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Narnian Virtues: how teachers and their students learn to cultivate character through response to the Narnia novels of C. S. Lewis

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Narnian Virtues: How 9 to 14 year olds cultivate character through response to the Narnia novels of C. S. Lewis

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Introduction

In this paper we discuss the cultivation of virtues in young people through the *Narnian Virtues* project, which investigates how teachers and students within the crucial formative period of 9 to 14 years old understand and acquire Narnian virtues (wisdom, love, fortitude, courage, self-control, justice, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, integrity, hard work, and curiosity) that underpin good character through their engagement with a literary curriculum. The *Narnian Virtues* research is informed by the design and findings of the *Knightly Virtues* character education project based at the University of Birmingham's Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, which developed a literary curriculum and programme of activities based on four stories. The Jubilee Centre's encouraging findings from a trial conducted to assess the impact of the programme are reported by Arthur et al. (2014) and recently explored in detail in the context of delivering character education through literature by Carr & Harrison (2015). The *Narnian Virtues* project expands previous literature-based character education interventions in two ways: (a) by developing a curriculum based on literary protagonists (the Pevensies) who are children, of an age similar to that of the students reading the novels, and (b) by extending the intervention age to include secondary school students up to 14 years of age.

We will begin by outlining our literary and pedagogical approach to cultivating virtues in young people, followed by an explanation of the *Narnian Virtues* project and the rationale for using the work of C. S. Lewis in a character education project in diverse schools. We will briefly discuss our initial research findings and explore in more detail why character education is relevant and necessary. We'd like to take the opportunity at this point to gratefully acknowledge the support of the John Templeton Foundation in funding the *Narnian Virtues* one year pilot project.

The Literary Approach to Cultivating Virtues

In *Poetics* (1968), Aristotle argues that whereas history deals only with “events”, literature deals with “truths” (p.59). Supporting this argument, in *Moral Education through English* McCulloch & Mathieson (1995) state that: “Literature, more than any other subject in the curriculum, offers the fullest possible picture both of the complexities of the moral situation and the consequences of action” (p.30). In the last decade other educators (Bohlin, 2005; Carr, 2005; Pike, 2014a; and Carr & Harrison, 2015) have also explored different aspects of using literature as a vehicle for moral and character education. In recent years popular fiction for young readers such as the *Harry Potter* series has received a good deal of attention and use by educators (Whitney et al., 2005; Seroczynski et al., 2011; Edgington, 2002), but the *Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis, which to date has sold 100 million copies in 47 languages, has received insufficient attention. Given Lewis’s background as a scholar of (Medieval and Renaissance) literature (at Oxford and Cambridge), a children’s author and an author interested in the education of young people and their character, we feel he is an overlooked figure as a character educator (Pike et al., 2015).

The *Narnian Virtues* project follows the work of the Jubilee Centre on the *Knightly Virtues* project, in producing curricula based on stories, through which children are encouraged to cultivate virtues and develop their good character. The protagonists are children, similar in age to the young readers in our project; Peter is thirteen in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Susan is twelve, Edmund is ten, and the youngest sibling, Lucy, is eight. Each character ages a year in *Prince Caspian* and Edmund and Lucy age another year in *The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader’*; Peter and Susan do not return to Narnia after *Prince Caspian*. Despite the length of time since the novels were written, the protagonists are still useful figures for young readers in the twenty-first century to engage with. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C.S. Lewis (1961) expressed the power and moral value of good literature when he reflected: “In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself” (p. 141). Young readers of Lewis’s novels enter a new world in Narnia, but learn, through the characters, the real world value of the virtues discovered and cultivated in Narnia.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie children are evacuated from London during the Blitz and arrive at Professor Kirk’s old house in the countryside, and there begins their adventure. All the Pevensie children grow in character in Narnia, but it is Edmund who experiences the greatest character transformation, firstly betraying his

siblings for Turkish Delight and the chance to be the White Witch's prince and finally re-joining his siblings to defeat the White Witch and liberate Narnia, under the guidance of Aslan the great lion. In *Prince Caspian*, the four children join forces with Prince Caspian, who has fled his cruel and usurping uncle Miraz. Once more the Narnians are under threat and it falls to their human visitors – “the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve” – to defeat Miraz and his Telmarine army. Peter fights with honour and courage and Edmund, having denied Lucy's integrity in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is the first to defend her when she sees Aslan before anyone else. In *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*, the third novel used in the project, Lucy and Edmund are reunited with Caspian, this time with their obnoxious cousin Eustace in tow. Caspian, imbued with a strong sense of justice, overthrows the slave trade on the island of Narrowhaven, liberating the enslaved, en route to discover the exiled friends of his murdered father. Eustace, who is lazy and lacking any curiosity or sense of adventure, breaks away from the hard-working crew of the 'Dawn Treader' and discovers a dragon's hoard of treasure. Transformed into a dragon himself, it is only then that Eustace discovers the true value of working hard and being a good friend. Aslan rewards his character transformation with a physical transformation back to human form in time to return back to the real world with Lucy and Edmund at the end of the novel. Lucy and Edmund are the first two siblings to enter Narnia in the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and they are last to leave through the door in the sky in the *Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*. Lucy's virtues of fortitude and integrity are the first to be tested when no-one believes what she has discovered in the back of Professor Kirk's wardrobe, but each of the Pevensies, and Eustace, cultivate virtues in Narnia.

The poet W.H. Auden observes that, each of us inhabits both a primary world of “experience” and a secondary world of the “imagination” (Auden, 1968, p. 9). In this secondary world significant moral and character education may occur (Pike, 2002). The relation between the two worlds is critically important because we make sense of each in the light of the other. According to Lewis's friend and colleague, J.R.R. Tolkien, “A Secondary World contains an ‘inner consistency of reality’ so that what you find inside is ‘true’ in that it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (Hooper, 1996, p. 567). This is important because the premise upon which moral and character education through literature is based is that reading literature helps with reading people in life. However, the sort of reading engaged in is likely to have a determining effect upon the acquisition, as well as the understanding of a range of virtues.

The *Narnian Virtues* project responds to this theory of aesthetic learning. Clearly, the way the project is implemented - the way children enter a secondary world is critically important, and plays a significant part in the Narnia narrative. Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter literally enter a secondary world through the wardrobe. In *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*, Lucy, Edmund and their cousin Eustace enter Narnia through the picture in the bedroom. It is a picture Eustace wants to smash, because he doesn't appreciate art or literature (Lewis goes on to tell us in the novel that Eustace has never read books about dragons, either), whereas Lucy and Edmund embrace the experience. 'Responsive teaching' recognizes that both the emotional and intellectual play a part in learning. "The way it feels to the reader, and what it does for him/her may yield a more lasting influence than any critical analysis aimed at advocating what is often regarded as an expert interpretation" (Britton, 1993, p. 88). The *Narnian Virtues* project seeks to engage with readers' feelings and motivation as well as their understanding of a range of virtues. The recognition that "intelligence" and "feeling" are "mutually dependent aspects of human consciousness" is especially relevant in responsive teaching (Wade and Reed, 1987, p. 56). The "broad range of affective components of appreciation, not just emotions properly so called, but also moods, desires, feelings, drives and attitudes or frames of mind" (Feagin, 1996, p. 9) are drawn upon. Rosenblatt's (1978) notion of the text as "stimulus" informs the methodology employed by the *Narnian Virtues*; a simple explanation of this concept is that "the text is a stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience" (p 156). Such an emphasis ensures that young readers are enabled to see the relevance of works of literature to their own lives. When 'stimulus' and 'blueprint' (where the text acts as a guide) come together in 'aesthetic' reading (and aesthetic teaching too that enables it).

Cultivating Virtues in Narnia: The Narnian Virtues Project

Lewis's construct of human morality in the Narnia novels is, as Tankard (2007) identifies, "part of the great moral tradition of humankind that Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* (1943) calls the *Tao*" (p. 72). Lewis' *Tao*, a Chinese term for the path, or the way, draws on the texts and beliefs of a vast number of cultures, religions and traditions, including ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Old Norse, Chinese, Indian, Roman, Greek, Australian Aboriginal, and American Indian. Lewis identifies eight moral laws of the Tao, which are of universal significance:

Lewis' 8 Laws of the <i>Tao</i>	Examples in <i>The Abolition of Man</i>
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<p>1. The Law of General Benificence</p> <p><i>Refraining from murder or bringing any sort of misery and suffering upon one's fellows; not being greedy, cruel or telling lies. Showing kindness and goodwill, doing one another good not evil, enjoying society and human companionship and loving others as oneself.</i></p>	<p>'Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you' (Chinese, <i>Analects of Confucius</i>)</p> <p>'Love thy neighbour as thyself' (Jewish, <i>Leviticus</i>)</p> <p>'By the fundamental Law of Nature Man [is] to be preserved as much as possible.' (Locke, <i>Treatises of Civil Govt.</i>)</p>
<p>2. The Law of Special Benificence</p> <p><i>Specifically refers to the duties of brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, children as well as rulers. As human beings we have special obligations and owe particular duties of care to those of our closer and wider family.</i></p>	<p>Be blameless to thy kindred. Take no vengeance even though they do thee wrong' (Old Norse, <i>Sigrdrifumal</i>)</p> <p>If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith' (Christian, <i>New Testament</i>)</p> <p>Natural affection is a thing right and according to Nature.' (Greek)</p>
<p>3. Duties to Parents, Elders, Ancestors</p> <p><i>Honouring one's father and mother by supporting them, caring for them and fulfilling one's obligations to them by showing proper respect, even when they are dead.</i></p>	<p>For him who fails to honour [father and mother] every work of piety is in vain. This is the first duty.' (Hindu, <i>Janet</i>)</p> <p>'To care for parents' (Greek, Epictetus)</p> <p>'You will see them take care ... of old men.' (American Indian)</p>
<p>4. Duties to Children and Posterity</p> <p><i>Providing for the education of the young and respecting children.</i></p>	<p>'The Master said, Respect the young.' (Chinese, <i>Analects of Confucius</i>)</p> <p>'The killing of... the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the people, is the saddest part....' (American Indian)</p> <p>'Children, the old, the poor, etc. should be considered as lords of the atmosphere.' (Hindu, Janet)</p>
<p>5. The Law of Justice</p> <p><i>Sexual justice, honesty and justice in court. One must be faithful to one's spouse and not</i></p>	<p>If the native made a "find" of any kind (e.g. a honey tree) and marked it, it was thereafter safe for him....' (Australian Aborigines)</p> <p>'Justice is the settled and permanent intention</p>

<p><i>commit adultery. One should not steal and should render to each person his rights. The legal system should not be partial and treat the poor worse than the rich.</i></p>	<p>of rendering to each man his rights' (Roman, Justinian)</p> <p>'Whoso takes no bribe ... well pleasing is this to Samas.' (Babylonian)</p>
<p>6. The Law of Good Faith and Veracity</p> <p><i>Keeping good faith and keeping promises. Fraud, lying, falsehoods are prohibited. Perjury is condemned as is saying one thing and doing another.</i></p>	<p>'I sought no trickery, nor swore false oaths' (Anglo-Saxon. <i>Beowulf</i>)</p> <p>'Hateful to me as are the gates of Hades is that man who says one thing, and hides another in his heart' (Greek, Homer, <i>Iliad</i>)</p> <p>'I have not spoken falsehood.' (Ancient Egyptian. Confession of the Righteous Soul)</p>
<p>7. The Law of Mercy</p> <p><i>The poor, the sick, the disabled, the weak should be cared for. It should be possible for a prisoner to be set free. Widows, orphans and old men should be looked after. We must always be tender enough to weep.</i></p>	<p>'In the Dalebura tribe a woman, a cripple from birth, was carried about by the tribespeople in turn until her death at the age of sixty-six...They never desert the sick' (Australian Aborigines)</p> <p>'When thou cutest down thine harvest ... and hast forgot a sheaf ... thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.' (Jewish. <i>Deuteronomy</i>)</p> <p>'Nature confesses that she has given to the human race the tenderest hearts, by giving us the power to weep. This is the best part of us.' (Roman. Juvenal)</p>
<p>8. The Law of Magnanimity</p> <p><i>Not only should we not injure, but we should protect others from being injured - death is not to be feared.</i></p>	<p>'The Master said, Love learning and if attacked be ready to die for the Good Way' (Ancient Chinese, <i>Analects</i>)</p> <p>'There are two kinds of injustice: the first is found in those who do an injury, the second in those who fail to protect another from injury when they can.' (Roman, Cicero).</p> <p>'Men always knew that when force and injury was offered they might be defenders of themselves; they knew that howsoever men may seek their own commodity, yet if this were done with injury unto others it was not to be suffered, but by all men and by all good means to be withstood.' (English. Hooker, <i>Laws of Eccl. Polity</i>)</p>

Cultivating Virtues as a Challenge to Behaviourism

Clearly, the *Tao* concerns not just virtuous behaviour but motivation for virtuous behaviour. However, a fundamental criticism of the nature of character education is that it is little more than behaviourism. A question was posed in the 1990s, asking: “Do you suppose that if Germany had had character education at the time, it would have encouraged children to fight Nazism or support it?” (Desmond, 1995, in Kohn, 1997, p.6). B. F. Skinner, the so-called father of behaviourism, even admitted in a 1968 radio interview: “Oh, yes. The Nazis made good use of the social sciences” (Evans, 1968, p.55).

In *The Abolition of Man* Lewis (1978/1943) explains what differentiates the fanatical distortions of an ideology like Nazism from the holistic approach to morality espoused by the *Tao*:

What purport to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies', all consist of fragments from the *Tao* itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation.... The rebellion of new ideologies against the *Tao* is a rebellion of the branches against the tree (p. 29).

The *Tao* recognizes that we have a moral responsibility to uphold justice for all; in addition to the responsibilities we bear to those closest to us. Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolf Höss may have believed himself to be honouring his duty to his children, whom he brought up with care and attention in the perimeters of the infamous Nazi camp, and to his country (Lewis' third law refers to duties to parents, elders and ancestors, and his fourth law is to children). However, if Höss and his contemporaries had given the same recognition to the laws of general beneficence and justice (first and fifth, respectively, in the *Tao*), their perceived justification for the persecution and mass murder of so-called 'enemies of Nazism' would not have been made. Lewis' meditation on the monstrosity of Nazism is more graphically illustrated in his novel for adults, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), published at the culmination of the Nazis' war on Europe and the Holocaust. In the novel, Professor Weston of the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE) expounds future methods of education, which include “selective breeding” and “liquidation of backward races”. He argues:

A real education makes the patient what it wants infallibly: whatever he or his [sic] parents try to do about it. Of course it'll have to be mainly psychological at first. But we'll get onto biological *conditioning* in the end and direct manipulation of the brain (p. 44, our italics)

In our current era of extreme ideologies, with increasing public attention on groups such as Islamic State, the *Tao* is as relevant now as it was during the 1930s and 40s, and the moral imperative for education remains. Yet, in our diverse societies in which the most violent of clashes of ideology are being carried out, the notion of character education raises questions about which virtues and values it is legitimate for schools to teach when students come from so many different homes, communities and traditions. Many teachers, Arthur (2005) observes, “have found subscribing to any set of values deeply problematic in a pluralistic society” and often “commit themselves to nothing in particular – or to a sort of undefined humanism where the only question is one of personal feeling” (p. 249). Pike (2014b) supports this observation, recognising that “all too often, we are afraid to discuss difference in a plural society (because of inadequate and insufficiently robust notions of tolerance)” (p.4). The *Narnian Virtues* project delivered the pilot curriculum in seven classes, in five diverse schools across Yorkshire, to students from a broad range of socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds, with the firm belief that the ethos of Lewis’s laws of the *Tao*, represented in the virtues presented in the Narnia books, have the potential to engage all young people, regardless of their background, culture or belief.

Measuring Virtue

The *Narnian Virtues* project developed a six-week curriculum in which students aged between 9 and 14 years studied one of three Narnia novels, working through selected extracts from the novels that presented virtues and their corresponding vices in action. Participating classes (seven classes in five diverse schools across Yorkshire) were provided with a teacher guide, pre-selected extracts and classroom activities, copies of student workbooks, student journals and the novels for each student in class. In classroom discussions and in the student materials, virtues were defined as good moral habits. This is consistent with classical thinking, going back to Aristotle, about the nature of virtue. Aristotle taught that a virtue is not a mere capacity or ability but a disposition—a tendency to act in a good way (Aristotle, 1987). Twelve virtues were identified as being salient across the three novels, affirmed across diverse cultures and therefore consistent with the *Tao*, and relevant to the lives of the participating students. The twelve ‘Narnian Virtues’

forming the basis of our curriculum were: wisdom (including prudence); love (including kindness); fortitude; courage (an aspect of fortitude); self-control; justice; forgiveness; gratitude; humility; integrity (including honesty); hard work (including diligence); and curiosity.

The *Narnian Virtues* project started and finished with two questionnaires. Questionnaire #1 was developed specifically for the *Narnian Virtues* project by co-investigator Francis (Francis et al., 2015a) and consisted of nearly 200 questions, a combination of Likert scale and multiple-choice items. Questionnaire #1 had three parts:

1. Knowledge Index of Narnian Character Virtues (KINCV). This tested students' ability to select from a list of various behaviours those actions that were examples of a given Narnian virtue (this was intended to provide a quantitative measure of students' understanding of the 12 target Narnian virtues);
2. The Narnian Character Virtue Scales (NCVS). These items asked students to rate the extent to which each of the twelve Narnian virtues described them (this was intended to provide a measure of students' behavioural application of the virtues); and
3. Student self-ratings of eight personality and attitude characteristics, taken from Eysenck & Eysenck's model of personality (1975) and adapted by Francis (1996) for his studies of youth. These eight characteristics (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, lying, self-esteem, empathy, happiness, and theistic beliefs) were not related to the virtue goals of the curriculum. As the project did not include a control group not exposed to the curriculum, these eight personality and attitude characteristics were intended to serve as a control and were not expected to change between the pre-test and post-test.

Questionnaire #2 focused entirely on students' understanding of virtues and character. It asked them to:

1. Define each of the 12 target virtues;
2. When given a particular virtue or vice, name its opposite;
3. Explain what virtues and vices have to do with good character; and
4. Explain how a person develops good character.

The data yielded by questionnaire #2 revealed a considerable improvement in students' understanding of the Narnian virtues and their relation to good character. The class means were noticeably low in test one across all classes with the highest class mean 12 out of 50 and the lowest just 1 out of 50. This indicated a paucity of knowledge of the language of virtue at the outset. All classes demonstrated improvement in the second test with the highest class mean 30 out of 50, and the lowest 15 out of 50. Pre- to post-test mean gains in each class ranged from 12 to 18, showing a consistent improvement across

all the participating age groups. Analysis of data from questionnaire #1 (reported in detail in Francis et al., 2015b) found a statistically significant improvement of 7.2% in students' ability to identify those behaviours that expressed a particular virtue; but no significant change in students' ratings of the extent to which the twelve virtues described them, or in their self-ratings on the eight personality and attitude characteristics used as control variables.

In debunking "Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education", Kristjánsson (2013) also acknowledged several legitimate concerns about delivering virtue education, including the historical lack of a clear empirical methodology. The majority of instruments to measure character depend on self-report questionnaires and as such, Kristjánsson (2013) asserts, are vulnerable to bias caused by "self-deceptions and self-fabulations" (p. 15). In a questionnaire delivered to school students who may deliberately or unwittingly bias their responses in an attempt to please the teacher and researcher, or to present their best self, even if it is not their most true self, this is a legitimate issue to consider in evaluating the empirical findings of the project. Although the *Narnian Virtues* project was, to an extent, confined by this methodology, the implementation of the second questionnaire (#2) testing knowledge, with fixed answers, provided additional non-self-reported data to bolster the findings of Francis's (2015a) instrument.

Despite the participating students not revealing an increased application in virtues in questionnaire #1 (contrary to the logical concerns of self-reporting bias discussed by Kristjánsson), a review of their entries in the student workbooks and journals, and comments offered in interviews and focus groups, *did* reveal examples of where they had applied the newly learned virtues in their lives, and how they recognised the project as relevant to their lives.

I think reading the book, it's shown all of the virtues and vices that they show, like when Edmund showing deceit and like all the bad things. It showed us that they were bad and we shouldn't do them and when like Peter were trying to stick up for Lucy and it showed that when someone's doing something to anyone, not just like your relative, you should try to help and get them out of it.

- *Kian, 12 years old*

I don't like to do anything wrong now because I like compare it to the characters that's done something wrong and I don't want to be like them. It's just really got me thinking and I do try to use the virtues more.

- *Megan, 12 years old*

I think it's helped me a bit like, because I play rugby, it's helped me a bit in sport, like, if someone's done something like say someone's hit me or something in tackle, and like having the wisdom not to do it back because like the consequences you'll get sent off, you'll get sin binned or whatever, and yeah, you just keep that mind that what could happen if you don't.

- *Alex, 12 years old*

Such comments do suggest a cultivation of virtues through the *Narnian Virtues* project, even though this response was not adequately captured by the questionnaire findings. Reflecting on the findings of the pilot project, with a view to developing the project for a three-year period, we suggest that the six-week period may have been too short to allow for greater behavioural change. The teachers who reported that given the ambitious goals and activities of the curriculum, 12 weeks were needed per novel per year supported this suggestion. As Berkowitz and Bier (2004) point out, character education “has long relied upon an Aristotelian principle that character is formed in large part through habitual behaviour that eventually becomes internalized into virtues” (p. 80). If virtues are habits, those habits need sufficient time and practice to become established.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing, we are confident that a literary curriculum is an appropriate and engaging model for character education, and we are encouraged by the feedback from the students that in schools of diverse character, C. S. Lewis remains relevant to young people. One thirteen-year-old girl who read *Prince Caspian* had the following to say on the literary model of the project:

I feel reading the book is a good way to learn about virtues and vices because not always just being told about something will like get you interested, because sometimes if someone's just telling you about something you won't be an interested as where in the book you learn about different characters so that reading it is actually interesting but you're learning at the same time, whilst being interested in the book.

- Keira, 13 years old

Finally, we would agree with Keira's 12-year-old classmate's reflections, when asked about the relevance of the virtues presented in the Narnia novels now, some sixty years since they were written:

I feel like, no matter who the person is, if you believe and they believe the same thing you should help them, no matter if they're the same race, not the same age, not the same gender, or religion or anything, you should still help them because it's like, almost like, not duty, but you feel that you have to help them because it's just nice and if you believe in them and then they believe in you, you can just help them in a way.

- Olivia, 12 years old.

We are grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for generously funding the pilot project in 2015 and hope to be granted funding to expand the project and continue it for a further three years. In closing, we extend an invitation to schools, teachers and educators who teach young people aged between 9 and 14, who are interested in joining the

Narnian Virtues project, teaching up to three Narnia novels over three years. Training, support and materials are provided, and as the feedback from our first cohort of young people demonstrates, the project captured their imagination and was an engaging project through which to cultivate virtues and good character. If you are interested in joining the project or know a school or teacher or parent who might be interested in working with us, the team would love to hear from you. Please contact m.pike@education.leeds.ac.uk

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