

What Race Terms Do: Du Bois, Biology, and Psychology on the Meanings of “Race”

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Abstract: This paper does two things. First, it interprets the work of W. E. B. Du Bois to reveal that the meanings of race terms are grounded by both a historical and an aspirational component. Race terms refer to a backward-looking component that traces the history of the group to its present time, as well as a forward-looking component that sets out values and goals for the group. Race terms thus refer to a complex cluster of concepts that involve biological, sociological, historical, moral, and political properties. Second, the paper defends W. E. B. Du Bois’s conservationist thesis about races, which holds that we should maintain race talk and racial distinctions. But instead of offering philosophical evidence, this paper defends the plausibility of the conservationist thesis with evidence from contemporary biology and psychology. It argues that, instead of eliminating race terms or concepts, we should conserve and revise them.

Keywords: Du Bois, race, psychology, biology, eliminativism, conservationism

In 1899, four years after W. E. B. Du Bois became the first black man to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard and two years after he accepted a professorship at Atlanta University, Sam Hose was lynched. 2000 men, women, and children gathered as a mob. They tied Hose to a tree, built a pyre, and set him ablaze. Then they dismembered him. They took as souvenirs his ears, fingers, genitals, bones, liver, heart, and flesh. Those who did not bought pieces from individuals and shopkeepers who took extra. This happened within 40 miles of Du Bois. And similar monstrosities happened to Richard Coleman, George Ward, and others (Young, 2005, pp. 639-40; Dray, 2002, ch. 1).

My title likely primed you for why I start with this account. Hose was black. His murderers and complicit audience were white. Race terms are integral to the story. Moreover, my main interlocutor here, W. E. B. Du Bois, studied the complex roles played by race in human history. He lived them too; his own infant died of diphtheria because white doctors in Atlanta refused to treat black children (Lewis, 2009, pp. 162-4).

These events establish the stakes of race talk. Race terms cannot be analyzed in abstract, cool ways without losing meaning and context. When a black man's knuckles could be jarred and placed in a storefront window to warn black people to stay in line (Dray, 2002, p. 82), analysts neglect part of the discourse about "race" if they focus only on natural properties grounding the semantics.¹ The ways "race" has been used are complex, and definitions of "race" should reflect this. The situation today is the same.

Some people (e.g. some "eliminativists") abandon race terms. They argue that no single foundation can ground them, or they hope to disarm oppressors of linguistic distinctions to stop the horrors.² But W. E. B. Du Bois wanted to conserve race talk.³ Race terms and racial identities, he held, could serve the political ends of unification and organization. To call yourself an "American Negro," for Du Bois, meant that you identified with the history of Negroes in America, committed yourself to getting wider American culture to appreciate the artistic and social achievements of Negroes, and fought for *de facto* (and not mere *de jure*) equality.⁴

I will explain Du Bois's theory of race in this paper. I do not think Du Bois's use of "race" is incomplete or perplexing, like Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued (1995).⁵ Instead, I agree with Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr. that when Du Bois uses the term "race," he refers to a cluster of concepts—biological, sociological, historical, moral, and political. This analysis stays true to the complexities of the uses of "race" by many different speakers and avoids essentialist traps (Outlaw, 1995).⁶ So what am I contributing? I want to include contemporary biology and psychology in explicating Du Bois's theory. Contemporary sciences lend credibility to his project of conserving race talk, especially if the main alternative is to eliminate it. As I understand it, two empirical problems beset semantic theories analyzing race terms. First, a theory must make sense of contemporary genetics. And second, a theory must account for psychological data that explains how we perceive one another and why we form groups. Because Du Bois grounds race terms in two ways (what I dub the "historical" and "aspirational" anchors), he can integrate this data in ways eliminativist theories cannot.

1. How Du Bois Anchors "Race"

Near the beginning of "The Conservation of Races," W. E. B. Du Bois writes: "The question, then, which we must seriously consider is this: What is the real meaning of Race; what has, in the past, been the law of race development, and what lessons has the past history of race development to teach the rising Negro people" ([1897] 1986, p. 815). What strikes

me about this formulation is that the meaning of “Race” is bound to two things:

1. the historical anchor: the historical development of a race to its present time, and
2. the aspirational anchor: historical lessons from a race’s development that can be used to guide that race toward its self-selected goals.⁷

Du Bois binds a race term to its historical development and future ambitions, forming a set of complex properties to which race terms refer. Through synecdoche, any of the heterotypical race terms—color terms like “black” and “white,” ethnicity terms like “African” and “European,” or anthropological words like “Negroid” and “Caucasoid”—can refer to the cluster concepts associated with that race term. In looking at the different ways race terms function, as well as the varied concepts a single race term may refer to, Du Bois transforms the question “What does ‘race’ mean?” into “What can ‘race’ do?”⁸

This intellectual strategy excises the meaning of “race” from exclusive identifications with biological essences or natural properties. And it nudges conversation toward socio-political questions about how “race” has operated diachronically in particular historical settings.

2. The Historical Anchor

Most poignant for the conversation of race development, or the historical anchor, Du Bois writes:

It [a race] is a vast family of human beings, *generally* of common blood and language, *always* of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. ([1897] 1986, p. 817 [Emphasis added])

Du Bois allows that physical and measurable things like blood and language play integral roles in racial formation. That is, lines of heredity and linguistics “generally” correlate with racial groups. However, he contrasts these features with a set of universal qualities that “always” partially constitute a given race: common history, traditions, impulses, and strivings for ideals of life. In other words, it is imaginable that members of a common race could speak different languages or have different lines of descent, though most often they will share both. But

it would be unimaginable that members of the same race would differ on some common set of historical narratives and motivations for action. This cluster of properties—general traits like skin color, hair color, and language; and universal traits like traditions, impulses, and strivings—applies to the group of people to whom the race term refers.

These histories and motivations can parallel human behavior and historical accounts in their complexity. But for Du Bois, it is the identity formed by history and inherited goals that will always partially constitute the meaning of a race term.⁹ The previous passage contends, moreover, that history tracks the meaning of race terms better than phenotype or language.¹⁰

The historical anchor is so crucial for Du Bois that he reemphasizes it.¹¹ Race cannot be measured disinterestedly from the outside, as by plucking strands of hair for genetic sequencing or tracing lineages in archives. Instead, it must be understood with respect to the inner life of a people—how they collectively feel, think, and act both to endure adversity and to reach their goals; and how they give reasons, justifications, and narratives for their actions. What makes the Teuton different from the Negro is not reducible to skin color or language, though both inevitably play parts. Instead, the most fundamental differences between races exist in the spiritual and psychological life of the people. Skin color and bloodline affect the day-to-day life of a race, but not as much as shared stories about a race's origin, common systems of religion, or reaffirmed statements about how to live well.¹²

Deceptively, the qualities of historical experience and narrative sound abstract. However, a race's history is not solely determined by its own actions. Wider communities treat racial groups in ways they cannot control. The history of the American Negro involves studying how wider society treated slaves, freed persons, and people perceived as either. Du Bois addresses the challenges of being a Negro in America:

[T]he Negro is still a group apart, with almost no social recognition, subject to insult and discrimination, with income and wage far below the average of the nation and the most deliberately exploited industrial class in America. Even trained Negroes have increasing difficulty in making a living sufficient to sustain a civilized standard of life. ([1933] 1986, p. 1023)

Negroes in America did not choose to be treated in these ways, but public policy and racist individuals discriminated against them. American society made issues of political recognition, economic equality, and survival of traumas. When Negroes could be dismembered as souvenirs, or when physicians refused to treat 18-month-old infants, the historical effects of

race are anything but abstract. These tangible effects constitute part of the historical anchor.

The advantage of not exclusively tying the meaning of race terms to biological properties is that Du Bois could affirm contemporary evidence that races do indeed have a biological component, but he can also say they are more complex than that. Geneticists who analyze populations can identify, with a high degree of accuracy, which biological race a single person belongs to—East Asian, Caucasian, and Sub-Saharan African. By measuring a person's genes and comparing them with the frequency of alleles in known race groups, a biologist can identify a person's geographic racial origin (Wade, 2015, ch. 5).¹³ Du Bois can incorporate this data into his theory of race. But just as most people would further interrogate one's race with questions about language, social upbringing, and political goals, Du Bois can include further information in the race term's meaning by associating them with a cluster of concepts. The biological portion of race terms is therefore integrated into a more holistic set of properties that a race term refers to. Moreover, Du Bois need not limit himself to the three biological racial categories; he can use additional historical information to discuss the meanings of race terms. He thus provides a flexible framework that accounts for the wide variety of races and the nuanced information we often incorporate into racial categories.

3. The Aspirational Anchor

Du Bois infuses his writings with calls to action and definitions of goals for the American Negro. These constitute the aspirational anchor, so named because it involves a future orientation of a people setting out things to achieve. At any given moment, a race must not only describe its identity as following from historical circumstances, but it must also decide whether and how to change it. For example, Du Bois writes:

As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development.

For the accomplishment of these ends we need race organizations: Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy. Not

only is all this necessary for positive advance, it is absolutely imperative for negative defense. ... [O]ur one haven of refuge is ourselves, and but one means of advance, our own belief in our great destiny, our own implicit trust in our ability and worth. ... And such a people must be united; not merely united for the organized theft of political spoils, not united to disgrace religion with whoremongers and ward-heelers; not united merely to protest and pass resolutions, but united to stop the ravages of consumption among the Negro people, united to keep black boys from loafing, gambling and crime; united to guard the purity of black women and to reduce that vast army of black prostitutes that is today marching to hell; and united in serious organizations, to determine by careful conference and thoughtful interchange of opinion the broad lines of policy and action for the American Negro. ([1897] 1986, pp. 822-823; see also: [1933] 1986, p. 1024)

“Negro” bears normative heft. Identifying as a race means having a genuine interest in the values that group lives by and the things they struggle for.¹⁴ This future and aspirational orientation of a race shows that a race can organize people, not in the sense of bunching them into biologically essential kin, but in the sense of giving a people values, motivations, and goals to identify with. As with the historical anchor, the aspirational anchor is not tethered to abstract ideas. The aspirational anchor makes concrete proposals for social organization and political action. Note, race terms respond to a group’s beliefs and circumstances. For example, where repealing Jim Crow laws was a tangible concern a few decades ago, today the reform of the criminal justice system might be more relevant.¹⁵ But when invidious racial discrimination has led to so much pain and opposition, some might wonder: is it not better to jettison the idea of races altogether and identify as “American” rather than “Negro,” or unite under a cosmopolitan banner of “human”?¹⁶ Why preserve the word “Negro” or the concept of races? After all, as Darwin noted, whatever differences exist between humans, their likenesses are more numerous (ctd. Du Bois, [1897] 1986, p. 816). Du Bois responds:

Names are only conventional signs for identifying things. Things are the reality that counts. If a thing is despised, either because of ignorance or because it is despicable, you will not alter matters by changing its name. If men despise Negroes, they will not despise them less if Negroes are called “colored” or “Afro-Americans.” ([1928] 1986, p. 1220)

Members of racial groups are treated differently not because of mere

linguistic convention, but because of deeper social habits. Eliminating race terms does little to undo the underlying discriminations of people who employ racial slurs, oppressive policies, or cognitive biases. Our reproach should target ignorant discrimination and social strife, not racial categories alone. Du Bois adds: “a Negro by any other name would be just as black and just as white; just as ashamed of himself and just as shamed by others, as today. It is not the name—it’s the Thing that counts” ([1928] 1986, p. 1222). This insight draws me to Du Bois. He holds a conservationist thesis—that racial categories ought to be revised and preserved because properly restored racial categories do important social work (cf. Kelly, Machery, and Mallon, 2010, pp. 435-6).¹⁷

Du Bois’s thesis can also make sense of psychological data on racial cognition and the development of in- and out-groups. Specifically, he can integrate three important findings. First, it is likely that humans have a genetic predisposition toward forming groups to foster cooperation. Comparative primate studies show that humans and similar primates form in- and out-groups. Complex societies accomplish more than individuals living separately. To promote this behavior, primates correct each other’s conduct, punish violations of group norms, and make judgments about each other’s intentions. Humans have developed neurochemical responses to reinforce such group formations. To aid the development of trust between group members, oxytocin is often released through interactions with in-group members. This neurotransmitter rewards cooperation but also predisposes people to distrust outsiders.¹⁸ Second, but related to the first, humans have likely developed a cognitive system for racial recognition. Such a system might help humans to detect racial properties, track social coalitions, or notice ethnicities. Du Bois’s strategy to conserve race terms and reform racialized concepts takes advantage of genetic predispositions toward socially organized behavior, and it readapts the cognitive systems that we use to identify each other. This lends plausibility to a conservationist thesis because trying to eliminate race terms, or racial categorization altogether, would work against biological and cognitive obstacles.¹⁹

The third and final psychological finding emphasizes just how quickly and intensely we form group associations. Infants, for example, prefer familiarity. Soon after birth, they show preference for the racial groups that raised them. If a baby is nurtured by Caucasian caretakers, then they will stare longer at Caucasian faces than non-Caucasian ones. This effect can be mitigated by raising a baby in a racially diverse environment, but the finding emphasizes the rapidity and automaticity of our racial judgments. Relatedly, the strength of the bonds we form for our in-group, and against

out-groups, is alarming. Take, for example, the Robbers Cave Experiment, which was performed on a group of middle-class, white, fifth-grade boys. At a summer camp, researchers randomly divided the boys into two groups and kept them in their own cabins and areas. The boys quickly formed separate identities. When they met again, the boys escalated from cautious interactions to outright hostility—using racial slurs and vandalizing each other’s cabins. Only after the researchers constructed a scenario where both groups had to cooperate to fix a broken water pipe did the groups cease their violence.²⁰

None of this data dooms us to invidious racial discrimination. But it should show how quickly and naturally we begin judging the races of others and forming social groups. My hope is that it also renders the conservationist program more practically plausible than the eliminativist one.

4. A Practical Conclusion

Because Du Bois offers two ways to anchor race terms, and because race terms refer to a cluster of concepts, he offers a framework that can integrate the complex data from biology and psychology, while still making sense of socio-historical data and fluid group identities. Moreover, because he proposes that we conserve racial distinctions, he taps into a natural tendency to do so—reinforced by our genetic predisposition toward group organization, our cognitive systems that recognize races, and our social tendencies to form strong in-group bonds and out-group distrust. Certainly, we need to reform our tendencies and retrain our minds. But Du Bois offers us a way forward that simply denying the reality of races (or wishing to eliminate them) fails to offer.

People already talk about races, and it is difficult to imagine how they could not. The fact of the matter is that different racialized groups have been treated in certain ways historically. And those same racialized groups often discuss their particular issues in specific racialized terms. There is an element of practicality here.²¹ Race terms can be used for pride and social uplift, which consequently drive people forward.²² Du Bois understood that racial identities can support the social uplift of a group, and rehabilitated notions associated with a given race term can become features to take pride in.²³

Notes

¹ The abstraction from sociocultural and historical particularities of *actual* situations is what I take as the main detriment to Kwame Anthony Appiah's influential "The Uncompleted Argument" (1995).

At two crucial junctions, Appiah glosses over particular differences between different groups of people. First, he asks, "For what common impulses—whether voluntary or involuntary—do the Romance people share that the Teutons and the English do not?" (1995, p. 66). And second, "If what Du Bois has in common with Africa is a history of 'discrimination and insult,' then this binds him, by his own account, to 'yellow Asia and... the South Seas' also" (1995, p. 74). Certainly humans share common impulses, e.g. a desire to be treated fairly. And they even share, at some point or another, a history of discrimination and insult. But the differences matter. The exact expressions of the preferences for fairness and the particular circumstances the preferences react against, as well as the exact society that enacts tangible policy or historical monstrosities, matter. We can admit that, for example, Jewish folk in Nazi Germany and Japanese folk in America were both imprisoned in their domestic lands. But it is crucial to acknowledge the differences in the reasons the government did it, the exact conditions of the prisoners, and how societies have admitted or ignored this part of their history. To distinguish groups—which race terms often do—the differences matter more than the similarities. Examples could multiply, e.g. many groups have been enslaved, but the differences between chattel slavery, domestic servitude, debt labor, sex trafficking, and other forms matter.

² Appiah, for example, challenges race terms, but he also writes, "The concept of race might be a unicorn, but its horn could draw blood" (2014, p. 113). So, he openly acknowledges how socially constructed terms can cause harm.

³ W. E. B. Du Bois most forcibly argued for this in his 1897 essay "The Conservation of Races" ([1897] 1986). But it is a theme throughout many of his works.

⁴ I am uncertain about whether Du Bois intended these to be jointly sufficient conditions for grounding race terms (i.e. if a person cannot meet all of them, they are not that race). I also suspect that these qualities might not be individually necessary. My main point is that race talk is complex, and Du Bois's theory offers the best framework for its analysis, neither eliminating racial distinctions nor reducing it to biological components. Creating necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in a race is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ Appiah's position has changed in the decades since his article was published, but he is still cited as an archetype of eliminativism.

⁶ Outlaw summarizes, "Race is thus to be understood as a cluster concept that brings together biological, cultural, and geographical properties in 'indefinitely long disjunctive definitions' in which the properties do not define a race by each property being 'severally necessary and the entire set of necessary properties... jointly sufficient.'" (1995, p. 84). He repeats a similar point when writing, "To this extent both the concept of race and that of racial categories refer to heterogeneous

complexes of socially normed biological and cultural factors. The biological features in racial distinctions are conscripted into projects of cultural, political, and social construction” (1995, p. 85).

⁷ This categorization into two anchors is my own. It is not how Du Bois describes his own project.

⁸ I do not mean to imply any strong modal notions by using the term “can” in the question, “What can ‘race’ do?” Du Bois has a practical goal in mind: unite the Negro people to uplift them. No detailed notion of possibility needs to be worked out here. Du Bois is foremost working in this actual world, here and now and in the near future.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel makes a similar point when talking about what unified the diverse city-states of ancient Greece. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he argues that the epic poems of the Greeks formed a cohesive identity between Greeks as disparate as Athenians, Spartans, and Arcadian. Moreover, their tragedies revealed common cultural conflicts, and their comedies allowed for them to gain reflective distance to begin resolving of the conflicts (1977, §727 ff.).

¹⁰ It is no coincidence that Du Bois begins *The Souls of Black Folk* with a chapter entitled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” wherein he describes the history and psychology of the Negro people, and which he concludes by imploring Negroes to band together in their work, culture, and history to develop the extant yet neglected cultural greatness of Negroes. It does not matter that American Negroes might speak different tribal dialects, creoles, or idioms. It does not matter if they were born in Africa, the Caribbean, or American Atlantic. What matters most is that they identify as Americans and as Negroes by unifying over a common way of experiencing the world and a shared set of values (Du Bois, [1903] 1986, pp. 363-5, 370; [1897] 1986, p. 821).

¹¹ For example, Du Bois writes,

What is the real distinction between these nations [or races]? Is it the physical differences of blood, color, and cranial measurements? Certainly we must all acknowledge that physical differences play a great part, and that, with wide exceptions and qualifications, these eight great races of today follow the cleavage of race distinctions... But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them. ([1897] 1986, p. 818)

¹² Du Bois stresses the collective aspect of a race when he lambasts the idea of individualism in history: “We see the Pharaohs, Caesars, Toussaints and Napoleons of history and forget the vast races of which they were but epitomized expressions... This [individualistic] assumption of which the Negro people are especially fond, can not be established by a careful consideration of history” ([1897] 1986, p. 817). That is, not just any history can contribute to discussions of race; rather, the history must be informed by entire tribes, groups, or peoples. This is why social sciences and humanistic disciplines (versus natural sciences)

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are privileged in pointing to the reality of race, how it is developed, and where it is going. If understood solely through science, race development shows a mere history of underdetermining data and overdetermining theory, a handful of granular data that escape the grasp of a unifying theorist just as she clutches her hand. Yet, if understood through history and sociology, the development of races can be understood and sculpted for future purposes.

¹³ The point here is not that the triad of biological races is correct, as there are alternatives (see: Wade, 2015, p. 100). My argument only requires that there is some biological basis for race, which I think Du Bois’s framework does well at integrating. The biological data shows that races do, in fact, exist in a more-than-subjective or more-than-socially-constructed way. Even so, history shows that social construction matters too; appealing to ontological abuses of social construction won’t stop a lynch mob. The philosophical challenge lay in integrating the complex data.

¹⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, characterizes racial identities as a nominal (they can label a person), normative (people of the race should act a certain way, and people in wider society should treat that race in a certain way), subjective (people of a race often characterize what they do as *acting as a race*), and narrative (racial identities play a role in how people create the arc of their lives) (2014, pp. 148-152).

¹⁵ For an analysis of contemporary problems in the criminal justice system, as well as its historical development, see: Alexander (2012).

¹⁶ Similar questions are put to Du Bois by a teenage reader of *The Crisis* ([1928] 1986, pp. 1219-20).

¹⁷ The article Kelly, Machery, and Mallon write does not name Du Bois as a conservationist; they characterize conservationist position based on: Outlaw (1995). For a more detailed discussion of conservationism, see: Mallon (2006, p. 526 ff).

Du Bois’s argument takes on the form of a dilemma. Either we should conserve races or we should not. Implicit is that not conserving races will do no good (e.g. by using terms of nationality or species membership instead). It then follows that we should conserve races.

¹⁸ For a review of primate and human social behavior, see: Wade (2015, pp. 41-53). Wade especially emphasizes the research of Michael Tomasello (2009).

¹⁹ For a review of the cognitive systems involved in racial recognition, see: Kelly, Machery, and Mallon (2010, sec. 2).

²⁰ For a review of psychological experiments on racial recognition and group formation in infants and children, see Bloom (2013, ch. 4).

²¹ Du Bois explains:

[W]hat word shall we use when we want to talk about those descendants of dark slaves who are largely excluded still from full American citizenship and from complete social privilege with white folk? Here is Something that we want to talk about; that we do talk about; that we Negroes could not live without talking about. In that case, we need a name for it, do we not? In order to talk logically and easily and be understood. If you do not believe in the necessity of such a name, watch the antics of a colored newspaper which has determined in a fit of New

Year's Resolutions not to use the word "Negro!"

And then too, without the word that means Us, where are all those spiritual ideals, those inner bonds, those group ideals and forward strivings of this mighty army of 12 millions? Shall we abolish these with the abolition of a name? Do we want to abolish them? Of course we do not. They are our most precious heritage. ([1928] 1986, p. 1221)

²² Du Bois emphasizes this point in another essay as well:

A new organized group action along economic lines, guided by intelligence and with the express object of making it possible for Negroes to earn a better living and, therefore, more effectively to support agencies for social uplift, is without the slightest doubt the next step. ... This organization is going to involve deliberate propaganda for race pride. That is, it is going to start out by convincing American Negroes that there is no reason for their being ashamed of themselves; that their record is one which should make them proud; that their history in Africa and the world is a history of effort, success and trial, comparable with that of any other people. ... There is no other way; let us not be deceived. American Negroes will be beaten into submission and degradation if they merely wait unorganized to find some place voluntarily given them in the new reconstruction of the economic world. They must themselves force their race into the new economic set-up and bring with them millions of West Indians and Africans by peaceful organization for normative action or else drift into greater poverty, greater crime, greater helplessness until there is no resort by the last red alternative of revolt, revenge and war. ([1933] 1986, pp. 1024-5)

²³ I am indebted to Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr. and Thomas W. Holaday for their extensive feedback on previous drafts. Sebastian Ramirez also generously served as a sounding board. Any remaining mistakes prove that even the best feedback cannot cure my philosophical denseness.

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