



# Vladimir Bibikhin As Antipalamite

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### **Abstract**

Vladimir Bibikhin may be called a modern-day antipalamite. He sharply rebukes Gregory Palamas's theology of energy, which has had a profound influence on modern Orthodox theological thought. The Russian philosopher calls the Palamite doctrine a "theological failure," asks why no one disputes Palamas today, and also why the God of Palamas, long ago divided in two, still remains divided into essence and energy. Emphasizing the Aristotelian concept of potential energy, he returns to the view that God is not divided, but rather exists as unmovable potential energy and as the Aristotelian Prime Mover.

### **Keywords**

antipalamism, energy, essence, Gregory Palamas, philosophy, theology

Bibikhin is a thinker who inspires not only Russians. In the philosophical legacy of Vladimir Veniaminovich Bibikhin one finds pure thought and reasoning that carried him away as it once did the Hellenes—the fruit of which became his philosophical legacy. Bibikhin's aim is to pursue the living thought, its active character. The philosopher did not lock himself up in history; he does not waste time on what has already been done. Rather, he concerns himself with that which is always relevant. Following Heidegger, he reads history from the point of view of the present, and as a result, history itself becomes current. Under new conditions, he attempted to show the development of human reason (which includes Russian thought). Bibikhin was not only a Russian thinker; his work is of interest to many. Vladimir Bibikhin writes himself that he is not looking for a new beginning for Russian thought, and that his goal was never to work exclusively with Russian philosophy. Rather, he was interested in thought in the broadest sense, constantly looking for the simple origin (Bibikhin 2003: 336) the ancient *αρχή* that once so preoccupied the Greeks. Bibikhin's work is characterized by constantly striving toward the living thought, by cultivating active participation in the thinking process in listeners and readers, as well as close examination of the author's work. His philosophical influences testify to his fascination with this new origin of thought. His interest in the great twentieth-century philosopher, Martin Heidegger, along with his continuation of the latter's work and popularization of the new philosophical method; demonstrate his deep yearning to return to the roots, to the beginning of philosophy. While discussing Heidegger's influence on Bibikhin, it should be noted that his famous Russian translation of *Being and Time* is used not only by Russian readers, but Polish students are also introduced to Heidegger using Bibikhin's translation.<sup>1</sup>

However, a completely different topic, involving Bibikhin, captures our attention: our interest in the Palamas debates. Today, Hesychast theology enjoys great popularity, and enthusiasm for St. Gregory Palamas<sup>2</sup> has cast a shadow over the other theological questions and other authors of the same period, while the return to late Byzantine thought in the Orthodox sphere has been tied to the glorification of Palamites. Vladimir Bibikhin decided to distance himself from the predominant interpretation and dispassionately launched a debate over what he considered to be

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<sup>1</sup> During the past academic year (2012/2013) at the Warsaw University Institute of Philosophy during Vavzhints Rimkevich's seminar on Heidegger, students worked with Bibikhin's translation of *Being and Time*.

<sup>2</sup> St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) — Byzantine theologian, and author of the theology of energy, according to which there exists a division within God between His imperceptible essence and perceptible energies. This division within God allowed Palamas to defend Hesychast prayer practices, during which God became known through His energies.

a questionable Palamist doctrine: the categorical division in God as divine, incomprehensible essence and as comprehensible, divine energies. Thus Bibikhin joined the ranks of the antipalamists, Gregory Palamas's Byzantine opponents. However, his position is informed by his understanding of Palamas's intentions, and which would lead one to conclude that Bibikhin's work represents an attempt to bring to an end to the debate that was started about essence and energy.

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Among the most vocal critics of the theology of energy in the fourteenth century Nicephorus Gregoras<sup>3</sup> and Demetrios Kydones<sup>4</sup> are particularly noteworthy. Both represent a strand in Byzantine thought which may be called Christian Neoplatonism, and which is distinct from the monastic strand and the Orthodox theology related to it. Opposition to Palamas and his doctrine of radical division in essence and energy of God emerged among Palamas's friends. Among the first was St. Gregory's friend Gregory Akindynos,<sup>5</sup> who had doubts about this division. Later such doubts were expressed by other thinkers as well, giving rise to the second stage of the Hesychast debates. Those who had spoken out together against Barlaam earlier were no longer in agreement.

Vladimir Bibikhin, too, found a place among them. In his opinion, by giving rise to the doctrine of essence and divine energies, St. Gregory defends himself from god forsakenness. His doctrine is the desperate cry of a monk who needs to know that God as such appears to every believer through the practice of prayer. According to St. Gregory, energy is not only something eternal in Go— it is both eternal and uncreated, and it is God Himself. By imitating St. Dionysius, St. Gregory wanted to make something completely inscrutable of this appearance of God in energies, which is why he introduced what was, in his view, a traditional division between essence and energy. From this division it follows that divine essence is not identical with God's activity, with His energies. It seems that the first critic of this view was Gregory Akindynos, who asserted: "There is only self-identity and indivisibility in God, apart from those peculiarities that distinguish the Holy Trinity" (Akindynos 1220). God's essence, too, repre-

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<sup>3</sup> Nicephorus Gregoras (1295–1360) — Byzantine thinker, scholar, and historian, who opposed the Palamist theology of energy. His theological perspective can be found in his work, *Byzantine History*.

<sup>4</sup> Demetrios Kydones (1324–1398) — Byzantine scholar, translator of Thomas Aquinas' works, his antipalamist views can be found in his essay *Against Gregory Palamas' Delusions*.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Akindynos (1300–1348) — a Byzantine theologian, one of the main participants in the Palamist debates. At first a supporter of Palamas, he later became his opponent.

sents a means of being, it is itself His being, which, “of course, really, that is, actively exists as wisdom, truth, freedom and other divine forces” (Bibikhin 2010: 111). It is clear that Bibikhin already finds support in Akindynos. His understanding of being is very close to Akindynos’s argument. Together they ascribe an energetic character to essence.

Objections to Palamist theology were perceived as attacks against Orthodoxy. St. Gregory asserted that he was not adding anything new to theology. He was following the Church Fathers in all matters. Teachings about energies already appeared in their writing a long time ago; he simply appropriated and developed it in greater detail. However, he not only repeated and expanded it; he added his own interpretation to it (although, in my opinion, this interpretation is in harmony with the tradition and intuition of the Church Fathers). According to his interpretation, energy becomes the mystical symbol of divine presence, thanks to which the Biblical and Evangelical history of the Living God endures (Bibikhin 2010: 113). Despite his repeated assertions that the Church Fathers already spoke about energies, his interpretation was original. At that time St. Gregory already felt godforsaken. He felt that the time of the prophets and apostles was passing, that Man and the world lived without God, which is why, when introducing his concept of energy, he wanted to return God to the world, in order to prove to Man that God is close to him and awaits his effort. These words made perfect sense at the time of the Hesychast revival. St. Gregory defended first-hand experience, and his understanding of energy testified to the Church’s life in the Holy Spirit. It is precisely this experience, the experience of deification, which plays the main role in his teachings about energy. By developing his concept of energy, St. Gregory wanted to express that God, being comprehensible through experience, touches the human heart, transforms it, and although as a whole He is incomprehensible, He continually reveals Himself. St. Gregory needed “energy” in order to defend the truth of religious experience, which was the divine inspiration behind the theology of the Fathers; but it was also necessary, in order to wage battle against the theological relativism of Barlaam.

Bibikhin constantly argues with Palamas, he is not happy that the latter did not develop his doctrine, and that the Church in Byzantium too quickly accepted and proclaimed his teaching about energies. Nervousness, political disputes and other factors contributed to the fact that no one had either the time or the desire to provide a good analysis of Palamas’ “energy.” For what is wrong, according to Bibikhin, with the Palamist teaching about energies? It is an obvious fact that in the course of a conversation with any man I do not come to comprehend his essence, but only his energies, through which he manifests himself. Of course, I recognize his presence as such, that he is, but not his entire being. It works in a similar way with God. A man who prays to Him comes to comprehend Him through His energies, His presence, His grace, through His deification of

fallen nature. However, in His fullness, God hides from Man, and He remains incomprehensible. Why, then, does Bibikhin call the Palamist doctrine of energies a “theological failure” (Bibikhin 2010: 141)? In order to understand Bibikhin’s position, one must touch upon his critique of Palamas’s teachings. However, it must always be kept in mind that Bibikhin never presented himself as a theological reformer, and never even considered the idea of concerning himself with theology in his texts. He simply attempts to renew the debate about energy that involved him, by which he himself had been affected. He wants to calmly undertake a study of palamist energy, to examine it closely, as a philosopher.

Bibikhin calls Palamas’s doctrine “scandalous.” In the course of his flight from Western scholasticism, St. Gregory comes close to the Muslim understanding of the prophetic calling. For in the pure heart of the praying man, as in the prophet, lives God. The palamist doctrine represented a departure from philosophical logic and this is what makes it scandalous. However, a doctrine is not a philosophy; one has to deal with it in a different way. At its inception, the criticism of the Palamist doctrine of energies already missed its mark. For example, the brothers Demetrius and Prochoros Kydones,<sup>6</sup> not sensing the profundity of the doctrine of energies, criticized Palamas’ philosophical absurdity. They tried to undertake a philosophical analysis of this doctrine, which led their enemies to initiate Palamas’ defense on philosophical grounds. However, according to Bibikhin, the efforts of both the former and the latter were immediately doomed to failure, because it is not possible to philosophically justify a doctrine.

Palamas was criticized (specifically by Akindynos) for ditheism, introducing novelties into theology instead of following the Church Fathers, iconoclasm, and for disrespecting Church vessels and service. However, what are of interest are the arguments against Palamist energy which Bibikhin repeats after the fourteenth-century Palamists.

1. According to Palamas, energy is uncreated. What does this mean? If it is uncreated, then it must exist on its own. But in Palamas’s doctrine it does not exist on its own, because it is connected to essence. If essence is the cause of energy, as in Palamas, then how can the uncreated (since energy must be uncreated) have its own cause? Moreover, according to Palamas, essence is unfathomable; nothing is part of it, while energy, at its end, allows for participation. For that which is uncreated cannot be part of anything else. How then can uncreated energy be comprehensible? Even if one asserts that God wishes to reveal himself to mankind and to the world, then why could he not reveal His essence to humanity? For the result would have been the same. Man would have come to know the same

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<sup>6</sup> Prochoros Kydones (1330–1369) — Byzantine theologian, monk, brother of Dmitry, antipalamist.

God. Thus, it is clear that the argument is correct. The Palamist doctrine has its shortcomings. They become apparent when it is stated that essence is unnamable, as opposed to energy. According to Bibikhin, the correct designation of energy is possible only when man is already gripped by it (Bibikhin 2010: 125). Then energy would be in its own designation (name), and the designation (name) would be energy (this question was taken up long ago by onomatodoxy).

2. Bibikhin's next counterargument again concerns the uncreatedness of energy. For there is no sense in the words used by Palamas about energy *necessarily issuing* out of essence. How can energy issue from essence, without issuing out of it? The same reasoning is repeated in connection with the words: "Difference without divergence" (Bibikhin 2010: 126).

3. According to Bibikhin's assertions, accusations of introducing multiplicity in God are absolutely correct. The Palamist doctrine divides God. St. Gregory says that he intended to defend the Christian, Biblical, Living God; the God Who, precisely because He is Living, is Someone, as opposed to the God of the philosophers, who is nothing; Who can act, and who can be the source of energy. However, Bibikhin asks what need there is to divide God into essence and energy. Is it not enough to simply speak of the Living God, Who reveals Himself to the world? What need is there for this division, which assumes the potentiality of essence, since that means that there is something in God that has not yet come into being? But can there be something like this in God? Can God not yet be something? That would mean that He is imperfect, which would contradict the intention of the Church Fathers. Bibikhin emphasizes that everything in God is actual, energetic, that God *is* energy, and that there is nothing unrealized in Him, that is, nothing that is not already eternal energy (Bibikhin 2010: 128).

Bibikhin emphasizes that "dynamis" and "energy" only become one in God. With these words he alludes, involuntarily perhaps, to the Neoplatonic tradition. Alluding to the words of Palamas's main opponent during the last stage of the Hesychast debates, Bibikhin takes his place among the Christian Neoplatonists, humanists with whom Orthodox theology was locked in perpetual conflict. The main representatives of this movement were Michael Psellos,<sup>7</sup> John Italus,<sup>8</sup> and later Nicephorus Gregoras, who was cited by Bibikhin. However it must be kept in mind, that this movement, although Christian, constantly approached the neoplatonic concept of the One. It seems that the conflict between the Palamists and the anti-Palamists must be discerned in this tendency. When one exa-

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Psellos (1018–1078) — Byzantine scholar, revived Byzantine interest in Plato, which sparked the future renaissance of classical thought.

<sup>8</sup> John Italus (1025–1090) — Byzantine philosopher, Neo-Platonist, he was excommunicated for his attempted philosophical interpretation of doctrinal beliefs.

mines the problem of “dynamis” and “energy” in Plotinus more closely, it is clear that movement from the One is not accomplished by free will or by love, but depends on the excess of force (dynamis). This process has a necessary character. In Palamas, as in the Biblical concept of the Living God, God has to desire to come out of Himself, and then this selfsame desire (will) becomes energy, a passing beyond oneself. Bibikhin’s criticisms may be correct, but they are tied to the Neoplatonic concept of God, which St. Gregory never adhered to.

4. The next antipalamist argument has an anthropological character. Man strives to become one with God; and yet, in St. Gregory’s opinion, God, as the absolute Unity, as perfect Simplicity, is forever beyond Man’s reach. This is why he introduces division in God, because that which is beyond reach is essence. Energy is that which the praying man experiences first-hand. Nicephorus Gregoras (and, after him, Bibikhin) asserts that this division in God is completely unnecessary, for the problem faced by sinful Man is the impossibility of comprehending God (Bibikhin 2010: 128). It is Man who is unable to fully comprehend God, and not because God is divided into essence and energy. Palamas asserts that a pure-hearted man is capable, in his contemplation, of seeing God as He is, and of course, through energies. However, Bibikhin states that, in order for this to happen, one does not need to “split God up in a strange manner into essence and energy” (Bibikhin 2010: 128). A very simple intuition is expressed in Bibikhin’s words—God, as such, is revealed to humanity through the practice of prayer, while our ability to apprehend Him depends on our ascetic preparedness and experience in prayer. Perhaps he wants to explain deification in the manner of Plotinus as God’s action, for then He would be revealed as eternal energy, an excess of force, which perpetually acts and has an energetic character. However, the existential dimension of God, which is described in detail in the monastic tradition, and the conceptual, theological expression, which patristic literature (including Palamas) entered, would then disappear from view.

Apart from the antipalamist arguments of Nicephorus Gregoras, which I have just discussed, Bibikhin invokes another writer of that period in his criticism of the palamist doctrine:—Prochoros Kydones, the brother of Demetrius. Citing Kydones’s words, one can easily see that Bibikhin feels sympathy toward this method of reasoning: “Prochoros spoke well; his argumentation comes across even in spite of his one-sided exposition” (Bibikhin 2010: 130). Prochoros wants to simplify the discussion on energies, and this is also Bibikhin’s intention, which is why both allude to the Gospel text in which the disciples entreat Christ to show them His Father. They speak very simply: “Show us your Father.” They do not ask about essence or energy. This is why when Man sees God’s grace, truth and beauty, he sees God as in His existence (essence), although he sees poorly (Bibikhin 2010: 131). Both Prochoros and Bibikhin state that truth, beauty and grace are the essence of God, and not His actions (energies), as

St. Gregory thought. For them, essence is the eternal action, and it is actively revealed to Man.

Prochoros also emphasizes a rather important pneumatological problem. The Holy Spirit is He, Who enlightens, transforms, supports, comforts. What need is there to introduce energies? Why obfuscate and occlude the active Holy Trinity? However, St. Gregory wanted his teaching about energy to prove that it is the shared activity of the Holy Trinity that is energy. Prior to energy thus understood remains He, Who acts, the Living God. His revelation in the world is the conscious action in which Man comprehends God only when he enters into synergy with Him (energy, action). Thus the vision experienced by the apostles at Tabor is no deceit: it is the uncreated apprehension of God in action, in divine energies, in which the actor becomes comprehensible.

In approaching the problem of energy one must first choose between different concepts of the Absolute, since our understanding of energy will also depend on this choice. Bibikhin asserts that God is energy. He places an emphasis not on “dynamis,” as in Plotinus, but on energy. In Plotinus one encounters the gradual conflation of the concepts of “dynamis” and “energy” in favor of dynamis, while in Bibikhin, the situation is reversed. “Energy” takes the place of “Dynamis.”

Another Byzantine antipalamist who is cited by Bibikhin is the Patriarch of Constantinople Gennadius Scholarius.<sup>9</sup> As a true scholastic, he could not avoid coming to terms with the undeveloped (from the point of view of logic) teaching of St. Gregory. Having explained the teaching about essence and energies in God, he writes the following:

There is no real distinction between essence and energy in God, but there are *grounds* for such a distinction, God *really* gives us such grounds! [...] for God’s simplicity demands that essence and energy have the same *modus vivendi*, that they are both the same Eternity and One God, and the distinction made by us can lead neither to a real distinction in God, nor to compositeness; however, each divine accomplishment (action) in the world is a particular reality in God (Bibikhin 2010: 133).

What Bibikhin likes in these words is precisely that which marks a drastic departure from the intention of Palamas, who did not want to submit theology to logical analysis, who wanted merely to describe the living, dynamic, spontaneous and energetic experience of Man’s contemplation of God.

The doctrine of hidden essence and the energies that reveal it is part of an attempt, made by St. Gregory, to prove the objective character of religious experience. The dispute was begun by Barlaam, who, in his con-

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<sup>9</sup> Gennadius Scholarius (1400–1472) — Byzantine theologian, Patriarch of Constantinople, and clergy member. Translator of Thomas Aquinas’ essays into Greek.



versations with Western theologians about Church unity, spoke out about the role of doctrines in theological dialogue. He asserted that divine reality cannot be described objectively, and therefore the problem of whether the Holy Spirit emanates from both the Father and Son or only from the Father cannot be a significant question in the dialogue between the Western and Eastern churches. With these words, Barlaam attacked Orthodoxy. For doctrines are the fruit of spiritual life, they can be proved, since knowledge about God is not merely opinion, but true knowledge, for God revealed Himself to the Church Fathers. Palamas defended the theology of the Fathers, although he introduced another intuition than that described by earlier Fathers into the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In Trinitarian theology, all of God descends into the world in the Son, who is equal to the Father, so that He may again enter the world as the Holy Spirit. God is revealed in His wholeness. But something else can be found in Palamas: not all of God descends into the world, but only His energies, which are distinct His from essence (Bibikhin 2010: 361).

It appears that, in introducing the notion of “energy,” Palamas understood it as action. He wanted to describe an active God who addresses his will to the world. Bibikhin emphasizes that God’s presence cannot be limited only to action, it can also be rest. And by rest not only *hesychia* at the highest level of contemplation is meant, which is a different kind of rest, the result of resignation, patience, even misunderstanding; or the rest of *kenosis*, the result of abandonment, as the God-man was abandoned on the Cross (Bibikhin 2010: 364). Bibikhin tries to convince his readers that, in order to make the doctrine of energies relevant again and to take it up, one must first abandon the image of energy as action (Bibikhin 2010: 364).

To whom must we return to accomplish this? To Aristotle, of course, says Bibikhin, according to whom the first manifestation of energy is fullness, completeness. God is energy. His nature has an energetic character, it manifests itself as fullness. Bibikhin finds similar opinions in Akindynos’ work, who asserts that

every acting force acts inasmuch as it is energy. When it is not fully energy, then it does not act completely on its own, but with something apart from itself. And that which does not act completely by itself, cannot be the first thing that acts, for it acts by inhering in something, and not with its own essence. The first actor, God, does not have any force mixed with it, with which it acts, but is wholly pure energy (Akindynos).

When St. Gregory speaks of energy, he refers to it as God’s action, and then he does not wish for God to remain unacting. Palamas tries to show uncreated things in the world with which it is possible to unite, and created things that can touch the uncreated. However, by dividing God into essence and energy, he makes the latter inaccessible, closed off. He found

the basis for this teaching in the Church Fathers, but gives his own interpretation to their words. In the Church Fathers he found the basis for energy, but did not find the very problem of energy in their writings. He had to deal with it on his own. This is why his commentary on the theology of the Fathers became very authorial. It represents a supplement to their theology, but in the spirit of Palamas' own theological intuition. Bibikhin correctly observes that Palamas has already lost the ancient intuition of Man's submission to Cosmos. Palamas strives toward certitude, which is possible only thanks to God, Who affirms everything with his irrefutable presence. The palamist doctrine is the fruit of a striving toward the absolute objectivity of truth, a struggle for truth and certainty in the fact that the dispute is waged not only over some opinions or hypotheses, but has an objective character.

Bibikhin's antipalamism has to do with another understanding of the central problem of energy. For Palamas, energy is action; it emphasizes God's existential character, and makes Him the Living God of Holy Scripture, while elevating all of Christianity to the level of a Biblical religion. Bibikhin understands energy somewhat differently. For him, energy is fullness, completeness. In his opinion, one must not divide God into essence and energies, because for him being has an energetic character. Palamas wanted to remind everyone that God, Who is becoming ever more withdrawn, remains present in the world through His energies, if not His essence, and in this way He also remains present in the life of Man. It is this estrangement of God's essence that Bibikhin finds so objectionable, which is why he asserts that God reveals Himself fully as energy. God is revealed to Man during prayer: not His parts (energies), but the whole God, His presence. Whether Bibikhin is right or not isn't the point. It's just that he takes a completely different position than that of the palamists. He adjoins the energy of Palamas to his own concept of energy. But the palamists also had their own concept, which was not derived from Aristotle, but from Christian asceticism, the essence of which was the search for God, the practice of holding Him in oneself and of constantly returning to this experience.

Bibikhin adheres to Aristotle's concept of energy, but emphasizes only one of its aspects: completeness, fullness. On the topic of potential energy, which represents a completed action, he writes: "energy is an actualization, which is full and which must no longer expect anything for itself" (Bibikhin 2010: 274). For Bibikhin, potential energy is an end in itself. It is not action (as in Palamas). It is entelechy, a completed action. It is "the now, always swept up by the now, which seizes it, always unfamiliarly, unbearably, almost intolerably. It is always too much. Like energy, like fullness, like being" (Bibikhin 2010: 344). Unlike Palamas, for Bibikhin energy always remains in being, and does not actualize anything outside of itself. It is "actualized being, which is full in itself, full of itself, and is an end in itself" (Bibikhin 2010: 439). Bibikhin believes that this

energy is identical to the Prime Mover. The Prime Mover is full of energy, although He Himself is unmoved: “All energy is potential after him. He is rest, potential energy” (Bibikhin 2010: 321). If the Prime Mover (God) is potential energy, then the division between essence and energy is plain wrong. Bibikhin leaves no room for understanding energy as action. For Bibikhin, God is the end and the beginning, “energy which seeks itself and finds itself.” God is potential energy and the beginning that moves everything at the same time. As is well know, the God of Palamas never became the Prime Mover, He is not energy; He only makes use of energy.

It would seem that Bibikhin challenged and successfully disputed the doctrine of Palamas. He exposed weaknesses in the doctrine of essence and energy discreetly, with understanding, and also offered an alternative way of understanding energy. In his book *Mir* (World), Bibikhin, comments upon Heidegger, and using the latter’s style of argumentation, writes about World [Heideggerian concept?] as presence (*prisutstvie*, the word he renders Heidegger’s *Dasein* with). The category of World can also be used in theology by replacing old metaphysical notions with new ones. Then, not essence and energy, but presence and attitude, would be of interest. The palamist debate might come to an end, then. Even this intuition deserves great respect. Perhaps contemporary Orthodox theology should be treated as a closed system, which no longer speaks the language of the day and is out of touch with modern thought, and which ended simultaneously with “the death of God” and “the end of metaphysics.” Perhaps its content should be expressed in a new language; in the language of Heidegger and Bibikhin?

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