Belief is Weak

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It is tempting to posit an intimate relationship between belief and assertion. The speech act of assertion seems like a way of transferring the speaker's belief to his or her audience.[1] If this is right, then you might think that the evidential warrant required for asserting a proposition is just the same as the warrant for believing it. In other words, when you have sufficient evidence to entitle you to believe something, you have sufficient evidence to entitle you to assert it. This is intuitive because it is natural to assume that you should only try to induce someone else to share a belief if you are entitled to have the belief yourself. Let's call the thesis that the level of evidence that entitles one to belief a proposition is the same as that which entitles one to assert it *entitlement equality*.

Even philosophers who disagree about the norms of assertion can agree on entitlement equality. For example, Wiliamson and Lackey both seem to be committed to entitlement equality, despite their different accounts of the norms of assertion. Williamson [1996, 2000, chapter 8] advocates a knowledge norm for assertion, arguing that a constitutive norm of assertion is that you must only assert p if you know p. Williamson also (more tentatively) endorses the thesis that a knowledge norm governs belief: you must only believe p if you know p.[2] So Williamson seems

[1]Grice [1957] went so far as to give a reductive analysis of meaning and assertion in terms of intentional belief transference.

[2]Williamson puts forward this thesis in *Knowledge and Its Limits*:

committed to entitlement equality. Lackey [2007] disagrees with Williamson about the norm of assertion: she argues that an assertion of p only requires as evidential warrant that it be reasonable to believe p. In so arguing, though, she directly endorses entitlement equality.

We argue that entitlement equality is false.[3] What entitles one to believe something is less, perhaps much less, than what entitles one to assert something. We argue that to believe something merely requires thinking it likely, while (normally) asserting something requires more than this. We accept that there may be a theoretical notion of outright or full belief that shares the same evidential norms as assertion, but we argue that this does not correspond to our basic concept of belief.[4]

Our first argument that the evidential requirements for belief are weaker than those for assertion comes from considering Moore-paradoxical sentences, such as the following:

(1)   ??It's raining but I'm not sure it's raining.

> We can suggest something more radical. Belief does not aim merely at truth; it aims at knowledge. The more it is justified by knowledge, the closer it comes to knowledge itself.(208)

> It is plausible... that occurrently believing p stands to asserting p as the inner stands to the outer. If so, the knowledge rule for assertion corresponds to the norm that one should believe p only if one ... knows p.... Given that norm, it is not reasonable to believe p when one knows that one does not know p. (256-257)

We are not entirely sure what is meant by 'occurrent belief' as opposed to just plain belief, but Williamson does seem attracted to the knowledge norm for belief generally. In recent work [2013], he has put forward the knowledge norm for belief as a consequence of his view that ones evidence is just one's knowledge ('E = K'):

> Given E = K, the requirement to conform one's beliefs to one's evidence is the requirement to conform one's beliefs to one's knowledge. Believing only what one knows is then a natural understanding of that requirement. (92)

[3]We are not alone in rejecting entitlement equality. Milne [2012], for example, writes, 'Sincere assertion requires a stronger epistemic standing than belief' and Stanley [2008] also rejects entitlement equality.

[4]We should note also that we are not committed here to the idea that there are constitutive norms of assertion at all [see Pagin, 2011, for an argument for this negative view]. But even if there are not, our arguments still show that in most typical speech-act situations, having a rational belief in p does not entitle you to assert p.

We need an explanation of why (1) is an infelicitous assertion. One explanation is that in order to be entitled to assert p you need to be sure that p.[5] In this case, anyone asserting (1) must be sure that they are not sure that it's raining, but they also must be sure that it's raining.[6] While this may be possible (if sureness does not iterate), it seems like an uncomfortable position and, so, can explain the oddness of (1).

Let us contrast (1) with this sentence:

(2)   I believe it's raining, but I'm not sure it's raining.

There doesn't seem to be anything bad sounding about (2). Suppose, however, the standards for assertion are the same as those for belief. Asserting that it's raining, we saw, is not normatively compatible with asserting that one is not sure it's raining. So, believing that it's raining should not be normatively compatible with not being sure it's raining. If (2) is a true assertion, it is reporting a normatively defective mental state: having a belief that is not warranted by the evidence. However, to our ears, (2) does not seem to be any kind of admission of irrationality.

So, it seems that one can believe p even if one has not ruled out the doxastic possibility that not p. However, one cannot assert p in these circumstances. This suggests that the standards for asserting p are strictly higher than for believing p. This is not a peculiarity of the particular sentence (1), rather it holds generally that an assertion of a belief allows epistemic hedging in a way that a straight assertion does not. Consider, for instance, this related contrast:[7]

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[5]It is not completely clear how this follows from standard accounts of the evidential norms of assertion such as Williamson's and Lackey's. Such data might support a principle that in order to assert something you need to be certain of it, which Stanley [2008] endorses. Williamson would seem to need something like a default principle that if you mention a specific piece of knowledge you are sure of it. (In the case of knowledge, this also might explain why it seems strange to say of one person that he knows that p but isn't sure that p.) See Williamson [2000, p. 254], for further discussion.

[6]Assuming when you are sure that p *and not q* you are sure of p and sure that q is false.

[7]These examples are particularly surprising since as Yalcin [2007] notes any use of 'p and might not p' is infelicitous when embedded under an attitude verb. So we cannot say:

(i)   ?Tim believes that it's raining and that it might not be raining.

(3)   I believe it's raining but I know it might not be.

(4)   ??It's raining, but I know it might not be.

There are limits to how much this argument alone can show. For we might think that conversation is governed by distinct norms from belief that disallow the epistemic hedging of (1) without also entailing that the evidential standards are higher for assertion those for belief. Here we follow a roughly Stalnakerian picture of conversation where the goal of assertion is to add a proposition to the common ground, roughly the set of propositions that are presupposed (or mutually taken for granted) in the conversation [Stalnaker, 1974]. We might assume that it is part of the practice of conversation that the common ground is always taken as certain; what is in the common ground is not doubted. In this case (1) and (4) would be odd because they are both proposals to add that it's raining to the common ground, and expressions of doubt about the proposition that it's raining. So they are both putting forward that it's raining as something that is not to be doubted and as something that is doubted by the speaker. This could explain their infelicity. Nothing in this account however, entails that in order to put something forward for the common ground, one must not have any doubts about it. Rather we just assume that putting something forward for the common ground is putting it forward *as* something that is not doubted for the purposes of the conversation. Thus, distinctive norms of conversational practice can explain in a manner compatible with entitlement equality why (1) and (4) are unacceptable while (2) and (3) do not seem to be admissions of epistemic irrationality.[8]

Another tact one might take is to simply deny that a sentence like (3) reports a belief at all. For example Stanley [2008] claims of a similar sentence (of the form 'I believe ϕ but don't know ϕ) that it is not in fact a belief report. He writes:

Given that (3) is acceptable we should not take (i) to show that belief in p is incompatible with belief in the epistemic possibility that p is false. Rather there may be a semantic or pragmatic explanation of why (i) is bad, as in Yalcin [2007], Klinedinst and Rothschild [2012], Dorr and Hawthorne [forthcoming].

[8]On this Stalnakerian picture, the norms for any given assertion might be relative to the purposes of the conversation. In this case, as Seth Yalcin (p.c.) suggested to us there might not be any general notion of the norms of assertion.

However the function of using "I believe" [in the sentence] is to qualify support for the truth of a proposition, rather than endorse it. In short, such uses of "believe" are not cases in which one reports a belief that p at all; they are rather cases in which one reports that one has weak reasons in support of the the truth of a proposition.

This view of sentences like (2) and (3) suggests a radical mismatch between the literal meaning of 'believe' and what it is used to expressed in these sentences. This should be avoided if possible. Our position is that 'believe' is used in its ordinary literal sense in (3).

Luckily, there are direct considerations in support of the idea that the epistemic standards for assertion are stronger than for belief. One comes from lottery cases. Many argue that one cannot felicitously assert that one's lottery ticket with a one in a hundred chance of winning won't in fact win [e.g. Dudman, 1992, Williamson, 2000]. However, at least intuitively, it seems reasonable to believe that one's lottery ticket will lose in these situations. If this were not the case no one would be even initially bothered by the lottery paradox. This data is problematic for anyone who endorses entitlement equality and thinks that lottery sentences are unassertable. Of course, the judgements about lottery cases might be denied.[9] But the data suggests that having a norm of belief on par with that for assertion is revisionary of our ordinary practice in a way that, e.g., the knowledge norm of assertion does not appear to be.

We will further support the thesis that the standards for belief are weaker than those for knowledge by making two points. The first is that belief is as weak as a variety of other states that might pre-theoretically seem weaker than belief, the second is that the word 'believe' is not ambiguously expressing both a strong sense, as strong as assertion in some contexts and a weak sense in other contexts.

Let us consider other other ordinary expressions for belief-like states such as 'think', which is the most standardly used non-factive attitude verb. We can run

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[9]Williamson [2000, p. 256], for instance, seems committed to the idea that belief that one's lottery ticket is a loser less than perfectly rational in these cases. Note that he also refers to 'outright belief' in this context, which we argue below is a technical concept that does not correspond to belief in the ordinary sense.

all the arguments above with 'think' just as well as with 'believe'. One might be tempted to say that 'think' expresses a weaker epistemic state than 'believe'. However, if this were the case it would be possible for someone to be in a state in which they think it's raining but they don't believe it's raining. Intuitively, an attribution of such a mental state is contradictory:[10]

(5) ??Tim thinks it's raining, but he doesn't believe that it is.

All this is unsurprising, as it is widely accepted that the verbs 'think' and 'believe' are synonyms.[11] However, consider the state of being of the opinion that p. This might appear to be a weaker epistemic state than believing that p. However, similar considerations show that it is not. For it seems contradictory to say:

(6) ??Tim is of the opinion that it will rain, but he doesn't actually think/believe that it will.

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[10]A worry about this argument is that due to what is called neg-raising, which we discuss below, negated attributions of belief often are interpreted as attributions of belief in the negation. So, saying 'I don't believe it will rain' seems tantamount to saying 'I believe it won't rain.' This could explain why (5) is contradictory without recourse to the thesis that thinking entails belief. However, this explanation fails to explain a range of other data. First, note that if neg-raising were really obligatory then the following sentence would sound contradictory which it does not:

(i)   Tim doesn't believe it's raining, nor does he believe it's not raining.

In addition, even when there is not an explicit sentential negation there is plenty of evidence that 'think' is not weaker than 'believe'. For example, if it were the following sentence would sound coherent:

(ii)   ??Martha thinks it's raining, but Ned believes it's raining.

Compare this, for instance, to:

(iii)   Martha likes to do the dishes, but Ned loves to do them.

Neg-raising can play no role in this contrast since 'likes' is also neg-raising.

[11]Though we note here a number of differences between 'think' and 'believe'. 'Believe' but not 'think' can be modified by 'firmly' and 'fully'. Having a belief that p seems equivalent to believing p, but thinking p doesn't seem equivalent to having the thought that p. 'Think' also allows a progressive use that belief does not: 'I was thinking that John would win, but then I realized he wouldn't.'

Thus it seems that even the expression 'being of the opinion that' picks out a mental state as strong as believing. This shows that the norms for belief cannot be stronger than the norms for being of the opinion that.

Most surprisingly, it seems that even suspecting may be as weak as believing, or close anyway. For some people find the following sort of sentence odd:

(7)   ?Tim doesn't actually think that John stole the painting, but he suspects that he did.[12]

This is less categorically contradictory-sounding then the previous examples, but some consulted suggest that there is some sort of oddity at least in (7). Note also that in legal contexts suspicion is often defined as a genre of belief. For example: 'SUSPICION. A belief to the disadvantage of another, accompanied by a doubt' [Bouvier, 1856]. Similar observations apply to other weak epistemic attitudes:[13]

(8)   a. ?Tim has some confidence that it will rain, but it's not that he thinks it will rain.
        b. ?Tim half-expects that it will rain, but it's not that he thinks it will rain.
        c. ?Tim is tempted to think that it will rain, but it's not that he thinks it will rain.

These examples suggest that, at least for some, 'believe' is a bit like 'open': when something is open to any degree it is open, when you believe something to any degree you believe it. We are not fully committed to this thesis as the judgments here are subtle and vary between speakers.

We don't take a firm stance here on whether, in fact, it is possible to suspect/half-expect/be tempted to think/have some confidence that p without thinking p, as the status of the judgments here is not sufficiently clear. We do note that if belief is as weak as at least one of these attitudes, then it is clear that the norms governing belief must be weaker than assertion, for merely suspecting p does not entitle one

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[12]We use '??' to indicate more infelicity than '?'. For a minimal pair compare to 'Tim doesn't actually believe that John stole the painting, but he hopes that he did.'

[13]These examples come from Williamson (p.c.).

to assert p. So these observations strongly suggest that entitlement equality is false. Moreover, if belief is as weak as any of these attitudes then a knowledge norm (or a truth norm) cannot govern belief, for no one would argue that one should only suspect p when p is known (or true).

A possible way of rescuing entitlement equality (and a knowledge norm for belief) is to plead for an ambiguity in the term 'believe'. On this view 'believe' has at least two meanings: it has a weak sense in which it means something like being of the opinion that or suspecting and a stronger meaning in which attributes full belief. The idea would then be that entitlement equality (and a knowledge norm) only apply to the latter, stronger sense. However, the examples above show that this cannot be right. For if 'believe' had two senses it should be possible to attribute belief in the weaker sense but deny it in the stronger sense. But we have seen that we cannot say of a single person that they are of the opinion that p but lack the belief that p. Thus, 'believe' is not ambiguous: it is simply weak.[14]

Further support for the thesis that 'believe' is weak comes from consideration of the linguistic phenomenon called neg-raising [Fillmore, 1963, Prince, 1976]. When saying that you don't believe p you often suggest that you believe not-p, i.e. that you disbelieve p. This is called neg-raising because the negation seems to be read further on in the sentence: not as negating the mental state verb but as negating its content. Neg-raising occurs with all the belief-like mental state expressions we have discussed so far, 'believe', 'think', and 'is of the opinion that'. Neg-raising does not, however, occur with 'know': saying 'John doesn't know p' doesn't suggest that John knows not-p.

What we want to observe is that only weak mental state verbs allow neg-raising. In the belief realm, 'is certain that', 'is sure that', and such expressions do not give rise to neg-raising. In the realm of desires, 'want', the weak term, allows neg-raising, but 'need' does not. In the realm of attitudes, 'like' the weak term allows neg-raising, but 'love' does not.[15] Thus considerations of neg-raising suggest that 'believe' and

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[14]The lack of ambiguity in 'believe' and 'think' may be surprising to those who posit wide-spread semantic or pragmatic ambiguity across natural language predicates.

[15]Of course, neg-raising only applies when these terms take propositional complements, as in 'I like/love that John made me breakfast' or 'I would like/love to go to the movies'.

'think' are, like 'is of the opinion that', weak expressions. The weakness of the expressions suggests that the standards for rationally holding them are lower than those of assertion.

We now want to make some suggestions about what does entitle one to believe a proposition. One standard view, the threshold view, is that you are entitled to believe p just in case you are entitled to have a sufficiently high credence in p. Usually it is thought that the threshold must be at least above 50%. Observations by Swinburne [1983], Yalcin [2010] and Jeremy Goodman (p.c.) suggest that this is not right. To take Goodman's example, consider a three-horse race. Assume that horse A is more likely to win than horse B which in turn is more likely to win then horse C (so the probabilities of winning could be 45%, 28%, 27%). In this case it seems fine to say 'I think horse A will win' or 'I believe horse A will win'.[16]

Interestingly, this piece of data does not eliminate the idea that the threshold for believing p is that you find p likely or probable. As Yalcin [2010] observes in cases like the above it is also acceptable to say 'Horse A is likely to win' or 'Horse A will probably win'.[17] Thus it seems that finding something likely may in fact be the right evidential warrant for believing it: but, surprisingly, thinking something probable does not require believing it more likely than not.

The case above might tempt one to think that it is sufficient for thinking something probable (and hence having warrant to believe it) that it be more likely than its salient alternatives. If this is right, then belief is relative to something like a partition of the relevant outcomes [as Yalcin, 2010, suggests]. This is a rather strange situation: for while in some contexts we might think that horse A will win in the scenario above, if the salient partition is just the proposition that horse A will win and the proposition horse A will lose, then we will not think that horse A will win. Clearly, then, seemingly valid arguments about beliefs will turn out to be false if they involve a shifting of the salient partition. For example the argument from think

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[16]'Think' seems slightly more natural here, but 'think' often feels more natural. Note also it is awful to say, in this case, 'I think horse A will win but I don't believe it will'.

[17]We note in both cases that these judgments are not completely universal, but they seem fairly robust. Of course, all these judgements could represent some form of cognitive error [see Windschitl and Wells, 1998] , but we agree with Yalcin that it is more likely that they reflect somewhat surprising aspects of our notion of likelihood and belief.

p to not think not-p is not valid if the partition is shifted.[18]

However, upon examination the view that one thinks p just in case p includes all the likely alternatives in a salient partition cannot be right, as Yalcin (2010) observes. In a lottery in which one ticket has a 2% chance of winning and every other ticket a 1% chance of winning, it would seem odd to believe that the 2% ticket will win or to think it probably will win. Thus, the threshold view might not be entirely wrong: to believe something might require a) it be significantly more likely than the salient alternatives, and b) it be above some contextually determined threshold of likeliness.[19] We do not pretend to be give the full conditions for being warranted in believing p here, but just to suggest a rough preliminary account.

This line of thought can be strengthened by considering the practice of asking questions like 'Who do you think will win the election?' In general a WH-question presupposes that there is at least one positive answer. This explains why it is strange to ask, 'Who are you confident will win the election?', unless it's already taken for granted that there is one person who the addressee is confident will win the election. But note that asking, 'Who do you think/believe will win the election?' does not seem to make any strong presupposition about the addressee's knowledge. So it seems that thinking/believing p does not even require being confident that p. This supports the idea that thinking p just requires thinking p is likely.

The reason that the evidential norms for thinking p likely are no lower than those for thinking p may be that thinking p likely entails thinking p. We can make the same argument as we made above with being of the opinion that p or suspecting p: there does not appear to be a coherent mental state in which one thinks p is likely without thinking p. The incoherence of such a state is suggested by the fact that the following sentence sounds bad:

(9)   ?Tim doesn't think John will win nor does he think John won't win, but he
        thinks John is likely to win.

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[18]Note, however, that any partition relativity in 'think' or 'believe' cannot be too easily switched or it would allow contradictory sentences such as 'I think horse A will win but I think horse A will lose' to be acceptable.

[19]Significance might be very weak, but we do not want to say just more likely because it does not seem like only a minuscule difference is sufficient, as Yalcin also observes.

It is worth noting that viewing thinking p as no stronger than thinking p likely yields a partial explanation of why neg-raising occurs with 'think' and 'believe'. When p and not-p are relevant alternatives, the only case in which you don't think either p or not-p is likely are ones where you think they have roughly even chances. Thus, as long as one assumes that you have any view at all about p versus not-p, not thinking p will entail thinking not-p. Since indifference between p and not-p cannot be guaranteed we do not have a full explanation of neg-raising, but we at least can explain why it's a plausible inference in many cases.[20]

The considerations above provide another direct argument against entitlement equality and against the thesis that believing p normatively requires knowing p. It is clear that one can be fully justified in thinking something likely without being entitled to assert it or knowing it. But we have seen that thinking or believing p is likely is sufficient for thinking p. In this case entitlement equality must be false. In addition, this line of thought indicates that believing p cannot normatively require knowing p.

We would note here that while belief seems to have weak evidential norms, certainly weaker than those for assertion and possibly even weaker than having over 50% overall credence, other epistemic attitudes related to belief do not. Being certain or being sure, for instance, have much stronger evidential norms than belief. Nothing we have said suggests that the evidential norms for these notions are weaker than those for assertion. In the philosophy literature one often sees reference to 'outright belief' or 'full belief'. The main use in the literature of these terms is to distinguish merely believing something probable from believing simpliciter. This may be a useful theoretical notion distinct from certainty and sureness, and it may be one for which norms comparable to those for assertion apply.[21] However, our arguments above indicate that this notion is not a disambiguation of what we ordinarily mean by 'belief'; rather it seems a theoretical posit not grounded in our ordinary use of the term 'belief'. Thus, those arguing for the importance of outright or full belief as

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[20]Note that this view also explains saying 'Tim doesn't think Bill will win, but he doesn't think Bill won't win' suggests that Tim gives roughly even chances or has no information at all.

[21]For example, Wedgwood [2012] writes 'we typically assume that a sincere assertion of a proposition p expresses an outright belief in p.' So, he takes the close relation to assertion as an essential mark of outright belief.

a notion stronger than ordinary belief but distinct from believing or being certain cannot argue for it on the basis of its commonsense status as grounded in our talk about belief.[22] The everyday notion of belief is a weak one.[23]

Suppose there is a an important notion FB (for 'full belief') for which entitlement equality holds (leaving open the question of whether the term 'full belief' picks out FB in English).[24] What can we say about it? For one thing, the badness of examples like (1) and (3) suggest that FB is incompatible with any kind of doubt. Many epistemologists like to think that knowledge entails the relevant sense of belief, so in this case knowledge would need to entail FB. But if knowledge entails FB than you cannot know anything for which you have doubts, which might be a worrisome consequence, since we tend to think we know in cases where we are not certain. So it seems like the advocate of FB as the relevant notion of belief either has to deny that knowledge entails FB or has to deny that we ever have knowledge in cases where there are doubts.[25]

We have argued that the norms of assertion are stronger than those for belief. We might want to ask why this is so. Here we can only speculate, as other norms for assertion (including a belief norm) would be completely coherent. However, they may lack important features that a stronger norm (such as a knowledge norm) has. We note one feature that may be relevant. If we work with an attitude that does not require full confidence to hold, assertion might not be an effective means of sharing

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[22]In particular, those who stress the importance of outright belief tend to do so against a Bayesian eliminativism about the notion [e.g. Sturgeon, 2008]. In this literature it is generally taken for granted that the notion of outright belief is the commonsense one. Our point here is that this is far from clear.

[23]Similarly, we might think that the mental act verb 'judge' is not weak in the way belief is. Williamson considers belief to be the inner analogue to assertion, but it seems that judging is a closer analogue as, like assertion, it is an act. Note also that 'judge' is not neg-raising: saying you don't judge that it's raining doesn't suggest you judge it's not raining. Also it is not clearly contradictory to say of someone that they believe p but do not judge that p. It as at least plausible that the evidential warrant required for judging that p is stronger than that for believing p. Tellingly, perhaps, the verb 'judge' in this general sense has little currency outside of philosophical contexts.

[24]It is clear, however, that locutions like 'firm belief' do not pick out the right notion. There is nothing at all defective about firmly believing your lottery ticket will lose, even if there are only probabilistic grounds for this.

[25]Of course, one way out of this dilemma is to use the conversational strategy sketched on page 4 to explain (1) and (3), so maintaining that FB is compatible with doubt [this is the strategy pursued by Stanley, 2008].

that attitude. For if A finds out the B has, say, 99% confidence in p, A might not raise his confidence to 99% even if he trusts that B has reached this confidence solely on the basis of good, non-misleading evidence. So, if 99% confidence were the norm of assertion, even a fully trusting audience who accepted an assertion that p might not then be in a position to assert p himself. More generally, finding out that someone correctly has come to have a high confidence in p does not immediately tell you what attitude to have towards p. On the other hand, finding out that someone knows p forces you to accept p yourself. Thus it seems that having an evidential standard like knowledge allows for efficient transference of information in a way that merely requiring belief does not.[26]

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[26]Thanks to Philippe Schlenker for suggesting this line of thought. Stanley [2008] pursues a related thought in his argument for a certainty norm for assertion.

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