

**KELLY'S PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY
AND DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM:
SOME DIRECT AND SOME 'INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT' ASPECTS**

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This paper is intended as a companion paper to two others focused on the links between Pragmatism and George Kelly's theory of personal constructs: Butt's (2005) discussion of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), and McWilliams' (2009) account of the ideas of William James (1842-1910). Given that much of what has been said about Pragmatism and PCP in these last papers, and also in Warren (1998, 2003) applies almost equally to Dewey, the present paper attempts to present a different perspective and to highlight lesser known matters that are hopefully not only interesting in their own right but also raise similarities and points of contrast between the intellectual careers of Dewey and Kelly.

Thus is here presented a discussion of some aspects of the ideas and career of a thinker long identified with North American Pragmatism, in the light of Kelly's (1955/1991) comment that Dewey's "philosophy and psychology can be read between many of the lines of the psychology of personal constructs" (p. 154/108). The discussion is necessarily selective, and in the context of a focus on the historical and theoretical origins of PCP. Its aim is to provide a fuller sketch of the wider climate of ideas to which both Dewey and Kelly were subjected as their scholarly work and their careers developed.

Key words: *personal construct psychology, pragmatism, Kelly, Dewey*

**CONTEXT: DEWEY AND KELLY IN
TIME**

Scholarly works

John Dewey (1859-1952) was appointed to a Chair of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy in 1904, insisting that the name of the Chair be as it was because of his conviction that the three disciplines it describes were inherently connected. He published a good deal of his major work before George Kelly (1905-1967) was an adult. Kelly was appointed to a Chair of Psychology in 1945, later to a Chair of Clinical Psychology (1946), both at Ohio State University, and then to a Chair of Theoretical Psychology at Brandeis University in 1965. Kelly's major work was published in 1955, though with a gestation period between 1930 and that publication date. Dewey's significant work in the period of Kelly's childhood, infancy, and adolescence in-

cluded: *The Reflex Arc in Psychology* (1896), *The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge* (1897), *The School and Society* (1900), *The Influence of Charles Darwin on Philosophy* (1910), *Democracy and Education* (1916/1966), *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). During Kelly's early adulthood Dewey published significant further work: *How We Think* (1910 originally, revised 1933), *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), *A Common Faith* (1934), and *Experience and Education* (1938). In a number of cases there were republications of the earlier works and revised editions in the period in which Kelly's own ideas were taking shape. As will be developed below, Dewey and Kelly also shared a more general social-intellectual milieu, one in which Dewey was a very significant and controversial figure. This significance and controversy turn around two matters: Progressive Education, and Dewey's social activism.

Progressive education

Kelly's early years studying and working in the field of educational psychology corresponds to what is identified as the 'progressive era' (1917-1957), spawned by what Cremin (1961) calls the 'progressive impulse' (1876-1917). The 'impulse' was constituted by a *zeitgeist* in which the ideas of Rousseau, Marx, Darwin (particularly Social Darwinism), Herbert Spencer, and Freud were resonating in Europe and had reached North America. Thus, too, was the psychologist William James (1899/1907) writing to teachers as the centrality and magnitude of the activity that is education was being recognized as having a vital function of ensuring social-cohesion. Dewey's (1900) *The School and Society* recognized this as did his later *Democracy and Education* (1916/1966) and there were numerous other voices that were formed into a full voiced choir of opinion, argument and experimentation that challenged North American education at its core. The formative role in relation to this choir was played by Joseph Mayer Rice, and the main choirmaster was John Dewey. Rice, a pediatrician who had become disturbed by the children he saw whose problems arose from the social conditions in which they lived, wrote an analysis of the parlous state of North American schooling and education. As Cremin (1961) tells us, Rice's articles in *The Forum* (between 1892 and June, 1893) were to constitute the catalyst for a revolution in thinking. Generally, he argues, progressive education originated in the wider "humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life – the ideal of government by, of, and for the people" to the urban-industrial civilization that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century (Cremin, 1961, p. viii). For him, "progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals" (Cremin, 1961, p. viii). The crucial points here are a stress on the social dimensions of life (influenced by the ideas of Marx and Social Darwinism, then Mead in particular), on the idea of a 'social science' (the new sciences of Sociology and Psychology), and on 'the practical' (American Pragmatism), combin-

ing as a coalition against ignorance and the threat of social divisiveness and fragmentation.

Progressive Education is captured well as to its essential features by Kneller (1964/1971): education should be centered on the *learner's needs and interests*, involve the learner *cooperating* rather than competing with others, and *actively involved* in the process, in respect of which process the *problem-solving project* was the 'gold standard' example, in a context where a teacher was a *mentor or guide* not an imparter of knowledge, that context (e.g. a school) being run *democratically* with learners having an equal voice with their guides or mentors. In Dewey's version of these features, there are no such things as 'subjects', as the world comes at us not as bits or lumps that are Geography or Mathematics etc., but as a 'blooming buzzing confusion' out of which *we* make a sense; though the sense we make is not completely arbitrary. All of these ideas sit very well with personal construct psychology.

Cremin's wider argument is that the Progressive Education Movement represents "a crucial chapter in the history of recent American civilization" and that "to ignore it is to miss one whole facet of America's response to industrialism" (p. ix-x). Thus, by the time Kelly was engaged in the general milieu of education – teaching, research, dealing with 'difficult students' – progressive ideas were 'in the air', and Dewey if not *the* mentor of the Progressive Movement, certainly a very significant influence within it. Indeed, an emphasis on the social dimensions of education, particularly a view that society could be 'restructured' using the schools, was controversial; it particularly annoyed those who had just fought a war, and would fight another, to *preserve* the *existing* lifestyle. Dewey did not accept the ideas of the Social Reconstructionist School of the Movement which had raised the question "dare the schools build a new social order?" This lack of support for 'harder Left' ideas was despite Dewey's social activism and his involvements in many social and political causes, such as women's suffrage, the unionization of teachers, his involvement in organizations encouraging social and cultural relations with Russia and Latin America, as well as his

championing of academic freedom. He had also, at some personal risk and aged in his late seventies, gone to Mexico to Chair the Committee established in 1937 to review the Moscow trial of Leon Trotsky, which concluded that, in essence, Trotsky had been 'framed'.

These last interests and involvements, in addition to his general social-critical commentary, account for the creation of an FBI file on Dewey (Beineke, 1987). This file shows three periods of active interest: 1930, during WWII, and after his death in 1957. The first two periods reveal concerns about his friendly relations with Russia and his visit there in 1928, and his membership of organizations with the foci indicated above. Material from the third period was only partly released and shows simply that the then FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, requested a review of the file, but the reason for that review and what he did with that summary is not known. A significant amount of this latter material was not released as of 1987, but a notation that President Harry Truman had congratulated Dewey on his ninetieth birthday appears twice (Beineke, 1987, p. 51)! Just how significant this last notation is can perhaps be gleaned from two others appearing elsewhere in the files: "subject's writings are numerous, involved, and complicated. Reading them is as task", and, concerning a physical description, "Carelessly combed gray hair ... Disheveled attire ... Retired, mild mannered gentleman ... Wears spectacles ... Monotonous drawl... Drooping moustache" (Beineke, 1987, p. 48). The national security importance of these observations is not exactly apparent.

Interestingly, in terms of Kelly's rural origins and early life, Dewey (who had similar origins) laments the demise of the rural community as the US moved to the new 'urban-industrial complex' style of life. The cohesiveness, sense of community, a closer to 'real life' that this community expressed and provided, was lost, and Dewey saw an alienating, destructive-competitive form of individualization emerging. This had the potential to fracture the cohesiveness of American society; which society still had recall of a bitter civil war little more than a half century earlier. That children, when asked questions like 'where does milk, or a woolen coat, or meat, etc. come

from?' might answer 'from a shop' was but a relatively trivial example of the distancing of people from the origins of things in real, practical activity of human beings in their efforts to live, and to survive at a higher than mere subsistence level. Again, Kelly's three early ('juggled') jobs -- with bankers, in an Americanization class for would-be citizens, and in language classes for labor organizers -- could hardly not have provided first-hand experience of these tensions that the progressive educator in general, and Dewey in particular, were highlighting and of which they were warning. Kelly's MA in 1927 (*One Thousand Workers and Their Leisure*) attests to his interest in social issues, just as do his PhD (*Common Factors in Reading and Speech Difficulties*) and his earlier Bachelor of Education Degree, evidence his interest in research and thinking in the field of education (Zelhart and Jackson, 1983; Fransella, 1995); the last to be extended through his University appointment. Moreover, he would have been unlikely to have not been aware of Dewey's general critical social commentary and his work in at least the 1930s and 1940s in the type of organizations that had raised the interest of the FBI. Equally, Dewey's views concerning the importance of labor organizing itself, of teachers becoming unionized, and of the specific organizations developed to effect that organization, were unlikely beyond Kelly's awareness.

We can thus locate Kelly in a general social-intellectual context where education was more broadly conceived than it had been both as to the activity itself in its various forms, styles, and processes, and in terms of its connection to the wider life of the individual in society. The essential features of progressivism writ large are summarized by Cremin (1961) as schools taking on a much wider program and responsibilities (embracing pupils' health, work, family and community life), the application of principles of teaching and learning emerging from the new social sciences and psychology, adapting practices to individual needs of children drawn now from a wider social class base and evidencing a wider range of ability. Underpinning all of this was the belief that "culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that eve-

ryone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences but in the pursuit of the arts as well" (p. viii-ix). It has been argued elsewhere that PCP assumes -- and needs to assume for its particular understanding of the idea of 'mental health' -- a democratic form of social life, 'democratic' understood in psycho-social terms (Warren, 1996). This is a credible argument and to the extent that it is there is a clear compatibility between PCP and these views as to what education should be about.

DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM AND KELLY'S PCP

Given earlier observations concerning existing work in relation to Dewey, Pragmatism and PCP, this section concentrates on two of Dewey's ideas that have had relatively less extensive attention and which are consonant with the present discussion: *growth* and *ideas as instruments*.

'Growth': The 'natural tendency' and the essence of education

A particular notion within progressive education and elaborated most fully and forcefully by Dewey is *growth*. It is here that, whatever the general debt Kelly has to Dewey, a more specific link can be discerned. Moreover, this link itself tightens the connection to pragmatism, particularly as Dewey was to develop it in his own thinking.

Dewey's pragmatism, like that of others of this movement, derives from the view that our thinking, the ideas we have and understandings we develop are all grounded in and by the practical problems of life and the practical requirements of life and living. Dewey, though, is concerned to relate this fact to the activity in which human beings engage and call 'education', and this is coupled with his contention that the three disciplines of Philosophy, Psychology and Education are so intimately connected. As he says:

"... philosophical problems arise because of widespread and widely felt difficulties in social practice. ... [wherever] a system [of philosophy] becomes influential its connection with a conflict of interests calling for some program of social adjustment must always be discovered. At this point the intimate connection between philosophy and education appears. ... when philosophical issues are approached from the side of the kind of mental disposition to which they correspond, or the difference in educational practice they make when acted upon the life situations which they formulate can never be far from view. ... If we are willing to conceive of education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men (sic), philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education" (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 328)

That interconnectedness between the practical activities of human life in which learning is -- and education ought to be -- grounded, is, in turn, interconnected with Dewey's particular form of pragmatism. As indicated elsewhere (Warren, 1998, 2003), the development of Pragmatism from the early ideas of C.S. Peirce to William James, to Dewey, saw three different concepts emerge. In the event of this emergence, Peirce was to use the term *pragmaticism* of his own position, allowing James to keep the term *pragmatism*, while Dewey distinguished his position as *instrumentalism*. The differences between these terms turn essentially around what each of these thinkers was endeavoring to elucidate; as Gallie (1952) has it, James was focused on the individual's thinking, Peirce on the essential character of all thinking.

For Dewey (1916/1966), *growth* does not imply a lack of something in the (immature) individual (or other animate entity) that is to 'grow' under particular circumstances. Rather, it is to be thought of as a potentiality or power. That power is based in two chief aspects of immaturity, *dependence* and *plasticity*. Dependence was a positive, not a negative feature evidenced by the fact that babies and children do not lapse

into an ever increasing parasitism, but, rather, are very well endowed with a power to “enlist the cooperative attention of others” (p. 43). This, in turn, for Dewey again denotes a power rather than a weakness because of its social significance; it activates and energizes the social level because it involves *interdependence*. Further, this idea of growth as a natural feature of the life of any organism, points up the significance of adaptability or what Dewey calls *plasticity*. By the last term he means not merely ‘fitting in’ to circumstances, but the ability to learn from experience, “to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation” (p. 44). Critically, this involves the power to modify actions next time on the basis of the results of previous experience; the power to develop *dispositions* and, in turn, *habits*. The latter can become ‘fixed’ and thus exert a hold over us, or ‘bad’ when they are severed from reason and intelligence. Routine habits -- as important as they can be -- represent the loss of plasticity, our power to vary our responses in our search for an appropriate, effective way of dealing with a new situation. The habits and dispositions that involve an intellectual element will be less likely to become so fixed that they impose “ruts, routine ways, with loss of freshness, open-mindedness, and originality”. The context of these ideas was a discussion concerning education and Dewey’s conclusion was that, since “growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (p. 53).

The ‘beyond itself’ that was the focus of thinking was discussed in Dewey’s *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* (1917) where his idea of growth as the principle of life is given specificity. In this work he argues that

Anticipation is ... more primary than recollection; projection than summoning of the past; the prospective than the retrospective. Given a world like that in which we live, a world in which enviroing changes are partly favorable and partly callously indifferent, and experience is bound to be prospective in import; for any control attainable by the living creature

depends upon what is done to alter the state of things. Success and failure are the primary "categories" of life; achieving of good and averting of ill are its supreme interests; hope and anxiety (which are not self-enclosed states of feeling, but active attitudes of welcome and wariness) are dominant qualities of experience. Imaginative forecast of the future is this forerunning quality of behavior rendered available for guidance in the present (p. 13).

With this prospective outlook in play, recall of the past and speculation about it, providing what others call ‘knowledge’, has to be seen rather as an instrument for predicting the future by way of forming hypotheses drawn from the past, for test in the future.

Ideas as ‘instruments’

From quite early on in his academic career, Dewey was critical of the ‘passivity’ of the image of human beings reflected in the ‘reflex arc’ notion that underpinned the discipline of Psychology by the late 1800s. Dewey argued in his *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896/1972), that this notion was timely and important, but incorrect. It was timely because the new science of Psychology was generating so much information that challenged previous generalizations and classifications as to require a new unifying principle. The idea of the reflex arc as a general working hypothesis, he felt, came closer than any other to meeting this requirement. However, it was an incorrect way of representing the phenomenon it was attempting to illuminate, still too much connected to the older psychology it sought to replace, but needing not to be rejected -- thereby restoring the older psychology -- but, rather, corrected.

The reflex arc accounted for behavior by conceptualizing a three-fold process in which a sensation (sense impression) gets the attention of a passive organism and becomes an ‘idea’, which generates an action; three separate, or ‘separated’, “disconnected existences” (p. 100). For Dewey, this has not sufficiently disposed of

the classical dualism between body and mind which is echoed in the S-R dualism of sensation-motor action. What is missed is the fact that what is in process starts not with the sense impression but with sensori-motor coordination, "the real beginning is with the act of seeing; it is looking, and not the sensation of light" (p. 97). Thus Dewey proposes that the reflex arc be understood as describing a "fundamental psychical unity" in which "sensory stimulus, central connections and motor responses ...[function] not as separate entities, but as divisions of labor, functioning factors, within a single concrete whole" (p. 97). Dewey was illustrating his discussion here with the phenomenon of the child seeing a candle flame, grasping it and being burned. A different, more graphic example of Dewey's point concerning the role of coordination is given, however, when he is responding, critically, against an account of consciousness as (merely) 'reactive'. The example given was that of a loud noise being heard and one's consciousness 'reacts':

If one is reading a book, if one is hunting, if one is watching in a dark place on a lonely night, if one is performing a chemical experiment, in each case, [a] noise has a very different psychical value; it is a different experience (p. 101)

For Dewey, the interaction of the organism with its world originates in the natural activity of 'seeking', which organizes and coordinates what otherwise looks like entities that have been called 'stimulus' and 'response'. These early ideas serving as criticism were to see S-R theory developed into a more complex position, but that development never quite rebutted the criticism and it ultimately gave way to a focus on the workings of the 'black box' that gave us the so called 'cognitive revolution' in psychology. In the circuit to which Dewey refers, the coordinating function which embraces itself and the merely apparently separate 'stimulus' and 'response', acts as an 'instrument'. Hence his notion of the 'idea' as something with which we 'work on' the environment; an 'instrument'.

Dewey called his form of pragmatism *Instrumentalism* to stress more clearly than had Peirce and James the nature of ideas, and of thinking which uses them, as that with which we work on the environment. Not just any idea or any environment but, rather, an environment which is not immediately or automatically yielding to our needs and interests, and an idea or set of them which originates in response to that failure to yield. As he puts it in his discussion of the influence of Darwin on philosophy (Dewey, 1910): "... the holding of an end in view and the selecting and organizing out of the natural flux, on the basis of this end, conditions that are means, *is* intelligence" (p. 43). As did Hegel who had influenced his early work and whose thought arguably did not entirely disappear from his thinking, Dewey rejects a dualism of 'theory' and 'practice'. There are no 'pure ideas' existing in some mental realm divorced from the real world, but all ideas begin with something we want to do and it being 'blocked' in the world that confronts us. Thus, "we estimate the import or significance of any present desire or impulse by forecasting what it will come or amount to if carried out; literally, its consequences define its *consequence*, its meaning or import" (Dewey and Tufts, 1908, p.302).

We have here, in Dewey's more general ideas, in the intellectual milieu they shared, and in these two specific ideas of *growth* and *instrumentalism*, some very clear links to what was to become PCP. This all serves to illuminate Kelly's observation that the ideas of John Dewey could be read between the lines of PCP. There is a shared conviction, not particularly novel in contemporary thought, that the human person has to be thought of as active in an ongoing process involving the development of capacities to move and act in and on the world, to reflect, and to grow in understanding. The notion of the mind as essentially a process, a process of growth in understanding, and a significant medium of that growth being the social world in which one is embedded, is clearly consistent with a PCP. Further, Dewey would appear not to be troubled by PCP's view of the person as a 'scientist', one whose laboratory can be taken as 'the world'. Or, again, both Dewey and PCP

likely untroubled with a view drawn from Schleiermacher's *hermeneutic phenomenology*, that that world provides a 'text' for us, a text for us to interpret (Warren, 2000).

Kelly's notion of a *construct* is highly compatible with Dewey's notion of an idea as an *instrument*, as is Dewey's notion of thinking with Kelly's construct system. Thus as a final brief point of contact between Dewey and Kelly and another thinker, is Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) also worth noting as a further point of interest for the historical focus here in view. Kelly's Experience Cycle, Dewey's account of thinking, and Herbart's Teaching Steps, are all highly compatible accounts of the processes of thinking and learning in and from the environment we inhabit. Thus, drawing on Meyer, (1939, p. 49), and noting Dewey's early interest Herbart, we can map both Dewey and Kelly also to Herbart (refer Table 1). As well as being a thinker generally significant to the educational milieu in which they found themselves, Herbart is a thinker who Kelly also mentions and who may have had more to offer than Kelly thought. Kelly felt that Herbart might have benefitted from the notion of personal constructs existing in multi-dimensional networks (Kelly, 1955, p. 305) in explicating Herbart's notion of *apperception*, a concept that, equally, has significance for the organization corollary (Warren, 1998). Of a number of different senses of the term *apperception*, the significant one here is referring to the mind's conscious reflection on the inner state of that mind. This sense became better known through Herbart's philosophy and psychology, and more particularly through his educational ideas. He used the term to refer to a process of assimilating the mass of sense experiences that filled the mind -- a mass that was composed in part of contradictions and incomplete or vague ideas -- to some sort of order or system with which the mind dealt with new experiences. The mind was conceived of as an active unity and the creative activity of mind that was apperception was conceived as a kind of 'mental breathing', as natural and inherent to the organism as was physical breathing (Warren, 1998)

The alignments look like this:

Table 1: A comparison of the steps in Kelly's 'Experience Cycle' with Dewey's process of thinking, and Herbart's steps in the process of effective teaching.

Experience Cycle	Dewey's 'Thinking'	Herbart's Teaching Steps
Anticipation	Problematic Situation	Preparation
Investment	Isolation of data	Presentation
Encounter	Reflection	Comparison
Confirmation/Disconfirmation	Testing in Action	Generalisation
Constructive Revision	Hypothesis becomes 'fact' or otherwise	Application

All of the last observations accepted, at least one critical note might, however, be sounded. An early and perceptive discussion of the significance of Dewey's ideas was added to our topic by Novak (1983) who focused on the extent to which personal construct psychology offered something to educators by way of a significant alternative to behaviorism in the classroom. In that discussion, Novak identified similarities and tensions between Dewey's philosophy and Kelly's theory. He agrees that the broad idea of the natural tendency in humankind to formulate and test hypotheses is highly compatible between the two positions and makes an interesting comment about the titles of two works. These works were Dewey's (1938), *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, and Bannister and Fransella's (1971) *Inquiring Man: The Theory of Personal Constructs*. However, he suggests we look beyond the similarities and finds that while Dewey's general emphasis on scientific thinking meshes well with Kelly's *person-as-scientist*, on the one hand Kelly goes further than Dewey, just as the later work of Dewey may ask something more of Kelly. Kelly goes beyond Dewey's philosophy

by providing “a tool, the personal construct, for analyzing and extending the personal process of ‘sciencing’” (1983, p. 327). The later Dewey, however, he saw as stressing two aspects that Kelly may have overlooked. The first was that Dewey was concerned with the “qualitative immediacy of perceptions” and their significance to real practical imperatives of here and now living. The second was that that last significance, and the adequacy of a perception formed, was tied very closely to others: “For Dewey, humans certainly enquire, but inquiry is vitally connected to the qualitative immediacy of perceptions and the social necessity for collective intelligence” (Novak, 1983, p. 327). Thus, too, does Novak challenge with the question of how much of Dewey’s thinking about democracy and his stress on freedom and inquiry, toleration of a diversity of viewpoints, and so on, is found in Kelly? In the quarter-century since Novak’s caution, the matters he raised have been pursued by thinkers within PCP. Not only has the necessity of a truly democratic society and egalitarian outlook been argued as lying ‘between the lines’ of PCP, but also the social dimensions of construing well acknowledged (Warren, 1998). A more nuanced understanding of the ‘Dewey connection’ is also being elaborated by discussions of PCP and different aspects of phenomenology, with which perspectives Dewey has clear affinities (Chiari and Nuzzo, 1996, 2004; Butt, 1998, 2005; Warren, 1998, 2000; Domenici, 2008)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is customary to finish a formal discussion with some form of summary and conclusion, but the foregoing discussion warns against such finality. Ideas of change and growth and of a mind actively engaged with the world, particularly and importantly a world of ‘others’ equally as much engaged in the same activity of making sense of that world, ought signal caution. Thus is offered but three simple points as to what is construed here as the significance of the foregoing discussion(s). First, some people find the historical and theoretical origins of ideas to be interesting. That is, they value the history of ideas, and establish-

ing the ‘location’ of any theory/theorist in the intellectual milieu that shaped them and their mentors and peers. Second, such ‘locating’ stresses that ‘no person is an island’, and this can ground a plea for mutual social-cultural understanding, thus deepening one’s individual understanding and meaning-making. Third, the nuanced nature of intellectual effort emerging from the same or similar intellectual milieu attests to the preservation of notions of *individuation* and *agency*, notions which are too easily lost in a contemporary world in which sameness and acquiescence would seem to be the imperatives.

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