

AWE *TOUT COURT*: NEITHER RELIGIOUS NOR SPIRITUAL

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that awe is not inherently a religious or spiritual emotion. Drawing on psychological research, it adopts Keltner and Haidt's two-component model of awe as a response to perceived vastness that triggers a need for cognitive accommodation. The article argues that the categorization of an awe experience as religious or non-religious, spiritual or non-spiritual entirely depends on the cognitive resources used by the awestruck subject in attempting to accommodate awe. To distinguish between religious, spiritual, and neither religious nor spiritual variants of awe, the article introduces working definitions of religion and spirituality. Religious awe involves reference to supernatural transcendence; spiritual awe emphasizes personal meaning and authenticity. In contrast, the expression "awe *tout court*" is introduced to refer to awe experiences that do not involve appeals to supernatural transcendence or subjective self-expression.

Questo capitolo sostiene che il timore reverenziale non è intrinsecamente un'emozione religiosa o spirituale. Basandosi su ricerche psicologiche, adotta il modello a due componenti proposto da Keltner e Haidt, secondo cui il timore reverenziale è una risposta alla percezione di qualcosa di immenso che attiva un bisogno di accomodamento cognitivo. Il capitolo argomenta che la classificazione di un'esperienza di timore reverenziale come religiosa o non religiosa, spirituale o non spirituale dipende interamente dalle risorse cognitive attivate dal soggetto interessato nel tentativo di accomodare tale esperienza. Per distinguere tra varianti religiose, spirituali e né religiose né spirituali dello stupore, vengono introdotte definizioni operative di religione e spiritualità. Il timore reverenziale religioso implica riferimento a un'idea di trascendenza soprannaturale; il timore reverenziale spirituale mette in risalto il significato personale e l'autenticità soggettiva del vissuto. In contrasto con queste due categorie viene introdotta l'espressione "timore reverenziale *tout court*" per indicare quelle esperienze di timore reverenziale che non comportano richiami ad alcuna trascendenza sovranaturale né forme di auto-espressione soggettiva.

KEYWORDS: Awe, Cognitive Accommodation, Nonreligiousness, Nonspirituality, Agnosticism

PAROLE CHIAVE: Timore reverenziale, Accomodamento cognitivo, Non religiosità, Non spiritualità, Agnosticismo

1. Introduction

Experiences of awe have sometimes been described as intrinsically spiritual or religious (Otto 1923; Heschel 1951, 1955, 1965; Wettstein 2012). More recently, philosophers have even gone so far as to propose an abductive argument for the existence of God from awe inspired by experiences of nature (Porcher and De Luca–Noronha 2021), as well as an argument for pantheism from two premises linking awe that resiliently persists under critical scrutiny to the cosmos and the divine (Byerly 2019). However, outside the circles of analytic philosophers of religion it is today widely agreed that appeal to the sacred, the transcendent or, more generally, to something beyond the realm of what is taken to be in principle explainable by the natural sciences, is but one option in accounting for experiences of awe (see, for instance, Caldwell–Harris *et al.* 2011; De Smedt and De Cruz 2013). I will adhere to this mainstream view in the present article.

The expression “accounting for experiences of awe” is ambiguous in the preceding sentence. It can be taken to refer to the internal, emic perspective of persons who experience awe and try to interpret or make sense of their experience. As opposed to this phenomenological reading, it may also be taken to refer to the etic perspective of observing researchers who strive to explain the fact that people do experience awe or try to give a conceptual account of what is going on when people experience awe. In what follows, I will keep both readings in play and trust that context will disambiguate.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James (1902/2002, p. 27) maintains that there is no difference at the emotional level between religious and nonreligious awe: “religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations”.

In this article, I follow James' lead but shift the focus away from (intended) objects of awe to the cognitive — more or less conscious, more or less reflectively explicit — interpretation of awe experiences. I will argue that the difference between religious and/or spiritual awe on the one hand, neither religious nor spiritual awe (the awe *tout court* alluded to in the title) on the other, has nothing to do with the objects or events experienced by individuals as awe-inspiring.

In section 2 I present some general psychological and philosophical observations on awe. Section 3 rehearses the main tenets of Dacher Keltner and Johnathan Haidt's (2003) conceptual framework for psychological research on awe and emphasises what I take to be its analytic strengths and weaknesses. After providing working accounts of the concepts of religion and spirituality, section 4 sketches the idea of neither religious nor spiritual awe, or awe *tout court*. Section 5 draws a tentative agnostic conclusion from the preceding considerations.

2. Awe

Awe is a complex mental state, often described in psychology as a profound emotional and cognitive response to stimuli perceived as vast (Keltner and Haidt 2003) or sublime (Arcangeli *et al.* 2020; Clewis, Yaden and Chirico 2021). Arguably, awe can have purely positive or purely negative emotional valence. But awe can also carry a mix of both positive and negative valence. In some languages other than English, the compound nature and the negative–positive ambiguity are reflected in composite noun phrases such as the German “Ehrfurcht” or the Italian “timore reverenziale”. It is worth noting, however, that some have taken natural language to be a poor guide to analysing and understanding awe. Paul Ekman (1992, p. 193), for instance, argues that awe should be conceptualized as a basic (non–compound and non–reducible) emotion.

Awe is also what philosophers call an intentional state. As John Searle puts it, “‘Intentionality’ is a fancy philosopher’s term for that capacity of the mind by which it is directed at, or about, objects and states of affairs in the world, typically independent of itself.” (Searle 2010, p. 25).

Sincere (and non-pathological) awe will clearly always be triggered by, directed at or about some perceived object, person or event. Awe that persists without the experience of an intended object or event that triggers the awe may indicate a problematic psychological condition. So, as with all intentional states, there is twist. As Tim Crane (2001, p. 337) puts it, there is “a familiar and recalcitrant fact about intentionality: that intentional states can be about things which do not exist.” Someone may be awestruck by objects or events they hallucinate. Or, less worryingly, someone may be awestruck by what they take to be an X (an imposing snow-covered mountain, say) from their peculiar visual perspective but which in fact is just a Y (say, a snow-clad roof and chimney). Presumably, once they realise their misperception, the emotion of awe will disappear (Quinn 1997).

This is not the place to delve into the extensive philosophical debates over the question of whether merely intentional objects should be allowed into the ontological inventory of the world (Jacob 2023). At this point I only want to emphasise that failing to distinguish clearly between the description of an object or event that is taken to be experienced and the object or event itself, if any, which triggers the experience, can lead to seriously misleading ambiguity. Subject A may experience a view of K7 as an awe-inspiring natural revelation of God, subject B may experience the same view of K7 as awe-inspiring *tout court*, and subject C may experience the view as not awe-expiring at all — perhaps because C has lived at the foot of K7 all her life and sees the mountain many times a day. The mountain that A, B and C perceive is K7. The ways in which A, B and C experience the view of K7 as well as the ways in which they interpret their experiences differ radically. I will get back to the idea of awe *tout court*, awe without metaphysical coziness or comfort, in due course.

Awe is usually rare in the sense that most of our everyday experiences do not trigger awe. Indeed, a person who appears to be constantly awestruck will either seem overexcited, spurious, or in need of help. Searle emphasizes that the intentional attitudes of a human mind are directed at objects or events which are “typically independent” of the intending mind itself. Perhaps, occasionally, a mind can be awestruck by itself, or by its own perceived accomplishments. However, results of recent psychological research consistently indicate that experiences of awe tend to

“induce a sense of ‘small self’ (perceiving the self as small and insignificant)” (Jiang *et al.* 2024, p. 476) which in turn can lead to reinforcing a series of prosocial attitudes and behaviours in awe-struck persons. Studies suggest that awe diminishes egocentrism and encourages individuals to prioritise collective well-being over personal goals (Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007; Bai *et al.* 2017; Stellar *et al.* 2018).

Awe has also been linked to cognitive and epistemic benefits such as improving creativity and problem-solving capacities. By disrupting habitual thought patterns, it seems that awe can enable deeper cognitive engagement with complex issues. Helen DeCruz (2020), for instance, draws on autobiographical reflections by scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Rachel Carson, Richard Feynman, and Albert Einstein, and on results from recent psychological research (Valdesolo and Graham 2017) to argue that emotions like awe and wonder qualify as epistemic emotions: they encourage scientists to value the natural world for its own sake, promote open-mindedness and curiosity, and facilitate scientific creativity and discovery.

To conclude this brief overview, I should mention neurophenomenological approaches to research on awe. The term “neurophenomenology” was coined by the neurobiologist Francisco Varela (1996). Generally speaking, neurophenomenology is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of consciousness that correlates measurements of physiological brain processes with first-person phenomenological accounts of experiences. The neurophenomenology of awe, more specifically, seeks to bridge the gap in scientific understanding between first-person experiences of awe and their underlying neural mechanisms and correlates (Reinerman-Jones *et al.* 2013; Gallagher *et al.* 2015). By integrating first-person experiential data on subjective significance with third-person neural data researchers aim to establish explanatory connections between etic and emic perspectives on the phenomenon of awe.

3. Keltner and Haidt on Awe

Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt’s seminal paper *Approaching Awe: A Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion* (2003) outlines a conceptual

approach which can still be considered the “leading research framework” for empirical research on awe in psychology (Jiang *et al.* 2024, p. 476). Keltner and Haidt plausibly posit awe as a distinct and complex emotion that can occur in moral, political, spiritual, and aesthetic contexts. They argue that awe arises when persons encounter stimuli which they perceive as vast, and which challenge their habitual ways of making sense of their experiences (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 303). Keltner and Haidt’s framework, then, can be seen as a two-component model: prototypical awe involves perceived vastness and a need for cognitive accommodation. “Vastness” does not necessarily refer to physical size but can also denote symbolic, structural or conceptual complexity. Keltner and Haidt thus emphasise that elicitors of awe can come from diverse domains. Among the possible triggers of awe there are the grandeur of landscapes or natural events just as the intricate structures of snowflakes, the exceptional moral resilience and selflessness of some human beings just as the sheer political, military or economic power of others, the elegance of a mathematical proof just as the complexity of a work of art. The concept of accommodation, in turn, which the authors link back to Jean Piaget’s developmental psychology (Piaget and Inhelder 1969), denotes the mental and conceptual adjustments or expansions individuals must undertake in their attempts at integrating awe-inspiring experiences into their cognitive schemata:

We propose that two features form the heart of prototypical cases of awe: *vastness* and *accommodation*. Vastness refers to anything that is experienced as being much bigger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference. [...] Accommodation refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience (Keltner and Haidt 2003, pp. 303–304).

Keltner and Haidt stress that only experiences which trigger both perceived vastness and need for accommodation should be counted as belonging to the awe-family. Other, perhaps related, emotions like surprise may be intense and require some degree of accommodation, but do not, according to the authors, involve perception of vastness. Conversely, attitudes like deference or resignation, for instance in the face of sheer

political and economic power, may involve perceptions of vastness but do not necessarily trigger a need for cognitive accommodation or transformation of conceptual frameworks (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 304).

Keltner and Haidt point out that attempts at satisfying the need for cognitive accommodation associated with awe may succeed or fail. When accommodation fails, they surmise that the experience of awe has negative valence (e.g., fear, terror), whereas it has positive valence (e.g., feelings of understanding or even enlightenment) when accommodation succeeds:

We stress that awe involves a *need* for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied. The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds) (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 304, emphasis in orig.).

The suggested explanatory correlation between satisfied and unsatisfied need for accommodation on the one hand, positive or negative valence of awe experiences on the other is plausible. However, Keltner and Haidt's two-component framework does not explicitly address the question of what it is for a process of accommodation to fail.

One important theoretical contribution of Keltner and Haidt's conceptual framework is that it allows to distinguish clearly between several elements that enter into constellations of awe: the object (or event or person) at which awe is intentionally directed, the perception of the object (or event or person) as vast by the awe-struck subject, and the need for cognitive accommodation triggered by the perception, that is, the desire to understand, comprehend and interpret the elicitor of awe in such a way as to make room for it in one's worldview and conceptual frame of reference.

No less importantly for the following discussion, Keltner and Haidt challenge the assumption, which is at play in the writings of the authors I cited at the outset, that awe is a somehow intrinsically religious or spiritual emotion. While they hold that awe can be a religious or a spiritual experience, like William James they treat religious awe and spiritual awe as just two varieties among others.

Arguably, however, the way in which Keltner and Haidt present their idea that awe experiences can be traced across a wide range of domains of human experience relies too heavily on conventional descriptions of the objects or events that can elicit awe in subjects. Among the possible elicitors of awe, they list “powerful leaders”, “encounters with God”, “tornadoes”, “grand vistas”, “cathedrals”, “awe-inspiring music” and “grand theories” (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 305). This list of mixed items certainly does a good job at illustrating the variety of contexts in which awe can occur. However, given the authors’ claim that awe is “a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion” (see the title of Keltner and Haidt 2003), it leaves the reader wondering whether the moral, aesthetic or spiritual quality of a given awe experience is supposed to be somehow dependent on what kind of object elicits the awe. Keltner and Haidt’s framework is somewhat ambiguous in this regard. But, given the emphasis it poses on processes of cognitive accommodation, it contains resources to remedy this ambiguity.

The next section argues that when it comes to distinguishing between religious, spiritual and neither religious nor spiritual awe (*awe tout court*), the focus should be placed on the element of cognitive accommodation or interpretation of awe-inducing experiences rather than on the objects or elicitors of awe.

4. *Awe tout court*

In what are certainly some of the more poetic lines in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Immanuel Kant famously wrote:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence [*Ehrfurcht*], the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me (Kant 1788/2015, p. 129).

This quote is a helpful point of departure for the following considerations. Arguably, it exemplifies what the discussion will focus on: non-religious and non-spiritual awe. As far as the starry heavens are

concerned, Kant (at some point, at least) was convinced of the synthetic apriority of Newtonian physics. Regarding the moral law, in turn, he emphasized that any assumption of an external source of moral normativity outside the transcendental subject — be it that the assumed source is taken to be supernatural or natural — leads to heteronomy, i.e., to the condition of being governed or directed by external forces, rules, or authorities rather than by one's own free will or autonomy (Kant 1784/1970).

To distinguish between religious, spiritual, and neither religious nor spiritual variants of awe in any meaningful way, working accounts of the involved concepts are needed. A working account of a concept makes no pretence to exhaustive or conclusive ontological definition. Its purpose is the pragmatic one of facilitating critical discussion. When key concepts are left at a merely intuitive level — as is sometimes the case in research on religion and spirituality — it becomes difficult to determine precisely what is being examined or discussed. This, in turn, leads to debates marked by participants talking past each other. Making explicit what one intends to refer to with the expressions “religion” and “spirituality” is sometimes criticised as an illegitimate affirmation of definitional power or hubris. But it can also amount to deliberately making one's considerations accessible (and vulnerable) to conceptually precise critique. In this latter sense I propose the following working accounts.

As regards the concept of religion, for the purposes of this article I refer to sociologist Steve Bruce. Bruce accounts for religion in terms of

beliefs, actions, and institutions based on the [assumed] existence of supernatural entities with powers of agency (that is, Gods) or impersonal processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma, for example) that set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs (Bruce 2011a, p. 1; see also Bruce 2011b, p. 112).

A straightforward implication of Bruce's account is that a human practice or belief system should not be considered religious unless its practitioners or adherents are, in virtue of their practice of belief, committed to the existence of supernatural beings or impersonal forces endowed with moral significance. Accepting Bruce's account for the

present context, I thus take experiences of awe to be religious when they trigger processes of cognitive accommodation or interpretation that involve appeal to assumed supernaturally transcendent entities, forces or principles. Non-religious awe, accordingly, is awe that brings about attempts at accommodation which steer clear of appeals to assumed supernatural transcendence.

Regarding spirituality, I turn to the work of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. Heelas and Woodhead account for spirituality in terms of highly individualized and subjectivized forms of meaning-making, which are developed outside traditionally established frameworks of religious authority, practice and canon (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, pp. 1–11). They argue that spirituality, as opposed to religion, is based on ideals of personal experience, inner exploration, and subjective authenticity in ways that can be completely detached from institutionalised religious practices, groups and communities. In their view, the shift from religion to spirituality in western societies reflects a broader cultural turn toward an expressive individualism, oriented by the idea of “nurturing [...] unique subjectivities” (p. 24) and identities:

It is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic) (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 2).

Following Heelas and Woodhead, then, I take an experience of awe to be spiritual when it triggers a process of cognitive accommodation which tries to make room for the awe-inspiring experience by assigning it a particular significance for one’s personal existence, well-being or individuality — or, to adapt Heelas and Woodhead’s useful expression, by interpreting the awe primarily in terms of nurturing one’s own unique subjectivity. Spiritual awe in this sense may or may not involve appeal to some assumed supernatural transcendence. Given the working accounts of religion and spirituality outlined above, religious and spiritual awe may overlap.

Assume there is an object or event X (a landscape, a starry night sky, an intact coral reef sparkling with life and movement) which elicits awe

in an epistemic subject A, i.e., A perceives X as vast, and the experience of X triggers a need for cognitive accommodation in A. There are two points that merit emphasis here. First, one and the same object or event X may elicit awe in subject A and fail to do so in some other subject B (this point has been briefly mentioned in the K7 example above). Second, even if both A and B are awestruck by their experiences of X they may be so in very different ways. For instance, X does not by itself determine whether the awe respectively experienced by A and B is to count as religious, spiritual or neither nor. This suggests that from the emic or first-person perspective of the awe-struck individual, the extent to which an episode of awe is imbued with religious or spiritual significance depends on how the experiencer interprets and makes sense of their experience — including the ways in which this worldview may undergo change due to experiences of awe. The difference is made entirely by the process of accommodation, i.e., by the cognitive and conceptual resources brought into play in trying to understand a given experience of awe. Analogously, explanations and analyses of awe from the etic or third-person perspective of researchers in psychology, philosophy, sociology or anthropology who adhere to the heuristic principle of methodological agnosticism will differ significantly from those of researchers who allow epistemically unhedged appeals to the divine, the supernaturally transcendent, or metaphysical ideas of cosmic order into their proposed explanatory accounts of awe (Rähme 2024). Let me briefly state what “epistemically unhedged” is supposed to mean in this context. In the sentence “Experiences of awe can establish a connection between awestruck subjects and God’s creation” the expression “God’s creation” occurs epistemically unhedged, whereas in the following sentence it occurs epistemically hedged: “Experiences of awe can establish a connection between awestruck subjects and what they take to be God’s creation”.

In a paper discussing the aesthetics of beauty in nature, De Smedt and De Cruz (2013, p. 178) write:

Although awe does not automatically trigger belief in God, for a theist, it can strengthen theistic belief. The initial sense of God may be innate, as in Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis*, or inferred as a conclusion of reason to a particular kind of first cause, or simply entertained as a hypothesis in the

manner of Pascal's Wager. Once the possibility of God is raised, however, the contemplation of some awesome aspect of nature as possibly the work of God may have a multiplier effect in two senses: a heightened interest in this aspect of nature and an increased sense of divine presence.

This clearly brings out the prospect that attempts at cognitive accommodation will be oriented by antecedently held beliefs and prior conceptual frameworks. Presumably, a theist will be more likely than an atheist or agnostic to accommodate awe triggered by the perceived vastness of a natural landscape in terms of God's creation, divine design or supernatural agency. And a spiritual person (in the sense of "spiritual" introduced by Heelas and Woodhead) will be more likely than a non-spiritual person to accommodate such awe by interpreting it primarily in terms of nurturing their subjectivity. What about the awe experienced by a person who is neither religious nor spiritual?

I propose the expression "awe *tout court*" to capture experiences of awe in Keltner and Haidt's sense (perception of vastness plus need for accommodation) which are neither religious nor spiritual⁽¹⁾. Awe *tout court*, then, involves attempts at cognitive accommodation which do not appeal to some assumed supernatural transcendence or cosmic order and do not frame the experience primarily in terms of its significance for the experiencing person's unique subjectivity or identity. Let me complement this negative characterisation with a positive one. The conceptual resources that can enable processes of accommodation involved in awe *tout court* are manifold. The awestruck person may, for instance, search for a scientific explanation of the elicitor of awe and their subjective experience of being awestruck — either by reading the relevant scientific literature or, if they have the necessary skills and means, by actively engaging in scientific inquiry themselves. Another (presumably very common) option would be to simply trust that there is a scientific explanation while accepting that for them cognitive closure in the sense of understanding is out of reach. Yet another option would be to consciously adopt an

(1) Let me stress that I introduce the expression "awe *tout court*" merely as a linguistic means to denote instances of awe which are neither religious nor spiritual in the senses of "religious" and "spiritual" outlined above. The "*tout court*", then, is not meant to suggest that what I suggest calling "awe *tout court*" is what, ontologically speaking, awe really or essentially is. I thank an anonymous referee for indicating that this point requires emphasis.

agnostic stance in the sense of suspending judgment regarding the question of how the elicitor of awe can be interpreted, explained or understood. Results from psychological research on awe suggest that the availability of this latter option — accepting a lacuna of one's understanding of the world without resorting to the remedy of religious or spiritual accommodation — may depend on the degree of tolerance for uncertainty of the awestruck person (Valdesolo and Graham 2014).

At this point, a clarification is needed. It might be objected that the agnostic awe just described does not qualify as awe in the sense defined by Keltner and Haidt, since it involves a conscious decision to refrain from accommodating the awe-inducing experience, thereby failing to meet one of the necessary conditions included in Keltner and Haidt's definition of awe⁽²⁾. However, this possible objection overlooks the fact that, according to Keltner and Haidt, the criteria for an emotion to be considered an instance of awe are the perception of vastness and the need for accommodation, not the successful achievement of accommodation and, arguably, not even active attempts at accommodation. Agnostic awe, then, does involve a need for accommodation, but the awe-struck subject — perhaps after having tried and failed to achieve cognitive accommodation several times — decides to leave this need unsatisfied and simply live with it.

5. Conclusion

One way to understand awe *tout court* is the following. Experiences of awe *tout court* can both be triggered against the backdrop of pre-existing and consciously held strong values — for instance: the sight of an intact coral reef against the backdrop of the pre-existing value judgment that biodiversity is intrinsically good — and themselves induce subjects to adopt novel strong values or recall implicitly held but non-occurrent values — for instance: someone listening to a Bach fugue for the first time and understanding that musical complexity is, for them, something of intrinsic value. The emotional valence of awe *tout court* is subjective. For example, seeing the Starlink satellite network move across the night

(2) I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this possible objection to the idea of agnostic awe.

sky in a straight chain of tiny illuminated dots may for some be awe-inspiring for its technological sophistication, or for the way in which it demonstrates the power of the richest man on planet Earth, in others it may spark sheer horror and disdain and make them aware, perhaps for the first time, that all along they had attributed intrinsic value to the starry night sky as something that must not be sullied.

It is evident that certain experiences of awe, in particular those elicited by nature, lend themselves to spiritual or religious interpretation. However, this does not establish that awe is inherently a spiritual or religious emotion. While some find scientific explanations incomplete or unsatisfying, others regard them as wholly sufficient and satisfactory. Likewise, some seek to ground their values and worldview in a metaphysical or transcendent framework, whereas others feel no such need. Consequently, the answer to the question of whether particular instances of awe call for spiritual or religious accommodation does neither depend on the nature of the emotion of awe nor on the objects or events at which awe is intentionally directed. It rather depends on the degree of “metaphysical-mindedness” of those who try to answer it.

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