that «knowing the world is a mode of being of *Dasein* such that this mode is ontically founded in its basic constitution, in being-in-the-world»¹⁰. It is precisely in the context of being-in-the-world as it is developed in *Being and Time* that Heidegger will most often mention empathy, generally with a pejorative accent.

2. Heidegger’s critique of empathy in *Being and Time*

To understand Heidegger’s critique of empathy, we need to recall his meditation of the basic structures of *Dasein* and the strong critique of every form of dualism. If we try to step out from his technical terminology, we may claim that according to his account the self is never isolated nor put in front of a world in a kind of dualistic view, but rather it is always disclosed and ecstatically¹¹ opened, embedded into the world which requires it to deal with certain concerns and preoccupations. It is precisely this original openness of the everyday *Dasein* that founds a concept of intersubjectivity (*Miteinandersein*) where the *Dasein* is always *being-in* and *being-with*. As we can read in the 1923 summer semester

⁴ Heidegger (2004), p. 61.

⁵ Heidegger (2004), p. 59.

⁶ Ivi, p. 61.

⁷ Ferencz-Flatz (2015), p. 488.

⁸ Heidegger (1985), p. 243.

⁹ Ivi, p. 160.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 161.

¹¹ The notion of *ekstasis* is used in this context as a synonym of openness, disclosedness.

lecture titled *Ontology. Hermeneutic of Facticity*, «the being-there of Dasein (factual life) is being in a world»¹².

In the twelfth paragraph of the second chapter of the *Being and Time*, Heidegger clarifies what he means with being-in: far from being a property typical of all entities ready at hand, the being-in of Dasein is an existentials: «'Being-in' is thus the formal existential expression for the Being Dasein, which has *Being-in-the-world* as its essential state»¹³. But *Dasein* is also characterized by another ontological structure: the *being-with* (*Mitsein*): Dasein is always a being-with the others, and this independently from the fact that the others are perceived, visible, close to me: «Dasein as Being-with lets the Dasein of Others be encountered in its world. . . Only so far as one's own Dasein has the essential structure of Being-with, is it Dasein-with as encounterable for Others»¹⁴. In its being-in and being-with, Dasein deals with the many concerns of everyday life, related to things as ready-at-hand, and to people: in the first case, the commitment of Dasein to care for things is called *Besorgen*, *concern*, while in the second it is called *Fürsorge*, *solicitude*, an essential element for the being of the Dasein; both the attitudes have to do with the possibility of Dasein of being free¹⁵.

At the end of the twenty-sixth paragraph of *Being and Time*, entitled «The Dasein-with of Others and Everyday Being-with», Heidegger introduces a discussion on empathy. There, we read: «This phenomenon, which is none too happily designated as "empathy" [*Einfühlung*], is then supposed, as it were, to provide the first ontological bridge from one's own subject, which is given proximally as alone, to the other subject, which is proximally quite closed off»¹⁶. For Heidegger, empathy serves as a bridge from one's own feeling, thought, or experience to another subject, as if empathy allows the projection of one's own feeling, for example, "into" another subject, closed off from the original perceiver: «In Being with and towards Others, there is thus a relationship of Being [*Seinsverhältnis*] from Dasein to Dasein [...]. The relationship of Being which one has towards Others would then become a Projection of one's own Being-towards-oneself "into something else"»¹⁷. His understanding of empathy as a projection into other's mind, as a form of mental transposition into other subjects, «pertains solely to a deficient mode of "being-with-one-anther", since it involves an elaborate *manoeuvre* of comprehension in order to 'get' to another subject, which is only required because we usually live among one another in a mode of reciprocal indifference and concealment»¹⁸. For Heidegger empathy is not a primordial existential phenomenon and does not represent a theme of proper philosophical investigation; rather, it compromises the genuine understanding of Dasein in its original constitutions of the being-with-the-others and the being-in-the world. As such, «"empathy" does not first constitute Being-with; only on the basis of Being-with does "empathy" become possible: it gets its motivation from the unsociability of the dominant modes of Being-with»¹⁹.

However, this is just a part of the story. It is in the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, when he addresses the issue of boredom, that Heidegger faces the issue of transposing oneself into other's experience. A bit later along the course, he asks a question very close to the function of empathy: «Can we as human beings transpose ourselves into another human being?»²⁰. Here, once again, the expression "transpose . . . into" underlines his understanding of empathy, from a mere cognitive and hypothetical perspective, opposed to an ontological and existential one. The act of mental transposition

¹² Heidegger (1999), p. 62.

¹³ Heidegger (1962), p. 80.

¹⁴ Heidegger (1962), p. 157.

¹⁵ Brencio (2022), (2014).

¹⁶ Heidegger (1962), p. 162.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Hatab (2002), p. 255.

¹⁹ Heidegger (1962), p. 162.

²⁰ Heidegger (1995), p. 201.

does not mean the factual transference of one existing human being into the interior of another being. Nor does it mean the factual substitution of oneself for another being so as to take its place. On the contrary, the other being is precisely supposed to remain what it is and how it is. Transposing oneself into this being means going along with what it is and with how it is. Such going-along-with means directly learning how it is with this being, discovering what it is like to be this being with which we are going along in this way [...]. Consequently, this self-transposition does not mean actually putting oneself in the place of the other being and displacing it in the process. However clear this negative injunction may seem, the positive interpretation of self-transposition that is frequently offered is nonetheless misleading. It is said that of course there is no question of any actual transporting oneself into another being, as if we could somehow vacate our own position and directly fill out and occupy the place of that being. The transposition is not an actual process but rather one that merely transpires in thought. And this in turn is easily understood to mean not an actual transposition, but an “*as if*”, one in which we merely act as if we were the other being²¹.

Here Heidegger seems to anticipate, even if with different ontological premises, the critique toward the simulation theory, especially in relation to empathy. The Simulation Theory (ST)²² is a theory of how we understand others’ minds and how we can reach an empathetic response. According to the simulation theory, «other minds are known by reference to a first person model that we form of their experience: understanding others means to run an inner simulation of their behavior, thus creating an “as-if” mental state which then has to be somehow projected onto the other»²³. In other words, the so-called primary empathy and social understanding are regarded as projections onto others of inner representations²⁴.

But let’s go back to Heidegger’s understanding of transposition. The self-transposition does not consist in our «simply forgetting ourselves as it were and trying our utmost to act as if we were the other being. On the contrary, it consists precisely in we ourselves being precisely ourselves, and only in this way first bringing about the possibility of ourselves being able to go along with the other being while remaining other with respect to it»²⁵. It is in this context that Heidegger states how expressions like “self-transposition” and “empathy” play a dominant role in describing human being’s fundamental relationships to beings, both animals and things. While according to him is not possible to transpose oneself into a stone, it possible that in certain contexts and situations «other human beings on average comport themselves to things exactly as we do ourselves»²⁶. It is possible, says Heidegger, that people go with (*Mitgang*) others in their understanding and access to things, but it is also true that in the everyday activities this possibility appears very difficult, and «so seldom [we] find ourselves really able to go along with them»²⁷. Heidegger is not denying the possibility of a human being transposing themselves into others but, rather, is stressing that this possibility already and originally belongs to man’s own essence, that is in its being with the others:

This possibility already and originally belongs to man’s own essence. Insofar as human beings exist at all, they already find themselves transposed in their existence into other human beings, even if there are factually no other human beings in the vicinity. Consequently the Dasein of man, not exclusively but amongst other things, being transposed into other human beings. The ability to transpose oneself into others and go along with them, with the Dasein in them, always already happens on the basis of man’s

²¹ Heidegger (1995), p. 202, my italics.

²² Goldman (2006); de Vignemont (2009).

²³ Fuchs (2013), p. 657.

²⁴ Fuchs (2017).

²⁵ Heidegger (1995), pp. 202-203.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 205.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

Dasein, and happens as Dasein. [...] The question concerning whether we human beings can transpose ourselves into other human beings does not ask anything, because it is not a possible question in the first place. It is a meaningless, indeed a nonsensical question because it is fundamentally redundant to the extent that being human means being transposed into the other, means being with the other. The question concerning the factual realization of such being-with-one-another is not a problem of empathy, nor a theoretical problem of self-transposition, but is a question of factual existence. From our discussion of this question, and especially of this latter one, we also saw how the erroneous theory of empathy and everything associated with it could possibly arise in the first place²⁸.

According to Heidegger, every theory of empathy starts with the assumption that «man is first of all an isolated being existing for himself»²⁹ and as a consequence we need to find a bridge «from one human being to another and vice-versa»³⁰; but this is just «an illusion reinforced by the philosophical dogma that man is initially to be understood as subject and as consciousness, that he is primarily and most indubitably given to himself as consciousness for a subject»³¹. This illusion is according to Heidegger the result of the long metaphysical tradition that from Cartesian philosophy to Hegel's thinking, passing through Kant's meditation, aims to put the isolated ego at the center of philosophy, as the point of departure of western philosophical tradition: «On the basis of a fundamentally inadequate metaphysical conception of man (as ego) and of human personality, Kant and his successors appeal to the notion of absolute person or absolute spirit, and then attempt to determine the essence of man in turn on the basis of this inadequate concept of spirit»³². Ultimately, the issue concerning the possibility of transposing oneself into others' experience is not an epistemological problem, rather a metaphysical one.

At this point, a decisive question seems to be urgent: if Heidegger is “against” a cognitivist account of empathy, does it mean that there is no room for such a concept and practice in his thought? The answer is no. In *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (1919-1920), Heidegger asks if any experience we are committed to has an inner reference to the I, a certain mineness³³ (*Jemeinigkeit*) related to the experiential dimension. His answer is that in every experience a certain reference to myself is present, which requires a self already embedded into the factual life-experience and implicated in all the intentional behaviors, primarily encountered in and through our engagement in the world. In the 1927 lecture series, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, he stresses the relationship among the self, *Dasein*, and the world, affirming that disclosing a world is always already a self-finding enterprise. And in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, we read: «To be in the mode of a self means to be fundamentally toward oneself. Being towards oneself constitutes the being of *Dasein* and is not something like an additional capacity to observe oneself over and above just existing»³⁴. The intentional directness toward the world and the things is a co-disclosure of the self, linked to intentionality. We can say that we find ourselves primarily as a worldly situated self, and the self-acquaintance is never detached from our ontological constitution. On the contrary, it happens through non-reflective character as an expression of factual life-experience, whose foundational character is represented by the *Mitsein*³⁵.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Heidegger (1995), p. 206.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Heidegger (1995), p. 208.

³³ The mineness is also what characterizes authenticity and inauthenticity: «As modes of Being, authenticity and inauthenticity (these expressions have been chosen terminologically in a strict sense) are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness» (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68).

³⁴ Heidegger (1984), p. 189.

³⁵ On the reception of Heidegger's account of empathy there are different positions. Lawrence Hatab described empathy as an “ekstatic being-in-there-with-the-Other, [an] empathic concern as a fundamental

Just one year after *Being and Time*, in the course entitled *Introduction to philosophy* (1928) he states: «If this word [empathy] is at all to retain a signification, then it is only because of the assumption that the “I” is at first in its ego-sphere and must then subsequently enter the sphere of another. The “I” does not first break out . . . since it already is outside, nor does it break into the other, since it already encounters the other outside»³⁶. What is important to clarify is that Heidegger is not denying the possibility of understanding others’ experiences; rather, this possibility is ontologically already present in the fundamental characterizations of *Dasein* such an extent that it does not require the any projection or simulation. Against any cognitivist approach to empathy, Heidegger reaffirms the primacy of the ontological constitution of *Dasein* as *Mitsein* on every mental act understood as a mere transportation into someone else’s mind.

3. Empathy in the context of Zollikon Seminars

The pathway from the early lectures in Freiburg to the experience of the seminars in Zollikon was the pathway Heidegger’s own life, not only of his thinking. The analysis of *Dasein*, as it is described in the first section of *Being and Time*, is recovered also in the *Zollikon Seminars*, a series of seminars delivered between 1959 and 1969 in front of an audience of doctors, psychiatrists, and analysts in the Zollikon house of Dr. Medard Boss. In this context, all the participants were physicians, psychiatrists, or psychologists with varying amounts of philosophical education. Each year, from the beginning of 1959 to 1969, Heidegger devoted his time and energy to “train” fifty to seventy participants, two to three times each semester. He spent three hours, two evenings a week, with the guests. These seminars were a testament to one of Heidegger’s strongest hopes: that there is the possibility of a dialogue to inaugurate between a new and alternative thinking – the so-

element of *Dasein*’s social world” (Hatab, 2002, p. 256). This ecstatic account of empathy is not a continuative condition of *Dasein*’s everyday life, but, rather, it is a rare and occasional possibility: «There can be moments of spontaneous, direct, affective responses, wherein we are immersed in/there/with the other person: we might wince, or tears might well up, or sadness might come all in direct response to what is seen/sensed/felt in and from the person’s words, tones, gestures, facial expressions, and body language» (*ibidem*). In these moments the reflective or self-conscious activity are not at work in our relationships. We are simply there for another fellow human, sharing and participating in his or her emotions, feelings, thoughts, fears, and experiences. Lou Agosta provides an extensive account of Heidegger’s understanding of empathy through the lens of the hermeneutic circle. In this way, all the key existential structures of being in the world, such as human affectedness, understanding, interpretation, and speech, are considered in their mutual relationship. The careful reconstruction of Heidegger’s use and refuse of empathy guides the author into a broad discussion of how a hermeneutics of empathy may enrich the interdisciplinary dialogue with psychoanalysis (Agosta, 2010). Some suggestions of an Heideggerian account of empathy are also provided by Kevin Aho. According to him, the experience of empathy is always mediated in advance by a temporally structured familiarity with the other; the other, to some extent, already matters and makes sense to me. Thus, for Heidegger individual experiences such as empathy are themselves made possible by *Dasein* (Aho, 2009, p. 66.). Dan Zahavi devotes an extensive clarification of Heidegger’s understanding of empathy, highlighting how he was the only phenomenologist to question the primacy of the empathic encounter. A Heideggerian account of intersubjectivity requires a simultaneous analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and world, in their mutual interconnection. As such, Heidegger’s consideration of intersubjectivity is “beyond empathy”: «The empathic approach [...] still misconstrues the nature of intersubjectivity, since it takes it to be, first of all, a thematic encounter between individuals, wherein one is trying to grasp the emotions or experiences of the other. [...] However, the very attempt to thematically grasp the experiences of others is the exception rather than the rule» (Zahavi, 2005, p. 165). In his account of intersubjectivity Heidegger emphasizes the social and cultural embeddedness of intersubjective understanding. On this, Zahavi seems to agree with the Sartre’s critique since Heidegger’s stand «misinterprets our original relationship to the other as an “oblique interdependence” rather than as a “frontal opposition”» (*ivi*, p. 192). However, the most critical interpreter of Heidegger’s stand on empathy is Ludwig Binswanger: «By presenting this ontological connection, Heidegger has banished entire libraries on the problem of empathy, the problem of perceiving the foreign as such, the problem of the “constitution of the foreign I”, and so on, to the realm of history, for what the latter want to furnish proof of and explain is always already presupposed in the proof and the explanations; the presupposition itself can neither be explained nor proven, but rather only ontologically–phenomenologically “disclosed”» (Binswanger, 1953, p. 66).

³⁶ Heidegger (2001), p. 145.

called meditative thinking, in contrast to the metaphysical one – and medicine, in order to train physicians in a different way: that is, in a non-metaphysical one.

In the context of the seminars in Zollikon Heidegger stresses his critical consideration of empathy: «The often quoted psychological theory of empathy rests on this obviously incorrect concept. This theory starts by imagining an Ego in a purely Cartesian sense – an Ego given by itself in the first instance who then feels his way into the other – thus discovering that the other is a human being as well in the sense of an alter Ego. Nevertheless, this is a pure fabrication»³⁷. In this context, the critique of empathy is tied with the critique of the Cartesian ego, or in other words, of subjectivism. Descartes transformed the embodied self into a disembodied thinking substance, a *res cogitans*: «In modern metaphysics the certainty of all the reality and its truth is based upon the self-conscience of the “I”: “*ego cogito ergo sum*”. It is starting from this point (the relationship between the “I” and reality, on the basis of the thoughts that I think, therefore I exist) that Western metaphysics thinks of subjectivity as the fundamental certainty of what “I am”. According to Heidegger, this is also what turns Western philosophy into anthropology. [...] Consequently, philosophy becomes an expression of the “subjectification” of being, in which everything is regarded in terms of its relation to our consciousness»³⁸.

And again, in the *Zollikon Seminars*, the Heideggerian understanding of empathy in the field of psychology is grounded on his notion of *Mitsein*:

The traditional, psychological theory that one perceives another human being through “empathy” and through “projection” of oneself into the other does not mean anything because the ideas of empathy and projection always already presuppose being-with the other and the being of the other with me. Both already presuppose that one has already [existentially] understood the other as another human being; otherwise, I would be projecting something into the void³⁹.

Stepping outside from the Heideggerian terminology, if we are allowed to use the word empathy in his meditation, we may say that empathy is not a feeling, neither a projection; rather it is a mode of disclosure of the ethical commitments human being has with itself, with the others, and with the world conceived as natural world. The intersubjective foundation of Dasein does not close it into a mentalistic view through which we can understand others’ experiences; rather, it breaks the boundaries which make the self isolated. This means that the intersubjective nature of the Dasein as *Miteinandersein* has important consequences in our social life⁴⁰. Here I am referring to the notion of authenticity conceived as an openness toward our original finitude as it emerges from our being-toward-death⁴¹, «including the vulnerability of its basic commitments»⁴². Authenticity unveils how the self cannot be separated from the world in which it is embedded: it is up to Dasein’s ability to take commitments and sustain them, to its ability to deal with concerns and to care for the others, to be responsible of the world and care for it, to face anxiety and fear. In Heidegger’s words: «Solicitude (*Sorge*) proves to be a state of Dasein’s Being – one which, in accordance with its different possibilities, is bound up with its Being towards the world of its concern, and likewise with its authentic Being towards itself»⁴³.

Authenticity founds freedom, as a mode to unveil what matters or not to our life, what provides meaning to our existence and, with Heidegger’s words, what is the truth of our existence: «This authentic disclosedness shows the phenomenon of the most primordial truth in the mode of authenticity. The most primordial, and indeed the most authentic,

³⁷ Ivi, p. 111.

³⁸ Brencio (2021), p. 129.

³⁹ Heidegger (2001), p. 162.

⁴⁰ Schatzki (2005).

⁴¹ Young (1998).

⁴² Kaüfer (2021), p. 71.

⁴³ Heidegger (1962), p. 159.

disclosedness in which Dasein, as a potentiality-for-Being, can be, is the truth of existence»⁴⁴. Ethical implications of Heidegger’s notion of authenticity are connected with the *Miteinandersein* of Dasein, that is with the social interrelatedness of our constitution, and they may illuminate the way we live, act, believe, build our relationships and a community, our sociality.

Following these arguments, we may affirm that Heidegger’s account of intersubjectivity and the *Daseinsanalytik* as an indication of a hermeneutics of facticity may contribute to enriching the dialogue among phenomenology, hermeneutic, social sciences and also health care. Perhaps this is the most fruitful legacy of Heidegger’s thinking: leaving open every interrogation about the meaning of our existence, both as living and social beings.

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⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 264.

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