# 4 Christians and the Transcendence of the Good

## A Response to Nigel Biggar

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### 4.1 Introduction

Questions of moral pluralism are complex. They are posed from different perspectives, and they are tackled along many different lines. This is even true of the discussion of moral pluralism and realism in theology. In this, theology is not alone. The discussion of moral pluralism in philosophy is strongly affected by different philosophical schools as well. In the Moral Compass Project, hosted by the Protestant Theological University, we notice this time and again when we discuss each other's contributions to the project. It makes a difference whether one approaches moral realism from an analytic or a continental philosophical perspective. The same goes for schools in theological ethics. It matters whether one approaches moral realism or relativism from a virtue ethical or divine command ethical point of view. Not only this, but one also quickly stumbles upon fundamental presuppositions which govern our ways of thinking about moral questions. Even in a post-metaphysical era, it is very hard to avoid any basic grand story that directs our actions and views, but is as such something that cannot be argued for in knockdown logical terms.

  This is why in the Moral Compass Project, not only ethical, but also theological and dogmatic questions play a role. In the end, whether one adopts a realist, relativist or pluralist standpoint does not go back to an evaluation of empirical data, but is embedded in a grand narrative of what the world and its origin in God look like. Such a grand narrative explains where moral convictions have their place in the universe and how we can make sense of those convictions vis-a-vis the moral pluralism that we find in our modern societies. Such grand narratives can hardly ever be proven true or false in any straightforward way, but they can be argued for or against in terms of their overall explanatory power in making sense of the world around us. Such an argument will always remain partial and contextual, as all the 20th-century masters of suspicion have argued, but this does not make them superfluous or

dangerous.[1] Quite to the contrary, precisely this partiality and contextuality opens them up to a conversation between persons in search of truth, goodness and beauty.[2]

The argument developed in this paper is an attempt to organize a critical conversation between two of such theological grand narratives. One has been presented and defended in the previous chapter by Nigel Biggar. I will summarize it concisely in Section 4.2 and criticize it for its explanatory power of genuine moral disagreements and pluralism in Section 4.3. In Section 4.4, I will present an alternative grand narrative inspired by Augustine of Hippo's *De Trinitate*, and finally, in Section 4.5, I will argue why I think that this theological grand narrative is a more convincing basis for a certain kind of moral realism in combination with a significant amount of moral pluralism.

## 4.2  Biggar's Argument

The beginning of Professor Biggar's argument in his paper "Goods, Rights, and Universality: A Christian View" leads to the main part of his argument in a small number of steps that can be summarized as follows:

1  Moral standpoints are plural.
2  Nevertheless moral views are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
3  There is no moral view from nowhere.
4  I, Nigel Biggar, am a Christian and that is why my moral standpoint is determined by my Christian faith.
5  Christian faith believes in God as one, albeit that this unity is also Trinity at the same time.
6  God is internally coherent and the world God created is coherent as well.
7  Therefore, there must be some set of given moral truths that can be acknowledged by all human beings.

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1  Famously, in theology this argument has been developed by John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006[2]), Ch. 10.
2  Anton Friedrich Koch's 'hermeneutic realism' helps me much to conceive of a form of realism that avoids relativism and absolutism at the same time. According to Koch, language is always rooted in a conversation *between* human beings and *about* a reality that none of them can grasp on their own (Koch, *Hermeneutischer Realismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); more concisely Anton Friedrich Koch, "Rationalität im Gespräch. Grundlegendes aus philosophischer Perspektive," in *Rationalität im Gespräch – Rationality in Conversation. Philosophisch-theologische Perspektiven – Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Markus Mühling et al. (Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 11–22).

I quote the decisive step where Biggar proceeds from the monotheistic belief in one God to the presence of a moral reality of some kind (steps 5–7 specified above):

> "The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Dt. 6.4). Christians (following Jews and alongside Muslims) are monotheists. They may believe that God's oneness is complex, Trinitarian, but it is still a unity. Part of what this means is that God is *alone* in the sense of being unrivalled, unchallenged, sovereign: "there is none beside him." Another part of what it means is that God is internally unified, coherent, rational – as opposed to psychologically chaotic, driven by conflicting passions, a divided mind. It follows that, because God is of one mind and sovereign, the world that he has created is fundamentally coherent and ordered. At bottom, there is one reality, reality is unified and this unified, ordered reality is not merely physical, but moral: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gen. 1.31). 'Good' is a moral, evaluative category. So created reality includes goods, things that deserve to be loved, and in loving which human creatures flourish. The Christian monotheistic understanding of God and of creation implies, therefore, a moral reality *of some kind*, which is *given* before human thinking and acting. So Christian monotheists are 'moral realists', as opposed to moral relativists or constructivists, according to whom morality is simply an individual or social construction. This is not to deny that what is right depends on circumstances, individual or social; but it is to say that it is not absolutely relative to them.[3]

In what follows in Section 4.2, Biggar argues for this moral reality as 'the Good' rather than natural law or divine commands. Biggar states that behind any law or command there is the reason why these laws or commands are given to you, which is "because it's good for you." (4) Also, the notion of the Good is situated by Biggar in the context of salvation history, in which the Christian God is leading his people to life abundant or human flourishing. This human flourishing, then, is universal. The universality of human flourishing is then nuanced by stating that it is coherent with a non-radical form of moral pluralism.

In the next sections, Biggar proceeds with a defence of moral realism and it must be said that the specifically Christian frame of reference within which this defence of moral realism is developed, plays only a minor role. Also, the non-radical pluralism of which Biggar claims that

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3 Nigel Biggar, "Goods, Rights, and Universality: A Christian View," in *The Transcendent Character of the Good: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives,* ed. Petruschka Schaafsma (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 51–2.

it is compatible with his version of moral realism plays only a minor role in the rest of his paper. Most of it is used to discuss charges that have been brought forward by others against moral realism, the charge of imposing Western moral convictions on non-Western cultures in particular, Biggar trying to refute them by showing that what is present in Western culture, is also present in other cultures.

## 4.3 A Critique

In spite of all the appreciation and respect I have for Professor Biggar's defence of moral realism and his honest intention to do justice to the fact that moral convictions differ markedly between cultures, the main thrust of his paper centres around the conviction that there is an inner unity present in the world concerning the Good. This interest in arguing for what he calls "moral realism" is backed up in a very strong way by rooting it in the unity of God in the monotheist religious traditions.

In this paper, I will not argue in detail against the various alleged shared moral convictions between Western and non-Western cultures. While these may indeed be there, I do not see that bringing them to the fore helps us to overcome moral subjectivism in Western culture. I would like to start where Biggar starts, in a Christian theology of God, the good and of creation, but then sketch a different path along the road of the consequences of it for moral realism, and moral pluralism in the Christian tradition.

Starting with a Christian theology of God, I would like to draw attention to the fact that in contemporary Christian theology, it is not usual to start so strongly with the unity of God and on the basis of that, primarily focus on the unity and consistency of the order in the world. Twentieth-century Christian theology has increasingly focused on the interplay between unity and diversity in God, drawing from the insight that the Triunity of God needs to be taken more seriously in Christian theology than it used to be.[4] Although I am by no means subscribing to social Trinitarianism – quite to the contrary[5] – I think that confessing

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4  To name a few classics both from the European continent and the Anglo-Saxon world, see, e.g., Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Catherine Mowry La Cugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes: zur Gotteslehre* (München: Kaiser, 1980).

5  Cf. Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine's De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 11 (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), especially the Introduction and Ch. 2; for a similar critique, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

God as Trinity should have consequences for our thinking about the unity of God. Drawing on Augustine, I would like to propose that we take the unity of God to be God's absolute uniqueness and so there is no automatic connection between the unity of God and the unity and consistency of creation. Once more, the fundamental threeness in God, which I take to be at the same level as the unity of God, gives us reason to think that if multiplicity is present in God in some way, there might well be a fundamental diversity in reality as the creation of the Triune God as well. In the theology of religions, this insight in genuine differences between religions and cultures has been emphasized as well, drawing on the doctrine of the Trinity.[6]

Apart from theological reasons to think of creation not only or primarily in terms of unity but as much and as fundamentally in terms of diversity and multiplicity, I think that there are phenomenological reasons to do so as well. Biggar starts with the thesis that moral views are plural, but when reading the main part of his paper, one wonders whether Biggar fundamentally appreciates this plurality or that he rather regrets that it is there, or regards it as caused by misunderstandings between people. But is this helpful? If cultural differences are genuine and moral disputes real, should we not start from a moral grand narrative in which a plurality of views can be fundamentally taken into account?

A subsequent question that can be asked at this point, is whether moral plurality is the result of evil or not. Is it a gift of creation that we make diverging moral judgements or is it the result of sin? This is a question that Biggar does not raise but it is quite fundamental to one's understanding of moral realism. If moral realism has to be made plausible as a set of convictions that everyone actually agrees on, one will have to explain why there is so much moral disagreement in the world. One of the sources of explanation available to Christian theology in this regard is the doctrine of sin. Along those lines, there would be moral disagreement in the world because all human beings are sinful and therefore lack a sufficient level of cognitive access to the good to know what is in fact good for them. This, however, leads to a tricky problem for the religious believer who claims that moral realism is true. Phenomenologically, it means that one claims a certain view of the world to be true, although it is simultaneously maintained that no one has actual cognitive access to it. Once more, if believers nevertheless uphold their moral realism, they claim to be exempt from this situation of sin, although they are as human as all the others. This easily turns their moral realism into moral

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6 Cf. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Christoph Schwöbel, *Christlicher Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

absolutism, because they claim to have the one true view of the world without being able to argue for it. In short, in order to adequately deal with the presence of genuine moral differences, a version of moral realism has to deal with evil.

One might say that Biggar's take on the question of moral realism as a question of common ground is a common sense version of moral realism.[7] He claims that moral realism is backed up by the fact that there is a fundamental similarity between moral convictions across cultures and religions. Biggar takes this point of departure for granted, although there are present day versions of moral realism that leave much more room for genuine moral and cultural differences and disagreements. However, this point of departure is itself by far not obvious and has its roots in a very particular moral epistemological paradigm, the paradigm of modernity. In this epistemological paradigm, moral truths are basically independent from the context in which they have their place. Claiming moral realism to be true seems to be a matter of finding an inescapable objective basis for the fact that, despite all their differences, all people still have the same epistemic access to a moral reality independent of human moral preferences, a stable deposit of moral truths. From that perspective, genuine cultural and moral diversity is something to be regretted rather than to be applauded.

## 4.4  An Alternative: God's Creative Presence among Us

But what if we take a different starting point? In what follows I want to sketch an alternative 'moral theological metaphysics' inspired by Augustine's theology. In the next section, I will discuss the consequences of that alternative metaphysics for the questions of moral realism in connection with cultural differences.

In his Trinitarian theology and anthropology in book 8 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine outlines a Trinitarian structure of love as a phenomenon between a lover, loved and love itself.[8] This love itself Augustine identifies with the person of the Holy Spirit.[9] God, as love, is therefore constantly present in reality and, like that love, is always in between people.

In Augustine this love is closely connected to justice, which is understandable because Augustine agrees with the Platonic tradition that God is the highest good, and so for love to be love (Augustine's term here is *dilectio*, although it is notoriously problematic to associate too specific meanings with his terms for 'love'), it cannot be anything other than love

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7 In this, Biggar is close to C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Collier Books, 1986[15]).

8 Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, viii, 10–12.

9 Augustinus, viii, 12 and xv, 27–39; cf. Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 6.5.3.

for the Good itself and love takes the form of justice: "True love then is that we should live justly by cleaving to the truth…"[10] Every person finds her fulfilment in loving love, because in it they find peace as peace with God, their neighbour and themselves. Thus the structure of reality is a structure in which the Good is both present and guiding, because reality was created by God and is directed towards him who is the Good itself, and finds its fulfilment in God.

Augustine's approach to the common good is quite open, strongly determined by the intentionality, or maybe more accurately, the existential state of the heart and the spiritual health of the mind who loves.[11] It does not take the form of a particular set of moral convictions, not even the commandments. Insofar as divine commands are in view, they take the form of the twofold summary from the Gospels and the command of love from the Gospel of John. Even the bold and well-known statement *ama et fac quod vis*[12] is from Augustine, and this is perfectly comprehensible against the background of his close connection between true love and justice. Anyone who would love justly in a perfect way, would not have to hesitate about what to do. They could do whatever they wanted. His doctrine of grace, however, includes the claim that there is no moral human being, however pious they are, who will reach that state in this life.[13] This leads to a strongly situational ethics where the access to the common good does not so much take the form of a set of commonly held principles, but is a shared sensitivity for the good in ever new situations. The basis of one's proper access to this shared sensitivity is the existential state of the subject.

In book 8 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine always construes the nature of just love in a Trinitarian way. There is the lover, the beloved and the love between them. What makes love just, is the love of Love itself, because thus, neither the lover loves himself, nor only loves the beloved, but the lover loves the justice that keeps the balance between the one and the other. Thus, no one ever holds a patent on access to the good. There is always a 'Transcendent Third' in play who disrupts our arbitrary access to the good while at the same time nourishing us in love for each other

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10  Augustinus, viii, 10: "Haec est autem vera dilectio ut inhaerentes veritati iuste vivamus…" (translation: Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 252).

11  At this point, my argument in this section runs a bit counter the otherwise excellent discussion of Augustine's ethics in Gerald W. Schlabach and Allan D. Fitzgerald, "Ethics," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia,* eds. Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 320–30.

12  Augustinus, *In Epistolam Ioannis Ad Parthos Tractatus*, vii, 8.

13  Cf. Maarten Wisse and Anthony Dupont, "'Nostis qui in schola Christi eruditi estis, Iacob ipsum esse Israel:' Sermo 122, In Iohannis euangelium tractatus 7 and the Donatist and Pelagian Controversies," *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 18 (2014): 302–25.

and ourselves.[14] The creative presence of the Most High among us is the creaturely grace that helps us to find new wisdom and do what is right in every specific situation. Thus, although for Augustine there is certainly something like moral common ground, it does not take the form of a set of commonly held moral convictions that all people agree on. This is all the more so because as we will see, the existential spiritual state of the heart is completely healthy in none of us. Each heart is broken by sin, and so no one can unconditionally rely on what he or she wants, because no one loves with true love. There is always a tendency to desire and this desire makes us want happiness quicker than justice permits.[15]

In the second half of *De Trinitate*, Augustine also draws on the effect of sin as *amor sui*, love of oneself.[16] Originally, that is before the fall, this *amor sui* is a good thing. After all, in Jesus' summary of the commandments nothing negative is said about love of oneself. One is asked to love one's neighbour as oneself. However, because of sin, love becomes detached from righteousness in that it becomes detached from God. Because God is no longer loved in the highest possible way, the love of neighbour and the love of oneself lose their embedding and become independent.[17] As a result, love of neighbour becomes instrumentalized and turned into a distorted love of oneself. Thus, even the love of oneself gets confused because self-love becomes impossible as one is no longer able to sees oneself as one truly is, namely as a creature of God.[18] A competitive relationship with the other arises because the self is no longer in control of itself. Augustine's famous notion of unrest is born.

Given the presence of sin in life, the sensitivity to the Good is damaged. It is never completely lost.[19] That is why it makes sense from Augustine's theology to appeal to the natural ability to know the good in every person. Any appeal to justice made by a human resonates with our natural predisposition to love God as the highest Good and reminds us of our origin and destination, even if we are not always willing to heed that reminder. Because of sin, the law is also given as a reminder of the Good, although in principle we can also see the Good of the law from our original disposition. So the law is not an arbitrary set of commandments given by a God who is not accountable for it, but a set of memories of a goodness that we can in principle recognize ourselves, even when we fail to do what we know to be good.

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14  Augustinus, viii, 12.
15  Augustinus, xiii, 7–11.
16  Cf. the discussion with references to Augustine: Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 4.5 and 4.6.
17  Augustinus, ix, 4.
18  Augustinus, x, 7.
19  Augustinus, xiv, 6.

We would, of course, be doing great injustice to Augustine's theology if, in addition to this analysis of his view of good, we were to skip the role of grace. Augustine is focused on bringing his readers to faith in Jesus Christ in all that he presents theologically.[20] In his great speculative works such as the *Confessiones*, *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate* he always maintains a delicate balance between on the one hand a great confidence in the possibilities of human beings as creatures of God, but on the other hand also a sharp eye for the necessity of faith in Christ to eventually become partakers of salvation.[21] The first is necessary in order not to lose touch with his intellectual readers who are on the edge of the Church, while the second is necessary to bring them beyond that edge into the community of the Church through baptism (cf. Augustine's own position in between books 7 and 8 of the *Confessiones*).

According to Augustine, it is impossible for fallen people to truly become a new person without faith in Christ (which for him is not so much an act of an independent subject as rather a movement of a relational being into a new community) and without exception to do the right thing. That status is not possible at all for fallen people, but also the way to reach perfection is impossible outside the grace of Christ. Incidentally, sometimes people do not consciously know this grace that they participate in, so it is certainly not the case that only Christians do good things and it is certainly not the case that Christians are always better people than non-Christians.[22] On the contrary, but nonetheless, faith in Christ is crucial to becoming a new person who continues to advance on the path of righteousness. Even when people do not walk on the path of faith, nor do good themselves, non-believers can see the holiness of the saints from the justice by which they live and love them for that reason.

## 4.5  Consequences of This for Ethics

What are the consequences of this moral theological metaphysics when we compare it to Biggar's version of moral realism?

First and foremost, this metaphysics provides a different approach to moral pluralism. Moral pluralism can now be interpreted on two levels and those two levels cannot be reduced to each other. Moral pluralism can be a result of sin and therefore problematic, but it can and is justifiable as a form of creaturely diversity. Concisely formulated: because God as Trinity has in Godself both unity and diversity, whereby both cannot be reduced to each other, similarly the moral order can also be

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20  Cf. Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, 24–9, 164–7.
21  Augustinus, xiii, 11–12; Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, Ch. 3.
22  Schlabach and Fitzgerald, "Ethics," 323.

characterized as a unity in diversity, because the love between people expresses the presence of God. This divine presence as the Good among us can never be reduced to a simple appeal to certain principles. Moral differences, therefore, as situational differences, are not a problem but invite to what is the kernel of moral reflection, a truly communal encounter between people. This breaks with the tendency of modern ethics to find the good in a person-independent way. If we would put it in terms of the notion of common ground: the moral common ground that people find between one another is not so much one and the same result in different cultures, but is the possibility and actuality of the debate itself, within and between cultures, and the fact that such debates lead to mutual recognition, enrichment and understanding. Thus, even though there is moral pluralism, all people have access to the Good itself as their basic way of being. Speaking on the level of creation, however, this does not mean that they always have to agree on moral issues.

As a consequence of this, and I see this as a strength of this alternative meta-narrative because it adds to its explanatory power, access to the good is indeed universal and indeed there is moral common ground, but such universal moral common ground is never trivial. Indeed this is how we experience moral diversity in a plural world. Moral disagreement is not only a matter of deplorable differences of opinion, but it is part of the complexity of our moral judgements and the richness of our perspectives on the world we live in. The promise of moral conversation is in this richness and not in a single set of principles that everyone agrees on.

At the same time there is also a second level at which there is moral pluralism and this is the level of sin. In any moral disagreement, the question is: is this moral disagreement the result of human diversity or of sin? This complicates our view of moral differences, but also makes them considerably more realistic. We no longer have to see every moral disagreement as a problem, but at the same time we can also keep an eye out for moral differences of opinion in which real evil is involved that must be designated as such. Augustine's theology provides a criterion for distinguishing between problematic disagreements and disagreements that are the result of creaturely diversity, namely in his ordering of justice and happiness (book 13 of *De Trinitate*).[23] Those who seek happiness prior to justice are focused on themselves at the expense of others and thereby do evil.

Of course, after this analysis of our access to the Good, one must also speak of grace and its significance for ethics. This can be done at various levels, levels that are no longer always easy to distinguish for postmodern theologians due to the impact of modernity. One should speak of God's grace at what one could call the level of the creaturely presence of God as the love between people, a love that is also there after the fall. After

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23  Augustinus, xiii, 6–12; cf. Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology*, Chs. 3 and 6.

all, how could humans live if the Most High was not with us. We would not exist, because all that we are is good and is created and maintained by God from moment to moment. Likewise, in every conversation that we have with each other that involves the Good, the Eternal is among us to inspire us, to energize us and to connect us with each other. Every moment of wisdom is a moment of grace and a reinforcement of love of neighbour. Grace is the backbone of reality as the Goodness with which God creates and sustains this world.

But grace is also present in another way, namely, when fallen people are touched by the special electing grace of Christ and made new people. They are received into the body of Christ and brought into the communion of the special dwelling place of the Spirit. True, even those who are taken into the body of Christ do often no better than those who are not, but nevertheless the body of Christ is pre-eminently a place of moral improvement and moral wisdom. After all, the body of Christ is formed by believers, but pre-eminently also by saints, people who shine as lights through moral exemplarity and who embody moral wisdom.[24] The saints guide a world that stumbles into the search for the good, for the priority of justice above happiness and thus offer a paradoxical access to the moral order on which the world is built, even if it is difficult for fallen people to perceive it and live according to its principles.

To sum up: do we need common ground as a set of common views on moral issues across cultures? It depends on what sort of common ground we mean. God is the common ground who inspires people every day to do good, to know it and to find happiness in it. Only from there does the question for moral common ground as corresponding moral viewpoints arise.

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24  This becomes especially evident in Augustinus, *Confessiones*, book 8, where Augustine is finally moved to conversion by the stories of the saints Marius Victorinus and Anthony the Desert Father.

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