

# Nagasawa vs. Nagel: Omnipotence, Pseudo-Tasks, and a Recent Discussion of Nagel's Doubts About Physicalism<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *In his recent "Thomas vs. Thomas: A New Approach to Nagel's Bat Argument", Yujin Nagasawa interprets Thomas Nagel as making a certain argument against physicalism and objects that this argument transgresses a principle, laid down by Thomas Aquinas, according to which inability to perform a pseudo-task does not count against an omnipotence claim. Taking Nagasawa's interpretation of Nagel for granted, I distinguish different kinds of omnipotence claims and different kinds of pseudo-tasks, and on that basis show that Nagasawa's criticism of Nagel is unsuccessful. I also show how his reflections do nonetheless point to a limitation of the approach he means to criticize.*

## Introduction

In his recent "Thomas vs. Thomas: A New Approach to Nagel's Bat Argument", Yujin Nagasawa presents an interpretation of the reasoning found in Thomas Nagel's "What is it Like to be a Bat?" and then uses a principle derived from Thomas Aquinas to attack that reasoning. According to Nagasawa, Nagel starts from the idea that physicalism implies the claim that humans can have a certain kind of epistemic omnipotence and then goes on to argue that this omnipotence claim is shown to be false by the fact that humans cannot execute a certain epistemic task, namely, the task of knowing what it is like to be a bat while simultaneously being human.

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Nagel's "anti-physicalist argument" fails, Nagasawa says, because the epistemic task that humans cannot execute is a pseudo-task, and inability to execute a pseudo-task cannot be used to undermine an omnipotence claim. Although I have doubts about Nagasawa's interpretation of Nagel, in this response to Nagasawa I set those doubts aside.<sup>2</sup> Taking his basic understanding of Nagel for granted, I argue that his attack on Nagel's reasoning as he understands it is not successful.

In the first section of the paper, I present the argument that Nagasawa attributes to Nagel as well as Nagasawa's criticism of it. In so doing, I show that there is a gap between the way Nagasawa formulates the argument and the way he explains it, and I propose an alternative formulation that represents the argument more accurately. Since the main point of Nagasawa's criticism is that the anti-physicalist argument tries to undermine an omnipotence claim by appealing to a pseudo-task, I turn in section two to the question of omnipotence claims and pseudo-tasks and show when it is legitimate to appeal to a pseudo-task when arguing against an omnipotence claim. In section three, I apply this to the anti-physicalist argument and show that Nagasawa's criticism is incorrect inasmuch as the omnipotence claim that the anti-physicalist argument attacks is of the sort that can be undermined by inability to execute a pseudo-task. I conclude with a short summary of what has and has not been shown.

### I. Nagasawa on Nagel

Nagasawa bases his discussion of Nagel primarily on Nagel's "What is it Like to be a Bat?" He notes that this paper contains no explicit argument against physicalism, but he also notes that it "has been taken as a powerful criticism" of physicalism (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 377), and furthermore he says that Nagel rejects physicalism in his *The View from Nowhere* (Nagel, 1986). These points lead Nagasawa to interpret "What is it Like to be a Bat?" in an anti-physicalist way (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 377).

Because the argument against physicalism is not given explicitly in Nagel's paper, Nagasawa proposes to reconstruct it. He paves the way by discussing a different argument, one that he calls "The Bat Argument" and that concludes:

- (5) Nagel (a human being) cannot know what it is like to be a bat.  
(Nagasawa, 2003, p. 378)

As Nagasawa understands this conclusion, it would not be undermined if Nagel could come to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat on the basis of being transformed into a bat or something that is half-bat, half-human; nor would it be undermined if Nagel could, as a normal human being, imagine or simulate being a bat. What the bat argument claims is that a *normal*

*human being* cannot know what it is like to be a bat *for a bat* (Nagasawa, 2003, pp. 378–80). In what follows, I will not always spell out all these specifications; instead I will at times speak more simply of “knowing what it is like to be a bat.” (Nagasawa later makes a further clarification of the conclusion of the bat argument, but this is not the right time to discuss it.)

Now as Nagasawa points out (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 381), it is not immediately obvious how one is to get from the conclusion of the bat argument to the falsity of physicalism. Furthermore, as already noted, Nagel does not tell us himself. The reconstruction that Nagasawa arrives at is as follows. Assume that Nagel knows everything physical about bats; then,

- (12) If physicalism is true then Nagel, who knows everything physical about bats, knows everything about bats.
- (13) If Nagel knows everything about bats then he knows what it is like to be a bat.
- (14) Nagel cannot know what it is like to be a bat (Conclusion of the bat argument).

Therefore,

- (15) Nagel cannot know everything about bats.

Therefore,

- (16) Physicalism is false. (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 382)

That is the “anti-physicalist argument” that Nagasawa believes Nagel to be making.

Nagasawa has a rather surprising reason for thinking that this argument is unsound, namely, that it violates a principle that he traces back to Thomas Aquinas and that he embraces in a form that he calls the “Revised Thomistic Principle”:

- (RTP) For any agent  $x$ , the fact that  $x$  does not have the power to execute a pseudo task does not entail  $x$ 's lack of power. (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 384)

Drawing a square circle is a pseudo-task: no one can draw a square circle, not even God, because there is no such thing as drawing a square circle. But it does not count against anyone's power that he or she cannot execute a pseudo-task, because a pseudo-task is not a task to execute in the first place. Nagasawa later points out a possible ambiguity in this principle and makes it clear that a pseudo-task is not just something that a particular agent cannot do but something that no one can do (Nagasawa, 2003, pp. 386–7).<sup>3</sup>

The point of the RTP is best displayed in the way that Nagasawa displays it, by showing how it can be used to undermine the following anti-theistic argument:

- (20) If Judeo-Christian theism is true then God can do everything.
- (21) If God can do everything then God can draw a square circle.
- (22) God cannot draw a square circle.

Therefore,

- (23) God cannot do everything.

Therefore,

- (24) Judeo-Christian theism is false. (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 385)

This argument is unsound because its second premise, (21), is rendered false by the RTP (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 385). Since drawing a square circle is a pseudo-task, it is not true that God's being omnipotent implies that he can draw a square circle, nor is it true that God's being unable to draw a square circle implies that he is not omnipotent.

With this in hand, let us turn to Nagasawa's criticism of the anti-physicalist argument. The core of Nagasawa's criticism is that the anti-physicalist argument (12)–(16) is parallel to the anti-theistic argument (20)–(24) and thus unsound for a parallel reason, namely, that its second premise, (13), is rendered false by the RTP. Thinking of omniscience with respect to bats as the result of exercising a kind of epistemic omnipotence (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 385), Nagasawa argues that the anti-physicalist argument tries to say that because Nagel cannot execute a certain task, Nagel is not possessed of omniscience with respect to bats, but that this argument is unsound because the task that Nagel cannot execute is in fact a pseudo-task.

It is obviously important to be perfectly clear about which task it is that Nagel cannot execute. If one looks at the argument (12)–(16) while keeping in mind its alleged parallelism with the anti-theistic argument, one might be tempted to think that the task in question is knowing what it's like to be a bat. In one place, Nagasawa even seems to say so himself:

The fact that Nagel cannot execute such a pseudo task as knowing what it is like to be a bat does not undermine Nagel's omnipotence with respect to knowing about bats.... Physicalism is not undermined just by the fact that Nagel cannot execute a pseudo task. (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 385)

But this, it turns out, is not an adequate expression of what Nagasawa really holds. As he himself points out (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 388), knowing what it is like to be a bat is *not* a pseudo-task: after all, bats can do it! To explain what the pseudo-task really is, Nagasawa spells out the following proposition:

- (6) Nagel (a human being) knows what it is like for a bat to be a bat.

He then says that the pseudo-task in question is bringing it about that (6) is true (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 388; see also p. 379).

Nagasawa explains what he means as follows:

If the premises of the bat argument are true, in order for Nagel to bring about (6), he has to do the following two things at the same time: be a human being and know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. If Nagel fails to do either of them he fails to bring about (6). (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 388)

The task that Nagasawa classes as a pseudo-task, then, is neither the task of being a human being nor the task of knowing what it's like to be a bat, but instead the conjunctive task composed of both of these.<sup>4</sup> And to avoid making Nagasawa's argument look weak in an unfair way, it is important to emphasize that for a task to be conjunctive in the required sense it is not necessary that its component tasks be integrated, as a pianist might integrate the task of moving the fingers of her left hand with the task of moving the fingers of her right hand. All that is required for Nagasawa's argument is a weak notion of "conjunctive task" according to which simply doing two things at once counts as doing one conjunctive task.

So Nagasawa understands the real conclusion of the bat argument, and the real third premise of the anti-physicalist argument, to be the proposition that Nagel cannot execute the conjunctive task of being human and knowing what it's like to be a bat. Indeed, the whole argument is concerned with what Nagel can and cannot, does and does not, know *while being a normal human*. Once one sees that, one might wonder whether the anti-physicalist argument (12)–(16) is formulated as accurately as it could be. The argument so formulated certainly does not appear to mention any conjunctive tasks. The following reformulation is more accurate:

- (12\*) If physicalism is true then Nagel, who *is human and* knows everything physical about bats, *is human and* knows everything about bats.
- (13\*) If Nagel *is human and* knows everything about bats then he *is human and* knows what it is like to be a bat.
- (14\*) Nagel cannot *be human and* know what it is like to be a bat.  
Therefore,
- (15\*) Nagel cannot *be human and* know everything about bats.  
Therefore,
- (16) Physicalism is false.

The italicized text is language that has been added to ensure that the argument is formulated in a manner consistent with the conjunctive nature of the tasks at issue.

## II. Pseudo-Tasks and Omnipotence Claims

In this section I show that some omnipotence claims are falsified by inability to execute a pseudo-task. Once this general point is established, I bring the discussion closer to the case at hand by discussing what I will call conjunctive omnipotence claims, explaining how such claims can be vulnerable to arguments based on pseudo-tasks.

Consider the following two omnipotence claims:

- (A) God can do anything.
- (B) God can do anything, even draw a square circle.

Claim (A) does not commit the claimant to the position that God can draw a square circle, and if someone tries to argue against (A) by pointing out that God cannot draw a square circle, the claimant can appeal to the RTP. But claim (B) cannot be saved in this way. (B) commits the claimant to holding that God can draw a square circle, and (B) cannot be defended by appeal to the RTP; appeal to the RTP works only if the omnipotence claim is appropriately formed in the first place.

Let us call omnipotence claims that do not imply that someone can execute a pseudo-task “well-formed” and omnipotence claims that do imply it “ill-formed.” An ill-formed omnipotence claim is false, and precisely because it involves a commitment to the possibility that someone can execute a pseudo-task, a pseudo-task is a legitimate counter-example to it. In such a case, the RTP cannot be appealed to. So if a proposed counter-example to an omnipotence claim turns out to be a pseudo-task, this fact alone does not mean that the claim is still standing; it may instead reveal that the claim is ill-formed.

Turning now to the question of conjunctive tasks and to omnipotence claims that refer to such tasks, I first distinguish two ways for a conjunctive task to be a pseudo-task. One is that one or more of its component tasks is itself a pseudo-task. For instance, the task of being human and knowing the last digit of pi is a pseudo-task simply in virtue of the fact that knowing the last digit of pi is a pseudo-task. To know that that particular conjunctive task is a pseudo-task we don’t need to know whether there is anything especially problematic about conjoining these two component tasks; the conjunction of “knowing the last digit of pi” and *any* other task is a pseudo-task. But there is another way for a conjunctive task to be a pseudo-task: none of the component tasks is a pseudo-task on its own, but they cannot be executed simultaneously. Sitting is not a pseudo-task, and neither is standing, but the conjunctive task composed of these two is a pseudo-task: although each is doable on its own, no one (not even God) can do both at once. In accordance with this distinction, we can see that there are two

kinds of conjunctive pseudo-task: those composed of tasks at least one of which is a pseudo-task, and those composed of tasks none of which is a pseudo-task.

Now consider a claim of the form “X can simultaneously execute the task T and also any task belonging to a certain class of tasks C.” This is an *omnipotence* claim because it involves the claim that X can execute *any* task in C, and it is a *conjunctive* omnipotence claim because it isn’t simply the claim that X can execute any task in C but the stronger claim that X can execute any task in C *while simultaneously executing T*. There are two reasons why such a claim might be ill-formed, corresponding to the two kinds of conjunctive pseudo-task. It might be ill-formed because it involved a commitment to X’s being able to execute a conjunctive pseudo-task of the first kind: the claim that X can simultaneously think of the last digit of pi and also sit in any chair in this room is an example. But such a claim might also be ill-formed because it involved a commitment to X’s being able to execute a conjunctive pseudo-task of the second kind. Suppose I claim that I can play any piano piece with one hand tied behind my back. This amounts to the claim that I can execute any number of conjunctive tasks of the form H+P, where H is the task of having one hand tied behind my back and P is the task of playing a piano piece. Having one hand tied behind one’s back is not a pseudo-task, and neither is, say, playing Beethoven’s piano sonata in C-minor, Opus 13 (“Pathétique”). But playing that piece with one hand tied behind one’s back *is* a pseudo-task: it involves the simultaneous playing of notes that are so widely spaced that they simply cannot be played by someone who has one hand tied behind his back.<sup>5</sup>

Conjunctive omnipotence claims of either of these two types are ill-formed, and for that reason they are both undermined by inability to execute a pseudo-task. If I claim that I can think of the last digit of pi while sitting in any chair in this room, my claim is false; I cannot defend it by appealing to the RTP and saying that what seems to falsify my claim does not really falsify it because, after all, the task or tasks that I cannot execute is or are pseudo-tasks. I have foolishly committed myself to the position that I can execute a pseudo-task, so the RTP cannot save me. And likewise with my boast about my piano-playing: in making this boast, I committed myself to being able to play *any* piece with one hand tied behind my back, and I cannot defend myself against the charge that I have spoken falsely by saying that playing the Pathétique Sonata with one hand tied behind one’s back is a pseudo-task. If anything, the fact that it is a pseudo-task underscores the falsity of my claim.

The point about ill-formed conjunctive omnipotence claims of the second type is worth dwelling on. A conjunctive omnipotence claim O is not just the claim that X has the power to execute T, nor is it just the claim that X has the power to execute any task belonging to C. It is a claim stronger than either of these, namely, the claim that X can at the same time execute both T

and any task belonging to C, despite any possible ways in which the two component tasks might tend to interfere with one another. Being a normal human is easy enough (you and I can do it); living underwater without artificial assistance is also easy enough (fish can do it); but being a normal human and living underwater without artificial assistance is impossible, a pseudo-task, because the former renders the latter impossible. Now suppose I claim that I can live anywhere without artificial assistance while still being a normal human; this commits me to the claim that I can overcome the incompatibility between being a normal human and living underwater without assistance. The fact that I cannot do so shows that my claim is false, despite the fact that doing so is a pseudo-task. The RTP would have protected me had I made a well-formed omnipotence claim, but unfortunately I did not.

If one feels tempted to think that inability to live underwater without assistance while being a normal human doesn't count against the claim that one can live anywhere without assistance while being a normal human, or that inability to play the Pathétique Sonata with one hand tied behind one's back doesn't count against the claim that one can play any piece with one hand tied behind one's back, then perhaps a further clarification of the omnipotence claims will help. Failure to execute a pseudo-task composed of T and a member of C – call the pseudo-task T+C1 – counts against O, but only if C is not taken to be the set of all tasks of a certain sort *that can be executed simultaneously with T*. That latter sort of claim would indeed not be falsified by inability to execute T+C1. As we have seen, to claim that someone has conjunctive omnipotence is normally more ambitious than to claim that he or she has non-conjunctive omnipotence, because one of the component tasks might get in the way of the other – as having one hand tied behind one's back gets in the way of playing the piano, or being a normal human gets in the way of living underwater without assistance. But when C is formulated in such a way that any task that T interferes with is not covered by the omnipotence claim, then the claim is only trivially conjunctive. So it is true enough that inability to play the Pathétique Sonata with one hand tied behind one's back doesn't count against one's ability to play any piece *that can be played in that way*, and it's also true enough that inability to live underwater while being a normal human doesn't count against one's ability to live anywhere *that a normal human can live*. But the corresponding non-trivially conjunctive omnipotence claims *are* undermined by the failures in question.

One final point before leaving this section. The ill-formed omnipotence claim (B) discussed above is rather obviously ill-formed, so much so that it might seem pointless to undermine it by pointing to a pseudo-task. And the same might be said of ill-formed non-trivially conjunctive omnipotence claims of the first sort, i.e., those that involve component tasks that are themselves pseudo-tasks. That is, given that one already knows that one or



more of the component tasks are pseudo-tasks, it would be foolish to assert the corresponding conjunctive omnipotence claim, and therefore there is perhaps not much to be gained by discussing how such a claim might be undermined. But things are different with the second type of ill-formed non-trivially conjunctive omnipotence claim. Here it could be quite understandable why someone might take such a claim seriously: he might do so because the incompatibility between the component tasks was not apparent. With all this in mind, then, let us turn to Nagasawa's criticism of the anti-physicalist argument.

### III. Has Nagasawa Refuted the Anti-Physicalist Argument?

Nagasawa reconstructs the anti-physicalist argument as one involving both an omnipotence claim and a counter-example that is supposed to defeat that omnipotence claim. He then argues that the alleged counter-example is a pseudo-task and that pseudo-tasks cannot undermine omnipotence claims. But we have seen that if an omnipotence claim is ill-formed, then it will be falsified by inability to execute a pseudo-task. So let us go back to the amended version of the argument and examine it more carefully. The omnipotence claim that serves as the consequent of (12\*) and the antecedent of (13\*) is a non-trivially conjunctive omnipotence claim. It says not merely that Nagel, while being human, knows everything about bats *that a human can know*, but that Nagel, while being human, knows *everything* about bats. It therefore commits the claimant to the view that Nagel can be human and know what it is like to be a bat. And if this conjunctive task is a pseudo-task, then the claim is false – appeals to the RTP will not help.

Contrary to Nagasawa's analysis, therefore, the anti-physicalist argument does not go wrong by pointing to a pseudo-task as a counter-example to the omnipotence claim in question. Nagel's inability to be human and know what it's like to be a bat would be no counterexample if the omnipotence claim involved were well-formed, but since it is ill-formed, using his inability as a counterexample is perfectly legitimate. Of course this does not mean that the anti-physicalist argument is sound. What it means is that Nagasawa's attempt to show that it is unsound by appeal to the RTP is unsuccessful.

The same point can be made differently. Nagasawa criticizes the anti-physicalist argument by saying that its second premise (13\* on my reformulation) is false in light of the RTP. That is, he holds that it is not true that if Nagel, while being human, knows everything about bats, then he knows, while being human, what it's like to be a bat. But to say that Nagel can, while being human, know *everything* about bats is to say among other things that he can, while being human, know what it is like to be a bat. After all, knowing what it's like to be a bat is a real task. So the argument's second premise, i.e., (13\*), is true. What is false is not (13\*) but the conjunctive

omnipotence claim that serves as (13\*)'s antecedent and (12\*)'s consequent, and revealing the falsity of this ill-formed claim – by pointing to a pseudo-task – is what (14\*) is intended to do. Again, while this analysis does not show that the argument is sound, it does show that Nagasawa's criticism of the argument is unsuccessful.

So far, then, we have seen that the anti-physicalist argument does not commit the error that Nagasawa accuses it of committing. But one might wonder if there isn't another argument in the vicinity that does commit that error. In particular, we have seen that a trivially conjunctive omnipotence claim is not undermined by inability to execute a pseudo-task. So let us consider a new version of the argument:

- (12\*\*) If physicalism is true then Nagel, who is human and knows everything physical about bats *that a human can know*, is human and knows everything about bats *that a human can know*.
- (13\*\*) If Nagel is human and knows everything about bats *that a human can know*, then he is human and knows what it is like to be a bat *on the assumption that this is something that a human can know*.
- (14\*) Nagel cannot be human and know what it is like to be a bat. Therefore,
- (15\*\*) Nagel cannot be human and know everything about bats *that a human can know*.
- Therefore,
- (16) Physicalism is false.

The italicized portions have been added so that the argument is concerned with a trivially conjunctive omnipotence claim.

Now then, how to assess this argument? (14\*) says that Nagel cannot be human and know what it is like to be a bat. The consequent of (13\*\*) says that Nagel, while being human, knows what it's like to be a bat *on the assumption that this is something that a human can know*. But these are consistent. Hence (14\*) does not falsify the consequent of (13\*\*), and one cannot argue from (14\*) and (13\*\*) to (15\*\*). This certainly means that the argument is unsound; indeed, it's invalid. But none of this – and here is the point as far as Nagasawa's criticism is concerned – depends on the fact that the task mentioned by (14\*) is a pseudo-task. It is quite unnecessary to investigate whether pseudo-tasks can or cannot be used to undermine omnipotence claims, because the argument is invalid from the start.

By distinguishing types of omnipotence claims, I have shown that Nagasawa's response to Nagel is flawed insofar as it wrongly supposes that inability to perform a pseudo-task can never falsify an omnipotence claim. However, a further question must now be addressed. Assuming for the sake

of discussion that the anti-physicalist argument (in its single-star version) is sound, it is noteworthy that what it shows is not that all forms of physicalism are false, but only that those forms of physicalism which commit the physicalist to a certain ill-formed omnipotence claim are false. Any form of physicalism that did not involve such a commitment would be immune to the argument. Hence the very same distinctions that reveal the weakness of Nagasawa's criticism of the anti-physicalist argument also suggest a way of reconstruing his concerns: thinking about pseudo-tasks reveals that the anti-physicalist argument is of only limited usefulness to the opponent of physicalism.

One might then ask whether versions of physicalism that are vulnerable to the anti-physicalist argument are worth refuting; perhaps any form of physicalism that involves an ill-formed omnipotence claim is so obviously false that it needs no refuting. Although obviously there isn't space here to discuss all the varieties of physicalism, I will venture to say that physicalisms that implied ill-formed omnipotence claims would be worth discussing and refuting when it was not obvious that they implied such claims. And the case at hand appears to be such a case: it is not obvious that the claim that someone can know everything about bats while still being human implies that someone can execute a pseudo-task. (Were the point obvious, it would be hard to understand the degree of interest that Nagel's bat argument has attracted.) Once the implication is revealed, then of course the physicalisms in question lose their plausibility, but until that time, they are certainly worth refuting.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

I have not argued that either the anti-physicalist argument (12)–(16) or its amended version (12\*)–(16) are sound arguments against physicalism. I have argued only that the amended version is a better representation of the argument that Nagasawa claims to find in Nagel and that Nagasawa's attempt to refute this argument is unsuccessful. Whether the amended argument is actually sound, and whether (if so) it refutes an interesting or only an uninteresting form of physicalism, will have to be considered at some other time.

## Notes

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2. For a recent, and in my view more accurate, account of Nagel's ultimate conclusions, see Alter (2002).

3. Throughout this paper, certain tasks get labeled as pseudo-tasks. All of them are pretty clearly impossible, but one might wonder in what way they are impossible, and how strong the impossibility in question is: are the tasks logically impossible, metaphysically impossible, nomologically impossible, or what? Partly because of space restrictions, and partly because I have doubts about the standard ways of distinguishing types and strengths of necessity, I will in this paper follow Nagasawa (Nagasawa, 2003, p. 390 n. 4) by so framing my remarks that nothing depends on the precise type and degree of necessity involved.
4. There are reasons to doubt that “being a human being” is rightly thought of on the model of a task, but I set them aside here.
5. If it is objected, for example, that someone might have three hands (leaving him with two hands for playing when one hand is tied behind his back) or that someone might have a hand three feet wide with 60 fingers on it, then the response is simply to formulate the task more precisely, as the task of playing that sonata with one hand tied behind one’s back *while also being a normal human being*. This means that the conjunctive task in question has three conjuncts and not just two, but that does not affect the real issue.
6. I am grateful to Yujin Nagasawa for bringing the issues in these last two paragraphs to my attention; this acknowledgement should not be taken to imply that he comes to the same conclusions about them that I do.

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