UNIT 11: SKEPTICISM OF SCEPTICISM

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- explain what skepticism is
- distinguish between knowledge skepticism and justification skepticism
- distinguish between global and local skepticism
- explain the role of skeptical hypotheses in Descartes' skepticism
- explain and evaluate different kinds of skepticism;
- analyse the role of doubt in philosophy.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

When we say that a person is skeptical, what is generally meant is that that person is not easily convinced and doubts any claim that is not well-founded. Skepticism is also a term which is used for a philosophical school of thought. Skepticism as a school of thought had its origin in ancient Greece. We all have doubts about some areas of alleged knowledge, although these doubts will vary among persons and groups. Accordingly, philosophers and

others have long debated the limits, the scope, of human knowledge. The more restricted we take the scope to be, the more skeptical we are. So, if we restrict knowledge claims to claim about our subjective experience, for example, we are very skeptical. Famous skeptical debates in philosophy have concerned knowledge of, among other things, the mind independent world, other minds, inductive inferences, historical events, and unobservable entities countenanced by science.

11.3 WHAT IS SKEPTICISM

While most of us are skeptical about some knowledge claims, skeptical arguments in philosophy try to show that we do not know or are not justified in believing many of the things we ordinarily assume we know or reasonably believe. These arguments often conclude that we do not know or are not justified in believing anything about the external world, or the past, or other minds

Skepticism comes in many forms. We may distinguish skepticism about knowledge from skepticism about justification. Skepticism about knowledge denies that people have, or can have, certain kinds of knowledge. Skepticism about justification denies that people are, or can be, justified in believing certain sorts of things. One can be skeptic about knowledge without being skeptic about justification. One might hold that people are justified in believing various sorts of things, but maintain that the level of justification people have for believing those things is not high enough for knowledge. One might hold, for example, that people are somewhat justified in believing many things about the external world, but deny that these beliefs ever reach the level of justification needed for knowledge. Similarly, one might be a skeptic about justification without being a skeptic about knowledge. Suppose, for example, one held that knowledge does not require justification, but only reliably produced true belief. One might deny that beliefs of a certain kind were justified, but still amounted to knowledge.

We can again distinguish between global skepticism and local skepticism. Global skepticism about knowledge denies that we do, or can, have any knowledge at all. If global skepticism about knowledge is true, then no one knows anything at all. But again, if global skepticism about knowledge is true, then no one knows even that this skeptical claim is true. Moreover, if global skepticism were true, then no belief in it could be based on premises which are known. In contrast, local skepticism about knowledge holds that we do not, or cannot, have knowledge about some particular domain, such as knowledge about other minds, the past, or the external world. The local skeptic need not deny that we have some kinds of knowledge. Such a skeptic might allow, for example, that we know our own mental states and some simple logical truths. Similar is the case with global and local skepticism about justification. So, for example, if global skepticism about justification were true, no one would be justified in believing it. If global scepticism were true, then no one would have any good reason for accepting it; no one would be justified in believing any premises which support it.



ACTIVITY: 11.1

- What is your own opinion on the concept of skepticism? Discuss

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- Distinguish between global and local skepticism. Discuss

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1:State whether the following statements are true or false

a. Skeptical arguments often conclude that we can know or are justified in believing anything about the external world, or the past, or other minds

b. One can be skeptic about knowledge without being skeptic about justification.

c. Local skepticism about knowledge denies that we do or can, have any knowledge at all.

d. If global skepticism about justification were true, no one would be justified in believing a proposition.

11.4 DIFFERENT KINDS OF SKEPTICISM

With respect to global skepticism, there are various important schools. First, there is the ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism (associated with the work of Sextus Empiricus). Pyrrhonian skepticism employs techniques instead of arguments in trying to undermine claims to know. Second there is Cartesian skepticism (associated with Descartes). Crucial in this type of skepticism is the use of skeptical hypothesis to cast doubt on much of what we ordinarily think to know. Third, there is Humean skepticism (associated with the work of Hume). This kind of skepticism is put up by considerations about the limit of inductive knowledge.

11.4.1 Pyrrhonian Skepticism

In the Hellenistic period a kind of skepticism developed which was advocated by the Pyrrhonians (the disciples of Pyrrho of Elis, c. 360-270 B.C.E). The central claim of the Pyrrhonians was that one should not advance any philosophical thesis; they maintained that they did not know whether knowledge was possible. The most famous of the Pyrrhonian

skepticism was Sextus Empericus. According to the Pyrrhonian, we can claim knowledge only if we have good grounds for believing that what is, is exactly as we think it is or perceive it to be. But we are never aware of any object as it is independent of us. We are always aware of objects as it stands in relation to us. Therefore we cannot know how any object really is in itself. For example, when we think of an object we think of it as possessing the qualities which we have perceived. But the question remains whether the object has only those qualities or does it have additional qualities which are not known to us? It may also so happen that the object has fewer qualities than which we have perceived. There is no way of confirming which are the qualities that are really have had by the object. The senses cannot tell which qualities are really and which are not there in the object. And as the senses cannot tell, the mind too cannot tell.

St Augustine refuted total or global skepticism on three grounds: First, skepticism is refuted by the Principle of non-contradiction. According to this principle, a proposition and its contradiction cannot both be true one of the other must be true. The propositions "The stick is bent" and "It is false that the stick is bent" cannot both be true. Thus we can at least know this much that the man is not both tall and not-tall. Second, Augustine held that the act of doubting reveals one's existence as something absolutely certain: from the fact I am doubting, it follows automatically that I am. Finally, Augustine also held that sense perception itself gives rudimentary kind of knowledge. According to him, deception in sense perception occurs when one "gives assent to more than the fact of appearance." For example, in the case of perception of bent stick immersed in water, the stick appears bent at the point when it enters the water. If we agree only to the appearance of the stick and consequently say that it looks bent, we do not commit any mistake. It is only when we say that stick is actually bent that we commit error.



ACTIVITY: 11.2

- What is the basic claim made by the Pyrrhonian skeptics? Discuss

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- Is it possible to compare the knowledge of an object as it is and knowledge of it as related to us? Discuss

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Fill in the gaps

a. The school pf Pyrrhonian skepticism is named after ….. of. ……
b. The most famous of the Pyrrhonian skeptics is……..
c. Augustine refuted skepticism on …… grounds.
d. The first principle on which Augustine refuted skepticism is principle of …….
e. From the fact that 'I am doubting' it follows automatically that 'I ……'

11.4.2 Cartesian Skepticism

Historically, Descartes' skepticism is one of the most two influential skepticisms, the other being Pyrrhonian skepticism. His doubt can be applied universally to all that can be doubted. Descartes discusses his skepticism in his book Meditations. Descartes was concerned with skeptical questions as to the possibility of knowledge. However, he was not a skeptic. In fact, Descartes' aim was to formulate a unified science of nature that was as certain as mathematics. His doubt or skepticism was methodic. It was methodic in the sense that Descartes employed skepticism as a method of

achieving certainty. He started with doubting everything. His idea was that if everything was doubted, whatever was left that could not be doubted anymore would be absolutely certain. Then he would enquire into what it is that made this absolutely certain such that it cannot be doubted. This was supposed to reveal the criterion of certainty. With this criterion than he would measure what could be accepted as truth and what would fall short of truth.

To doubt every proposition, Descartes employed two skeptical hypotheses: possibilities of error that are both incompatible with what we think to know and that cannot be subjectively distinguished from normal circumstances. The first is the dream hypothesis and the second is the evil-demon hypothesis.

One can doubt everything that has been given through the senses. Senses sometimes deceive us regarding the nature of things. However, here it can be objected that from it we are not supposed to conclude that we cannot have knowledge through senses. For, there are instances of perception, for example, regarding my knowledge about my body right now, where we do not doubt our knowledge, that is, we do not think that we are deceived. But, Descartes said, for all I know I may now be dreaming - this is Descartes' dream hypothesis. It might be the case that the perceptual experiences that I now I am having are mere dreamt experiences. This may look at the first sight to be capable of being disproved easily. But let us look into it more closely. I pinch myself to ensure whether I am dreaming or not. But the next question that would arise is whether I am dreaming that I am pinching myself. The awareness I am having that I am awake now may also be a dream experience. There is no evidence which can conclusively tell me that my experiences are not dream but real experiences; nothing to tell me that all the things that I see in front of me have existences outside my mind.

However, the dream hypothesis is not applicable in certain cases. It may be argued that even if I am dreaming, there are still many things which

cannot be doubted. For example one cannot doubt even when one is dreaming that two plus three make five; that a square can never have more than four sides. These propositions seem absolutely certain to me. In other words, such propositions do not seem to be affected by doubt as 'advnetitious ideas' (derived through the senses) seem to be. Empirical propositions, one may say are doubtful while analytical propositions are not so. But it is possible to doubt even such analytical propositions. Some propositions that have seemed absolutely certain to me on certain previous occasions turned out to be false later. So, in these cases too I cannot the possibility of the propositions turning out to be false later. For it is possible that a deceitful and all powerful intelligence has so programmed me that I find myself regarding certain propositions as absolute certainties which are as a matter of fact false. This is Descartes' evil demon hypothesis.

The two skeptical hypotheses are incompatible with ordinary experiences and Descartes was very much aware of it. In fact this is what Descartes wanted to show. Descartes was looking for that kind of certainty which will escape even the kinds of possibilities falsehood as presented by skeptical hypotheses. Descartes put to test everything he knew against these two possibilities, singly or together. When he did that he found that whatever he had been considering as certain till that time turned to be something he could doubt, except one thing: he found that he could doubt everything to save the indubitable truth of "I think, therefore I am" -cogito ergo sum.

According to Descartes, one could doubt everything but any attempt to doubt one's existence as a thinking being is impossible, because to doubt is to think and to think is to exist. What Descartes meant was that the self that doubts its existence must exist to be able to doubt in the first place. Descartes examined his single indubitable truth to find out what guarantees its certainty and saw that it is 'clarity and distinctness which lends a proposition its immunity to doubt. Descartes discovered in the certainty of

his own existence an essential characteristic of certain truth: anything that was clear and distinct as his own existence would be certain.

Descartes' approach to the problem of certainty and knowledge is characteristic of rationalism. Whatever may be their differences, the rationalists agree that sense experience is untrustworthy and that certain knowledge is to be obtained by exercise of pure reason. Descartes seems to be claiming to have discovered certainty in both 'objective' and 'subjective' sense. When he equated existence with thinking he claimed certainty in the objective sense, while criterion of 'clarity and distinctness' can be considered as an example of subjective certainty. But unfortunately Descartes' own interpretation regarding cgito ergo sum is ambiguous. If the cogito is regarded as an inference of some kind, then it can be argued that it commits the error of arguing in a circle. The 'I' of 'I am' is already pre-supposed in the 'I' of 'I think'. Any necessity it possesses is a matter of logic which has nothing to say about actual existent things.

Descartes says that as long as he is doubting (thinking) the certainty of the cogito is assured. Now there are certain occasions when he is not thinking. Does he have any guarantee that he continues to exist as a potentially thinking thing at that time? Descartes does not give any clear explanation regarding this.



ACTIVITY: 11.3

- Can we regard Descartes as a skeptic? Discuss

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: State whether the following statements are True or false:

a. Descartes discusses his skepticism in Meditations. (True/False)

b. Descartes' aim was to formulate a unified science of nature that was as certain as mathematics. (True/False)

c. One cannot doubt anything that has been given through the senses. (True/False)

d. 'Cogito ergo sum' means 'I am, therefore I think'. (True/False)

11.4.3 Humean Skepticism

Hume is one of the best known philosophers who proposed skepticism (Treatise On Human Nature; An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding). One important element of his skepticism is that it is motivated by considerations about the limits of knowledge based on induction. According to Hume, inductive arguments are never justifying and the central problem is how we can ever have a non-circular or non-question-begging justification for our use of it.

Since the time of Descartes, most philosophers have distinguished between propositions of mathematics and statements about the empirical world. Hume referred to these propositions as Relations of Ideas and Matters of Facts respectively. The first kind of propositions expresses a relation between numbers or geometrical figures. According to him, they are intuitively or demonstratively certain. Their truth can be discovered by the operation of thought - it does not depend on anything of the world. Matters of fact are quite different from them. Firstly we can deny them without contradiction (whereas we cannot deny the truth of 'two and two make four'). Secondly their truth seems to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. But how do we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect? This truth, says Hume, is attained by experience and not by a priori

reasoning. It is true that we can trace particular effects back to general causes, for example, gravity. But common human curiosity does not enquire into these principles. What then is the foundation of all conclusions from experiences? What justifies the inference from past conjunction of cause and effect to similar conjunction in the future? The reasoning involved here is not 'demonstrative, that is, it does not involve logic. It is also not inferred intuitively. The only alternative left is that the justification lies in the supposition that the future will resemble the past. But how will we know this without arguing in circularity? To take a concrete example: Let us assume that an object, say bread, exhibiting sensible qualities like colour weight and so on, possesses 'secret powers' which nourish us. Because a cause (secret power) has always been followed by a particular effect (nourishment) in the past, we argue that eating of bread will nourish us in the future as well. There would be no contradiction in denying this as 'relation of ideas' is not involved here. now if we claim that we know that bread will nourish us when next we eat it, it is only because we are assuming the truth of the general proposition 'All future conjunctions of causes and effects will resemble past conjunctions of similar causes and effects. But how can this be known without begging the question? Thus, for Hume we do not know that the future will resemble the past. What we have is just belief.

According to Hume, we also do not have intuition of a power or necessary connection between cause and effect. The idea we have of necessary connection is derived from imagination and our experience of uniformity in sequence of events.

Hume's conclusion is that we can have knowledge of mathematical propositions to of statements derived from them by means of deductive inference and the sciences, which deal with general facts. Thus he rules out theology, ethics, aesthetic, and metaphysics as constituting legitimate fields of knowledge.

Hume himself was dissatisfied with the conclusion his arguments led him to. But still Hume's skepticism is regarded to be example of superior

argument. Hume distinguished firstly between 'antecedent' and 'consequent' skepticism. In the former we start by doubting everything and then look for some certain, infallible criterion to provide the basis of knowledge - in Descartes' case it was the cogito. Hume's position was one of consequent skepticism, which involved a thorough-going examination of the reliability of human faculties. But whether one's skepticism is of antecedent type of consequent type, Hume rejected extremism, which he regarded as self-destructive. He was aware of the consequences for the philosophers if his assumptions and arguments were followed through to their logical conclusion. Hume thought there is no answer to skepticism, but skepticism should be ignored outside the study. As an ordinary man he dines, plays a game of backgammon, converses and is merry with his friends. But when after these amusements, he returns to his philosophical speculations they appear 'cold', 'strained', and 'ridiculous.

Hume believed that we cannot help but believe skepticism to be false, even when presented with most convincing arguments. We have natural or instinctive belief in the existence of external bodies, continuous selves and real causal connections in nature. We have to believe in such entities for our daily living. But for Hume we are dealing here with probabilities: we do not have knowledge in the strict sense. The reason for this is that Hume regards belief as result of our natural impulses rather than as something regulated by reason.



ACTIVITY: 9.4

- What do you understand by 'antecedent' skepticism? Give your viewpoint

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Fill in the gaps

a) One important element of Hume' skepticism is that it is motivated by considerations about the limits of knowledge based on…….

b) According to Hume, ……..are intuitively or demonstratively certain.

c) The truth of Matters of Facts seems to be founded on the relation of ……..

d) According to Hume, we also do not have intuition of a power or…… between cause and effect.

e) Hume regards belief as result of our……..rather than as something regulated by reason.



11.5 LET US SUM UP

- What is generally meant by skeptical is that the person is not easily convinced and doubts any claim that is not well-founded. Skepticism is also a term which is used for a philosophical school of thought which had its origin in ancient Greece.

- Skepticism comes in many forms. We may distinguish skepticism about knowledge from skepticism about justification. Skepticism about knowledge denies that people have, or can have, certain kinds of knowledge. Skepticism about justification denies that people are, or can be, justified in believing certain sorts of things.

- We can again distinguish between global skepticism and local skepticism. Global skepticism about knowledge denies that we do, or can, have any knowledge at all. In contrast, local skepticism about knowledge holds that we do not, or cannot, have knowledge about some

particular domain, such as knowledge about other minds, the past, or the external world.

- Pyrrhonian skepticism employs techniques instead of arguments in trying to undermine claims to know. According to the Pyrrhonian, we can claim knowledge only if we have good grounds for believing that what is, is exactly as we think it is or perceive it to be. But we are never aware of any object as it is independent of us. We are always aware of objects as it stands in relation to us. Therefore we cannot know how any object really is in itself.

- Descartes employed skepticism as a method of achieving certainty. He started with doubting everything. His idea was that if everything was doubted, whatever was left that could not be doubted anymore would be absolutely certain. Then he would enquire into what it is that made this absolutely certain such that it cannot be doubted. This was supposed to reveal the criterion of certainty. With this criterion than he would measure what could be accepted as truth and what would fall short of truth.

- Humean skepticism put up by considerations about the limit of inductive knowledge. It is motivated by considerations about the limits of knowledge based on induction. According to Hume, inductive arguments are never justifying and the central problem is how we can ever have a non-circular or non-question-begging justification for our use of it. But we have natural or instinctive belief in the existence of external bodies, continuous selves and real causal connections in nature. However, for Hume we are dealing here with probabilities: we do not have knowledge in the strict sense.

- Skepticism leads to criticism of knowledge. Skepticism doubts the possibility of knowledge. But, the human mind finds it difficult to go on doubting. Human mind starts enquiring into the limits and conditions of knowledge. And, enquiry into the limits and conditions of knowledge is

what epistemology does. In other words, criticism of knowledge means epistemology. As such, any system of philosophy based on epistemological reflections may be called critical.

- The way Kant presents his analysis of process of knowledge has been described as Criticism. Kant himself stated that Criticism is the philosophy which criticizes and examines everything before reaching a definite judgment and finds out the limit of knowledge before trying to know anything.

- Kant selected certain doctrines of the rationalists and certain doctrines of the empiricists and put them together into his own philosophy. He incorporated elements of rationalist and empiricist thought but he changed those views to have their meanings and implications altered and created a new approach, which he called critical philosophy.

- A priori does not mean knowledge which is explicitly present in the mind before it has begun to experience anything at all. It means knowledge which is not derived from experience though it makes it appearance only on the occasion of experience.

- The term 'a posteriori' means 'known posterior to experience', or 'known dependently on experience'.

- Analytic judgments are those in which the predicate is contained, at least implicitly in the concept of the subject. They are said to be 'explicative' judgment because the predicate does not add to the concept of the subject anything which is not already contained in it, explicitly or implicitly.

- Synthetic judgments unlike analytic judgments affirm or deny of a subject a predicate which is not contained in the concept of the subject. Therefore, they are called 'ampliative' or 'augmentative judgment', because they add something to the concept of the subject.

- In all synthetic judgments something is added to the concept of the subject. A connection is affirmed between predicate and subject but in such judgment the predicate cannot be got out of the subject by mere analysis of the subject. Now this connection may be purely factual and contingent: it is then given only in and through experience. And when this is the case the judgment is synthetic a posteriori.

- According to Kant there is a class of synthetic propositions, in which the connection between predicate and subject, though not knowable by mere analysis of the concept of the subject, is nonetheless necessary and strictly universal. These are called synthetic a priori propositions.

- Synthetic a priori are to be found, in the first place, in mathematics. Similarly the propositions of geometry are also synthetic a priori propositions. In the second place, synthetic a priori propositions are also found in physics.

- Metaphysics aims at extending our knowledge of reality. Its propositions must therefore, be synthetic. At the same time, if it is not an empirical science, its propositions must be a priori. It follows, therefore, that if metaphysics is possible; it must consist of synthetic a priori propositions. But the claim of metaphysics as a science is in doubt.

- Kant believes that the human reason is naturally impelled to raise problems which cannot be answered empirically and as such one can ask how metaphysics, considered as a natural disposition is possible. But Kant doubts whether the claim of metaphysics to constitute a science is justified - the question here is really whether metaphysics considered as a science is possible.

- Kant solved the problem of the synthetic a priori judgment by substituting a new hypothesis concerning the relation between the mind and its objects. He suggested the hypothesis: 'Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to ascertain anything about them a priori by concepts, and thus to extend

our knowledge, came to nothing on this assumption. Let us try the, whether we may not make better progress in the task of metaphysics if we assume that objects must conform to our knowledge. This at all events accords better with the possibility which we are seeking, namely of a knowledge of objects a priori, which would determine something about them before they are given to us.'

- Kant's Copernican revolution does not imply the view that reality can be reduced to the human mind and its ideas. He is not suggesting that the human mind creates things, as far as their existence is concerned, by thinking them. What he is suggesting is that we cannot know things, that they cannot be objects of knowledge for us, except in so far as they are subjected to certain a priori conditions of knowledge on the part of the subject.



11.6 FURTHER READING

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2) Fogelin, R. 1994. Pyrrhonian reflections on Knowledge and Justifications, Oxford: Oxford University Press

3) Hume, D. Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals ed. P. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

4) Kant, Immanuel. 1929. Critique of Pure Reason trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press

5) Dicker, Georges. 2004. Kant's theory of knowledge; an analytic introduction. Oxford University Press,

6) Guyer, Paul (ed.) 2006. The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern philosophy. Cambridge University Press

9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: a) False b)True c) False d) True

Ans to Q 2: a) Pyrrho/ Elis b) Sextus Empiricus c) Three

a. Principle of non-contradiction b) Am

Ans to Q 3: a) Yes b) Yes c) No d) No

Ans to Q 4: a) Induction b) Relations of Ideas

c) Cause and effect d) Necessary connection

e) Natural impulses

11.8 MODELQUESTIONS

A. Short Questions

Q 1: What do you mean by Pyrrhonian Skepticism?

Q 2: Define skepticism

Q 3: What is global skepticism?

Q 4: What are the different kinds of skepticism?

Q 5: Who wrote the book Meditations?

Q 6: What are the two skeptical hypothesis put forward by Descartes?

Q 7: State the meaning of Cogito ergo sum.

Q 8: Who is the author of essay concerning human understanding?

B. Short Questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q 1: Write a short note on Copernican revolution.

Q 2: Distinguish between analytic and Synthetic judgments.

Q 3: What is skeptical hypothesis? Explain in brief.

Q 4: Do you find any distinction between 'Antecedent' and 'Consequent' skepticism? Briefly discuss.

Q 5: Briefly explain the distinction between a-priori knowledge and a-posteriori Knowledge.

Q 6: What are the distinctions between Global and local skepticism? Explain briefly.

Q 7: What are three grounds on which St. Augustine refuted total or global skepticism? Briefly explain.

Q 8: Write a brief note on Humean Scepticism.

Q 9: Explain briefly on Synthetic a posteriori judgments.

C. Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: What do you understand by skepticism? Discuss

Q 2: Explain and examine different kinds of skepticism.

Q 3: Discuss Kant's theory of Criticism.

Q 4: Is synthetic a priori statement possible? Discuss.

Q 5: Explain the Copernican revolution.

Q 6: What is skepticism? Explain the viewpoints of Cartesian skepticism.

Q 7: What are the different kinds of knowledge? Discuss.

Q 8: Discuss the different types of judgments.

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