Logical Opposition and Social Opposition

Oposición lógica y oposición social

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Abstract: There are pathologies both of logical opposition and of social opposition. Logically, we often construct false dichotomies, mistaking contraries for contradictories and misrepresenting distinctions as bifurcations. Socially, groups that are distinct may see themselves as competitively opposed, leading in extreme cases to demonization and de-humanization of the 'opposite' group. In this paper I offer preliminary accounts of both logical and social opposition and explore ways in which they may be connected.

Keywords: Adversariality, contradictory, contrary, dichotomy, opposition, polarization.

Resumen: Hay patologías de ambos tipos, en términos de oposición lógica y en términos de oposición social. Desde un punto de vista lógico, a menudo construimos falsas dicotomías, confundiendo contrarios por contradictorios, y presentando inadecuadamente distinciones como bifurcaciones. Desde un punto de vista social, grupos que son distintos pueden verse asimismo como competitivamente opuestos, dejando entrever en casos extremos una demonización y deshumanización del grupo 'opuesto'. En este trabajo, ofrezco una análisis prelimar de ambos fenómenos, la oposición lógica y la social, y exploro formas a través de las que ellos pueden ser conectados.

Palabras clave: Adversarialidad, contradictorio, contrario, dicotomía, oposición, polarización.

Introduction

Bertrand Russell once said "what is wanted is not the will to believe, but the will to find out, which is the very opposite." Russell is known as a clear writer,

but it is not obvious what he meant when he made this comment. In what sense is the will to find out the opposite, or the 'very opposite' of the will to believe? The question points to the need to think further about opposites. Opposites may be logical or social, and there are several varieties of each. In this essay I wish to explore both, with a view to considering some relationships between them.

There are pathologies both of logical opposition and of social opposition. One author said: Surely we can tell the sheep from the goats, the quick from the dead, the males from the females, the A from the not-A, without resorting to traditional forms of oppression, both physical and spiritual. A disinterested respect for formal logic is inadequate as a motive for murder (Jay, 1981, 49-50).

Logically, we often construct false dichotomies, mistaking contraries for contradictories, turning distinctions into bifurcations, and neglecting to consider anomalous cases. Socially, groups that are distinct may come to see themselves as opposed; while some opposition makes for healthy criticism, opposition may come to be accompanied by hostility leading eventually to polarization and, in the worst cases, to demonization and de-humanization. My concern here is to offer a preliminary description of both logical and social opposition and then to suggest some ways in which they are connected.

Douglas Walton's work provides an interesting backdrop to this discussion because he has not fallen into the trap of portraying all argumentative discussions in an adversarial way. In his book *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, Walton (1995) distinguished a number of contexts in which persons may employ and consider arguments. These are:

(a) critical discussion
(b) negotiation
(c) inquiry
(d) deliberation
(e) information-seeking
(f) interviewing an expert
(g) pedagogy

A few preliminary comments can be made about this list. One might, for

instance, wonder why debate is not on the list. It appears that Walton subsumes debate within the category of critical discussion. But given that debate is intrinsically competitive and critical discussion need not be, we could call for a distinction here. In other contexts, we might wish to conflate two of Walton's categories. The question arises, for example, as to whether the interviewing of an expert could not simply be counted as one way of seeking information. One might argue in favour of deleting the category 'quarrel,' attributing its presence on the list as an unneeded recognition of the ambiguity of the word "argument."

On the matter of negotiation, Walton is aware of the fact that there are two importantly different models of the process. One is competitive, with each side seeking to get its own way, and achieve a victory over the other. The other is collaborative (often called 'interest-based') and emphasizes a win-win strategy; both parties seek to achieve something valuable while building a good relationship in the process. Argument strategies could be expected to differ in these contexts; we would expect adversarial criticism and competitive discourse to play a greater role in the first than in the second, and charitable reconstruction of the other parties views to play a greater role in the second than the first.

 But it is not these qualifications that are my main subject here. In reflecting on *opposites* and *opposition*, my interest is in competitiveness and adversariality in these contexts. Are the claims people want to support logical opposites? Do the people supporting them oppose each other socially? If so how, and with what degree of animosity? Logical opposition, involving consideration of contrary and contradictory claims, and alternate interpretations of reasons and evidence, will be relevant to all the contexts Walton mentions. But social opposition, of the kind that involved adversarial roles and emotional criticism, will not. In win-win negotiation, deliberation, information seeking, the consultation of experts, and teaching contexts, there should be little, if any, need for social opposition, as an aspect of argument criticism. Obviously quarrels are not contexts of calm opposition; by definition, they involve competition and hostile adversariality.

While all contexts in which argumentation appears allow for reflection and criticism, not all require adversarial competition. We might call such contexts those of calm opposition. Clearly, calmness in this sense will be a matter of degree; though I wish to distinguish calm opposition from

adversarial opposition; given that there are degrees, I do not wish to di-
chotomize the two. To what extent can inquiry, critical discussions, and de-
bates be conducted within the bounds of calm opposition?

Logical Opposites

Logically, we may speak of opposites when we have contraries and when we
have contradictories. Examples of contraries are the beautiful and the ugly,
the moderate and the extremists, the lost and the found, the public and the
private, the immigrant and the non-immigrant, the rural and the urban.
Contradictories involve denial of the very thing asserted: a woman is beau-
tiful or not; a violin is lost or not; a book is interesting or not. Mistaking
contraries for contradictories is a common and well-known logical error
which I will call here the Error of Contrariety. When we commit the Error of
Contrariety, we misunderstand contraries in a way that confuses them with
contradictories. This logical error results in the construction of false dichoto-
mies. Few would dichotomously organize the world into the Lost and the
Found or the Light and the Dark, but it is all too easy to bifurcate society
into Immigrants and Non-Immigrants, Rural and Urban, moderate and
extremists. Even male and female turns out to be a false dichotomy, as we
will see.

From contrary predicates, we can readily construct contrary proposi-
tions. Contrary propositions cannot both be true; however they can both be
false. When propositions are contradictory, they must have opposite truth
values; if one is true, the other is false. An act that is good cannot be evil;
however an act may be neither good nor evil. If a man lives in a rural area,
then he does not live in an urban area (not both true); however both con-
traries can be false. The man may live in an area that is neither urban nor
rural (it may be suburban, for example, or he might live on a houseboat that
travels national canals). Thus 'Eric lives in the country' and 'Eric lives in the
city' are contrary propositions and not contradictory ones. The contradic-
tory of 'Eric lives in the country' is 'Eric does not live in the country'. It is *not*
'Eric lives in the city'.

We form contrary propositions from such *opposite* attributes as the ugly
and the beautiful, the lost and the found, the interesting and the uninterest-

ing, the winners and the losers. With contraries there is a middle. Neglecting that middle can distort our understanding, restrict our imagination, limit our choices of action and policy, and bias our relationships. I stress here dichotomies that are false because the either-or is not exhaustive. There are, however, at least six different ways in which dichotomies can be false. (I have argued this elsewhere.) They can fail to be exhaustive, fail to be exclusive, fail to be either exclusive or exhaustive, fail because they are constructed around ill-defined terms, fail because there are off-the-spectrum items, or fail because of indeterminacy. But here we will keep things relatively simple and stick to the matter of non-exhaustiveness.

The Pythagorean Table of Opposites, cited with approval by Aristotle, included:

Limited/unlimited
Male/Female
Good/Evil
Light/Dark
Right/Left

Recalling the argument from Opposites in Plato's *Phaedo*, we might add Life and Death.

Thinking of current philosophical disputes, we can add:

Subjectivist/Objectivist
Relativist/Absolutist
Realist/Constructivist
Feminist/Non-feminist
Analytic philosophy/continental philosophy
Dualist/physicalist

Under the title "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind," Hilary Putnam discussed baneful divisions in philosophy, attributing some of them to a phenomenon of *recoil*. What happens here is that two positions are defined, with one of them being a kind of 'mirror image' of the other. (They may, for example, share a common assumption that is false, in which case they do not exhaust the possible array

of positions). Supposing that there are only two possible views, a thinker feels forced into one by his strong rejection of the other.[1] He feels repelled, recoils, and is driven to the *opposite* position.

Graham Priest has used dichotomous constructions to order that contradictions inevitably emerge in philosophy; this is all a softener for what later emerged as para-consistent logic. In a book entitled *Beyond the Limits of Thought,* Priest employs in his premises dichotomous constructions that are easy to dispute. These include:

Determinate/indeterminate
Sayable/not sayable
Expressible/inexpressible
Intrinsic/extrinsic

Though not written for this purpose, Priest's book seems to be an excellent source for errors of contrariety. Terms that should be understood in a kind of spectrum way (the concepts admit of qualifications and degrees, as with *safety* or *health*) are treated as contradictory opposites. Consider, for example, the expressible and the inexpressible. Are there not feelings and ideas that can be partially, though not fully, expressed? A mode of expression suggestive of bifurcation turns out to involve degrees. The following quotation from Nancy Jay begins to seem apt: *As a fundamental principle of formal logic, this A/not-A dichotomy is wonderfully simple and supremely all-encompassing. But it is necessarily distorting when it is applied directly to the empirical world, for there are no negatives there.*

Priest's oppositions are easily interpreted as *contraries.* He arrives at the conclusion that philosophy inevitably leads to contradictions only by treating them as contradictories.[2]

Let us stipulate that 'P' refers to a predicate, 'Pa' refers to its contrary, and 'notP' refers to its contradictory. Then 'x is P' and 'x is Pa' are contrary statements: both these statements may be false, but both cannot be true. The statements 'x is P' and 'x is not P' are contradictory statements. We can

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[1] Hilary Putnam, "Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind", *Journal of Philosophy* 1994, 91, 445-417.

[2] I am indebted to Colin Hirano for challenging discussions of this work.

use this apparatus to represent the relationship between many of the terms above. It would work for these pairs.

Winner/loser P, Pa
Good/evil P, Pa
Light/dark P, Pa
Male/female P, Pa

A person may be neither a winner nor a loser; a character may be neither good nor evil; at twilight it is neither light nor dark. A hermaphroditic (inter-sex) person, or a person in transition between male and female may be neither male nor female. These contrary predicates, though *opposites*, do not provide the basis for constructing contradictory statements or exclusive disjunctions. There are degrees, anomalies, and borderline cases. We might carelessly assume a bifurcation and claim that any given item must be either P or Pa and cannot be both. But such a supposition would be a mistake. When we consider such pairs, represented here as P and Pa, we cannot straightforwardly use them to construct an exclusive disjunction.

The logical principle of excluded middle does just that: it excludes the middle, and it does not hold for contrary propositions. The problem is, here, that often there really are middles (the moderately successful person who is neither a winner nor a loser; the suburb that is neither urban nor rural; the shop at the front of one's home that is neither private space nor public space; the citizen born abroad who moves to his 'homeland' in mid life; the baby born with both ovaries and a penis). If we classify in binaries so as to exclude these middles, we have a distorting system that encourages us to ignore realities that may be important.

To express contradictory opposition, we need to use words so as to articulate opposite in the sense of logical denial. Thus:

Beautiful/not beautiful P, not P
Good/ not good P, not P
Light/not light P, not P
Male/not male P, not P

We do get exhaustive categorization with logical denial, though some-

times at a cost. There is a sense in which the negative here is infinite; it can include anything and everything — except, of course, exactly those items that fall in the original category.

Consider: there are various ways of not being male. A person might for instance be female, which for human beings is the standard way of being non-male. (You might think a woman is a not-man or, as Aristotle somewhere said, "a woman is defined by a certain lack.") But this 'lack' defines too large a category to be filled by females alone; there are many 'not-mans' who are not female. A person might be, or be counted as, non-male due to hermaphroditism or trans-sexuality or having been falsely identified as male or being pregnant. (A 'man' who had been a 'woman' maintained his vagina and uterus and was able to become pregnant and carry a child. Was this a pregnant man? So it was said.) An animal might be non-male because it is self-reproducing. One can of course stipulate a criterion of maleness, providing a cut-off point. (No pun intended!) Such-and-such is male and the rest is other (female). The point is this: if the infant's penis is more than two centimeters in length, the infant is male (or surgically adapted to be such), and if the penis is less than two centimeters in length, the infant is not male and is deemed female and is surgically reconstructed as such.[3]

A more technical example is that of deductive and inductive arguments. A theorist might give some independent meaning to the term 'inductive,' defining it perhaps in terms of empirical generalization or reasoning from experienced cases to unexperienced ones. If that is done, and a distinct meaning is also given to the term 'deductive', it will turn out that 'deductive' and 'inductive' are *contrary* predicates. There will be a middle: many arguments will turn out to be neither inductive nor deductive. These include analogy arguments based on consistency principles, conductive arguments, abductive arguments, and narrative arguments.[4] That is to say, if the predicates 'inductive' and 'deductive' are contraries, then 'inductive/deductive' distinction does not provide an exhaustive categorization, for arguments.

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[3] The male/female dichotomy for human beings has generally been constructed and enforced – medically, surgically, and socially. Exceptions may be as much as 2% of the population, but until recently our thinking and our social practice has not sought to allow for them. I am endebted to Judith Grossman for discussion of these cases.

[4] I argued this point in "The Great Divide" (*Problems of Argument Analysis and Evaluation*. Foris/de Gruyter 1987) and the theory is developed in my textbook *A Practical Study of Argument* (Wadsworth/Cengage, 7th edition, Belmont, CA, 2010).

Indeed, to erect a dichotomy around 'deductive' and 'inductive' will be to distort one's theory of argument. This classificatory system will omit to consider relevant variety in arguments, and it will be reductive. It will exclude a middle that really does exist and should not be excluded.

Now many tradition-minded theorists will be unhappy with this conclusion and will seek to avoid it. Here's how: define 'deductive' and then define 'inductive' as 'non-deductive'. Any argument will then be either deductive or inductive – though it might be hard to tell which. It either IS deductive, or it ISN'T deductive –and that's it. (It can't be both and it can't be neither).

In general, for any characteristic that you can place on some sort of a continuum, you can take a point on that continuum and say something like 'to the left it's A and to the right it's not –A.' You can at that point use your stipulation to construct contradictory predicates. But, as John Dewey pointed out long ago, in such constructions the negative term and carries little information. You discover little about an argument if you find out that it is *non-deductive*.

Bifurcation can be achieved. We can find it, or we can impose it –or both. Now it will often be a contestable matter whether a pair of semantically opposite predicates should be represented as P/Pa or as P/not-P. Consider for instance:

Safe/unsafe
Nature/nurture
Natural/supernatural
Competitive/cooperative
Absolutist/relativist
Conceivable/inconceivable
Knowable/unknowable

With regard, say, to the knowable and the unknowable, consider an item that is knowable to some extent, but not fully. Is this thing *knowable*, or is it *unknowable*, or is it *knowable to some degree*? If we wish to allow this last possibility, incorporating a third category, then we would represent the knowable/unknowable as P/Pa, a relation of contraries. If we do not, we will construe it as P/notP, a relation of contradictories.

I propose here, and have argued elsewhere, that a true dichotomy should be understood as an exclusive disjunction. If, around two predicates, we can construct a true dichotomy, then every item that they classify must have *one or the other*, and *no item can have both*. With regard to statements in natural languages, we can ask whether Non-Contradiction and Excluded Middle should apply. The answer will affect our formalization of those statements. If we represent a statement as x is P and another statement as x is notP, we are representing our decision that the second predicate is the contradictory opposite of the first. The item x is either P or it is notP and there is no further possibility. To such statements, the principles of non-contradiction and excluded middle will apply. If the natural language predicates are contrary, the corresponding statements should not be formalized so as to be contradictories.[5]

We can, then, distinguish between the opposition of contraries and that of contradictories. This distinction, while highly important, is easily neglected – and the costs can be great. We have considered here two kinds of *logical* opposition. Clearly a position or claim a position may be explored and supporting evidence and arguments examined without anyone committing the Error of Contrariety. Debates, critical discussions, and argumentatively conducted inquiries need not involve any such mistake. Often, though, they do, and it seems likely that excluding middles, where middles exist, will contribute to polarization. A logical pathology is to distort by simplistic bifurcation; we often do this by failing to consider all possibilities, by failing to take into account context, the limitations of our knowledge, or the contestability of our terms.

Social Opposition

We may turn conflicts of claims into conflicts between people, resulting in social opposition.[6] Socially, oppositional roles may acquire extraneous ele-

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[5] Dichotomies can be false for a variety of reasons. A constructed dichotomy may be false because it is not exhaustive; that is mainly what is being discussed here. It can also be false because it is not exclusive, because it is neither exclusive nor exhaustive, or because it is fundamentally misconstrued, erected on a faulty assumption or on the basis of faulty definitions of key terms.

[6] One certainly could not say that all enmity or all hostility is undesirable. Obviously

ments of hostility and enmity. My sense is that social pathologies of opposition are many and that there are important ways in which logical and social pathologies may support each other. I will consider here some of the ways in which logical pathologies contribute to social ones.

Socially, people may be opposed and have 'opponents' in various ways and to various degrees. We may consider opponent roles in a variety of contexts including those of argument and debate; social institutions such as court, parliament, and debate, organized around opposing roles; and political conflict, in its most extreme form waged by violence. Opposition may involve commitments to positions or claims which are in different ways conflicting or opposite; such opposition may or may not be antagonistic and adversarial.

1. Struggles for dominance in argument

Consider here a person and her opponent, call them X and Y. Let us say that X puts forward an argument and Y is responding, and is making a critical response to that argument. X argues *for* the claim C; Y argues *against* this claim C. We can ask: is Y simply against C in that he accepts a contrary proposition? Or does he accept a contradictory proposition? Or does he, perhaps, have doubts about the argument for C? The claim that he is 'opposed' does not make this clear, and there are many possibilities. In questioning X's position and arguments, Y is in an oppositional role. This role in questioning her conclusion need not involve any opposition to X as a person – though often that slide is made.

In critical discussions people often go do more than considering evidence and reasons for and against a claim that has been put forward. They engage in the argumentative process, often with considerable passion. Often the discussion acquires a decided competitive overtone, as both proponent and opponent seek to dominate and 'win' by showing that they are right and the

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this is a huge topic and an ethically sensitive one. But let me stipulate here that while opposition of roles in a court, Parliament, game, or debate may be functional as contributing to needed criticism, enmity in the sense of hostility toward the other, and dichotomization and polarization of human beings is *prima facie* counter-productive, destructive, and undesirable.

other party is wrong. The dynamic acquires a *motif* that some of my (male) colleagues love to joke about: I am right; therefore you are wrong. What may have begun as a theoretical discussion or policy debate becomes a competition – often one with decidedly adversarial overtones. X and Y, who are reasoning back and forth, and considering one another's arguments with regard to a claim C, come to struggle for the 'top' position, of winner in the debate. Each wants to prevail over the opponent. The proponent and the opponent are then competing for dominance in a game that is played as a zero sum game. They have constructed it in that way: they argue for opposed claims, one and only one can win and the other will be defined as a loser and may even see himself as humiliated because he didn't 'win.' It is this kind of intellectual adversariality and struggle for dominance that feminist philosophers criticized some years back. They identified the highly competitive and aggressive style, characteristic of some circles in philosophy, as macho and competitive, prevalent in a male-dominated profession, and unattractive to many women.[7]

2. Polarization around two positions

Colloquially it is often said that there are 'two sides' to every question.[8] There is often a pro and con; debates are typically constructed as though there are two sides. However, two positions represented by persons in oppositional roles may in various ways, and for various reasons, fail to exhaust the possibilities. A logical reduction into two sides can distort discussions of social policy. Often public debates may be structured around simplified alternatives – as when we think of 'pro' and 'con' and assume that if you are *for* one of just two alternatives you must therefore be *against* the other. Some versions of the debate over abortion have this characteristic. Policy options are discussed as though there are just two: a *pro choice* policy according to which there is no restriction on a woman's choice and a *pro life* policy according to which the embryo and fetus are regarded as persons and

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[7] See Maryann Ayim, "Violence and Domination as Metaphors in Academic Discourse", 1988.
[8] See my "Are There Two Sides to Every Question?", 1988.

any intentional termination of pre-birth life counts as murder. Simplified and polarized debates of this kind typically omit interesting intermediate positions. They omit to consider third positions such as (in the case of abortion law) permissiveness up to some date and regulation after that.

3. Roles that are taken too far

Many institutions and practices involve oppositional roles: courts, debate, and Parliament being three obvious examples. In parliament we have the government and the opposition; in law, the prosecution and defense; in debates there are those who oppose and those who support a proposition; theorists of critical discussion use the terms *proponent* and *opponent*. Claims are put forward and defended –and criticized – by people who employ arguments at least some of the time. Oppositional roles are needed for the progress of discussion and investigation and, in legal contexts, for fairness and procedural justice. These roles presuppose opposition in the sense of criticism; some persons put forward claims, and it is the role of other persons to submit those claims to scrutiny. Oppositional roles have important social functions and – interestingly — require cooperation in a number of significant respects. In principle people can occupy and perform in these roles in ways that are calm and pacific; opposition of this kind need not involve elements of competitiveness and a quest for domination and it certainly need not involve insult and hostility. And yet as we know so well, court, parliament, debates, and academic discussions may be conducted in a highly competitive and combative way, featuring intense rivalry and such hostile elements as name-calling and recourse to *ad hominem* and Straw Man fallacies. Shouting, insults, and (in some countries) even physical fighting may be involved. In the winter of 2003, the *New Statesman* reported that some women members of the British House of Commons were taking testosterone treatments so that they could participate in the combative debates required for their political careers. The opponent, defined as such because of social roles, becomes a competitor and even an enemy. If debates are polarized and intermediate positions neglected, this dynamic is of intense competition is more likely to occur and worse when it does occur.

4. Struggles to the death

Some conflicts involving enmity become intense to the point where they are struggles to the death, resulting in war and, in the very worst cases, massacre and genocide. Here opposition becomes a matter of Us and Them at its most intense. Sides are polarized so that there is great pressure to be on one side or the other. If middle or outsider roles exist, they will be precarious. The idea is to win victory by the application of physical force. The survival of the 'us' is at stake. The enemy people need to be demonized to justify the struggle. If they have to be de-humanized, or even eliminated, so be it — because 'we' are now in jeopardy and must do whatever it takes to ensure our security and survival. We may here of think of Aryan and non-Aryan here, of Serb and Croat, and of Tutsi and Hutu.

And here is an appalling example from my own country. Canadian forces are engaged fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan; their role is publicly contested by many who fail to understand why young Canadian men and women are dying in this far-away place and why Canada, which they wanted to understand as a peacekeeping nation, was suddenly engaged in fighting a war. Arguably, this context is one in which the security of our country is threatened, but the threat is not immediate and to many Canadians it is not obvious. Canadian Chief of Staff General Rick Hillier did not like skepticism about the Afghan mission one little bit. He spoke out strongly in support of the military role and once, rather notoriously, referred to the Taliban as "scumbags." Asked why he used this language (CBC radio "As it happens," April 15, 2008) General Hillier said well these people were the worst of the worst; they were, after all, killing Canadian men and women in the armed forces. He said he was right to use the word "scumbags" to 'tell it like it is', rally the troops, and inform the public. When Hillier announced his resignation in April, 2008, he was praised as a soldier's soldier, who had rallied the troops immensely, and was one of the few strong leaders in Canadian political life. Personally, I would submit that de-humanizing rhetoric is dangerous and not heroic.

Concluding Comments

Socially people can be opponents in different senses, with different degrees

and kinds of competition and hostility. I don't wish to dispute the value of criticism or oppositional roles, but rather to warn against intensifying them so as to contribute to false polarization and harmful adversariality. My suspicion is that the relationship between logical opposition and social opposition works in two directions. I have suggested that when we commit the logical error of contrariety, that mistake contributes to polarization in the social sense. But the relationship probably goes the other way too: if we see others as our opponents, we are more likely to exaggerate the differences between their positions and our own, resulting in logical inaccuracies. There are various forms of logical opposition and of social opposition. Here, I have boldly labeled some of these as pathological, and I have engaged in a preliminary discussion of how they might be related. Obviously there is much more to be said.

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