# The UBI through a feminist looking-glass: can HE spot a Wollstonecraft dilemma?

Abstract: As the growing debate around the policy and the theoretical implications of the Universal Basic Income prompts further discussions, one must acknowledge the issues this proposal has to face from anterior debates. In this case, the debate concerning the issue of the "Wollstonecraft dilemma" carries a lot of importance relative to the UBI. If the accomplishment of equality on the labour market and the maintenance of the difference between men and women is contradictory, the UBI can be said to have no chance of convincing feminists of its worth. I shall argue that the UBI, if the Wollstonecraft dilemma is conceived as a mostly misleading problem, can succeed in attracting the sympathy of feminists. I will begin by presenting the basic components of the UBI, some of its policy-oriented traits and then proceed to inventory the main arguments for and against the UBI from the feminist side. I will then summarily present Fraser's "universal care giver" model, through which I will show that an appropriate amount of consideration can reconcile different and apparently contradictory contentions. Then, I will be considering the perceived inconsistencies between two systems as opposed as the care ethics and liberal feminism, only to conclude that they represent two sides of the same issue and that the UBI can be, due to its commitments, responsive to both.

Keywords: care ethics, difference, equality, liberal feminism, UBI, universal care giver Wollstonecraft's dilemma

#### 1. Introduction

In 2010, the Indian rural area of Madhya Pradesh sees the implementation of a bold pilot programme. The SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) and UNICEF would attempt to test a system of unconditional, monthly, cash transfers that was going to reach approximately 6000 individuals. The sum was to be disbursed to all the individuals

#### Alexandru Stafie

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selected who could, in turn, spend it discretionarily<sup>1</sup>. More recently, at the end of 2015, Finland proposed the introduction of the exact same measure, only to be applied at a national scale. Even if the process would imply incre-

mental departures from conventional welfare programmes, each citizen would receive, by the end of the transition period, around €800. More immediately, the city of Utrecht will find itself in the incipient stages of implementing the scheme, come January 2016. Also, Switzerland will submit the decision to introduce such a system to a nation-wide referendum<sup>2</sup>.

The concept that lies behind all these efforts is named the Universal Basic Income or the Basic Income. It is not a newly-fledged idea, as it can be traced as far back as Thomas More. Other proponents of a similar system include Thomas Paine, Charles Fourier, Thomas Spence, Herbert Spence or Bertrand Russell. Certainly, these are prototypical frames for the UBI. However, they revolve around a nucleus of ideas: that any individual be allotted a certain sum, aggregable with any other revenue streams, regardless of her work status<sup>3</sup>. A summation of these ideas is famously offered by Bertrand Russell: "a certain small income, sufficient for necessaries [...] should be secured to all, whether they work or not, and that a larger income, as might be warranted by the total amount of commodities produced, should be given to those who are willing to engage in some work which the community recognises as useful"<sup>4</sup>.

# 2. Foundational concepts

The current version of this idea pursues the same logic, making the UBI particular amongst contemporary welfare systems. Its uniqueness stems from the fact that it is conceived at an individual level and not at a household one, that it is indifferent to other sources of income, work history or willingness to work<sup>5</sup>. One can say, therefore, that the UBI does not represent a grant, a subsidy or a conditional unemployment benefit<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, if one is to deconstruct the UBI into its foundational elements, one will find the concept of real freedom. This, in turn, relies on three essential components: a functional system of rights, self-ownership and leximin opportunity<sup>7</sup>. The first implies that decisions and/or consequent actions do not stem from the arbitrary will of the others. The second condition is set as an interval, between compatibility with not being able to act and the incompatibility with most sorts of forced acts, like military service<sup>7</sup>. Lastly, leximin opportunity represents a dynamic description of the distribution of opportunities. If A is the least disadvantaged individual in a state, X, A must not have fewer opportunities than the person occupying the same place under any other arrangement. The dynamic part states that if a state, Y, is found so that A is minimally as opportunity-endowed as in X, the next person (the second worst-off) in the opportunity-endowment hierarchy must receive the same treatment, so that she is not worse-off in Y than in  $X^9$ .

Surely, there are technicalities other than those of the normative sort that define the UBI. Firstly, it should be dispensed in cash and not in kind. While the former allows for a greater ease of exchange and division, the latter would also present some benefits, such as the ability to receive a share of a beneficial externality, such as a motorway, or the possibility of enjoying goods that are too expensive to be bought at their per-unit price by a single individual, such as clean air<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, the UBI should be given as monthly or annual payments, as opposed to a lump-sum transfer, as this would cover against financial risks, but also due to the fact that one's preferences and her clarity of judgement can vary with time<sup>11</sup>.

This being said, one must inquire with regard to the relevancy of the UBI, both for feminist political theory, but also for the feminist desiderata. Some of the most insightful critiques and votes of confidence with regard to the cross between UBI arguments and feminist ones come from what is known as Wollstonecraft's dilemma. Although not particularly addressed to the UBI proposal, this apparent paradox still claims an important place in the debate over public policy, but also in the field of political theory. Wollstonecraft's dilemma can be best explained by the contradiction between two aims of women's movement: on one hand, the claim for equality and gender neutrality and, on the other hand, the claim for recognition of women's difference from men<sup>xii</sup>. In other words, whether the UBI can aid women's situation relative to the unpaid work they perform in the household or just cement existing inequalities is still a

topic for debate, as the recognition of the respective care-work women do through a sort of payment such as the UBI could actually represent a confirmation of the "preordained" role of women or, more specifically, of gender-based labour distinctions<sup>13</sup>.

The dilemma attributed to Mary Wollstonecraft's name has surfaced in the discussion of the nature and the issues of the welfare state and has been popularised by Carole Pateman<sup>14</sup>. The issue were important in the context of ensuring full citizenship for all the members of the community. That desideratum, according to Pateman, was not to be accomplished within the existing welfare (patriarchal) system due to the fact that women took two incompatible routes towards that end. The first route is delineated by the demands of equality of rights, for instance, exemplified by what the liberal agenda has proposed. The second route is that requires differences in talents, abilities, interests, be kept intact in the realisation of the ideal of citizenship. Pateman affirms that the male foundation of the welfare state implies that the aforementioned strategies are due to bifurcate into a binomial set of choice. Specifically, this requires of women that they choose between "transforming" themselves into men and continuing performing tasks perceived as feminine and not tangent on citizenship<sup>15</sup>. Simplifying, the question is whether a welfare scheme can simultaneously aid women in becoming equal, independent citizens and address their domestic issues<sup>16</sup>.

The issue is contentious due to the male perception of citizenship, as it stands. The fact that men regard full citizenship, paid labour and autonomy as distinct from women and house-work is problematic, in Pateman's view<sup>17</sup>. Strangely enough, Pateman envisages a welfare policy that would supply women with the means for subsistence and public participation as a significant step towards ensuring full citizenship. Also, this would do away with the existing dichotomies brought about by the existing welfare state architecture<sup>18</sup>. Even more, through this measure, women can join men in benefiting from welfare programmes to which the former rightfully would be entitled, as the illusion that only men contribute to the welfare system through the taxes they pay will disappear. In other words, the role of women as social welfare-providers will be recognised<sup>19</sup>.

The gendered division of labour is what lies at the crux of this conundrum, the Wollstonecraft dilemma. This division of work foci between men and women, based only on their gender, is seen as possibly the greatest source of inequality, both social and economic<sup>20,21</sup>. Its replication, then, can create issues for welfare schemes or theories of justice, in the end. If a welfare scheme is aimed at providing relief for citizens, it must pay attention not to allow for the continuation of this injustice through choices such as those presented by Pateman.

Before going further, it is worthwhile to mention that although gender roles do not pressure women alone into decisions and actions, the impact on men is relatively lower than on women<sup>22</sup>. Also, as discussed, the Wollstonecraft dilemma puts one in the delicate situation of having to choose from apparently dichotomous pairs: dependent/independent, wage work/ care etc.<sup>23</sup>.

# 3. For and against the UBI

It is argued, firstly, of an UBI that the introduction would target the position of poor women, if not that of women in general, and that it can be improved through the recognition of unpaid care work. More precisely, the revenue stream represented by the UBI would increase the bargaining power of women and, at the same time, would encourage men to take over some of the domestic chores. On the other hand, the introduction of this scheme could represent a sort

Consequently, an analysis of the effects of the UBI from this perspective is welcome. To begin with, there is the question of withdrawal from the labour market of recipients of the UBI. Of course, the degree of this phenomenon can only be estimated. However, a more certain assumption is that women will constitute a larger portion of the individuals involved, more as they have a weaker labour market participation and attachment. That implies that women with lower level of education or training will exit more hastily, in favour of performing care work in the household<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, an exit of women from the labour market, even for relatively short periods of time, can imply a depreciation of their ability to earn equally or more relative to their continuous employment period, as their skills will not have been utilised for that exact period. Consequently, women's bargaining power in the household can also decline, negatively related to the risk of being more dependent and vulnerable. Even more, the statistical discrimination against women, the indirect discrimination by means of generalising particular events or traits to the whole group, can increase if there is an exit from the labour market on the part of some women<sup>26</sup>.

Similarly, the fact that an UBI is introduced cannot guarantee an equal participation from men in the process of children's upbringing, as women will be more readily triggered to respond to household requirements. Furthermore, this can ultimately attract a decrease in women's status, as well as hindering their prospects of advancement in a career or another<sup>27</sup>.

However, there are positive arguments related to the introduction of the UBI related to the feminist perspectives. The first of them is that, at least for poorly-paid women, their absolute income and their relative income (to their partner's) will increase. Moreover, women can also make a choice between participating in the labour market or in the household, if they so desire. Another, quite important, assertion is that the value of unpaid work will increase, both economically, but also status-wise. This is because it will contribute to women's income, but also give them a feeling of recognition, of contributing to an important task<sup>28</sup>.

Still, there is the fundamental claim that gender roles can be too well-established for the UBI to change the status-quo<sup>29</sup>. This argument can lead to a key issue with regard to the rapprochement between feminism, the UBI and their common understanding under the Wollstonecraft dilemma. More specifically, the fact that the debate has largely been polarised between sets of alternatives, such as Ostner and Lewis', "male breadwinner /female carer model" and Esping-Andersen's idea of decommodification<sup>30</sup>. The former supplies one with categories to look to when trying to see the distribution of roles within the family. The male breadwinner model assumes men to have the responsibility of earning an income for the family, while women carry the responsibility of care<sup>31,32</sup>. On the other hand, the commodification-decommodification dichotomy revolves around the degree of dependence of the individual from the market wage. In other words, commodification implies a large degree of market wage reliance, whereas decommodification implies a degree of independence of the individual from her wage through means such as receiving services (benefits) because she is entitled through a right to receive them, for instance<sup>33</sup>.

While the first emphasises the care-work side of the coin, the other is accused of stressing the state-market reverse. Therefore, for Ostner and Lewis individualisation plays a major role, in that it is signified by economic independence and independence from family obligations.

From this emanates the interval between the strong male breadwinner states up to the weak male breadwinner states, the latter being characterised by strictly delineated genderised labour divisions and the former with the exact opposite: the assumption by the state of much of the care work<sup>34</sup>.

Of central relevance is that the dichotomies allowed by the Wollstonecraft dilemma do, in fact, appear to be themselves genderised and not necessarily logically opposed. That can be followed through this sequence: equality/difference; wage labour/care work; male/female. However, the fact of the matter is that the gender hierarchy is discreetly inserted a priori and that the concept of equality does not necessarily entail difference as an antonym<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, the concept of decommodification, defined as the possibility that a person subsist without having recourse to the market, is opposed to "commodification", a Marxist-inspired state or process of alienation and deprivation of the individual worker. However, one can argue that in order to be decommodified, one must have been fully commodified<sup>36</sup>. However, far from the clear delineation that Esping, Ostner and Lewis propose between the concepts they put forward, it can be asserted that there is a dynamic relation between capitalism and the welfare state, for instance. More precisely, as Offe does, one can argue that there is a permanent interaction between commodification and decommodification, such as the labour movement's efforts to create growth and employment, but also to propose the reduction of working hours<sup>37</sup>.

Also, in the same vein, one can mould together the "universal breadwinner model" and the "care giver parity model", as Fraser does, and create what is named the "universal care giver model"<sup>38,39</sup>. If the first is concerned with the excessive care for waged work and the adoption of male norms by women, the second treats the "confinement" in the private sphere and the inaction on the front of the genderised roles. Fraser takes as criteria for evaluating the first two models five indicators: anti-poverty (the capacity to fulfil basic needs), anti-exploitation (the prevention of dependence with regard to the state, the family etc), equality of respect (seen as income, leisure time and respect), anti-marginalisation (the equal participation in various spheres) and anti-androcentrism (the modification of gender roles). The highest scoring items with regard to the first two conceptions are kept and the rest are renounced in order to produce the universal care giver model, in which men and women are equally encouraged and supported to participate in the execution of the respective household-related tasks<sup>40</sup>. This illustrates that apparently irreconcilable concepts can find common footing, even if it takes certain modifications, and that the UBI can offer, ultimately, a positive contribution to the feminist cause<sup>41</sup>.

# 4. A challenge for the UBI

Therefore, it can be asserted that the UBI caters to at least two of the aforementioned "opposites": care or housework, either as a profession or as an act of dedication and equality of the most minimal sort, that on the labour market, an idea of liberal descent.

Ergo, one should attempt to model the UBI to fit the "ethic of care" arguments<sup>42</sup>, in that the former can be conceived as malleable enough to fit the particular attention that the latter awards to caring and taking care of. The fact of the matter is that, just as the UBI does, the ethic of care promotes care towards the *other*<sup>43</sup>. By this I mean that the UBI recognises both the importance of individuality, but also the relevance of enabling those with different lifestyles to pursue their real freedom. Consequently, one must also support the assumption that the care ethics does not collide with an individualistic view.

Firstly, it can be asserted that the UBI does not deny a relational perspective with respect to, amongst others, gender. The basic stake of the care ethics is that there are, truly, different genders, in that women tend to conceive the world as a nexus of networks, whereas men tend to define it in terms of rules. Otherwise, women display empathy from a foundational source, where men do not necessarily<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, the recognisance of this innate difference can bring about a subtle difference in sense: we can discuss in the language of relation centred vs. agent centred 45.

This, for women, can mean a sort of self-denial, if we are to accept the argument put forward by means of the Wollstonecraft dilemma. In other words, women have to choose to be the carers or to be regarded as something else than women. There are opinions that, due to the rise of egalitarian theories, this incompatibility between being the care-giver and the care-receiver (or, I might add, the non-carer) can be less of an issue<sup>46</sup>. Even more, the care ethics does not instrumentalise care, it does not necessarily put care as the "currency" of interaction in the sphere of well-being<sup>47</sup>. If all these are true statements, then women are, on one hand, condemned to "care or.." and, on the other hand, to not be necessarily compensated for their work. Not implicitly, I argue. This due to the fact that the UBI, in this context, can offer the basis for performing care-work or caring after someone. Does this damage the claim of non-instrumentality of the care ethics? I respond that it does not, due to the fact that even care-work can be recognised and respected and even made possible through payment. Even more, it awards the two parties, the carer and the caree, with greater autonomy, therefore allowing for a greater focus on the individual needs of the carer and the caree. Through the UBI, the carer can be somewhat freed from the carer position and the caree not resent her position. In other words, dependence can be diminished, if the carer can fulfil self-development and the caree may no longer depend strictly on the carer.

On the second front, there is the issue that stems from liberal feminism, of whether women's abilities extend beyond those required for house work. To put it in another way, whether women can, of their own free will, make decisions and advance relative to issues other than pertaining to the domestic sphere<sup>48</sup>. Along the development of the feminist movement, liberal arguments have surfaced often and they include "equality, autonomy and, individual rights"<sup>49</sup>. Therefore, can the UBI help towards securing, say, the freedom to occupy whatever position one desires on the labour market? The question can be answered affirmatively. Firstly, the UBI can offer the degree of independence that women can use to their advantage in securing a job, be it through the increased bargaining power inside the distribution of roles inside the couple or through, more simply, their opportunity to gain requalification or qualification in a field or other. Moreover, the UBI does not restrict the opportunities of development to labour. Due to the fact that it is a non-paternalistic system, the UBI can enable one to choose whatever occupation or non-occupation. Even more, the variety of remunerated occupations or jobs can be extended through the recognition of formerly unrecognised work, such as domestic care. Furthermore, as the current gender income-bias stands, the gender with the superior earning capacity can be drawn towards the mean through the taxation that the UBI requires. Therefore, equality and diversity are both accomplished.

Ultimately, one may have recourse to a reading<sup>50</sup> of the very Mary Wollstonecraft that bears the name of the dilemma that features in this essay. It can be said that what Wollstonecraft<sup>51</sup> wanted to convey, in her response to Burke's criticism that that extension of formal rights would lead to an egotistical, chaotic society, was that there is a need for a system of equal rights in order for women to be able to tie more affectionate and duty-charged relations with the others<sup>52</sup>.

If carefully considered, the above stances can illustrate different facets of the same issue, not different problems. Not unsurprisingly, the UBI can support both the recognition for activities formerly considered "natural work" (domestic work), but also ensure that individuals have an appropriately wide spectrum of choices from which to choose: whether to care for someone, how much (related to the situation, in the case of the care-logic) and to ensure that payment derives from equal work, if the situation has not already been regulated.

#### 5. Conclusion

In this essay I roughly contoured the main ideas behind the UBI. I proceeded to shed light on the main arguments for and against this scheme from a feminist perspective. I focused on how Wollstonecraft's dilemma can subvert any attempt to reconcile the two perspectives, only to show that with the necessary consideration and with the emphasis on the correct aspects, the UBI has the potential to meet halfway the demands that feminists have voiced. I then suggested that the UBI could even be compatible with a system as specific as the care ethic, in that it can allow for the freedom to care for or not (or reducing dependence) and by not stifling the network and situation-specific view that the system takes. I went on to argue that the liberal feminist concern with freedom of choice and equality in recognition can also be alleviated by the introduction of the UBI, as the latter can attenuate differences in income, provide recognition for activities considered to be feminine and non-retributable or by allowing for enough room for decision to all concerned. To conclude, the UBI has plenty of resources to answer creatively to some of the arguments against it: the key is they mode in which the arguments are regarded.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Guy Standing, "Basic Income Pilots in India," guystanding.com, last modified May 30, 2013. http://www.guystanding.com/files/documents/Basic Income Pilots in India note for inaugural.pdf
- <sup>2</sup> Donald Ambrecht, "Finland's basic income experiment-can it work?", weforum.org, last modified December 10, 2015. http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/12/finland-basic-income/
  - <sup>3</sup> Daniel Raventos, Basic Income: The Material Conditions of Freedom, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 15
  - <sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1919), 110
- <sup>5</sup> Philippe Van Parijs, "Competing Justifications of Basic Income: Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform," in *Arguing for Basic Income*, ed. Philippe Van Parijs (New York: Verso, 1992), 4
  - <sup>6</sup> Daniel Raventos, Basic Income: The Material Conditions of Freedom, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 11-12
- <sup>7</sup> Philippe Van Parijs, Real Freedom for All: What(if anything) can justify capitalism?, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 25
  - 8 Ibid., 21
  - <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25
  - 10 Ibid., 44
  - <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 47
- <sup>12</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 2
- <sup>13</sup> Caitlin McLean, "Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income", *Glasgow Caledonian University*, 2015, 2

- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 252
- 16 Ibid., 254
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 258
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 259
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 259-260
- <sup>20</sup> Julieta Elgarte, "Basic Income and the Gendered Division of Labour," *Basic Income Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008), 2
  - <sup>21</sup> Ailsa McKay, The Future of Social Security Policy, (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 83
  - <sup>22</sup> Ingrid Robeyns, "Will a Basic Income Do Justice to Women?," Analyse & Kritik 22, no. 2 (2001), 99
- <sup>23</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 9
  - <sup>24</sup> Ingrid Robeyns, "Will a Basic Income Do Justice to Women?," Analyse & Kritik 22, no. 2 (2001), 89
- <sup>25</sup> Caitlin McLean, "Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income", *Glasgow Caledonian University*, 2015, 3
  - <sup>26</sup> Ingrid Robeyns, "Will a Basic Income Do Justice to Women?," Analyse & Kritik 22, no. 2 (2001), 92-93
- <sup>27</sup> Julieta Elgarte, "Basic Income and the Gendered Division of Labour," *Basic Income Studies* 3, no. 3 (2008), 3-4
  - <sup>28</sup> Ingrid Robeyns, "Will a Basic Income Do Justice to Women?," Analyse & Kritik 22, no. 2 (2001), 91-92
  - <sup>29</sup> Ibid., (2001)
- <sup>30</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 3
- <sup>31</sup> Jane Lewis et al., "Patterns of Development in Work/ Family Reconciliation Policies for Parents in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK in the 2000's," 262, doi:10.1093/sp/jxn016
- <sup>32</sup> Mick Cunningham, "Changing Attitudes toward the Male Breadwinner, Female Homemaker Family Model," *Social Forces* 87, no. 1 (2008), 299
- <sup>33</sup> Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, (Polity Press, Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 21-22
- <sup>34</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 4
  - <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 8
  - <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11
  - <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 12
  - <sup>38</sup> Nancy Fraser, "After the Family Wage," *Political Theory* 22, no. 4 (1994)
- <sup>39</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 15
- <sup>40</sup> Caitlin McLean, "Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income", *Glasgow Caledonian University*, 2015, 9
- <sup>41</sup> Erik Christensen, "Feminist Arguments in Favour of Welfare and Basic Income in Denmark," *Basic Income European Network*, last modified September 2002, 24
  - <sup>42</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, *Convenio*, (Iasi: Polirom, 2002), 119
  - <sup>43</sup> Ibid., (Iasi: Polirom, 2002), 124
  - <sup>44</sup> Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8
  - <sup>45</sup> Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, (New York, London: Teachers College Press, 2002), 2
  - <sup>46</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, Convenio, (Iasi: Polirom, 2002), 126-127
  - <sup>47</sup> Nel Noddings, Educating Moral People, (New York, London: Teachers College Press, 2002), 2
  - <sup>48</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), 225
  - <sup>49</sup> Lisa Schwartzman, Challenging Liberalism, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 2006), 1
- <sup>50</sup> Daniel Engster, "Mary Wollstonecraft's Nurturing Liberalsim: Between an Ethic of Justice and Care," *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001)
  - <sup>51</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Man, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

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