

Beyond the Euthyphro Dilemma: Divine Nature as the Ground of Moral Goodness

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Abstract

The Euthyphro Dilemma is often treated as a decisive challenge to theistic ethics: either God commands what is good because it is independently good, or an action is good only because God commands it. This article argues that both horns rest on a false assumption that God and goodness are independent realities requiring external correlation. Drawing on the Divine Command Theory literature and its critics, together with Scripture, the article develops **Divine Nature Theory**: the position that moral goodness is grounded not in bare command nor in an external standard, but in God's own necessary and essentially good character, of which divine commands are a reliable but derivative expression. The argument moves through the structure of the Euthyphro Dilemma, the strengths and limits of Divine Command Theory, the case for Divine Nature Theory, the biblical account of human moral awareness, and a sustained engagement with Johannine theology, before summarizing the findings and their implications for Christian ethics.

Keywords:

Euthyphro Dilemma; Divine Command Theory; Divine Nature Theory; Moral Realism; Imago Dei; Johannine Theology; Christian Ethics; Philosophy of Religion.

Introduction

Few philosophical puzzles have proven as durable as the Euthyphro Dilemma. First posed by Plato roughly 2,400 years ago, the question has become the standard challenge to any theory grounding morality in God: is an action good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is already good? The first option appears to make morality arbitrary; the second appears to make God morally superfluous, a messenger reporting a moral order that exists independently of him. Theistic ethics has long been read as forced to choose between these alternatives. The stakes are not merely academic: how this dilemma is resolved shapes whether religious ethics can claim any rational grounding at all, or must instead be defended as a matter of authority alone.

This article argues that the dilemma, while formally valid, does not exhaust the theistic options, because it assumes God and goodness are two independent realities related only externally. If God is not one being among others but the necessary ground of contingent reality, goodness need not stand either above God or beneath his arbitrary will; it can instead be grounded in God's own eternal nature. On this view of Divine Nature Theory, God's commands are neither arbitrary impositions nor reports of an independent order, but reliable expressions of who God essentially is. This claim requires philosophical defense, since it is not obviously true merely because it is theologically convenient; the remainder of this article supplies that defense. Readers who find the conclusion congenial should not, for that reason alone, find the argument for it persuasive; the two must be evaluated separately.

The argument proceeds in eight stages. Section 2 examines the origin and structure of the Euthyphro Dilemma. Section 3 evaluates Divine Command Theory's strengths and the objections that motivate a move beyond it. Section 4 develops Divine Nature Theory. Section 5 grounds the discussion biblically

through the imago Dei and conscience. Section 6 turns to Johannine theology. Section 7 states the article's findings directly, before Section 8 draws out their implications for Christian ethical practice.

The Euthyphro Dilemma and Structure

i. The Origin of the Dilemma

The dilemma takes its name from Plato's Euthyphro, in which Socrates questions a young man prosecuting his own father for impiety. Pressed to define piety, Euthyphro proposes that the pious is "what is loved by the gods." Socrates then asks: is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods (Plato, 1997, 10a–11b)? Although Plato's concern was a polytheistic pantheon of finite, morally imperfect gods, the question's structure transfers readily to any account grounding value in the commands of a personal agent. Applied to classical theism: does God command what is good because it is good, or is it good only because God commands it? The apparent symmetry of the question is deceptive, since classical theism differs from Plato's pantheon in a way that bears directly on how the question should be answered, as Section 2.3 argues.

ii. The Structure of the Dilemma

On the first horn, goodness is constituted by divine command, and had God commanded cruelty, cruelty would be good — morality becomes contingent on divine will alone. On the second, goodness exists as a standard independent of God, and God's command merely tracks it — God's authority becomes merely epistemic, and morality would remain intact even if God did not exist, since the independent standard, not God, ultimately grounds it. Each horn, taken on its own terms, threatens something Christian theology has traditionally wanted to affirm: that morality is neither groundless nor independent of the God confessed as its author.

iii. Why the Dilemma Does Not Exhaust the Christian Options

The dilemma's force depends on an unstated premise: that God and goodness are logically independent realities related only externally. Classical theism has reason to reject this. God is not a contingent being who happens to possess goodness, comparable to a human possessing honesty; God is the necessary, self-existent ground of all contingent reality, including whatever moral order exists. The question "what stands outside God as the ground of goodness?" then becomes confused, since it presupposes God is one item within a larger reality rather than the ground of reality itself. Put differently, the dilemma treats God as an impressive resident of the universe rather than as its metaphysical foundation — a picture more suited to Plato's Olympian deities than to the God of classical theism.

This draws support from Scripture's own manner of speaking about God and goodness. Jesus' statement that "no one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18) establishes a striking association between God and goodness as such; James 1:17 presents God as the source of "every good and perfect gift"; and 1 John 1:5 declares that "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." **The central claim of this article is that answering the Euthyphro question requires moving beyond divine command to divine nature: God commands what is consistent with his essentially good character, and the goodness of the moral order is ultimately grounded in God himself.** This reframes the question at the level of being rather than command — addressed in Sections 3 and 4. Section 7 states the resulting findings directly, in compact form, so the article's central claims can be identified and evaluated independently of the surrounding argument.

Divine Command Theory and Its Limits

i. Defining Divine Command Theory

Divine Command Theory (DCT) holds that moral obligation is constituted by God's commands: an action is obligatory because God commands it, wrong because God prohibits it. Quinn (1978) offers the classic defense, arguing that human moral autonomy is compatible with obedience to divine commands and that several versions of the theory withstand the standard objections. DCT rightly emphasizes that God possesses genuine moral authority over creation: divine commands cannot simply be reduced to human legislation. Scripture consistently presents God as one who commands and judges, and Jesus gives his disciples commands, including the command to love one another (John 13:34–35). Any account of Christian ethics that cannot make sense of commanded obedience

has failed to reckon with a persistent biblical pattern, and DCT takes that pattern with appropriate seriousness.

II. Moral Obligation and Moral Goodness

A more precise version of DCT distinguishes obligation from goodness: God's commands generate obligation without necessarily constituting goodness itself. This accounts for obligation's binding, other-directed quality, while leaving open what makes the content of those obligations good in the first place, the question that motivates Section 4. A theory that answers only the obligation question, while leaving the goodness question unaddressed, is incomplete rather than false, it needs supplementing, not discarding.

III. The Problem of Arbitrariness

The familiar objection: if goodness is simply constituted by whatever God commands, cruelty would have been good had God commanded it. Adams (1987) responds by arguing that God's commands are good *because* they proceed from a being who is essentially loving, who could not command cruelty for its own sake. Wierenga (1983) offers a related defense on the same grounds. Both responses, however, concede the deeper point this article presses: what makes divine commands non-arbitrary is not the commanding itself but the character of the one who commands is already a move from command toward nature. Neither Adams nor Wierenga intends this as a concession; both continue to describe their positions as versions of Divine Command Theory. But the explanatory weight has shifted, and Section 4 argues that shift should be followed to its natural conclusion.

IV. The Problem of External Standard

A second objection asks what grounds the claim that God's character is good in the first place. If goodness is defined independently of God and God simply satisfies that definition, the dilemma's second horn reappears. Moreland and Craig (2003) note that any account failing to locate morality's ground in a necessary, non-contingent reality struggles to explain the objectivity moral judgment presupposes. If the standard by which God's goodness is measured lies outside God, the theist has relocated, not solved, the grounding problem — precisely what Divine Nature Theory avoids. The theist who stops at a qualified command theory has therefore not yet answered the question the arbitrariness objection originally posed, but only pushed it back one further step.

V. The Problem of Divine Goodness

A third difficulty concerns the coherence of calling God “good” under a strict command theory: if “good” simply means “commanded by God,” the claim “God is good” becomes trivial or unintelligible. Christian theology has wanted this claim to be substantive to prove that God possesses genuinely praiseworthy moral excellence, not a definitionally guaranteed one. Ordinary religious language bears this out: believers do not typically praise God merely for satisfying a definition, but for a moral excellence they take to be genuinely admirable. A theory of divine goodness should be able to make sense of worship, and worship directed at a merely definitional goodness is difficult to distinguish from worship directed at nothing in particular.

VI. Command as Expression Rather Than Constitution

These difficulties suggest commands should be understood as expressions of a goodness constituted at a deeper level, in God's character such as: God is good; God's will expresses that character; God's commands communicate that will. Commands remain authoritative while DCT's genuine insight is preserved but their authority is now explained by, rather than substituted for, divine nature. This is a modest but decisive shift: nothing DCT affirms about the authority of divine commands is denied, but the explanatory order is reversed.

Divine Nature as the Ground of Goodness

I. From Divine Command to Divine Being

Divine Nature Theory locates the ground of goodness in God's necessary, essentially good nature. Command theories answer “what makes an act obligatory?” Nature theories answer the deeper

question, “what makes anything good in the first place?” and propose the answer is not a further standard or a bare act of will, but the being of God himself.

II. The Ontological Priority of God

God enjoys ontological priority over contingent reality: God depends on nothing outside himself, while everything else depends on God. If moral properties are real, as moral realism generally affirms, the theist has reason to locate them in the same necessary being who grounds contingent reality, rather than in an uncreated realm of values standing alongside God. Theistic Divine Nature Theory avoids this difficulty, since the ground of value is a personal, knowing being rather than an inert abstract realm, which explains both why moral facts are the kind of thing that can obligate persons and how finite persons might come to know them.

III. “God is Good”: Attribute or Identity?

On a weak reading, goodness is one attribute among God's many. On the stronger reading this article defends, goodness is bound up with the divine identity itself — what God necessarily and eternally is, not a property that could in principle be absent. This is what allows Divine Nature Theory to escape the arbitrariness objection: because goodness is inseparable from who God is, no possible scenario has God's nature grounding cruelty. This is not a claim that God lacks options in the ordinary sense; it is a claim about which possibilities are coherent, given who God necessarily is.

IV. Goodness Outside God

A critic may argue this is circular: to say God is good because goodness is grounded in his nature merely relocates the question. Wierenga (1983) responds that necessary identity claims of this kind are not viciously circular, since they specify what God's goodness consists in, rather than merely asserting that God is good because God is God is comparable to identifying the standard meter with a particular physical bar: informative because it specifies which reality plays the grounding role. The comparison is imperfect, since the meter was a contingent stipulation and God's nature is not, but it illustrates that identity claims of this general form need not be empty.

V. Divine and Moral Objective

Because God's nature is necessary rather than contingent, the goodness grounded in it is not subject to change, culture, or preference. Moreland and Craig (2003) argue that cultural consensus cannot supply the objectivity moral judgment requires, and that a necessary, unchanging ground offers a more secure foundation than any socially constructed alternative. Secular moral realism faces a comparable question about what grounds objective value in a universe without God; Divine Nature Theory at least supplies a candidate ground with the requisite necessity.

VI. God's Goodness and God's Freedom

Does grounding goodness in necessary nature compromise divine freedom? Classical theism holds that necessity and freedom are not opposed here, since God's goodness is not imposed from without but is the expression of who God most fundamentally is. Perfect freedom consists in the unhindered expression of a perfectly good nature, not the mere possibility of acting otherwise. On this view, the ordinary human intuition that praiseworthiness requires the live possibility of doing otherwise turns out to be mistaken when applied to a being whose nature is essentially, rather than accidentally, good.

VII. Divine Nature, Divine Command, and the Dilemma

Nature grounds character; character shapes will; will issues in commands; commands generate obligation. Commands remain authoritative, but their authority is explained by derivation from God's good nature. Returning to Section 2.2: an action is good insofar as it corresponds to God's nature, and obligatory when God's will, flowing from that nature, commands it. Goodness is neither arbitrary fiat nor an independent standard, but grounded in the being of God, preserving what is right in each horn while rejecting the premise that generated the dilemma. The dilemma, in other words, is dissolved rather than merely answered: once the shared premise is rejected, the forced choice between arbitrary command and an external standard no longer applies.

Human Moral Awareness: Divine Breath, Imago Dei, and Conscience

I. The Question of Human Moral Awareness

If goodness is grounded in God's nature, how can finite human beings possess any awareness of it? Scripture answers through three interlocking doctrines: the divine breath, the imago Dei, and conscience. None of these doctrines, on its own, would suffice; together they form a cumulative case for why creatures as limited as human beings can nonetheless perceive, however imperfectly, the goodness that grounds their existence.

II. The Divine Breath

Genesis 2:7 describes God breathing life into the human formed from dust — signaling that human life is derivative and God-given rather than self-originating. The moral awareness Scripture elsewhere attributes to humanity (Romans 2:14–15) is best understood as part of that same God-derived constitution, not a separately generated faculty. This ordering matters theologically: it makes moral awareness a gift received rather than an achievement accomplished, consistent with the wider biblical pattern in which human capacities are traced back to divine giving rather than human self-origination.

III. The Imago Dei

Genesis 1:26–27 grounds human distinctiveness in the image of God. Middleton (2005) argues the imago Dei establishes a relational and ethical account of human dignity rather than shared divine substance: to bear God's image is to be commissioned to represent God's character within creation. *If moral goodness is grounded in God, and humanity is God's image-bearer, human moral awareness is a derivative capacity oriented toward the goodness in which it is grounded*, been the bridge between Sections 4 and 5.

IV. From Image-Bearing to Moral Responsibility

Genesis 1:28's commission to dominion presupposes a moral agent capable of representing God's character. Wright (2004) situates this within the wider canonical narrative of Old Testament ethics, where Israel's vocation to reflect God's character to the nations extends the more general vocation given to humanity in Genesis 1. On this reading, moral responsibility is never merely individual; it is corporate and representative, since Israel's obedience or failure was understood to reflect on the character of the God Israel served before a watching world.

V. Romans 2:14-15, and Universal Moral Awareness

Paul's argument that Gentiles without the Mosaic law nevertheless “do by nature things required by the law,” their consciences “bearing witness,” provides the New Testament's clearest witness to universal moral awareness. Moo (2018) and Schreiner (2018) read this as evidence that moral knowledge is not confined to those with special revelation, but is written into human constitution as such, consistent with humanity's status as image-bearer. Paul's argument is notable for its scope: it applies to Gentiles who have never received the Mosaic law, which is precisely what one would expect if moral awareness derives from a universal human constitution rather than from a particular body of revealed law.

VI. Conscience is Not the Source of Morality

Romans 2:14–15 describes conscience as a witness to a moral reality it did not create, not its source. Conscience functions as the fallible faculty registering derivative moral awareness, it can be miscalibrated or suppressed (1 Corinthians 8:7–12; Titus 1:15), exactly what one would expect of a witness rather than a legislator. A legislator whose pronouncements are self-validating cannot be mistaken; a witness plainly can be, and Scripture's own portrayal of conscience as sometimes weak, sometimes seared, and sometimes wrongly confident fits the latter picture far better than the former.

VII. The Fall and the Distortion of Moral Awareness

The Fall explains this fallibility. A self-generated moral awareness would make its distortion arbitrary; a derivative capacity mediated through the imago Dei explains why conscience, while never extinguished, becomes an unreliable guide once sin enters the human situation — consistent with Scripture's witness that revelation, supremely in Christ, remains necessary to recalibrate it. Without

this doctrine, the well-documented variability of moral conviction across individuals and cultures would count as evidence against any universal moral awareness at all; with it, that variability is exactly what a good but distorted witness would be expected to produce.

Johannine Theology and the Revelation of Divine Goodness

If Divine Nature Theory is correct, the Johannine literature supplies the New Testament's clearest witness to God's character and its revelation in Christ. This is not accidental: no other New Testament corpus returns as insistently to the question of what God essentially is, rather than merely what God has done, making it the natural terminus for an argument concerned with divine nature rather than divine action alone.

I. God is Light

First John 1:5 declares “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” Brown (1982) reads this as an ontological claim: God is himself constitutively identified with moral purity, not merely productive of pure acts. Köstenberger (2004) notes the Johannine light-darkness contrast functions christologically throughout the Gospel, establishing divine identity as the ground of ethical distinction rather than the reverse. On this reading, believers are not called to imitate an abstract standard of light but to walk in fellowship with the God who is himself light demonstrating a relational rather than merely rule-governed conception of moral purity.

II. God is Love

First John 4:8's “God is love” resists reduction to the claim that God merely acts lovingly; Smalley (1984) argues the text identifies love with God's very being. Van der Watt (2006) shows Johannine ethics is consistently grounded in this pattern: believers are commanded to love one another (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:7) because love is constitutive of the God in whom they live. Love is not one divine attribute among others but a summary description of divine goodness itself. This has direct bearing on the Euthyphro question: if love is not merely something God does but what God is, then the command to love cannot be an arbitrary imposition, since it simply asks creatures to reflect, in creaturely measure, the very nature of the God who made them.

III. The Son as Revelation of the Father's Character

“No one has ever seen God; the only God... has made him known” (John 1:18). Carson (1991) argues this Christological claim is the Gospel's interpretive key: every statement about divine character must be read through the Word made flesh. Bauckham (2008) adds that the Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as sharing directly in the unique divine identity, such that to see the Son's character is to see the Father's. This Christological claim carries real weight for the present argument, since it means the character in which goodness is grounded is not a hidden or inaccessible reality but one that has been historically disclosed, in a human life, for examination and imitation.

IV. The Good Shepherd and Self-Giving Goodness

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Keener (2003) observes it is this willingness, not the shepherd's authority, that the text calls “good” demonstrating goodness defined by self-giving action rather than the mere possession of power. Morris (1995) notes the deliberate contrast with the hired hand who flees, locating goodness in sacrificial commitment rather than formal authority. The wider Johannine narrative reinforces this pattern: throughout the Gospel, Jesus' authority is repeatedly demonstrated through acts of service such as washing feet, healing, feeding, rather than through displays of coercive power, consistent with a goodness defined by self-giving rather than domination.

V. Divine Love and the Cross

John 3:16 and 1 John 3:16 present the cross as the definitive disclosure of a love that already constitutes who God is, not a love the cross generates. Thompson (2015) argues the Johannine cross narrative resists reducing love to sentiment: it is definitional self-giving for another's good, and the cross is the supreme instance of a love already true of God before the incarnation. The cross therefore functions, on this reading, less as an isolated act of atonement to be understood on its own terms and

more as the climactic disclosure of a character consistently displayed throughout Jesus' ministry and, in the Johannine telling, throughout the eternal relationship between Father and Son.

VI. Truth, Holiness, and Love as Integrated Character

The Johannine writings resist treating light, truth, holiness, and love as separate qualities; Köstenberger (2004) cautions against isolated proof-texting, arguing they cohere within a single, unified divine character in which truthfulness, purity, and self-giving love are simply different descriptions of the one God. This integration matters for Divine Nature Theory specifically, since a theory that grounded goodness in only one divine attribute, say, love without holiness, or power without love would face exactly the kind of distortion the Johannine writings are at pains to avoid.

VII. Love Command and Christ as Embodiment

The Johannine love command (John 13:34) could read as arbitrary imposition were it not grounded in the prior claim that God is love: God commands love because God is love, not by arbitrary decision. Van der Watt (2006) argues Johannine commands are intelligible only in light of the relationship and revelation from which they proceed; Bennema (2022) summarizes this as Johannine ethics' defining feature moral transformation flows from participation in Christ's character and mission rather than an independent code. On this account, Christian ethics is not primarily a matter of following an external rulebook but of an ongoing relationship of abiding (John 15:4–5) that gradually reshapes the believer's character to resemble the character being described.

Viii. A Johannine Response to the Euthyphro Dilemma

Together these texts supply a scriptural answer to Section 2's question. God's nature grounds goodness; God's self-revelation in Christ discloses that nature; and Christ's moral instruction — supremely the command to love — expresses, rather than constitutes or merely reports, goodness already present in God's being.

Findings

The preceding sections establish five findings that together ground this article's central argument:

- i. The Euthyphro Dilemma is not exhaustive of the theistic options. Both horns assume God and goodness are independent realities related only externally, an assumption classical theism has principled reason to reject (Section 2) Rejecting that assumption does not dissolve the question by fiat; it requires the positive metaphysical account developed in Sections 3 and 4..
- ii. Divine Command Theory correctly identifies that God's commands generate genuine obligation, but even its best qualified defenses (Adams, 1987; Wierenga, 1983) ultimately locate what makes those commands non-arbitrary in God's character rather than in the act of commanding itself (Section 3) This is a finding about the DCT literature's own internal logic, not merely an external criticism of it..
- iii. Divine Nature Theory resolves the dilemma by grounding goodness in God's own necessary, essentially good being. This is neither arbitrary fiat nor an external standard, and it withstands the standard circularity and objectivity objections (Section 4) The theory's central move is to relocate, rather than eliminate, the explanatory burden the arbitrariness objection originally identified..
- iv. Human moral awareness, via the divine breath, the imago Dei, and conscience, is best explained as a derivative capacity to recognize a goodness humanity did not itself originate, one distorted but not destroyed by the Fall (Section 5) This finding depends on reading Genesis and Romans together as a single coherent account of human moral constitution, rather than treating each in isolation..
- v. The Johannine corpus supplies the clearest scriptural warrant for this account: God is identified with light and love in his very being, that character is revealed definitively in Christ, and Christ's commands express rather than constitute or report that character (Section 6). Of the three sources of evidence marshaled in this article, philosophical argument, Old Testament theology, and Johannine theology, it is this last body of evidence that supplies the most direct scriptural confirmation of the thesis defended throughout.

Implication for Christian Ethics

This account carries practical implications. First, it reframes moral obedience as participation in the character of the God who is himself the standard being expressed, not submission to arbitrary power. Second, it grounds Christian ethical formation Christologically: because Christ definitively reveals divine character, moral growth consists in conformity to Christ rather than mere rule-following, consistent with the Johannine emphasis on abiding in Christ (John 15:4–5). This has a further consequence for how Christian moral failure is understood: sin is best diagnosed not merely as rule-breaking but as a rupture in the relationship of abiding through which character is formed, which is why Johannine ethics places such weight on remaining in Christ rather than on isolated acts of compliance.

Third, it offers resources for engaging morally difficult biblical material, including Old Testament warfare texts. Copan (2011) and Copan and Flannagan (2014) argue such texts must be read within their full canonical context and in light of God's revealed, unchanging character, rather than as isolated commands whose moral status is settled by their bare occurrence; Divine Nature Theory supplies the theological rationale for exactly this move, since it is God's consistent character, not the isolated command, that governs how such texts should be read. This does not resolve every interpretive difficulty such texts raise, and this article does not attempt a full treatment of them; it claims only that Divine Nature Theory supplies the correct interpretive starting point, namely that any individual command must be read in light of the unchanging character it is presumed to express, rather than treated as self-interpreting in isolation.

Fourth, since conscience is a fallible witness rather than an infallible source, it should be cultivated and calibrated against Christ's revealed character rather than treated as morally self-sufficient. Finally, this account unites theology and ethics: the God Christians confess determines the kind of life Christians are called to live, precisely what Zagzebski (2004) and Van der Watt (2006) each identify, from philosophical and Johannine perspectives respectively, as the mark of a theologically grounded moral account. Christian communities that separate doctrine from ethics, treating theology as a matter for the classroom and ethics as a matter of practical technique, therefore work against the grain of the very account of goodness this article has defended, in which right belief about God and right conduct toward others are two expressions of a single underlying reality.

Conclusion

The Euthyphro Dilemma retains real force against unqualified Divine Command Theory, but it does not exhaust the options available to Christian theology, since it rests on a picture of God and goodness as independent realities that classical theism has principled reason to reject. Divine Nature Theory offers a coherent alternative: God's commands establish obligation, but the goodness they express is grounded in God's own necessary, eternally good character, definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. This is not a minor terminological adjustment to existing theistic ethics but a change in where the explanatory weight is placed: from the fact of divine commanding to the character from which that commanding proceeds.

This account preserves Divine Command Theory's genuine insights while answering the objections that make unqualified command theories vulnerable, and it does justice to the *imago Dei*, the witness of conscience, and above all the Johannine testimony that God is light, God is love, and that this character has been made known once for all in Christ. Christian ethics, on this view, is neither arbitrary submission nor autonomous moral reasoning, but the lifelong task of conforming to the character of the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. If this account is correct, the Euthyphro Dilemma, for all its ancient pedigree and continuing philosophical interest, poses no ultimate threat to a theology that has always confessed more than a commanding deity, namely, a God whose very nature is the good that Christian ethics seeks, however imperfectly, to embody.

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