

## WHY LEAVE NATURE ALONE?

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It is commonly held that there are a great many situations in which human beings ought to “butt out” of nature and let things run their course. For example, we ought not “police the jungle”: we should not save a poor antelope from being eaten by a lion, or even save starving, drowning or diseased animals facing painful deaths; we should set aside large areas of wilderness and not allow mining, clear-cutting, or other similarly destructive practices; we shouldn’t introduce alien species into a flourishing ecosystem; we shouldn’t put out forest fires caused by lightning strikes.<sup>1</sup> There are good reasons for these judgments. We can’t save prey from predators without removing the predators from their environment, which is bad for the predators, but also causes other problems as the prey multiply. Even saving a drowning animal removes a potential food source from other animals in the ecosystem. Clear-cutting forests takes away habitats for many creatures, leaves an ugly landscape, and contributes to climate change. Introducing alien species can wreak havoc in an ecosystem and bring about many undesirable consequences for native species. Forest fires serve an important function in regenerating ecosystems, so putting them out can be harmful to those ecosystems.

These are all good reasons, even if not always overriding reasons, to leave nature alone. But they are all *contingent, extrinsic* reasons for butting out. They appeal to the bad consequences for other animals or for ecosystems that would result from interfering. Thus they are also *philosophically boring* reasons; the work of justifying noninterference lies largely with scientists. Environmental philosophers may prefer a more direct justification for noninterference. In what follows I will discuss two theoretical attempts to justify noninterference: one consequentialist, one nonconsequentialist.

A consequentialist may justify noninterference by appealing to the intrinsic value of *wildness* or *naturalness* itself (Hettinger and Throop 2008; Elliot 2008). When determining the consequences of a course of action, we must take into account not only such things as the effects on the beauty of the landscape, health hazards to people and animals, and global warming, but also the effects on the degree of wildness in the affected area. A nonconsequentialist, on the other hand, can argue against interference on the grounds that there is a general principle providing moral pressure against interference in an ongoing process—there is “moral inertia” (Sartorio 2008).

These views may sometimes yield different results. The following grossly oversimplified example illustrates how this might happen. Suppose that some people are determined to enter some wild area and cut down some trees. I can prevent their actions only by building an electrified fence around the wild area. This will be, let’s say, somewhat bad for the living things in the wild area. It will, for example, prevent the wild animals in that area from roaming freely,

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<sup>1</sup> Some argue that, at least in principle, interfering in nature to reduce the amount of predation would be morally justifiable on the grounds that it would reduce animal suffering; see McMahan 2010. See Fink 2005 for a good discussion of issues relating to human interference in predator-prey relations.

and I would have to kill some plant life in order to build the fence. But building the fence will prevent even more destruction of plant life by others. Furthermore, while building the fence will decrease the amount of wildness in the area, it will prevent a greater decrease in wildness that would result from others' interferences. Should I build the fence? This is a case where the nonconsequentialist defender of moral inertia and the consequentialist defender of the intrinsic value of wildness *might* reach different conclusions. The nonconsequentialist might, depending on the details of the case, argue that I should not build the fence, because building the fence is interfering in an ongoing process, bringing about a change that makes some nonhumans worse off than otherwise. The consequentialist might argue that I should build the fence, because even though I would be decreasing the amount of wildness present from what it was, I have no alternative that would result in a greater amount of wildness. For the consequentialist, what matters is the net reduction in wildness that would result from my action; for the nonconsequentialist, what matters is that I not interfere, even if one of the consequences of my own failure to interfere is that others interfere more.

The notion that wildness has intrinsic value has received some attention in environmental philosophy. I will add my voice to those who find it implausible that wildness could have intrinsic value. On the other hand, as far as I can tell, the notion of moral inertia has not been explicitly utilized in philosophical discussions of environmental issues. I will raise what I take to be important questions about this nonconsequentialist strategy. Ultimately I think moral inertia will not give the environmentalist what she wants; thus, environmentalists should be satisfied with appealing to the bad causal consequences of interfering with nature, and not worry about more direct justifications involving wildness or inertia.

## **I. WHAT WILDNESS IS AND WHY IT HAS NO INTRINSIC VALUE**

As a first pass, to say that an organism, or a species, or an ecosystem is wild (or natural) is to say that humans have not interfered with it. "As we use the term, something is wild in a certain respect to the extent that it is not humanized in that respect. An entity is humanized in the degree to which it is influenced, altered, or controlled by humans" (Hettinger and Throop 191). "For present purposes I shall take it that 'natural' means something like 'unmodified by human activity'" (Elliot 292). "The natural is defined as being independent of the actions of humanity" (Katz 103). Wildness comes in degrees. Some things are more affected by humans than others. An unexplored section of jungle or tundra and its plant and animal inhabitants have a very high degree of wildness. The interior of my office, and many of the things in it (my computer, my cell phone, the furniture), have a very low degree of wildness. Many things are wild to an intermediate degree. Genetically modified plants are wild to some degree but not as wild as unmodified plants. Domesticated dogs are more wild than robot dogs but not as wild as wolves. The exhibits at the San Diego wild animal park are more wild than a playground but less wild than an African game preserve.

These are just examples. It is difficult to give a very precise account of the degree of wildness an ecosystem possesses that would determine, for example, whether the Rockies are more wild than Appalachia. This is because it is hard to say what makes one human interference more significant than another. I will rely on my intuitive judgments here and hope that the reader shares them; but if not, it is not important, because my arguments will not hinge on any particular judgments about wildness.

Attributing intrinsic value to wildness could explain many moral judgments. It would provide a reason not to “police the jungle,” even if by doing so we might be able to prevent some animal suffering. It would partially explain why we think it is important to reintroduce species into the wild, rather than keeping them in zoos, and why we think plastic trees are a poor substitute for trees. The wildness defender may also argue that the fact that there are cases where it is unclear what we ought to do concerning the environment can be partially explained by the fact that wildness comes in degrees, and our uncertainty about what to do tracks our uncertainty about the degree of wildness present.

Despite all this, I think the claim that wildness has intrinsic value is untenable. First, wildness is a “negative” property. To be wild is to be *not* interfered with by humans. In general, it is unlikely that negative properties could have or be a basis for intrinsic value, for they do not mark a real similarity between things. Among the things that have this property are random scattered atoms on the far side of the universe, distant suns, and underground Antarctic lakes. These things have really nothing in common beyond being physical objects. It seems very unlikely that all these things could have intrinsic value.<sup>2</sup>

To believe that this negative property has intrinsic value is to believe that when humans came into existence, things thereby got worse in an important way. Now, to be sure, humans *have* made the universe worse in many ways. But that’s because of *particular* bad things they did and do, destroying things and making things worse in specific ways. Surely it is not just in virtue of coming into existence that they made things worse. The view that wildness has intrinsic value sets humans apart from the rest of the universe in an implausible way; it is chauvinistic. For suppose there is another species out there that is a lot like humans in relevant ways. Members of that species have a great impact on their environment. They are intelligent and destructive. It would be chauvinistic to say that something’s interaction with *humans* decreases its value, but its interactions with that other species do not decrease its value.

Why the focus on human interaction? Hettinger and Throop give some reasons: “only human activities are fully morally assessable. Also, human activities can affect nature on a scale and speed much greater than the activities of other individual species... As a group, humans have become too powerful and too populous to be simply ‘plain members and citizens’ of biotic communities” (195). Let us take these claims in turn. First there is the claim that only human activities are morally assessable. The relevance of this fact is unclear. It is relevant to how we ought to react when we learn that some valuable thing has been destroyed by a human rather than a boulder; we might punish the person but not the boulder, and attribute moral wrongness to the

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<sup>2</sup> But see Davison 2010 for a heroic defense of this unlikely claim.

action of the person but not to the motion of the boulder. But the distinction holds no obvious relevance when determining the value of something. Second is the claim that humans are powerful and have a greater impact on the environment than do other beings. Here, again, it does not seem to matter to something's value whether it was affected by something powerful or something powerless; and if it does matter, it is not clear why being affected by something powerful makes something *less* valuable rather than more. We find the grand canyon amazing, in part, because it demonstrates the great power of water to destroy and shape the earth; we do not think that the great power of the water detracts from the value of the canyon, or that it would have been more valuable if it had come about as a result of some less powerful process (also see Ereshefsky 62).

Perhaps the problem is that the definition of "wild," as meaning unaltered by humans, is defective. We might want to count some human actions, but not all, as unwild. For example, consider the "uncontacted tribes" of South America and New Guinea. We might want to say two things regarding the people in these tribes: first, that we should not interfere with their ways of life, and second, that their interactions with the non-human world do not diminish the wildness of their surroundings. Their hunting activities, for example, should not be lumped in with the objectionable interventions in nature discussed at the beginning of this chapter. One thought might be that we could define what is wild or natural by appeal to technology. Here is a suggestion from Eric Katz: "human actions can also be judged to be natural—these are the human actions that exist as evolutionary adaptations, free of the control and alteration of technological processes" (Katz 104). Relatedly, Holmes Rolston III suggests that what is important is not to eliminate human interaction with the nonhuman, but rather to follow the "rules" of an ecosystem: "Eating animals is not an event between persons but a human-to-animal event; and the rules for this act come from the ecosystems in which humans evolved and have no duty to remake" (Rolston 69). What is problematic, according to Rolston, is imposing "culture" on nature, which involves treating wild nature as something other than what it really is (68). The hunting behaviors of the uncontacted tribespeople do not alter nature by technology, nor do they violate the rules of the ecosystem or impose culture on the uncultured.

Unfortunately these proposals are not promising. Marc Ereshefsky has pointed out that Katz's distinction between natural and unnatural actions in terms of evolutionary adaptations is unsupported by evolutionary biology (Ereshefsky 59-61). Furthermore, Ereshefsky points out, even though human culture is importantly different from the culture of non-humans, there is no reason to think this difference is important when considering what we should preserve (Ereshefsky 70) – nor, I think, is there any reason to believe that imposing human culture on something non-human decreases its value except insofar as it negatively affects its other qualities, such as by diminishing its beauty, causing it pain, or killing it. And in fact Rolston's explanation for why we should not impose human culture on wild animals boils down to the claim that doing so harms the animals, or harms the species (68)—not just because human cultural interference with nature is bad in itself. To think that human culture, in particular, has value-decreasing effect just because it is distinctively human, over and above the negative

*instrumental* effects intervening might have on the welfare of animals or species, is to reanimate the concern about chauvinism.

Perhaps we can avoid the accusation of chauvinism by endorsing a subjectivist view of value. Suppose we think that to be valuable is just to be valued by someone. Then the claim that wildness has intrinsic value amounts merely to the claim that wildness is valued intrinsically by someone. And it seems clear that wildness is, in fact, valued intrinsically, by many people. On this view, there would be no deep mystery about why things that have been interfered with by humans have less value than things that have been interfered with by non-humans; or at least there would be no mystery about how it could be that humans speak truly when they say that wild things are more valuable, for they would merely be asserting that they value wild things more.

But endorsing this sort of subjectivism leaves the environmentalist with no recourse when the anti-environmentalist fails to value wild things more than non-wild things. Given subjectivism, the anti-environmentalist makes no mistake in her valuing; she just values different things.

We may modify our subjectivism to be less permissive. We may say that not all valuing is equal. Perhaps there are rational valuing and irrational valuing; perhaps those who value wildness value rationally, and those who don't, don't. But given the problems already noted, there seems no reason to think that it is more rational to value wild things than non-wild things. So this more sophisticated subjectivism offers no advantages to defenders of the view that wildness is valuable.

J. Baird Callicott defends a form of subjectivism that might be thought to offer some help here (though his concern is not to argue for the value of wildness in particular, but rather to give a broad defense of the environmentalist's values). According to Callicott, although values are subjective, it is still possible to value things wrongly.

If you care about yourself, wish others well, and delight in social prosperity, you have the "right" values, but not because your values correspond to any moral facts. Rather, one may be said to have the right values in the same sense that one may be said to have the right number of fingers if one has five on each hand. Values, like physical features, have been normalized, standardized by natural selection. (Callicott 87)

We may wish to question Callicott's claims about the effects of natural selection on what we value. And we may wonder about why we should care about the sense of "rightness" that is tied up with normalcy in this way – why should I care about valuing normally?<sup>3</sup> But even if we accept Callicott's claims, we do not quite have what we need, since it is obvious that a great many people do not in fact value wildness; in virtue of this fact it would be hard to maintain that valuing wildness is "normal."

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<sup>3</sup> For criticisms along these lines see, e.g., Shrader-Frechette 1990, p. 189.

Callicott attempts to solve the problem of disagreement (again, about environmental values generally, not just wildness) by showing that those who, for example, do not care about pollution, are making factual errors about the effects of their actions: “the apparent conflicts of value that confront us at every turn are differences of opinion about ‘matters of fact,’ ‘cause and effect,’ i.e., about the best *proximate means* to achieve our *ultimate ends*” (Callicott 96, his emphasis). Once people learn the effects of pollution of certain sorts, they cease to think that such pollution is justifiable, according to Callicott. But even if Callicott is right about this, it does not help the defender of the intrinsic value of wildness. Suppose everyone would agree that we should butt out of nature when interfering would have some significant negative impact on human lives. This would not show that humans value wildness *for itself*; it would show at most that they value it instrumentally. We can all agree that there are good instrumental reasons not to interfere with nature. The question at issue here is whether we would be making a mistake by not *intrinsically* valuing wildness.

If this is right, then consequentialism is in tension with the notion that we should butt out of nature, except insofar as interference makes things worse in ways beyond decreasing the extent of wildness.

## II. MORAL INERTIA

Let us now consider a nonconsequentialist alternative. We may account for the obligation to refrain from interfering with nature by appealing to a notion of moral inertia. Here is Carolina Sartorio’s gloss of the notion:

Sometimes how things are (or were bound to be) determines what we can permissibly do. In particular, the preexistence of a threat—or, more generally, of a causal process of some sort—makes intervening impermissible, if other things are equal... Moral inertia, then, is a kind of pressure to leave things unchanged. (Sartorio 120-121)

Moral inertia arises for a specific class of interventions: those where an agent interferes with a process that can clearly be seen as already “in motion,” and one where there is a path that can clearly be seen as the “preset” path. (Sartorio 131)

Sartorio illustrates the principle with the following example. Two sick people are sitting on a beach in different spots. Each requires a health pebble to become well. There is a health pebble floating in the water towards one of the sick people. You are in a boat near the pebble. You could redirect the health pebble so that it floats toward the other sick person instead. You have no connection to either person; they are equally deserving of the health pebble; etc. Is it permissible to redirect the pebble? Sartorio says no. If she is right, then the principle of moral inertia is true. What makes it impermissible to redirect the pebble is that this would involve interfering with an ongoing process.

It is plausible that the principle of moral inertia underlies another, more well-known principle: the doctrine of doing and allowing, according to which it is worse to do harm than to allow harm. If doing involves interfering, as seems plausible, then the doctrine of doing and allowing is merely an application of the principle of moral inertia.

The thought, then, is that the environmentalist's view is also an application of the principle of moral inertia. We have reason not to transform or destroy nature, not because of special wildness value contained there, but because this involves interfering in an ongoing process. There is a nonconsequentialist reason against such interference, just as (many believe) there is a nonconsequentialist reason against violating a person's rights; just as one typically may not violate rights merely to bring about some increase in some person's well-being, one typically may not interfere in natural processes even in order to improve the well-being of an antelope. If this is so, then there is an interesting and perhaps surprising tension between consequentialism and (a certain sort of) environmentalism. Of course, to say that there is this reason is not to say that it must be *overriding*; other factors may well outweigh considerations of inertia.

But this is only a rough starting point. Consider Sartorio's more careful statement of the principle of moral inertia:

Moral Inertia (Non-intervention): Given any two moral agents (or two equinumerous groups of moral agents) X and Y, if X is originally under P's scope and Y isn't, and if you could intervene so that P is deflected from X to Y, then, other things being equal, you ought not intervene. (Sartorio 128)

Moral Inertia (Non-intervention), or MINI, concerns a very limited range of cases: cases of *deflection of harm*, or threats of harm, from exactly one person or group to another. And it has implications only for cases in which "other things are equal" – which they never are. We can see how MINI might be extended to apply to *some* cases that involve nonhumans. For example, if a lion is about to attack antelope A1, and we could somehow intervene to get it to attack antelope A2 instead, MINI would tell us not to, other things equal. But this is hardly the sort of case environmentalists are typically interested in. Consider the thought that we ought not to go and clearcut a forest even if we could replace the cut trees with new ones that are just as beautiful. How would MINI apply here? This is not a case of deflection of harm. There is no existing threat to the forest (or anyone) that the clearcutting deflects. In order for us to draw any conclusions about the clearcutting, and to have something useful for the environmentalist, we must have a more general principle of inertia.

It will not be sufficient merely to say that cutting down the trees is interfering with a causal process or changing things from the way they were or were bound to be otherwise. Moving my arm into the air would displace some molecules in the air. This is a way of changing things. But that does not constitute a reason not to move my arm. It's not as if I need some sufficiently strong counterbalancing reason to do so. So the question is: supposing moral inertia exists, what are its limits? Does moral inertia extend to cases where there is a threat to

nonhuman and nonsentient welfare, such as cases of cutting down trees? Does it extend to cases where nobody's welfare is at stake? What sorts of causal processes are the ones that we have a strong moral reason not to interfere with?

Maybe the difference between displacing some air molecules and cutting down a forest is that only in one case does the action make a difference that matters morally. The thought, then, is that there is pressure to leave things unchanged only when making a change makes a difference that matters morally. We might say something more specific about what sorts of changes make a difference that matters. For example, we might say that the only differences that matter are differences in distributions of welfare.<sup>4</sup>

But of course bringing about a change that is an unmitigated benefit is not the sort of thing that there is any reason at all not to do. If Ann is asleep on the train tracks and I can wake her up before the train runs her over, the fact that this would be interfering with an ongoing process gives me absolutely no reason to refrain. It's not as if on the one hand I could save her life, but on the other I'd have to interfere in this ongoing process, and the life-saving reason outweighs the non-intervention reason. There is no pressure to leave a process unchanged rather than do a purely beneficial act. There is pressure to leave a process unchanged only when interference would make some affected party worse off than if there had been no interference.<sup>5</sup> This suggests the following principle of moral inertia:

Moral Inertia (Negative Difference): If there is a causal process underway that you could interfere with, and your interference would make a negative difference to the well-being of some affected party, then you have, in addition to the reason generated by the loss in well-being itself, a defeasible reason not to intervene.<sup>6</sup>

MIND would give the environmentalist more of the results she wants. Unlike MINI, it covers the case of clearcutting a forest. It also seems to cover some cases of geoengineering to combat climate change. For example, it would seem to entail that there is extra reason not to inject sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere even if this might have some beneficial cooling effect, so long as the intervention would negatively impact some individual's well-being (or perhaps the well-being of some ecosystem) (Gardiner 342).

MIND is vague in ways similar to the way attributions of value to wildness are vague. There is vagueness concerning what counts as a causal process, and what counts as interfering.

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<sup>4</sup> There will be room for disagreement over what sorts of beings genuinely have welfare. People do, and lions and antelopes certainly seem to, but do trees and other non-sentient organisms have welfare in a non-derivative sense? Can a non-living thing be genuinely well off? I won't attempt to answer such questions here.

<sup>5</sup> There are cases that seem like cases of pure beneficence but where some would say intervention would be wrong. Rolston discusses a case in which some whales stranded on the ice were rescued by humans; on first blush this might seem like a case of pure beneficence (Rolston 66). But saving the whales is bad for the creatures that would have eaten them had they died, and this seems to be a main reason not to intervene.

<sup>6</sup> Sartorio notes that in moving from MINI to MIND, we have taken what was an all-things-considered reason not to intervene in certain specific circumstances when other things are equal, and converted it to a *defeasible* reason not to intervene in a wide range of circumstances; it is not clear that what motivated the principle in the specific case would motivate the more general principle that applies even when things are not equal.

This again provides some reason to think it might be true; after all, there are cases in which we are not sure whether to intervene, and at least some of these will be cases in which we are not sure what would count as intervening, or what counts as an ongoing causal process.

MIND runs into problems, however, when we think about cases in which a mistake has already been made. For example, suppose humans have introduced a destructive alien species into an ecosystem. MIND entails that there was reason for them not to have done that; but we're supposing it has already been done, and we have to figure out what to do next. On the face of it, MIND entails that we shouldn't do anything. After all, there is now a causal process underway consisting of these alien creatures killing off some native species and altering the ecosystem. But this would mean that MIND commits us to a strange sort of refusal to correct our moral mistakes. Surely if it was wrong to introduce the alien species, and we can undo what we did, we ought to do so, even if that involves an intervention into an ongoing process. Furthermore, it does not seem to matter whether the person who introduced the species is the same person who eradicates it; it is permissible to clean up someone else's mistake.

If that is right, then perhaps we would need to add more complexity to MIND:

MIND\*: If there is a causal process underway that you could interfere with, and your interference would make a negative difference to the well-being of some affected party, *and the process was not itself the result of some person's interference in a causal process that made a difference to the well-being of some affected party*, then you have, in addition to the reason generated by the loss in well-being itself, a defeasible reason not to intervene.

MIND\* removes the unwanted implication that there would be reason not to correct one's mistakes. But it reintroduces a problem that plagued the view that wildness is intrinsically valuable: the problem of human chauvinism.

Consider these scenarios:

*Bad Human*: A bad human brings an alien insect into an ecosystem and releases it with the intention of destroying the native plants, which it begins to do.

*Elephant*: An alien insect hitches a ride on an elephant and gets into an ecosystem, where it begins to destroy the native plants.

In *Bad Human*, it seems clear we have good reason to undo the wrongdoing of the bad human if possible; this is consistent with MIND\*. In *Elephant*, we have reason not to interfere in the ecosystem; the insect invasion was the result of a natural process, not the result of any intervention by people. If we could intervene in *Elephant*, we could intervene everywhere. But what is the relevant difference here? There might be several possibilities, but two are salient. We might think the difference is just that in *Bad Human*, it's a human that interferes, while in

Elephant, it is a non-human, and we have reason to undo the interference of humans but not of nonhumans. Or we might think the difference is that in Bad Human there is wrongdoing, but there isn't any wrongdoing in Elephant, and we have reason to undo wrongdoing when we can. So let us consider a third scenario:

*Unaware Human*: An alien insect hitches a ride on an unsuspecting person's clothes and gets into an ecosystem, where it begins to destroy the native plants.

In Unaware Human, there is no wrongdoing. (Unless we suppose that the person ought to have been more careful; but we can just imagine that the person was careful, and took great pains to ensure that no alien species hitched a ride on her clothes, but that she failed to detect the sneaky insect.) But now I think we are pulled in two directions, each of them uncomfortable. On the one hand, it seems that *whether there was wrongdoing involved is irrelevant* to whether we should undo the consequences of the act. If a human introduces a destructive alien species into an environment, surely we can try to reverse that, whether it was on purpose or not. We can't take moral inertia as a reason not to interfere to solve some problem, when our interference, even if unintentional, was responsible for the problem. On the other hand, the only difference between Unaware Human and Elephant is the species of the animal on which the insect hitched a ride. To say that this makes a difference to what we ought to do is to reintroduce the sort of objectionable chauvinism that plagued the view that wildness is intrinsically valuable. How can the mere species of the carrier of the invading insect make a difference to our moral obligation to interfere with the destruction?

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that both the consequentialist and the nonconsequentialist approach fail to justify the thought that there are non-contingent, intrinsic reasons not to interfere with nature. I have not exhausted all the possibilities. For example, one might formulate a hybrid view according to which (i) there are acts of interference that there are nonconsequentialist reasons not to perform, but (ii) one has an obligation to minimize the occurrence or the impact of such acts (the consequentialist component). This could justify the correction of prior mistakes. But it would not help provide an adequate account of what is going on in Bad Human, Unaware Human, and Elephant.

This of course does not mean that there are no reasons at all to refrain from interfering. It just means that, unless some other reason can be given, we will have to be content with philosophically boring reasons to refrain from interference.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Avram Hiller and Carolina Sartorio for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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