

HEGEL, THE BLACK ATLANTIC AND MPHAHLELE

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Introduction

Hegel's famous 'Lordship and Bondage' dialectic continues to dominate not only philosophical but also political, racial as well as feminist discourses. Conceptualizations, reconstructions and reinterpretations of this allegory have largely been concentrated more at the level of generality than at the level of specificity. Recently, however, women and black people have located the allegory within the specifics of sexual and racial problematics. Black reconstruction of this Hegelian paradigm, for example, has its famous articulation in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967) and, more recently, in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993). The aim of this paper is to contribute to this reconstructive project by examining Es'kia Mphahlele's articulation of the Master/Slave (Servant) relationships in his texts. How different from the general abstract level is the specifically black interpretation of Hegel's paradigm? How helpful is this dialectic in understanding concrete black/white relationships? To provide insight into these questions, I shall firstly give my understanding of the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic; secondly, proffer a Fanonian perspective; thirdly, review Gilroy's latest version of the dialectic within the framework of what he calls 'The Black Atlantic'; and finally, assess Mphahlele's conceptualization of the Master/Slave dialectic within the Hegelian model and critique his resolution of the tension.

Hegel's Master/Slave Dialectic.

Hegel's claim is that there can be no self-consciousness or self-knowledge without the presence of another person to authenticate one's own knowledge or awareness of self. But the Other is given (or appears with) a character of negativity. The Other is the one who is not me. This Other is, however, also a self-consciousness who excludes me by being itself. What we have then is the presence of two **independent** human beings whose self-consciousness is **dependent** on and mediated through the Other.

Self-consciousness, Hegel argues, is desire. But human desire, unlike animal desire, can only be satisfied by another human in the form of **recognition**. By this, Hegel does not mean merely being conscious or aware of another's existence: 'the individual ...may, no doubt be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness' (Hegel, 1939:233). By recognition Hegel seems to mean that the Other be regarded as an independent, self-affirming, self-determining free subject. In this sense, to recognize someone as a subject would entail, to use Kant's phrase, treating a person not as a means but as an end withal. In fact, to refuse recognition to anyone would amount to treating that person as a means, an object or thing, or an animal. So the desire for recognition is basically the desire for respect, to have others affirm one's personhood. The quest for recognition is simultaneously a negation of the Other. In order to gain recognition, therefore, each consciousness has to impose itself on the Other thus giving rise to a life-and-death struggle. The struggle involves the possibility of death, for 'it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained' (Hegel, 1939:233). But the nature of recognition requires that neither of the protagonists should perish because death would defeat the very purpose or reason of the struggle. If both die, there will obviously be no recognition. If one dies, the Other remains deprived of recognition. Hence one protagonist must overcome the Other dialectically, that is, in the words of Kojève, 'he must leave him life and consciousness and destroy only his autonomy...he must enslave him' (1969:15). With the victory of one over the Other, the **Master/Slave relation is constituted**.

Several consequences arise from this constituted relation. By risking his life, the master achieves two things: recognition and freedom; consequently, an apparent higher self-consciousness. But since this recognition is accorded by a slave, a less than human animal in Aristotle's terms, it does not constitute an objective confirmation of the master's self-consciousness and thus lacks authenticity. In contrast, by submitting to the master through refusing to risk life for freedom, preferring slavery to death, the slave forfeits the right to recognition. Despite this forfeiture, the slave however gains an experience the master has never had: the fear of death. Confronted by fear, the slave has 'melted to its inmost soul, has trembled throughout its very fibre'. This complete perturbation of its entire substance, this absolute dissolution of its stability into fluent continuity, is, however, nothing less than the 'simple, ultimate nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity' (Hegel, 1939:237).

Since the desire for recognition has not been satisfied, the slave has to negate himself as slave. There is absolutely nothing to defend in slavery except to change it. In fact, the very being of slavery is 'change, transcendence and transformation... The slave knows what it is to be free. He also knows that he is not free, and that he wants to become free' (Kojève, 1969:22). The slave's desire to be free in turn generates fear of the slave in the master. Freedom is realized through labour. In transforming nature through labour the slave simultaneously transforms himself because he acquires knowledge and discipline.

The dialectic reaches a stage where the Master and Slave are each both independent and dependent on the other. This condition creates dissatisfaction, for they are both unable to find objective truth in each other. If, as Kojève asserts, the opposition of 'thesis' and 'antithesis' is meaningful only in the context of their reconciliation by 'synthesis', then the interaction of Master and Slave must end in the 'dialectical overcoming' of them both (1969:9).

Most western philosophers (including Kojève but with the exception of Marx, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir ¹) do not pay much attention to the applicability of the Master/Slave paradigm to the concrete, empirical situations of oppressed people. They merely ignore the wretched conditions of the oppressed under racism, sexism and colonialism and regard the paradigm as an academic issue only.² On the other hand, it is ironic that Hegel's paradigm is subjectively appropriated and understood by black intellectuals even though Hegel himself is known for his racist views. Informed by material, political as well as existential conditions of their concrete lived experiences in oppressive colonial and racist societies, blacks have constructed critical revisions of Hegel in rather different forms. For most, the necessity of violence in the course of black emancipation is a popular theme. Among the most notable are Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Mask*), Albert Memmi (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*), Mohammed Sahli and Anouar Abdel-Malek.

Frantz Fanon

Although Fanon devotes only five pages to 'The Negro and Hegel' in *Black Skin, White Mask*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* permeates almost the entire text. In this text, Fanon deepens the Hegelian concept of self-consciousness, and also offers a sharp critique of 'recognition' by denying that reciprocity is present when the relationship between the Master and Slave has the additive of colour or race. What appears then, at first glance, as a summation of the 'Lordship and Bondage' section of Hegel's *Phenomenology* actually turns

out to be a brilliant exposition of the concrete application of the dialectical inter-relationship of the independence and dependence of self-consciousness to the black situation in a racist society.

Three elements of the Hegelian paradigm dominate Fanon's Master/Slave analysis: recognition, reciprocity and violent struggle. Like Hegel, Fanon links identity or rather consciousness of self, to recognition. Genuine recognition requires that it be reciprocally constituted. If it is a unilateral process or relationship, a situation of domination and oppression inevitably ensues. In the event of unilateral recognition, Fanon insists, a savage struggle entailing the possibility of the risk of life or 'convulsions of death' becomes necessary.

Fanon sees the situation of Blacks as markedly different from the mythical and metaphysical Hegelian Master and Slave relationship. He argues that in Black and White relationships, the Master (white) never indicates an interest in the consciousness of the Slave (black). What is important for the Master, according to Fanon, is not recognition but the Slave's labour. In a footnote Fanon writes:

For Hegel there is reciprocity; here, the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work.

In the same way, the Slave in this case is in no way identifiable with the one who loses himself in the object and finds in his work the source of his liberation.

The Negro wants to be like the Master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave (1967:220-221).

The above captures in a nutshell the difference between Fanon's and Hegel's interpretations of the Master/Slave relationship. For Hegel, the Slave's freedom is possible only through the mediation of objectification in work. In Fanon liberation for the Slave results from the spontaneous act of violence, for 'to work means to work for the death of the settler' (Fanon, 1968:93).

While Fanon differs radically with Hegel in so far as the paradigm is applied to a racialized context, he none the less concurs with Hegel's view that human beings desire recognition from other human beings and that recognition is unattainable without a 'savage struggle' which entails the risk of life and 'convulsions of death' (1968:218). Further, recognition of a reciprocal nature is a precondition for Fanon. Without reciprocal recognition, there can be no consciousness of self, self-knowledge, human dignity or freedom. In being denied

recognition one is in fact denied humanity, turned into the inessentiality of an object, an animal. It is therefore this denial of recognition by the Master that necessitates a second violent confrontation. This time, the violent struggle is not between two independent self-consciousnesses, but originates from the slave as an act of emancipation from servitude.

The Black Atlantic

In his recent book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* Paul Gilroy argues that Frederick Douglass' narrative in his three autobiographies should be interpreted as an alternative to and an inversion of Hegel's allegorical scheme. While in Hegel the Master emerges from the struggle as the victor possessed of consciousness that exists for itself, in Douglass the Slave is the one who, by preferring death over slavery, by taking a turn towards death, achieves self-consciousness. In this way Douglass transforms Hegel's metanarrative of power into one of emancipation.

Douglass' narrative is about his bitter fight with Covey, the slave breaker to whom he (Douglass) is sent by his slave master, Thomas Auld. After several severe beatings from Covey, Douglass one day resolves, with devastating consequences, to stand up against Covey's brutality in his own defence. The Hegelian struggle ensues, but Douglass discovers an ideal speech situation at the very moment in which he holds his tormentor by the throat:

I held him so firmly by the throat that his blood flowed through my nails....Are you going to resist you scoundrel ... Said he. To which I returned a polite 'Yes, Sir' (quoted in Gilroy, 1993:62).

After a long struggle, Covey gives up and lets Douglass go. The recourse to violence emphasizes the fact that the order of authority, the locus of power on which slavery relies, cannot be undone without recourse to counter-violence of the oppressed. For Douglass, violence is a necessary condition for emancipation. He says:

I was nothing before; I am a man now. It [the fight] recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a free man. A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity... I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of manly independence. I had reached a point at which I was **not afraid to die** (quoted in Gilroy, 1993:63. Emphasis added).

In Hegel, the one consciousness, intimidated by the terror of death, the fear of death, prefers slavery to death. In Douglass, however, the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the 'continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends' (Gilroy, 1993:63). Death thus presents itself as a release from terror and bondage.

Gilroy suggests that Douglass' autobiographical story can be read intertextually in conjunction with the horrific story of Margaret Garner's attempted escape from slavery. This story, Gilroy says, constitutes part of the African-American literary tradition and part of the black feminist political project. After escaping from the plantation with her family, Margaret Garner, besieged in a house by the slave catchers, kills her three year-old beloved youngest daughter with a butcher's knife and attempts to kill her three remaining children, rather than let them be taken back into slavery by her former master (Gilroy, 1993).

In both these stories, there is a refusal to legitimate slavery, a refusal to initiate the Hegelian conception of the dialectic of intersubjective dependency and recognition characteristic of modernity. As Gilroy aptly puts it:

The repeated choice of death rather than bondage articulates a principle of negativity that is opposed to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave preference for bondage rather than death.

Mphahlele and Hegel

In *The African Image* and 'The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics. The South African Case' Mphahlele probably articulates what is true of most black South Africans of his generation and the one immediately following when he writes:

I first came to know the White man at the point of a boot and then at the point of an index finger - as a servant of him (1962:29).

and

We know Whites as our employers and foremen or managers or supervisors, as our teachers when government permits them to teach in our schools. We also know them in domestic situations where our people work as 'maids' and 'nannies' (1981:48).

'The Master and Slave (servant) relationship is the most central feature structuring social life in South Africa, 'that quintessentially South African relationship that so often serves as the model for the whole black/white relationship in this country' (Ruth, 1986:72). In South Africa, therefore, one needs no lesson from Hegel and his disciples to know about the

Master/Servant, white/black dialectic or struggle. Yet it is not unimaginable that Mphahlele might have had some contact with Hegel before he wrote some of the stories we are about to examine given the company he has kept internationally.

The depth of Mphahlele's philosophical interests has either not been appreciated or has been misrepresented by the almost exclusively literary interests that have dominated his writing. There is enough evidence to suggest that by the time the little known collection of short stories entitled *In Corner B* appeared in 1967, Mphahlele was certainly acquainted with, for instance, the German idealist tradition, and therefore (if not directly, through the mediation of people such as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire or Frantz Fanon) with Hegel. In 1958, six years after the publication of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*, Mphahlele was invited by Kwame Nkrumah to the All-African People's conference in Accra. Mphahlele appreciated the intensity of Frantz Fanon who, while delivering a fiery denunciation of colonialism, maintained a remarkably calm face and manner.

In August 1961 Mphahlele found himself in Paris where the intellectual climate was dominated by the Kojevian and Sartrean interpretations of Hegel's Master/Slave dialectic. It seems clear to me that in the midst of such illustrious company Mphahlele must undoubtedly have been aware of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and the Master/Slave dialectic.

Three stories in *In Corner B* focus on the Master/Servant, white/black struggle, namely: *The Living and the Dead*, *The Master of Doornvlei* and *Mrs Plum*. In all of these, three Hegelian categories are dramatized: recognition, reciprocity and struggle. In the *The Living and the Dead* the Hegelian dependence-independence theme and recognition feature prominently. Jackson, the black servant, fails to turn up at work after a previous day off. Because his servant is not there to wake him up, Stoffel Visser, the white master, fails to deliver a letter to a government minister recommending and urging the banishment of black servants from white suburbs. The master, independent as he is, is not only dependent on Jackson to wake him up on time, but also to prepare good meals for him:

'Its all Jackson's fault' Stoffel said. 'He goes out yesterday and instead of being here in the evening to prepare supper he doesn't come. This morning he's still not here, still not here, and I can't get my bloody breakfast in time because I've to do it myself, and you know I must have a good breakfast everyday' (p.81).

Mphahlele also captures the master's dependence on the servant in the following:

Stoffel stepped into the street and got in his car to drive five miles to the nearest police station. For the first time in his life he left his flat to look for a black man because he meant much to him - at any rate as a servant (p.91. Emphasis added).

In Hegel, this is the stage in the dialectic in which both the Master and the Slave are dependent and yet independent on each other. The Master is dependent on the Slave through the latter's labour while the Slave is dependent on the master for livelihood. The Slave is independent to the extent that he can survive without the Master's labour while the Master has gained independence through struggle.

Despite the acknowledgement that the servant 'meant much to him'; despite the shame he experiences after learning about what has happened to Jackson (in essence, shame, as Sartre rightly points out, is shame before somebody), despite in other words reluctantly recognizing the fact of Jackson's humanity, Stoffel Visser is determined not to reciprocate Jackson's recognition. What is the next step? Sack Jackson because he is the source of Visser's shame? 'No. Better continue treating him as a name, not as another human being. Let Jackson continue as a machine to work for him' (p.95). Mphahlele is here reflecting on the utter disdain with which the white master views the black servant, a disdain so totally destructive that it seems to obviate any consideration of the servant except as a 'machine to work'. This attitude is also forcefully reflected in *The Master of Doornvlei*.

In this narrative, the white master, Sarel Britz, is heavily dependent on his black servant Mfukeri (the bossboy) to exact as much labour from the farm labourers as he possibly can. This character, identified by his brutality and callousness towards his own people, immediately reminds the reader of Mtutuzeli Matshoba's character, *Bobbejaan*, in a story with a similar Master/Slave theme, *A Glimpse of Slavery* (Matshoba, 1979). Mphahlele is here dramatizing a significant observation: that in an avid attempt to gain recognition from the Master, a Slave charged with overseeing other slaves becomes more brutal than the Master himself. We see that the black foreman, after a few accolades from the Master, 'felt triumphant. He had never in his life dreamt he would work his way into a white man's trust... At least he could retain a certain amount of self-respect and the feeling that he was a man' (p.105). The master on the other hand, as in Hegel, probably realizing that the recognition accorded him is not from another free self-consciousness but from something less than an animal, seeks reassurance by asking, 'what do you think of me Mfukeri?' (p.104).

The turning point of the story is the brutal and savage struggle to death between Britz and Mfukeri symbolized by their animals, Kaspar (Britz's stallion) and Donker (Mfukeri's bull). When Kaspar gets badly gored by Donker, Britz shoots the stallion and orders Mfukeri to do likewise with his bull or leave the farm. Is Mphahlele here toying with the Fanonian solution of violence for liberation?

Without enunciating it strictly in Hegelian terms, Ruth identifies Hegelian categories in the struggle symbolized by the two animals. The importance of the fact that the struggle is symbolised as a fight between two male animals that are traditional symbols of potency cannot be underestimated. The struggle for the kind of power that the Britzes of South Africa would wield is not couched in terms of a problem in human understanding - it is quite simply a **brutal animalistic** struggle to death, a struggle where the death of one demands the death of another (1986:74).

Mfukeri, however, refuses to shoot his bull, preferring to leave the farm. Mphahlele may thus be interpreted as suggesting that violence is not the right solution for the Master and Slave impasse. This interpretation, I shall argue, seems to accord with Mphahlele's general philosophical outlook.

Mphahlele's concern about white intransigent refusal to recognize blacks as human beings is constantly hinted at in the three stories of *In Corner B*. In *The Living and the Dead* black people are equated to 'simple things' as when Stoffel Visser says some white people 'are so wooden-headed they won't understand simple things like kaffirs' (p.82). He also equates black servants with animals: Jackson has 'the devotion of a trained animal' (p.85). In *Mrs Plum* the refusal to accord recognition to black people is articulated through Mphahlele's concern for names.

Names, particularly among Africans, have not only cultural or social but also ontological significance. In Africa names have definite meanings, they transcend being mere labels or simple tags, they have a social signification. In point of fact, a number of names studied collectively may well express the *Weltanschauung* (world-view) of a people. Karabo, the black maid in *Mrs Plum* is impressed by her employer, Mrs Plum, for insisting on calling her by her African name, because 'I know so many whites who did not care what they called black people as long as it was all right for their tongue' (p.166). To white masters and madams, black servants do not have individual identities or personal names but collective or group identities such as 'hoys', 'girls' 'Jims', 'Johns', 'Kaffirs' etc. Karabo feels utmost

resentment when her former Belgravia employers actually encourage their child to call her 'You Black Girl'.

More serious, however, is Karabo's realization that animals are accorded more recognition and respect than black people. Pets are called by their names while black servants are not. Karabo notes this refusal to recognize blacks in a neighbour who has dropped in at Mrs Plum's house to report that Dick, Mrs Plum's gardener, has been very negligent with her dogs in the street: 'When he left, the white man said 'Come on Rusty, the boy is waiting to clean you'. Dogs with names, men without, I thought' (p.181-2).

This attitude is also evident in Mrs Plum's loving treatment of Monty and Malan, her dogs, while glibly dismissing Dick, the gardener, on their account. Hence the common hatred of black servants for their employers' pets: the latter outdo them in their quest for recognition from the Master.

We see therefore that Mphahlele makes use of the Master/Slave key categories such as recognition, reciprocity, dependence-independence, and struggle. What solution does Mphahlele offer for the liberation of the slave? We have seen that, with Hegel, emancipation comes through the mediation of work, while Fanon emphasizes the necessity of violence as a precondition for liberation in the face of the intransigent inflexibility of the oppressor. Paul Gilroy also argues in favour of the preference for death as a possible option for liberation.

Mphahlele seems to be ambivalent on the question of violent and non-violent means. This ambivalence expresses itself clearly in *The Master of Doornvlei* where the life-and-death struggle is symbolized by the animals and Mfukeri's subsequent refusal to obey the master's demand to kill Donker the bull. Mphahlele acknowledges this ambivalence thus:

Ambivalence, ambivalence. How can Blacks and Whites not be ambivalent toward each other after so many generation of coexistence in which inequalities have been perpetuated? While I appreciate the militant Black attitude against integration in this country, the Bantustan idea disgusts me, infuriates me (1972:103).

The Mphahlelean ambivalence is not only evident in relation to the means but also at the level of the ends, influencing both his universalistic humanism and his particularistic Africanness. He attempts a reconciliation between the specificity of African identity and the sameness of humanistic universalism. The former amounts to a form of cultural imperialism inscribed in European attitudes towards Africans. The latter is predicated on the Senghorian

humanistic conception 'man remains our first consideration; he constitutes our **measure**', and the discourse of non-racialism that he has so vehemently argued for in *The African Image*.

The contradiction in Mphahlele's resolution of the tension between particularistic Africanity on the one hand and humanistic universalism on the other is illustrated by the fact that the universalism he expresses in the concept of non-racialism is conceptualized as a critique of the politics of difference inscribed in the particularistic discourse of the Pan Africanist Congress. (Cf. the section *The Nationalist* in *The African Image*). Mphahlele acknowledges this seeming contradiction himself when, in consideration of an alternative to non-racialism, he remarks 'could we do this [consolidate African humanism] without running the risk of being called anti-white?... Already the concept of Black Consciousness has suffered a backlash, and is now a synonym (to White authority) of subversion, racism' (1984:157).

In his 'Variations on a Theme: Race and Color', Mphahlele provides us with a glimpse of his response to the Master/Slave relationship:

You could create a poem, or a novel or a play that incites to violence between racial groups, directly or indirectly. I have intimated that this is a waste and a roundabout way of getting people to march against their enemy (1972:100).

In *The Wanderers*, although the victims of Glendale Farm occasionally resort to violence, this is not strong enough to bring about liberation. Almost at the end of the novel, Mphahlele appears to suggest that educational mobilization and self-rediscovery are essential for emancipation, hence we 'need to find ways of decolonizing the mind. This will lead to the liberation of the self, which in turn must be a rediscovery of self' (1982:36). He thus attempts to recommend a **rational approach** to the universe. This rationalism is expressed through a series of rhetorical questions:

How can I do more than launch the children upon the route to self-discovery? Different times make, and demand, different heroes. How can I make my children understand we have all wandered away from something - all of us Blacks? That we are not in close contact with the spirit of Nature, although we may be with its forces, that growing up for us is no more that integrated process it was for our forebears, but that this is also a universal problem?... How can I make these children understand that the cruelty of the times demands that I recognize the limitations of my traditional humanism, that, if the white world reminds me that I'm black, I must reserve my humanism for those of my colour and fight power with the instruments of its enthronement? How can they understand that the basic truths I'm teaching them only amount to a state of mind that becomes of little immediate import in the face of economic and political power? (Mphahlele, 1973:282-285)

What are we to understand by 'instruments of its [power] entronement'? Does this refer to violent or ideological instruments employed during the appropriation of power and land? What is 'The cruelty of the times'? Why should the latter demand the recognition of African humanism? It would appear that 'the cruelty of the times', given the nature of the apartheid rule, means violent responses by government forces. Because African humanism excludes violence, it contains serious limitations as an emancipatory philosophy. But does humanism, even of the African kind, exclude violence? Would it be a contradiction for a humanist to espouse violence in defence of human dignity, and against human degradation and servitude as Fanon's humanism³ does? It would therefore appear that there is no necessary contradiction between humanism and violence.

Conclusion

What is the legacy of Hegel's analysis of the Master/Slave dialectic to black people? If, as Fanon has pointed out, his attempt to resolve the problem through the dialectic of labour is unsatisfactory, his emphasis on mutual recognition and reciprocal respect remains central to contemporary discussions of sexual as well as racial equality and anti-discrimination discourse. The different responses indicate the multiplicity of dimensions in which the paradigm can be interpreted. Slavery, for instance, is not merely a physical issue exhausted by chattel slavery, it is as much a moral, social, psychological or theological issue as it is a political and epistemological problem. Hence, any attempt at a one-dimensional resolution without due concern for its multi-dimensionality will invariably produce reductionist resolutions inadequate for addressing the problem. A Fanonian (violent) solution or a Mphahlelean (rationalist) approach alone may not be sufficient. Perhaps a synthetic approach, one that recognises the violence of the relationship while not primordializing it could be a relatively successful approach for gaining reciprocal recognition.

Notes

- 1 For the application of the Hegelian paradigm to concrete situations see Marx's works in connection with the relations between the capitalist and the workers, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* for relations between individuals, and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* for relations between men and women.
- 2 See Hussein, A.B. 1985. *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*. New York: Plenum Press, p.103.

3. For Fanon's humanism, see Lou Turner and John Alan 1986. *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought*. Chicago: News and Letters Publications.

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