

## Reason, Society, and the Social Intuitionist Model

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although Jonathan Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) of moral judgment does not claim to be a defense of either rationalist or sentimentalist ideas of morality, because it does not seem to include much of a role for personal reasoning, many rationalists have critiqued this model heavily. Specifically, the present paper explores critiques made by Cordelia Fine in 2006, and David Pizarro and Paul Bloom in 2003. Responses by Haidt himself as well as Neil Levy are explored to make the argument that not only can Haidt's model withstand these critiques, but also suggests that the SIM can be used to defend either a rationalist or a sentimentalist moral position. Further merits of the SIM are also explored, in particular its ideas about social interaction as a key part of moral judgment making, as these social links seem to be both significant and unique to the SIM. While philosophers have traditionally looked at morality (and indeed, psychology as a whole) as fairly individual, it is possible that this aspect of our lives in particular is more social than previously thought.

### **KEYWORDS**

Rationalism, sentimentalism, intuitionism, society, morality, moral psychology

The field of moral psychology has been split into two main camps—moral rationalism and moral sentimentalism. Moral rationalism is the belief that most of our justified beliefs about moral reality come from effortful reasoning processes. On the other hand, moral sentimentalists believe that a lot of our moral reality is based on our intuitive emotional (and therefore nonrational) reactions to moral dilemmas and situations. While there are many reasons to fall on either side of this divide, one might find it impossible to determine a middle ground. However, Jonathan Haidt proposed a Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) of moral judgment as a counter to the thoroughly rationalist models which seem to dominate the field (2001). This model has been met with much criticism from rationalists, and while it is not a strictly sentimentalist model, it does argue that there is a greater role for moral emotions in our moral judgment than rationalists want to concede. However, the SIM may be used to defend either rationalism or sentimentalism, but does not seem to prove the reality of either.

That being said, there is still much merit in the attempts being made by the SIM, particularly if one considers it to be merely descriptive, rather than normative. Even more specifically, the SIM does something that almost no other model of moral judgment has done—it has brought to light some of the social aspects of morality, specifically, the role that interaction and having relationships with others plays in our moral judgments. These social factors are important to consider and should not be ignored, even for the sake of “morality through reason alone.” As such, this paper will 1) set up the main points given by Haidt about his model; 2) seek to explore some of the rationalist critiques of the SIM, as well as the responses to these arguments; and 3), in light of these critiques, this paper will investigate some of the potential merits of the SIM, especially its social features.

## **EXPLORING THE MODEL: GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE SIM**

### Introductory Remarks

Before discussing the model itself, it is important to preface with a few notes on the nature of the SIM. While Haidt has some fairly strong things to say about what he calls philosophy’s “worship of reason” (Haidt 2001, 815), he does not claim that his model is a pro-sentimentalist concept, either. Rather, Haidt’s main focus is to propose a model which is empirically based, and looks something like the way that people generally work to get to moral judgments (a conclusion

about what is “good” and what is “bad,” morally; Haidt, J. 2001). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that Haidt is attempting to argue for a *descriptive* model, rather than a *prescriptive* normative system of ethics. Just because the world is seen as operating according to the SIM, does not mean that it should, and while Haidt has made claims elsewhere which suggest adopting normative, pluralistic, ethical principles based on the model, for the sake of discussion we are going to treat the SIM as descriptive.

### Links in the SIM

According to Haidt, there are six basic “links” in the SIM: intuitive judgment, post hoc reasoning, reasoned persuasion, social persuasion, reasoned judgment and private reflection (2001). The first four are used in nearly every moral judgment a person needs to make, while the last two (the “reasoning links”) are used more infrequently, especially by a majority of “normal” people. However, this is not to say that these links are inconsequential or always unnecessary, just that they do not seem to be involved in the “everyday” moral thinking of most people. Especially important to note are the reasoned and social persuasion links, which are included by Haidt because he believes that morality is an interpersonal process, rather than a stagnant, individualistic way of reasoning as is proposed by rationalist models (2001).

As one might suppose, the way this model works out practically is fairly straight forward. When first faced with a moral dilemma on which one must make a call of the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action, that person makes an *intuitive judgment* call (Link 1) on the situation. For example, when given a story of incest and asked if it was “okay” for the brother and sister to “make love,” a person will intuitively say “no” (Haidt 2001). This judgment is made quickly and with little conscious effort or processing on the part of the one making the call (Haidt 2001).

Next, Link 2 is employed—*post hoc reasoning*. After a judgment has been passed as to the morality of an action, a person will employ more effortful reasoning as a means of justifying a decision they have already made intuitively (Haidt 2001). According to other research in psychology, people have what is known as the confirmation bias: a tendency not only to search for only evidence which supports what we already believe but also to quickly disregard information which contradicts our pre-formed beliefs (Perkins, Faraday and Bushey 1991). While this process is more effortful than that of Link 1, it does seem to be extremely

biased, and not nearly the kind of reasoning which a rationalist would like to have employed in a model of moral judgment making, because it does not include the careful, reasoned consideration of all available information.

The third link—*reasoned persuasion*—is the first of the social links in the SIM. This link is employed as an attempt to convince others of the legitimacy of the created Link 2 reasons for moral intuitions. In other words, Link 3 is the verbal confirmation of Link 2, with the addition of attempting to convince another that one's reasoning is sound. Haidt proposes that this link is more about "triggering new affectively valenced intuitions in the listener," (2001, 819) since the initial intuition was affectively charged, instead of actually convincing the listener through rational and mental reasons, such as logic. However, there does seem to be some blurriness here as to what actually takes place in the pronouncement of this link. The only thing that can be said for sure is that upon completion of Link 2, a person generally will (at some point) try to convince others (or themselves, in light of disagreement by another) of their reason(s) for making a moral judgment one way or another, and will do so by whatever means possible. While these explanations seem to be well-reasoned (or at least attempt to be), it is hypothesized that moral argument works only through affective persuasion, since moral decisions tend to be emotionally charged (Haidt 2001).

Continuously, Link 4—*social persuasion*—is perhaps one of the most radical and provocative links in Haidt's model. The idea of the social persuasion link is simply that we are influenced by our social groups. While this may come as no surprise to many, Haidt takes the idea one step further to propose that after one member of a person's social group has made a morally charged call on some action, thought, idea, etc., others in the group will pick up on the idea as "truth,"—even without the use of reasoned (or any other kind of) persuasion (2001). One example of this might be something like the formation of cliques that occur specifically within school settings. Once a member of a particular clique decides (passes a moral judgment on) the status of a new student to the school—judging her to be worthy or unworthy of inclusion into the group—the rest of the members are usually quick to agree. This agreement occurs regardless of whether the rest of the members were neutral on the new student before, or even if they held the opposite opinion. In the same way, even as adults, when someone within our social group makes a judgment call on a particular action or situation, many

people are likely to either switch opinions or simply accept the reasoning of the group at face value, in order to reduce instances of social incongruence.

Although Haidt proposes that we rarely come to change our mind on moral matters without the influence of other people, and that times when we think that private reasoning is what changed our minds may be illusory conclusions, he does concede that some people (particularly philosophers) are capable of this kind of change through self-reasoning (2001). As such, he adds to his model Link 5 (*reasoned judgment*) and Link 6 (*private reflection*). Reasoned judgment is when a person overrides, without social help and through sheer effortful logic, their initial intuitive moral judgment. Private reflection is when, through consideration of a moral situation, a person spontaneously arrives at a new intuition which overrides the intuition which was made initially in Link 1.

#### Why we Should Doubt the Importance of Reasoning's Role in Moral Judgment

Haidt suggests four main reasons why a person might doubt the importance that reasoning plays in moral judgment, and suggests ways in which the SIM might overcome these problems (Haidt 2001). The first reason is that moral judgment is probably a similar process to other types of judgment, which is suggested to be a dual-process model of reasoning (effortful, rational deliberation) and intuition (a faster, generally more emotionally laden way to reach a conclusion) working on a parallel within the brain. Also similar to other kinds of judgment and problem solving, a majority of the end process is thought to be intuitive, despite the fact that moral judgment research and models have mainly focused on the moral reasoning process. Haidt suggests that the grounds on which many believe that reasoning plays such a huge role in moral judgment comes from the way in which we conduct the research in this area. Research on moral judgment usually includes some type of "moral interview," and it is the way these interviews are conducted, argues Haidt, which is skewing our view of moral judgment processes. Haidt proposes that these interviews may artificially induce the activation of Links 5 and 6, causing it to appear as if people naturally use these reasoning links much more frequently than they really do under more "normal" circumstances which occur outside of the lab. Unlike rationalist models of moral judgment, Haidt argues that the SIM is fully compatible with a dual-processing model because it makes intuition the main focus of our moral judgment process. In addition, the

SIM recognizes that moral judgments are not made in an isolation chamber—there is a heavy social influence on most of what we believe.

Second, Haidt puts forth several reasons why our reasoning capabilities are more often than not like lawyers defending our initially made intuitive judgments than they are like scientists searching out the truth (Baumeister & Newman 1994; Haidt 2001). The first is the relatedness motive, which is the drive to belong to a social group or groups, and is the motivation for taking on the moral judgments of others as discussed above in Link 4. A second reason for thinking reasoning to be more like a lawyer is the coherence motive, or a drive to avoid cognitive dissonance. This idea is discussed in Link 1 above, and is in essence just confirmation bias, in addition to what is called “makes-sense epistemology,” or the idea that once we find evidence that makes sense of what we previously intuited, we stop searching (Perkins, Allen and Hafner 1983). Haidt argues that our reasoning capacities may only be capable of working objectively under very specific circumstances, such as those which do not trigger any social or emotional ties, and no judgment has previously been made on the subject—arguably, these conditions are extremely artificial and are found only in rationalist studies of moral judgment. Under realistic circumstances, where reasoning is not unbiasedly free to search as a scientist, Haidt argues that it is more like a lawyer, and this is reflected more accurately in the SIM (2001).

A third reason to doubt a more prominent role of reasoning in moral judgment is that of post hoc reasoning. Related to the phenomena of confirmation bias and makes-sense epistemology, discussed above, post hoc reasoning seems to play a huge role in our judgments. We are so desperate for justification that avoids cognitive dissonance that we will cite reasons for our judgments and behaviors that are impossible. Haidt suggests that in the moral realm, our minds search for reasons to support our moral judgments from our cultural knowledge of what is considered right and wrong by our social group. It is this post hoc searching which causes us to believe that reason is running the show—because we can come up with reasons, they must have been there all along. In addition, Haidt cites how difficult it is to persuade anybody through reason alone that one’s position on anything moral is right, which further suggests that reasoning does not play the decisive role the rationalists want to believe.

Finally, Haidt points out that most of our moral action is emotion-lead, rather than reason-lead. Perhaps most important are his illustrations of psychopathy

and altruism. Psychopaths are all reason and no emotion, and are capable of committing what many would consider to be immoral acts, such as murder, without so much as flinching, which suggests that emotion is needed in order for a person to be truly moral. In addition, altruism has been shown to be exhibited most when emotions are elicited, specifically empathy, which further suggests a connection between feeling and action in the moral realm. Given the evidence, Haidt suggests that we should shift our attention from reasoning to emotion as the main drive for our moral judgments—not because reasoning does not play a role, but because in “real life” circumstances, emotions seem to be the main driving force, and reasoning takes a backseat. As Haidt puts it, the emotional dog is wagging its rational tail: the tail is important for communication, but it is definitely not the whole dog (2001).

### **RESPONSES TO HAIDT’S MODEL**

Despite the fact that Haidt’s model of moral judgment is not really a *sentimentalist* model, but rather is an *intuitionist* model (which attempts to blend the ideas of sentimentalism and rationalism), understandably, the rationalists do not buy much of what Haidt proposes about reason. Specifically, critics like Cordelia Fine (2006), David Pizarro and Paul Bloom (2003) suggest that if we just look a little closer we will find that reasoning plays a much bigger role (or at the very least, a different role) than the one proposed by Haidt in the SIM. While Haidt (2003) and Levy (2006) offer some reply to the criticism posed by the rationalist arguments listed above, there is still some debate as to the complete role of social factors within the SIM, as well as suggestions that Haidt does not push these factors far enough (Levy 2006; Greenwood 2011; Sneddon 2007; Clarke 2008).

#### Rationalist Critiques

To begin, Fine critiques Haidt’s model on three main points. First, she suggests that Link 1 can be disrupted by conscious, deliberative moral reasoning (Fine 2006). As evidence, Fine points towards research done using the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which is designed to measure the amount of prejudice or stereotype enforcement exhibited by individuals beyond their consciousness. This research found that those who already had low prejudice and were shown their tendencies to enforce racial stereotypes using their IAT results, later more carefully controlled their behaviors regarding these stereotypes (Monteith 1993,

as cited in Fine 2006). Fine claims that these findings suggest that, at least in the case of stereotypes and prejudices, we can consciously choose to override the intuitive “gut reaction” of Link 1 in Haidt’s model. Arguably, this interruption of Link 1 is due solely to the person’s (rationally) held values and beliefs.

Second, Fine argues that despite the fact that moral judgments may appear to be made based on intuition, as Haidt suggests, this does not rule out the idea that these intuitions are based on controlled reasoning which has been done prior to the present instance being recorded by most experiments of moral reasoning and judgment (Fine 2006). Monteith (2002, as cited in Fine 2006) followed up their IAT study to test whether certain individuals have synthesized their unprejudiced beliefs into intuitive unprejudiced behaviors, arguably through the conscious thought seen in the first study. Subjects were given a distracter task in order to retrieve intuitive thoughts on a number of racist jokes. Those who showed little discrepancy between their supposed thoughts and actions in a prejudice-inducing situation rated these jokes more unfavorably than those who reported a discrepancy between thought and action. This suggests that the non-discrepancy group had trained themselves to make their intuitions match their beliefs in such a way that their beliefs are now intuitive, suggesting evidence that previous controlled reasoning can change our intuitions (Fine 2006).

This idea of controlled change in intuitions points to Fine’s third point, which is the idea that, when within the bounds of the right circumstances, our reasoning will question our moral thoughts and beliefs (2006). Research indicates that situational factors can cause us to secondguess our moral intuitions. Similar to the research done on prejudice, if we believe that something will lead to a better outcome we are more likely to change our initial thoughts on the matter (Fine 2006). For example, if told that introverts are more successful than extroverts (situational effect), people will rate themselves as being much more introverted than they otherwise would consider themselves to be (intuitive judgment). However, when given scores obtained from an introvert/extrovert scale, people reconsidered their initial rating of themselves in light of the new evidence (reasoning questions intuition; Kunda & Sanitioso 1987 as cited in Fine 2006).

Similarly, the second argument made by Fine (2006) closely relates to an argument made by Pizarro and Bloom (2003), who suggest there are two ways we can control our intuitions through reasoning. The first is similar to Fine’s argument in that our intuitions can be changed and effected over time by prior reasoning.



Especially through empathy, we can effectively change our Link 1 intuitions on a matter. Second, when we are confronted with information which does happen to be contrary to our initial beliefs (such as when we discover the real reason our mother did not call us on Sunday is because she was in the hospital), we are forced to make a new judgment call, and this, argue Pizarro and Bloom, is done through reasoning.

Finally, Pizarro and Bloom suggest that when people are outside of the artificial conditions created by empirical studies of morality, they actually do apply active reasoning to their “real-world” moral decisions (2003). They argue that while many of the situations used by Haidt in his research on morality do have quick, automatic, intuitive answers—it is wrong to kill babies, have sex with one’s sibling or a chicken (Pizarro & Bloom 2003; Haidt 2001)—many of our real-world moral decisions do not have such simple judgment calls. Every day we make decisions which require us to make a moral call, and there are no “‘off the shelf’ answers” (Pizarro and Bloom 2003, 195). These tough questions include such things as “how much is too much time away from my family?” and “should I ‘go with the flow,’ protecting my in-group status, or stand up for my belief that X (even though no one is being harmed)?” Pizarro and Bloom argue that these questions take serious, conscious moral reasoning, and are situations which remain unaccounted for by SIM (2003).

#### Haidt and Levy Respond to the Rationalists

*Haidt’s Response to Pizarro and Bloom (2003).* First, Pizarro and Bloom suggest that the changing of situational factors force us to change our moral judgment of the situation, and that this change is completed through reasoning. However, Haidt defends his original position by stating that, “the emotional dog does learn new tricks” (2003, 197). Haidt argues that his model was carefully constructed with this idea of changing situations in mind (Haidt, The emotional dog does learn new tricks: A reply to Pizarro and Bloom 2003). However, Haidt does not believe that our change in moral judgment is due to the way that we have privately reasoned about the new situation (Link 6), but rather it is about the social context in which the new information is viewed (Link 4).

Continuously, Pizarro and Bloom (2003) as well as Fine (2006) suggest that intuitions can be changed through prior reasoning. Specifically, we can change our intuitions over time to match up more closely to our moral beliefs through

the use of conscious moral reasoning. On this point, Haidt agrees—with the exception that he does not think that the reasoning which is occurring has to be Link 6 private reflection. Instead, Haidt proposes that what is actually occurring is, again, something closer to Link 4 social persuasion. As we immerse ourselves in situations which socially fit with our beliefs, that experience (not conscious reasoning) changes our intuitive judgments to fit with those beliefs (Haidt 2003).

A further argument put forth by Pizarro and Bloom (2003) is that the SIM does not really apply outside of the laboratory. They argue that the kind of huge, overarching moral decisions that people end up making in the real world end up being decided by reasoning—the back and forth of a tough decision is eventually decided by logic and effortful thought. Haidt replies that the SIM has built into it structures which account for these “real-world” tough choices (2003). Haidt suggests that when faced with a tough moral dilemma, people loop continuously through the first four links of the model, each time taking on the viewpoint of a different person who would be affected by the decision, perhaps because of an encounter with that person or something which reminds the chooser of them (i.e. a woman considering an abortion would think of her fetus when seeing a baby). In addition, this looping process may even take place within the chooser’s head through Link 6. Regardless, Haidt suggests that this kind of “tough” dilemma is relatively rare when one considers how many moral judgments are cast by an individual even in a given day (2003).

*Levy’s Response to Fine (2006).* Levy narrows Fine’s arguments down to two main points. The first point is that, contrary to the SIM, our moral intuitions are not “impervious to conscious control,” and we can control and inhibit our natural intuitions (as is seen in stereotype research; Levy 2006; Fine 2006). Very simply, Levy responds to the first point in a way similar to what Haidt himself tells Pizarro and Bloom—while it is possible that controlled reasoning does influence our moral judgments, this is probably a rare occurrence (2006; Haidt 2003). Further, we rarely seek out challenges to our moral beliefs, and when those beliefs are challenged, we only search far enough to find information to re-support our view, and then we stop looking—“makes-sense epistemology” at its finest (Levy 2006).

The second point of contention Levy sees as being at the crux of Fine’s argument is the idea that the automatic processes that give rise to moral judgments may or may not have been influenced by controlled processes, but nevertheless do reflect our moral values which, arguably, are based in reason (Levy 2006). However, Levy

argues that this point is not enough to prove that our beliefs are based on reason, only that, yes, they are in fact our own beliefs. In other words, Levy argues that “moral values,” rather than being based in reason, are just a set of values which we personally hold—and may very well be old intuitions of their own. In essence, then, the fact that our moral judgments are a reflection of our moral values merely shows that our intuitions belong to us (as they match our unique set of values) and does *not* mean that any piece of that process (value or judgment) is or was ever based in reason alone. In conclusion, Levy says that although it may be possible to change and amend our intuitions through reason, we rarely do so, since we do not like to look that closely at our moral beliefs. Additionally, even when we do try to make alterations to our moral intuitions, the process is driven by emotions—not reason (Levy 2006).

In summary, while Haidt makes a valid effort to defend his model against the critiques of rationalists who disapprove of his emphasis on intuition, Levy (2006) and Clarke (2008) both suggest that this is still not enough evidence to totally disprove that our moral judgments truly are based in reason—at least to the degree than Haidt suggests. Clarke even goes so far as to say that one cannot make a call as to whether moral judgment is rationalist or sentimentalist based on the model: it can be used to defend both. All that is to say, defending a sentimentalist standpoint or refuting rationalism is not where the SIM’s strengths lie.

## **THE “SOCIAL” IN SOCIAL INTUITIONIST MODEL: THE MERITS OF THE SIM**

Several authors<sup>1</sup> support the idea that the main merit of the SIM is its emphasis on society’s role in individual morality, regardless of its inability to fully defend itself from the arguments of moral rationalists. There are at least two main points discussed by these authors which will be briefly sketched here. The first is an attempt to refute the idea that morality is created individualistically—completely separate from social influence (and to point to the SIM as evidence of that). The second is the idea of “moral experts,” who are present in our society and to whom we look for moral guidance, whether we realize it or not (Levy 2006; Sneddon 2007).

First is the idea that we have placed too much emphasis on individualism in the past—both psychology and philosophy alike have focused their efforts in understanding morality on the individual level, and how they personally think about

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1. Greenwood 2011; Levy 2006; Sneddon 2007

what is good and what is bad (Greenwood 2011). The implications of this is that not enough models of morality in general have included social factors—whether those models be rationalist or sentimentalist. The argument is that even if our moral judgments are made using reasoning, our reasoning is not truly our own—we are creatures who have created an extremely complex society and culture, and this includes not only the transference of goods necessary for survival (food, shelter, protection, etc.) but also the transference of ideas (Greenwood 2011). Because we do not live as hermits in a cave, neither do our ideas of morality, and whether “reason is a slave to the passions” (Hume 1740) or not does not deny the fact that *both* our beliefs and emotions are influenced by social forces.

Second, both Levy (2006) and Sneddon (2007) suggest that, above and beyond the role that Haidt suggests that social forces play (Links 3 and 4), is the role of “moral experts” in our moral judgment calls. Specifically, Sneddon suggests that of course Haidt’s participants were morally dumbfounded when confronted with difficult to discern moral cases—they were being questioned alone, without any social help or support. As such, it might be supposed that it is almost as if a piece of their cognitive ability was missing; as if we each have off-loaded some of our moral knowledge onto others, and as such we put our trust in them to tell us what is right and wrong. For example, a woman facing the dilemma of whether or not to divorce her husband might go to her pastor or priest, her mother, or even various groups of women who either have gotten divorced or decided not to despite former feelings in that direction. This woman would consider these people to be experts in something that she is facing for the first time—just like one would call a plumber or Google the answer if they did not know how to unclog their toilet, so we seek out the advice and reasoning of expert others when making moral calls (Sneddon 2007).

On the other hand, however, while it makes sense that the social nature of morality is far more complex than Haidt’s model acknowledges, it seems reasonable to suppose that there is no room—and in fact, no need—to add an extra Link to the SIM. As discussed above, the mere inclusion of the social factors of morality already put the SIM leagues ahead of other models of moral judgment, since people are not isolated land masses, and moral cognition is definitely not an exception to that. In addition, while it has been argued to be a limitation of the theory that it does not include a Link for “moral experts” (Levy 2006; Sneddon 2007), Haidt might argue that this factor is included in Link 4,

social persuasion, and that the role of experts is not necessary once moral beliefs have been learned. However, this still seems to fall short of what it means to rely on an expert when facing more difficult decisions—while these types of choices arguably do not come up on a daily basis, there is something to be said about not having an intuition, or not trusting it to the point where one would seek further confirmation from an expert.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, while Haidt's SIM does seem to have some merits in that it includes social factors which other models leave out, it still has some limitations in that it cannot fully refute the claims brought against it by the rationalists. The rationalists argue that one cannot prove that effortful reasoning is not the cause of our intuitions or our everyday (out-of-the-lab) moral judgments (Fine 2006; Pizarro & Bloom 2003). However, Haidt (2003) and Levy (2006) argue that even if reasoning does come into play in the shaping of our intuitions, it is done very rarely. In addition, Haidt (2003) argues that the changing of our intuitions over time to match our beliefs is a *social* process, not a process of reasoning. Finally, while the SIM has made great strides in even considering the social implications on our moral judgments, some have argued that it is still lacking something because it does not include consultation of moral experts (Levy 2006; Sneddon 2007). While Haidt might argue that consultation of moral experts is included in Link 4 of his model, it still appears that the SIM could use with a bit of a revamping of its social aspects in order to truly capture the way our moral judgments work.

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Hershberger

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