

Philosophy and Progress

Volumes LXXIII-LXXIV, January-June, July-December, 2023

ISSN 1607-2278 (Print), DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3329/pp.v73i1-2.75237>

DEFENDING RUSSELL'S THEORY OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS AGAINST A STRAWSONIAN ATTACK

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Abstract

Although Russell's theory of definite descriptions is highly appreciated in the area of philosophy of language, it has faced some objections from different angles. One of the major objections is known as the objection arising from incomplete definite descriptions. According to this objection, a speaker by his/her utterance of a sentence containing an incomplete definite description often succeeds in saying something true despite the fact that such a sentence always expresses a false proposition. This particular objection against Russell's theory arises because of an ignorance concerning the distinction between the meaning of a sentence and the assertion made by a speaker by using that sentence in a particular context.

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To address this distinction between meaning and assertion Scott Soames' theory concerning the connection between meaning and assertion has been adopted. With the help of this theory, it has been shown that the problem arising from incomplete definite descriptions does not pose a genuine threat to Russell's theory.

Introduction

Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions is one of the most dominant theories in the area of philosophy of language. In spite of being a dominant theory, Russell's theory of definite descriptions has faced with some objections. There are opponents of Russell's theory who object the theory from different positions. Peter Frederick Strawson is one of the most prominent opponents of Russell's theory. In his paper titled "On Referring", Strawson, raised some objections against Russell's interpretation of definite descriptions. In this paper, Strawson argues that Russell's theory of definite descriptions commits some fundamental mistakes. He also tries to show the reasons behind those mistakes. Although the objections raised by Strawson have some significant impacts in the area of philosophy of language, it is hard to accommodate so many objections in a single paper like the present one. Therefore, I will address and then defend Russell's theory against the most important objection from Strawson's part which is known as the Argument from Incompleteness.

The Argument from Incompleteness: According to Russell's theory of definite descriptions, a descriptive sentence of the form 'The F is G ' expresses the following proposition: *exactly one thing is an F and whoever or whatever (if there is any) is an F is G .* This analysis of definite descriptions entails that a sentence

containing definite description always involves a uniqueness condition. That means that the definite description contained in such a sentence can be satisfied by exactly one object (if it is satisfied by any object at all). If there is more than one satisfier of the relevant definite description, then the non-compound sentence containing it expresses a false proposition. But we observe that there are many descriptive sentences in which the relevant definite descriptions are, apparently, satisfied by more than one satisfier. These kinds of definite descriptions can be called, following Kripke and Soames, *improper definite descriptions*.¹ And, a sentence containing an improper definite description fails to satisfy the uniqueness condition given by Russell in his theory of definite descriptions. If a non-compound sentence containing a definite description fails to satisfy the uniqueness condition, then that sentence necessarily expresses a false proposition. Now, the problem is that a speaker may use a sentence, i.e. 'The *F* is *G*', containing an improper definite description 'the *F*', and say something true; but the proposition expressed by this sentence, according to the Russellian interpretation, may be false. To some philosophers this phenomenon poses a threat to the acceptability of Russell's theory of definite descriptions; for, it has been claimed by those philosophers that Russell's theory fails to capture this phenomenon. Strawson is one of those philosophers who focus on this problem of the Russellian theory. He thinks that the appraisal of uniqueness condition of

¹ In his paper titled "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", Saul Kripke considers "the table" as an improper definite description (since it is satisfied by more than one satisfier). At the same way, Scott Soames in his paper titled "Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions do not Defeat Russell's Theory of Descriptions" considers such kind of definite descriptions as improper definite descriptions.

definite descriptions is problematic, because it sometimes fails to provide the correct analysis in determining the truth values of descriptive sentences. Strawson also maintains that it is not the case that a sentence containing a definite description always involves uniqueness. And, he does not agree with the view that a descriptive sentence always requires a unique existence of the object refer to at all times. Regarding this, he says:

Consider the sentence, “The table is covered with books”. It is quite certain that in any normal use of this sentence, the expression “the table” would be used to make a unique reference, *i.e.* to refer to some one table. It is a quite strict use of the definite article, in the sense in which Russell talks on p.30 of *Principia Mathematica*, of using the article “strictly, so as to imply uniqueness”. On the same page Russell says that a phrase of the form “the so-and-so”, used strictly, “will only have an application in the event of there being one so-and-so and no more”. Now it is obviously quite false that the phrase “the table” in the sentence “the table is covered with books”, used normally, will “only have an application in the event of there being one table and no more”.²

In the above example, given by Strawson, the sentence “The table is covered with books” contains an improper definite description “the table”. For, the definite description “the table” is satisfied by many satisfiers. Now, in Russell’s interpretation “The table is covered with books” is such a sentence that always expresses a false proposition as the definite description contained in it, *i.e.*, “the table”, is an improper definite description which is satisfied by many objects. Here, Strawson disagrees with Russell. He claims that it is possible to make a true assertion by

² P.F. Strawson, “On Referring”, *Mind* 59, no.235 (1950): 332.
Doi: 10.1093/mind/lix.235.320.

using the sentence "The table is covered with books", though the sentence contains an improper definite description in it. He argues that when a speaker utters the sentence on a particular occasion, he/she does not imply the unique existence of a table. Rather, the speaker refers to a particular table by uttering this sentence on that particular occasion. Here, if the table referred to by the speaker is covered with books, then the speaker says something true. So, it is possible for a speaker to say something true of something on an occasion by using a sentence containing an improper definite description. Now, the objection explained above can be summarized in the following way:

According to the Russellian interpretation, a descriptive sentence containing an improper definite description always expresses a false proposition because the definite description contained in that sentence fails to maintain the uniqueness condition. But, according to Strawson, such a sentence can be used to say something true. So, Strawson claims that Russell is incorrect in his interpretation of definite descriptions.

Strawson's objection stated above seems to be a threat to Russell's theory of definite descriptions. For, it appears that his view conforms to the everyday uses of sentences containing improper definite descriptions. It is true that in our everyday use of language we often use sentences like "The table is covered with books" to make true assertion. And it has already been stated earlier that by using such a sentence the speaker does not entail the unique existence of a table; rather, he/she refers to a particular table in the context. This everyday phenomenon is captured by Strawson's view but it cannot be captured by Russell's view. It can be a genuine threat to Russell's theory. So, this apparent phenomenon needs to be investigated. In fact, the problem with incomplete definite descriptions in Russell's

theory has led to an important amount of research on how to complete improper definite descriptions and solve the problem. In particular, Sainsbury, Ludlow, Neale and others have come forward with a variety of accounts to find a way to deal with the above-mentioned problem. One way of dealing with the above-mentioned problem is known as the *Elliptical Approach*. Thus, here, it is important to examine this approach.

The Elliptical Approach: According to the Elliptical Approach, a sentence containing an improper definite description can be completed by adding the full form of the definite description *explicitly*; or, it may be the case that the context of utterance *implicitly* determines the range of the definite description.³ Here, the former case is called the *Explicit Approach* and the latter case is called the *Implicit Approach*. According to the defenders of Russell's theory, on a particular occasion a speaker by her utterance of the sentence "the table is covered with books" does not claim a unique existence of a table. The reason is that the definite description "the table" contained in that sentence may be understood as an unsaid part of a complete description "the table near the window"; or, the domain of the definite description "the table" may be restricted by the context in which the sentence containing it is used. So, there are two different approaches to complete an improper definite description. And, many defenders of Russell's theory seem very confident that by these approaches Russell's theory of definite descriptions can be defended against the problem related to improper definite descriptions. However, a proper investigation shows that ultimately both of the approaches fail to answer the following questions: what is to be considered as the complete form of an improper definite description? Or,

³ Stephen Neale, *Descriptions* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990), 95.

how a quantifier gets restricted etc.? Although initially the Explicit Approach and the Implicit Approach both seemed very attractive approaches, after investigation it appears that none of the approaches can give a satisfactory answer to those questions. As a result, they have failed to solve the problem arising from the Argument from Incompleteness. This failure of two well-known approaches, *i.e.*, the *Explicit Approach* and the *Implicit Approach*, opens a challenge for Russellians in solving the above-mentioned problem of Russell's theory. As the present paper offers a defense of Russell's theory against the above-mentioned problem, it is important to inquire why this problem arises. Actually, this problem is rooted into a misconception concerning the distinction between meaning and assertion. The distinction between meaning and assertion has been properly addressed by Scott Soames. So, I will be using Soames' theory as a tool to defend Russell's theory against the above-mentioned problem.

Soames' Distinction between Meaning and Assertion: Before proposing his conception of meaning and assertion, Scott Soames addresses the traditional conception of meaning and assertion. Traditionally, it is believed that by uttering a sentence a speaker of the sentence mainly asserts the meaning of the sentence. This traditional belief about the relation between meaning of a sentence and the assertion made by the speaker by using that sentence can be called the **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion**. Scott Soames discusses about this **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion** in his paper titled "The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean" in the following way:

A sincere, reflective, competent speaker who assertively utters S (speaking literally, nonironically, nonmetaphorically, and without conversational implicatures cancelling the normal

force of the remark) in a context C says (or asserts), perhaps among other things, what S “says” in C (also known as *the semantic content of S in C*).⁴

According to this **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion**, there is no difference between the semantic content of a sentence and the assertion made by the speaker of that sentence. That is, in a context C , a competent speaker by her utterance of the sentence S makes the assertion A . Now, according to the traditional belief, the semantic content M of the sentence S is identical with the assertion A . This traditionally believed relation between meaning and assertion also holds the view that to understand the assertion, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence used. That means that the meaning of a sentence determines the assertion made by the speaker by using it in a particular context. This point can be better understood by an example. In response to the following question: “what games has your friend played yesterday?” asked about one of my friends who is good at indoor games and participated in a match yesterday, what I utter is:

(1) She played chess yesterday.

Here, the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence (1) is:

(1a) She played chess yesterday.

In the given context, what is expressed by the sentence and what is asserted by the speaker by uttering that sentence are the

⁴ Scott Soames, “The Gap between Meaning and assertion: Why What We Literally Say Often Differs from What Our Words Literally Mean”, *Philosophical essays: Volume 1, Natural language: what it means and how we use it* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 278.

same. Here, by uttering a sentence the speaker actually utters the semantic content of it. But Soames finds this **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion** problematic. He thinks that the **Traditional Picture** is not quite right because the meaning and assertion are not always identical with each other. That is, by literally and non-metaphorically uttering a sentence the speaker may make assertion which is different from the proposition expressed by that sentence. According to Soames, it may be the case that the semantic content or the proposition expressed by a sentence and the assertion made by uttering that sentence are not identical, and the same assertion may not be a part of the semantic content of the relevant sentence.⁵ That means that by uttering a sentence a speaker sometimes makes assertions which may be different from the semantic content. For instance, suppose, in response to the question "What does Max do on Sundays?" I utter the following sentence:

(2) He plays chess.

Here, the semantic content of the sentence (2) is this:

(2a) He plays chess.

In the given context my primary intention is to assert that:

(2b) He plays chess on Sundays.

Here, what my primary intention to assert is not that "He plays chess" but that "He plays chess on Sundays". That means that the assertion (2b) is not identical with the semantic content of the sentence (2) and not even a part of it. Rather, the primary

⁵ Soames, "The Gap between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean", 288.

assertion (2b) is richer than the semantic content of the sentence (2). However, by pointing out that assertions are not identical with the semantic content, Soames has shown that the traditional conception of meaning and assertion is not right. He has strengthened his claim by pointing out that some assertions are not even a part of the semantic content of the sentence uttered; rather, in some cases they are richer than the semantic content.

Since the assertions made by the speaker are, sometimes, different from the semantic content of the sentence uttered, a question may automatically arise here: why something different from the semantic content of the sentence gets asserted? This particular phenomenon occurs because, according to Soames, there is a *gap* between these two, *i.e.*, meaning or semantic content and assertion. Soames observes that the traditional conception of meaning and assertion fails to identify the above-mentioned *gap*. Moreover, there is a belief that the semantic content of a sentence and the assertion made by uttering it holds a very strong connection between them. Soames not only identifies the gap between meaning and assertion, he also explains the nature of this *gap*. And to explain the nature of this *gap*, Soames introduces us with his idea of *primary assertion*. He does not rule out the possibility of semantic content for being an appropriate proposition to be asserted by the speaker. However, sometimes the semantic content of a sentence may interact with the contextual elements to generate a pragmatically enriched proposition. And, this pragmatically enriched proposition is considered to be the speaker's primary intention to assert by uttering that sentence.⁶ Soames calls this pragmatically enriched proposition the *primary assertion*. Now, it may be the case that a primary assertion which is speaker's primary

⁶ Soames, "The Gap between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean," 280.

intention to assert is not always identical with the semantic content. The reason is that the primary assertion is supplemented by the contextual elements; on the other hand, the semantic content is not supplemented by the contextual elements. According to Soames, when the primary assertion is formed by the speaker by uttering a sentence, there may be other assertions that are also asserted (not the primary assertions). These assertions are considered to be asserted because they are "relevant, unmistakable, necessary and a priori consequences of the speaker's primary assertions".⁷ So, the proposition which is semantically expressed by a sentence is considered to be an assertion only when it is a consequence of the primary assertion. That means that the semantic content of a sentence may not be asserted even though it may be a complete proposition for being asserted by a speaker.

It may seem that the semantic content does not contribute in making assertions. So, a question may be raised here: does the semantic content of a sentence take part and contribute in making assertion? According to Soames, the semantic content of a sentence plays a very important role in making assertion. He says that what is asserted by the speaker is not directly determined by the semantic content but the semantic content interacts with the information supplied by the context to generate pragmatically enriched propositions. That is, the role of the semantic content is to provide the building blocks for assertions and constrains the way by which these building blocks are assembled.⁸ So, the semantic content of a sentence

⁷ Soames, "The Gap between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean," p.280.

⁸ Scott Soames, "Naming and Asserting", *Philosophical Essays: Volume 1, Natural Language: what it means and how we use it* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University, 2008), p.366.

can be viewed as something that constrains the assertions a speaker makes by uttering that sentence. But it should not lead one to think that the contextual supplementations are added after identifying the semantic content of the relevant sentence. Rather, a speaker may make assertions without identifying the semantic content of the sentence uttered. To understand this point, consider the following example⁹, suppose, in response to the question: “how many children do you have?” a speaker utters the following sentence:

(3) I have two children.

A competent speaker may make assertions by uttering the sentence (3) even when she does not know what the semantic content of it is. The speaker who assertively utters the sentence (3) can be considered as a reliable judge of deciding what he/she asserts or others may assert by using that sentence. But the speaker may not have a reliable intuition on the basis of which she may identify whether the semantic meaning is “I have exactly two children”, or “I have at least two children”, or “I have at most two children”, or something else. That means that the speaker may not know what the semantic content of the sentence is, but she/he knows what assertions she makes by using that particular sentence. Moreover, the semantic content of a sentence is too *theory-laden* to be a part of speaker’s knowledge. So, it is clear from the analysis that a competent speaker may know what is asserted by his/her utterance of a sentence in spite of the fact that the semantic content of that sentence is psychologically unavailable to her. The ideas discussed above can now be summarized and put in the following way:

⁹ Scott Soames, “Drawing the Line between Meaning and Implicatures - and Relating both to Assertion”, *Philosophical Essays: Volume 1, Natural Language: what it means and how we use it*. (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.308.

- (a) The semantic content of a sentence generates a pragmatically enriched proposition along with the elements supplied by the context of utterance of the sentence in question.
- (b) A primary assertion is a pragmatically enriched proposition which is the speaker's primary intention to assert.
- (c) The other assertions (not the primary assertions) which are also made by the speaker are considered as "relevant, unmistakable, necessary and a priori consequence of the primary assertions".¹⁰

All of the above-mentioned ideas help Soames to put forward his own principle concerning the connection between the meaning of a sentence and the assertion made by a speaker by uttering that sentence. Soames' own principle is considered to be an alternative to the **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion**. This alternative idea concerning the connection between meaning and assertion can be called Soames' **Alternative Picture of Meaning and Assertion**. Soames describes the **Alternative Picture of Meaning and Assertion** in the following way:

If M is a meaning (or semantic content) of an indexical-free sentence S, then normal, literal uses of S (without conversational implicatures that force reinterpretation of the utterance) result in assertions of propositions that are proper pragmatic enrichments of M. When M is a complete

¹⁰ Mostofa N Mansur, "Bertrand Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions: an Examination", (PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 2012), 171, <https://philarchive.org/archive/NAZBRT>.

proposition, it counts as asserted only if M is an obvious, relevant, necessary and a priori consequence of enriched propositions asserted in uttering S , together with salient shared presuppositions in the conversation.¹¹

The above-mentioned principle illustrates that by uttering a non-indexical sentence S in a context C what the speaker asserts, *i.e.*, A is not identical with the semantic content M of the sentence S . That means that when a speaker utters a sentence (literally and non-metaphorically) she may assert something different from the semantic content of that sentence. This is the core of Soames' alternative conception of meaning and assertion and this significant idea can help one in defending Russell's theory by resolving the problem arising from the Argument from Incompleteness. In the following section, I will use Soames' alternative conception about meaning and assertion to deal with the above-mentioned problem of Russell's theory.

Dealing with the problem arising from the Argument from Incompleteness: In order to serve the purpose of the present section, I will begin with a summary of the problem arising from the Argument from Incompleteness:

According to the Russellian interpretation, a sentence containing an improper definite description, such as "The table is covered with books", always expresses a false proposition. But a speaker who utters such a sentence often succeeds in saying something true. So, the problem for a

¹¹ Scott Soames, *The Gap between Meaning and Assertion: Why what we literally say often differs from what our words literally mean*, *Philosophical essays: Volume 1, Natural language: what it means and how we use it* (Princeton and Oxford : Princeton University Press, 2008), p.280.

defender of Russell's theory is: how a speaker often succeeds in saying something true by uttering a non-compound sentence containing an improper definite description, even though the proposition semantically expressed by such a sentence is false?

Now, this problem can easily be solved if we replace the **Traditional Picture of Meaning and Assertion** by Soames' **Alternative Picture of Meaning and Assertion**. It is appeared from his **Alternative Picture** that, on a particular occasion, the assertions made by the utterer by uttering a sentence and the semantic content of that sentence is different. This phenomenon allows a speaker to assert something true of something by using a non-compound sentence containing an improper definite description which expresses a false proposition. Actually, when a speaker utters a non-compound sentence containing an improper definite description, he/she utters it in a context and every context contains some elements to complete the assertion made in that context. So, a sentence containing an improper definite description requires contextual supplementations to generate pragmatically enriched proposition. This pragmatically enriched proposition is mainly the speaker's primary intention to assert, *i.e.*, primary assertion, which is different from the semantic content of the relevant sentence. Since the primary assertion is different from the semantic content, they can involve different truth values. So, it is possible for a speaker to assert something true by his/her utterance of a sentence whose semantic content is false. If that is the case then the afore mentioned problem does not pose any genuine threat to Russell's theory. And we have got an explanation of how a speaker often succeeds in saying something true of something by using a sentence containing an improper definite description. To make this point clearer,

consider the following example: suppose, a friend of the speaker asked: is there any space on the table to keep some new stuff? In response, the speaker utters the following sentence:

(4) The table is covered with books.

According to the Russellian interpretation, the sentence (4) expresses the following proposition semantically:

(4a) Exactly one thing is a table and whatever is a table is covered with books.

The proposition semantically expressed by the sentence (4), i.e. (4a), is false as there is more than one table exists in the world. But by uttering the sentence (4) a speaker can assert something true in the given context. Obviously, in the given context the speaker is not asserting that there is only one table in the entire world. Instead, in the given context, what the speaker asserts by uttering the sentence (4) may be one of the following:

(4b) The table near the window is covered with books.

(4c) The table with a flower vase on it is covered with books.

(4d) The table on which there is a copy of Bertrand Russell's *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* is covered with books.

...

...

Etc.

The propositions stated as (4b), (4c), (4d) ... etc. are pragmatically enriched propositions. In the given context, the speaker by her utterance of the sentence (4) may mean any of

(4b), (4c), (4d) ...etc. to assert something true. That is, if the table near the window, or the table with a flower vase on it, or the table on which there is a copy of Bertrand Russell's *Human knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* is covered with books or... etc. then the speaker has said something true, even though the semantic content of the relevant sentence is false (due to fact that there is more than one table in the world). This indicates that on the given occasion the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence (4) and the assertions the speaker made by uttering that sentence are not the same. The reason behind it is that the assertions (4b), (4c), (4d) ... etc. are pragmatically enriched by contextual elements whereas the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence (4), i.e. (4a), is not pragmatically enriched by contextual elements. It is now understandable how the semantic content of a sentence and the assertions made by the utterer while using that sentence are different and how they involve different truth values. Therefore, a sentence containing an improper definite description can be used to assert something true, even though the proposition semantically expressed by such a sentence is false. And, Russell's theory can accommodate this fact. So, the problem concerning improper definite descriptions does not pose any genuine threat to Russell's theory.

The above-mentioned solution to the problem arising from the Argument from Incompleteness may not seem convincing to the critics of Russell's theory. One fact is that the semantic content is the literal meaning of the sentence which stays the same in all contexts of its use; on the other hand, the assertions made by using a sentence may differ from one context to another and sometimes the speaker makes more than one assertion in the same context. So, a critic may raise the question that when

more than one assertion has been made how can one select a proposition from a number of propositions as the speaker's assertion by uttering a sentence? It is true that there is no principled way on the basis of which one can select one or more propositions from a number of possible propositions as the speaker's assertions but this does not pose any problem for the defenders of Russell's theory. This question is totally irrelevant to the proposed solution of Russell's theory and a defender of this theory needs not to worry about how can one select one or more propositions as the speaker's assertions from a number of propositions. For, Russell's theory is concerned about the semantic content of descriptive sentences; it is not concerned, here, with what assertions can be made by a speaker by using a sentence on a particular occasion. A defender of Russell's theory only needs to show that the semantic content of a sentence is different from the assertion a speaker makes by uttering that sentence. Moreover, the lack of any principled way to follow in selecting one pragmatically enriched proposition from many of them as the speaker's primary assertion is related to the assertion which is an issue of pragmatics; and Russell's theory is a theory that concerns semantics not pragmatics. Russell clears this point in his article "Mr. Strawson on Referring":

My theory of description was never intended as an analysis of the state of mind of those who utter sentences containing descriptions...I was concerned to find a more accurate and analyzed thought to replace the somewhat confused thoughts which most people at most times have in their heads.¹²

¹² Bertrand Russell, "Mr. Strawson on Referring", *Mind* 66(1957):388.

Thus, it appears that many critics of Russell's theory have raised the criticism concerning the Argument from Incompleteness because of their misconception related to the connection between the meaning of a sentence and the assertion made by the speaker by using that sentence. By making it clear that the semantic meaning of a sentence may not be identical with the assertion made by the speaker by using that sentence, it has been shown that a speaker may say something true by using a sentence containing an improper definite description, even though the proposition expressed by such a sentence is false. Russell's theory can accommodate the phenomenon that it is possible to say something true by uttering a sentence that expresses a false proposition. Thus, the problem arising from the Incompleteness of definite descriptions does not pose a genuine threat to Russell's theory.

Conclusion: In fine, the objection arising from the Argument from Incompleteness against Russell's theory of definite descriptions is founded on an unawareness of the difference between meaning and assertion, if we keep in mind that the meaning of a sentence may be different from the assertion made by using that sentence, we can easily understand that this objection fails to pose a genuine threat to Russell's theory. The so-called problems arising from the improper definite descriptions are actually pseudo problems.

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