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The Science of Nexialism

If you have never read A E van Vogt's novel "The Voyage of the Space Beagle", it's likely you will have never heard of Nexialism. Fortunately, van Vogt gave his readers a definition of this then putative new science at the start of Chapter 7.

"Nexialism is the science of joining in an orderly fashion the knowledge of one field of learning with that of other fields."¹

A. E. van Vogt, **The Voyage of the Space Beagle**, 1950.

Nexialism was an anticipation of the interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary and multidisciplinary lines of research we now find proliferating in modern scholarship. But Nexialism was more than just interdisciplinary studies. Van Vogt also saw it as a way to encourage scientists from different disciplines to work together in a truly effective manner, with the aid of a properly trained bridge-builder: a specialist in the mechanics of interdisciplinary studies, who could bring experts together and facilitate communication between them.

The novel wove together four separate Science Fiction stories. The first, "The Black Destroyer", was first published in July 1939, and it was in that story that van Vogt introduced his idea of Nexialism to the world², well before the idea of having interdisciplinary studies or conferences on any subject had become trendy.

As I look back on my life the works of two authors, Colin Wilson and A. E. van Vogt, stand out as both inspirational and influential on my own intellectual development. It was from Wilson that I learnt about Phenomenology, the work of Edmund Husserl, and the idea of the intentionality of perception, on which I shall have more to say later.

And Van Vogt introduced me to the idea of Nexialism.

Already, back in 1939, van Vogt was concerned that the growing trend towards greater and greater degrees of specialisation in science, could isolate scientists from each other. Isolate scientists, their ideas and expertise, from other scientists in different fields. And in their academic isolation, as van Vogt saw it, these scientists would find themselves unable to solve problems that confront them that went beyond their own field of expertise. And in the future van Vogt envisioned, this inability would persist even when all the relevant experts were present, due to their inability to work together and interweave their knowledge into a comprehensible whole. In van Vogt's *Space Beagle* stories, the experts had become so specialized that it was only

¹ Van Vogt, A. E. **The Voyage of the Space Beagle**, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1950.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._E._van_Vogt. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Voyage_of_the_Space_Beagle

through the aid of the Nexialist that the scientists could work together to find answers to the hazardous problems confronting them.

I experienced a classic example of the kind of extreme specialization that van Vogt envisaged, when I attended a conference on Arthurian Literature in Bangor in 2002. At the conference one of the speakers delivered a paper on the "First Continuation" to Chretien de Troyes's unfinished poem, *Le Conte du Graal*. Chretien's poem was the first to tell the story of the (Holy) Grail, and because it was left unfinished, a string of works were penned in an effort to complete the work. The first continuation begins at the very point where Chretien's narrative breaks off, and its story, at least in the early part, directly follows on from Chretien's story.

After the speaker had finished, questions were invited from the floor, and I asked a question about how events in the early part of the first continuation related to final incidents of Chretien's poem. The details don't matter. What mattered was that the speaker couldn't answer the question because she had no real knowledge of Chretien's poem. Her focus was solely on the "First Continuation", and on the differences between the shorter and longer versions of that work. What had happened in the preceding work was of no importance to understanding the continuation.

Just one example of the growing trend amongst academics to know more and more about less and less.

But van Vogt was not concerned simply with the trend towards greater specialisation. Of more concern to him was the prospect that at some time in the future scientists would become so specialised that they would no longer be able to talk to one another on subjects of common interest.

While we have not reached that point yet, the risk is there. And one pointer to that is the trend in all disciplines to develop their own exclusive language through jargon, acronyms, and specialist terminology. As I delved deeper and deeper into the medieval Arthurian literature scholarship, I'll admit that it took a while to understand terms like redaction, and the difference between intertextual and intratextual analysis.

Today redaction is defined as either the process of editing text for publication, or a version of a text, such as a new edition or an abridged version.³

The need to understand that you are looking at a *redaction* becomes much more important when you are dealing with ancient and medieval texts, because in almost every case we do not have the author's own original work. Instead, we have to rely on a handwritten copy by someone else, and usually the work that has come down to us will turn out to be a copy of a copy of a copy. And in each copy the scribe who

³ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/redaction>

makes the copy will make their own mistakes, ‘corrections’ and emendations. Which is why, when you compare different manuscripts of the same work, you are likely to find marked differences between the texts, including the inclusion in some texts of whole passages that are totally absent from other redactions. This leads some scholars to work at comparing the different redactions in an effort to try and determine the structure of the content of the original work. While others, dismiss that whole idea as impossible and choose to concentrate on simply trying to understand the intent of the particular redactor that they are studying.

In Ancient History, as well as studying the ancient source texts, Epigraphy, Numismatics, and Prosopography count among the standard tools of the trade.

But today modern archaeology also draws heavily on the technological advances to resolve old puzzles and make new discoveries.

Aerial photography is used to find the locations of buried ancient ruins for future excavation. And ground radar devices are allowing scholars to digitally map whole settlements too big to be excavated in full. But it remains the province of archaeologists and historians to interpret the data, and it is the responsibility of the relevant scientists and technologists to present the data in an accessible format to the archaeologists and historians. And that is where problems can arise.

Not long ago, I watched a TV program on the age of the Sphinx; **Secrets of Egypt – The Sphinx**. The Egyptologist was adamant that the Sphinx was built during the Old Kingdom by the Pharaoh Khafre. A geologist proposed a much older date based on arguments that the extensive weathering of the stones of the Sphinx could only have been caused by water erosion. While a third expert argued that the Sphinx was built a few hundred years before the Pyramids, and that it originally had a lion’s head, which was only later reshaped into the smaller human head it now bears.

Now TV programs like this are not scholarly works. But what caught my attention was how unwilling the different ‘experts’ were to consider any evidence that appeared to contradict their own opinion, especially the Egyptologist.⁴

This is the kind of situation where a properly trained Nexialist could help build bridges towards a common ground that might be able to resolve the problem. There are many others, including critical areas such as the debate on climate change.

⁴ With regard to this debate, I recently attended a public lecture where the speaker was an Egyptologist. When I raised the question of the age of the Sphinx and the issues cited above, the speaker acknowledged that they personally agreed with the geologist that the Sphinx probably was much older than the pyramids. But they also admitted that to say so publically would put them at odds with one of the colleagues they were working with. Something that they would prefer to avoid. Out of respect for their concerns I won’t name them here.

Only there are no Nexialists, are there? Well yes and no.

If you look on line through Google you can find links to the following two American based organisations that claim to be trying to bring into reality the idea of van Vogt's science of Nexialism.

The first is the **Nexial Institute of Texas**:

“Established in 1994 as a Multi-disciplinary Consulting Institute to help and assist companies, students, and Individuals in their innovative and creative endeavor utilizing the nexus (connection) between disciplines in Science and Engineering, and the Humanities. We find for companies new and simple ways to solve their problems, with cost-effectiveness in mind. We will start with a fresh outlook, and the emphasis is on finding new or different, better solutions, not just minor variations of the same old answer whenever necessary.”⁵

The second is the **Institute of Nexialism** in Colorado:

“The Institute of Nexialism (ION) will be established in 2000 to develop a curriculum for training in the art of integrated thinking and conflict resolution.”⁶

The ION site has a markedly New Age feel to it, and appears to have been inactive since 2000. According to their site:

“Nexialism goes beyond interdisciplinary science and even beyond pan-disciplinary science to integrate both science *and being*. Based on research conducted by the Bear Mountain Institute and neighboring facilities, ION establishes a formal system of training within which participants learn how to think from multiple aspects of the mind, combining science and experiential intuition. In simple terms, this involves combined "left" and "right" brain thinking, but also a deep understanding of the role of each mode and their healthy interaction. ... ION staff have been active in facilitating groups in their study of "*A Course in Miracles*" (*n collaboration with Unity of Boulder and the Foundation for Inner Peace*). ION also explores *various forms of Eastern meditation, and spiritual philosophies such as those of Alan Watts, Ken Wilbur, Sai Baba, and others.*" (My italics)

The **Nexial Institute** site was posted in 2002, and also does not seem to have been active since that time. And while at first it seems to be soundly based in the goal it sets itself, a look at the site also suggests some more dubious, and possibly darker aspects. For example, there is a topic of Social Engineering that reads:

⁵ <http://nexialinstitute.com/default.htm>

⁶ <http://www.nexial.org/ION/>

“Historical analysis of assumptions, the “basis” of society, particularly hidden assumption, what works, what does NOT work, and why; consequences of selected actions, and how to avoid certain disastrous fallacies. Government is opposed to Freedom, but freedom is required for progress, thus the optimal government is the least government. Redistribution of wealth in all forms is theft, and always destructive of the society in direct proportion to the loss of incentive (two ways: loss by those from whom stolen, and by those who receive the stolen values – doubly destructive)/ collectivism thus never works. Government consumes value that should be capital, thus halting production of wealth. Key word indicators of those with intent to destroy freedoms, “for the children”, “entitlement”, “social contract”, “common good” and so on – Responsibility exists, if at all, only in individual people. Societies have no social responsibility outside of that exhibited by individuals within the society. The society is the sum of individual actions, no more no less.”

In both cases the idea of Nexialism would appear to have been adopted to promote personal or group ideologies very alien to the scholarly ideal originally envisioned.⁷

In contrast there are some academics whose work can be found on Google Scholar who are making a serious attempt to integrate the Nexialist ideal into their own research. See for instance, “Nexialism and the Law of Unintended Consequences” by Dr. Philip A Laplante, Penn State University,⁸ and “Nexialism and translational research” by C. Ronco.⁹

So, for the moment, we all can say is that:

- Almost 80 years on, the idea of a Nexial science still remains an exciting idea to at least some people;
- That there are both individuals and groups still attempting to use, and in some cases perhaps, abuse van Vogt’s idea for their own ends; but
- That Nexialism has never been formally and successfully adopted and developed into a proper science by any accredited academic institution.

⁷ And yes I am aware that van Vogt did in later life become actively involved in Scientology. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A. E. van Vogt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._E._van_Vogt)

⁸ “Abstract: What do broken windows, merit systems, and cattle prods have to do with new processes and compliance rules? Can the laws of unintended consequences be used as an advantage? Find out as this nexialist explores the interconnectedness of things.” http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/login.jsp?tp=&number=5512509&url=http%3A%2F%2Fieeexplore.ieee.org%2Fxppls%2Fabs_all.jsp%3Farnumber%3D5512509, <http://php.scripts.psu.edu/users/p/a/pal11/index.php>. See also “A Nonlinear Perspective on Higher Education”, by Laplante and others, <http://www.computer.org/csdl/mags/co/2010/12/mco2010120090-abs.html>

⁹ [International Journal of Artificial Organs](#). 2006 Dec; 29(12):1103-4.

Why Nexialism has remained so much on the fringe is an interesting question, but one I would prefer to examine at another time.

The main problem Nexialism faces is that there are no agreed criteria by which one can lay claim to being a properly qualified Nexialist. This is the issue I would like to address in the remainder of this paper.

1. The Academic Base

The first principle I would suggest is the need for a broad academic base.

A Nexialist cannot be a specialist. But they need to be sufficiently well-versed in a range of scientific and other academic fields to allow them to understand what specialists are telling them either directly, on paper, or on-line.

For myself, I am well versed in Pure and Applied Maths, Physics, Chemistry, and Zoology, having studied them through High School up to my first couple of years at University.¹⁰ This foundation has been firmly overlaid over time by a range of extracurricular reading and activities including in my youth heavy involvement in a local Astronomy club for several years.



My own photo of the Moon ca. 1974.

But I quickly became disenchanted with science, at least the way it was presented to me by my University at the time.¹¹ So I dropped out. At the same time I'd developed a strong interest in Literature, Philosophy and Ancient History, in particular, Roman History.¹²

¹⁰ I'd grown up with a handwriting problem which meant that my handwriting was untidy and also very slow. In High School, my marks in English, languages and history plunged, because exam essays were the principle means of assessment for those subjects. So I immersed myself in Maths and Science subjects.

¹¹ This was in the early 1970's. Back then University Academics held our secondary education system in low regard. Forget everything you learnt in school. That was the first thing we were told, and it was a great disincentive to the inquiring mind. Astronomy had no place in the Physics curriculum, and there seemed little prospect of Relativity theory being addressed, at least not at the Undergraduate level. This was very frustrating as I had read as much as I could about it while in High School.

¹² I was introduced to the first two by Colin Wilson's **Outsider** series books. As to Ancient History, it was a British TV called **The Caesars**, modelled, if not directly based, on Robert Graves **Claudius** novels, which first drew me to Roman history. By the end of High school I'd read **I, Claudius**, **Claudius the God**, and **The Brothers Karamazov**. And not long after that, T E Lawrence's **Seven Pillars of Wisdom**.

By the time I went back, five years later, the University had moved from full year to semester subjects, and by then I'd decided to do just the subjects I was interested in. That saw me focus mainly on Ancient History, with touches of Philosophy, Religion, Drama, and Astronomy along the way.

And to be frank, my Arts degree, much more than my previous foray into science, taught me both the art and the science of critical thinking. It was not just about learning facts and theorems. In Ancient History in particular, you were actively encouraged to do your own research and put forward and argue your own theories.

The degree taught me the structure and protocols of academic writing. But, it didn't teach me how to write¹³ and argue my case as well as I could have. In part, this was a problem of the times. Personal computers were still new and primitive, and I was doing all my work on a typewriter on foolscap paper. Rewriting meant retyping out the whole page, and often the whole assignment. And when you were under deadlines, there was little time for that. Small wonder that my papers often included paragraphs running the length of the page as I struggled to get all my ideas out in print.

Actually, it was my work in the Australian Public Service, with the training I received there in writing Reasons for Decisions, and writing in Plain English, that refined my writing and communication skills. And it was there that I learnt many important computer skills as well.

If this appears to be a digression, it isn't really. As I've said, the first foundation of Nexialism must be a broad Academic background. But in this, the school of life can be almost as important as formal education. Put simply, I would argue that Nexialism is not a young person's science. Rather, I would suggest, Nexial studies should be undertaken at a post-graduate level through a series of courses tailored to the individual. Such courses would need to be structured to complement the academic background of the student, while also including core skill training in the Nexial approach.

2. Communication

At its heart Nexialism should be a collaborative endeavour. And to be a good collaborator, you must have good communication skills. You need to be able to write and speak plainly, in simple but not simplistic terms.

One of the most important things my time in the Public Service taught me, was the value of Plain English, or the equivalent in whichever language the aspiring Nexialist normally works.

¹³ Although I learned more about the rules of English grammar in my three semesters of Latin, than in all my prior schooling.

To quote the guide that I was given to work from;

“It is the job of plain English to tell the other person naturally, and unaffectedly, pleasantly and persuasively, what we want them to know.”¹⁴

The work is many years old now, and was written specifically to address problems of verbosity, archaic language, and an over-reliance on jargon, in written communications between public servants in all departments and the general public. Of course it is equally applicable to verbal communications as well. I can still recall the number of times I used to cringe at my desk on hearing colleagues use departmental acronyms when speaking to their clients. Most of our clients were elderly, and often less well educated, who would have no idea what the acronym stood for, or meant. GARP, for example, stood for the Guide to the Assessment of Rates of Pension, a medical manual that set out the parameters for determining the level of medical impairment arising from specific medical conditions. (Nothing to do with the novel by John Irving, and subsequent film, **The World According to GARP**.) It would only take a few seconds more to explain that under the legislation we are legally bound by the rules set out in the current Guide to the Assessment of Rates of Pension.

This is the trap of every organisation, not just the Public Service, and of every academic field. Acronyms and jargon are the shorthand for efficient communication between colleagues within a department, organisation or academic field. They are something you use every day to quickly and clearly convey what you mean. But because they are so helpful, it is easy to fall into the trap of forgetting that not everybody knows them outside your own field. And then they too often become a barrier: a wall that separates those in the know from those who want to know, and frequently need to know, what you are saying.

The **Plain English** guide cited above has almost certainly been superseded by subsequent communication theories and guidelines. But its basic rules, with some modifications, are still worth bearing in mind.

1. Write as simply as the material will allow.
2. Write as briefly as possible. Be concise.
3. Write as accurately as possible.
4. Write as directly as the circumstances allow.
5. Write pleasantly and try to sound genuinely interested.¹⁵

The last point may sound patronising and an invitation to insincerity. But in practice it should be neither. The Nexialist must always be genuinely interested in what others have to say, even where they may disagree, because their principle role is to bring people and their ideas together. And the same principles apply for verbal as well as

¹⁴ **Plain English**, published by the Department of the Premier, Melbourne, Victoria, 1978, p.1.

¹⁵ **Ibid.**, p. 2.

written communications. Not that I would lay claim to be proficient in the practice of either, yet.

A broad academic base has to go hand in hand with good communication skills if the Nexialist is to make any real and substantial contribution to scientific and other scholarly development. It gives him or her at least a degree of familiarity with the jargon of the experts they are working with. The Nexialist needs to be able to understand what the experts are telling them, whether directly or in writing. And they need to be able to translate what they are hearing into terms which they are comfortable working with, and which they can pass on to others in different fields of expertise. All, without losing any of the sense or import of the knowledge shared with them.

They therefore need to be good listeners, as well, who are always prepared to seek clarification where needed. And to provide feedback to those they are communicating with, in order to ensure that they have properly understood what others are telling them.

Phenomenology.

According to his Wikipaedia biography, “Van Vogt was always interested in the idea of all-encompassing systems of knowledge”. This was the inspiration for his idea of Nexialism, but clearly he understood that for something like Nexialism to work, a new approach was needed; drawing together an all-encompassing system of knowledge required a new way looking at, and dealing with masses of information. Which is why “he became interested in the General Semantics of Alfred Korzybski”. And he developed his ideas on this in three later novels, which I have not read, **The World of Null-A** and **The Pawns of Null-A**, and **Null-A Three**. “Null-A, or non-Aristotelian logic, refers to the capacity for, and practice of, using intuitive, inductive reasoning (compare fuzzy logic), rather than reflexive, or conditioned, deductive reasoning”.¹⁶

General Semantics has been presented “as both a theoretical and a practical system whose adoption can reliably alter human behavior in the direction of greater sanity”. Korzybski “asserted that general semantics training could eventually unify people and nations”.¹⁷ General semantics is said to have “survived most profoundly in the cognitive therapies that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s”, such as Gestalt therapy, although the founders of Gestalt therapy did not credit Korzybski for their ideas.¹⁸

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._E._van_Vogt

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_semantics

¹⁸ **Ibid.**

Whether that is true or not, General Semantics was essentially an attempt to change the way the way we think. If you want to know more about it, then there is apparently an ongoing Institute of General Semantics, with its own web-site.¹⁹

Personally, there are many ideas underlying General Semantics, such as non-Aristotelian logic and Time-Binding²⁰ that I find problematic. However I do acknowledge the importance that the system placed on behavioural awareness. I cite it here simply to demonstrate the complexities of the ideas Van Vogt, himself, grappled with in his quest to find the all-encompassing system of knowledge he sought.²¹

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it was Colin Wilson who introduced me to phenomenology, the work of Edmund Husserl, and the idea of the intentionality of perception. And it is intentionality of perception that lies at the heart of the behavioural awareness sought by both Van Vogt and Korzybski.

With regard to phenomenology, intentionality of perception is actually a bit of a two-edged sword.

Put simply, the way we each perceive the world is always intentional, and subject to all manner of influences, such as our education, the culture we were brought up in, and even things as simple as the weather and the kind of mood we are in. Consequently, everything each of us thinks, does, hears, sees, creates and touches, is forever overlaid by our own intentionality at the time. And the way all those things and experiences are perceived by others is similarly overlaid by their own intentionality. Accordingly, to put it into pseudo-Platonistic terms, all that we see around us is but an intentional shadow of the underlying reality that we can never truly know in full.

Taken that way, the Phenomenological perspective could be seen as quite pessimistic. Certainly, that was what I found when I took a course on the Phenomenology of Religion, in the first year of my degree. From memory, the core message of the course was that it is not possible to know what members of any religion really experience, think, or feel about their faith. This meant that a phenomenological study of any religion could only really look at the way the religion and its adherents present themselves and behave in the world.

¹⁹ <http://www.generalsemantics.org/the-general-semantics-learning-center/overview-of-general-semantics/basic-understandings/>

²⁰ **Ibid.** Put simply, the capability to build on the knowledge of prior generations as a basis for an ethical standard by which to evaluate human behaviour. “Acknowledging our time-binding inheritance dispels us of the ‘self-made’ notion; as we understand how much we owe to others, we begin to understand our own limitations”.

²¹ A quest that ultimately saw him adopt and become an advocate of L Ron Hubbard’s Dianetics, and consequently, Scientology.

That was over 30 years ago.

For a modern perspective, the following comments by Prof. Lisa Guenther, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University are worth reading:

“For me phenomenology is a philosophical method that starts with lived experience in the first person. Starts with a description of just how an experience such as the perception of a table or the memory of an event, how that unfolds for the person who is having that experience. And then the second step of phenomenology is not just to describe but to distil the basic structures of that experience that make it possible and make it meaningful. And so I think phenomenology is really well suited to engaging with issues of perception and issues of perceptual anomalies, or perceptual distortions. Because there is a very rich tradition from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, a French Phenomenologist, of looking in particular at perception and visual perception as one of the basic types of experience. And one that we rely on, for sighted people at least, to make sense of the world in a bodily way even before or beyond our linguistic sense making. ...

“So classical phenomenology, and Husserl would be my go to person for that, focuses in its analysis of the structures that make meaningful experience possible on the first person consciousness and its correlation with the world. ... The consciousness is understood as lived in the mode of an “I”; I think, I see, I remember. And it’s singular. No one else can share my consciousness with me, or can have direct access to my consciousness, except through the various ways that I express myself, often bodily, in the world.”²²

And for Prof. Guenther, phenomenology is not an abstract and impotent way of looking at the world. Instead, she has used it constructively to present evidence to a US Congressional hearing on the impact of solitary confinement on those subject to that form of incarceration. In respect of which she argued;

“And I think that the evidence of deterioration of even basic cognitive skills or capacities such as the capacity to perceive an object in the world clearly, or the capacity to remember something that happened; the way that solitary confinement affects these basic capacities for me puts in question the degree to which we can be confident that when we start with the first person consciousness and with “I” as a singular being, that we’re actually getting to the

²² The passage is my own transcript of an interview presented on the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) Radio National Program **The Philosopher’s Zone**. As it was my own transcript, any faults in the transcription are my own. The full interview can be heard on the ABC’s website at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/alone-and-apart/5002594>, at least for the time being.

bottom of structure of what makes coherent meaningful experience possible. So for me the deterioration of these capacities in solitary confinement suggests that at bottom we're not just single "I"s, but we're already inter-relational, intersubjective and, I would say, intercorporeal, interbodied beings. And this is why I actually work more with Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists who ground their analysis not just in the first person consciousness but in a kind of ambiguity between the "I" and third person social structures, or even physiological structures such as the structure of the body."²³

So, to use Prof. Guenther's words, phenomenology:

1. Starts with a description of just how an experience unfolds for the person having that experience.
2. Is then used to distil the basic structures of that experience that make it both possible and meaningful.
3. And all such analyses need to be grounded not just in the first person consciousness but in a kind of ambiguity between the "I" and third person social structures, or even physiological structures such as the structure of the body.
4. Not just single "I"s, but inter-relational, intersubjective, intercorporeal, and interbodied beings.

Phenomenology, therefore, does offer us a useful way to extract, analyse and understand the experiences of others, even though we cannot share their actual experiences and perceptions.

Another important point to bear in mind is that phenomenology is also about psychology. To quote from David Woodruff Smith's online article in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

"Phenomenology as we know it was launched by Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* (1900-01). Two importantly different lines of theory came together in that monumental work: psychological theory ... and logical or semantic theory ...

"Husserl's *Logical Investigations* was inspired by Bolzano's ideal of logic, while taking up Brentano's conception of descriptive psychology. ... Logic studies objective ideas, including propositions, which in turn make up objective theories as in the sciences. Psychology would, by contrast, study subjective ideas, the concrete contents (occurrences) of mental activities in particular minds at a given time. Husserl was after both, within a single discipline.

"For Husserl, then, phenomenology integrates a kind of psychology with a kind of logic. It develops a descriptive or analytic psychology in that it describes and analyzes types of subjective mental activity or experience, in short, acts of

²³ **Ibid.**

consciousness. Yet it develops a kind of logic — a theory of meaning (today we say logical semantics) — in that it describes and analyzes objective contents of consciousness: ideas, concepts, images, propositions, in short, ideal meanings of various types that serve as intentional contents, or noematic meanings, of various types of experience. These contents are shareable by different acts of consciousness, and in that sense they are objective, ideal meanings. ... Husserl opposed any reduction of logic or mathematics or science to mere psychology, to how people happen to think, and in the same spirit he distinguished phenomenology from mere psychology. For Husserl, phenomenology would study consciousness without reducing the objective and shareable meanings that inhabit experience to merely subjective happenstances.”²⁴

Later, in his discussion of Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Mind, Smith notes:

“In the 1980s John Searle argued in *Intentionality* (1983) (and further in *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1991)) that intentionality and consciousness are essential properties of mental states. ...

“The analysis of consciousness and intentionality is central to phenomenology ... and Searle's theory of intentionality reads like a modernized version of Husserl's. ... (with) an important difference in background theory. For Searle explicitly assumes the basic worldview of natural science, holding that consciousness is part of nature. But Husserl explicitly brackets that assumption ...

“Since the mid-1990s a variety of writers working in philosophy of mind have focused on the fundamental character of consciousness, ultimately a phenomenological issue. Does consciousness always and essentially involve self-consciousness, or consciousness-of-consciousness... ? If so, then every act of consciousness either includes or is adjoined by a consciousness-of-that-consciousness. Does that self-consciousness take the form of an internal self-monitoring? If so, is that monitoring of a higher order, where each act of consciousness is joined by a further mental act monitoring the base act? Or is such monitoring of the same order as the base act, a proper part of the act without which the act would not be conscious?”²⁵

Which brings me back to what I, personally, took away from Colin Wilson's works. The understanding that if perception is intentional, then we have the capacity to:

- a. Be aware of the intentionality of our own perceptions;
- b. Understand the factors that are influencing our thoughts and perceptions; and
- c. Step back from those influences to allow a more objective understanding of what we are considering.

²⁴ Copyright © 2008 by David Woodruff Smith, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

²⁵ Ibid.

That, at least, is the ideal that I would argue a Nexialist should aspire to with proper training in Phenomenology.

Through Phenomenology, a trained Nexialist should be able to extract, analyse and understand the experiences that underlie the theories, opinions and biases of the scientists and experts they are working with. They should do this constructively, not destructively, with an intent awareness of their own intellectual biases and limitations. Biases that they should always be striving to understand, address and put aside. Limitations that they should always be willing to acknowledge, address, and in cooperation with others, overcome, as much as that is possible.

Another reason why good communication skills are also very important.

Psychology

Since the “analysis of consciousness and intentionality is central to phenomenology”,²⁶ it follows that some training in elements of psychological theory is also important to the aspiring Nexialist.

My reference to ‘elements’ is clearly intentional. Modern psychology has become so complex and diverse that picking your way through it to determine which fields of study would be most helpful and productive is somewhat akin to picking your way through an intellectual minefield. As noted on the About.com website, the “following are just some of the major fields of psychology”:

Abnormal psychology, Biopsychology, Clinical psychology, Cognitive psychology, Comparative psychology, Counseling psychology, Developmental Psychology, Educational psychology, Experimental psychology, Forensic psychology, Health psychology, Human Factors Psychology, Industrial organizational psychology, Personality psychology, School psychology, Social psychology, and Sports psychology.²⁷

Of these, cognitive psychology is probably the most relevant. “Cognitive psychology is the scientific investigation of human cognition, that is, all our mental abilities – perceiving, learning, remembering, thinking, reasoning, and understanding. ... Fundamentally, cognitive psychology studies how people acquire and apply knowledge or information. It is closely related to the highly interdisciplinary cognitive science and influenced by artificial intelligence, computer science, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, biology, physics, and neuroscience.”²⁸

²⁶ Woodruff Smith, **op.cit.**

²⁷ <http://psychology.about.com/od/branchesofpsychology/a/fields-of-psychology.htm>.

²⁸ http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Cognitive_psychology

But other fields such as industrial organizational psychology, personality psychology, social psychology could also serve as useful tools.

In my former employment in the Australian Public Service (APS) I was heavily involved in investigating and determining compensation claims for conditions both physical and mental. This required continual assessment of medical reports as evidence, including very many, often conflicting, reports from both psychologists and psychiatrists. From this, I have a strong if indirect background in the area of abnormal psychology.

And as I advanced through the APS, I was also given a good deal of training in various types of Human Factors Psychology, depending on what theories were at the time held to be most relevant and productive from the Department's perspective on the issues of staff supervision and management. In the course of this training I almost certainly undertook something at least similar to the Myers-Briggs personality test. Later, we were required to undertake self-assessments to determine the degree to which our personalities emulated the ascribed characteristics of the eagle, the owl, the dove and the peacock. Or various combinations of these. From memory, I leant largely towards the owl, but with some strong dove and eagle aspects. While my then manager was very much the peacock.

Then, towards the end of my employment I had my "personal profile" assessed using the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI),²⁹ which showed my personal strength to lie in cognitive function. With a corresponding weakness in matters practical.

The purpose behind all of these tests from the formal management perspective, was to give middle level managers the skills to both understand themselves and their own ways of thinking, and to give them insights into the way their colleagues functioned. So, in theory, it should have been a tool to enable and empower people of very different styles of thinking and relating to others, to work together more productively and without conflict. Sadly, it was an ideal too often more honoured in the breach than the observance. Largely, this was because these tests were something imposed from above that you were expected to undertake to establish your qualifications for advancement in the organisation. But they were not something many people took seriously.

This kind of profiling and self-analysis could be a very useful tool in helping an aspiring nexialist to understand their own patterns of behaviour and thinking. But as an interactive tool, their use is limited, because they can only be used as an aid to constructive debate with people who have either undertaken the same or similar types

²⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herrmann_Brain_Dominance_Instrument, and the tests official site at <http://www.herrmannsolutions.com/>.

of testing, or who are prepared, whether they have undertaken the test or not, to listen to and seriously consider what you have taken away from such tests and training.

If their minds are closed, then the best you can hope for is to surreptitiously use your own skills to analyse their cognitive behaviour patterns as best you can, in an effort to develop the best strategies of approach for the issues you wish to deal with.

On this subject, there are three other schools of thought I consider worth mentioning at this time. The first of these was only recently brought to my attention by Jakup Matya of the University of Huddersfield, via one of his postings on the ResearchGate site. This is the theory of Enactivism.

From my limited readings to date, Enactivism is “a theory of mind” and “a model of cognition as ‘embodied action’”.³⁰ According to David A Reid’s paper, “A good starting point to understanding Enactivism is the problem of the relationship between an entity and its surroundings.” But while Reid considers that the “philosophical basis of Enactivism can be found, with some effort, in the writings of [Wittgenstein](#) on the philosophy of psychology”, others see it as rooted in phenomenology. Specifically:

“Enactivism, a combination of Constructivism and Embodied Cognition, is a theory wherein cognition and environment are inseparable, and learning is drawn from the interaction between learner and environment. It is rooted in the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty and Bateson’s biological perspective work. Enactivism is underpinned by the thought that actions are not simply a display of understanding, but they are themselves understandings. ... Cognition is an evolving interaction between systems; the cognitive system is a producer of meaning rather than a processor of information, as in constructivism. Learning is not about gaining information; instead, it is seen as an ongoing process of exploration about consciousness, self, context, and interactions of complex systems in order to adapt to the evolving world.”³¹

Again, this could be a useful tool in helping nexialists understand their own and others patterns of behaviour and thinking. And it seems to have the potential of providing a valuable approach to how we learn. But the theory is relatively new, and not without its critics, and I raise it here as an avenue for future exploration.

The second “school of thought” I want to look at is to be found in the works of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow is probably best known for his “Hierarchy of Needs” theory³², and that element of his work was certainly touched on

³⁰ See the David A Reid’s paper at <http://plato.acadiau.ca/courses/educ/reid/enactivism/>, and <http://www.embodiment.org.uk/topics/enactivism.htm>

³¹ From a page originally authored by Stacey Bernier (2011) and edited by Neil Busby (2013). http://etec.citl.ubc.ca/510wiki/Enactivist_Theory.

³² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs.

more than once in the many of the management and supervision courses that I undertook during my previous employment.

But I first read of Maslow's work well before that, in the writings of Colin Wilson. And for Wilson, the most exciting thing that he found in Maslow's writings was his concept of the Peak Experience. To quote from Wilson:

"Maslow had first contacted me in the mid-1960s after reading a book of mine called *The Age of Defeat* ... in which I complained that throughout the 20th century, there has been a strong 'defeat-bias' in literature ... what I called 'the fallacy of insignificance' – the feeling of most serious writers that life is a long-drawn-out defeat. ...

"Maslow told me he was excited by this because he also had a deep conviction that human nature has been 'sold short' by modern psychology ... and that we ought to take account of what he, Maslow, called 'higher ceilings of human nature'.

"What fascinated me was Maslow's concept of the 'peak experience' ... the experience of sudden overwhelming happiness, the feeling that life is wonderful; this, Maslow discovered, seems to happen to healthy people on a regular basis."³³

Importantly,

"Maslow discovered that when he talked to his students about peak experiences, they began remembering peak experiences that they had half forgotten about. For example, one young man was working his way through college as a jazz drummer, and he described how, at about two o'clock one morning, he began drumming so perfectly that he couldn't do a thing wrong; he went into the peak experience. What was so interesting was that, as the students talked to one another every day about their peak experiences, they began having peak experiences all the time."³⁴

Two things stand out from this. Firstly, what Maslow calls a peak experience is clearly much more than just an experience of "overwhelming happiness". It is, or at least has the potential to be a transcendent self-actualising experience that enables a person to function as long as the experience lasts, at their full personal potential.³⁵

Secondly, what happens with Maslow's students suggests that we already have the capacity to develop our potential for Peak Experiences, through familiarity with the phenomenon and, I would suggest, intentional effort.

³³ Wilson, Colin, *Super Consciousness: The Quest for the Peak Experience*, London, Watkins Publishing Ltd, 2009, Foreword (Kindle edition).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See the discussion of Maslow's position at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-actualization>.

Colin Wilson

Which brings me to the works of Colin Wilson and his own almost lifelong quest to achieve what he called Super Consciousness, the capacity to achieve peak experiences at will.

It is sadly ironical to note that not long before writing this, in the course of researching this section I learnt that Colin Wilson had passed away on 5 December 2013. He was 82.

As his Obituary in **The Guardian** put it, he was “Britain's first homegrown existentialist star”.³⁶

But he was much more than that, and through his writings sought to distance himself from the distinctly pessimistic ‘existentialist mainstream’³⁷ by making himself the champion of what he called the New Existentialism.

Wilson wrote his first autobiography, **Voyage to a Beginning**, when he was only 36.³⁸ His second autobiography, **Dreaming to Some Purpose**, was published in 2004.³⁹ While I have copies of both in my library, it is simpler to follow here the summary of his life provided by the already cited **Guardian** obituary, and that of **The Independent**.

Colin Wilson was very much a self-made man, and an exemplary one at that. He was the author of more than 100 books (more than 150 according to **The Independent**⁴⁰). Not a bad achievement for a man of limited education, “the son of a shoemaker”, who “left school aged 16”.⁴¹

But as **The Independent** notes, “Since the age of 12 he had been preoccupied with asking the meaning of human existence and at 14 had read George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*”. After leaving school for eight years he “took on a variety of unskilled jobs while writing”, maintaining, in his own words, “a voluminous journal, which was several million words long by the time I was 24”. Towards the end of this



Colin Wilson, taken at the end of a fleeting visit to his Cornwall home in 2002.

³⁶ John Ezard, **The Guardian**, Monday 9 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/09/colin-wilson>

³⁷ In particular, “the existentialist insistence on the inherent meaninglessness of the world”. See the entry on Existentialism and Nihilism” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialism>.

³⁸ Wilson, Colin, **Voyage to a Beginning**, London, Celia and Amelia Woolfe, 1968, p. xi.

³⁹ Wilson, Colin, **Dreaming to Some Purpose**, London, Century 2004.

⁴⁰ Marcus Williamson, **The Independent**, Saturday 21 December 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/colin-wilson-author-8991678.html>

⁴¹ **The Independent**

time, he was “living rough on Hampstead Heath, working at a café and spending his days at the Reading Room of the British Museum”.⁴²

Out of this came Wilson’s first book, **The Outsider**. Published by Victor Gollancz on 26 May 1956, “it sold out of its initial print run of 5,000 copies in one day”.⁴³ And yet this was not a work of epic fiction, or a popular novel. Instead, as **The Guardian** notes, it “was an attempt to map a single, negotiable path of mysticism from the span of recent western art and philosophy. Wilson looked for the path through case studies of the agonies and ecstasies of thinkers, artists and men of action including Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway, Vaslav Nijinsky, Vincent van Gogh, Hermann Hesse and Lawrence of Arabia. He condensed them into a single type, ‘the Outsider’, a questing spirit straddled between devastating experiences of nothingness and moments of the highest insight.

“‘Our life in modern society is a repetition of Van Gogh’s problem,’ Wilson said, ‘the day-to-day struggle for intensity that disappears overnight, interrupted by human triviality and endless pettiness.’”⁴⁴

“Cyril Connolly said it was ‘one of the most remarkable first books I have read for a long time’ while Philip Toynbee called it ‘a real contribution to our understanding of our deepest predicament’.”⁴⁵

“His passionate inquiry into his themes continued but critics deserted him. He went out of fashion and ... survived financially only because many of those dealt with murder or the occult as pathways to the insights that fascinated him.”⁴⁶

Wilson’s works were not without their faults, and I have no wish to dwell on them here. But as Ezard noted in **The Guardian**, “He was greatly gifted. Almost entirely self-educated, he had huge mental energy, read prodigiously and explored the worldwide resources of literature, philosophy and science with earnestness.” He “bore his literary disappointments gracefully. He remained sure that he would triumphantly find and remove the psychic impediment which, he thought, had blocked all human creativity in his time. It was by no means an ignoble cause, as the praise for his early work showed.

“Toynbee and the rest panned (his later works) without explaining, or apologising for, their earlier zeal, or offering any help or counsel to their one-time prophet.” But again, as Ezard notes, “The key to the collapse of the Wilson phenomenon was perhaps that philosophy and religion ceased to be seen as mainstream topics after the

⁴² **The Independent**

⁴³ **The Independent**

⁴⁴ **The Guardian**

⁴⁵ **The Independent**

⁴⁶ **The Guardian**

1950s. His promise failed as much for lack of a challenging or nourishing climate as for any other reason.”⁴⁷

This brief summary of Wilson’s life that I’ve put together may seem out of place. But, as I said at the beginning, his writings had a tremendous influence on my own intellectual development. And it was Colin Wilson’s work that prompted me to read Dostoyevsky’s **The Brothers’ Karamazov** when I was 17, and Lawrence’s **Seven Pillars of Wisdom**, not long afterwards.

Wilson was, in many ways, one of the first Nexialists. But he was also a victim of the society he grew up in, and of the unhelpful disparagement of many of his intellectual contemporaries. His life is one of the strongest arguments for the need to make education freely available at all levels to everyone with the skill and willingness to pursue it. One can only wonder how much more he might have been able to achieve with some proper formal training to enhance his critical thinking skills. But that was not to be, and in the end he remained, as he had begun, an Outsider.

While I have not yet read all of Wilson’s **Super Consciousness** book, it is clear from his final summation, that his goal; the capacity to achieve peak experiences at will; continued to elude him. In the end, it wasn’t just the achievement of peak experiences at will that he was seeking, but the capacity to achieve such experiences and stay there. As he says of his own experiences, “In these states of concentration and enlightenment, I catch a glimpse of another level (of consciousness, where) ... my sense of meaning would be so deep, my interest in everything so great, that I would have passed the point where ‘regress’ or collapse is possible. I would be sustained by sheer perception of meaning”.⁴⁸

For both Wilson and Maslow, the level of human consciousness is not a steady state. We all know this. It fluctuates with our moods, and the circumstances of our life. When we are tired, or depressed, our level of consciousness; the way we view the world around us; will often be flat and dreary. And even the things in which we would normally delight, at such times become uninteresting. It’s hard to concentrate on work and find the motivation to do what needs to be done. Almost everyone who reads this will have experienced such feelings at some time.

The trouble is most people just accept this as how life is. We know that there are things we can do to kick ourselves out of such a depressed state; and I am not talking about clinical depression here. We can read a book, go for a walk, the list is endless, and it just depends on making the effort to distract ourselves from our current mental torpor. And if we can’t pick ourselves up, there’s often someone close to us who can help. Mostly, we don’t get trapped in such a state. We come back to our usual level of mental functioning.

⁴⁷ **The Guardian**

⁴⁸ Wilson, Colin, **Super Consciousness: The Quest for the Peak Experience**, op.cit., p. 197.

But also have the capacity to function above that level as well. To attain a state where, if you are a writer, for example, the words just flow as if they are writing themselves. Such experiences are not confined to just our cognitive function. I often find that when I come out from watching a particularly thrilling and enjoyable action movie, such as the first **Die Hard** movie, I emerge from the cinema feeling energised. Then, for a short time, the world actually look different; more intensely real than the way it usually seems as I go about my usual day to day tasks.

I can also remember times when I would be running down a gentle slope in my younger days. Sometimes, I would just give myself up to the experience, turning my strides into leaps ahead, feeling even as I did that if I could put just a little bit more effort into it; mental, not physical; my foot need never touch the ground.

This is very akin to the human ‘flying’ potential postulated by the late Douglas Adams in the third of his **Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy** books, **Life, the Universe and Everything**:

“‘... there is an art to flying,’ said Ford, ‘or rather a knack. The knack lies in learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss.’”⁴⁹

An idea elaborated on by the Hitchhiker’s Guide later in the book:

“Clearly, it is ... the missing, which presents the difficulties.

“One problem is that you have to miss the ground accidentally.” If you try to miss deliberately, “you won’t.”⁵⁰

While the suggestion, like the books themselves, is clearly offered very much tongue in cheek, it is underlain by a tantalisingly credible subtext: the idea that there are extraordinary things we should be able to do as thinking human beings. But we can’t, because we have always believed it was impossible. That’s how we were brought up. That’s what we were taught. But what might not be possible, if only we could get past our innate preconceptions.

Think of those savants who can instantly rattle off multi-digit prime numbers in order, despite being cognitively and socially impaired in many ways. How can they do such seemingly impossible mathematical feats, while most of us cannot even imagine how it is possible to do what they do?

Not that I am suggesting that it should be possible to train people to instantly calculate multi-digit prime numbers, any more than I am suggesting that we could fly if only

⁴⁹ Adams, Douglas, **The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy: A Trilogy in Four Parts**, London, Pan books, 1992, p. 318.

⁵⁰ **Ibid.** p. 359

we could miss the ground. But I do believe that when I felt I could almost fly, I was experiencing a higher state of consciousness than usual. A variant of the Peak Experience that Maslow wrote about. A glimpse of the kind of super-consciousness Colin Wilson spent much of his life searching for.

It is a very elusive kind of experience, an intensity of thinking that most of us should be capable of achieving, but which few can hold onto for long. And few can achieve intentionally.

But how much more might we be able to do cognitively, if we were able to attain and maintain that kind of intellectual overdrive for extended periods of time. A goal worth working for, if at all possible. And perhaps a good problem for future Nexialists.

Nexialism

Fundamentally, Nexialism is about solving problems; problems that transcend the limits of any one field of expertise. Some Nexialists may work alone, especially initially, picking out and identifying specific problems in their research, whose solutions have long frustrated the specialists. Problems for which the Nexialist, thanks to their different perspective, may be able to see a solution, or at least a path to a solution.

All expert knowledge, no matter how broadly based, is limited. No one can ever be an expert on everything. And none of us works in isolation, shielded within an intellectual cocoon that protects us from ideas outside our own fields of knowledge. Of course, many may wish it could be otherwise, and will vigorously defend their own pet theories in the face of the strongest evidence to the contrary. Think of Fred Hoyle's refusal to accept the 'Big Bang' theory for the origin of the universe, and his long defence of his Steady-State Theory of Cosmology; his rebuttal of the 'Big Bang'; despite all the evidence to the contrary, right up until his death in 2001.⁵¹

As argued above, a Nexialist should have a broad Academic background with post-graduate studies on the principles of Nexialism, good communication skills, training in Phenomenology with particular emphasis on self-awareness and the intentionality of perception, and a knowledge of modern psychology including cognitive psychology and Maslow's theory of Peak Experiences.

⁵¹ "The real tragedy is that this brilliant man simply couldn't accept new evidence and adjust his world-view accordingly. And so he died in ignorance, clutching onto his discredited theory, in futility, for nearly the last forty years of his life." <http://scienceblogs.com/startswithabang/2009/06/23/the-last-100-years-1950s-the-t/>

Ideally, the Nexial approach could be compared to weaving a tapestry of ideas that can help the experts transcend the limitations of their own expertise. They should be the facilitators for the exchange of knowledge between different specialised fields, while still remaining free to inject their own ideas and insights wherever it seems appropriate.

Nexialism is consequently very much collaborative rather than solo work, delivered as far as possible in a manner that cannot be considered threatening to the intellectual egos of the experts the Nexialist is working with. Working in cooperation with other Nexialists as well, who may have come from different academic backgrounds, for the sake of the ideas and insights they can offer.

A College of Nexialism

In **The Voyage of the Space Beagle**, Van Vogt's Nexialist was a graduate of a special school established to train people in the new science of Nexialism. Graduates were then assigned to work with other scientists; people often hostile to the intrusions of these intellectual interlopers.

Right now, there is no school of Nexialism. Nexialism is not a recognised science. And while there are a few practicing scholars who have declared themselves to be Nexialists, there are currently no agreed standards by which to validate their claim to that title.

As I argued at the beginning, the need for trained Nexialists is already demonstrated both by the growing number of interdisciplinary conferences being held and by the reluctance of many experts to accept the ideas of scholars outside their field that conflict with their own pet theories.

For now that need can only be addressed by gifted 'amateurs' who are prepared to work outside their areas of expertise, and who are willing to undertake further studies, formally or informally, to broaden their knowledge base. Here, the internet can be a great tool, thanks to the proliferation of open-access courses and journals now available on line. The Internet also offers many ways to open useful contacts with other academics both within and outside your own fields. ResearchGate is an excellent tool for this. The site has put me in touch with a number of scholars from around the world who have proved very helpful to my own work. With regard to my recent paper on the Assassination of Philip II of Macedon, this included links to modern studies on the psychology of assassins in the USA, together with references to late Roman and Byzantine sources that I was completely unfamiliar with.

Websites like ResearchGate⁵² allow scholars to follow online debates on issues of interest to them, to post their own responses to issues raised, and also post questions of their own, and open new debates. By such means they can open up new lines of communication with scholars from around the world, most of whom are quite happy to help if they can. Such online interactivity can be very useful to aspiring Nexialists, because it offers real opportunities for collaboration on problems that cross normal academic boundaries.

It may be that it will be from sites like ResearchGate that the first self-proclaimed individual Nexialists will emerge and hopefully gain at least academic recognition if not accreditation. Such sites may even become our first consultative schools of Nexialism. Importantly, Nexialists of different backgrounds will have the means to interact with each other, to debate and determine their own consensus of what Nexialism should be. And through the academic bridges they can build, new avenues of intellectual debate should slowly emerge, offering help to both the specialists and their own research.

In so doing, they may become the inspiration and foundation for future formal Colleges of Nexialism.

⁵² <http://www.researchgate.net/>

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