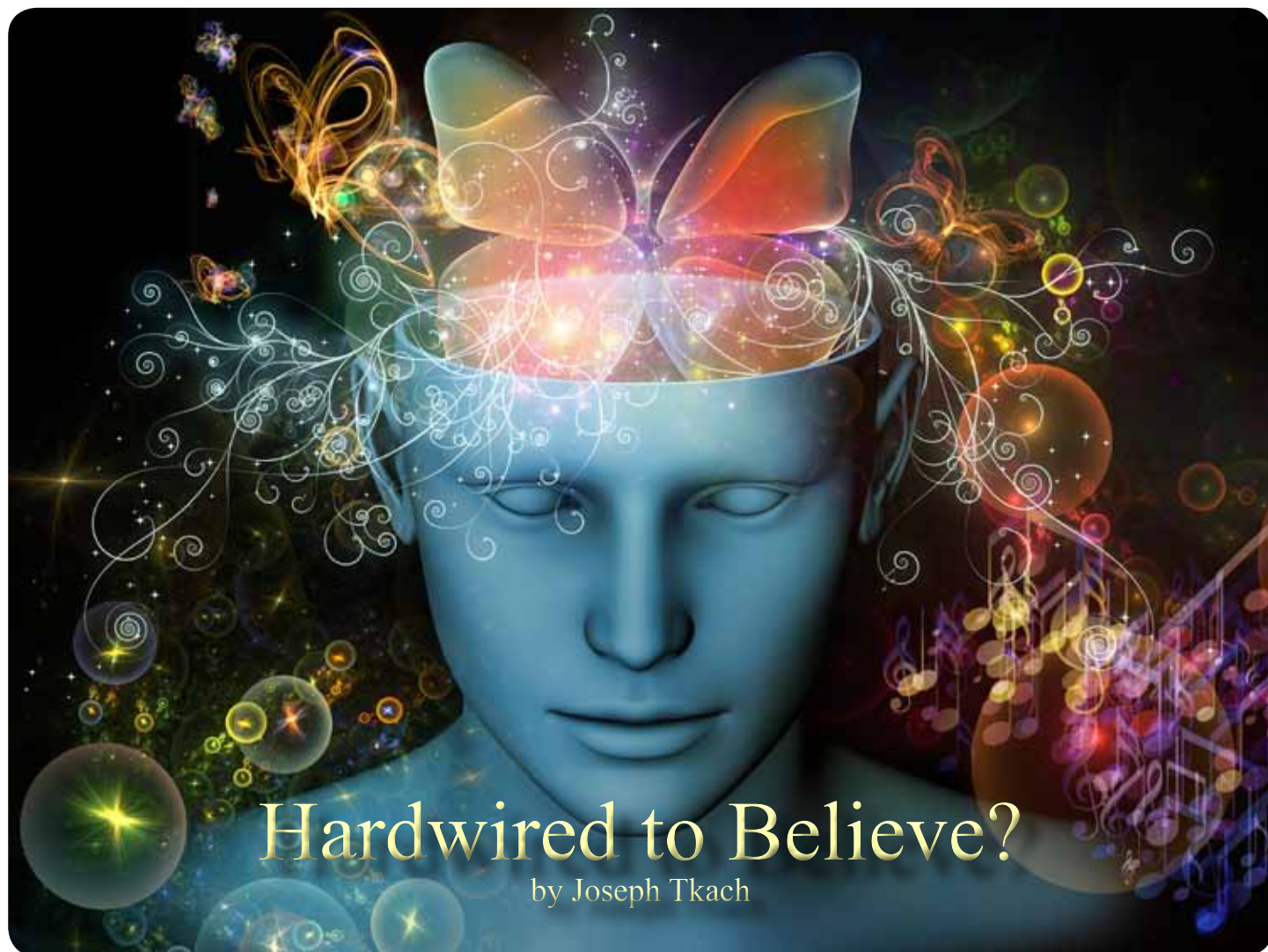


Because

...for anyone who's ever asked, 'why?'

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Hardwired to Believe?

by Joseph Tkach

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson has a wonderful way of highlighting the nuances in Scripture that may be missed in other Bible translations. Here is his take on Psalm 8:1-2:

*God, brilliant Lord,
yours is a household name.
Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you;
toddlers shout the songs
That drown out enemy talk,
and silence atheist babble.*

Can't you just hear atheists sniggering at that? They consider the songs of toddlers to be where belief in God belongs. For them, the only smart choice in a sophisticated, educated modern world, is a materialistic worldview where there is no room for belief in God or in the supernatural.

But not so fast! Recently I came across an article that presents research showing how humans may be “hard-wired” to believe, and that even hard-core atheists can't avoid an inbuilt bias towards metaphysical beliefs. According to journalist Nury Vittachi...

Cognitive scientists are becoming increasingly aware that a metaphysical outlook may be so deeply ingrained in human thought processes that it cannot be expunged. While this idea may seem outlandish—after all, it seems easy to decide not to believe in God—evidence from several disciplines indicates that what you actually believe is not a decision you make for yourself. Your fundamental beliefs are decided by much deeper levels of consciousness, and some may well be more or less set in stone. ^[1]

Vittachi goes on to quote atheist Graham Lawton,

who admitted that, “Atheism is psychologically impossible because of the way humans think.” Vittachi continues:

These findings may go a long way to explaining a series of puzzles in recent social science studies. In the United States, 38% of people who identified themselves as atheist or agnostic went on to claim to believe in a God or a Higher Power (Pew Forum, “Religion and the Unaffiliated”, 2012). While the UK is often defined as an irreligious place, a recent survey by Theos, a think tank, found that very few people—only 13 per cent of adults—agreed with the statement “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”. For the vast majority of us, unseen realities are very present.... The implication is that we all believe in a not dissimilar range of tangible and intangible realities. Whether a particular brand of higher consciousness is included in that list (“I believe in God”, “I believe in some sort of higher force”, “I believe in no higher consciousness”) is little more than a detail. [1]

The more we learn about the cosmos, the more we realize that there is much more to it—and to us—than what meets the eye. Not all scientists are atheists by any means. Many on the cutting edge of scientific discovery know that a purely materialistic view of the cosmos does not fit the facts. According to a 2009 Pew Research Center poll, “Just over half of scientists (51%) believe in some form of deity or higher power; specifically, 33% of scientists say they believe in God, while 18% believe in a universal spirit or higher power.”

Of course, some scientists are atheists and argue that metaphysical beliefs are just in our heads—the result of impersonal, unintelligent evolutionary processes and so not to be trusted. But new discoveries are giving us deeper insight into the reality of the creation as God actually made it, not as we might assume it to be. And though we must admit that scientific research can never prove that the God of the Bible exists, and that he has created and redeemed us in Christ, we should expect that whatever is discovered about creation will be compatible with the revelation of the creator God given to us in and through Jesus Christ.

There is nothing irrational or unscientific about trusting in the claims of revelation as given to us by prophets and apostles in Holy Scripture and as further confirmed through personal experience. Also, there is no threat to God in scientific discovery. After all, God is the one who made whatever is discovered. One leading physicist even suggested wryly that in the decades ahead, we may learn more about God from science than from theology. I don’t mean to imply that scientists will be “preaching the gospel.” That’s the Christian’s job. The job of science is to study created reality, and God is not a created physical object. But scientists are discovering that what is “real” in creation leaves plenty of room for rationally affirming metaphysical claims such as the reality and existence of a transcendent and personal God who has the intelligence, power and motivation to make himself known.

As some of the ideas now shaping scientific thought become better known, and as the limits of science become more widely recognized, I suspect that an atheistic worldview will be seen more and more for what it is: a metaphysical assertion that cannot be justified on the basis of the growing scientific knowledge of the universe. I think that more and more people (including scientists) will find themselves in the same position as David who, having come to know God through the prophets and the history of Israel, looked up at the majesty of creation and proclaimed these words (Psalm 8:3-4, *The Message*):

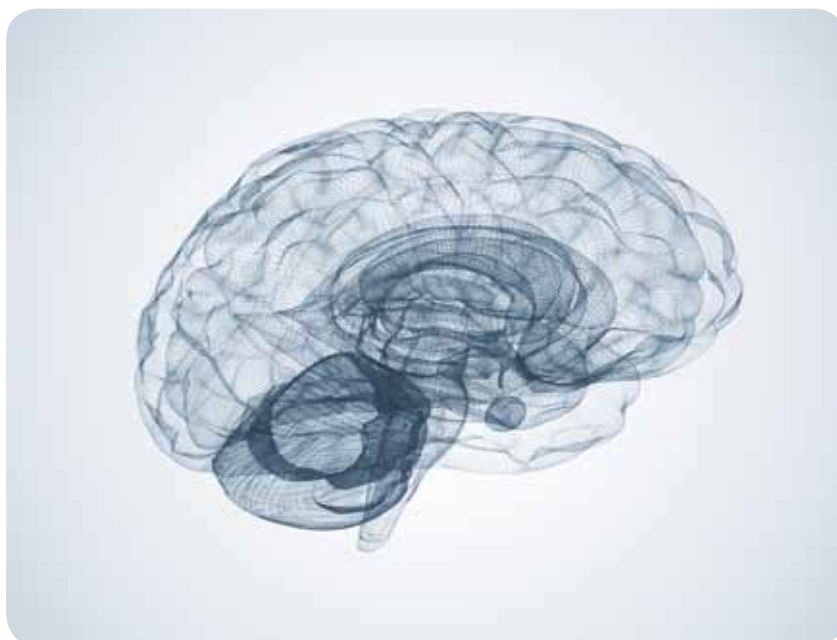
*I look up at your macro-skies,
dark and enormous,
your handmade sky-jewelry,*



*Moon and stars mounted in their settings.
Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,
Why do you bother with us?
Why take a second look our way?*

God created us in his image to know and to trust him. To that end Jesus dedicated his life and ministry: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). We may not believe him, but placing ourselves absolutely beyond the reach of Jesus’ ministry is not an option that God has given us. Some people are drawn to Christ willingly, while others put up fierce resistance. But whatever the case, it’s Jesus’ ongoing ministry (which was decided before creation and is now being carried out by the Spirit) to confront all people with the reality of his existence and the reality of God’s gracious gift of salvation. Sooner or later, all must come to terms with it.

Some may think that the arrogant claims of militant atheists are more rational and scientific than the claims of faith from those who have come to know God through the witness of historical revelation gathered up and passed down through the centuries. But the unbe-



lief of atheists has made them hard of hearing—deaf to the evidence. They should listen more carefully when “nursing infants” sing their praises to God (Psalm 8:2).

^[1] “Scientists discover that atheists might not exist, and that’s not a joke,” *Science 2.0*, http://www.science20.com/writer_on_the_edge/blog/scientists_discover_that_atheists_might_not_exist_and_thats_not_a_joke-139982

Because

Lost Forever, or Are They?

by Eben and Hilary Jacobs

Late one night several years ago, my late wife Trixie and I were talking when we heard a deep guttural scream and a thud like a drum thrown down.

“What was that?” she asked apprehensively. “It sounded terrible.” She felt something sinister must have happened.

Not being as emotionally sensitive, I responded, “Oh, it may just be some youngsters in the street shouting.”

“No, it was more like a car crashing.”

As it remained quiet afterwards we left it at that. Around five in the morning there was an urgent knock on our door. It was Pastor Strydom who rented one of the flats in the building through me as the local letting agent.

“Eben come urgently. Somebody has fallen down off the building.” Looking down from the passage on the first floor, I saw the pulp of a woman lying distorted on the tarmac. We went down and Pastor Strydom covered the body with a blanket. I noticed it was a young girl of about 18. I climbed up the fire escape from landing to landing until I got to the ninth floor. There I found a jacket and a note.

“I hate love. Love only brings hurt.”

The Pastor had some commitments so I stayed around waiting for the police. A son of one of the tenants on the ninth floor came to me as I went back up the fire escape. “Did you know the girl?” I asked.

“Yes, she was the girlfriend of a friend of mine. Around twelve, after a little party we had, he took her back

home on his motorbike. He broke up with her then and left. Somehow she came back to our building. I think she must have walked all the way.”

Her demise was due to a disappointment in a relationship and she probably felt, like so many teenagers, that she could not live without the guy. It is usually the girl who is most compromised in the intimacy of a love relationship.

About six months later as we sat in our lounge, yet another tragedy played out. This time it was a young man who had failed his Matric (South African school exams), and dreading what his parents might say, he felt a total failure. He too jumped from the top, and I saw his body hit the ground and bounce up and down like a rag doll.

One of my fellow board members, a concerned fellow Christian who had tried to prevent him taking his life, was inconsolable.

“Oh Eben, I should have done more to help him. I failed him, and now he’s dead, and his blood is upon my head.”

I took her to Pastor Stydom’s wife, who I felt should be able to deal with the woman’s distress. “Maybe he is not lost,” ventured Sister Strydom. “Perhaps he repented and accepted Christ as he fell.”

“What kind of consolation is that?” my mind screamed at me. This woman had to see a psychologist, and even then it took some time for her to get emotionally straightened out.

A Helpless God

Does the salvation of an individual depend on whether we human beings can persuade someone to repent in the nick of time? Is God so helpless that he relies on us to prevent tragedy?



Our God says he is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. He says he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his ways and live (Ezekiel 18:23). Jesus said that when he is lifted up, He will draw everyone to himself (John 12:32 emphasis mine).

Revelation 20:11-13 shows the dead, “small and great” standing before the great white throne, being judged according to what they had done “as recorded in the books,” but nothing is said here of condemnation. In addition, the Book of Life was opened. Could this perhaps be to make new entries – not to “throw the book” at those before the throne? If some people in the last judgment turn to Christ in faith when they learn for the first time what Jesus has done for them, would he turn them away?

These Scriptures do not paint a picture of a ruthless, vengeful God, throwing vast hordes of created humanity into a lake of fire. Rather, they bring to mind another picture seen by the prophet Ezekiel, speaking of God’s chosen people, Israel. In chapter 37 we read of Ezekiel’s encounter with a vision of the helpless dead of past generations.

In the vision these people say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.” God says to them: “O my people, I am going to open up your graves and bring you up from them.

I will bring you back to the land of Israel... I will put my Spirit in you and you will live... Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says unequivocally, “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26). A few verses later, he says “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.” (verse 32)

Reorient our thinking

Regarding the last judgment, the late Reformed theologian, Shirley C. Guthrie suggested we would perhaps do well to reorient our thinking about this crisis event. “The first thought that comes to Christians when they think about the end of history ought not be anxious or vindictive speculation about who will be “in” and go “up,” and who will be “out” and go down.” It ought to be the thankful and joyful thought that we may confidently look forward to the time when the will of the world’s Creator, Reconciler, Saviour, and Renewer will prevail once and for all — when justice will triumph over injustice, love over hatred and greed, peace over hostility, humanity over inhumanity, the kingdom of God over the powers of darkness. The last judgement will come, not against but for the good of the world... That is the good news, not just for Christians, but for everyone!^[1]”

We can be confident that God is true to his word when he says “he wants everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Although his ways and times may often be

invisible to us, we nonetheless trust him to love the humans he has made. He will not allow anyone to slip through the cracks, but will give everyone a chance to choose life – eternal life.

And those two desperate young people who couldn’t take any more of this cruel, evil world and plunged to their deaths? Jesus died for them too. They too have a Saviour who will “wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

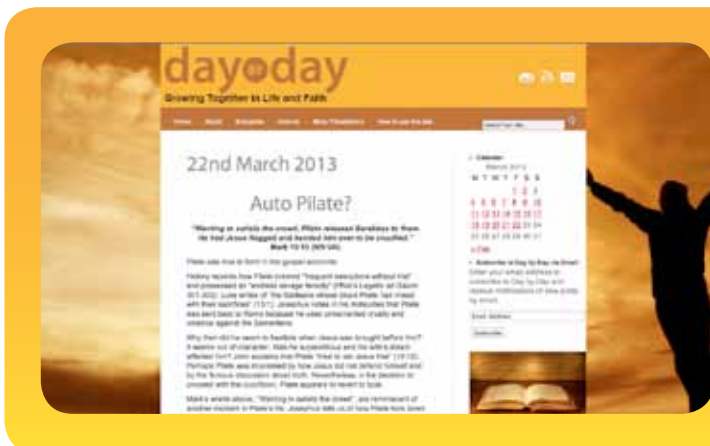
Universalism

God’s desire that all should be saved, and his grace made available to all humanity should not be confused with the doctrine of universalism which teaches that all will be saved anyway, regardless of what a person believes, how he lives or what he does.

Contrary to universalism, the Bible teaches that there is salvation only in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has done everything necessary for every human to be saved, but all who remain hostile to God remain unsaved by their own choice.

[1] Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1994) p. 387

Printed with kind permission of Face to Face. (Eben Jacobs passed away on the 29th July. He was a long time member in the GCI Cape Town North congregation, as well as one of our editors and regular writers for our South African magazine, Face to Face. His mischievous smile and gentlemanly ways will be fondly remembered by all who knew him. Our love and condolences go to his wife, Hilary, and the family. – James Henderson)



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You Poor Old Thing, You

by Jonathan Buck

I feel sorry for terribly ugly dogs, one of which really caught my eye. It had a squashed-in nose and huge bulging eyes as if it had been chasing a rabbit and had run into a tree. It was also wider than it was tall, so it looked like a small oil tank with matchstick legs at each corner.

It was so unbalanced when it lifted a leg it fell over. “You poor old thing, you,” I thought, but the dog didn’t seem to mind in the least. It staggered up and tried again. I watched in fascination as it teetered between falling over again and finishing off. My heart went out to that little dog. Every day it had to go through this embarrassing routine, stuck in that ridiculous body.

Watching the poor dog made me think of how God must look at me. I’m stuck in a ridiculous body, too, shaped and formed by years of cultural conditioning into a mess of phobias, fears, worries and unfortunate personality traits. I teeter every day on that knife-edge between functioning normally and being overwhelmed by an embarrassing inner weakness. I’m like that dog. It didn’t choose to be an oil tank on spindly legs, it simply ended up that way because of the silly notions

of dog breeders and the poor habits of its owner. And I am who I am because of the silly notions of all those who’ve influenced me, and my own poor habits.

But when Jesus was here and saw people like me “his heart was touched with pity” (Mark 6:34, Phillips). “You poor old things, you,” he thought to himself, put in our terms today.

That drew my attention to the owner of the dog. He clearly loved the immensely ugly creature snuffling along beside him, and he wasn’t embarrassed by it either. He didn’t hide behind a bush when his dog fell over relieving itself. Instead, he waited patiently while it got up, angled its three legs into position and again up went the fourth. I could almost feel the owner’s tension as he willed his little dog to succeed.

The dog felt no embarrassment either. With obvious satisfaction it fell back on to all four legs and off it waddled into another day feeling utterly free, and so can we, because we too have an owner who loves us and wills us poor old things to succeed.

JESUS WENT WITH HIM



BY TAMMY TRACH

“The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers and cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.” This quotation by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe captured my imagination during my inward-looking, emotion-laden teen years. I had friends and a loving family, but I often felt no one understood me, not deep down inside. I didn’t even understand myself at that point, but most teenagers don’t, and it doesn’t always change as we become adults.

The desire to know someone who is close to us in spirit is a universal one. We all want to be known, understood, accepted and loved just as we are, no strings attached. But this world can be a lonely place. Most of us feel alienated at one time or another, either from friends, family or the world in general. Even with lots of loving support, which is vital to our well-being, we have to do many things on our own: job interviews, driving tests, surgery. No one can help or even hold our hands.

I imagine Jairus was feeling quite alone as he faced the impending death of his daughter (Mark 5). The family had no doubt gathered around to share the burden, but ultimately the pain of losing a loved one takes place in each individual mind and heart. Jairus carried that pain with him as he approached Jesus in the midst of the crowd. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet and

pleaded with him to come and heal his daughter (verse 23). Then something amazing happened—Jesus went with him (verse 24).

Many must have wanted Jesus’ attention that day, including the sick woman who touched his robe. The crowd was full of people with diseases and problems, some perhaps as severe as Jairus’ daughter’s illness. But Jesus, without any discussion or excuses, simply went with him. That act alone must have given Jairus encouragement and strength to face what he would find at home, especially when messengers came to tell him his daughter had already died. Jesus didn’t desert him at the news, but continued to walk with him to the house.

Jesus has not changed. He still has his Father’s loving heart, which is always turned toward our hearts, thinking and feeling with us, knowing and understanding our suffering. He goes with us into those situations we must face alone and doesn’t turn back when the going gets tough.

During those times when you feel most alone, remember Jesus is with you. He walks with you down the lonely, difficult paths, even the steep, rocky ones with no flowers or trees to brighten the way. He is close to us in the Spirit, and he is the one who makes the earth an inhabited garden for us.

Speaking of Life:



Top of the Charts

If you tuned in for the Olympic ice-skating in Russia earlier this year, you probably heard a piece of music written by Japanese composer Mamoru Samuragochi. Over the last 20 years, Samuragochi has worked his way to the top of the charts, composing for both symphony orchestra and video games alike. And he did it all while being completely deaf!

But his meteoric rise came to a halt when a man stepped forward claiming that not only was Samuragochi not deaf – but he, not the famed composer, had been ghostwriting his work for the last 18 years. This revelation sent shockwaves through the classical music community. And people who had looked to Samuragochi for inspiration were left shaken and ashamed.

Now, I know that we all probably look to athletes, politicians and theologians as models for how to live our life. But just because they're famous doesn't mean that they're somehow immune to stumbling. We are all human and we live in a fallen world. When people fall, it shouldn't come as a surprise. Instead, it should point us back to the one never stumbled. His name was Jesus and he said this: **“I am the way and**

the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Jesus faced ridicule, hostility, deceit, threats, abandonment, betrayal and finally an unjust and torturous execution. He also withstood internal temptation from evil itself and endured unimaginable mental anguish. Yet, for all this, he never gave in to sin – remaining pure not only for himself, but also for us. Through our union with Christ, his non-stumbling will stand in the place of our stumbling and we can trust in him wholly – without fear or doubt.

It truly is disappointing to find out one of your heroes has fallen. And for those who held Samuragochi in high regard, I hope they won't be turned away from the artistic beauty found in classical music. But more than that, I hope all of us in our stumbling will remember to turn to the one who has promised never to lie to us and by his truth has brought us back into communion with our loving Father God.

I'm Joseph Tkach, Speaking of LIFE.



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