

Kenneth Einar HIMMA*

PRACTICAL AUTHORITY, WILL-IMPOSITION, AND THE SOCIETY OF ANGELS

Joseph Raz argues both that there can be practical authority without sanctions and that such authority is constituted, in part, by the power to impose its will on subjects with respect to what they must do. This essay argues that the Razian claim that practical authority is partly constituted by a power of will-imposition implies that a telling counts as authoritative only if backed by the threat of a sanction. Since law is a form of practical authority, this claim is logically inconsistent with the conclusion Raz draws from the society-of-angels argument.

Key words: *Authority. – Will-imposition. – Law. – Conceptual jurisprudence. – Coercion.*

* External fellow, University of Surrey's Institute of Advanced Studies at Surrey Centre for Law and Philosophy, United Kingdom, khimma@gmail.com, ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2517-6937.

Joseph Raz argues that practical authority is constituted, in part, by the power to impose its will on subjects with respect to whether they comply with an authoritative directive. As he puts the matter, a person counts as having practical authority over other persons only if they are “effective in imposing [their] will on many over whom [they claim] authority” (Raz 1994, 211, emphasis by author). Note that Raz’s claim assumes, plausibly enough, that it is a necessary condition for *P* to count as having practical authority over *Q*, that *P* is *effective*, or *efficacious*, in inducing *Q* to comply when they are not antecedently disposed to do so.

There are two key claims here. The first is that *P*’s directives must be efficacious in guiding the behavior of *Q* to count as having practical authority over *Q*. That is, it is in the nature of practical authority that it is efficacious in guiding the behavior of those over whom authority is claimed. Otherwise put, practical authority is conceptually efficacious. This is not surprising: if *Q* always openly defies *P*’s directives and *P* can do nothing about it, then *P* lacks practical authority over *Q*. It might be true that *P* *claims* authority over *Q*, but *P*’s claim is false.

Practical authority resembles the law in this important respect: it is a conceptually necessary condition, for a normative system to count as one of law, that it is efficacious in guiding behavior. Indeed, Hart regards efficacy as one of the two minimum conditions for the existence of a legal system:

There are [...] two minimum conditions necessary and sufficient for the existence of a legal system. On the one hand, those rules of behaviour which are valid according to the system’s ultimate criteria of validity must be generally obeyed, and, on the other hand, its rules of recognition specifying the criteria of legal validity and its rules of change and adjudication must be effectively accepted as common public standards of official behaviour by its officials. The first condition is the only one which private citizens *need* satisfy; they may obey each ‘for his part only’ and from any motive whatever (Hart 2012, 116).

If there are two systems in a society that claim legal authority over its members and only one is efficacious, the efficacious system is the one that counts as the law in that society. This is true of practical authority and for the same reason. The claim that practical authority is conceptually efficacious cannot plausibly be denied.

The second key claim is that the conceptual efficacy of practical authority must be explained in part by the authority’s ability to impose its will on subjects when they are not antecedently disposed to comply. Raz’s claim is

thus that for *P* to have practical authority over *Q*, it is a *necessary condition* that *P* has a power to induce *Q* to comply, when *Q* is not antecedently disposed to comply by means that amount to *an imposition of P's will on Q*.¹

This essay argues that Raz's claim that practical authority is partly constituted by the power of will-imposition – which I think is correct – is inconsistent with the conclusion he draws from his famous society-of-angels thought experiment – that there can be law without sanctions. My thesis here is concerned with the implications of Raz's view that practical authority is partly constituted by the power of will-imposition, with respect to the conclusion of his society-of-angels argument.

This analysis is grounded in an explication of the nature of will-imposition, as that is defined by *our* conceptual practices. I argue that if it is true of our conceptual practices, as Raz believes, that practical authority is partly constituted by the power of will-imposition,² then a mandatory directive counts as authoritative only if backed by a detriment reasonably contrived to deter enough noncompliance to enable the authority or *telling* to minimally achieve the purposes they intend to achieve by guiding behavior, which hence counts as a sanction (the sanctions thesis).³

This point should not be glossed over. I believe both that practical authority is partly constituted by a power of will-imposition *and* that a directive counts as authoritative only if backed by a sanction.

However, it is crucial to understand that I argue for neither claim here. The thesis of this paper is a claim about the relationship between two of Raz's positions – namely that those two positions are logically inconsistent. Accordingly, the thesis of this paper is logical: it is that Raz's claim that the power of will-imposition is a constitutive property of practical authority is inconsistent with his claim that, for the existence of a legal system, it is not necessary that it backs at least some legal norms with the threat of a sanction.

¹ There are, of course, other necessary conditions for *P* to have practical authority over *Q* – or, as the matter is commonly put, other *existence conditions* for practical authority (Raz 1994, fn 1).

² Insofar as some property partly *constitutes* someone as having practical authority, I will characterize it as a *constitutive property* or *feature*. The constitutive properties of something thus correspond to its existence conditions and conceptually necessary properties, which define its metaphysical nature.

³ By a *telling*, I mean content that has its source in some agency and that tells someone what she must do; the concept hence picks out authoritative directives and orders, as well as non-authoritative demands.

The methodology involves an analysis of *our* conceptual practices for applying the phrase *impose one's will* and is thus a philosophical explication of *our* ordinary concept of will-imposition. It might be true that there are objective, mind-independent truths about the nature of will-imposition – although if so, I have no idea how we human beings could have reliable epistemic access to these truths.

However, it is important to understand, as will be discussed below in Section 1, that Raz's claim about practical authority makes a claim about the content of our conceptual practices. It does not even *purport* to identify objective truths about a given mind-independent concept of authority.⁴ *Our* conceptual practices regarding the use of a phrase are determined by *our* conventions for using it, together with shared philosophical assumptions, if any, about the nature of the associated kind that might condition the application of these conventions in hard cases. Since my argument is grounded in an analysis of our conventions for using the relevant locutions, it is partly empirical and partly philosophical – as is true of any piece of conceptual analysis.⁵ Accordingly, it counts as a piece of naturalized jurisprudence.

Further, it should be noted that there is nothing in my analysis that implies that the reason people comply with the requirements of law is that they wish to avoid the sanctions authorized as a response to noncompliance. It is compatible with my thesis that there can be a legal system in which everyone always obeys the law for moral reasons. Of course, I think that this state of affairs is vanishingly improbable, which is why I am not a Marxist. But there is nothing in our conceptual practices that would preclude such a state of affairs. Either way, nothing of significance turns on this claim.

1. A PRELIMINARY NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

At the outset, it is important to note that conceptual jurisprudence is concerned to explicate the content of *our* concepts, which is determined by *our* conceptual practices, as constructed by *our* semantic conventions for using the associated word and any *shared* philosophical assumptions about

⁴ See the next section for a defense of this claim.

⁵ For example, if the Pope does not count as a bachelor because he is not eligible for marriage, then the semantic conventions for using the term, which are summarized in the dictionary definitions of the term as “unmarried man”, are qualified in this case by the *philosophical* assumption that it is in the *nature* of bachelorhood that bachelors are institutionally eligible for marriage.

the nature of a kind that, if any, qualify the application of those semantic conventions in hard cases. Put simply, conceptual jurisprudence, properly understood, is concerned to explicate what we do with words and phrases having to do with legal practice.

H. L. A. Hart makes this utterly clear at the beginning of his Preface to *The Concept of Law*:

The lawyer will regard the book as an essay in analytical jurisprudence, for it is concerned with the clarification of the general framework of legal thought, rather than with the criticism of law or legal policy. Moreover, at many points, I have raised questions which may well be said to be about the *meanings of words*. [...] Many important distinctions, which are not immediately obvious, between types of social situation or relationships may best be brought to light by an examination of the *standard uses of the relevant expressions and of the way in which these depend on a social context, itself often left unstated* (Hart 2012, vi, emphasis by author).

If there is doubt about this (and there should not be), Raz is just as clear that his theory is concerned to explicate the concept of law as its content is determined by our conceptual practices. As he explains:

The notion of law as designating a type of social institution is not, however, part of the scholarly apparatus of any learned discipline. It is *not* a concept introduced by academics to help with explaining some social phenomena. Rather it is a concept entrenched in our society's self-understanding. [...] It occupies a central role in our understanding of society, our own as well as other societies. In large measure what we study when we study the nature of law is the nature of *our* own self-understanding. [...] It is part of the self-consciousness of our society to see certain institutions as legal. [...] [T]hat consciousness is part of what we study when we inquire into the nature of law (Raz 2009, 31).⁶

⁶ Scott Shapiro also makes clear that the goal of conceptual jurisprudence is to explicate the content of our ordinary concepts: "[T]he term 'jurisprudence' has a couple of other *well-established uses* as well" (Shapiro 2011, 1, emphasis by author). Indeed, the reason that his planning theory of law fails is that his analysis of positive norms as identical with plans *obviously* has no basis in our conceptual practices with respect to those ordinary concepts. If you were to use *norm* instead of *plan* in asking someone to make plans with you for the weekend, they would not

Though neither theorist explicitly conceived an analysis of our concepts as being grounded in our semantic conventions – that is obvious. It is nonetheless clear that both theorists think that the canons of ordinary usage pertaining to law are qualified in hard cases by what they take to be shared philosophical assumptions about the nature of the corresponding kind and that the principal task of conceptual analysis is to identify and explicate those assumptions.

Neither theorist is concerned with a mind-independent or objective concept of law, the content of which is determined independently of what we do with words. And one reason is that it is difficult to explain how ordinary human beings, with the abilities we have, could discern the contents of concepts that are determined independently of our practices, even assuming that the claim that the universe self-sorts into various categories is not utter nonsense. Accordingly, this essay is concerned to explain the nature of will-imposition as it is determined by what *we* do with *our* words, and not as determined by objective, mind-independent considerations that can be discerned only by someone who can attain a God's-eye perspective, which no human being can plausibly claim to have.

That said, it is important to reiterate that the arguments of this essay do not depend on the assumption that we do not have reliable epistemic access to the nature of a kind, as determined by objective considerations. The claims of this essay are that (1) *our* conceptual practices pertaining to the notion of will-imposition imply that the power of will-imposition is partly constituted by the power to induce compliance by threatening detriment that counts as a sanction, and (2) this is inconsistent with the conclusion Raz draws from his society-of-angels argument.

2. THE POWER TO INDUCE COMPLIANCE BY WILL-IMPOSITION AS THE POWER TO PERSUADE

It is a conceptual truth, as the Raz quote above assumes, that practical authority is generally efficacious in inducing subjects to comply. Just as it is a necessary condition that a normative system is generally efficacious in inducing subjects to comply for that system to count as one of law, it is a necessary condition that *P*'s tellings are generally efficacious in inducing *Q*

have a clue what you were asking. See Himma, "Farewell to the Planning Theory of Law: No Laws Are Plans or Planlike" forthcoming in *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*.

to comply for *P* to count as having practical authority over *Q*. If *Q* has no inclination at all to comply with *P*'s tellings and *never* complies with them, then *P* does not count as having authority over *Q* – though *P* might claim otherwise.

It is important to observe that the claim that *a* is effective in producing *b* implies, by definition, that the occurrence of *a* *has something to do* with the occurrence of *b*. In the medical context, to say that treatment *a* is efficacious in inducing sustained remission of condition *b* is to say that the application of *a* *causes* the remission. In the context of guiding behavior, to say that *P* is efficacious in guiding the behavior of *Q* is to say that *Q* generally complies with *P*'s tellings and that *Q*'s compliance *has something to do* with the fact that the telling has its source in the system or person. Accordingly, the behavioral efficacy of a normative system or person must be explained in terms of an ability – or power – that helps to explain the capacity of the system or person to induce subjects to comply when subjects are not antecedently inclined to do so.

Raz explains practical authority's constitutive efficacy in terms of it possessing an "effective" power to induce compliance. Someone lacking the right kind of power to induce members of a group to do as they direct lacks the requisite resources to guide their behavior by telling them what they are required to do and hence does not count as having practical authority over them for that reason.⁷ Having the power to induce compliance in potentially recalcitrant subjects is, in his view, the ground of authority's constitutive capacity to direct behavior by telling subjects what to do.

The applicable power is not physically mechanistic. Whatever power an authority might have to induce compliance, it does not involve an ability to mechanistically bring it about that subjects comply. It should be clear, for instance, that *P*'s implanting and using a microchip in *Q*'s brain, which enables *P* to mechanistically control what *Q*'s body does by means of imperative sentences, does not count as exercising practical authority over *Q* by telling *Q* what to do. *P*'s imperative sentences in this case are analogous to commands that one might input into a computing device to cause it to perform a desired operation.

Authoritative guidance is equipped by nature, as we conceive it, with the resources to make a practical difference in what subjects decide to do, *not* by mechanistically causing a complying act *but* by inducing subjects to

⁷ Similar considerations explain why it is a necessary condition for a system to count as one of law that it is efficacious in guiding behavior. See Hart's quote associated with Note 2, above.

comply. While it is not preposterous to describe *P*'s causing *Q* to do *a* as *inducing* *Q* to do *a*, a power to mechanistically cause someone to comply cannot constitute, even partly, someone as having practical authority over others. Practical authority induces compliance by making a difference in a subject's deliberations about what the subject should do. However, *P* cannot make the required difference in *Q*'s deliberations by mechanistically *causing* *Q* to make the desired movements because those mechanisms bypass *Q*'s deliberations altogether.

Practical authority can make a difference in a subject's deliberations about whether to comply only by *rationally inducing* them to do so – i.e., by creating something they are likely to regard as a reason to perform the required act because, as a rational self-interested agent, they should regard it as such. Practical authority, as we conceive it, is partly constituted by the power to generate reasons that are reasonably contrived to rationally induce compliance in rational self-interested agents, by *persuading* them to do so, and is thus partly constituted by the power to *persuade*.

The relevant power, in Raz's view, is the power of will-imposition. Again, as Raz explains, a person counts as having practical authority over members of a group only if they are "effective in imposing [their] will on many over whom [they] claim authority" (Raz 1994, 211). Indeed, it is plausible to think will-imposition is the only capacity that practical authority has, by its nature, to induce rationally competent subjects to comply, by creating reasons that persuade them to do so. It is hence the power of will-imposition that constitutes the requisite power to persuade, which any practical authority has, by its nature.

3. THE POWER OF WILL-IMPOSITION

The relevant power of will-imposition cannot be understood without grasping the concepts of power and will-imposition out of which it is constructed. This section explicates these constituent concepts as a step towards explicating the compound notion of the power of will-imposition, as the content of that concept is determined by our conceptual practices.

3.1. The Concept of Power

To have a power to bring about state of affairs $\mathcal{S}$ is to have the ability to bring about that $\mathcal{S}$ occurs, as it is incoherent to say P has the *power* to bring about something P is unable to bring about.⁸

This power is nomological, or causal, in character. The claim that P has the *power* to bring about state of affairs $\mathcal{S}$ entails that it is *nomologically* possible for P to do something that causally brings about the occurrence of $\mathcal{S}$.⁹ However, it likewise entails the stronger claim that there is something that P has the ability to do that is reasonably likely to bring about $\mathcal{S}$. It might (or might not) be nomologically possible for me to run a sub-four-minute mile by moving my legs fast enough to traverse a mile in less than four minutes, but I do not have an ability that counts as a power to do that because I cannot make them move that fast while carrying my weight across the length of a mile without some technological enhancement, no matter how hard I train.¹⁰

To constitute a power, this causal ability must be reliable in the sense that someone with this ability can regularly do a and consistently bring about $\mathcal{S}$ by doing a . There is a sense, for instance, in which Bob Beamon counts as having been *able* to long-jump 29 feet, since he did that in 1968, and it is self-evidently true, to put the matter in philosophical slogan-speak, that “*does* implies *can*.” However, he never had something that counts as the *power* to do so, because his next-best jump was under 28 feet, during a career that

⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *power* as “an *ability* or capacity to do something or act in a particular way” (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/power>, last visited June 22, 2026, emphasis by author), while *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as the “*ability* to act or produce an effect” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/power>, last visited June 22, 2026, emphasis by author). I cite dictionary definitions in this essay only to justify the claim that a certain proposition is a truism – which would otherwise have to be assumed – or to clarify which usage is relevant. The dictionary definitions I cite do no heavy philosophical lifting at all.

⁹ The relevant use of power has not, as far as I can tell, been explored by legal theorists. Legal theorists tend to focus on political power, which is not the relevant usage here. Political power refers to what a person is authorized to do in the political sphere or, for those who are more cynical, what they can get away with doing in that sphere.

¹⁰ I once devoted a year to trying to run a mile in under five minutes and got no closer than five-and-a-half, before I realized, to my great frustration, the futility of the endeavor.

spanned more than ten years. Although breathtaking, his record-breaking jump was a fluke because, while he was *able* to do that once, that ability was not reliable and hence did not rise to the level of a power.¹¹

Someone with a causal ability to bring about $\underline{S}$ without fail counts as having the power to bring it about, but one can have the power to bring about $\underline{S}$ that is not perfectly reliable in bringing it about. Although the causal ability of a calculator to bring about a state of affairs in which two numbers are correctly added might be perfectly reliable, most adults count as having the power to add two numbers even though they often make mistakes. It is therefore enough to constitute them as having the power to add two numbers that they can consistently bring about that two numbers are correctly added, by performing the relevant operations over the period during which they count as having the power to do so.

How consistently someone must be able to produce $\underline{S}$ by doing $\underline{a}$ in order to count as having a power to bring about $\underline{S}$ by doing $\underline{a}$, is not clear, but this much is: the claim that someone can have the power to bring about $\underline{S}$ by doing $\underline{a}$ without being perfectly reliable in bringing it about by doing $\underline{a}$ entails that the requisite ability need not be causally mechanistic. Since we conceive practical authority's power to persuade as a causal ability (what else could it be?) to *influence* the subject's reasoning *rather than as the ability to mechanistically change* the brain states on which the subject's beliefs supervene, noncompliance remains both conceptually and causally possible.

Accordingly, the claim that P has the causal power to bring about state of affairs $\underline{S}$ by doing $\underline{a}$ does not entail P 's doing $\underline{a}$ *causes* the occurrence of $\underline{S}$. I have a causal ability to bring it about that some readers are persuaded by the arguments I make and accept the conclusion, but it misdescribes the matter to say that I *caused* them to accept it. Although one needs certain causal abilities to persuade other people (e.g., the ability to communicate content), one does not count as persuading a person by *causing* their beliefs to change. As we conceptualize the notion, persuasion operates by *influencing* someone's deliberations and not by *causing* their beliefs or deliberations to change.

¹¹ There are some complications here, such as the fact that the stadium in which Beamon landed that jump is more than 2,200 meters above sea level, but none that requires modifying the analysis: if he could reliably jump that distance there, he would count as having the power to jump that distance – at least, in that stadium.

3.2. The Concept of Will

Though it is uncontentious that practical authority is constituted, in part, by the power to impose its will on subjects with respect to what they do, it is not clear what will-imposition amounts to, since there is no literature explicating that concept. One conspicuous difficulty pertains to the meaning of *will* in this context, as we cannot explicate what it is to *impose one's will* without understanding what the term *will* means.

It is important to note that the problems associated with fleshing out the concept of *free will* are not concerned with the concept of will; they are concerned with explaining the concept of *freedom* in a manner that entails that competent rational subjects can permissibly be held accountable for acts that are morally wrongful because they have freedom to choose what they do. As Timothy O'Connor and Christopher Franklin describe the issue:

[D]isputes about free will ineluctably involve disputes about metaphysics and ethics. In ferreting out the kind of control at stake in free will, we are forced to consider questions about (among others) causation, laws of nature, time, substance, ontological reduction vs emergence, the relationship of causal and reasons-based explanations, the nature of motivation and more generally of human persons. In assessing the significance of free will, we are forced to consider questions about [...] rightness and wrongness, good and evil, virtue and vice, blame and praise, reward and punishment, and desert (O'Connor, Franklin 2002).¹²

The problem of free will is ultimately concerned with whether our folk attributions of culpability are justified and thus with whether subjects may, on our shared moral views, be permissibly blamed, censured, or punished.¹³ It is, accordingly, concerned to explicate the relevant concept of *freedom* in order to ascertain whether we can justly be held morally accountable for our acts, because those acts count as *freely* chosen on the relevant usage of

¹² The problem is especially acute if determinism, i.e., the view that every event has a physical cause, is true.

¹³ I make no claims here about the content of objective morality since I doubt, like most moral theorists, that we have epistemic access to any such content. The only theories that imply that we have such access – such as moral intuitionism and the Kantian claim that the content of an objective morality can be derived from objective truths of reason to which we have reliable epistemic access in virtue of being rational – have long been decisively refuted.

the terms *free* and *freedom* – which requires ascertaining, once that concept is adequately explained, whether our wills are free in the morally requisite sense.¹⁴

The noun term *will* is etymologically related to the noun term *willing* as its root but the occurrence of the former in the locution *impose one's will* does not refer to something that counts as a willing. The term *willing* is used to describe a conscious mental state that is commonly believed to constitute the immediate cause of an action: the conscious mental state constituting my willing (or volition) to lift my left arm at time *t*, on these shared views, causes me – in some mysterious way – to lift it at time *t*. Although it is not optimally clear what will-imposition amounts to, it is clear that a willing qua conscious mental state is not the kind of thing that can be *imposed* on others.

To understand the relevant use of *will*, it is helpful to consider the idea of something being done *against* someone's *wishes*.¹⁵ To say an act *a* was done against *Q*'s wishes is to say that *a* was done against *Q*'s *evident* desires – and hence to say that it was done not just without *Q*'s consent but *over* *Q*'s expressed objection. If *P* does something *Q* does not want done but is unaware that *Q* does not want it done, then *P*'s doing it does not count as *against Q's wishes*. While *Q* need not verbalize their objections, to constitute *P*'s act as done *against Q's wishes*, this must be evident to *P*: if *Q* criticizes *P* for having done it against *Q*'s wishes when those wishes have not been made evident to *P*, then *P* is likely to respond, and quite reasonably, that *P* did not know that *Q* did not want it done.

This much is clear about the logical relationship between doing something against a person's *wishes* and doing something against a person's *will*: the claim that *a* is done against *Q*'s *will* implies it is done against their *wishes*; however, the claim that *a* is being done against *Q*'s *wishes* does not imply that it is done against *Q*'s *will*. A judge who overrules *Q*'s objection to permitting *R*'s testimony counts as permitting it against *Q*'s *wishes* but not as against *Q*'s *will* – unless *Q*, for instance, has committed a criminal offense trying to prevent the judge from issuing the order. It might be true that *Q* need not do something to physically resist *a* being done in order for it to count as having *a* done *against Q's will*, but *Q* must, at least, express an objection to it being done.

¹⁴ As they explain, “[t]he topic of free will also gives rise to purely empirical questions that are beginning to be explored in the human sciences: do we have it, and to what degree?” (O'Connor, Franklin 2002, Note 16).

¹⁵ As *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the term, *to wish* is “to have a desire for” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wish>, last visited June 22, 2026).

This suggests that the term *will*, like the term *wish*, refers to a mental state that takes as its content an *evident* preference with respect to something; however, this use of *will* in claims about act *a* being done *against* this preference, unlike the term *wish*, asserts that the preference has been expressed in a way that communicates resistance to *a* being done. While one might think the relevant difference has to do with the strength of the preference, this is problematic: I can have the most passionate preference that *a* not be done, but doing *a* is not done against my will *unless* I express my resistance by attempting in some manner to prevent it being done.

Another difference between the two concepts is that the claim that *a* is done against *Q*'s *will*, unlike the claim that *a* is done against *Q*'s *wishes*, implies that *Q* has some *direct* control over whether *a* is done. A judge's order that *R* take *Q* into custody can be made against *Q*'s *wishes* but not against *Q*'s *will* because *Q* lacks the right kind of control over whether the judge issues that order to *R*: given that *Q* can resist *R*'s efforts to take *Q* into custody even if *Q* is handcuffed, *R* can take *Q* into custody against *both Q's wishes and will*. However, that is different from resisting the judge's issuance of the order.

Consequently, one relevant usage of *will* is to refer to a preference expressed in the form of a willing. Just as the claim that *a* is done against *Q*'s will implies that *Q* has instantiated a willing that resists *a* being done, the claim that *P* has imposed their will on *Q*, with respect to *P*'s doing *a*, implies that *P* has instantiated a willing which conflicts with *Q*'s willing that *P* not do *a*. If *P*, for instance, must deploy force to incarcerate *Q*, *P* has done something against *Q*'s will that counts as an imposition of *P*'s will on *Q* – although that need not also count as an exercise of authority over *Q*. The meaning of *will* is related to the meaning of *willing* in this instance as follows: *P*'s willing that *a* be done produces the behavioral manifestation – i.e., *P* doing *a* – of the preference expressed by *P*'s will that *a* be done.

Another relevant use of *will* is to refer to a preference that is, or would be, expressed in a willing: if *Q* is disposed to instantiate a willing expressing a preference not to do *a* but decides to instantiate a willing to do *a* because *P* has threatened *Q* with detriment should *Q* not do *a*, then *P* counts as having imposed *P*'s will on *Q* with respect to *P* doing *a* – though not necessarily as having done something *against Q's will*. The meaning of *will* is related to that of *willing* in this example in the following way: *P*'s act expressing a willing that *Q* do *a* reverses and thereby, as one might put the matter, *overrides Q's will* that *Q* not do *a* in virtue of, say, making a threat that induces a willing on the part of *Q* to do *a*.

These two usages of *will* correspond to two important mechanisms of authoritative guidance: the first describes how it functions in contexts where a telling is *enforced* against a subject for noncompliance, and the second describes how it functions in contexts where the subject is induced to comply as a means to avoid the imposition of a sanction. It would, of course, be premature to infer the sanctions thesis at this point in the argument because these are examples that merely illustrate two usages that cohere with – rather than provide substantive support for – that thesis. But they clearly speak to its plausibility.

3.3. The Compound Concept of Will-Imposition

It is clear that the notions of will-imposition and will-opposition (i.e., something being done against one's will) are related since both involve the ability to override someone else's will by reversing or neutralizing it. However, authority's constitutive power of will-imposition cannot be explained in terms of the notion that it characteristically does something against the will of subjects with respect to what they are directed to do. The problem is that if *P* tells *Q* to do *a* and *Q* complies out of fear that *P* will *punish* *Q* if *Q* does not comply, *P* has imposed *P*'s will on *Q* without doing something against *Q*'s will. (*P* might, of course, punish *Q* for noncompliance with *P*'s will).

It is a conceptual *truism* that will-imposition involves the use of force. As the idiomatic phrase *impose one's will* is defined by *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, it means “to force other people to do what one wants”.¹⁶ Practical authority's constitutive power of will-imposition can thus be explained only by reference to a power that involves using force as a means of inducing compliance. It should be clear that Raz is concerned not only with our ordinary concept of law and authority, but also our ordinary concepts of power and will-imposition. Nowhere does Raz (or anyone else in the literature) stipulate special meanings for any of these terms.

That said, we cannot reliably infer the sanctions thesis from the claim that practical authority is partly constituted by a power of will-imposition with respect to what subjects do because the term *force* is ambiguous. Although the term *force* is most commonly used to refer to a threat of violence as

¹⁶ Impose one's will. *Merriam-Webster English Dictionary* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impose%20one%27s%20will>, last visited June 22, 2026).

a means of coercing someone to do something they do not want to do,¹⁷ a second usage is defined in terms of a power to *persuade*: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this use as a “mental or moral strength or power”.¹⁸

4. PERSUASION BY WILL-IMPOSITION: AUTHORITY AND THE POWER TO PERSUADE

Epistemic authority differs from practical authority in a number of interesting respects but one is especially salient: while *P* being able to do something reasonably contrived to persuade *Q* to do what *P* directs *Q* to do is a necessary condition for *P* to count as having *practical* authority over *Q*, *P* being able to do something reasonably contrived to persuade *Q* to believe what *P* says should be believed is not a necessary condition for *P* to count as having *epistemic* authority over *Q*.

Epistemic authority on a given topic is wholly constituted by recognized expertise on it: an oncologist counts as an epistemic authority on cancer solely in virtue of their expertise, which is conferred by their education and publicly acknowledged by their license to practice medicine and a medical board certification in oncology; it is their expertise that constitutes their diagnostic and therapeutic claims as reasons for patients to believe them. An oncologist utterly unequipped to persuade patients of their claims and recommendations might be quite bad at doctoring; however, they nonetheless count as having epistemic authority on cancer in virtue of possessing the requisite expertise.¹⁹ Societally recognized expertise on topic *t* is enough to constitute someone as having epistemic authority with respect to *t* because it is not a necessary condition for *P* to count as having *epistemic* authority over others as to *t* that *P* is efficacious in persuading them that *P*'s beliefs about *t* are correct.

In contrast, as Raz points out, *P* being minimally efficacious in persuading *Q* to do what *P* tells *Q* to do is a necessary condition for *P* to count as having practical authority over *Q*; someone unable to persuade others to

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this usage as “coercion or compulsion, especially with the threat of violence” (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/force>, last visited June 22, 2026).

¹⁸ Force. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/force>, last visited June 22, 2026.

¹⁹ Similarly, someone who has expertise in a given area of mathematics counts as an epistemic authority in that area regardless of whether they are any good at teaching courses in their area of expertise.

comply with their tellings lacks the power to induce compliance that is partly constitutive of practical authority. If, for instance, someone lacks the resources to persuade drivers to pull over to the shoulder when they are committing an infraction on a stretch of highway, it is partly because they do not count as having practical authority over them to *direct* their driving behavior on that stretch.

Practical authority also differs from epistemic authority in terms of the mechanism it uses to persuade: *when* an epistemic authority wants to persuade, it will do so by means of explanations that others are free to question: if an epistemic authority wants to persuade *Q* to believe or do *a*, they will try to do so by explaining why it should be believed or done, according to some evidentiary metric that *Q* regards, or should (on the relevant epistemic standards) regard, as relevant in deciding *whether* *Q* should believe or do *a*. An oncologist counts as not crappy *at doctoring* partly in virtue of being willing and able to explain their claims about a cancer patient's condition in an accessible manner that answers any questions the patient might have.

In contrast, a police officer who pulls you over on the highway *need not* attempt to convince you they are justified in either pulling you over or ordering you to exit your car – though they should, especially during these times of unrest between the police and the public. If a police officer finds it disrespectful to be questioned, they will likely respond by threatening to arrest you should you fail to comply. However, if they answer your questions, they are likely to regard themselves as having done you a favor. Although practical authority is partly constituted by a power to induce compliance by means of persuasion, practical authorities are not usually willing to explain themselves to subjects because practical authorities expect subjects to do as they are told when they are told to do so. This is part of what authoritative guidance is deployed to do – i.e., to preempt debate.²⁰

It is true, of course, that practical authority must be able to create epistemic reasons for subjects to believe that they should do what the authority tells them to do; however, one need not be an epistemic authority to create epistemic reasons to believe what one says. It is enough with respect to the vast majority of what we say that we are sensibly regarded as credible and reasonably conscientious about verifying claims before we assert them. If *Q* knows that *P* carefully reads the newspaper and is generally honest, then *Q*

²⁰ This does *not* imply that authoritative tellings give rise to second-order preemptive reasons for action, as Raz defines that compound notion. One can preempt debate by threatening force, but a threat of force gives rise only to a first-order prudential reason to comply.

has a defeasible epistemic reason to believe what *P* says when *P* claims that the newspaper said something. It suffices to endow a practical authority *P* with the capacity to produce epistemic reasons that *Q* has persuasive reason to believe that (i) some normative system governing *Q*'s behavior confers authority upon *P* to *direct* *Q*'s behavior over a given range of acts, and (ii) *P* says what they mean when they tell *Q* to do something within the applicable range of behaviors.

The relevant power to persuade subjects to comply is what is picked out by talk of practical authority being *effective* in imposing their will on subjects. Since *P* counts as having practical authority over *Q* only if *P* is, at least, minimally effective in imposing *P*'s will on *Q*, having the power of will-imposition over *Q* with respect to what *Q* does is partly constitutive of practical authority. Nonetheless, someone who is equipped to persuade others to do *a* only by resorting to the means deployed by epistemic authorities when they try to explain themselves does not count as having practical authority pertaining to whether other people do *a* because someone can count as having practical authority to require a subject to do *a* without being remotely inclined to explain why they must do *a*. "Because I said so" is often said to emphasize that the subject of an authoritative telling is not entitled to an explanation – and will not get one. Persuasion by explanation has nothing to do with will-imposition and thus tells us nothing about the nature of practical authority as it is determined by our conceptual practices.

4.1. Causal and Rational Inducement

There are two ways that *P* can do something that counts as imposing *P*'s will on *Q* to induce *Q* to perform some act: causal inducement by physical compulsion and rational inducement by persuasion.

Physical compulsion, as was discussed above, is *not* relevant in explaining practical authority's constitutive power to induce compliance by will-imposition because authority imposes its will by *rationally* inducing the subject to comply by giving rise to reasons that persuade, and not by *causally* inducing the brain states that mechanistically produce body movements. Practical authority persuades, and hence rationally induces, subjects to comply by providing reasons that are reasonably contrived to change their deliberations about whether to comply. In contrast, one can physically compel a person to "do" something that they do not want to do only by neutralizing any effect the applicable reasons may have in a subject's deliberations – by rendering them normatively impotent. This could be done,

for example, by producing a sequence of brain states that causes a subject to ignore those reasons. However, someone whose bodily movements are physically *compelled* in this way does not count as having *performed* an act.

Rational inducement by persuasion involves the transmission of content that makes a difference in a subject's deliberations by implicating practical reasons they find relevant, whereas causal inducement by physical compulsion does not. Although it might be possible for *P* to causally induce *Q* to do *a*, *P* does not count as exercising their practical authority by doing so because the relevant mechanisms do not – and need not – include transmitting content: practical authority is exercised by directing the behavior of others. Nonetheless, one can do something that counts, on our conceptual practices, as *directing* behavior only by transmitting content that expresses a telling.²¹

The only way *P* can do something that counts as persuading *Q* to do *a* is by creating reasons that change *Q*'s assessment of the applicable reasons in *Q*'s deliberations so that *Q* goes from believing that the reasons favor not doing *a* to believing that they favor doing *a*. Persuasion involves making a person aware of reasons that change, or should change, their deliberations; while this can be done by calling their attention to a reason they are unaware of, practical authority does this, or attempts to do this, through tellings that *create* new reasons to do what they require.

4.2. Will-Imposition as Persuasion by Force

Practical authority is partly constituted by a power to persuade subjects to comply by doing something that creates practical reasons to comply; however, as seen above, the mechanism is different from making arguments or giving explanations. Our conceptual practices mark this difference by explaining authority's constitutive ability to persuade in terms of a power of will-imposition. However, this entails that practical authority's constitutive

²¹ Imposition of will by *enforcement* does not *necessarily* involve changing the content of the subject's will, and for this reason, does not *necessarily* count as exercising authority. Someone whose sole responsibility is to administer lethal injections to inmates convicted of capital crimes is *authorized* to do so but is not plausibly characterized as *exercising practical authority* by doing so. Although etymologically related, the concepts of authority and authorization come apart in such cases.

power to persuade, and thus to *rationally induce*, subjects to comply is grounded in an ability to threaten something that counts, on at least one of the two definitions discussed above, as *forcing* compliance.

Practical authorities do not exercise their authority when they attempt to persuade subjects by making arguments. Since (1) practical authorities, as discussed above, need not attempt to persuade subjects by giving arguments and (2) someone can count as exercising practical authority only by doing something reasonably contrived to persuade its subjects, practical authority cannot be exercised by simply giving arguments; though there is nothing in our conceptual practices that would preclude someone who has practical authority from making arguments, doing so does not count as exercising practical authority.²²

Practical authorities persuade by means of *coercive* force. If you point a gun at me and threaten to kill me unless I give you the money in my wallet, your threat will persuade me to do so. By conveying that I will be killed if I do not comply, you have created a reason for me to surrender my cash that outweighs any countervailing reasons I might think I have because, being rationally self-interested, I should regard it as such.

Notice that it would not merely be *unjustified* to refuse. Given that you are threatening my life, it would be arguably *irrational* to do so since refusing to do so, absent exceptional circumstances, raises serious concerns about my mental health. While not every unjustified decision counts as irrational, it is irrational, absent exceptional circumstances, to refuse to surrender one's wallet when a gun is pointed at one's face. Indeed, this strikes me as the case even if one has reason to believe the robber is bluffing. Some bets are not worth making no matter what the odds of winning turn out to be. When one is betting one's life in circumstances where someone else has threatened it, the best bet is to avoid death by complying. One can always earn more money, but one cannot get one's life back.

²² One might think that appellate judges must attempt to persuade litigants by issuing opinions justifying their orders and hence count as exercising their authority when they do so, but this conclusion is false. If judges are not legally obligated to issue opinions, then they are simply extending a courtesy by doing so. However, if judges are legally obligated to issue opinions, they are satisfying a legal directive that constrains how they exercise their legal authority when they issue an opinion. But judges are not exercising their legal authority *by* issuing opinions expressing their reasoning. It is not uncommon for authorities to do things that do not count as an exercise of their authority – even if they are legally required to do these things. Police in the U.S. are legally required, for instance, to read suspects their Miranda rights but do not count as exercising authority when they do so.

Of course, a robber does not count as exercising practical authority over someone by threatening to kill them; however, the issue is whether a robber does something that counts as persuasion by threatening force – and that is easily settled: just as a judge does something that counts as *persuading* a litigant when the latter complies with the judge’s order to avoid being held in contempt, a robber does something that counts as *persuading* a victim to part with their cash when they comply to avoid being murdered. Though garden-variety robbers cannot do something that counts as exercising practical authority by bundling their tellings with threats of punishment or sanctions, that is exactly how courts do something that counts as exercising their practical authority.

What is being changed in these cases is a *belief* on the part of the subject about what the subject should do. A credible threat of nontrivial detriment alters the deliberative calculus by implicating the subject’s prudential interests in a way that changes, and should change, their beliefs about whether to comply, by creating something they regard, and should regard, as a reason to do so. Persuasion-by-force constitutes a mechanism of rational inducement that is uniquely effective among self-interested beings who are hard-wired, like us, to avoid what *we regard* as detriment.²³

We can now straightforwardly resolve the ambiguity with respect to the term *force*. It might have seemed that something can count as an instance of force on just one of these usages; on this reasoning, nothing can count as an instance of coercion *and* as an instance of persuasion. But coercion can rationally induce a subject to comply by persuading them to comply as a means of avoiding the threatened detriment in circumstances where they are not already disposed to comply.

5. THE SANCTIONS THESIS: WILL-IMPOSITION, ACQUIESCENCE, AND EFFICACY

Establishing that the sanctions thesis can explain practical authority’s constitutive power of will-imposition is straightforward. Given (1) that the phrase *impose one’s will* means “to *force* other people to do what one wants” and (2) that the sanctions thesis explains authority’s power to *persuade* in terms of a norm-governed capacity to *enforce* (or order enforcement of) its

²³ I include the qualifier *we regard* because what counts as detriment to us depends on our preferences. Some people, for instance, do not regard certain kinds of pain as detriment because they experience it as pleasurable.

tellings, the sanctions thesis explains practical authority's constitutive power of will-imposition as a power to persuade subjects to do as they are told – as a means of avoiding the imposition of something that counts as force.

The application conditions of the relevant use of the term *force* are as broad as those of the term *coerce*. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, *force* means “coercion or compulsion, especially with the use or threat of violence.”²⁴ The inclusion of the term *especially* indicates that one can deploy something that counts as force without threatening violence: if *P* threatens to disclose embarrassing facts about *Q* if *Q* refuses to do *a* and *Q* complies to prevent the disclosure, *Q* counts as forced *and* coerced to do *a*, as we conceive those notions. Force and coercion amount to the same thing because *P* counts as coercing *Q* to do *a* if and only if *P* threatens to deploy force in the event *Q* fails to do *a*.

It is equally straightforward to show that *only* the sanctions thesis can explain practical authority's power of will-imposition. Any act reasonably contrived to “*force* other people to do what [an authority] wants” constitutes an *enforcement* mechanism in virtue of thereby being reasonably contrived to deter noncompliance to the requisite extent. Since the only way to *force* someone to do something not involving physical compulsion is by means that count as coercive, the sanctions thesis uniquely explains practical authority's constitutive power of will-imposition.

The sanctions thesis incorporates both uses of *force* discussed above by explaining authority's constitutive power of will-imposition in terms of its norm-governed capacity to create *persuasive* force by threatening *coercive* force: the notion that we have, or converge on *taking ourselves to have*, an objective reason to avoid coercive force is what explains its persuasive force. Practical authority's power of will-imposition can thus be explained only in terms of a constitutive ability to persuade through means that count as coercive and is hence *forceful* in both senses of the root term.

(It bears noting that this explains why normative political philosophy is principally concerned with articulating the conditions under which authoritative guidance, such as that of law, is morally justified. The only plausible explanation of why authoritative guidance, by its nature, stands in need of moral justification is that it threatens and *does* bad things to people when they do not comply. However, the only bad thing practical authorities

²⁴ Force. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/force>, last visited June 22, 2026. This usage of *force* is purely descriptive.

could do, *by its nature*, to subjects who fail to comply is to impose detriment that is plausibly described as a *sanction*, as I have explained the notion above.)

Although the two terms share the root *force*, the claim that *Q* was *forced* to comply with a telling is logically independent of the claim that the telling was *enforced* against *Q*. To begin, if *Q* counts as having been forced to do *a*, it is false that a telling requiring *Q* to do *a* counts as enforced against *Q* because a telling can count as *enforced* against a subject only after they have not complied. While a clear and credible threat of *enforcement* can induce compliance (by *forcing* it), an act counts as an instance of enforcement only if performed in response to a case of noncompliance. For instance, a court is permitted to apply a contempt sanction to induce a subject to comply only if the subject has not already complied.

Conversely, if a telling requiring *Q* to do *a* has been enforced against *Q*, it is because *Q* was deemed – by some agent authorized to make such determinations – not to have done *a* and thus does not count as having been forced to do it prior to its enforcement. It is true that a sanction can be imposed on a complying subject because the authority either believes the subject did not comply or just does not care. However, it is as misleading to characterize a telling as *enforced* against a *complying* subject as it is to characterize a subject as *punished* for an offense they did not commit. Since the point of a norm permitting enforcement is to induce *compliance* and one cannot induce the compliance of someone who has already complied, it is misleading, if not incoherent, to characterize a telling as having been *enforced* against a subject who complied. Since, further, punishment involves “inflict[ing] [...] retribution”²⁵ and since retribution cannot be inflicted on an innocent person, it is also misleading, if not incoherent, to describe someone who is sanctioned for something they did not do as having been *punished*.²⁶

While we might sometimes use the phrase “wrongful enforcement” to describe such cases, this is more a matter of verbal economy than of conceptual precision. Such precision is usually unwelcome in ordinary conversation but is essential in coming to understand *our* concepts – which are the only concepts we have reliable epistemic access to. A punishment imposed on an innocent subject counts no more as an instance of enforcement than a voided agreement counts as a contract. Conceptual precision requires

²⁵ Punish. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/punish>, last visited June 22, 2026.

²⁶ Retribution involves the infliction of punishment that counts as *deserved*. “Retribution,” *Cambridge English Dictionary*; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/>, last visited June 22, 2026.

much more verbiage, which is why it is unwelcome in most social situations. Nonetheless, nothing is lost other than the time it takes to add a few words; it is as unjust to impose a sanction against someone who complied with the relevant telling as it is to impose one for a crime they did not commit. A *threat of enforcement* can be deployed to *force* a person to comply but only if they have not already complied – and, *a fortiori*, only if they have not been *forced* to comply.

While the related concepts of force and enforcement can hence come apart in both directions, they are both related to the concept of coercion since they involve reference to the same mechanisms. However, although the concepts of force and enforcement thus incorporate the concept of coercion, which is forward-looking because it is concerned only with efforts to induce compliance by *detering* noncompliance, only the concept of enforcement incorporates the concept of a sanction, which is backward-looking, in virtue of being a response only to noncompliance.

We can now explain the two ways that someone with practical authority can impose their will on subjects. The first is by backing their tellings with a threat of detriment reasonably contrived to induce compliance by persuading subjects to comply as a means of avoiding its imposition. The second is by enforcing tellings with detriment that counts as a sanction in virtue of being reasonably contrived to deter and punish noncompliance, if not expressly intended to do so. Since only the sanctions thesis is equipped to explain what constitutes practical authority as having the power to impose their will on others in each of these ways, it uniquely explains practical authority's constitutive power of will-imposition.

It bears remembering that there is nothing in the sanctions thesis or the supporting analysis here that entails that subjects always comply; the mere fact that an authority has the power of will-imposition over subjects does not entail that the detriment threatened by the authority will necessarily induce compliance. Subjects violate authoritative directives for a variety of motives, which might include the belief they will not be caught or that the benefits of noncompliance exceed the costs.

The thesis and arguments of this essay also do not entail that people are motivated to comply with authority *only* by prudential considerations. It might be true that most subjects comply with the authorities in their lives because they accept them as legitimate and hence regard authoritative directives as giving rise not only to prudential reasons but to moral reasons.

Nonetheless, all that the sanctions thesis presupposes, by way of claims about the motivation of subjects, is that self-interested subjects regard the prudential reasons to which nontrivial sanctions give rise as relevant – even

in cases in which they do not need recourse to considerations of self-interest to decide to comply. I comply with traffic laws because I believe I have a moral obligation to others to protect their safety by doing so. But I also comply because I, like most people, regard the prospect of having to pay a ticket or go to jail for a violation as relevant – though I do not need to think about these considerations to decide whether to violate a traffic law (which, like most folks, I sometimes do if there are no safety-related reasons to comply).

One might reject the underlying premise that practical authority is partly constituted by the power of will-imposition precisely because it entails that practical authority is coercive by nature, and one might find this conclusion counterintuitive. However, it is crucial to observe that, as an observable empirical matter, every uncontentious instance of a telling that counts as authoritative is backed by a threat of detriment reasonably contrived to deter noncompliance to some threshold extent. An employer's tellings are backed by a threat of termination; a teacher's tellings are backed by a threat of suspension; a military commander's tellings are backed by a threat of a court martial; and the valid tellings of a legal system are backed by liabilities that take the form of punishment for breaches of criminal law and take the form of orders of compensation for breaches of civil duties; these court orders are backed by the contempt sanction.²⁷ While I am aware that the conclusion may be regarded as contentious, I think this essay succeeds, at the very least, in shifting the burden of proof to dissenters to find an uncontentious counterexample.

6. A CONCEPTUAL INCONSISTENCY IN RAZ'S THEORY OF PRACTICAL AUTHORITY

It is worth noting that the Razian theory of authority is marred by an inconsistency. Raz's claim that it is a necessary condition for *P* to possess practical authority over *Q* that *P* is minimally effective in imposing *P*'s will on *Q* is inconsistent with his society-of-angels argument. The latter argues that it is possible to have a normative system that counts as law in a society of rational self-interested beings who are always inclined to comply with the authority's tellings, regardless of what they purport to require. Otherwise put, the society-of-angels argument is intended to establish that there can be something that counts as legal authority without sanctions.

²⁷ Court orders are backed by the contempt sanction in every legal system we know of; such sanctions include incarceration and fines to induce compliance.

The obvious problem here is that the idea that there can be a normative system that counts as a system of law and hence as authoritative without sanctions cannot be reconciled with Raz's claim that it is a necessary condition for *P* to count as having practical authority over other persons that *P* is effective in imposing *P*'s will on them and thereby in inducing them – by means of threats of force – to do as *P* directs. As we have seen, the only way a person can impose their will on others is by means that count as threatening detriment in the form of sanctions. It straightforwardly follows that there cannot be a system that counts as law without sanctions and hence that there cannot be someone who counts as having legal authority in a system of norms lacking sanctions.

One might think that the idea that there can be a normative system lacking sanctions that counts as a system of law is also inconsistent with Raz's claim that it is in the nature of practical authority that its tellings give rise to second-order preemptive reasons, but there is no inconsistency here. There is nothing in Raz's theory of practical authority that implies that authoritative tellings give rise *only* to second-order preemptive reasons. Although Raz's society-of-angels argument implies that authoritative tellings need not be backed by a sanction, his theory of practical authority implies that authoritative tellings necessarily give rise to first-order reasons of some kind, as any theory of practical authority must. A preemptive reason is a second-order reason that merely excludes acting on certain first-order reasons; for this reason, by itself, a preemptive reason is not a reason to do anything – and is hence not a reason to comply. If authoritative tellings are conceptually normative, as Raz believes, then it is because they give rise to first-order reasons to comply, which, in his view, are augmented by second-order preemptive reasons.

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