

Spinoza as Savage Thought

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Abstract: drawing on Deleuze's recovery of Spinoza's contemporaneity in connection to the problematic of the body and its contra-formal and contra-substantial reconceptualisation as a dynamic, relational assemblage, this paper advances the idea that Spinoza's philosophy can be said to provide, moreover, one of the basic geometric configurations underlying the strongly embodied perspective peculiar to the savage Lebenswelt (taken the latter term in a broad, Husserlian sense) which Deleuze and Guattari briefly examined in the second volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Secondly, it attempts to show that, in a time in which the claim is often made that the characteristically modern exceptionality of humans vis-à-vis non-human beings proves problematic at best, reconsidering the specificity of the savage life-world may contribute to substantiate and illustrate the parallel claim that the univocality of our notion of humankind should be questioned and ultimately abandoned, as well. Lastly, it examines the interconnectedness between these issues and engages in a de-colonial rethinking and delinking of modern ontology, epistemology, anthropology, and social theory.



Paintings, tattoos, or marks on the skin embrace the multidimensionality of bodies. . . . 'Primitives' . . . have no face and need none. . . . European racism as the white man's claim has never operated by exclusion, or by the designation of someone as Other: it is instead in primitive societies that the stranger is grasped as an 'other.' Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavors to integrate nonconforming traits . . . , sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions, in a given ghetto . . . (it's a Jew, it's an Arab, it's a Negro, it's a lunatic . . .). From the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be. . . . Racism never detects the particles of the other; it propagates waves of sameness until those who resist identification have been wiped out.

-- Deleuze & Guattari (1987 [1980]:176, 178)

Culture is an inadequate concept for dealing with difference . . . because it takes for granted its own ontological status.

-- Blaser (2013:550)

1

In his second book on Spinoza, Deleuze (1988 [1981]:122-30) links the recovery of Spinoza's contemporaneity to the problematic of the body and its reconceptualisation as a multiple, dynamic, and relational assemblage. I would simply like to push further in this paper the connection between *Spinoza, the body, and us* – an 'us' which, given our postcolonial (or, more precisely, de-colonial [Mignolo 2009]) condition, rather than being broadened to assimilate those who(se bodies) do not look like us, should instead assume the challenge posited by their incommensurable alterity; for by expressing other possible worlds radically different from ours, the Other

paradoxically represents too for us the very possibility of a future.^[1] And, needless to say, there are no 'Others' who deserve such name more than the 'savages' do. A word of clarification is in order here: the term 'savage' comes from the Latin *silva* ('wood') and it denoted in Roman antiquity the inhabitants of the forest, who lacked social structure (from the ethnocentric viewpoint of the Romans, that is). Therefore, it was used in Rome as a loose synonym of *barbarian*, which in turn comprised *inter alios* the Persians and the Punics, and whose meaning was thus wider and extensive to all types of others. Similarly, it should be noticed that *humanitas* was in Rome equivalent to *Romanitas*, and hence opposed to *barbaritas*. Put otherwise: the *homo humanus* was the opposite of the *homo barbarus* (the non-Roman, broadly speaking). In the dawn of modernity, 'savage' would come to exclusively designate instead those deemed as 'primitives', i.e. those who(se bodies) do not look like us (literally!): the 'cat man', the 'crocodile man' or the 'bird-of-paradise man', for instance. I shall refer back to them later on.

In short I would like to venture that if Deleuze's philosophy can be described as a 'machine' particularly apt for retransmitting the 'sonar frequency' of, say, Amerindian thought (Viveiros de Castro 2014 [2009]:92), Spinoza's can in turn be interpreted to provide one of the basic geometric configurations of *savage thought* – to use Lévi-Strauss's (1966 [1962]) well-known and lucid expression;^[2] a configuration that assuming a de-colonial positional instance committed to epistemic insurgency, and in lack of a better term, I would venture to call (provisionally) *reversed or embodied parallelism*. The term 'parallelism' alludes here, as anyone familiar with Spinoza's philosophy may easily guess, to the reciprocity $\text{mind} \neq \text{body}$; in turn, with the expression 'reversed or embodied' I mean to turn upside down the hierarchy (the axiology) commonly projected, throughout the history of Western and especially modern thought from Descartes to Husserl (and beyond), over such two instances: $\text{mind} < \text{body} \rightarrow \text{body} < \text{mind}$.^[3] By 'reversed parallelism' I am not thinking here, however, on a relation of the type of 'double' or 'perpetual disequilibrium' that is characteristic of most savage political ontologies – which I have examined in two recent papers (Segovia 2018a, 2018b), and on whose fractal arithmetics and X-shaped vortex geometry Viveiros de Castro (2012) has produced an immensely insightful and thought-provoking 'meta-fantasy'. It is rather the savage *Lebenswelt* (in a broad Husserlian sense if you wish, and more exactly in terms of von Uexküll's [1909] reciprocal subordination of *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* as adjacent dimensions in any 'experienced world')^[4] that I have in mind and which I am interested in exploring in this paper: the lived experience combining what we (but only we) would (mis)name as 'body' and 'mind' (or 'soul', or 'self'), as well as the type of thought adequate to their aforementioned embodiment.

2

Allow me then to begin by recalling Spinoza's 13th proposition in the *Pars Secunda* of his *Ethica*, which reads as follow: *Objectum ideæ humanam mentem constituentis est corpus sive certus extensionis modus actu existens et nihil aliud*, i.e. 'The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, in other words a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else', as per Elwes's translation (Spinoza 1936:88).^[5] Thus according to Spinoza the 'soul' or 'mind' (*mens*) is *the idea of the body* – nothing more. Spinoza's systematic avoidance of the term *anima* in his *opus magnum* (which he finished writing in 1674) is most telling in this respect, for *anima* has too many and too-clear theological connotations to serve his purposes. As Deleuze writes, '[s]oul is too burdened with theological prejudices and does not account [*inter alia*]: 1. for the true nature of the mind, which consists in being an idea, and the idea of something; 2. for the true relation with the body, which is precisely the object of this idea' (Deleuze 1988 [1981]:86). We can draw a first thesis from this:

Thesis no. 1. *The 'soul' is thought, and more exactly the thought of the body.* (Well understood of course, as Althusser [1998:11] reminds us, that in Spinoza '*mens* is neither the soul nor the mind but instead the power, the *fortitudo*, the *virtus* of thinking').

In other words, for Spinoza thought is always situational and, moreover, *embodied*: we think what we live in/through our bodies. One could therefore reverse Descartes and affirm: 'I exist, therefore I think'.^[6] Actually, it is this potential reversal – which is for us, moderns, absolutely necessary and urgent (see e.g. Ingold 2011) – what makes me tentatively label Spinoza's *prise de position* 'reversed or embodied parallelism'. For, on the one hand, it

is true that in purely logical terms Spinoza's *parallelism* precludes as such all possible primacy, be it of the mind over the body – which defines western metaphysics – or inversely of the body over the mind (Deleuze 1992 [1968]:106-17); thus, for instance, in the *Short Treatise* Spinoza writes: 'No idea can exist unless the thing also exists', but '[t]here is no thing of which there is not an idea in the thinking thing'. And yet, on the other hand, it is obvious that the thing's existence is the *conditio sine qua non thinking* would not take place. Put differently: *there is, by definition, no disembodied thought.*^[7] One may speak then, as I have already suggested, of *embodied parallelism*, and insofar as the latter is at odds with the traditional superiority conferred to the 'soul' in western metaphysics, of *reversed parallelism* as well. (Put otherwise: Spinoza's symmetry is asymmetric and, for us, counterintuitive.)^[8]

Furthermore, in the concluding lines of the *scholium* to the aforementioned proposition (2.13) of the *Ethics* Spinoza writes: 'in proportion as any given body is more fitted than others for doing many actions or receiving many impressions at once, so also is the mind, of which it is the object, more fitted than others for forming many simultaneous perceptions . . . [and w]e may thus recognize the superiority of one mind over others' (Spinoza 1936:89-90). Let us draw a second thesis from this:

Thesis no. 2. *The more sophisticated and complex the body, the richer the 'soul'.*

3

But then one could say that the body does matter – for it determines and overdetermines the 'soul'.

Now, if Spinoza stands in this against the history of western metaphysics at large, he also stands against the very *core* premise of Jewish-Christian (and despite its potential contemporary subversiveness, Islamic) thought. Which ultimately amounts to say that he stands too against the very *ideological* root of modernity, or Integrated World Capitalism (Guattari 1979) – as a 'sorcerer' if you wish, to appropriate Deleuze & Guattari's playful expression in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987 [1980]:239-52), against its 'spell' (Pignarre & Stengers 2011 [2005]).^[9]

Which premise? Namely, that whereas the body is the principle of all contingency the soul is the principle of all stability in us. Thus the opposition between the internal: the soul, and the external: the body, plus the subsequent subordination of the latter to the former, plus its depreciation too: mere nature (corruptible and hence inferior by all means) the body lacks the richness and mystery of the 'soul', which unlike the body representing its periphery is, therefore, the true centre of the (human) 'person': literally, a 'mask' concealing an almost infinite variety of morally good and evil folds (in short, the combination of the sublime and the depraved) but infinitely free to will (regardless of whether its will can be deemed free or not) and whence our very identity gets its contour-lines and permanency.

Integrated World Capitalism? Certainly that as well. For the freedom of the market is but the best imaginable scenario/theatre for our disembodied souls to exercise their infinite (i.e. divine) will in the form of an unlimited acquisition/accumulation of use-values, sign-values and, more importantly, that likewise disembodied thing we love more than anything else: money, our precious (even if it is just paper, or more often an electronic *datum*) exchange-value. Besides, no mistake should be made at this point: if today our bodies are more and more incorporated into this self-referential metaphysical orgy (for it is both things: metaphysical and orgiastic, a puritan displacement or abstract re-inscription of the libido) this – I fear – should be read as an inoffensive extension of the market's grammar: just like our (Christian) souls began their (mis)adventure by abhorring of their bodies – that we may end up without them as 'technological singularities' cannot be overlooked – so too can our bodies now party on their own without any animistic interference (a.k.a. hookup culture, if you dare) or vaguely accompanied, otherwise, by the worldly-wise idea (but what true ideas can we have after spending our time in Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram?) that a healthy body will make us feel better (a.k.a. fitness for all). Sport is no exception: it has more body-and-soul stuff in it for sure, but its acceptability is proportional to its normativisation and symbolic enclosure.

It may be objected that the body is regaining significance today – or even gaining new significance – in academic discussions and artistic performance, medical research (on viral challenges, for instance) and Science & Technology Studies (including techno-medical research on human enhancement via the augmentation of body

capabilities), as well as through the increasing popularity of tattoos, piercings, organic diets, cosmetic surgery or crude physical humour.

Yet, on the one hand, it is hard to tell whether all this represents the many (convergent?) sides of a *single* prism (a general conversation on the body, its meanings, and its potentialities) or, conversely, the (mere) accumulation of *different* phenomena that respond to entirely diverse motivations and thus resist any possible conceptual unification (or totalisation).^[10] Does, for example, the desire to consume organic food in order to have a healthier body as a means to achieve a higher degree of self-esteem and self-actualisation (as per Maslow's hierarchy of needs) respond to the same preoccupation that the photography of artists who, like Isabel Muñoz, question the boundaries between extolled and tortured bodies? Is Zanele Muholi's art, committed as it is to denounce the marginalisation/repression of conventionally-raced and conventionally-gendered bodies, expressive of the same concern that has led, for instance, Dr. Frederick N. Lukash, voted one of 'America's Top Doctors' by the Consumer Research Council of America, to write a book titled *The Safe and Sane Guide to Teenage Plastic Surgery* (2010), which he understands to be, 'at its best, . . . quality-of-life surgery' (3) to help teenagers 'fit' into society and 'look like everybody else' (1)? Lastly, and to anticipate an issue to which I shall later return (namely, the marking of the body), are tattoos – those collective markers and signs of trans-species becomings in stateless societies – *qua* narcissistic signs that 'add cultural capital to the body's surface' in 'contemporary consumer culture' (of which they have become a regular aspect: Turner 1999:40) and tattoos *qua* counter-hegemonic markers of resistance in underground culture one and the same thing, i.e. variant manifestations of a common interest in (notice that I am not saying a common rendering of) the 'body'? And if one were to respond affirmatively to this question, to what extent would one be replicating a purely abstract, and again *disembodied* (one may fear too: purely individual), notion of the body?^[11] To paraphrase Judith Butler (2007:966): to learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter, but if there is a critical role for thought during times of war – and are we not actually living times of 'permanent' war? (Hardt & Negri 2000:10-11, 13, 17-18, 39) – it is precisely to thematise such frame.

On the other hand, in order to advance one step towards such thematisation it might be safe to distinguish between two opposed attitudes and their corresponding practices: those that tend to *liberate* our bodies from their power-driven enclosure (be it physical, symbolic, or both) and those that tend to *imprison* them even more (eventually by new means) – and their products: *subversive and docile bodies*.^[12] Also, it must be observed that the criticism against the embodiment regimes of the latter type of (depoliticised) bodies and its intrinsic association to the spreading logic of late capitalism does not only come (albeit, of course, with different purposes) from conservative circles and traditional Marxists, but also from the post-Marxist left (e.g. Baudrillard 1970). Yet we seem to have been persuaded that it is *only now* that we can truly *manage* 'our' bodies. Be that as it may, we may stay high for only a little while, as eventually, if paradoxically then, we may need to *leave our bodies behind* – or in any event, we are told, a few *privileged* ones will. For the most consequent among today's neoliberals are aware that the modern 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Baudrillard) has reached physical limits – those of a planet that can no longer sustain the modern game, to begin with (Stengers 2015 [2009]; Moore 2016; Povinelly 2016; Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2017 [2014]); and then too those of our, in the end, corruptible bodies. Accordingly, they propose that we 'transcend biology' (Kurzweil 2005)^[13] and thereby fulfil our total emancipation from nature (and the flesh). In this way, they assure us, we will no longer be constrained by anything and be truly ourselves. Hence:

Thesis no. 3. *Informed by Christianity first, and then by capitalism (as a consequence), our view of our 'souls', our view of ourselves generally offers us a disembodied image – or else its reverse: a mindless body. We, dualists.*^[14]

4

Yet it is essential to add something not-less crucial at this juncture. Our very modern notion of 'humanity' stands by and large too on the premise discussed in the opening lines of the preceding section. If I may put it thus:

Thesis no. 4. *We (likewise) define 'humanity' as something shared by all 'humans' notwithstanding their eventually different physicalities.*

Arguably then:

Thesis no. 5. *We have invented the nature/culture divide – and consequently the (paradoxically reversed) opposition between biological and social sciences – to (nevertheless) keep and reinforce such definition: humans belong to the same biological species indistinctly, what makes them different from one another is their culture.*^[15]

But *if* it is the body that determines the ‘soul’, that is to say, if our ‘soul’ is the idea of our body (as per thesis no. 1 above), and if to each type of body *corresponds* a type of soul (as per thesis no. 2), then it is doubtful (at best) that all different ‘human’ bodies share the same humanity that, identical from one body to another, would logically unify them. We may draw from this a provoking supplementary thesis:

Thesis no. 6 – which Spinoza would never have formulated, but which his philosophy authorises, one could say paraphrasing Althusser. *Far from being obvious, ‘human’ universality is a myth, or, if you prefer, an ideological construction; in other words, a selective and ultimately reductive take on a multiple, ever-differing reality that we should no longer describe as ‘human’, therefore.*

A proof of this can be found in the following images, of which the first one represents a ‘cat man’ from Amazonia; the second one, a ‘crocodile man’ from Papua New Guinea; and the third one, a ‘bird-of-paradise’ man, also from Papua New Guinea:



Their bodies differ, and presumably so do their ‘souls’, i.e. their respective ideas of their respective and divergent bodies! A rigorous application of Spinoza’s philosophy demands this conclusion – though the ‘savages’ do not need of Spinoza’s philosophy to be aware of such contrast.

As a rule, the members of every tribal group denominate *themselves* as the ‘true people’. There is, next, those other people who are more or less *like* them: ‘those who are like us’ (e.g. those who speak a variant dialect of the same language). And finally there are the *others*, be they potential allies or enemies; but in any event everyone is clear that they are something else and totally different, and therefore they are not designated by the same word, they do not share a common taxon. Even if they can be said to share certain bodily aspects (legs, arms, etc.), these are not significant, for they present other more important bodily aspects that make them radically diverse. After all, one is more similar to all those other beings they are ontologically and classificatorily linked to in each case (jaguars, crocodiles, or birds of paradise) than to what we (but only we) would call (somewhat naively, then) other ‘humans’.

It is not only that their anthropology (what does it mean to be ‘human’?) differs from ours, but that they have an altogether different ontology (how do things partake in being?) and an altogether different epistemology (how can we know what things are?).

One can better understand in this light the anecdote, which Lévi-Strauss (1961 [1955]:79-80, 1983 [1973]:329) liked particularly, and which Viveiros de Castro (2014 [2009]:49-63) has recently recovered to illustrate his theory of



Amazonian multinaturalism: upon arriving in the Antilles, the Spaniards organised inquisition tribunals to determine if the Indians had *souls*, while the Indians, in turn, drowned the Spaniards in a river to check what kind of *body* they had (corruptible, incorruptible?). In short, the Spaniards never doubted that the Indian had bodies, they wanted to know if they had souls. Conversely, the Indians wanted to know what type of body the Spaniards had in order to learn *who* they were. In brief, they were Spinozists.

5

Looking at ourselves on the others' looking glass – or put differently: practising a sort of 'symmetric anthropology', as Latour (2007) would have it – demonstrates, in short, how pretentiously *cum* naively we take our rather poor ontological views to be; and the question of the *body* (in a broad sense: cf. the discussion of its abstractness on Section 3 above) proves, as we have just seen, an excellent barometer thereof.

It is therefore essential to ask whether in a time in which the characteristically modern exceptionality of humans vis-à-vis non-humans is being questioned for good reasons (see e.g. Latour 2013), the uncritically assumed *univocality* of our notion of *humankind* should not be problematised and perhaps abandoned – as a undesirable colonialist tool (Segovia 2018c) and as a terribly boring thing, that is. And with it any

univocal notion not only of 'what a body can do' (Spinoza), but also of what a body 'is' – as there is nothing like a body, but *bodies* in the plural. For here and elsewhere, as Foucault (1980:133) has it, 'the essential . . . problem . . . is . . . that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth . . . of . . . detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time'.

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1. On the Other as the expression of a possible world which disrupts the present and opens it to the future, while simultaneously making the I and its logic of identity explode, see Deleuze 1990 (1969):301-21: 'Others . . . introduce the sign of the unseen in what I do see, making me grasp what I do not perceive as what is perceptible to an Other. . . . What happens when the others are missing from the structure of the world? . . . Harsh and black world, without potentialities or virtualities: the category of the possible . . . collapse[s]. . . . Filling the world with possibilities, inscribing the possibility of a frightening world when I am not yet afraid, or, on the contrary, the possibility of a reassuring world when I am really frightened by the world, encompassing in different respects the world which presents itself before me developed otherwise . . . – this is the Other. . . . [M]y self is made up of a past world, the passing away of which [is] brought about precisely by the Other. If the Other is a possible world, I am a past world' (306-7, 310).
 2. Lucid in the sense that it stresses that 'savage thought' is 'savage *thought*' – which is less a pleonasm than a straightforward postcolonial provocation, therefore.
 3. Notice that whereas the meaning of the mathematical symbol \div is 'geometrically equal to', that of $<$ is 'precedes'; therefore, the latter must not be confused with $<$ or 'less than'.
 4. For example, that of the tick, which he famously studied. Let us not forget that Deleuze (1988 [1981]) proposes to study human life in ethological terms in turn, finding in Spinoza a precedent (27, 125-6) and in von Uexküll (67-8) an ethological referent for it.
 5. A similar point is already made in the *Short Treatise* – the very first (Dutch) draft of the *Ethics* which Spinoza likely wrote between 1656 and 1661 (Spinoza 1972-87:1.51₃₂-52₁₃, 118₁₅₋₂₅; cf too 15_{34ff.}, 16_{30ff.}, 17₁₀₋₂₅, 97₂₅₋₃₆, 101₁₅₋₁₆).

6. Cf. Astuti's (1995:464) description of the Vezo of Madagascar: 'To be a Vezo is to have learnt Vezo-ness, and to perform it: identity is an activity rather than a state of being'. Performative rather than inherited, Vezo-ness results, *inter alia*, from walking in a specific way, from organising one's hair in a likewise specific way, etc. – all *bodily* traits.
7. Cf. Lambek 1998:112: 'If, from the perspective of mind, body and mind are incommensurable, from the perspective of body they are integrally related'. I would just emend this affirmation by substituting 'are' by 'may seem to be' incommensurable, by which, following Kuhn (1970:148), he means the type of (limited) relation that is characteristic of those things which fail 'to make complete contact' (109) – 'mind' and 'body' universally falling, in his view, under such description (cf. though the references provided in the previous note).
8. By way of excursus: determining what is and what is not counterintuitive in each case is what the so-called cognitive approaches to religion and mythology, e.g. Boyer's (2001), lack – this being one of the reasons for which they can be viewed as one of the latest refuges of the abstract, *disembodied* Cartesian cogito and hence prove so problematic. Thus, for example, certain shamanic visions/images provoked by the inhalation or ingestion of hallucinogenic substances cause the very same neural reactions, and hence present the very same visual quality, than what we would call 'real' visual images (Araujo & al. 2012; Albert 2014). Moreover, assigning counter-intuitiveness to certain 'beliefs' (e.g. the identification of the Amazonian crimson-crested woodpecker by the Yekuana with their hero and first shaman, as studied by Guss 1989:118, 145), might simply reveal unfamiliarity with the conceptual framework and the logic behind such 'beliefs' (a binary division of reality that separates, for instance, bright- and non-bright-coloured beings and more- and less-dynamic social roles, with crimson-crested woodpeckers and shamans thus belonging in the same category; plus the assimilation of the first shaman with the first bird that makes its appearance at dawn). See further Vásquez 2011:188, who limits himself to highlight the latter point, as well as 198, where he aptly writes: 'While Boyer, Barret, Atran, and others are quite correct in pointing to cognitive ontologies that establish the boundaries of what is possible' – again, for a universal 'human' mind – 'they are missing the main sources of cultural and religious creativity. . . . The real issue is not to demonstrate that there are deep recurring patterns of religious life. Rather, the task is to understand how religious diversity emerges in interaction with and supported by cognitive and evolutionary concerns'.
9. On Spinoza's influence on current political insurgency see e.g. Antonio Negri (2004).
10. Beyond, that is, the somewhat superficial claim that, since all this happens at the same time, it must be read as the sign of our times.
11. The more we can say is that today '[t]he body lies at the centre of political struggles' (Turner 2008:40). But then again, when did it not?
12. A non-nuanced reading of Foucault might suggest that resisting domination is not possible. Foucault himself opposed such interpretation in his later work – affirming e.g. that 'technologies of the self' allow us to 'effect, *by [our] own means*, a number of operations on [our] own bodies, on [our] own souls, on [our] own thought, on [our] own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform [ourselves], modify [ourselves], and to attain a certain state of *perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power*' (Foucault 1999:162, my emphasis; 'their' and 'theirselves' in the original). As Deleuze [1990] puts it, '[o]ur ability to resist control, or our submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move'.
13. Ray Kurzweil is since 2012 director of engineering at Google.
14. I use here this term in its common pejorative meaning: as a relation between two terms based on their reciprocal exclusion, and therefore in a sense that is opposed to its frequent use to describe (together with other terms like binary, etc.) stateless societies based on the reciprocal subordination (and affirmation) of the two terms thus linked in them – what Deleuze would label a 'disjunctive synthesis'. See further Segovia 2018a, 2018b.
15. I elaborate here on Descola's (2013 [2005]) criticism of what he calls modern 'naturalism'.

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