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ANARCHISM OR POLITICAL DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF WILLIAM GODWIN

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## ANARCHISM OR POLITICAL DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF WILLIAM GODWIN

### I

William Godwin was the first to formulate a systematic and comprehensive political philosophy of anarchism. His ideal, pictured in the distant and difficult future but nonetheless projected as a realizable goal, is that of a decentralized, stateless society whose people are guided by reason, rather than by violence or power, and freely associate in groups and districts that are intended to serve their larger needs. Accordingly, he is opposed to democracy, at least to democracy as we ordinarily understand it; and an important part of his work consists in criticism of its familiar forms—the institutions of voting, majority rule, election, political representation, legislative assemblies, and so forth, although these are not always clearly distinguished from one another in Godwin's writing.

However, Godwin did not conceive of himself as opposing "democracy." Rather, he used this very word to designate also the society of rational men and multiple "districts" he thought could eventually abandon political authority; and he explicitly rejected the disorder of "anarchy."

The ideals in democratic theory of freedom and of the dispersion of power among the people of society, the same factors which led Plato with a much different attitude to visualize democracy as a polity without order and law, are central in Godwin's image of social harmony; and most of the traditional and contemporary arguments offered for democracy also favor, at the same time, the Godwinian conception. "Why should I submit," the

democrat asks, "to someone who arrogantly declares himself, by himself, the best, and the infallible?"<sup>1</sup> Anarchist political philosophy asks such questions too, not failing to challenge even the victorious majorities of democracy.

There are many features of those historical states we commonly call "democracies" that Godwin's criticism, being generally abstract and theoretical, disregards. He has little to say in his criticism about the restrictions that are placed on majorities by constitutions, bicameral legislatures, state and local legal authority, the appointment rather than election of powerful leaders, the economic structure of society, artificial numerical devices such as the American "electoral college," the ancient Greek usage of lottery sometimes instead of majority rule, and so forth. Nevertheless, his rejection of democratic procedures is sufficiently focused and comprehensive to ignore these complications, whatever their significance for the validity or practicality of his own ideal. Yet despite the polemical and rhetorical character of Godwin's writing, the occasional familiarity and simpleness of his ideas, and the obvious traditional difficulties with anarchist philosophy in general, his critique of democracy is profoundly important.

The failures of democracy and the widespread alienation from law and custom in the present age have contributed to a deeper interest in and attraction to anarchism<sup>2</sup>; and its first great theorist should, of course, be taken seriously. Godwin's critique of parliamentary procedures is far richer and more subtle than most of his political philosophy. Indeed, his criticism

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has considerable merit, even if the truth of what he says does not imply that anarchism itself is valid. The whole problem of justifying democracy is clearly more difficult than it has been commonly conceived to be; and the problem is made more sensitive by the persistent social deprivations and military violence that mark "democratic" history. The political philosophy of anarchism, sharply renewing and invigorating the classical recognition of grave dangers in democracy, renders it a practical and intrinsically questionable tool, rather than the great authoritative social perfection that motivates popular thought.

Before proceeding to the details of Godwin's arguments against democracy, we shall do well to acknowledge a number of important qualifications on his own anarchist ideal and on the scope of the present essay. Most important is the fact that Godwin gives general arguments against the institution of government that I do not consider independently, although their spirit is at work in the points I shall be discussing. He does not, however, call for an abrupt rejection of governmental forms, as anarchists have sometimes been accused of doing. On the contrary, he recognizes the need for a long transitional period in which national representative assemblies acting through majority rule would play some political role, preferably, as little a role as possible; and he speaks highly of democracy, especially of representative democracy, as an alternative to monarchy and aristocracy. He recognizes, too, that, despite the undesirability of government and of current states in particular, it may well be "unavoidable" or "prudent" to submit to present political authority. The choice, in any case, is not simply between the established states we know and a society in which every person is at liberty to do what he wants. Godwin is deeply

committed to rationalism, and never tires of reminding us of the restrictions on action that are mandated by morality and reason. The result, of course, is truly utopian, characterized by the naked optimism that continually arises to surprise us in the history of philosophy. But it would be injudicious to hinge a view of Godwin's achievement on an ideal whose description takes just a few of the thousand pages he wrote on *Political Justice*. His analysis of democracy is itself much broader than the ten pages or so which we shall consider, and it includes the presentation and criticism of older and well-known arguments against democracy that had been used to support kings and aristocrats.

## II

Although other places in his book develop some of these points more completely, Godwin's own criticism of democratic methods is found mainly in the chapter, "Of National Assemblies."<sup>3</sup> Believing that national legislative assemblies are unnecessary or only minimally necessary in a decentralized and free society, he presents four arguments against them; and these involve the rejection, most importantly, of two hallmarks of historical democracies: majority rule and political representation. In part, also, he brings into question the viability of uniformity and law in general, as well as the conception of the democratic state as the operative combined wisdom of individuals. I shall consider these four arguments serially and in detail.

(1) Godwin first argues against the institution of the legislative assembly that it introduces the "evils" of a "fictitious unanimity," lumping together the majority and minority voters in collective support for any law which is passed. Since the argu-

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ment is about the freedom and independence of minorities, it applies as well to direct democracy, to the electoral process, and to procedures whereby some other fraction than a majority is empowered, in a national assembly or in society at large, to decide law. Godwin's point here is thus a general one, representing indeed the deepest and most difficult problem of democratic theory. It is hard now to say anything new about this problem, but we can note an interesting ambiguity in Godwin's formulation. The minority in a national assembly, he says, even after having exposed the injustice of the measures ultimately adopted, is "obliged, in a certain sense, to assist in carrying them into execution." Actually, there are two distinct "senses," each of which introduces its own problems and possibilities.

In one sense, Godwin is arguing that majority rule renders a minority morally inconsistent. A law, voted by a majority rather than by a unanimous assembly, is pronounced as the work of the whole and is supported by the authority of the whole, as if there were indeed a kind of unanimity in favor of the law. Thus, in a way, the minority is bound in name to what is really a "fictitious unanimity." Even though a legislator were to emphatically announce his disagreement with the law, he continues to support the procedures of making and enforcing law, including this particular law, and he continues to identify himself as a member of the assembly. He is, accordingly, in a position of moral ambiguity, which could only be avoided by repudiating the authority of the law in question or leaving the country. Since the former alternative undermines democracy and the latter abandons it (a similar dilemma may arise in the case of any other law or in any other country, however democratic), neither possibility hurts Godwin's claim that there is a certain "evil" in the public

unity of the assembly.

This is, I think, a serious and powerful argument, and its flaws deserve a serious analysis. The issue has implications that reach beyond the problem of justifying democracy.

Let us assume that, in the deliberations of a democratic national assembly, a minority argues that, say, abortion is morally justifiable and should not be prohibited by law; but that abortion does, in fact, become legally prohibited in accordance with the will of the majority. Let us assume, also, that the minority continues to support the authority of the assembly, despite the assembly decision against it, despite what it believes (in Godwin's words) to be the "injustice" and "folly" of the legislative decision. It simply does not follow that what the minority is doing now, having abandoned its acceptance of abortion and abided by the law, is contrary to its own moral judgment. For, since the practice was prohibited by law, the moral importance of law becomes a datum in the minority's judgment about what to do. And it may be the reasoned conviction of the minority that the desirability of law and government outweighs the desirability of abortion. The goods and evils of the democratic and legal relationships must, in other words, be balanced against the goods and evils of illegal abortion (or illegal protest). In one sense, the minority becomes committed to what it considers "injustice" and "folly." It would prefer the assembly to reverse its decision, withdrawing the prohibition, and argues against the law; and in the absence of governmental restriction it would condone abortion, freely accepting the practice on the basis of its own moral judgment. But in a sense the minority is not committed to what it considers injustice and folly, for in supporting the law it chooses to do what it

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thinks best. A man's support for a law with which he disagrees does not at all signify the abandonment of his moral autonomy. In general, the moral status of a type of action may vary relative to its legal status; it depends, among other things, on the practice in question, the particular legal system, and the social and political context in which the law is effective.

So far, I have interpreted the "fictitious unanimity" which Godwin finds in democracy as a paradox of rationality: under the majority rule of a national assembly one participates in the enactment and support of laws with which one disagrees (and which may well be unjust). It is not obviously false, I suggest, that a government can justifiably command one to do what is wrong, i.e., to do what would be wrong if the government had not commanded it. But there is more involved than this in the rejection of "fictitious unanimity." In a second sense, Godwin is arguing that the unanimity attained in majority rule has bad moral effects on the minority. It contributes to the "depravation" of the human understanding and character, and makes men "timid, dissembling and corrupt." "He that contributes his personal exertions, or his property, to the support of a cause which he believes to be unjust, will quickly lose that accurate discrimination, and nice sensibility of moral rectitude, which are the principal ornaments of reason."

It would be easy to brush off Godwin's argument, in this second meaning of it, on the basis of our analysis of the former meaning. We could easily say that, choosing to support a law with which one disagrees on moral grounds, one may be utterly rational, discriminating, and morally sensitive: considering the alternatives and goals, he truly does believe it reasonable to support the law. One *may*, of course. Yet I

think it fair to recognize that the sheer weight of tradition involved in common support for law characteristically replaces the fine discrimination Godwin idealizes. Hence, the vicious belief sometimes encountered nowadays in the rhetoric of democracy that, in a state governed by a majority vote of the people, one has an unqualified responsibility to obey the laws, as if there could be no practice that is too horrible for a democracy to justifiably endorse.

Perhaps Godwin means here that even the most rational and discriminating person loses his carefulness in the blanket acceptance of a whole legal system or general support for the practice of abiding by law. For one thing, such a position carelessly encourages others to obey laws that were best broken. "What then can be more absurd," Godwin says, "than to present to me the laws of England in fifty volumes folio, and call upon me to give an honest and uninfluenced vote upon their contents?"<sup>4</sup> Such a problem may be avoided, however, if we acknowledge the duty to break unjust laws under certain conditions at the same time we continue to assert a general responsibility to follow laws. One does not then endorse uncritically the whole fifty volumes of English law (for example), but leaves the decision on breaking the law to individual cases in which a conflict of values arises. We are, in any event, committed as men to much that we do not understand or endorse, and the argument for anarchism unwittingly illuminates the ambiguity of human existence.

(2) Godwin criticizes not only the "fictitious unanimity" produced by majority rule, but the "real unanimity" that results from the suppression of individuality such as occurs in the procedures of a legislative assembly, or in the acceptance of law and in the processes of education. Men in

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assemblies lose their independence by connecting themselves with sects or parties that seriously limit the freedom and rationality of their public judgment. Accordingly, a national assembly provides men with a "visible standard by which to adjust their sentiments"; such a standard, Godwin claims, is "unnatural in its character" and "pernicious in its effects." "The genuine and wholesome state of mind is," he says, "to be unloosed from shackles, and to expand every fibre of its frame, according to the independent and individual impressions of truth upon that mind." Godwin is not saying here that a uniformity of sentiment or action is in itself bad, but that it is bad, and is bad in its effects, when its imposition is artificial, "unnatural," or "deceitful." Also, he is not idealizing individual will or desire but individual rational belief. Thus, he refers here to the source of the preferred uniqueness in "individual impressions of truth."

Is the "real unanimity" produced by national assemblies' "unnatural"? Surely society and its institutions are not unnatural to man; we do better to acknowledge with the ancients that man is naturally social. Since there are historical causes for the development of unanimity in the relationships of men with one another and with the rest of the world, it is not even clear what is meant by calling the institutions in question or their effects "unnatural." If any factor which restricts human uniqueness and individual freedom were unnatural, nature would come to have a surprisingly small scope.

Moreover, the unanimity produced by national assemblies or other social forms, even if dispensable, is not without its benefits. "We cannot advance in the voyage of happiness," Godwin says, "unless we be wholly at large upon the stream that would carry us thither: the anchor, that we first

looked upon as the instrument of our safety, will, at last, be found to be the means of detaining our progress." But the question of "first" and "last" is not at all so obvious, and a much larger proof would be required to show that law, the consummate "visible standard," were not itself necessary as an "instrument of our safety."

The "real unanimity" in question, however natural or unnatural, is pernicious in its "effects," Godwin says, because it inhibits the expansion of individual abilities, restricting intellectual improvement and the attainment of happiness. Yet happiness and knowledge, even if we refer to these only as possessions of individuals, are unlikely to be comprehensively attained in society without the minimal freedom from others that is actually *made possible* by law. We must believe this at least, if we do not accept Godwin's optimism about human nature or his conception that perfect freedom of inquiry would, in fact, result in agreement.

Nevertheless, Godwin is surely right to object that the "real unanimity" that arises in belief and practice leads to the often detrimental acceptance of the "visible standard" as a necessary, unquestioned authority. One who unthoughtfully follows even a valid standard set by others is indeed like one who possesses true belief without a *logos*; and such a person, not trained in reflective criticism and moral autonomy, will not be prepared for important moral choices—like the man described in the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*, who, acting on the basis of habit rather than wisdom, unwittingly chooses a new life in which he will eat his own children. To our continuing misfortune, moral independence is not now being taught as adequately as is obedience to authority or collective opinion; but Godwin loses theoretical depth by simply meeting

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this misfortune with a call for the abolition of government. The balance of goods and evils is much more complex, and the dangers of freedom are equally severe.

(3) The third argument against national assemblies is a criticism of the practice of voting. Here again Godwin's reasoning has a relevance beyond national assemblies and even beyond what we would ordinarily classify as democratic states; an assembly of aristocrats, like an assembly of elected officials, could make decisions by voting. However, any critique of voting must have a unique importance for democracy because of the more complete way in which voting there affects political life. Godwin offers three reasons for rejecting this practice.

First, he claims that the general tendency of debate and discussion to improve the intellect is undermined by uniform termination in a vote. The result, he says, is a "perversion of reason." The orator will seek a transitory effect rather than permanent conviction and will take advantage of prejudices to win the vote. "That which might otherwise have been a scene of patient and beneficent enquiry, is changed into wrangling, tumult and precipitation." It is a fact, however, that individuals make self-conscious decisions even where discussion is not ended by a vote. There will characteristically be more than just a "gradual" and "imperceptible" enlightenment of the mind, and people will be interested in influencing the decisions of others. Accordingly, it is no surprise that we find a lot of wrangling and a lot of prejudice in debates that occur outside national assemblies. Imagine the systematic propaganda large organizations could turn loose in the absence of all governmental control. Godwin should himself be embarrassed by the ironic contrast between his demand for rationality and the strongly rhetorical and

prejudicial character of his own philosophical writing—as when he refers to the source of numerous legislative amendments in a national assembly as "the corrupt interest of imperious pretenders." If wrangling occurs apart from the practice of voting, it is hard to believe that voting is the problem. The greater amount of wrangling in legislative assemblies is likely to be due to the seriousness of the issues, the generality of the decision, and the power and violence that will support the decision; but without Godwin's narrow optimism we can hardly think that the techniques of irrational persuasion originate with government.

Second, Godwin claims that the practice of voting introduces into the debates of a national assembly a linguistic orientation which is "ludicrous and disgraceful." It vitiates the proper form by which sensitive and rational people will try to affect one another's belief and action. The larger implication here is that the terminology and linguistic structure of law are artificial, without the desired meaningfulness and rationality of the language of common life. But the answer to this second criticism of voting is obvious. There are distinct ideas and effects that legislators want, but which are difficult to obtain consistently and effectively in language other than that which they actually use. For the purposes of government and law, it is useful to have a certain kind of precision and firm terminology, an easy distinction between different articles of law, easily applied rules, a multiplication of similar but not identical rules, and the possibility of convenient modification through amendment. These technical forms are necessary for the generality, systematic character, and social importance of law; and their justification thus rests on the need for law as an instrument for the attainment of human ends. In any case, a language that is "artificial" is not

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thereby unuseful or bad, as we know from the history of the technical languages of science. The philosophical analysis of moral and political issues itself depends very heavily on technical terminology and assumptions.

Godwin's third criticism of voting questions the assumed relationship between the validity of a law and the vote for it. "The whole [debate on any law in a national assembly] is then wound up, with that flagrant insult upon all reason and justice, the deciding upon truth by the casting up of numbers." Put simply and modestly, the point is that there is no reason to think that a majority will make just laws. People will be corrupted by the irrational character of this procedure, a balance of power may be held by those who are irrational, ignorant, or corrupt, or the majority itself may be ignorant or corrupt. Just as an individual person may decide to do what is bad for himself or others, so a majority may decide to do what is bad for itself or others. The procedure of voting carries no universal likelihood of rightness, although given certain psychological assumptions, it is more likely to do better than autocracy or oligarchy.

This is a serious and important criticism of voting. It is very old in its mistrust of majorities, but finely formulated in anarchist theory, which draws what to some will seem the inescapable conclusion: the abolition of democratic government. But the conclusion of course does not follow at all. If government has some goods to provide, we must weigh these against its evils, comparing also the varying effects of the different forms of government with one another. Again, the outcome is not obvious. Since the goods intended by government are important, it is, despite its evils, by no means obviously worse than anarchism, which intends important goods that

government cannot provide. And if government were desirable, we should expect the argument for democracy to rest on the historical claim that democracies have generally served better.

(4) Godwin's final argument against national legislative assemblies rests on the claim that no group of men, as a group, can function as a "moral individual" or possess so-called "collective wisdom." Although the people involved in an assembly may be intelligent and morally responsible individuals, the assemblies themselves can only be appraised indirectly: they do not "deserve our direct approbation," he says. "A multitude of men, after all our ingenuity, will still remain a multitude of men."

The meaning of this argument is not entirely clear, and it points to some controversial problems in the study of society. But we are surely justified in claiming that the argument is in certain simple respects mistaken. It is patently not true that a group of men, "after all our ingenuity," is still a "multitude." For the group may have some social form which enables it to arrive at collective decisions even if the capacities, perceptions, and desires of the individuals are somewhat diverse. A mere multitude lacks a decision procedure, while a society, as Godwin himself indicates, can indeed be an "agent."<sup>5</sup> Godwin's own position is paradoxical with respect to this issue, because in criticizing certain social forms—namely, the forms of government—he criticizes the *forms*, not simply the individuals who participate in them. Surely a society can be enough of an individual to perceive certain relationships, to formulate policies, and to act; and we commonly recognize this as we assign praise and blame. Although individuals who make and administer law are always individually responsible too, and although individuals will



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always form the basis of social activity, "taking the lead of the rest, and employing their force," the social arrangements are not themselves thereby without effectiveness and responsibility. And people who extend the use of their power or force to others are not just "tools" for the legitimation of government if their support for government is self-conscious, knowledgeable, and voluntary.

"The pretence of collective wisdom," Godwin says in the rhetorical style that typifies his writing, "is among the most palpable of all impostures. The acts of the society, can never rise above the suggestions of this or that individual, who is a member of it." Clearly, however, the knowledge on which society acts may be the result of combining disparate elements of knowledge from different individuals. Although it will always be individuals who perceive the fundamental relationship among these elements, or who recognize the relevance of certain things individually known to social choice, it is reasonable to describe the resulting choice as a product of "collective wisdom." Men learn things from others and may deliberately proceed to learn together, with much greater effectiveness and comprehensiveness. And even if Godwin were right that the ignorance and selfishness of the single individuals who are pre-eminent in a national assembly will negate or undermine the "wisdom" of the assembly, it does not follow that anarchism is true

## III

Such are the four arguments Godwin gave against the institution of national assemblies. As I have explained, they are at the same time arguments against more general democratic forms; and they are, in part, calculated to serve this broader purpose.<sup>6</sup> Now, the net result of the several

criticisms is the conclusion, not surprising nowadays, that democratic government is restrictive. In a way, democracy restricts minorities to laws they do not accept; it inhibits the development of individuality by providing an artificial standard for individual action; it restricts the influence of reason and free discussion by requiring a vote; and it limits the role of individual intelligence and responsibility, replacing individuality in some respects by collectivity. With the exception of the fourth, these arguments all do in fact prove that democratic government is restrictive; and they are thus true, in significant and fundamental senses. It does not follow, however, that democratic procedures or government ought to be abolished. Specifically, it does not follow that national legislative assemblies ought to be abolished. For a variety of reasons, it is much more difficult than Godwin admits to demonstrate this.

From a theoretical standpoint, we need only point out that, in general, the restriction of freedom and individuality need not be bad. Some kinds of restriction are obviously morally desirable, so that restriction as such is not always to be avoided. If we maintain, as I do, that men have a "*prima facie* duty" to avoid restrictions on freedom and moral autonomy, we still do not have much to go by; for in view of human nature, more compelling duties may well commonly take precedence. Thus, in constant criticism of Godwin's attack on national assemblies, I have argued that, even after accepting his analysis, one must still weigh the advantages and disadvantages of democratic government against one another, each alternative being in some respects undesirable. The important point is that in any social policy there is a genuine conflict of goods creating an issue that is much more complex than is recognized by

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many theorists of both anarchism and democracy.

If Godwin has not proven that we should abolish national assemblies, has he proven that we should at least minimize as far as possible their power? This may seem to follow from the maxim that freedom and moral autonomy should be preserved as far as possible, other things being equal. National assemblies, Godwin claims, should be "employed as sparingly as the nature of the case will admit." This claim, however, is insufficiently specific in content. The "nature of the case" will always introduce competing goods and evils concerning which Godwin can provide no acceptable general standard. He faces here the same difficulty that is widely defined for John Stuart Mill's defense of liberty: the imprecise dividing line between freedom and government control. One of the functions Godwin is willing to grant national assemblies, at least temporarily, in his decentralized society is that of reducing or settling conflicts between districts. However, if as we should, we take note of constituencies or groups rather than simply geographical districts, this function will quite naturally lead, as far as we can tell from the way men now act, to the comprehensive power of established governments.

What is the current value, then, of Godwin's critique of democracy? Here, too, we can take a clue from Mill's work. There is a great danger in the neglect of the evils of democracy and government, because governments tend to justify and speed their

own expansion, lessening the realm of privacy and individual liberty. They tend to assume powers that neither they nor their societies need, and they introduce violence and evil of the most momentous kind into human history. Godwin's theoretical position contains a criticism of democratic government and a defence of liberty that keep this point alive. In calling attention to the evils of majority rule, republicanism, and other techniques of democracy, he enables us to take more seriously the practical reforms necessary to balance the power of government. And not only this. Contrary to his own intention, he makes us confront in supreme social choices the inextricable mixture of goods and evils in life. It is important for democrats to realize the force of Godwin's arguments, so that their own will be better. Although anarchism is now commonly neglected by historians, political philosophers, and theorists of government, it should be taken more seriously; and it could only be proven unacceptable by a more far-reaching historical and psychological analysis than it typically encounters—or than it encountered in the present essay. An anarchist society is no less valid or practical than Plato's perfect city, and I am troubled by the thought that intellectuals generally find a grandness of vision and an ideal of great persuasion in authoritarian rather than libertarian perfection.

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## NOTES

1 Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (Detroit, 1962), p. 169.

2 This is evident in many radical and student organizations. A recent theoretical book is

Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York, 1970).

3 *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 3rd ed. (London, 1798), II, v, 23, pp. 201-208. I have

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used the photographic facsimile in three volumes edited by F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto, 1946). All unfootnoted quotations in the present essay are from the chapter on national assemblies.

4 *Ibid.*, I, p. 191.

5 *Ibid.*, II, p. 206.

6 See *ibid.*, II, p. 207.

## SYNTHESE

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