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AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354-430)

Whereas some philosophers, such as Spinoza and Kant, led uneventful lives that contributed little to their scholarly interests, the thought of Augustine can well be said to have grown out of the experiences of his vigorous career and the events of his turbulent time.

He was born of a pagan father and Christian mother, Monica, in Tagaste of North Africa. In his boyhood he stole some pears, an event that later gave him a profound understanding of sin. Displeased with the literary style of the NT and absorbed in the problem of evil, he accepted the Manichaean view that matter is essentially evil and spirit essentially good. He took to himself a concubine, who he truly loved and by whom he had a son, Adeodatus (“given by God”). But then his mother insisted that he contract a legal marriage with another girl. Regretfully he dismissed his concubine. Then, when the marriage could not be speedily arranged, he took another concubine.

In public life he was a professor of rhetoric at Carthage and Rome (383). Later he became a professor at Milan, where he was first attracted to Christian preaching by St. Ambrose's polished literary style and the content of his sermons. Meanwhile he became disillusioned with Manichaean dualism and suffered temptations to skepticism. Soon Neoplatonism convinced him of the possibility of knowledge. Finally he was converted (386). He became priest in 391 and was elected bishop of Hippo, North Africa, in 395. The capture of Rome by the barbarians in 410, for which the pagans blamed Christianity, stimulated him to write his tremendous work *The City of God*. He also wrote voluminously on other theological and philosophic themes.

During this time, too, a British monk, Pelagius, travelled through Rome and continued on to Palestine, preaching free will and salvation by works. This led to a great controversy on grace, sin, and baptism. Then the Donatists disturbed ecclesiastical order by insisting on too strict a standard for those who had denied the faith during the final Roman persecutions. Since North Africa had been troubled by the Donatists for many years, Augustine the bishop found himself in the midst of a fight from which he did not shrink.

Both personal experience and historical scholarship required Augustine to consider skepticism. When he broke with the Manichaean theory of evil, he did not know where to turn to find truth. Should he adopt the principles of the Pyrrhonists and the Academicians that nothing can be known with certainty, that one should suspend judgment on all matters, and that freed from dogmatic delusions, one should live a life of wisdom by governing one's actions, not by truth, but by probability? Even today

some university circles strenuously defend academic freedom with the proviso that no fixed truth be found and taught.

Against skepticism Augustine directs not only *ad hominem*, logical, and academic arguments, but also personal and moral considerations. Indeed, these latter underlie the former. For philosophy is not merely a speculative, disinterested research problem; it is primarily the problem of one's own personal destiny. The skeptics taught that suspension of judgment, because it frees us from delusions, is the way of wisdom and blessedness. Can they then *know* that this is the way of wisdom? These men chose the name *Skeptic* because they professed to want the truth and to seek it. But is it wisdom or is it not rather foolishness to engage in a search which from the start is doomed to defeat? Nor can this useless search provide even a plausible rule for daily conduct. The skeptics talk about plausibility and probability; they call propositions doubtful and false. Since, however, a plausible proposition is one that approximates the truth and a doubtful one is one that does not, it is evident that the truth must be known before any proposition can be properly judged doubtful. Any theory of probability must itself be based on truth, for no one can properly assert a proposition to be probable, unless the theory of probability used is itself true. There is, then, no good reason for making any decision, e.g., whether to buy or sell, or for choosing to live as a priest rather than as a soldier, unless truth can be known.

More systematically, skepticism is overturned and truth is discovered in the immediate certainty of self-consciousness. No one can be mistaken as to his own existence. Augustine can ask his opponents, Do you know you exist? And if he does not, there is no point in continuing the conversation. Doubt itself cannot occur, neither illusion nor hallucination, unless the man exists to do the doubting.

Dubito ergo sum fits nicely into Platonic philosophy, but this cornerstone of Augustine's system was not borrowed from Greek philosophy. Here we have an original stroke of his own genius. Yet the *Dubito* or *Cogito* is only the cornerstone—not the total foundation, as Descartes later tried to make it. Augustine wanted to force his opponents to admit an instance of intellectual intuition. The *Dubito* is the most vivid example. But it is still a single case, and not the basis of all other certitudes. In addition, Augustine specifies mathematical formulae, e.g., three times three are nine, and particularly the forms of logic, e.g., either you are asleep or awake, and if there are but four elements, there are not five. Trivial though these seem to some people, they are sufficient to wreck skepticism. More important intellectual intuitions are the norms of beauty and morality, e.g., one ought to seek wisdom.

Obviously, Augustine was not an empiricist or sensationist. Sometimes he talks as if all knowledge could be as certain as the forms of logic and mathematics. In a few instances he even seems to say that sensation and imagination are hindrances to knowledge (*De trinitate*, IX, vi), but more

frequently he distinguishes between his trustworthy, visual knowledge of the walls of Carthage and his untrustworthy imagine of Alexandria, which he has never seen. He considers the testimony of the senses decisive against Manichaeism, though he immediately dismisses astronomy as unimportant relative to the knowledge of God (Conf., V, iv, 6-7).

Augustine has a very definite theory of sensation, which he defines as a passion of the body that does not in itself escape the attention of the soul. Since the body is inferior to the soul, it cannot affect the latter. However, when an external body affects our organs, the soul, because its duty is to protect the body, notices the disturbances. Thus sensation depends both on us, organ and soul, and on the external object. With this admission it seems difficult to be sure that the physical modification of the organ can serve as a means of transmitting to the soul correct information about the external object.

Augustine's interests, however, led him in a different direction. He preferred to argue that as the external world is impregnated and organized by intellectual forms, sensation somehow provides material that the intellect can grasp. He used a verse of poetry as an example. It is a verse because of its rhythm, i.e., because of the numerical relationship between the long and short syllables. These numbers exist in the moving air when the verse is recited, in our sensation of hearing it, in our memory when we recognize it as a familiar hymn, and in our judgment as we decide that it is well or poorly pronounced. Thus the emphasis falls upon the intellectual structure of reality, and pure sensation—what the German philosophers called the *Given*—tends to vanish in an act of thought.

This epistemology was designed to prepare for the knowledge of God—of supreme importance both systematically and practically. Augustine, unlike Aristotle and Aquinas, was not interested in a proof of God's existence based on observation of nature. To discover God one should reflect on the possession of indubitable truth. The laws of logic and the formulae of mathematics are necessary and universal. Now, universality and necessity cannot be abstracted or otherwise derived from sensory experience. At the most, experience could tell us that a thing is so now; it could never assure us that it has always been so, always will be and must be so. We have not experienced all of the past; we have experienced none of the future; and necessity is a stranger to sensation. Nor can these indubitable truths have their origin in the subjective reason of any individual human being. Were this the case, different individuals might have different logics. But the laws of logic are common and necessary to all men. Therefore, these truths are superior to every human reason. We do not sit in judgment over truth, but truth is the norm by which we judge everything else, even ourselves. Yet, since reason is a most excellent thing, truth as superior, eternal, and unchangeable must be God. If truth is not God, and there is something superior to truth, then this higher being would be God. In any case, it is proved that God exists.

Malebranche, a 17th century French philosopher and a strong Augustinian, spoke of seeing all truths in God. Roman Catholics accuse him of the heresy of ontologism, and other interpreters also assert that he taught a direct intellectual vision of God. Whether Malebranche was a heretic is not a question to be decided here; it could even be that he advanced Augustinianism and rid it of some internal flaws; but it is clear that Augustine did not teach ontologism. We may see God in truth, but we do not see truth in God.

In asserting that even the ungodly know unchangeable, moral principles, Augustine, in addition to referring them beyond the human mind and finding them written in the Book of Light, called truth, continues by saying that these truths are copied, transferred, or impressed on the mind as a seal is impressed on wax (*De trinitate*, XIV, xv), and that we see God in a glass darkly, i.e., in ourselves who are an image of God (*ibid.*, XV, viii, 14). Throughout this tractate he also argued in tedious detail that memory, understanding, and will make man an image of the Trinity.

Augustine's main interest here is an exposition of the Trinity. The epistemological remarks are incidental and possibly should not be pressed too far. But the wording implies that man never has the truth itself; he has only a copy of it. Unfortunately, illustrations, such as the seal, more often confuse the reader than clarify his thought. If, however, the accuracy of an impression depends as much on the wax as on the seal itself, the certitudes with which Augustine repulsed the skeptics are compromised. Even the *Dubito* (*ibid.*, XV, xv-xvi) is subject to some restrictions, though Augustine does not take up the precise point now being made. There seems to be a strange mixture of mystery, ignorance, and complete certitude. B.B. Warfield (*Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, p. 145) remarks "God is not identified with the intelligible world as it appears in the soul of man, except as its immediate author. He is in the soul of man not *substantialiter* but only *effective*; and it is precisely in this that the difficulty of the conception lies." Perhaps then Malebranche was a better Augustinian than Augustine. If, nonetheless, we may say that the Ideas are directly present to the mind of man, and if he is not restricted to copies which he could not know are copies, much less know what they are copies of, then Augustine can solve the perplexing problem of communication. This problem, concerning the relation of words to thought and therefore the possibility of teaching, has reappeared in the linguistic studies of the present day.

Communication is effected through words, and words are signs. The difficulty lies in producing an agreement between two people as to the significance of a word. If a word is defined by other words, a sign is explained by other signs; but if a man is ignorant of the latter, the explanation fails. Next, the ostensive definition may be tried. The teacher points with his finger to a book or hat. But it is not so easy to point to an odor or a sound. If the teacher walks in order to explain walking, the pupil may

think he is definition hurrying or even walking ten paces. If the word to be explained is not walking, but speaking, the difficulty of the word *word* or *sign*, not to mention prepositions *by*, *for*, and *through*, or conjunctions *and*, *when*, and *but*, ostensive definition breaks down.

Augustine solves the problem by insisting that knowledge comes first and the use of signs comes afterward. The pupil must already know the meaning before the teacher's words can help him. He has this knowledge because of the truth within. When the teacher gives a lesson in geometry, the pupil looks within his own mind, consults the truth there, and judges the teacher's assertions. The pupil already has the truth and sees the Ideas because Christ the Logos is the Light that lighteth every man. Let this suffice for Augustine's epistemology.

Because of its inherent importance, Augustine was intensely interested in the question of evil, and because of his adherence to Manichaeism, he was always anxious to show that evil is not a substance. Every substance, material or spiritual, is good. Just as a living being is better than a nonliving being, so that latter is better than pure nothing. This viewpoint derives from Platonic teleology. In opposition to mechanism, Plato had argued that all definitions are statements of purpose; a thing is what it is good for, and that which is good for nothing is precisely nothing. To exist means to be good—for something. Therefore evil is nonexistence.

Whatever advantage teleological metaphysics may have against Manichaeism, the denial that evil is a substance does not go far in explaining sin. Not only man, but the devil, too, is good, i.e., serves some purpose; but the devil is wicked and man is a sinner. So little does Augustine minimize the seriousness of sin that a modern author (W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, I, 390, col. 1; 346, cols. 1, 2) can from his anti-Christian point of view speak of Augustine's "neurotic exaggeration of guilt and sin, and unhealthy otherworldliness."

The immediate point is the story of stealing the pears. When Augustine was a boy, he and his friends stole some pears one night. To the superficial secularist this is just a boyish prank; to Augustine's keen, analytical mind, enlightened by divine revelation, it is an example of total depravity. What does this theft involve? Jean Valjean stole a loaf of bread because his family was hungry. But Augustine was not hungry. Besides, the pears were not worth eating and the boys threw them to the pigs. Most crimes have understandable motives: ordinarily a thief or a murderer desires wealth, and they think wealth itself is a desirable good. But the only motive in stealing the pear was the theft itself. This theft was a case of the love of evil for evil's sake. Even worse, the boy Augustine would have had no fun that night stealing pears by himself. The fun depended on stealing with the gang. The motive therefore was the pure love of evil enhanced by complicity in crime. He not only did such things, but took pleasure in them that did them. Hardly anything so well distinguishes blind secular shallowness

from the penetration of a Christian perspective than a sense of sin and guilt.

Augustine also saw and stated clearly the paradox sin produces when God is conceived as the Almighty Creator. "If sins come from the souls which God has created . . . how can one explain that sin is not borne back upon (*referantur*) God" (*De libero arbitrio*, I, ii). In other words, if God is the ultimate and independent cause of the totality of existence, is He not responsible for everything that happens? Or, again, how could a good will, as created by God, ever choose to do wrong (*ibid.*, I, xi)?

It should be mentioned that on this point, and on several others as well, RC interpretations of Augustine usually differ from those of Protestants. The RC policy is to minimize the amount of change between Augustine's early and later writings. He is also as much as possible forced into the mold of Thomism and contemporary RC dogma. It is undeniable that his later writings and especially in his *Retractions*, Augustine corrects some of his earlier statements. Therefore Protestants, stressing the direction of change, generally view him as a forerunner of Calvin.

In the early tractate *De libero arbitrio* (c. 390), Augustine begins by assuming that right conduct would be as impossible without free will as wrong conduct. Free will therefore is a good gift of God, and He is not to blame if we misuse it. Yet God's foreknowledge seems to make sin inevitable. To this consideration Augustine replies that foreknowledge is no more the cause of future events than memory is the cause of past events. Nor do sin and hell justify the assertion that it would be better not to have been born (Augustine seems to have forgotten the Scripture here: *ibid.*, III, v), for a horse astray is better than a stone not astray.

None the less, if we speak strictly, only Adam before the fall had free will. It was possible for him not to sin. But we, who have inherited the corruption of his nature, are unable not to sin. Thus men today are not free. Neither in heaven will there be free will, for there sin will be impossible.

This small amount of free will may not be enough to satisfy RC theology; it may be too much for a consistently correct Augustinianism. At least two difficulties are obvious. First, if right conduct as well as wrong conduct requires free will, there can be no sin now nor any righteous action in heaven. Second, the account of foreknowledge is defective because it implies that God discovers truth empirically by peering into the future as the human memory recollects the past.

Augustine came to a more consistent position through his vigorous controversy with Pelagius. This exponent of free will came to Rome before or during 410, visited Africa about two years later, and then made his way E. The height of the controversy lasted a full decade and then continued in a modified form for another ten years. Or, perhaps, we should say that it still continues. Pelagius taught that the will is free and that therefore sin is not inevitable. No inherited depravity limits a man's choice. Furthermore, God commands us not to sin, and it is absurd and impious to suppose that God would

command the impossible. To order a soldier to jump fifty feet might be the device of a brutal martinet, but it cannot be the requirement of a reasonable master. If, therefore, our Father commands us to be holy and to be perfect as He Himself is perfect, it must be possible for us to obey. In fact, some have done so. It follows also, since sin consists solely of particular actions, that no matter how many times a man sins, his will retains its original freedom and innocence. There can be no such thing as an evil character that determines the will, for this is inconsistent with freedom. Free will is also inconsistent with divine grace. Of course, Pelagius used the term *grace*: he had to. But he reduced the idea to such things as the giving of the law and the example of Christ's life. But grace in the sense of a regeneration power that makes a man willing to imitate Christ is obviously incompatible with free will.

Augustine wrote voluminously against Pelagius. He maintained hereditary depravity and used infant baptism as a clinching argument. He defended the position that God indeed commands the impossible and that obligation is not limited by ability. There was also ecclesiastical action; and although in the E Pelagius obtained an acquittal by chicanery, the reluctant bishop of Rome, under pressure from Augustine and the Emperor, finally condemned him in the W.

Toward the end of his life Augustine wrote two more treatises, *Grace and Free Will* and the *Predestination of the Saints*, wherein we find his latest thought on these matters.

In the former he begins by asserting free will and supporting it with many passages of Scripture. This language is unfortunate because in the sequel it is seen that Augustine is merely asserting the occurrence of voluntary decisions and is not denying that they have been determined by preceding causes. At any rate, he immediately adds that grace is necessary along with free will in order to live a good life. Indeed, God is able to convert opposing wills and to take away hardness of heart. Otherwise, why should one pray for the conversion of sinners? It is certain, says Augustine, that it is we who will, when we will, but it is no less certain that it is God who makes us will what is good; and he quotes Phil. 2:13. "It is certain," he repeats, "that it is we who act, when we act; but it is God who makes us act by applying efficacious powers to our will, who has said, "I will make you to walk in my statutes"" (*Grace and Free Will*, xxxii). Or, again, the Scripture "shows us that not only men's good wills, which God converts from bad ones ... but also those who follow the world are so entirely at the disposal of God that he turns them whithersoever he wills and whensoever he wills. ... What is the meaning of 'they shall not stand' (John 7:4, 12)? Now, why did they not stand by free will; but with a will perplexed by fear took to flight; were it not that God has the lordship even over men's wills?" (*ibid.*, xli). Calvin could say no more.

Augustine's *Predestination of the Saints* insists that both the beginning of faith and the later increases of faith are entirely gifts of God. Not only does our belief on Christ come from God, but even

the thought of Christ which precedes belief in God's work. Augustine admits that he had not always so understood the matter, but he has now come to see more clearly that the Apostles deny all merit and teach that God calls some but not others. There is an external call, such as even the Pharisees heard; but there is another calling, certain and sure, by which a man is made a believer. This calling does not relate to foreseen merit, for there is none. All salvation is of God.

It is true that there are passages in Augustine on which the Romanists can seize with a show of triumph; and it is also true that the W church drifted farther and farther from Augustine for 1,000 years. But his final treatises show that he deserves the title "The Theologian of Grace."

In A.D. 410 the barbarians sacked Rome. Though the progressive dissolution of the Roman Empire had long been evident, the actual fall of Rome shocked the ancient world. The remaining pagans immediately interpreted this disaster as a punishment of the gods on a nation that had forsaken them for Christ. To vindicate Christianity of this charge, Augustine set himself the 13-year long task of writing *The City of God*. The first five books, which are said to be the most important single source of information on Roman civilization, aim to prove that the worship of the pagan gods does not produce earthly prosperity. Books six through ten show that the spiritual blessings cannot be expected from the old Roman religion. Then, constructively, books 11 to 14 explain the origin of the two cities, the city of God and the "other" city. Their historic development is traced through books 15 to 18, and their respective ends are described in books 19 to 22.

However much Augustine may have been influenced by Neoplatonism in his epistemological attack on skepticism and his metaphysical reply to Manichaeism, he was quite clear that neither the gods and demons of its more popular forms, by which it tried to suppress Christianity and resurrect polytheism, nor even the more rational philosophy of Plotinus could fit into a Christian world-view. First of all, Christianity teaches that God created the universe by a voluntary fiat. This excludes Neoplatonic emanationism. Second, Christianity is a system of redemption that takes place, not through Neoplatonic discipline that is consummated in a mystic trance, but through the course of historical events culminating in the death of Christ. Both of these factors, the creation and the crucifixion, are instances of something that happened once for all; hence Christianity attaches an importance to history that Neoplatonism never could.

Augustine, now, wishes to defend the importance of singular events in distinction from permanent and universal principles. The standard pagan objection is that creation makes God irrational and arbitrary. An eternal Form of an eternal world or a permanent ground of existence is understandable, but a first motion voluntarily produced is not. Why would a rational God choose to create at one moment rather than sooner or later? What could He have been doing before He chose to

create? And again, since the volition itself is a change of mind, God must be mutable.

Augustine, both here and in the *Confessions*, makes a double reply. First, the relation of the created world to the eternal God involves the problem of time. Past time seems not to exist, for it no longer is; future time obviously does not exist, and present time is either the present hour, half of which is past and half future, or it is an indivisible moment that is not time at all. Time therefore can exist only in memory and anticipation; that is, time is a function of a created mind. To ask what God was doing before He created things is to ask a meaningless question, for there was no before. A similarly meaningless question would be, Why did God create the universe here instead of there? God did not create the world in space any more than He created it in time. Space is a function of the universe and God created them together.

Augustine has a second and *ad hominem* reply to the pagan objection of unique events. If the human soul is coeternal with God, as everything must be in a world where nothing happens once for all—and on this point Plato, the Stoics, and Plotinus all agreed—then what becomes of their theories of human blessedness? Has the soul been and will it always be miserable? If, however, as they actually claim, the soul by a certain process may become blessed, then either this is an event that happens once for all or blessedness and misery must alternate eternally. The pagans accept the latter alternative. Plato had his reincarnation and the Stoics their eternal recurrence. But this produces another dilemma. During the periods of blessedness either the soul foresees its next descent into misery or it does not. If it does not, it is ignorant, and true blessedness is not consistent with ignorance. On the other hand, if the soul knows it cannot escape the eternally recurring misery, this knowledge will destroy its bliss.

With this general defense of unique events Augustine now turns to actual history. The topic has become one of great interest today through the works of Karl Marx, Pitirim Sorokin, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee. The key to the problem Augustine finds in sin and redemption. Here he opens a long discussion on the origin of sin, the nature of the will, and proceeds to discuss the Trinity and the Incarnation. This material is substantially similar to that summarized above. But as to history, Adam and Eve, created righteous, would have produced a single human society had they not sinned. Even after sin, the human race might have been a single society had not God redeemed a part of it. Actual history, therefore, is the struggle between two antagonistic societies — the City of God and the worldly city. The early city is motivated by the love of self to the contempt of God; the heavenly City is motivated by the love of God to the contempt of self. Their origins, their policies, and their destinies are different.

The earthly city is not to be identified with the state nor is the City of God the visible church precisely, for on the one hand there are hypocrites and unbelievers in the church and on the other not

only are Christians citizens of the state but also there are or may be Christian princes. Yet because of historical actualities Augustine sometimes seems almost to make this identification. Even so the medieval and modern problem of the relation of church to state did not occur to him. Besides, the state cannot be precisely the wicked city, because the state is a divine institution for the punishment of sin and for the good, the temporal good, of sinner, including Christians. Had Adam never sinned, civil government, and not merely slavery (*City of God*, XIX, 15), would not have been instituted. Government, therefore, is not a positive good, even if one hesitates to call it a necessary evil. It is necessary for the preservation of peace, even if and especially because peace sometimes requires war. Augustine was not a pacifist (*ibid.*, IV, 15; V, 22; XV, 4; XXII, 6). In fact, he justifies Rome's universal conquest on the ground that the subjugated nations were better ruled by Rome than they had been by themselves (V, 17).

Augustine's theory of the state is very realistic and perhaps a little rugged. Not only does he justify wars of conquest, but he even regards judicial torture as inevitable and therefore, as justifiable. Of course he deprecates the popular conception that the purpose of the state is to provide means of indulgence. On the other hand Cato and Cicero so insisted on justice (unless Augustine has translated Roman *Jus* into New Testament *dikaiosune*) as the law of nature and the essence of government that no actual state fit their idealistic definition. Augustine's definition, viz., a people united in a general agreement on those things it respects (*ibid.*, XIX, 24) is so framed as to include all historical communities. He even notes the similarity between kingdoms and robber bands (*ibid.*, IV, 4). Indeed, with respect to the Greek antithesis between nature and convention, Augustine, although he holds the state's authority to be based on its divine institution, leans rather to the side of Sophistic conventionalism with respect to detailed legislation. Thus, in opposition to the Donatists, who claimed their private property on the ground of their own labor, Augustine preached and wrote that private property exists solely by civil decree. This tendency toward a totalitarian theory, checked only by disobedience to laws that interfere with the worship of God (*ibid.*, XIX, 17 and 19), stems from his allegedly Christian unconcern for all matters merely temporal. As a pilgrim on earth and a captive of the worldly city, the Christian can never be too greatly interested in property, slavery, or other details of government.

The aim of the earthly city is earthly peace, order, and unity of will among its members on civil affairs. The City of God participates and cooperates in this earthly peace both because it must and because it can use it to advantage. Yet the earthly city with its heavenly members suffers many evils—malice, torture, and even foreign languages. Worse, even its goods are temporary, for this city will eventually be destroyed in hell.

Some object that eternal punishment is too long for a sin committed in a finite time—as if the duration of a crime had any relation to the duration of the punishment. Nor does Augustine hold with Plato that all punishment is remedial. The pains of purgatory, he says, are remedial, but we do not even pray for the godless dead (*ibid.*, XXI, 24).

The City of God also aims at peace, but it is the heavenly peace of eternal blessedness. The saved will fill up and possibly more than fill up the gap in heaven left by the fallen angels. Those who died in infancy will row at the resurrection to normal size; blemishes shall be removed, except that some of the scars of martyrdom will remain as marks of honor. But the great reward will be the beatific vision of God, the peace that passeth all understanding. Though now we see only darkly, then we shall see face to face. The will will be more free then than now, for it will be free from delight in sin. God will be all in all and we shall enjoy our final Sabbath.

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