Book Review

James B. Freeman (2005). *Acceptable Premises: An Epistemic Approach to an Informal Logic Problem*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xiv + 401 pp.

1. WHAT PROBLEM IS THERE ABOUT PREMISES?

With the exception of some proofs of logical truths, all noncircular arguments contain at least one basic premise, i.e., a premise that is not itself supported by argument. In order to evaluate an argument, to make an estimate of its worth, it is necessary to evaluate its basic premises. Given any basic premise, the acceptability question, i.e., the question whether there is a presumption for this premise and how we may ascertain its presumptive character, is of paramount importance when the argument is to be evaluated according to standards of informal (rather than formal) logic. 'When, if ever, is a premise – indeed a statement in general – acceptable? That is the central question of this book' (p. 3). This informal logic problem is even wider in scope than Aristotle's problem about the *endoxa* (reputable opinions). According to Aristotle, the *endoxa* are to provide the basic premises for dialectical reasoning. Unless one can assess whether certain statements that figure as basic premises are indeed endoxal, one can not properly evaluate the dialectical soundness of the reasoning. Now Aristotle characterizes the *endoxa* as opinions shared by all or by the majority or by the wise, and either all of the latter or the majority or the most prominent and reputable of them (*Topica* I.1 100b21–23). The facts underlying Aristotelian endoxality seem to cover the cases where basic premises are vouched for by common knowledge or expert testimony (cf. p. 296). (But even then one may wonder how to ascertain these facts.) In this book, however, the author, James B. Freeman, deals with many more sources vouching for basic premises, and thus with an amplified concept of endoxality.

For this Aristotelian problem Freeman advances a Kantian solution. By this I do not mean to say that Freeman's solution separates the noumenal world from the empirical, but rather that it presents us with an encompassing and thoroughgoing investigation of our epistemological

constitution. However, what this quest is aiming at in Freeman's case is the uncovering of the sources of presumption rather than knowledge.

2. A SURVEY OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS

The book consists of three parts. Part I is the most abstract part. In it the author sets up various relations between dialectical and epistemological notions. Part II goes into the details of belief-generating mechanisms and their potential of vouching for basic premises, whereas Part III gives practical advice about how to determine the acceptability of a proposed premise in a given case as well as a philosophical perspective on the whole enterprise.

2.1. *Part I*

In his first chapter, *Why do We Need a Theory of Acceptability?*, Freeman argues that the need for a book on premise acceptability arises because existing answers to the central question ('When is a premise acceptable?') are inadequate. He discusses Descartes' and Locke's (classical) foundationalism and a number of 'popular' criteria for acceptability, such as truth, *de facto* acceptance (Hamblin), argumentative support, and probability.

In the second chapter, *Acceptability and Presumption*, Freeman (in line with Cohen, 1992) takes the point of view that 'a statement is acceptable just when there is a presumption in its favor' (p. 21). He then proceeds to analyze the notion of 'presumption' in order to explicate that of 'acceptability'. He agrees with Pinto (1984) that presumption is a dialectical notion referring to a context of dialectical exchange between a proponent and a challenger. The kind of presumption needed to define acceptability is presumption from the point of view of the challenger. Challenger presumption for a statement, again, is defined as a challenger's obligation to concede the statement at a particular point in a dialectical exchange.

In Chapter 3, *Factors Determining Presumption*, presumption is further analyzed into two factors, 'presumption of warrant and fulfillment of the pragmatic condition', which 'are jointly sufficient for there to be a presumption of statement' (p. 65). Warrant (a notion developed by Alvin Plantinga, 1993, and not to be confused with Stephen Toulmin's notion) again consists of four factors, three of which concern the lack of contravening evidence (namely, the proper functioning of one's belief-generating mechanisms, their operating in a suitable environment, and their operating according to a design plan aimed at arriving at the truth), whereas the fourth concerns the reliability of these mechanisms, i.e. the probability (which must be high) that these mechanisms yield

correct results. Following Thomas Reid, Freeman holds that a pre-
sumption of reliability can in many cases be defended against the
skeptics.

The pragmatic condition is a cost-benefit condition of which a
refined version was formulated by D. S. Clarke, Jr.: 'X is justified in
accepting a proposition p relative to evidence e as true only if the
expected cost of acquiring additional relevant evidence e' is higher
than the expected cost of acting on the basis of p which would be
incurred if p were to later prove mistaken' (Clarke, 1989, p. 82; quoted
on p. 63).

Freeman stresses that 'there *being* a presumption does not entail
consciousness or *awareness* of presumption.' (67). Even so, 'acceptabil-
ity' is an internal notion (p. 71), which is , however, explicated in
terms of both internal and external notions. Therefore, Freeman char-
acterizes his position as 'an externalist internalism' (p. 72).

Chapter 4, *Epistemological Considerations*, meets some internalist
objections to the present approach. It contains a discussion of episte-
mic duty and of BonJour's coherentism (1985). Otherwise than in
(Freeman, 1996), Alston's theory of justified belief (internalist external-
ism, 1985, 1988) now appears to be equivalent to Freeman's theory of
acceptability (externalist internalism).

2.2. *Part II*

After the philosophical study of the concept of 'acceptability' has been
taken care of in Part I, and terminological decisions have been taken,
the author now turns, in Part II, to a painstakingly detailed investiga-
tion of the various sources of presumption and their reliability. The
first question to be asked here is that of the title of Chapter 5, *What
Types of Statement Are There?* After discussing classifications by Sproule
(1980) and some other authors, Freeman arrives at the following
epistemic typology:

1. Broadly Logically Determinate Statements.
2. Broadly Logically Indeterminate Statements.
2.1 Evaluative Statements.
2.2 Nonevaluative Statements.
2.2.1 Extensional Nonevaluative Statements (descriptions). These have
    truth-conditions without reference to other possible worlds.
2.2.2 Intensional Nonevaluative Statements (interpretations). These have
    truth-conditions that refer to other possible worlds, e.g. because
    these conditions involve nomic generalizations of some sort.

The next four chapters inspect each type to see what personal (= not
received from others) mechanisms generate basic (= not inferred) beliefs

expressible by statements of that type and whether presumptions are created by these mechanisms.

Chapter 6, *Necessary Statements and* A Priori *Intuition*, distinguishes five types of necessary statements: Formally True Statements, Semantically True Statements, Conceptually True Statements, Mathematical Statements, and Metaphysical Statements. After inspecting each of these five types of statements, Freeman concludes that 'we have seen that in each case, when we come to believe them in a basic way through a personal source, that source is *a priori* intuition.' (p. 121). *A priori* intuition is not totally reliable, but it is presumptively reliable.

Turning to Chapter 7, *Descriptions and Their Belief-Generating Mechanisms*, it appears that there are three personal mechanisms that may be involved in generating basic descriptive beliefs: perception, introspection, and memory. *Perception* can be either original or acquired. Original perception generates beliefs about the physical world, but also about other minds (via natural signs), in both cases it is presumptively reliable. '... to deny a presumption of reliability for original perception is to deny our common sense. It is to go against our constitution.' (p. 132). Acquired perception can be either physical or institutional. There is presumption for these forms of perception as well. For the institutional perception this holds as long as there is a presumption that we have learned the constitutive rules governing the institutional practice to which the perceived event belongs. *Introspection* as to the contents of one's mind, as to mental operations, and as to the causes of our bodily sensations; is in each case presumptively reliable. With regard to *memory*, the conclusion is equally positive, as long as the memory is clear-cut.

The voluminous Chapter 8, *Interpretations and Their Modes of Intuition*, scrutinizes one by one the different types of interpretative statements and shows that in some cases even they may serve as acceptable premises. Interpretations refer to explanations, of which three types are distinguished: physical, personal, and institutional explanations. Each of these makes use of a particular type of universally quantified subjunctive conditionals: physical subjunctives, personal subjunctives, and institutional subjunctives, respectively. The notion of an explanatory subjunctive conditional can be supported by a precise logical analysis, and so can the notion of a nomically sufficient condition. This classification of types of explanation and of subjunctives suggests a long list of types of interpretation, including such items as causal statements, dispositional statements, ascriptions of belief and intention, attributions of sign, interpretive classifications, and various rhetorical classes of interpretation, such as the class of comparisons. For statements of each of these types it is shown that they can be paraphrased in terms of the explanatory subjunctive, or in terms of nomically sufficient conditions,

or that they contain conjunctive or other truth-functional components that can be so analyzed.

The mechanisms generating basic beliefs expressed by the three types of explanatory subjunctive are called physical, personal (together: empirical), and institutional intuition. Since the subjunctives correspond exactly to the warrants of inferences (in Toulmin's sense), 'the reliability of intuition to grasp reliable warrants and the reliability of intuition as a mechanism generating beliefs expressed in subjunctive conditionals amounts to the same thing' (p. 173). The warrant's 'backing is the input for the mechanism generating subjunctive beliefs' (p. 173). This backing differs widely from field to field and we must look at each field separately to assess the reliability of these intuitions. In the case of *physical intuition*, Freeman perceives a great difference between intuition used to impose the interpretive category of causation, which is not presumptively reliable (but needs to be tested), and intuition used to impose the interpretive category of natural kind which is arguably presumptively reliable as a basic belief-generating mechanism. In this Freeman follows Kornblith (1993). *Personal intuition* is presumptively reliable where it generates (on the basis of natural signs) beliefs concerning another person's proximate intention (goal and belief) or (on the basis of natural signs of the corresponding occurrent states) concerning his affective dispositions. Moreover personal intuition generates general beliefs based on empathy. By a Reidian constitutional argument, we can see that personal intuition is presumptively reliable in this case as well. But it is not reliable where psychological explanations are concerned. *Institutional intuition* as a 'belief-generating mechanism is presumptively reliable to the extent that there is a presumption one has learned the rules' (p. 194).

The chapter ends with a section of objections and replies, in which Freeman deploys Reidian arguments to combat Hume's skepticism, and deftly handles Goodman's grue, Hempel's ravens, and Quine on natural kinds.

In Chapter 9, *Evaluations and the Moral Faculties*, Freeman adopts a standard division of value judgments into judgments of intrinsic value, of deontic value, and of aretaic value. *Moral sense* is a belief-generating mechanism for singular *prima facie* value judgments, *moral intuition* for general *prima facie* value judgments.

The section on *judgments of intrinsic value* contains a critical discussion of the elitism of Ross (1930) and Moore (1903), who overlooked the intrinsic value of human persons. There are three main sorts of what is intrinsically good: satisfaction (including pleasure), excellence, and human persons. Moral *sense* generates properly basic singular beliefs of *prima facie* intrinsic goodness and badness of one's own pleasure and pain, and moral *intuition* corresponding properly basic general beliefs. As to pleasure and pain of others (as well as to features of

excellence), Freeman argues that there is a conditional presumptive reliability of the moral sense which generates conditionally presumptive basic beliefs assigning *prima facie* intrinsic values to them. The condition is that 'our perception or personal intuition of the situation is reliable' (p. 234). However, the presumptive reliability of moral intuition when it generates general statements about the goodness or badness of traits of states of affairs is not conditional. '… moral intuition is a completely internal belief-generating mechanism' (p. 240). Of course all beliefs generated by these mechanisms are defeasible. Following MacLagan (1960), Freeman argues for the intrinsic value of persons.

In the section on *judgments of deontic value* Freeman classifies *prima facie* duties according to their concomitant moral sentiments. The latter are listed (following James Wilson, 1993) as: sympathy, fairness, personal integrity, and fidelity. Prudential obligations, which are based on self-interest and the desire for attachment are separated from moral obligations, which are based upon the desire for affiliation. In this area, the moral sense is again conditionally presumptively reliable, 'the condition being that the mechanisms generating the interpretation on which the belief is based are presumptively reliable' (p. 250). There is also a conditional presumption for the moral intuition in intuiting general deontic principles.

In his treatment of *judgments of aretaic value* of feelings, desires, commitments, actions, and characters, Freeman draws on Adam Smith (1976 [1759]) and again on James Wilson (1993). Judgments of feelings can be self-referential, other-referential, or impartial-spectator-referential. What we need here as a personification of conscience is an *agapic* spectator. Appropriateness of feelings equals congruence with what the agapic spectator would feel in my situation. Similarly for moral goodness of desires, etc. Is the moral sense presumptively reliable in making these judgments? If feelings, etc., of others are concerned, such judgments presuppose beliefs about other minds, 'but the purely evaluative part of the judgment is immediate and thus basic' (p. 262). 'Once we have formed the presupposed belief concerning the other's feeling, desire, or commitment, and as long as there is a presumption that our understanding of the situation is reliable, we can see whether the feeling, desire, or commitment accords or conflicts with that of the agapic spectator, were he to be in this situation' (p. 267). So there is indeed a conditional presumptive reliability of the moral sense in this case. Also, moral intuition is reliable in its aretaic employment. When judging my own aretaic value, the moral sense is presumptively reliable on condition of there being a presumptive reliability of my understanding of the situation.

In Chapter 10, *Taking One's Word*, starting from Coady's (1992) account of testifying, Freeman defines an internalist notion of testimony

from the challenger's point of view: 'A statement that p as put forward by a proponent in a dialectical exchange and received by the challenger of that exchange, heard and understood by her, constitutes *testimony from the challenger's point of view* just in case she is aware of signs both that the proponent is vouching for his statement that p and that the proponent has the requisite competence, authority, or credentials to state truly that p' (pp. 290, 291). Once it is understood that Thomas Reid's *principle of credulity* (humans have a disposition to rely on the word of others) and his *principle of veracity* (humans have a natural propensity to tell the truth) are both part of our constitution, it can be argued that '... the case for the presumption of reliability of testimony is analogous to the case for perception' (p. 292).

Several sources of testimony must be distinguished. *Personal* testimony, i.e., reports of someone's experiences through perception or introspection, as well as his memories of such experiences, is presumptively reliable. In differing degrees, the same holds for testimony received through chains. Presupposing the presumptive reliability of common knowledge, it is argued that – given certain other presumptions – there is a presumption for a belief based on expert testimony. In the case of descriptive reports, there is indeed a presumption for common knowledge and even for the word of the news media. Finally there is a presumption for institutional testimony such as maps, signs, timetables, measuring devices, and other scientific instruments.

2.3. *Part III*

Chapter 11, *An Outline of the Practice of Epistemic Casuistry*, aims to address the practical question of determining when and why a particular basic premise is acceptable. For this one needs to answer three questions:

1. What type of statement is it?
2. What source vouches for it?
3. Does this voucher create a presumption for the statement? i.e.:
3a. Is the source presumptively reliable
3b. Is the source epistemically compromised in this situation?
3c. Is the expected cost of mistakenly accepting the statement in this situation greater than the expected cost of procuring further evidence? (p. 320).

The chapter runs again through all the different types of statements and their belief-generating mechanisms to sort out in which circumstances there is a presumption for a statement. The orientation is toward treating practical cases.

At the end of the book, in Chapter 12, *Theoretical Considerations*, Freeman discloses the name of his position: *commonsense*

foundationalism. Essentially, so we are informed, this is the episte-
mological position Plantinga calls Reidian foundationalism. It tells
us that 'should the basic premises of an argument express basic or
foundational beliefs that are either self-evident or that are properly
supported by nonpropositional evidence available to the challenger,
the person evaluating the argument, those premises should be prop-
erly basic or acceptable for that challenger.' According to Freeman,
'it has been the burden of this book to clarify this hypothesis and
present a confirming argument for it. That argument is the justifica-
tion for the commonsense foundationalist position we have devel-
oped over the course of this book' (p. 369). This commonsense
approach, which turns out to be inspired not only by Thomas Reid,
but also by Charles Peirce's critical common sensism, is defended
against Pyrrho and Hume.

The book ends with programmatic remarks about aesthetic valua-
tions and *sensus divinitatis*. However, these matters, as well as the
question of connection adequacy, exceed the bounds of this book.

3. COMMENTS

Let us return to the book's first sentence (already quoted in Section 1):
'When, if ever, is a premise – indeed a statement in general – accept-
able?' (p.3). This is a question of formidable scope, which would even
be larger had the author taken seriously what is put between dashes:
'indeed a statement in general'; for then it would have been necessary
to account also for arguments as a source of acceptability and hence
for connection adequacy, a subject that the author, at the end of the
book, emphatically leaves out. The task that remains is large enough
and involves most of epistemology (although the focus is on presump-
tion rather than knowledge). The author is to be admired for putting
the project through in an orderly and well-organized way, with an eye
for many interesting questions that are met on the road, but never los-
ing track of the right course to fare.

The task would have been a lot easier had the author, right in the
beginning, agreed with Hamblin's position that a statement is accept-
able if and only if it is accepted (p. 12). Hamblin's position is close to
the pragma-dialectical view that exactly those statements about which
the discussants have agreed – in the opening stage – that they can be
used as basic premises may be so used. Adoption of this point of view
is not an abandonment of normativity, though it leaves aside the con-
sideration of acceptability of statements *per se*, that is, outside of a
context where discussants make such agreements. There are still norms
to consider. For one thing there is the norm that discussants should

abide by the agreements they made, and of course there are many other procedural norms of argumentation. Thus it is possible to have a normative theory of argumentation that is not concerned about the epistemic norms for acceptance. This does not mean that the problem of acceptability is not there, but only that it can be left to another discipline. If one, for once, makes a distinction here between informal logic and argumentation theory, one could say that informal logic incorporates the part of epistemology needed to deal with the problem of acceptability, whereas argumentation theory leaves this problem to epistemology.

Pragma-dialecticians and other Hamblinians may see Freeman's book as a book on epistemology, rather than as one concerning their core business, but that is not to say that for them the book is without interest. As soon as it comes to the application of argumentation theory – the evaluation or construction of particular arguments – it will be crucially important to make correct estimates about whether or not certain premises are *generally* accepted, and for this it can be very helpful to have theoretical insight into the normative foundations of acceptance; therefore, James Freeman's book will be most welcome to them as well.

The bulk of the book consists of piecemeal research into the presumptive reliability of numerous belief-generating mechanisms, undertaken in Part II. Rightly so, because the heart of the problem of acceptability lies in the specific problems connected with particular types of statements. Therefore, it is a good thing that most space is devoted to these detailed investigations, which are then followed by directions for the practical assessment of premise acceptability in Chapter 11 (Part III). Not that the more abstract chapters of Part I could have been left out. They serve to settle a number of conceptual and terminological issues that the author had to deal with anyway, and thus contribute to the clarity of the whole. What may be a bit disappointing for some is that the more concrete and practical sections (Part II and Chapter 11) are still rather abstract. The author provides examples and cases, but not many. Admittedly, adding more casework would have made the book still more voluminous.

In Chapter 2, the dialectical definition of challenger presumption (as a challenger's obligation to concede a statement at a particular point in a dialectical exchange) is problematic. For, now one may ask what is meant by an 'obligation to concede'. Freeman adds some clarification (p. 30) from which it appears that this obligation is a dialectical one. We can think of it as determined by a normative system of dialectic. The dialectical situation is such that asking for a justification of a statement S (which is a basic premise proposed by the proponent) would involve the dialectical obligation to show that such a justification is required.

But the challenger is unable to show this (she has 'no plausible justification for her request nor plausible counterconsiderations against *S*,' p. 30). There is a dialectical rule which stipulates that you must either challenge or concede a proposed premise. The challenger can not challenge, so, by dint of dialectical rules, she is obliged to concede. This may seem clear-cut, but how can the challenger be sure that she will not be able to show the need for justification of *S*? Is the obligation to concede *S* dependent on what the challenger perceives as plausible? Then the definition will be psychological rather than dialectical. Challenger presumption would be a psychological rather than a dialectical concept. Or is the unavailability of means to show the need of justification of *S* again determined by dialectical rules? Then the definition would not apply to most interesting cases of presumption, since these are all defeasible, so that showing the need for justification can not be ruled out by sound dialectical rules.

Perhaps this definition is putting the cart before the horse. Presumption should not be defined in terms of obligation to concede, but obligation to concede should be defined in terms of presumption. Presumption then would be defined for different types of statement separately by the piecemeal approach of Part II. In fact, Part II does not depend on the dialectical definition of Chapter 2. We may conclude that in Freeman's book presumption figures as an epistemic notion, rather than a dialectical one.

Ultimately, Freeman's definition of 'acceptability' is circular: acceptability is defined in terms of challenger's presumption (p. 32), challenger's presumption is, as we saw, defined in terms of obligation to concede (pp. 29–30), but on p. 45 ('let us recall that to concede a proposition is to grant that it is acceptable') it seems that concession is again defined in terms of acceptability. However, this circularity need not be vicious, when the purpose is to establish relations between some concepts.

About Parts II and III I shall only make some stray remarks. I was surprised to see that Freeman discusses necessary statements and *a priori* intuition without even mentioning Kripke's distinction between the necessary and the *a priori*. Perhaps there was no need to, but even then the reader would have expected at least some remark about why the Kripkean distinction could be left aside. There is also a neglect of the indeterminacy of set theory: nowadays, there are many mathematical universes (e.g., with or without the Axiom of Choice or the Continuum Hypothesis), and it seems very implausible that we can intuit the truth, let only the necessary truth, of the null axiom (p.121). The necessity of mathematical statements may have to be relativized to a particular mathematical universe. Many other examples Freeman gives of necessary truths are controversial. Intuitionists do not accept the

Law of Excluded Middle (p. 114, first formally true statement), Free logicians will object to the implication of the existential quantification by the universal (p. 114, second formally true statement), and together with Meinong they will object to the principle that 'no object can have a property without existing' (p. 117).

According to Freeman, there is no need to argue that there is a presumption for the reliability of perception (p. 132). Yet Freeman (following the lead of Thomas Reid) argues at length that there is such a presumption (pp. 127–138), and rightly so.

In Section 8.3 Freeman presents his own (and Charles Daniels's, 1980) analysis of the subjunctive conditional. He does not explain why he does not use the Stalnaker-Lewis type of analysis, or whether that would make a difference. Admittedly, all Freeman needs to show here is that some analysis is possible.

On page 185, I found the use of upper and lower case delta confusing, but this may entirely be my fault.

I found the inductive proof on pp. 203–204 fascinating, but am still in doubt about what it proves. Perhaps it shows that for each consistent formula of propositional logic there is a substitution instance (with subjunctives substituted for propositional letters) that one can come to believe on the basis of perception and/or intuition (including *a priori* intuition).

Freeman staunchly defends the intrinsic value of human persons, which makes one wonder about the intrinsic value of nonhuman creatures.

Figure 9.1 on p. 245 was really helpful. Unfortunately, there are very few figures in the book.

On p. 311, it is argued that there is indeed a presumption for common knowledge or commonsense beliefs. One argument given for this rests on the (Aristotelian) principle that 'in a good argument, the premises should have greater prior probability or plausibility than the conclusion' (p. 311). This would allegedly make it impossible to argue against a commonsense proposition C without committing the fallacy of problematic premise. I think this argument is flawed. An argument against C is an argument for the conclusion *not-C*. If C has the highest degree of certainty or plausibility, *not-C* has the lowest. The Aristotelian principle, therefore, does not stand in the way of finding premises for this argument; premises of any degree of certainty or plausibility higher than the lowest will do, as far as this principle is concerned. In particular, there is no need for the premises to be more certain or plausible than C in order to raise the plausibility of *not-C*, and lower that of C, to such an extent that in the end the presumption will be on the side of *not-C*. For instance, it used to be common knowledge that the earth is flat. Against this, arguments could be

brought starting from acceptable premises (though not perhaps of the highest degree of plausibility), which eventually tipped the balance. Of course by pointing out the failure of *this* argument for the presumptive reliability of common knowledge I am not implying that common knowledge fails to be presumptively reliable.

Chapter 11, on epistemic casuistry, could have done with more examples and case-work. Parts of this chapter now consist of rather lengthy abstract expositions (e.g. on pp. 352–353).

One may wonder why a proponent would ever advance as a premise some piece of common knowledge. Either the challenger will share this common knowledge, which would make it unnecessary to state it, or she will lack this piece of common knowledge, in which case the proponent must defend it by argument instead of trying to use it as a basic premise (cf. p. 355). But the answer is in the book; turn back to p. 322: even if the challenger shares the knowledge it may be useful to increase the salience.

James Freeman has given us a very substantial book. From my survey of its contents it might seem that it is very hard to read, but actually the book is well-written and well-organized. It may be used as a handbook of commonsense foundationalism. It is an epistemological work, but epistemology has been severed from the austere concepts of knowledge and certainty and has been brought down to the more mundane concern of establishing presumptions. There is a laudable stress on the defeasibility of nearly everything. Some may complain that the book too easily declares many of our belief-generating mechanisms to be presumptively reliable, but others – this reader being among them – will find and accept well-argued easement for their skeptical qualms. Of course many debatable points remain. No worry, '... the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.'

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