

CONCEPTION OF MORAL VIRTUE IN AL-GHAZÂLÎ AND MENCIAUS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, virtue has been an essential topic for all societies. Living in a society brings some responsibilities for human beings. The thinkers of societies mention the notion of virtue according to the framework of their civilizations. Each civilization has its own values, beliefs and social structures which shape its concept of virtue. But at this point, a problem arises: Is a virtue relative or the same in every civilization? In addition to virtue, accordingly, there have been discussions about human nature, whether it is good or bad. In this paper, I will examine the ideas of Chinese philosopher Mencius / Meng zi 孟子 and Muslim philosopher al-Ghazâlî on virtue and try to compare and contrast their ideas.

Keywords: Mencius, Meng zi, al-Ghazali, philosophical anthropology, ethics, virtues

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The main assertion of Mencius is that human nature is good. With this assertion, he claims that the nature of human beings can be known. He gives examples and conditions to explain his assertion. I will give his ideas to understand why he thinks that human nature is good. What makes human beings behave virtuously? Is it right to blame a person because of his/her non-virtuous behaviors? To perceive his ideas, I will give a brief history of Chinese philosophy and the main features of the Confucian school since Mencius is a follower of Confucianism. With this background, I will focus on the ideas of Mencius on virtue. The main assertion of Al- Ghazālī on the same topic is that human nature is a mix of good and bad/evil. To comprehend the aspect of al-Ghazālī, I will give brief information about his life and his main ideas about the relevant topic. Finally, I will compare the two philosophers in terms of the notion of virtue and argue which one of them has the more convincing theory.¹

I. CHINESE PHILOSOPHY: THE INTELLECTUAL MILIEU OF MENCIOUS

Existence of philosophy in Chinese civilization is a controversial issue. Since the scope of this paper cannot cover such a comprehensive debate, I will just give a brief history of Chinese philosophy. China is an ancient civilization. History of China is based on the history of dynasties. In terms of philosophy, the Zhou Dynasty (周朝) (1046-256 BC) is the crucial period. The land of Zhou was a vassal state of its former dynasty, Shang (商朝) (1600–1046 BC). The Zhou Dynasty defeated the Shang Dynasty and established a new dynasty, and introduced the idea of the *Tiān mìng* (天命) “Mandate of Heaven”. According to this idea, the leaders gained their authority to rule from the heavens.

The Zhou Dynasty is divided into the Western Zhou (西周) (1046–771 BC) and the Eastern Zhou (东周) (770-256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou is also subdivided into the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋时代) (770–476 BC), and the Warring States Period (战国时代) (475–221 BC). The government of the Zhou Dynasty was based on the feudal system. The emperor divided the land into fiefs which were ruled by his relatives. After a while, the local lords became independent and Zhou kings lost their authority and power.

¹ For the Chinese philosophical terms I preferred to use official transliteration system; Pinyin (pin yin 拼音) and simplified Chinese. For the names and terms I preferred both original Chinese names and Latinized ones. For the Arabic terms I preferred latinization.

Centralized power decreased and a multistate system gradually emerged. The small states started a lethal competition to control larger regions. This was the period of Warring States (战国时代) (475–221 BC). The Warring States was a period of uncertainty, insecurity and chaos. The thinkers of the Zhou Dynasty started to question how the government should be, what the most important thing is in life, what makes us human beings, how human beings should organize the social and political structures etc. Thinkers of the Zhou period strived to seek answers for these and numerous other questions. Therefore, this period became one of the most significant eras of Chinese history, known as The Hundred Schools of Thought (诸子百家 / zhūzǐ bǎijiā). The four most influential schools of thought that evolved during this period were Confucianism (儒家/Rújiā), Taoism (道家/ Dàojiā), Mohism (墨家/ Mòjiā) and Legalism (法家/Fǎjiā). Among these schools, it is Confucianism which provides the background for the intellectual flourishing of Mencius. Therefore, I would like to briefly discuss Confucianism and its significance for Mencius’ intellectual milieu.

II. CONFUCIANISM (儒家 / Rújiā) IS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL SCHOOL OF CHINESE HISTORY

Confucianism focuses on ethics and morality. Kong zi (孔子), who is known as Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, was born in 551 BCE. The corruption of the warring states period led Confucius to believe the solution was to restore the beliefs and practices of the early Zhou dynasty. Confucius regarded himself as a transmitter, not an innovator. He advocated that rather than inheritance, competence must be the criteria for choosing officials. He believed that rituals (lǐ/礼) and filial piety (xiào/ 孝) were needed for the society to show respect and gratitude to their ancestors. Confucius claimed that people have the capacity for kindness however, it needs to be cultivated through education, ritual, and virtuous representatives. The word he used for this virtue was 仁 / rén, diversely translated as humanity, benevolence, kindness, or reciprocity. The character consists of 亻rén, the radical form of 人 /rén, which means person, and 二 /èr means two. Since the original Chinese character includes these components, reciprocity might be the best translation. This reciprocity covers Confucian virtue. Being virtuous is the most important element of Confucianism. Confucius utilized the term

Junzi (君子) to describe the ideal personality. The term literally means nobleman/person of noble character.² It is generally translated as ‘gentleman’ in terms of philosophical usage. However, Junzi (君子) was described as a person who behaves virtuously. Thus, it should be translated as *the virtuous man*. Five behaviors of the gentleman most central to the Analects (论语 Lúnyǔ) of Confucius are benevolence (rén 仁), righteousness (yì 義), ritual propriety (lǐ 禮), wisdom (zhì 智), and trustworthiness (xìn 信).³ These are the main elements of Confucian virtue. Confucian thinker Mencius / Meng zi 孟子, is the best known Confucian philosopher after Confucius, who followed the Confucian philosophy, especially in terms of virtue; he emphasized human nature.

The above discussion provides a brief background for Mencius and his intellectual heritage. Many moral concepts that he utilizes in his ethics are taken from this intellectual heritage.

III. MENCIOUS / MENG ZI 孟子 AND HIS WORKS

Mencius is latinization of Meng zi 孟子 (372–289 BC), which means Master Meng. His original name was Meng Ke (孟軻). Mencius is believed to have been a student of Zi Si (子思) who is a grandson of Confucius.⁴ This connection with Confucius himself made the position of Mencius more respected among other followers of the Confucian School. Ideas of Mencius are known from his book *Mengzi* which includes his dialogues, debates, and sayings. *The Book of Mengzi* is divided into seven books. Each of these seven books is subdivided into two parts which are further divided into chapters.

Mencius lived in the second half of the Zhou Dynasty, it was mentioned before that it was the period that the power was divided between the small states. The authority of the king was corrupted. The small states were fighting with each other. The peasants suffered from high taxes and the devastation of invading armies. Mencius was one of the thinkers that were trying to find a way to organise society and save the people from the suffering and chaos.

Mencius emphasized that human beings learn from watching and adopting those around them. In the proper society, people who are in the lower positions hierarchically learn from

people above them. Therefore, in society, the most important thing is having a king who has virtue so that his subjects would be influenced by the king and serve him virtuously. “Morality and ritual were more effective than any amount of brute force in motivating people to behave properly. Mencius urges the ruling class to practice benevolent government (rén zhèng 仁政) and teaches intellectuals to take the responsibility for the world.”⁵

As a Confucian philosopher, Mencius gave importance to the virtues that he called four principles or four sprouts (sì duān/四端). These four virtues are benevolence or reciprocity (rén 仁), appropriate behavior or dutifulness (yì/义), etiquette/rites (lǐ/礼), and wisdom (zhì/ 智). These virtues are sprouts in the human heart/mind (xīn/心). The word xīn/心 refers to both the physical organ and also mental process like thinking, perceiving, feeling, desiring, and intending. Thus, the best translation of xīn/心 is heart/mind.⁶ Xīn/心 has the inclination to feel compassion, shame, respect, right and wrong (惻隱 cèyǐn, 羞惡 xiū-wù, 恭敬 gōng-jìng, 是非 shì-fēi).⁷

If the innate sprouts of human beings are properly cultivated, the person will become virtuous like a sprout of a tree will become a tree if it is properly nourished. In that sense, Mencius did not claim that human beings are born with perfect virtues. Besides, every human being has sprouts of virtue and a natural foundation for moral perfection.

To show all human beings have sprouted, he utilized the example of a child who is about to fall into a well.

No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others . . . My reason . . . is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion . . . shame . . . courtesy and modesty . . . right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the [sprout] of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom.⁸

5 Xinyan Jiang. “Mencius on Moral Responsibility” in *The Examined Life: Chinese Perspectives: Essays on Chinese Ethical Traditions*, ed. Xinyan Jiang (Binghamton, N.Y: Global Publications, Binghamton University, 2002), 143.

6 Karyn Lai. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 38.

7 Bo Mou. *History of Chinese Philosophy*, op. cit., 191.

8 Mencius: 2A.6, this is quoted by Bo Mou in the *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 191-192.

2 See <https://www.mdbg.net/chinese/dictionary?page=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E5%90%9B%E5%AD%90>, 01.05.2022.

3 Taken from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>, 10.05.2022.

4 Bo Mou. *History of Chinese Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2008), 190.

Any person who witnesses a child about to fall into a well would automatically strive to save the child because naturally he hates to see a child suffer. In this example, Mencius advocates that this behavior is innate not related to external motivation like being appreciated by others. In this sense, the person who witnesses a child about to fall into a well acts spontaneously without any mental activity.

The distinctive feature of human beings/human nature is virtues that are innate. Mencius claimed that just like how our ears desire good music, and how eyes desire a good painting, the heart/mind of humans desire goodness and virtuous behaviors. He advocated that human nature is good (xìng shàn/性善). Xìng/性 literally means nature. Mencius utilised this term to emphasize the tendency which is natural. In the books of Mencius there is noteworthy conferencing between xīn and xìng (mind and human nature), therefore, sometimes, it is challenging to grasp the distinction between these two notions.⁹ For Mencius, human beings are inclined to be virtuous just as water is inclined to flow downward.¹⁰

It is largely agreed that Mencius does not say that the sprouts straightforwardly provide a reason to act, but rather that they constitute inclinations that need to be nurtured or developed. He complains about people losing these inclinations because of unawareness or not reflecting on them. The loss may also be because of inappropriate environmental conditions.¹¹

According to Mencius, there are two main conditions for moral character; environment and cultivation. While the environment is an external issue, cultivation is an internal issue. Therefore, a person is responsible for his own cultivation in terms of virtue. If a person fails to be virtuous because of external reasons such as social environment, economy or politics, the person is not responsible for it. Thus, external conditions are essential for being virtuous. In this point, the reason for all behavior without virtue is external conditions.

Moral behavior is a part of humanity but there is no law sanctioning individual moral behaviors like helping others, taking care of the ones who need help and generosity. These behaviors are conscientious. However, apart from instinctive conscience behaviors, there are mentally thought behaviors. These mentally thought behaviors might be virtuous. The main thing is that a person might behave virtuously because he/she thinks that the action is virtuous. For instance, when someone sees an elder woman who carries her bags hardly, maybe he/she

does not want to help her instinctively but probably he/she helps her to carry her bags because their parents always warn them to help elders. In this case, virtuous behavior is not done by instinct but by external inculcation. If there is an external inculcation, it means that the person mentally thinks about what is right to do. This mental process is directly correlated to the person's background. This background includes religious beliefs and worldview. Religious beliefs make human beings evaluate the situation they are in according to their belief system and make them choose righteous-virtuous behavior. The worldview is the conceptual structure for knowledge activities. As soon as human beings are born, they begin to acquire knowledge. This acquisition has a specific frame according to the society the one is born in. In this sense, worldview affects the behavior of a person since he/she was born. Thus, the debates cannot answer the question of the goodness or badness of human nature since it was influenced by external factors with the birth.

Furthermore, since all human beings have human nature, the goodness of human nature must be universal as well. If the goodness of human nature has a direct relation with the external and internal conditions which naturally include a worldview because a human being cannot be thought of without the worldview of the culture he/she was born in. Here comes a question about Mencius's goodness of human nature. If external conditions and accordingly worldview affects being virtues then each civilization and culture do have their own virtue understanding. When various cultures examined the claim of Mencius that human beings internally have the goodness sprouts which make them behave virtuously unless external conditions affect them negatively can be seen as logical. However, then the contrary is possible. This means human nature might be bad unless the external conditions such as religions, customs and worldviews etc. cultivate and encourage people to behave virtuously.

IV. AL- GHAZÂLÎ ON VIRTUE

Al-Ghazâlî was born in 1058 in Khorasan. He received his education from an early age and became a famous religious scholar at a young age. The depth of his knowledge in religious sciences brought him to a high position when he was 33 years old, as the chief professor of the Baghdad Nizamiye Madrasah, which was the most important science center of the period. Al-Ghazâlî, who spent a few years in this position, turned to Sufism due to an internal change he experienced and left his job in 1095. This isolated life, which was

⁹ Karyn Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, op. cit., 38.

¹⁰ Mencius, 6A:2, "Mencius on Moral Responsibility," in *The Examined Life: Chinese Perspectives: Essays on Chinese Ethical Traditions*, ed. Xinyan Jiang (Binghamton, N.Y: Global Publications, Binghamton University, 2002), 143.

¹¹ Bo Mou, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 192.

spent with inner purification and the desire to learn the way of the Sufis, lasted for about 11 years.¹² Afterwards, he returned to his education life around 1106 and became the head of the Nizamiye Madrasa in Nishapur. He left his duty as chief professor again in 1109 and returned to his hometown Tus. However, this time, he left his job not to be in seclusion, but to carry out education and training activities more freely and continued his education activities in the madrasah he founded with his own means, next to his house. During this period, he received offers from state dignitaries to return to the madrasa life, but he turned down these offers. Al-Ghazâlî died in 1111, in Tus. Although the exact number of Al-Ghazâlî's works is not known, some of his most famous works are *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyâ' ulûm al-dîn)*, *Munqidh min al-Dalal, Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahâfut al-falâsifa)*, *Chemistry of Happiness (Kimyaa' al-Sa'adeh)*, *Jewels of the Qur'an (Jawahir Al-Qur'an)* and *Doctrines of the Philosophers (Maqâsid al-falâsifa)*.

Most Muslim scholars regard as his major work, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyâ' ulûm al-dîn)*. The voluminous *Revival* is a comprehensive guide to ethical behavior in the everyday life of Muslims (Garden 2014: 63–122).¹³ The work is divided into four sections, each section includes ten books. The first section is about ritual practices (*'ibâdât*), the second is social customs (*'âdât*), the third is about the things that lead to hellfire (*muhlikât*) and thus should be stayed away from, and the fourth section is about those that lead to salvation (*munjiyât*) and should be sought. Both the name of the book and the explanations in his short preface show that al-Ghazâlî wrote this work as a reformation project for the Islamic Ummah, and it is generally accepted that *ihya* was written with such a claim in both old and new scholarly circles. In the preface of the work, the author complains that the scholars who should be the pioneers of the hereafter are formalists who have been deceived by the devil. He says that they corrupt the concept of science and mislead the public by considering it to consist of fatwas given in accordance with the demands of politicians, or numerous theological debates, or the rhetorical speeches of preachers that affect ordinary people. Moreover, he argues that seeing the real sciences and the afterlife path followed by his predecessors are now forgotten, he came to the conclusion that it is necessary to write the book he named *Ihyâ'u ulûm al-dîn*.¹⁴

Al-Ghazâlî takes the Qur'an and Sunnah as the main source on moral issues, and also

makes use of philosophers along with tasawwuf and Islamic scholars. While he explains his ideas, he is giving verses and hadiths related to the subject in each part of *Ihya*. The importance of virtue and vice in morality is obvious. The ultimate goal in most human actions is happiness, and knowing the virtues that will achieve this goal is as essential as knowing the reasons that prevent reaching the goal in question. The key to happiness is virtues, and in order to turn to virtues, it is necessary to stay away from vices.

According to Al-Ghazâlî, good morals are acquired in two ways. The first is creation, the second is work and struggle. Moral beauty is the greatest gift God gave to man while creating him. If a person is born with good morals, he does not need to be educated or make an excessive effort to behave well. However, if a person makes an effort to improve his morality, the moral beauties that are potential in him will emerge more. Just as training one's voice makes a beautiful voice more beautiful, moral education reinforces good morals.¹⁵ Morals are not doing good or bad deeds, neither are they able to do good or bad deeds; rather, it is the deed that gives the urge to the human soul to give or to hold. Manners, as Al-Ghazâlî believes, are the reflection of the soul and its inner image.¹⁶

A person who cannot do good deeds voluntarily must insist on doing good deeds, just like taking bitter medicine. For him, it is possible to reveal the beauties that are not in the nature of man or that are hidden in his depths, with persistence, repetition and patience. To support this view, he presented evidence from the words of the Islamic elders and the prophet and from the verses of the Qur'an.¹⁷

Al-Ghazâlî, like other mystics/mutasawwifs, emphasized the concepts of "*riyâdah*" and "*mujahadah*" (opposing the desires of the soul and striving to gain good behavior) in terms of acquiring good morals. Love for good and hatred for evil must be constant. Because virtues are not stable.¹⁸

15 Demircioğlu, *İbn Sina ve Gazali'nin bazı Değer Kavramları*, op. cit., 1570.

16 Al-Ghazâlî, 1986. See Mohammed Hassan al-Awamreh, "Al-Imam Al-Ghazâlî's View of Moral Education: Its Purposes and Pillars", *US-China Education Review B*, 6, no. 5, 2016, 313.

17 Demircioğlu, *İbn Sina ve Gazali'nin bazı Değer Kavramları*, op. cit., 1570.

18 Mustafa Çağrırcı. "Gazzâlî", <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ihyau-ulumid-din>, 05.06.2022.

12 Aytekin Demircioğlu. *İbn Sina Ve Gazali'nin Bazı Değer Kavramları Yönünden Karşılaştırılması*, *OPUS-Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 16 (28), (2020), 1564, also see 1562-1584.

13 Frank Griffel. "al-Al-Ghazâlî", <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-Al-Ghazali/>, 05.06.2022.

14 Mustafa Çağrırcı. "İhyâü Ulûmî'd-Dîn", <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/ihyau-ulumid-din>, 05.06.2022.

V. ON HUMAN NATURE: AL-GHAZÂLÎ'S PERSPECTIVE

For Al-Ghazâlî human nature consists of a mix of good and evil. According to him, human beings have for nature; the animal nature, the beastly nature, the devilish nature and divine nature. The animal nature (*bahimiyya*) includes animal qualities of a person such as eating, sleeping and copulating. Animal nature reveals greed. If a person only performed the requirements of animal nature, the person would become like a dog and also would acquire shamelessness, hatreds, evilness etc. The beastly (*sabiyya*) nature is to protect the body from any dangerous attack. It includes anger, hostility and aggression. If a person shows his/her anger without auto-control he/she acquires pride, narcissism and love of power. The devilish (*shaytaniyya*) nature for satisfying desires of a person. It reveals deception, dishonesty and conspiracy and if a person behaves according to the devilish nature he acquires treachery. The last one is the divine (*rabbaniyya*) nature. It is the source of all good qualities. It includes worship to Allah, good behavior to all etc. To become a wise man, one should behave accordingly.

When a person is born, these natures come with his/ her body. For him, these natures are improvable, changeable and cultivated by the efforts of a person and with the gift of God. It can be seen from this statement that human nature is not perfect. However, it is perfectible with effort. In other words, the roots of the four natures are inside in the soul of a human being. With auto-control and cultivation one can develop good nature.

Although the human soul contains all the four natures, they develop respectively during the various stages of the life of a person. Animal nature is the first to develop with the existence of a human being to sustain basic life. The beastly nature inculcates to human beings the aggression to protect themselves from external danger. Losing control over the animal and devilish nature causes moral destruction. When a person reaches the age of seven, the age of discrimination (*tamyiz*), the devilish nature starts to develop within him/her. This nature strives to show evil by satisfying the desires of a person. Although the divine nature emerged with the creation of a person, it develops gradually.

These natures shape the internal and external qualities of a person. A person has both animal and divine nature. Thus, negligence of divine nature improves animal nature. This makes a person less human and more animalistic. Trying to be near to Allah and resemble angels is a moral struggle. Although the human soul has both good and bad sides, when it is created it is divine.

For al-Ghazâlî the human soul is eternal. Since he believes the source of the human soul

is the same with angels, its nature is divine and eternal. However, even its origin is divine, for al-Ghazâlî the human soul is not perfect unless they cultivate it for perfection. On the other hand, it has an inclination to good and hatred to evil. Every soul has been given a body to obtain paradise for its eternal life. To achieve it, moral responsibilities play an important role. Al-Ghazâlî rejected the idea that human nature is unchangeable. For him, there is a possibility of changing one's nature. So that he encouraged moral perfection.

Human nature can be changed in two ways; human education (*ta'allum bashariyy*) and divine grace (*jawdilahiyy*). "Human education (*ta'allum bashariyy*) which involves the will and needs time and practice according to the ability of the person involved. The divine grace (*jawdilahiyy*) where the human being becomes knowledgeable at birth as 'Isa Ibn Maryam and Yahya Ibn Zakariyya and other prophets."¹⁹ This knowledge may be given to non-prophets as well.²⁰ These people are aware of their duty and purify themselves. They are empowered by divine grace to be able to do so.

For Al-Ghazâlî, in Arabic the notion of the self might be described by four terms; Qalb (heart), Ruh (soul), Nafs (desire-nature) and 'Aql (intellect reason).²¹

CONCLUSION

Both Mencius and al-Ghazâlî attempted to explain the nature of human beings. According to both al-Ghazâlî and Mencius human beings can gain moral perfection and humans have a responsibility for moral perfection. For moral perfection, one must put an effort and cultivate. From the point of al-Ghazâlî's view human beings have mixed nature by birth, thus to overcome evil nature one should seek perfection. For this perfection, knowledge and action are the essential ways. In this point, al-Ghazzali does not refer to knowledge just as a rational mind (*'aql*). The knowledge also involves the divine knowledge (*wahy*) as a fundamental of Islam. A human being must rely on the Quran and Sunnah to implement their knowledge of them in his life. The implementation is seen as the actions/behaviors. On the other hand, Mencius considered human nature as originally good. For him, human beings hate to see

19 Mustafa Abu-Sway. *Al-Ghazzâlîyy: A Study in Islamic Epistemology* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996), 78-79.

20 Ibid, 78.

21 M. Umaruddin. *The Ethical Philosophy of Al-Ghazzâlî: Al-Ghazzâlî's Theory of Ethics* (Aligarh: Muslim University, 1951), 89.

others suffer and are inclined to help the suffering one by birth. However, if the environment is not suitable, one might tend to be evil. Therefore, a person has to cultivate the goodness that he already has an innate inclination.

When these two philosophers are compared, although the environment, time and beliefs affected their theories, al-Ghazâlî's theory seems more comprehensive because for Mencius, human nature is good by nature and unless the environment led them astray, they naturally behave virtues. Even if a person is responsible for cultivating and improving their virtues, if their environment does not supply convenient conditions, a person might behave non-virtues and it is not his responsibility but his environment. On the other hand, al-Ghazâlî claimed that innate human nature is both good and bad. He advocated like Mencius that a person is responsible for his moral improvement and education. For him, since human beings also have badness, they have to insist on their virtues. Having a non-virtuous environment is not an excuse for people to behave non- virtues.

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