

Cracks in the glass: fiction, imagination and moral learning

For Patrizia, who tried to show me the good in Stendhal.
The failure was mine.

Suppose I want to be a champion skier. I might be tempted to look at champion skiers skiing, see what they do and follow their example. Not a bad idea. But there are problems. Champion skiers go so very fast; it is hard to see what they are doing in any detail. Also, I don't know what to look for—those crucial bits of technique that make the difference between being an average skier and being an excellent one. At this point I might enlist an expert skier who will talk me through the ski-performance, pointing to and elaborating on the bits of technique I ought to follow. Even better if the expert has a video of a champion ski-performance and can slow it down, perhaps even stopping it from time to time, enabling me to see in detail what is happening.

Suppose things are a little different. The expert does not have a video, but instead has devised an animated cartoon of a skier, which can be slowed and stopped at appropriate times. Sounds good? Maybe. Before signing up for the expert's lessons, it would be sensible to ask how the animated movie got to be made. The animated movie shows all sorts of detail that one can't pick up from watching a ski-performance because, as I say, it is just so fast. How did the expert know what detail to put in to the animation drawings? In the animation, the skier leans this way into the turns, uses the poles thus, and so on. Is that really the right way—the way that works to make you a better, faster, more economical, perhaps more elegant skier? I wouldn't need to ask these questions if what was on offer was a conventional film, for film *records* what is there, not what the maker thinks is there. We would watch the film, suitably slowed, and simply see what the skier did; the results might surprise us all, but they would be reliable, bar digital manipulation or some other tampering. That is not how things are with animation. An animation is, at best, a record of what people think happens. Worse, it might simply record how someone imagines things to be, how they would like them to be, or how they would be in a good story.

The expert might ask us to notice that, in the animation, what the skier is doing looks elegant, powerful and effective. Right: it looks all these things. But recall, it's an animation. I can make an animation of someone diving elegantly out of a tenth story window, sailing safely to the ground. But don't try to emulate the person in the animation, because, elegant and effective though it looks, gravity just doesn't work that way. What we want from the ski-expert is evidence that the animation—something which records what he or she believes about ski technique—is both faithful to the reality of skiing and helpful to someone like me who wants to improve.

Why am I labouring this? Take the idea that a value (certainly not *the* value) of literary fictions is their ability to illustrate the rich detail of our mental and moral lives, and thereby, perhaps, to enhance various

skills, notably moral thinking, moral feeling and what is sometimes alleged to be moral perceiving. I describe all these skills as “moral” skills, on the grounds that (a) they are skills which seem to be important, perhaps essential, for right moral decision and conduct and (b) in discussions of learning from fiction the examples of the exercise of these skills are usually examples where some moral question is at issue. But we might frame the issue more broadly than this, as concerning “how to think well”, where “thinking” is itself taken rather broadly to cover feeling, perceiving as well as modes of propositional thought. But one restriction on the domain of thinking here is important: that the thinking be about persons rather than about numbers or brute physical processes or something else outside the social realm.

I am doubtful about the power of fiction to illuminate and develop our moral thinking. I don’t have a general, powerfully focused argument to offer against the idea; my arguments are a rag bag of common sense reflections on the requirements of learning, mixed with a few points drawn from social psychology. At this stage I’m not really asking that we draw substantial conclusions: rather, that we think about the issue in a way which has been curiously ignored. When novelists and dramatists are praised for their insight into the human mind they are most often said to be imaginative, to produce “richly imagined” narratives with the power to engage and move us. It is rare, on the other hand, for a critic to claim that a novelist or playwright has a vision of effective moral thinking well supported by the best empirical psychology—I suspect it has never happened. That’s not surprising; critics are experts in literature, not in personal and social psychology, except that they sometimes say things they ought not to say given that limitation on their expertise. F. R. Leavis said that Dickens, for all his failing, does not, in *Hard Times*, give “a misleading representation of human nature”.¹ Dr Johnson said of Shakespeare that “he has not only shewn human nature as it acts in real exigences, but as it would be found in trials, to which it cannot be exposed.”² By no responsible reckoning were either in a position to say these things.

But my focus here is on writers of fiction, not of critics. I suspect that novelists like Henry James are like our ski-instructor who has only the cartoon to hand; they don’t record life, they interpret it, and probably get it wrong a lot of the time. Worse, they are like ski-instructors who have very little correct understanding of how to ski, many false beliefs about it, may even be congenitally bad skiers, and have decided, in order to make the animation into an interesting narrative, to show the skier chased over golden mountains by goblins and other distractingly nonexistent beings.

At this point a clarification is in order. I am not advocating any kind of eliminativism about folk psychology. I am not suggesting that our normal ways of thinking about human motivation are fundamentally flawed. On the contrary, I am assuming that for many, many purposes, our knowledge in this area does just fine. We see a man walking away from a car with a petrol can and draw the right inference about his motives; we see the child’s facial expression and realise she is unhappy. But, to repeat,

¹ *The Great Tradition*, New York University Press 1963 (first published in 1948), 233.

² *Preface to Shakespeare*, 1765.

this is base-level stuff, not the kind of thing we are supposed to get from reading Henry James. All I am suggesting that we have very little reason to think that, when it comes to the description of the subtlest, most difficult to articulate, least visible psychological processes, novelists, even great ones, are any better placed than the rest of us are to get this right. And the rest of us are not well placed at all.

Also, I don't rule out the possibility that we may benefit in various ways from getting false opinions from fiction. It may be that in doing so we increase our sense of self-understanding. Perhaps that leads to increased confidence and optimism, even when we are quite wrong in thinking that we understand ourselves. And having a shared sense of self-understanding created or reinforced by fictional narratives may contribute to social cohesion. But these advantages, if they exist, are not what I am concerned with. My question is epistemic.

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Let's characterise the view I oppose a bit more carefully. The kind of learning from fiction that's on offer here depends on the holding of two conditions. The first is:

Fidelity: fictions offer us “actually possible” pictures of what human thinking, feeling and acting are like; pictures which stay within the boundaries set by the capacities of real people to think and feel and act.

We learn, as Aristotle put it, about “how a person of a certain type on occasion speaks or acts, according to the law of probability or necessity”, and we may add, how they think and feel.³ But however often fictions exemplify fidelity, we need another reason to value their doing so. For we have lots of real examples of agency to learn from--ourselves and other real people. So I offer a second condition:

Enhancement: fictions allow us to engage imaginatively, reflectively and in detail with the thoughts, feelings and actions of characters in ways that would be hard or impossible in our normal, on-line transactions with real people.

There is a number of ways fictions provide enhancement; here is a sample: (a) consideration of purely fictional characters and situations relieves us of the burdens of decision-making, strategic thought, action-planning that normally go with any close knit interaction with others, thereby freeing mental resources for the detailed and reflective engagement referred to above; (b) fictions scaffold our own efforts at mind reading by offering description, commentary and contextual information; (c) fictions enhance our own powers of imaginative engagement by making the thought, feeling and action of characters vivid through self-consciously aesthetic modes of representation.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Section I, Part IX.

No one will claim that all or even most fictions satisfy these conditions. But, say the optimists, these two principles are true of *some* fictions—it doesn't have to be many--and we are able to say with some reliability which ones. So we can claim that fictions provide a way to enhance our understanding of real people, their motives and actions. They give us a no doubt fragmentary and imperfect but still worthwhile insight into the mind's work, which may inform our thinking about other, this time real, episodes of thought, feeling and action, including our own. What we take from the fiction might not be explicitly *said*; there's a lot in fiction that is not said in fiction. It may take strenuous interpretive effort to get at it. But when got, it may be credited, at least in part, to the fiction itself.

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The optimistic view has its best known contemporary advocate in Martha Nussbaum. In *Love's Knowledge* and elsewhere Henry James is presented as a novelist who provides the kind of detailed representation of the practice of moral thinking, feeling and decision-making that give literature a right to be counted a philosophical enterprise. Nussbaum's view is not widely accepted, certainly not in its details. Some of her more general conclusions seem doubtful or even eccentric: the idea, for example, that we might take pleasure in the drama of our own moral lives. Other conclusions seem disappointingly banal, certainly from a moral philosopher's point of view. Do we really need to read the *Golden Bowl* to recognize that loved ones are not fungible goods, for example? Perhaps worries like this explain why some have been dismissive of Nussbaum's whole project, Jenny Teichman famously calling it "snake oil".⁴ But Nussbaum belongs to a large and distinguished family of optimists; in the novelistic tradition recent representatives are Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond,⁵ while the venerable Shakespeare-as-philosopher-of-the-person branch is graced with such figures as Johnson, Bradley and Tony Nuttall.⁶

One optimist who I will comment on in a little more detail is Noel Carroll, who offers a "clarificationist" model of fiction's contribution to our understanding of moral thinking; some of his remarks will help clarify my target. Carroll's most direct concern is with the representation of moral issues themselves in fiction, rather than with the representation of what I am calling moral thinking. Thus he emphasises the role that fictions, sometimes relatively unsophisticated ones, have played in dramatising moral abuses

⁴ "Henry James Among the Philosophers" *New York Review of Books*, February 10, 1991

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Vision and choice in morality*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1956; Cora Diamond, "Having a rough story about what moral philosophy is", *The Realistic Spirit*, MIT Press, 1991. Carroll says that the morally clarificatory role of fiction is not to provide us with propositional knowledge but to engage our "antecedent moral powers", and thereby to "augment them" (Art, narrative and moral understanding, in his *Beyond Aesthetics*, p.283). Carroll denies, however, that there is any significant role in fiction for the creation of empathic effects, where, as he puts it, "imagining what it would feel like to be a character is not the norm in experiencing fiction" (op. cit.).

⁶ Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*; Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Penguin Books, 1991 (first published in 1904); A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, Yale University Press, 2008.

such as slavery, sexual discrimination or homophobia. Such exercises often don't employ and might not benefit from the kind of exploratory and finely-tuned approach to the mind I want to focus on here, working instead by eliciting from an audience such "ground floor" responses as the recognition of the personhood of the relevant agents, and a sympathetic response to their manifest suffering. We do not need to understand anything much about the details of thinking and feeling to come to see, from such a fiction, how horrible it would be to be in a concentration camp, or to be abused for the colour of one's skin.⁷ It may also be that children's moral development is helped by their exposure to simple moral tales; perhaps stories at this level assist their folk psychological/moral understanding. My argument is about the educative worth of narratives at the high end; the narratives which focus on the microstructure of moral thinking, feeling and acting. The contrast here parallels that between the instructor who can tell you how to put the skis on, and the one who can help you shave a tenth of a second off your downhill run time.

Carroll tends to play down the extent to which fictions of any kind provide new knowledge, emphasising instead the capacity of fiction to increase our capacity to apply what we already know to new, complex cases, and to find connections between, or deeper meanings in, what we already know or believe. But understanding connections between our beliefs sounds to me like gaining new beliefs: believing P and Q I put them together and arrive at a new belief by inference. Since, on no one's account, is belief closed under inference that counts as getting a new belief. What is it to find a deeper meaning in what one believes? It might, once again, be a matter of making an inference from what I believe. Or it might be a matter of re-expressing what I believe using other concepts. But an appropriately fine grained analysis of

⁷ Keith Oatley and colleagues review the state of the evidence for the power of fiction to create empathy. They do not distinguish between studies where participants actually engaged in empathy and studies where, by some means or other, participants came to have a more sympathetic attitude towards the group represented; not all such effects can automatically be assigned empathy as their cause. Oatley and colleagues also do not ask whether there are frequent occasions when empathy-inducing representations are put to highly questionable moral uses, as when xenophobia is generated by vivid representations of wrongs done to one's own social group by people from another. Since there is evidence that people are more inclined to empathise with people they feel closer to than with others, empathy is unlikely to have a generally improving moral effect and may be a significant source of moral error. (Oatley et. al. do note that "Experiences with the morals of stories may not always represent what we would consider self-improvement, however, as the possibility exists that readers may chose to model morally murkier aspects of narratives as well", but they do not develop this theme.) Also, evidence suggesting the recruitment of areas of the brain used in social cognition for narrative comprehension do not suggest much about the elicitation of empathy from narrative because it should be agreed on all hands that narrative comprehension involves pragmatic processing which is itself in part theory of mind skill. Certainly, it is hard to know what to make of their claim that in one experiment "Reading Chekhov induced changes in [subjects'] sense of self—perhaps temporary—such that they experienced themselves not as different in some way prescribed by the story, but as different in a direction toward discovering their own selves". (See Mar, R.A., Djikic, M. & Oatley, K. (2008). Effects of reading on knowledge, social abilities, and selfhood. In S. Zyngier, M. Bortolussi, A. Chesnokova, & J. Auracher (eds.) *Directions in empirical studies in literature: In honor of Willie van Peer*. (pp. 127-137). Amsterdam: Benjamins.)

belief will tell us that new concepts mean new belief. Carroll's clarificationist view is not an alternative to the "new knowledge" interpretation of Optimism; it's a version of it. What Carroll seems to be opposing is the view that fictions might reveal new moral generalities on a par with "murder is wrong", and we can agree with him that it is unnecessary to defend such an ambitious view in order to claim epistemic significance for fiction.

While Carroll does not quite put it this way, his dual emphasis on deepening our understanding of "the moral knowledge and emotions we already command" and on "augmenting" our antecedent moral powers (p.283) suggests a view hospitable to the idea that fiction has not merely moral significance, but significance for our understanding of moral thinking, and hence a capacity to engage and have us reflect upon states more complex and less easily discriminable than the ground floor responses mentioned just now.

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I'd like the argument that follows to apply to as wide a group of theorists as possible, but it will help focus ideas if we first consider a concrete example of fiction's supposed insight into moral thinking: one on which Nussbaum places some emphasis. Instances in this area are very disparate; no example I know of could really be called typical. But this one suggests a worry with some general application, and will lead naturally to the general anti-Optimist arguments that I will put forward.

In James' *The Golden Bowl* we find Adam Verver struggling to give his daughter Maggie the freedom she merits. He achieves a breakthrough of moral perception when he finds an image of her as, in James' words, a "sea creature...consciously floating and shining in a warm summer sea, some element of dazzling sapphire and silver, a creature cradled upon depths, buoyant among dangers, in which fear or folly, or sinking otherwise than in play, was impossible."⁸ This image is a cause, we are to understand, of Adam's subsequent action, and a partial determinant of Maggie's liberation.⁹ It is the *right* image, with the right connotations of freedom and sexual maturity (so says Nussbaum), and it's an image which moves us by its "lucidity, expressive feeling, and generous lyricism". It is not "a flat thing, but a fine work of art".¹⁰

Here, two things are aligned in ways that give the impression that we have made a breakthrough in understanding moral thinking: Adam is represented by Henry James as moved to appropriate moral action by an image, while we are encouraged (by Nussbaum) to be moved, in a way at least partly

⁸ *The Golden Bowl*, P. 477.

⁹ "...as a picture, it is significant—not only in its causal relation to his subsequent speeches and acts, but as a moral achievement in its own right. It is, of course, of enormous causal significance; his speech and acts, here and later, flow forth from it and take from it the rightness of their tone" (Nussbaum, "Finely aware and richly responsible" *Love's Knowledge*, p.520).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

aesthetic, by the image and its power to move the character. But—and this is the worry—there is little reason to think that grasping an image of this kind, in this way, is an effective way of managing one’s moral obligations. No reason, in particular, to see anything verisimilar in the claim that to perceive someone in this way is “to know their situation, not to miss anything in it”.¹¹ But if our emotions are engaged, we stand a good chance of not noticing this, of mistaking the impressive emotional power of this passage for its truthfulness.¹²

So what Nussbaum gives us in this example is, I claim, an instance of something common in fictional contexts: the illusion of insight. Why should we think of this and like cases as illusion? There are several reasons, two of which I will now consider in more general terms; together they add up, I believe, to a prima facie case against the optimistic view.

The first, illustrated by the example just given, is the argument from *emotional mis-targeting*. Emotions affect beliefs in somewhat the way perceptions do. When things are observed to be inconsistent with what we believe, our beliefs tend to shift accordingly. And when our emotions are in conflict with what we believe, there is also a tendency to bring the two into harmony by adjusting belief, at least when emotion does not easily give way.¹³ That is often to the good; neurological patients in Damasio’s gambling experiments did badly because they failed to get the right kind of aversive emotional cues from high-risk strategies, and did not rethink their play; people with intact orbito-frontal cortex were guided by their emotions, adopted more sensible views about what would be unacceptably risky, and avoided big loses.¹⁴ But emotion is course-grained, and poorly-guided, and provoked by representations of events as easily as by events themselves; the emotions aroused by manifestly fictional representations of events may have quite strong effects on beliefs, though there is no guarantee or even much indication of a correlation between the fictional representation and the real events themselves. Even well-educated viewers of Oliver Stone’s unreliable and manipulative *JFK* were highly influenced in their beliefs about the

¹¹ p.521. Nor, for that matter, in Maggie’s own passionate assertion that, while jealousy is generally proportional to the strength of love, “When, however, you love in the most abysmal and unutterable way of all—why then you’re beyond everything, and nothing can pull you down.”

¹² See also Katerina Deligiorgi, Literature and Moral Vision: Autonomism Reconsidered *Philosophical Inquiry* 29:3-4 (2007), criticising Nussbaum’s conflation of the good agent and the good reader. Deligiorgi also has some apt criticisms of views I earlier expressed, some of which the present essay is intended to correct (see my ‘The Moral Psychology of Fiction’ *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995), pp. 250-259; ‘Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction’ in Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics*, pp.161-181.

¹³ See Clore and Gasper, Feeling is believing, in Frijda et al (ed) *Emotions and Beliefs: How feelings influence thought*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁴ See Bechara, A., Damasio, A., Damasio, H., Anderson, S., 1994. Insensitivity to future consequences following damage to human prefrontal cortex. *Cognition* 50, 7–15. For criticism of the experiment and the conclusions drawn see Barnaby D. Dunn, Tim Dalgleish, Andrew D. Lawrence, The somatic marker hypothesis: A critical evaluation, *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 30 (2006) 239–271

likelihood of a wide-ranging conspiracy behind the Kennedy assassination.¹⁵ Additionally I suspect—though I admit to having no systematic evidence for this—we are affected in our beliefs about a represented situation by emotionally arousing aesthetic features of the representational vehicle which have no bearing on the question of whether what is represented is true; this would make sense of the care taken to aestheticize religious practices and state ceremonies.¹⁶ Indeed, the aesthetic embellishment of fiction creates, much in the way that religion does, an atmosphere of high-minded disdain for down-to-earth criticism. It sounds fitting, in a literary context, to insist on the “rightness” of an image; it would sound merely bathetic to advise someone who wants to achieve something worthwhile or to do good to be subliminally exposed to the names of their parents or of good friends. But there is some evidence that subliminal priming of the names of one's parents triggers the motivation to achieve, and that exposure to names of good friends primes the goal of helping.¹⁷ More evidence, so far as I know, than there is for the efficacy of imagining your daughter as a sea creature.

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This last argument combines nicely with one I'll call *lack of vigilance*. It will be helpful to develop it in a couple of stages. Note, first, some experiments of Dan Gilbert's which he suggests support an unorthodox view of belief-formation.¹⁸ In one experiment, subjects read an account of a crime; at the end they were asked to recommend an appropriate sentence. Within the material presented were certain false

¹⁵ See Butler, L., Koopman, C., and Zimbardo, P. G. (1995). The psychological impact of viewing the film, “JFK”: Emotions, beliefs, and political behavioral intentions. *Political Psychology*, 16, 237-257.

¹⁶ I note some convergence of this line of thinking with a claim made by David Velleman (“Narrative explanation”, *Philosophical Review*, 112 (2003), 1-25). He argues that narrative fails as a vehicle for knowledge, because narratives impose on us emotional transitions and a sense of closure that makes us think we have caught on to a causal-explanatory process when all we have is our own “sense of an ending.” Velleman had in mind the emotional “cadence” of a narrative's overall structure; but the same idea could apply at the micro-level, where we consider, as we do in the case of Adam Verver, a character's transition from thought to action. A writer can create an emotionally powerful effect that takes us across this mysterious divide, making us conclude that a good case has been made for the claim that thinking in that way really can help us to act well—or equally, that thoughts with a certain quasi-aesthetic defect (the wrong image, maybe) will send us astray. But these ideas need better support than they get merely from our finding them emotionally or aesthetically satisfying. And none of this better support is on offer, or even, apparently, considered by the writer or by the institutions of literary criticism and interpretation that surround the writer. That just isn't a question we ask when we enter the literary domain.

¹⁷ Fitzsimons G. M. & Bargh J. A. 2003. Thinking of you: nonconscious pursuit of interpersonal goals associated with relationship partners. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 84:148–64; Shah, J. Y. 2003. Automatic for the people: how representations of others may automatically affect goal pursuit. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 84:661–81

¹⁸ Daniel T. Gilbert, Romin W. Tatarodi, Patrick S. Malone, You Can't Not Believe Everything You Read, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65 (1993): 221-233.

embellishments to the descriptions of the crime which, if taken seriously, would make them seem worse. These “fictional” passages were not disguised; they were clearly indicated as false and printed in red, while the rest was in black. Nonetheless, the results clearly indicated that subjects who, in their reading task, were distracted by a digit-search task and hence less vigilant, were influenced in their decisions by the material in red, tending to give longer sentences than were given by people who were not exposed to the false material.

Gilbert’s explanation is that anything we are told goes straight into the belief system; it then requires effort, which is not always available or exercised, to remove it. So the distraction task had the effect of allowing the false material to stay in the belief box. Dan Sperber has a better idea: it’s not that everything we hear is initially believed; instead, we possess a mechanism of vigilance which keeps things out of the belief box, but operating it involves costs.¹⁹ So the mechanism is likely to be activated in situations of perceived risk and not in others. In particular, where the information is of no great personal relevance—as it was not in Gilbert’s sentencing experiments—we would not expect there to be much vigilance displayed. That suggests that fictions generally will not have much vigilance lavished on them, unless, unusually, they display relevance to our personal circumstances. If material is not very personally relevant—and so not likely to call our epistemic defences into play—and also emotionally charged through the use of expressive language or artfully arranged episodes of conflict and resolution, the chances of it getting through the defences of our belief system are quite high. And fictional material of high quality often has both these characteristics.

I said that Gilbert’s subjects were influenced by the avowedly false material because they were distracted; this may lead us to question the relevance of his experiment to conclusions about the gullibility of fiction-readers. It’s true that fiction readers are not generally distracted by being asked to do a digit-search while they are reading. But there are often other distractions present in attending to the kinds of fictions we are focusing on here. Consider the tendency in high-end literature, drama and film to render language and other representational devices harder to process than they would be in less self-conscious projects, with complex sentences, strange tropes of narration, counter-intuitive editing techniques, and so on. These are elements of what we call style, and Sperber and Wilson has claimed that the function of style is to facilitate the discovery of relevance in communication. With epizeuxis, as in

There’s a fox, a fox in my garden

we understand that the speaker was surprised or excited by the presence of the fox; the extra processing cost imposed by the repetition indicates that relevant information is available that would not be accessible otherwise.²⁰ But style may serve purposes which are the reverse of knowledge-enhancing. I suggest that

¹⁹ Sperber, D., F. Clément, C. Heintz, O. Mascaro, H. Mercier, G. Origgi, and D. Wilson. "Epistemic vigilance." *Mind and Language* 25 (2011): 359-393..

²⁰ See Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd Edition (Wiley, 1995), p.219.

one of the reasons we enjoy complexity in fiction—and hence one reason we find complexity in successful fiction—is that it provides the kind of distraction that lowers vigilance, helping thereby to generate an illusion of learning. Paradoxically, the sheer complexity of great narrative art, so often taken as a sign of cognitive richness and subtlety, may increase its power to spread ignorance and error.

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