

## **Defining education: al-Farabi and Ibn Sina terminologies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary debate on proper term of Islamic education has been long disputed. This disagreement is reflective of more profound and substantial problems besetting Muslims view, especially their leader, on what Islamic education is and its concomitants. One way to solve the problem, or at least to provide solid basis to analyze and then to answer the question, is to read our Islamic heritage on this theme. Unfortunately, as far as my limited knowledge goes, there is no one single unified discipline in Islamic tradition called education, understood in modern sense, although hints and sometime even extended discussion of some of its aspects can easily be found. Our task, therefore, is to reconstruct what we read and put it into today's educational context of ours. This paper is meant to be small contribution along this line. It focuses on two prominent thinkers, representative of philosophical strand in Islamic tradition, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Justification of choosing them, other than the obvious influence of their ideas on later development of Islamic thought including education, is that their elaboration is marked by meticulousness, a quality often associated with philosophy. The approach adopted in this paper is to identify terms used by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, which can be construed as education, and then to analyze them and put them within general context of modern education. The expected result is to recognize terms used in classical Islamic era to signify education and to ascertain which term is more proper.

**Keywords:** *terms; Islamic education; al-Farabi; Ibn Sina.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

How education is defined is still very much debated today, although there may be agreement on some characteristics of education. Especially in the field of Islamic education, there is no one single term agreed upon to embrace all aspects conveyed within the term "Islamic education". This fact, however, reflects more profound question posed by encounter with Western colonialization followed by Western cultural hegemony. At the end of the nineteenth century, there are two terms used by vast majority of Muslim educationists of the time, namely, *tarbiya* and *ta'lim*. For example, Muhammad Abduh in Egypt uses both to refer to Islamic education (Abduh 1993, p. 167). These two terms are Arab world and Iran with their Persian counterpart, *amuzish wa parwarish* (Nasr 1994, p. 141).

What is alarming is that these two words, at least one of them explicitly, are understood in line with Western conception of education. In India for instance, Sayyid Ahmad Khan similarly uses term *tarbiya*, which he meant to bring out innate characters, contrasted to term *ta'lim*, which he understands merely to be preparation for student's profession (Lelyveld cited in Daud 1998, p. 145). Another case is Turkey, where term *terbiye* is used to secularize and change social structure of Turkey society, "to liberate the school from the traditions of society, even to set it at cross purposes to the society." The weight of this approach "was on the secular, pragmatic and civilizational role of teaching and learning." (Berkes 1998, pp. 405-6). And given the dominant role played by Ottoman Empire, what happened in Turkey could be quickly disseminated to other Muslim world.

This fact is sufficient to show how deep the West, as culture and civilization, has influenced Muslim world. In fact, the new coined term, *tarbiya*, is interpreted and understood along the meaning of Latin word *educere*, from which the word education, and hence Western concept of education, is derived (al-Attas 1985). In Islamic tradition, the word *tarbiya* does not signify education proper, until very recently. This paper aims simply at showing terms signifying Islamic education, espoused by two major philosophers, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (al-Mawardi 1986). Hopefully, it can be shown that the overwhelming usage of the term *tarbiya* is not rooted in Islamic intellectual tradition. Instead, it emerges after Muslims are made aware of Western concept of education and adopt it accordingly.

## II. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

### A. Al-Farabi's Life

Born Muhammad bin Muhammad Abu Nasr al-Farabi in approximately 258/870 (Madkour cited in Sharif 1963 p. 450) or 259 (Zayid n.d), not much detailed information is available about al-Farabi's life. One of classical biographical dictionary, for example, does not give detailed report on early life of al-Farabi only to say that his origin is al-Farab, one of Turks cities in Transoxiana who later came to Baghdad and lived there, and studied philosophical knowledge with Yuhanna bin Jilad (al-Qifti 2005 , p. 210). As a matter of fact, historians has recorded not much of his life prior to age fifty, after which more information

exists (Zayid n.d; Madkour 1963, p. 451). This scarcity, however, does not prevent historians from agreeing his mastery of philosophical knowledge ('ulum hikmiyah), particularly logic, of which he is said to be the first greatest logician (Fakhry 2002, p. 8). His command of logic is established by works on this subject. He wrote commentaries on *Analytica Posteriora*, *Analytica Priora*, the *Categories*, *Isagoge*, *Rhetorica* and *On Interpretation*. Other than these, he also wrote original contribution on this field mainly for pedagogical reason, that is considered to be "had no parallels in ancient or medieval history", that include *Risalah fi al-Tawti'ah*, *al-Fusul al-Khamsa*, *al-Alfadh al-Musta'malah fi al-Mantiq* and *Kitab al-Huruf* (Fakhry 2002, p. 8). In *al-Fusul al-Khamsa* for instance, he analyzes methodically several terms employed by logicians, such as deduction, prior, noun, article among others. And in his *al-Alfadh al-Musta'malah fi al-Mantiq*, he mentions various terms which "We have received from those proficient in the grammar of the people who speak the Greek language." (al-Farabi 1968, p. 42).

Reaching fifty, he went to Baghdad, center of learning of the time, where he discussed logic with distinguished logicians of Baghdad, notably with his teacher Abu Bishr Matta bin Yunus, whom al-Farabi surpassed. This gained him famous title, The Second Teacher (al-mu'allim al-thani) (Madkour 1963, p. 451), just after Aristotle, who is called The First Teacher (al-mu'allim al-awwal). After spending twenty years in Baghdad, al-Farabi was attracted by another center of learning in Aleppo, Syria, in the court of Sayf al-Dawlah, where he died in 339/950 (Madkour 1963, p. 451-2).

Al-Farabi wrote many important works. Al-Qifti and Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah list seventy. Because of the importance of logic in the works of al-Farabi, some scholar divides his works into two categories, that of logic and that of others (Madkour 1963, p. 452). Logical works are primarily concerned with Aristotle's *Organon* and are for the most part still in manuscript. The other works are concerned with other branches of philosophy (Madkour 1963, p. 452). His works include *Kitab al-Burhan*, *Kitab al-Qiyas al-Saghir*, *al-Kitab al-Awsath*, *Kitab al-Jadal*, *Kitab al-Mukhtasar al-Saghir*, *Kitab al-Mukhtasar al-Kabir*, *Kitab Shara'it al-Burhan*, *Kitab al-Nujum*, *Ta'liq Kitab fi al-Quwwah*, *Kitab al-Wahid wa al-Wahdah*, *Kitab Ara' Ahl al-Madinah al-Fadilah*, *Kitab Ma Yanbaghi an Yataqaddam al-Falsafah*, *Kitab al-Mustaghliq min Kalamih fi Qatighuriyas*, *Kitab fi Aghrad Aristutalis*, *Kitab Ihsa al-'Ulum*, *Kitab al-Radd 'ala Jalinus*, *Syarh Kitab al-Majisti*, *Kitab fi al-Falsafah wa Sabab Zhuhuriha* and others (Ibn Abi Usaybi'a 1995, pp. 138-40; al-Qifthi 2005, pp. 211-2). Al-Farabi influence to subsequent scholars is immense, as shown by Ibn Sina admission that the he was able to understand Aristotle's *Metaphysics* only after reading al-Farabi's *Aims of Metaphysics*.

## **B. Ibn Sina's Life**

What is striking about Ibn Sina's life is his unusual education, so to speak. Unlike al-Farabi, whose early life is obscure, Ibn Sina's is given in great detail, thanks to autobiography he dictated to his pupil al-Juzjani up to the point when he met al-Juzjani and later al-Juzjani wrote his biography until his death (Gohlman 1974). This autobiography and biography is preserved in several books on historiography.

Born Abu 'Ali al-Husayn bin Abd Allah ibn Sina in Afshana, in 370/980, his family moved to Bukhara after his birth. He spent his childhood studying al-Quran and adab literature and finished memorizing al-Quran by ten. He used to listen to his father and brother discussing Isma'ili doctrine on reason and soul, which he could understand, he admitted, but could not accept. Then, Ibn Sina studied Indian mathematics and jurisprudence (fiqh), in which he was already a keen inquirer and familiar method of discussion and argumentation known in fiqh. After a self-proclaiming philosopher came to his home, he started to study logic and read Isagoge under his supervision. Shortly, his teacher began to discern Ibn Sina's exceptional ability in logic, that was proven by his ability to give better definition than his teacher and soon Ibn Sina studied logic and its commentaries on his own. This autodidactic tendency of Ibn Sina extends to other areas of inquiry, such as geometry, natural philosophy, medicine—that he considers to be easy subject—and mathematics. He then devoted his time for one year and a half to restudy logic, physics, and mathematics, until he was confident with his mastery on these subject. After finishing these subjects, he proceeded by studying metaphysics. On this last subject, however, Ibn Sina found difficulty, even after reading it forty times, making him memorize it. Only after he read al-Farabi's Aims of Metaphysics (aghradl ma ba'da al-tabi'ah), did Ibn Sina grasp its meaning.

Due to his famous proficiency in medicine, he was invited to treat Samanid ruler, Nuh bin Mansur, where Ibn Sina was allowed to visit royal library to read some works on various subjects not to be found in the other place. When he was just eighteen, he said in his autobiography "I was finished with all of these sciences; at that time I had a better memory for learning, but today my knowledge is more mature; otherwise it is the same; nothing new has come to me since", that demonstrates that he is a prodigy.

Shortly after his early twenties upon his father death and being entrusted to hold official position, Ibn Sina was forced to flee his hometown to Gurganj, where he met Abu al-Hasan al-Suhayli, who was keen of philosophical knowledge. From this point of time, his life was always moving from place to another. After al-Suhayli, he met Ali bin Mamun, then Amir Qabus, ruler of Jurjan, to experiencing difficult phase in his life, traveling from Nasa, Baward, Thus, Samanqan, Jajarm and Jurjan, where he planned to meet Qabus, who was at that time defeated and jailed. Afterward, Ibn Sina went to Dihistan, where he was sick to come back again to Jurjan to meet his pupil, Abu Ubayd al-Juzjani, who became his long life companion and wrote his biography.

While in Jurjan, he met Abu Muhammad al-Shirazi, who provided for him a place to stay in. Here, al-Juzjani was frequenting Ibn Sina to read Almagest and asked the teacher to dictate a book on logic, entitled al-Mukhtasar al-Awsath fi al-Mantiq. On Abu Muhammad request, he also wrote al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ad and al-Arsad al-Kulliyah. This phase of his life is marked by prolific activities. Later, Ibn Sina went to the ruler of Ray, where he finished al-Ma'ad. After Ray was attacked, Ibn Sina flee to Qazwin, then Hamadan, where he met Shams al-Dawlah. Here, al-Juzjani asked Ibn Sina to write commentary on Aristotle's work, which he declined. However, he agreed to write, instead, a compendium of his own on philosophical subject with argumentation, entitled, al-Shifa'

and become his magnum opus. This, he did while he was serve as an official in Shams al-Dawlah rulership. After Shams al-Dawlah died, Ibn Sina had to run away again and hid in the house of Abu Ghalib al-Attar, where he finished physical and metaphysical part of al-Shifa, followed by logic part.

He was then prisoned by Taj al-Mulk, son of Shams al-Dawlah for four months in Hamadan. While in prison, he wrote Kitab al-Hidayah, Hayy bin Yaqzhan and other work. After being freed, he decided to secretly go away to Isfahan to meet 'Ala al-Dawlah, where he completed logic part of al-Shifa and *Almagest*, summarize Euclid work, arithmetic and music. While with Ala al-Dawlah, he finally finished al-Shifa and wrote al-Najah and a book in Persian as a gift to Ala al-Dawlah, entitled *Danish Namah-yi Ala'i*. He eventually died in 428 at the age of fifty eight.

He started writing at twenty one and since had produced many works, many of which were done during his constant moving from one place to another for safety reason or otherwise. Among his many works are al-Majmu, al-Hasil wa al-Mahsul, al-Birr wa al-Ithm, al-Mukhtashar al-Awsath fi al-Manthiq, al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ad, al-Arsad al-Kulliyah, al-Shifa', Kitab al-Hidayah, Hayy bin Yaqzhan, al-Najah, *Danish Namah-yi 'Ala'i*, al-Insaf, al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat and others.

### III. INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCE

#### A. Influence on al-Farabi

Al-Farabi is clearly conversant with Greek philosophical tradition reaching Muslim world through its translated version in Syriac and then Arabic. It is substantiated by at least two things. First is that al-Farabi writes about history of Greek philosophy up to the time it reached the Muslim world in his now lost work *fi zuhur al-falsafah*, which fragments are recorded in Ibn Usaybi'ah biographical dictionary (Fakhry). This surviving work, al-Farabi masterfully shows his thorough understanding of the development of philosophy since its presupposed inception in Greek civilization. Second is his defense of Plato and Aristotle as the utmost authority in philosophy and his trying to harmonize both differing views on some philosophical problems (al-Farabi 1968, p. 80). Individually, al-Farabi also elaborates separately thought of both Plato and Aristotle (al-Farabi 1962). All this clearly proves that al-Farabi is not only influenced but also adopts Greek philosophical thought and puts it within his own frame.

As a Muslim, al-Farabi tries to work within boundaries of this religion. This is proven by his pioneering attempt at reconciling religious and philosophical truth, a trend soon followed by his successors. Harmonization aimed at by al-Farabi between religion and philosophy serves two purposes. First is to Platonize peripatetic philosophy so as to make it more suitable to religion. And second is to provide rational interpretation of religion (Madkour cited in Sharif 1963, p. 457). Therefore, it is clear that al-Farabi, although being influenced by Greek philosophical heritage and, thus, defending it, is working within the framework allowed by Muslim society where he lived.

## **B. Influence on Ibn Sina**

As a scholar working in falsafah tradition, Ibn Sina is obviously influenced by Greek philosophical tradition, from which the name falsafah is derived. However, unlike al-Farabi who tries to compromise views of Plato and Aristotle, Ibn Sina tend to prefer Aristotelian tradition, known as Peripatetic, over other philosophical traditions (Gutas 2004, p. 323). For example he writes “[Those who] attempted to slander the Peripatetics and to find fault with books on logic as well as those who built on their basis ... propagated the delusion that philosophy is [only] Platonic, wisdom [only] Socratic, and that among the ancients only the earliest, and among philosophers only the Pythagoreans possessed knowledge.” (Ibn Sina cited in Gutas 2004). This clearly indicates that among many philosophical strands reaching Muslim world, Ibn Sina tends to weigh more on Aristotelian tradition. This attitude of Ibn Sina is grounded on two basis. First is his conviction that “any philosophical system not based on logic, and hence on the Verification of truths by means of syllogisms and the Discovery of middle terms primarily by Guessing them Correctly, is by its very nature not valid.” (Ibn Sina cited in Gutas 2004). Second is his understanding of history of philosophy as culminating in the Aristotelian philosophy (Ibn Sina cited in Gutas 2004).

With regard to influence on Ibn Sina coming from Islamic tradition, it can be noted that some of his substantial conceptual contribution has been proven to be inspired by Kalam tradition (Wisnovsky 2000). Added to this are those concepts not found Greek tradition, such as prophecy, which is elaborated by Ibn Sina at length. All this reveals that Ibn Sina is not merely following footsteps of Greek giants, instead he skillfully demonstrates his genius inspired by Islamic tradition.

## **IV. TERMS OF EDUCATION**

### **A. Al-Farabi's Terms of Education**

Al-Farabi has explicitly mentioned the term ta'lim in his several books. In his al-Burhan, he defines it as “Every action taken by human being meant to instill in another human some knowledge or to instill in him habitual character (malakah i'tiyadiyah) from which springs an action” (al-Farabi cited in Yasin 1985, p. 156). Here al-Farabi is speaking about what is now known as cognitive education and training respectively. He does not differentiate between both, underlining that what is important is transference of either knowledge or skill. In another book, he defines ta'lim differently, saying “Producing theoretical virtue in peoples and cities ... by means of words only” (al-Farabi 1995, p. 71). Having in mind about virtuous city (madinah fadilah), al-Farabi primarily defines ta'lim in the context of society. It is to inculcate in the people of the city sufficient knowledge so as to make them able to live accordingly which is obtained through words, hence excluding some part included in the first definition.

Furthermore, al-Farabi details theoretical virtue prescribed for inhabitants of virtuous city as knowledge of (a) highest principles of the beings (mabadi' al-mawjudat al-aqsa) and their order (b) happiness (c) supreme rulership (al-ri'asah al-ula) (d) specified

actions leading to happiness (al-Farabi cited in Nanji 1989 p.1). Also, he adds that happiness in this world and the Hereafter can be achieved by acquiring four things, which are content of education for al-Farabi. They are theoretical virtues (*fada'il nazhariyah*)—which he defines as “knowledge the ultimate purpose of which is to obtain knowledge about all existents (*mawjudat*) rationally in a certain way”—reflective virtues (*fada'il fikriyyah*)—which, in contrast to theoretical virtues that pertain to unchanging things (*al-ashya' allati la tatabaddal aslan*), is concerned with changing objects (*al-ashya' al-waridah al-mutabaddilah*) which enables its possessor to know what to do at a particular situation—personal virtues (*fada'il khuluqiyah*)—which al-Farabi classifies into bodily act, emotional act and thinking act—and practical arts (*sina'at amaliyah*), which he also calls practical political philosophy (*falsafah madaniyah*), depending on the subject of its practitioner (al-Farabi 1995).

As far as method of *ta'lim* is concerned, he divides method of *ta'lim* into rhetoric (*khitabah*) and dialectic (*jadal*). Both are applicable by way of face-to-face instruction (*mushafahah wa mukhatabah*) as well as writing (*kitabah*) (al-Farabi cited in Badawi 1997, p. 19). These methods are applicable to both first and second definition, with obvious exception of half part of the first definition, that is, transference of skill that cannot be done by words only. Al-Farabi mentions special category, called *al-ta'lim al-khas*, which refers to demonstrative methods (*turuq burhaniyah*), as contrasted to methods of dialectic (*jadaliyah*), rhetoric (*khatbiyah*) and poetic (*shi'riyah*), that he considers to be general approach suitable—especially the last two—for common people (*jumhur*) (al-Farabi 1990, p. 152). This specialization is to be understood within the context of various degree of people living in the ideal city. Some of them can be taught by demonstrative methods, which are the highest, but the generality of people cannot but be taught with methods of dialectic, rhetoric and poetic.

In regard of how *ta'lim* is delivered, he mentions two methods, that of audition (*ta'lim masmu'*), “in which teacher is using words” and that of imitation (*ta'lim bi ihtidza'*), in which “student sees teacher doing something so that he could imitate him in doing it, thus rendering him capable of doing it independently” (al-Farabi 1968). It corresponds to first definition mentioned above. *Ta'lim masmu'* is teaching with word, whereas *ta'lim bi ihtidza'* can be understood to mean skill education or attitude education. Al-Farabi explains further steps on what student should do when he is being taught something using words. He says “Everything which is to be learned through word, it is of necessity that student of that thing will be in three stages. First he must conceptualize and understand the meaning of what he listens from his teacher, i.e., the meaning that the teacher intend to deliver to the student. Second he submit to the existence of what he already conceptualize or understand from the word of the teacher. Third is memorizing what he has conceptualized and submitted.” (al-Farabi 1968). Here, al-Farabi is detailing stages which every student must go through.

What is interesting is the second term that al-Farabi is using to denote education, that is, *ta'dib*. He describes *ta'dib* as “when people and citizens habituate deeds out of practical characters (*malakat 'amaliyah*) so that their intention is encouraging toward them they

become engraved within their selves ... through word or action.” (al-Farabi 1995). Al-Farabi contrasts ta'lim to ta'dib, where the first aims at creating theoretical virtue by means of words only and the latter seeks to generating practical virtue using words and action. This means that ta'dib is more comprehensive in scope than ta'lim, because it necessitates the latter.

## **B. Ibn Sina's Terms of Education**

As is the case with al-Farabi, Ibn Sina does not use one single term encompassing all aspects of education understood in modern sense. However, he uses several words which may be considered as designations of several aspects of education. First is ta'lim, which Ibn Sina divides into several categories, first of which is artistic (sina'i), such as art of carving (al-nijarah) and coloring cloth (al-sibaghah). This kind of education is done through habituation (muwazabah) of utilizing such skill. Second is verbal mimicry (talqini), like teaching poem or language, by means of accustoming that poem and language. Third is what Ibn Sina vaguely calls ta'dibi, which can develop only via consultation with teacher, without further explanation. Fourth is imitation (taqlidi), which is to make student become convinced on something, by way of trusting teacher. Fifth is reminding (tanbihi), such as reminding student who already knows magnet and its feature, when he overlook it, by saying that this is magnet that you already know (Sina 1956, p. 57). In this division, Ibn Sina distinguishes ta'lim based on intended result of education. It is whether art (sina'ah), verbal mimicry (talqin), mental imitation (taqlid), reminder (tanbih) or ta'dib, which Ibn Sina has left vague. However, this last term is the most comprehensive of all this, since the only explanation Ibn Sina gives is that it can be obtained through consultation (mashurah), which may be interpreted as comprehensive.

Ibn Sina uses another terms to describe education, tarbiya. Nonetheless, Ibn Sina does not use this term in the sense used today. It denotes, according to Ibn Sina, infant care, starting from being born up to early childhood (Sina 1999, pp. 203-20). What is notable here is that, when a child is reaching six years old, Ibn Sina recommends that he is educated by teacher whom he calls mu'addib and mu'allim simultaneously (Sina 1999, v. 1, pp. 203-20), which may suggest what education is according to Ibn Sina.

Another means by which to devise Ibn Sina's concept on education is by way of constructing it from Ibn Sina's own education, so to speak. This is particularly fruitful, because his main concern is not to develop educational concept per se. Expectedly, given his extraordinary education, Ibn Sina puts more weigh on self-education. For instance, when he asserts that knowledge of intelligible is acquired by two ways, guessing correctly the middle term (hads) and instruction, the latter is reducible to the former (Sina cited in Gutas pp. 181-214). To enhance the process of guessing correctly the middle term, Ibn Sina used another means. Some of them are logic, prayer, dreams and independent verification (Sina cited in Gutas pp. 201-219). This points to the fact that education according to Ibn Sina is not limited theoretical-cognitive area, but is extensive to all dimension of human being, including spirituality.

## V. CONCLUSION

As a way of conclusion, it may be deduced rather hastily that both philosophers agree that ta'lim is the necessary ingredient in education, which for al-Farabi is transfer of knowledge, roughly corresponding to modern concept of cognitive education, and for Ibn Sina it encompasses several aspects of education. What is noteworthy is that both seem to concur that ta'dib is all-inclusive concept about education. For al-Farabi, it is discernible from this broader definition of ta'dib compared to ta'lim. As for Ibn Sina, although he seems to put ta'dib as sub-category of ta'lim, he, however, defines it, probably deliberately, in vague manner, so as to make it comprehensive of all other aspects of ta'lim and hence make it all-embracing concept. Regarding the more popular term for Islamic education today, tarbiya, both philosophers do not recognize it as a term for education proper as it is very likely that this term is new coinage of modern Muslim after encountering with the West and thus makes it more prone to Western conceptual influences, as has been proven by some scholars. This fact can be attested even by skimming works related to education prior to Western civilizational hegemony on Muslim.

This paper has shown that education, understood as comprehensive process, for al-Farabi and Ibn Sina is not conveyed by the term tarbiya. They offer, instead, term ta'dib which is deemed more complete terminology. This fact is not in isolation. In fact, as quick study on Muslim scholars' work on the subject of education will clearly show, tarbiya was never used as a term to convey education. The fact that this particular term is now in vogue demonstrates the unduly influence of the Western civilization on Muslims outlook, that cause many undesirable consequences manifesting in our current educational situation.

Ta'dib is considered comprehensive term for education, since its basic meaning is recognition and acknowledgement of every thing's proper places. Al-Tahanawi cites one of the meaning of adab as "preserving (*ri'ayah*) the limit of everything" (al-Tahanawi 1996, p. 127). The concept of ta'dib is important in our contemporary multifold challenges, since "it provides an authentic, integrated and comprehensive concept powerful framework for our educational thinking and practice." (Daud 1998, p. 146). If we are to hope to ever resurrect Islamic education in the contemporary context of Western dominated world, then the first thing to do is to practice adab, to put things in their proper places, that is, in this context, to use proper definition truly descriptive of all aspect of Islamic education, so that we then might be able to set priorities and arrange things accordingly.

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