Part 4: The Human in Culture

Anthropological Approaches to Human Nature, Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

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Abstract: This article reflects on how anthropology has traditionally dealt with the alternation of cultural specificities and human universals. It revisits the foundational anthropological concept of cultural relativism in light of the inevitability of standpoint and ethnocentrism. Today, within the discipline of anthropology, it is possible, indeed necessary, to update the conceptual apparatus in order to maintain the potential to speak truth to power and to undertake a cross-culturally sophisticated critique of globalization as we once did of evolution. The methods and messages of anthropology remain crucial to contemporary practice of the discipline in Canada and elsewhere.

Keywords: human nature, cultural relativism, Americanist tradition, history of anthropology, ethnocentrism

Résumé : Cet article se penche sur la façon dont l'anthropologie a traditionnellement traité de l'alternance des spécificités culturelles et des universaux humains. Il revisite le concept anthropologique fondateur du relativisme culturel à la lumière de l'inévitabilité du point de vue et de l'ethnocentrisme. De nos jours, au sein de la discipline anthropologique, il est possible, voire nécessaire, de mettre à jour nos outils conceptuels afin de résister à la pression des pouvoirs en place et d'entreprendre une critique transculturelle sophistiquée de la mondialisation, comme celle que nous avons su faire de l'évolution. Les méthodes et les messages de l'anthropologie demeurent essentiels pour nos pratiques contemporaines au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde.

Mots-clés : nature humaine, relativisme culturel, tradition américaniste, histoire de l'anthropologie, ethnocentrisme

Introduction

This article revisits what may seem to many to be an old-fashioned kind of anthropology, one grounded in but not identical with the Americanist tradition that grew up around Franz Boas and his first generation of students in the early decades of the 20th century (Darnell 2001).[1] It is not a research paper in the traditional sense but rather a reflection on what makes us anthropologists and how some aspects of that professional identity have maintained continuity over time. My tracing of this genealogy is necessarily personal, since my own linguistic–cultural anthropology and history of anthropology have emerged from it.

The critical research strategies of Boas's resolutely anti-evolutionist paradigm built upon an emerging cross-cultural comparative database and ranted against premature generalization. Postwar positivism in North America has obscured the theoretical coherence of this paradigm to a point where heroic historicist efforts are now necessary to restore its meaning. Such a reassessment is underway. The exemplars I have chosen for this coalescence of revitalized Americanist ideas are not scholars conventionally understood to share a single intellectual project. Moreover, many of them are not anthropologists in the narrow sense. They all, however, have moments of thinking like anthropologists and of addressing issues on which we are the long-established experts within the humanities and social sciences.

The strand of Boasian thought that intrigues me is not the mainstream of this tradition in its heyday, however, or at least not as that mainstream is too often caricatured. Rather, I want to suggest that today, we confront similar trajectories toward simple answers that cry out for resistance from both the ethnographers and the theorists among us. The question of human nature has been foreshortened in the social sciences and humanities, with an accompanying lack of nuanced attention to the culturally specific. Ethnography, particularly in cultural studies,

has been dismissed as mere detail rather than as the real-world verisimilitude that instantiates the plasticity of human nature. Anthropologists, more than any other social scientists, have the ethnographic skills to characterize human nature as simultaneously diverse and uniform. The critical identity of the human resides in personal and cultural agency (what Edward Sapir called "the impact of culture on personality") and on the species-wide capacity for reflexivity. I believe that our discipline urgently needs, at present, to move in tandem between theory and ethnography, between the universal and the culture-specific, the biological and the cultural. We are uniquely poised to avoid the larger culture's predilection toward renewed speculative and premature generalization based on rigid dichotomization of what are, in the real world, continuous phenomena with overlaps and ambiguities.

One of the significant fracture lines in contemporary anthropology revolves around the binary causality attributed by many to culture and biology, with the apparent corollary that anthropologists must choose between the two traditional ends of this continuum. Segal and Yanagisako (2004) have recently argued that the North American discipline should jettison its long-established commitment to the multiple perspectives of the four traditional sub-disciplines. Their exhortation to "unwrap the sacred bundle" implies that American anthropologists have accepted the inevitability of the traditional quadratic structure passively and unreflexively (although they present no evidence for this purported mental state of their colleagues).

Segal envisions the American Anthropological Association umbrella of professional identity and socialization devolving to the presumably incommensurable specialized positions of the Association's 34 constituent sections.[2] Yanagisako apparently takes pride in having presided over the dismantling of the Stanford University Department of Anthropology into two bitterly opposed camps, roughly geared around the oppositions of culture versus biology and cultural analysis versus science (Segal and Yanigisako 2004). Presciently, the program has since been reunited, if not reintegrated.

My own position is that if the scientists and the humanists within our discipline decline to communicate with one another, we have ceded the strongest claim of anthropology to provide a unique and critically useful edge on understanding the essence of human nature and identity. Neither perspective alone is complete or autonomous. Anthropology is not, of course, the only social science discipline to have struggled with such internal diversities of method and interpretation. There has long been a polarization, for example, between experimental and social psychology, human and physical geography, and clinical practice and experimental medicine. Anthropology alone has insisted—until quite recently and, I trust, only in certain quarters—that the two approaches are not conceptually separable. In my view, for example, Borofsky (2002) sets such a high standard for evidence of collaboration across the sub-disciplines that his model fails to capture a more generalized professional ethos of awareness that the specialized problems of culture and human nature attacked by particular anthropologists do not, or at least should not, exist in a vacuum.

This position has seemed obvious to me since my first encounters with anthropology. In a long-ago undergraduate theory course, the Boas-trained instructor offered her students two alternatives in approaching the question of human nature: psycho-biological universals or comparative ethnography. Most of the class found the former more titillating, but in retrospect I think we have gotten further with the latter. The universals have been harder to get at, given our ethnographic methods and predilections.

Moreover, the past four decades sometimes have seemed to over-emphasize the universals, or at least to assume we can formulate them directly, unmediated by surface diversities. I want to explore some of these arguments in anthropology and related disciplines and to hypothesize that they constitute instances of premature generalization, much like those which concerned Boas in the paradigm of classical evolution. Today's universalists ask, for the most part, the right questions about human nature and identity, but the answers are more complex.

Linguistic Theory and Universals

Since my own career began in linguistic anthropology, I begin by exploring the (usually ethnographically uninformed) obsession of contemporary linguistic theory with universals. For most of my professional career, the science of language has abrogated responsibility for the description and explanation of the real languages around whose study it crystallized as a professional discipline. Noam Chomsky's focus on Saussurean "langue," the "competence" of "ideal speaker-hearer in a perfectly homogeneous speech community," cavalierly dismissed as "mere performance" the real speech on which analyses of unwritten languages have traditionally been based (1965:1). Chomsky argued that any linguistic feature that turns out not to be universal is thereby excluded from the universal grammar that he aspires to formulate. Such a theory is non-falsifiable, since all counterexamples can be rejected as mere "butterfly collecting." This rather crude

position has not actually changed much since the 1960s. Chomsky (1987) now asserts that the study of language is not actually about languages at all; it is about the human capacity for language, understood to be replicated everywhere with trivial variations that are uninteresting to theory as he conceives it.

The equally unfalsifiable corollary, of course, is that since most theoretical linguists speak English, English will serve as well as any other language or languages as a [universal] linguistic metalanguage. Those linguists who continue to work on real languages, along with their speakers, are reduced to apologizing for the particularity of their work; many have acceded to its categorization as non-theoretical. Sadly, this has been the price of a place in the mainstream. Cognitive science, for all its breakthroughs in framing language alongside other modes of human neurological and cultural–communicative complexity, has, I believe, prematurely adopted the overvaluing of Chomskian universalist baggage.

From an anthropological standpoint, we urgently need the ethnographic verisimilitude provided by learning how speakers of particular languages accomplish social order. Polish-born linguist Anna Wierzbicka, long-based in Australia, offers an elegant methodological contrast to the Chomskian approach through her meticulous attention to the content and context in which particular languages (usually Polish, English and various Australian Aboriginal languages) have developed their characteristic features and continue to be spoken (Wierzbicka 1972). Wierzbicka calls her putative universals "semantic primitives" (i.e., basic conceptual categories defined at the lexical rather than at the grammatical level). These universal concepts are combined in language-specific ways, facilitating translation by paraphrase into a metalanguage of underlying componential forms. Thus, for example, seeing is a universal capacity or concept, whereas colour is one form it takes in many, perhaps even most, human societies. What is seen—for example, particular colours identified in the lexicon—varies with culture and language (Wierzbicka 1972). Ethnoscience in 1960s anthropology developed a parallel ethnosemantic logic, albeit largely independently.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) equally elegant critique of contemporary linguistics also suggests that we (philosophers, linguists and, by extension, anthropologists) ought to be working from the languages and their speakers to the universal theory rather than the other way around. They privilege pragmatics, defined as "a politics of language." In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, Chomsky is a theorist of the arbour; his model is abstract and linear, excluding what it cannot incorporate tidily. Their own contrasting "rhizomatic" standpoint emphasizes the mutual entailment of language and its social field. They aspire "to make Chomsky's trees bud and to shatter linear order" through such a pragmatics (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 157). They differ from the cognitive scientists in considering the human mind more like a grass than a tree.

Social scientists are not, of course, immune from classificatory aspirations to grand generalization. As a long-ago student of Erving Goffman, I was constantly frustrated by the disarticulation between the elegance of his holistic approach to communicative behaviour, moving beyond language to interaction, and the facile assumption that his interactionist framework applied universally (with a surprising failure to distinguish his metalanguage from everyday language). Concepts such as "tie-signs," "stigma," "impression management," or "the presentation of self in everyday life" manifest themselves in diverse forms that Goffman himself failed to explore across cultural borders. Although his arguments doubtless contained a modicum of the "devil's advocate," a position he often adopted with glee, Goffman appeared to genuinely believe that we ethnographers of speaking could never learn about other societies the kinds of things he thought he already knew intuitively about his own by virtue of childhood socialization. His own society, moreover, was unproblematized in his research projects which subjected mental patients, homosexuals, compulsive gamblers and Shetland Islanders to the vagaries of his own member-of-culture intuitions (Goffman 1967). Goffman's superb ethnographic intuition remains strangely unreflexive, lacking the defamiliarization of anthropological fieldwork.

The method of introspection, especially in its reflexive guises, can certainly provide insight. But contemporary understandings of reflexivity acknowledge its partiality, its status as one among many standpoints. Goffman's definition of sociology as a science (Goffman 1981) never acknowledged the contingent character of his own position—for example, that being Canadian affected his standpoint—although McGregor (1985) argues persuasively that his lurking cynicism about human relations fraught with danger represents a peculiarly Canadian mindset. The kind of reflexivity entailed by the work of ethnography seems to me infinitely more interesting than intuition in isolation.

The member-of-culture may respond to our discovering of the shared patterning underlying surface incommensurability with a hearty "so what?" to the explicit formulation of that which every civilized person always already knows. But once one establishes that there is more than one way to do anything, the search is on for a level of generalization that facilitates meaningful comparison.

One of those levels might be found in intra-cultural variability. Anthony Wallace, for example, contrasts the over-facile attribution of homogeneity to all members of a culture, reproducing itself by "replication of uniformity," to the "organization of diversity" in which the actions of the members of a culture complement one another without necessarily understanding their differences (1962:passim). The organization or attainment of social order, in such a model, precludes premature glossing over of functional complexity.

At another level of generalization, structuralism as formulated by developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1970) recognizes patterns as significant only when they occur across structural levels, for example, from physics to chemistry to biology, or from species capacity to cultural pattern to individual action. Within levels of structure, he considers information to be descriptive rather than explanatory or theoretical. Chomsky's (1957) descriptive versus explanatory adequacy follows a similar train of logic.

Sometimes the anthropologist's response to theory generated from a culture-specific, Western, or logocentric standpoint is simply to render it cross-cultural by applying the generalization to alternative data, without necessarily critiquing the limitations of premature generalization inherent in the source. Much has been made in linguistics of language philosopher Grice's (1966) universal maxims for linguistic interaction, the pragmatics as opposed to the grammar of speaking. Perhaps most significantly for ethnographers, Grice speaks about a "cooperative principle" that entails interaction and collusion to create effective communication. Grice's specific maxims, despite their generalized formulation, however, are not universal in their application; ethnographers have found no magic formula. In illustration, I present his maxims and append some First Nations illustrations of the need for more nuanced and culture-specific formulations of the application:

(1) **The Maxim of Quantity:** speakers must provide as much information as required but no more than this.

First Nations speakers assume that background information is shared. Thus, the interpretive task of the unprepared listener may be insurmountable. Private behaviour, among known persons, in all cultures has this property of eliding what is already known, but most Canadian First Nations elaborate this maxim as an aesthetic principle for valued speech. Minimalism reigns, even at the cost of effective information transfer.

(2) **The Maxim of Quality:** speakers must not present statements they believe to be false or for which they lack adequate evidence.

First Nations speakers are much more concerned than mainstream Canadians to know where information comes from and how reliable it is, a preoccupation arising naturally from transmission of important cultural knowledge through oral tradition.

(3) **The Maxim of Manner:** speakers should avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief and orderly.

Anyone who has ever heard a First Nations elder in pedagogical mode will need no elaboration of the challenges to universality herein. Relevance is in the ear and mind of the listener and is not necessarily understood fully at the time of speaking.

(4) **The Maxim of Relation:** Grice takes for granted that conversations have beginnings, middles and ends, and respond to the transitory and immediate needs of interlocutors.

In First Nations communities, ideally conversations evolve across occasions, relationships and lifetimes.

My somewhat belaboured point is that ethnographers cannot use Grice's maxims or Goffman's interactional frames as purported universals. We ought to be searching for things like them but we cannot expect their detailed realizations to be universal. The level at which the maxims are general or universal remains an empirical or ethnographic question. Functional universals such as Grice's co-operative principle are more likely to emerge than substantive ones.

Ethnographic Standpoints

Whether we begin inductively or deductively, the challenge is how to move between the external analysis and what Boas called "the native point of view," from the etic to the emic. What Edward Sapir (1933) labelled "the psychological reality of the phoneme" applies beyond meaningful units of sound to meaning within culture more generally. Sapir (1916) was also the Boasian anthropologist who formulated more abstract ways of getting at "time perspective" in American aboriginal culture. But I would not want to claim that he ever got both trains of thought into the same argument. This is the characteristic Boasian toggle switch between science and history (Darnell 2001), between universal human nature and the impact of culture on human social identity. One involves individual agency, intra-cultural variability, and member awareness, whereas the other privileges analytic distance and aspires to objectivity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1964) vast vistas of myth diffusion, adaptation and reintegration are patterned in ways that could not possibly be formulated by the member-of-culture situated at a single point or local area within a continental cultural region. There is a wonderful old teaching film (The National Film Board's *Behind the Masks*)

where Lévi-Strauss is explicating mask designs and the carver is trying to dispute his imputed meanings. Lévi-Strauss brushes off anything the artist tries to say as irrelevant to his own argument. His grand rhetoric about the universal products of the human mind holds a similar degree of generality, "a view from afar" (1985) of culture and identity. Yet Lévi-Strauss turns to ethnography to make his case. He makes it effectively when his meticulously detailed comparisons reveal similar "deep" or underlying patterns in social structure, political organization, village settlement pattern, myth, art, language, et cetera, particularly for the South American societies he studied firsthand. Part of this quintessential French intellectual longed to concentrate the universalist argument on the culture of the Parisian intellectual (as did Pierre Bourdieu). Another part of Lévi-Strauss remains stubbornly attracted to the well-chosen ethnographic comparison as a method of articulating the universal. Darnell (2004) argues that the historicist side of the Boasian argument is recapitulated in this analyst-based, external perspective on the meaning of culture in terms inaccessible to its members and that Lévi-Strauss is, in some very serious sense, a Boasian as well as a structuralist. His structuralist universals have historical manifestations as they move among intersecting cultures.

The key to the significance of the ethnographic standpoint is that the validity of the counter-example holds utterly different significance in inductive and deductive research. A scientific theory that fails to account for a single counter-example is, at best, limited in its applicability. I am more interested, however, in the scientific status of the near-universals that may be derived from comparative ethnography.

Again, I turn to a linguistic model widely borrowed by anthropologists: Jakobson (1968) identified similar "markedness" of phonological patterns in child language acquisition, aphasic patterns of loss and regaining of speech, and putatively universal laws of sound change. In all three domains, some things were found to be more basic, more common, than others. There are many languages without phonemic (meaning-changing) voiced stops (b/d/g), but if there is no contrast of voiced and voiceless, the language will almost always have the voiceless series. Glottalized series appear only alongside a prior contrast of voiced and unvoiced. Furthermore, a language that distinguishes voiced and voiceless stops will be likely to have a similar distinction at other points of articulation. Occasional exceptions do not invalidate or falsify this "near-universal" statement about universals. Interpretation and contextualization abound in such a model. It generates explanations of particulars in relation to generalizations based on many cases. For example, comparative linguists turn to historical contact to explain anomalies and to show patterned change in progress.

In "The Study of Geography" in 1889, Boas contrasted science with history–geography–cosmology and asserted the necessity of employing alternating methods according to the problem at hand. In the intervening years, of course, many of us have come to question the idea that science itself lies beyond interpretation. But it is certainly the case that we cannot do science without grounding our knowledge in interpretation. Further, many of us, especially those influenced by feminist theory, deem the standpoint of the investigator to be inseparable from phenomena observed.

British social anthropology also wrestled with the question of whether our "science" is universal. A collapsed Azande granary roof led Evans-Pritchard (1937) to muse on what we would now call the social construction of science. Evans-Pritchard deals with it by suspending the judgments of his home world and getting his head around how the Azande interpretative system uses witchcraft to explain the apparently random consequences of termite-driven collapse. He even acknowledges the superior explanatory power for Azande survivors of witchcraft as the source of harm, relative to the depersonalized random chance taken for granted by Western science.

Malinowski (1922) made similar points about the inseparability of spells and practical knowledge in the construction and use of sailing canoes in the Trobriand Islands. I suspect that this debate has suffered in intervening years because "we" are hung up on the word "science," which we hubristically assume has no precise equivalent outside the European Enlightenment legacy (although Chinese, Indian and Arabic "sciences" share many of its features). Because of the prestige of science, however, non-Western peoples around the world legitimately valorize their own forms of "indigenous knowledge" by claiming for them the prestige of "science." Human inquiry, both naturalistic and philosophical, is certainly a universal. But again, contents and the degree of their systematization differ dramatically, and we are hard-put to understand the alternatives insofar as we attempt to do so in categories derived from our own tradition(s).

Clifford Geertz (1988) contrasts the eye–I-witnessing strategy of Malinowski with the apparently objective journalism of Evans-Pritchard, the universalizing and homogenizing elegy for the primitive in Lévi-Strauss, and the moralizing cross-cultural critique best known through the work of Ruth Benedict. National traditions in anthropology have conceptualized the cross-cultural in remarkably parallel ways.

Returning to North America, Benedict elegantly problematized the ethnocentricity of the normal and abnormal across cultures. Her relativism was one of tolerance rather than of nihilism. Benedict's methodology now seems naively ethnocentric in its borrowing of terms from Western abnormal psychology (the megalomaniac Kwagiuth and the paranoid-schizophrenic Dobuans) and Greek mythology (the Dionysian Plains and the Apollonian Zuni). Nonetheless, Benedict (1934) provided a surprisingly unsensationalized treatment of these contrasts, which she deployed in her musings about where the America of the interwar years had gone off track. Cross-cultural contrast provided the method that allowed for reflexivity and that engagendered a critique of American society and its discontents. Benedict's later work (1946) moved "beyond relativism" to explore universals on which judgment, subsequent to ethnographic effort to understand phenomena in their own terms, could and should be made.

Sapir's "Culture Genuine and Spurious" (1924) which appeared a decade before Benedict's classic work, had been virtually unintelligible to his cronies in Rockefeller-sponsored interdisciplinary social science. His colleagues assumed the inevitability and desirability of "the American way." And Margaret Mead's 17 years of *Redbook* magazine columns (which she co-authored during the 1960s and 1970s) would hone this sort of critique, through ethnographic contrast, to its fullest elaboration. As the United States moved inexorably out of its isolationism to manifest destiny beyond the continental frontier, anthropologists provided guidance to both politicians and the general public. Even in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Benedict (1946) was able to move beyond the naïve cultural relativism with which she is usually associated today to advise on how to reincorporate Japan into the civilized world, as defined by the victors.

Benedict's images of cultural diversity are grounded in an unarticulated, and therefore unquestioned, assumption of universals located not all that far from the surface of human behaviour. Selection from her "arc of cultural possibilities" presupposes a content and internal logic for the selections and adaptations made by unique cultures (Benedict 1934). Something like this model is implicit in all comparative ethnography, whether or not its critical cross-cultural implications are drawn explicitly.

Not all cultures have such clear patterns. Rapid culture change was responsible for Benedict's poignant quotation of a California Digger Indian that the cup of his culture was broken (Benedict 1934:33). She recognized that such change often caused disintegration of traditional cultures, but did not theorize what interwar Americanist anthropology called "acculturation."

In a latter-day resuscitation of Benedict's strategy, Eric Wolf (1999) accepts her implicit expectation of seeking out interesting patterns, selecting three "extreme" cultural elaborations from different levels of social organization (the Benedictine version of the Kwagiuth, cannibalism of the Aztecs, and whatever one might want to call Hitler's National Socialist genocide campaigns). Discussion of these diversities is *only* interesting, I argue, insofar as it entails underlying universals and a method for pinning down their nature. Wolf's point is that relations of power operate in all societies but manifest themselves differently depending on the complexity and specific culture history and political economy of the society.

I have argued elsewhere (Darnell 2001) that Whorf's (1956) efforts to correlate language, thought and reality through the study of grammatical categories followed a pre-existing Benedictine labyrinth. He contrasted the grammatical categories of Standard Average European (SAE) with those of Hopi, a language whose encoded way of seeing the world seemed better suited for explicating Einstein's relativity theory than for devising the physics on which it was based (Whorf 1956). But there is in Whorf, as in Benedict, the possibility of "multilingual awareness," of reflexivity, of becoming (dialogically) bilingual and bicultural, of negotiating multiplex identities.

I will address just one more example of an important theorist whose ideas would be so much more interesting after a good introductory course in anthropology. Richard Rorty (1979) deconstructs the "mirror of nature" paradigm that has enmeshed Western philosophy in metaphysics and argues that all we are left with is the possibility of "edifying conversations" and perhaps the history of science. That is, he gives up on the idea of "truth" or even of closer approximations to something(s) in the real world. We can *merely* talk to each other. Even more sadly, however, he rejects the edifying potentials of ethnography and argues that the conversation he envisions can only be intelligible within the bounds of Western philosophy itself (Rorty 1979). Edification is divorced from the capacity for empathy.

Following a precedent long ago set by Boasian maverick Paul Radin (1927), I have been arguing the contrary position, that dialogic interaction, (i.e., conversation) is both possible and edifying across cultural boundaries. We anthropologists have been doing that for a long time. Radin's exegesis of Winnebago philosophy was arrived at through edifying conversation. His exemplar attests to the anthropological capacity to imagine communities other than our own. We have the capacity to talk to others and to arrive at levels of abstraction where the questions we ask emerge despite the difficulties of getting to their cul-

ture-specific answers. We can learn new categories, acquire new tools to think with. We do these things all the time within our own society. The possibility of ethnography rests upon the same communicative potentials across human communities.

Conclusion

Ethnography is necessarily an enterprise of the bricoleur. But we must not fall into the trap of thinking that that precludes generalization about human nature and personal or group identity. We have allowed the world to see anthropology too much as the study of disappearing exotica and too little as a way to integrate increasingly broad communities as we think together about a globalizing world and its discontents and resistances. Globalization, like human nature, is not as simple as it seems on the surface, and we must take care that our productive concepts lead us not to premature conclusions but to careful generalization that does not mask underlying diversity, whether cultural or biological.

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Notes

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2 In the Canadian context (Harrison and Darnell 2006), the model of national confederation as an umbrella for more diverse provincial interests and perspectives may, perhaps, seem more viable than in the U.S. Moving back and forth between federal and provincial jurisdictions need not signal incommensurability even when the positions are not identical.

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