

Are creationists talking nonsense on scientific issues?

Benno Zuiddam

Augustine of Hippo warned Christians against uninformed statements about science. Theistic evolutionists claim that his warning applies to creationism. A careful examination of Augustine's statement in the context of his book on the literal meaning of Genesis shows that this claim is ill-conceived.

Church Father Augustine of Hippo continues to be a favourite among Christian evolutionists; not only to justify their position, but also to actively condemn traditional Bible believers. Over the last few months I received several requests to respond to a specific passage where St Augustine warns Christians against talking nonsense on scientific issues. This is subsequently applied to those who take the historical claims of Scripture seriously and dare to be outspoken about this. One finds this particular passage on the internet, but also in supposedly academic publications like *The Counter-creationism Handbook*, sanctioned by the University of California Press.¹

Unfortunately, where targeting creationism is concerned, graciousness does not seem to be a priority. One of my correspondents was actually prompted to read this quotation carefully and realize that it truly applied to him. He was to recognize that believing the historical aspects of Genesis in the 21st century is a dangerous idea that only serves to make Christianity ridiculous.

Interestingly, those who quote Augustine (figure 1) to refute creationism do not necessarily give the impression that they are in the habit of reading Church Fathers or to be guided by them otherwise. Ask the same antagonists whether they agree with Augustine's views on original sin, predestination, paradise as a real historical place on Earth, Eve built from Adam's rib, the age of mankind, and the historicity of Noah's flood as a worldwide event, and it becomes apparent that those who quote Augustine may be missing the point that they are endorsing a Church Father with fundamentalist views. This could suggest that quotations that 'prove' differently are likely to be out of context.

The situation is slightly different among those who, unlike theistic evolutionists, do not claim continuity with the historic Christian faith. Over the last few years it is increasingly understood in non-Christian circles that Augustine is very much at odds with any neo-Darwinist explanation of the history of the earth.² As apparently this light has not yet dawned among those who remain committed

to the theory of theistic evolution, this contribution examines the famous quotation, its author and context, and concludes with some practical guidance.

'Christians talking nonsense'

Usually the famous 'anti-creationist' quotation is presented in English, even in a continental European setting where everyone concerned speaks a different language. This suggests that the original Latin source was not taken up, read, or inwardly digested.³ Furthermore, to someone familiar with the particular history of Augustine's work in translation, this indicates that only the quotation was read and subsequently put forward to 'refute' creationism. The 'famous' Augustine quotation comes from a book that hardly anyone owns, let alone reads: Taylor's *Literal Meaning of Genesis* (1982).⁴

De Genesi ad litteram reflects Augustine's adult ideas about biblical interpretation, preferring literal over allegorical exegesis. Although allegorical exegesis continued to have its legitimate place as a symbolic picture for truths that were found elsewhere in Scripture, it wasn't proper exposition of the meaning of a passage. Augustine's definitive work on Genesis had different false starts and eventually slowly matured over a period of 14 years before it was finished.⁵ Until recently it wasn't well known in the English-speaking world because it wasn't available in translation, and Latin skills are becoming scarce. It was rather popular in the Middle Ages, when all scholars read Latin, but until quite recently it was rarely consulted and otherwise only readily available in French. It was eventually translated into English by John Hammond Taylor, an American Jesuit, and published after his death.⁶

The full passage from this book that is supposed to silence creationism reads:

"Usually, even a non-Christian⁷ knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the

predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learned from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although *they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertions*.⁷⁸

The typical theistic evolutionist use of this passage runs as follows: “Apparently Augustine, in his day, had trouble with people who tried to make deductions about the way the world works by assuming that Genesis provided information of a scientific nature.”⁷⁹ The Bible is seen as merely a book of faith and should not be used differently. In June 2016 a group of scientists in the Netherlands published an open letter along these lines. Its contents are supportive of theistic evolution as an explanation for the universe, and restrict the authority of Scripture to matters of faith and morals.

“Christians believe that God stands at the beginning of the Cosmos and that he has a daily involvement with this world. The scientific view of a world that is billions of years old does not undermine the authority of the Bible at all, nor does an evolutionary development of life on earth. Within its parameters science provides insight into exactly how origins and developments took place. The Bible speaks in a completely different

language about the origin of the world and the human race and mostly concerns itself with giving reasons and purpose; it isn’t a book of science, but a message of hope and grace.”¹⁰

Of course this approach is rather different from that of the Church Fathers and of the doctors of the church in the thousand years of Western civilisation that followed them. Until the Enlightenment, Christian scholars in all fields, Augustine included, took the historical aspects of the books of Moses very seriously.

Author and book

What is bewildering in critical publications such as *The Counter-creationism Handbook*, is that scholars who quote Augustine so confidently in favour of evolution do not seem to realize with whom they are dealing. Why not? Because the Church Father was not a transformist. He did not believe in gradual transformation of one species into another by descent with modification through many generations.¹¹ Like many scientists of his day, he probably accepted *abiogenesis*, spontaneous generation. Augustine might be used for a theory of theistic evolution that does not build on transformation, but neo-Darwinism is firmly outside this category.

It is equally noteworthy that those who quote the passage do not seem to realize that they actually cite from an

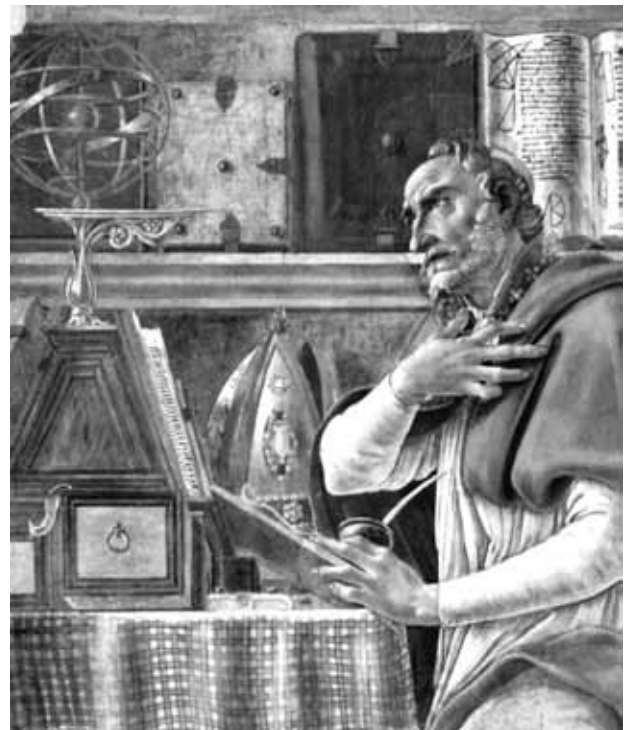


Figure 1. St Augustine of Hippo

otherwise extremely fundamentalist book by an author who argued that mankind is only a few thousand years old, and who preferred God's revelation to Greek scientific theories of origins any day.¹² Augustine believed both creation stories in Genesis to be factual. He also firmly believed that Moses was the one human author of the Pentateuch.¹³ That Augustine remained a biblical literalist until the very end of his life, is clear from his *Retractiones (Revisions)*.¹⁴ In retrospect he affirms that his specific goal with the *Literal Meaning of Genesis* was "the proper assessment of what actually happened".¹⁵

Merely a look at secondary sources should make one cautious about quoting Augustine to refute creationism. That this Church Father was committed to biblical literalism is by no means a novel observation. Twenty five years ago, Eileen Reeves wrote on Augustine and Galileo:

"In the *De Genesi ad Litteram*, Augustine had insisted upon the importance of the literal meaning of Scripture, and he had argued its preeminence largely at the expense of two other modes of interpretation. The first type involved allegorical readings; and though these were valid in that they usually told, in symbolic terms, the story of man's eventual salvation, Augustine believed that they might be proposed only when all efforts to establish a literal reading had been exhausted."¹⁶

A quick glance at a secondary source like this suggests that Augustine might not be the right author for finding fault with Bible believers. A book that prefers a literal interpretation of almost anything in Genesis is unlikely to produce quotations that undermine this idea. If it seems to do so, such statements are likely to be taken out of context. Someone truly interested in this Church Father, and not merely hunting for the odd quotation, would have appreciated and practised Augustine's view that the ideal reader knows the whole book.¹⁷

Quotation in context

After the character of a source, it is also helpful to consider the linguistic side, or the 'direct textual context' of a passage. It is quickly established that in this passage Augustine is not making a general statement about the nature of the alleged events in Genesis. Quite the contrary, he provides guidance to his readers on how *obscure places* in Genesis should be treated.¹⁸ His point in context is: Where the meaning of a passage in Scripture is not clear, Christians should refrain from offering their ignorance in scientific matters as a surrogate interpretation of the Bible. Those who try this make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of anyone who has basic knowledge about the universe. What is worse,

it also reflects badly on the biblical authors and keeps infidels from believing the Scriptures:

"If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learned from experience and the light of reason?"¹⁹

Augustine instills respect for Scripture and for the truth. If the meaning of a passage is unclear, it is inadvisable to deliberately seek an interpretation that goes against the facts of life, logic and common experience. When, on the other hand, a passage in Scripture has an obvious meaning, which seems to go against reason or common experience, Augustine insists that Scripture should be accepted at face value and believed nonetheless.²⁰ In other words, this quotation counsels Christians not to do puerile things with obscure passages in Genesis. The specific example to which the Church Father applies his warning is Genesis 1:3, about the creation of light as a phenomenon before the actual creation of sun, moon, and stars.

A second textual point that should be taken into consideration is that this passage is about facts that can be observed. Augustine argues against replacing proper exegesis with factually incorrect information about things that actually happen, and people can see for themselves. He is talking observable science, not metaphysical theories of origin, and that only for interpreting obscure passages of Scripture. Translated for a contemporary scientific context this would mean: evolutionary processes in nature, insofar as these are factual, observable, and repeatable, are not the issue. Scholars who take the historical message of the Bible seriously generally recognize the reality of change in this present world. However, on the basis of God's revelation they adhere to a different metaphysical theory of origins, namely that evolution cannot be used to explain the development of this world from its very beginning. In their present form these processes cannot be used to extrapolate back to a creation event, but should be connected to the 'Cosmic bend' in history (C.S. Lewis) that took place when mankind fell into sin (figure 2). Since that time the natural world is subject to principles of violence (*chamas* חָמָס) that were not part of God's original creation.

Thirdly, the wider textual context of this quotation confirms that for Augustine a clear meaning of Scripture overrules other considerations, even if Scripture happens to contradict normal experience or predominant theories of science. This is evident in the *Literal Meaning of Genesis* as a book, but also other writings such as the *City of God*. Unlike today, God's revelation was considered a reputable

way to access scientific and historical truth. Truth could be acquired by personal experience and reason or by means of revelation. Philosophy or science concerned itself with the former and theology with the latter. This would remain the paradigm for Western Christianity until the Enlightenment. For this reason Augustine accepts the miracles and divine interventions that Genesis records as historical. For him God had spoken reliably through Moses, so paradise was a location on this Earth and Adam and Eve were the parents of all mankind.

The points above show that theistic evolutionists use Augustine in a way that completely fails to do justice to the source. Rather than cautioning against a literal interpretation of Genesis, Augustine actively encourages it. His warning is directed against Christians who try to tackle obscure verses without knowledge or common sense. Whosoever applies this quotation to opponents of Darwinism does so ill-advisedly, because this use implies that any supernaturalist position should be abandoned, also on topics that many

theistic evolutionists hold dear, like: Our Lord's virgin birth, his miracles and resurrection, the Apostles' Creed, Nicaea, and basically every main tenet of the Christian faith. In its departure from the historical infallibility of Scripture, the theistic evolutionist approach is reminiscent of an earlier intellectual gliding scale. There is a long list of Enlightenment scholars, starting in the 17th century, who, unlike Augustine, believed that cherubs do not brandish flaming swords, and finally ditched all the supernatural from Scripture.²¹

Beyond the quote

While Augustine continues to be quoted out of context, there are several aspects of Augustine's argument that every orthodox believer should take to heart. A personal reflection on and beyond the quotation as such:

Firstly, God's Word is holy. Public exposition of God's Word, both from pulpits and in journals, requires learning as well as a special calling to do so. This does not sit well with our neo-evangelical times, where every Tom, Dick, or Sally takes up his ESV or NIV. Nonetheless this is one of the reasons why there are few academic theologians who take a creationist position seriously. Theology may seem a free-for-all in some circles, but generally it isn't. A sense of calling is simply not good enough. One's calling, as well as its exercise, must meet biblical requirements. God's Word requires faithful exposition. This calls for many years of accumulated expert knowledge and thorough familiarity with the original languages.

Secondly, how genuine is our reference to the Fathers of the Church? Creationists might be guilty of the same selective use that this article ascribes to some theistic evolutionists. Do we read the Church Fathers only to pick up the odd quote that supports our position, or do we read them in context? Are we genuinely interested in taking a position that reflects the doctrines of historic Christianity, or just looking for a quick proof text?

Thirdly, a little bit of knowledge is not only dangerous, but can be extremely irritating for others who know so much more. Someone with a



Figure 2. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise (Gustave Doré)

Ph.D. and many years in the field is aware of many aspects of a problem, as well as related issues. For a theistic evolutionist with this background it can be exasperating to meet ‘yet another creationist’ who has read one or two books and behaves like an expert who can debate on equal terms, while the theistic evolutionist has practised university science for 30 years.

Of course this has a background. Tertiary education has been almost completely secularized, particularly over the last 20 years. Academia has ruthlessly slaughtered many dissidents,²² as has the church. Believers have been forced to go out and fend for themselves, with however limited means. Even the Vatican has distanced itself from its creationist doctrine under Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Since Cardinal Schönborn was pulled into line for his Intelligent Design (ID) sympathies 10 years ago and Cardinal Meissner sidelined as an ancient voice in the wilderness, Rome openly disassociates itself from its former creationist stance, to such an extent that even ID may not be advanced. Those who still dare speak up are few and speak from unattractive places like Kazakhstan, posted where they were supposed to do least harm. In most mainline protestant denominations the situation is not much different, or worse.

Fourthly, expertise in one field of study means just that. The creationist cause is best served by the old proverb “Cobbler, stick to thy last”. A last was a piece of wood shaped like a human foot and used in making or repairing shoes. Everyone should stick to his own area of competence. Granted, it is perfectly alright to teach others the basics, or other appropriate levels. You may not have an education in science, but, by all means, if you have done a lot of reading on a subject, run a seminary on creationism in your local church or school. There are parents who run excellent home-schools that compete with the best in formal secondary education. But that doesn’t make you an expert, so don’t behave like one. Stick to what is appropriate. Don’t overreach, admit where you are not really qualified to give a suitable answer, but support the cobblers to do their work. Even if you are an expert with a Ph.D. in one field, that does not automatically qualify you for other fields. A renal specialist should not try and do the work of an ophthalmologist. Although he could give basic advice from his education and experience as a General Practitioner, he would be ill-advised to do surgery in the other’s field.

Lastly, this debate is very similar to Andersen’s tale about the *Emperor’s New Clothes* (1837; figure 3). Nobody would confess that he couldn’t see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool. No costume the Emperor of Evolution had worn before was ever such a complete success as his Augustinian cloak. “But he hasn’t got anything on”, a little child said. One needn’t be an expert tailor or even an adult, to call attention to the obvious.



Figure 3. The Emperor’s New Clothes

References

1. Isaak, M., *The Counter-creationism Handbook*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 8, 2007.
2. Cosner, L. and Sarfati, J., Non-Christian philosopher clears up myths about Augustine and the term literal, *J. Creation* 27(2):9–10, 2013.
3. See the *Book of Common Prayer*, collect for the second Sunday in Advent: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.”
4. Taylor, J.H., *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (translated and annotated by John Hammond Taylor, S.J. in two volumes), Newman Press, New York, 1982.
5. Dawes, G.W., Could there be another Galileo case? *J. Religion and Society* 4: 3–4, 2002.
6. O’Meara, J., Saint Augustine’s Understanding of the Creation and Fall, *The Maynooth Review* 10:52, 1984.
7. A preliminary remark from the Latin original of this passage: Although Taylor has done a superb job, in this place the Latin is probably not as derogatory as the English translation suggests with “even a non-Christian knows something about”. In the context of this chapter (*De Genesi ad litteram* I.19), a non-comparative translation (of *etiam-ita*, see ref. 8) makes more sense: “Indeed, also a non-Christian usually knows one or two things about the earth, the heavens” etc.
8. See Taylor, ref. 4, pp. 42–43. The italicised quote in Taylor’s translation refers to 1 Timothy 1:7. Cf. Augustinus, A., *De Genesi ad litteram* (Augustini Opera Omnia—editio Latina PL34), Nuova Bibliotheca Agostiniana, Roma 2016, I.19.39: “Plerumque enim accidit ut aliquid de terra, de coelo, de caeteris mundi huius elementis, de motu et conversione vel etiam magnitudine et intervallis siderum, de certis defectibus solis ac lunae, de circuitibus annorum et temporum, de naturis animalium, fructum, lapidum, atque huiusmodi caeteris, etiam non christianus ita noverit, ut certissima ratione vel experientia teneat. Turpe est autem nimis et perniciosum ac maxime cavendum, ut christianum de his rebus quasi secundum christianas Litteras

loquentem, ita delirare audiat, ut, quemadmodum dicitur, toto coelo errare conspiciens, risum tenere vix possit. Et non tam molestum est, quod errans homo deridetur, sed quod auctores nostri ab eis qui foris sunt, talia sensisse creduntur, et cum magno eorum exitio de quorum salute satagimus, tamquam indocti reprehenduntur atque respuuntur. Cum enim quemquam de numero Christianorum in ea re quam optime norunt, errare comprehenderit, et vanam sententiam suam de nostris Libris asserere; quo pacto illis Libris credituri sunt, de resurrectione mortuorum, et de spe vitae aeternae, regnoque coelorum, quando de his rebus quas iam experiri, vel indubitatis numeris percipere potuerunt, fallaciter putaverint esse conscriptos? Quid enim molestiae tristitiaeque ingerant prudentibus fratribus temerarii praesumptores, satis dici non potest, cum si quando de prava et falsa opinione sua reprehendi, et convinci coeperint ab eis qui nostrorum Librorum auctoritate non tenentur, ad defendendum id quod levissima temeritate et apertissima falsitate dixerunt, eosdem Libros sanctos, unde id probent, proferre conantur, vel etiam memoriter, quae ad testimonium valere arbitrantur, multa inde verba pronuntiant, non intellegentes neque quae loquuntur, neque de quibus affirmant.”

9. See noanswersingensis.org.au/saintaugustine.htm, accessed 31 August 2016.
10. “Christenen geloven dat God aan het begin van de kosmos staat en van dag tot dag betrokken is op deze wereld. Het wetenschappelijke beeld van een miljarden jaren oude wereld ondergraaft het gezag van de Bijbel op geen enkele manier, en een evolutionaire ontwikkeling van het leven op aarde doet dat evenmin. Wetenschap verschaft binnen een eigen kader inzicht in het ‘hoe’ van de oorsprong en ontwikkeling. De Bijbel spreekt in een heel andere taal over de oorsprong van de wereld en de mensheid en geeft vooral een duiding van het ‘waarom’ en ‘waartoe’; het is geen boek van natuurwetenschap maar een boodschap van hoop en genade.” Source: geloofwetenschap.nl/index.php/opinie/item/750-oude-dino-s, accessed 31 August 2016.
11. Guinagh, K., Saint Augustine and evolution, *The Classical Weekly* 40(4): 28, 1946.
12. In *De Civitate Dei* (liber 12, c.11), Augustine argues against Greek philosophers who held that the human race always existed. He speaks of the falseness of the history which ascribes many thousands of years to times gone by (*de falsitate eius historiae, quae multa millia annorum praeteritis temporibus ascribit*) and says: “Such men are also misled by certain wholly untruthful writings which purport to contain the history of many thousands of years of time. For we compute from the sacred writings that six thousand years have not yet passed since the creation of man. Hence, the writings which make reference to far more thousands of years than there have been are vain, and contain no trustworthy authority on the subject.” (*Fallunt eos etiam quaedam mendacissimae litterae, quas perhibent in historia temporum multa annorum milia continere, cum ex litteris sacris ab institutione hominis nondum completa annorum sex milia computemus. Unde ne multa disputem quem ad modum illarum litterarum, in quibus longe plura annorum milia referuntur, vanitas refellatur et nulla in illis rei huius idonea reperiat auctoritas.*) Added to this, Augustine taught an immediate creation without the possibility of a gap theory, as he denied that God used pre-existent material in creation, see Gay, J.H., Four Medieval Views of Creation, *The Harvard Theological Review* 56(4):249, 1963. Christian argued that Augustine was only meant to address the age of mankind, not the history of the world, see Christian, W.A., Augustine on the Creation of the World, *The Harvard Theological Review* 46(1):17, 1953. This is less likely as Augustine addresses the Greek fallacy of an everlasting world in the next chapter, and makes a similar argument about Adam and Eve two chapters later (liber 12, c.13) where the context is the age of the world.
13. Farrugia, M., Gn 1:26–27 in Augustine and Luther: before you are my strength and my weakness, *Gregorianum* 87(3):491–493, 2006.
14. Augustine’s *Retractiones* 24.1–2 admits that initially it was a real struggle for him to seek for the real meaning of Scripture, allegorical interpretations took so much less effort, but that he persevered after several attempts. Looking back, he also states that these books about the literal meaning of Genesis raised a lot of questions that did not receive a definite answer. This, however, refers to theological questions, not to the historical aspects and reliability of Genesis. Adam was still very much driven from a literal paradise, and a flaming sword was placed to guard the way to a real tree of life (*de paradiso dimissus est Adam, et flammea romphaea posita est custodire viam ligni vitae*). Augustine, while confessing his own fallibility and the shortcomings of his attempts at answers, continued to believe in his approach as such. That he also didn’t change his literal historical view on Genesis is firmly suggested by the fact that his revisions for the *Literal Meaning of Genesis* do not concern matters of science or historical reliability, but theological interpretations.
15. “Secundum rerum gestarum proprietatem”, *Retractiones* 24.1.
16. Reeves, E., Augustine and Galileo on Reading the Heavens, *J. the History of Ideas* 52(4):565, 1991.
17. McCarthy, M.C., We are your books: Augustine, the Bible, and the practice of authority, *J. the American Academy of Religion* 75(2):331, 2007.
18. *In obscuris Scripturae locis nihil temere asserendum*, that is, freely translated: don’t switch off your brain when dealing with obscure passages in Scripture.
19. See Taylor, ref. 4, p.43.
20. Dawes, G.W., Evolution and the Bible: The hermeneutical question, *Relegere* 2(1): 61–63, 2012.
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