In Defense of Pragmatic Reason: Responding to the Postmodern Challenge

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Responding to the Postmodern Challenge

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ABSTRACT: The last fifty years have seen a renaissance in the study of argumentation. Curiously, the same period has seen the rise of epistemic and moral attacks on the value of rational argument. The essay provides a pragmatic justification for the utility of rational argument and demonstrates that public reason is at the heart of a progressive, inclusive, and humane society capable of confronting the many problems facing civilization.

KEYWORDS: Enlightenment, epistemology, postmodern critique, pragmatism, public reason, public sphere, rationality

1. INTRODUCTION

The last fifty years have seen a renaissance in the study of argument, with three great research traditions emerging in Europe, the United States, and Canada. The most thorough- going of those traditions grew out of groundbreaking research focused on the characteristics of argumentation as a process (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, 135- 157, 187-196). The theory of pragma-dialectics has been developed to include principles for assessing argument form, a myriad of case analyses of argument in context, and even an approach to describing and assessing the rhetorical dimensions of argumentation via a consideration of the strategic maneuvering involved in argumentative exchanges (see for example van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Snoeck Henkemans 2002*)*. An alternative approach emerged in Canada, Informal Logic, that focused on argument form, especially principles for assessing evidence and reasoning (see Johnson and Blair, 1980; Johnson and Blair, 1987; Johnson, 2000). A third approach developed in the United States centering on explaining how argument varies by context, including research traditions focused on fields and spheres of argument (Rowland, 1982; Rowland, 2008; Rowland, 2009; Rowland, 2012; Goodnight, 1982).

While the last half-century has witnessed an enormous outpouring of productive work on argumentation, there also has been a growing attack on the very idea of public reason. The attacks on public reason have taken two main forms: theoretical statements drawing on postmodernism that deny that there is any means of privileging any given argument as superior to any other argument and moral attacks on reason as supporting oppression, imperialism and capitalism. The two lines of attack coalesce into a broad sense that public reason and the values of the Enlightenment that undergird a commitment to liberal democracy have failed and need to be supplanted by a new moral and epistemological order.

There is indeed a need for a new moral and epistemological order, an order that recognizes the great value in Enlightenment principles as expressed in the three great theories of pragmatic argument. In what follows, I defend public reason against both critiques and argue that public reason must remain at the center of any attempt to build a humane, inclusive, and democratic world. Contrary to the postmodern critique, public reason and the values the Enlightenment have not failed; for the most part, they haven't been tried.

2. CRITIQUES OF PUBLIC REASON

The attack on the epistemological function of public argument came from postmodern scholars who, often drawing upon the work of Bruno Latour, claimed "that there was no such thing as objective truth" (Risen, 2022, October 13, B10). The core "epistemological challenge" to theories of reasoned argument flows from two premises: the world can only be understood through symbol use and there is no principled means of picking between different symbolic constructions, leading to the conclusion that there is no justifiable way to label any particular argument as true or more coherent than competing arguments (Rowland, 1995, 351-352).

Attacks on the epistemology of public reason have become very common over the last quarter century. In a review of the postmodern critique of science and public reason, J. Aaron Simmons and Brandon Inabinet referred to "critiques of 'objectivity,'" as quite "familiar," and argued that "Postmodernism should be understood primarily as an epistemic thesis of competing truths" that has the potential to create "a culture of indifference toward reality" (2018, 222, 238). Ohers attack "technological rationality" for fostering "a closed universe of thought and discourse that stifles and silences all other points of view" (Anderson and Preli, 2001, February, 73). The impact of the various postmodern indictments of reason (or technological reason or scientism) has been to produce "cultural derision of reason" (Szalai, 2021, September 30, C6). Today, the postmodern critique is quite common in the public sphere. As Leon Wieseltier observed somewhat trenchantly, "When the intellectual history of our time is written, it will be a sorry chronicle of knocks on reason" (2011, July 14, 36). Similarly, Paul Krugman labeled the contemporary public sphere as "post-modern, fact-free politics" (2012, January 2, A19). On this point, Michiko Kakutani noted that the "postmodernist argument that all truths are partial (and a function of one's perspective)" has helped create "the post-truth era" (2018, July 14). Pamela Paul added that skepticism of public reason has become so widespread that the "belief—that science is somehow subjective and should be practiced and judged accordingly—has recently taken hold in academic, governmental and medical settings" (2023, May 4). The attacks on standards of public reason have multiplied to the point that many conclude "there are many equally valid realities and truths" (Andersen, 2017, September), a view that David Brooks believes is creating "an epistemic crisis" (2021, July 2, A21).

The assault on public reason also has been advanced by many who claim that argument is a regressive, not progressive, force in society. One view is that rational argument functions as a form of "technical reason" that is used by "experts to oppress the public" (Rowland, 1995, 353). Some have labeled "concepts like objectivity and the

worship of the written word as characteristics of 'white supremacy culture,'" and even characterized "rational thought" and the "'scientific method' as attributes of 'white culture'" (Singal, 2023, SR9). Others claimed that science has supported racism, observing, "Scientists are responsible for creating racial categories defined by skull size, pain tolerance, skin thickness," categories that reinforce racism, and that demand an effort "to decolonize science" (Gewin, 2022, November 24). John Patrick Leary observed that many believe "science' is never objective" and "vested with highly subjective concepts of expertise and authority" that have been used as "a powerful weapon of dispossession, sanctioning slavery, segregation, and colonial conquest" (2021, May, 7). A related critique focuses on claims that standards of public reason "privileged objective knowledge and masculine ways of knowing," an approach that leads to "problematic exclusions of certain types of knowledge," such as the personal experience of women (Keohane and Jakes, 2021, 111, 114). Overall, the view that rationality is "coercive" and produces "oppression" has become "deeply and widely embedded in American academia" (Andersen, 2017, September).

3. JUSTIFYING PRAGMATIC REASON

The challenge in justifying a theory of argument against the epistemological and moral charges may seem daunting, but a way forward is possible when the pragmatic roots of argumentation theory are considered. Pragmatic argumentation theory can be justified not as a method of discovering eternal truth but as a method of identifying and validating "symbolic statements that function as useful problem-solving tools" (Rowland, 1995, 354). Thus, the pragmatic argumentation theorist can cheerfully admit that all perspectives are shaped by personal experience and culture and that there is no means of getting directly at objective reality, but add that pragmatic theories of argumentation identify methodological principles that consistently work to solve problems. The approach draws on the work of Nicholas Rescher, who argued that "the proper test for the correctness or appropriateness of anything methodological in nature is plainly and obviously posed by the paradigmatically pragmatic questions: Does it *work?* Does it attain its intended purposes?" (1977a, 3; also see Rescher, 1977b). If pragmatic theories of argument do not provide a means of identifying reality directly, how do they help people choose among competing approaches? The answer is that some statements about reality work consistently to solve problems, while others do not. Pragmatic argumentation theory helps identify such rule-of- thumb epistemological principles.

The most basic principles undergirding pragmatic argumentation theory are tied to the constituent parts of argument: evidence, reasoning, and conclusions. There was a time in human history when what counted for evidence was a contested issue. People attempted to predict the future based on portents, the musings of soothsayers, the tea leaves in the bottom of the cup, or deciphering meaning from the entrails of a sacrificed animal (Dalrymple, 2015, September 1; Collins, 2008, Fall). The difficulty was that drawing inferences about the future from tea leaves, soothsayers, the entrails of sacrificed animals, or a host of other practices provided no useful information about future events. In contrast, looking at other forms of evidence was often quite revealing. In medicine, certain symptoms (type of examples) were consistently related to certain outcomes. Examples

grouped into categories (statistics that served as a precursor of the social scientific and scientific methods used today) could reveal the comparative productivity of different approaches to farming, or business, or engineering, or any other human endeavor. One of the core findings underlying the Enlightenment was the discovery that claims supported by strong evidence were more likely to work or come true than those that weren't supported by that strong evidence.

A similar point can be made about reasoning. Claims backed by consistent reasoning had more generalizability than claims that were not consistently supported. Among other things, the principle of consistency provided a rule of thumb principle for testing whether the government of any society supported a policy for principled reasons or for some self-interested reason. A similar principle applied to testing conclusions. Underlying many different approaches to argument is the extremely useful judgment that conclusions are more likely to consistently work for solving a problem or set of problems if those conclusions have been rigorously tested through a process of argument and counter-argument. A related principle is that the individual or group judging a given dispute should not have an interest in that dispute.

To this point, I have focused only on the pragmatic justification for definitional components in argumentation, evidence, reasoning, and claims, what Toulmin called the primary triad of Data, Claim, Warrant (1958). More developed theories of argument form, such as the extremely detailed analysis of fallacies that is found Informal Logic, or approaches to argument process in pragma-dialectics, or treatments of argument in context similarly can be justified based on pragmatic principles.

From the pragmatic perspective, knowledge claims are really claims about the capacity to consistently do something with a symbolic description of the world. Here, I am not disputing that knowledge may be created through means other than pragmatic argument. Sudden flashes of insight do occur. But not all of those flashes of insight will prove useful for solving problems. The key point is that pragmatic approaches to argumentation are one means of discovering new knowledge, but the only justifiable means of validating knowledge claims.

The postmodern critique in no way disputes that in the natural world, especially in physics, astronomy, engineering, and chemistry, some pragmatically justifiable predictions work essentially every time and with great accuracy. For example, *National Geographic* reported, "Some GPS receivers are so accurate they can establish their location within 1 centimeter" (*National Geographic,* n.d.). Of course, instrument error is always a potential problem, but absent such an event, the pragmatic utility of GPS has been validated in countless airplane flights, sea voyages, and other endeavors. The point is that it is possible based on pragmatic grounds to label some claims about nature as true in all but special cases, based on the underlying epistemic principle stated by Richard Feynman, "nature cannot be fooled" (Qtd. in Dyson, 2011, July 14, 40). In such cases, the postmodern critique is not so much wrong, as it is trivial. One may critique natural science as "dismissive scientism" (Simmons and Inabinet, 2018, 224), but it is much harder to dispute the pragmatic utility of the principles defining science that produce results essentially every time.

A similar point can be made about the world of human interactions, where the pragmatic predictions are less precise because of human and cultural variability. Yet there are principles that have demonstrated their utility throughout human history, across time

and culture. For example, some level of demand for politeness is found in all cultures (Morand, 1995, October). Social psychologists, such as Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, have demonstrated that "when people believe a conclusion is true, they are also very likely to believe arguments that appear to support it, even when these arguments are unsound" (2011, 45). The point is that pragmatic reason can be used to identify general principles governing human behavior and thought. The findings will not be nearly as precise as those in the natural sciences or engineering, but they still have utility. Similar pragmatic principles apply to designing public policy. For example, market-based regulation where government uses price signals to regulate some social problem, such as pollution, have been demonstrated to be more effective and more efficient than direct government regulation (Krugman, 2010, April 7).

Principles of pragmatic reason are not useful in cases where the dispute concerns values that are in tension with each other, unless some aspect of that value conflict relates to the world as well as the values. Principles of pragmatic reason do not provide a principled way of choosing between values such as a clean environment and a strong economy. But those principles may still be useful for considering the magnitude of environmental benefits that would be produced by a given proposal, as well as the economic costs of the proposal. In that way, principles of pragmatic reason have great utility even in cases where the dispute is about values, not facts.

The underlying point is that that the principles and findings of science (and all other forms of knowledge) are most appropriately justified, not with some claim to have uncovered objective reality itself, but with pragmatic principles that work to solve problems. In a discussion of "The Evangelical Roots of Post-Truth," Molly Worthen distinguished between religious (and ideological) views that are supported by their internal religious or ideological structure (and thus are untestable outside that structure) and perspectives that are informed by Enlightenment values and a commitment to pragmatic reason. She observed of the views based in pragmatic reason that "the worldview that has propelled mainstream Western intellectual life and made modern civilization possible is a kind of pragmatism. It is an empirical outlook that continually, if imperfectly, revises its conclusions based on evidence available to everyone, regardless of their beliefs" (2017, April 16, SR 8). In that way principles of pragmatic reason provide the internal structure justifying science, social science, the humanities and other knowledge creating institutions. Ironically, at the end of his life Bruno Latour himself "became an ally and defender of the research establishment in the face of anti-science attacks from corporate and conservative interests" (Risen, 2022, October 13, B10). Latour recognized that the self-interested and ideologically based relativism of such groups threatened the very idea of facticity and therefore undermined the capacity for reasoned action. Latour responded to conservative attempt to weaponize postmodern ideas in service of their ideological agenda, by arguing that science and other forms of knowledge can "remain robust only when they are supported by a common culture, by institutions that can be trusted" (Qtd. In Risen, 2022, October 13, B10). Put differently, facts should be understood as pragmatic rule of thumb principles that have demonstrated their value in solving problems. Pragmatic argumentation theory provides a principled defense for epistemic standards that can protect society from the dangers posed by corporate ideological argument or religious doctrine or tradition or self-interest, or postmodern relativism.

While there has been a great deal of theoretical debate about the postmodern critique, there is reason to doubt whether even postmodern theorists apply the theoretical principles in their own lives. One suspects that the most committed postmodernist trusts the navigation system in their car, consults an electrician when the power goes out, visits the doctor when they are sick, and otherwise demonstrates respect for expertise, science, and pragmatic reason in their ordinary life. Rejecting science, expertise, and reason is simply a way to die young.

4. PRAGMATIC REASON AS PROGRESSIVE FORCE

There is a curious paradox in the axiological critique of pragmatic reason. Those who argue that pragmatic reason has supported racism, gender bias, environmental degradation and war, bitterly oppose all of those evils, building strong arguments for the creation of an inclusive and humane society. Since there are no good arguments for discrimination, environmental abuse and other horrors, it is difficult to see how pragmatic reason could be guilty of the charges leveled against it. The advocates of the axiological critique respond that segregationists, Nazis and others made arguments for their worldview. But not good arguments. People have made arguments for any number of evil and obviously false worldviews. The problem is not that pragmatic argument led to the moral horrors, but that a failure to apply the moral critique implicit in theories of pragmatic argument did so.

There are two primary reasons that pragmatic public reason is a force for sensible public policy and an empowering democratic culture in which everyone is treated fairly. First, strong arguments are by their very nature arguments that are supported with the best available evidence. All of the great human rights movements (women's rights, civil rights, gay rights and those fighting for the rights for others who have been denied full participation in society) are based in the unanswerable argument that members of the particular group in question are human beings just like everyone else. In every case, the balance of evidence overwhelmingly supports the mission of the group. Precisely the same point can be made about support for action to prevent environmental degradation, protect workers and consumers from dangerous conditions, and a host of other important policies. Opponents of equal treatment and proponents of dangerous products make arguments in defense of their positions, but not arguments that are supported by strong evidence.

Second, the process through which rational arguments are tested provides an important safeguard against dangerous or evil arguments. It is hard to defend arguments for oppression, environmental abuse, or unregulated capitalism against the objections to those views. James Madison and John Stuart Mill are probably the two most important American and British theorists of the free marketplace of ideas (Rowland, 2002). The key methodological principle flowing out of their writing is that stronger arguments are likely to win out over weaker arguments over time, as long as there is free and open debate. The strong arguments win out because proponents of any proposal must be able to answer the objections brought against that proposal and demonstrate that it would produce superior results in comparison to competing proposals. The primary risk in such a context is not a failure of the argumentative process, but that ideological or other non-rational factors may influence the decision-making process. Ideologically based systems, whether Freudian, Marxist, Neo-conservative, or any other worldview, are dangerous because they deny the

legitimacy of external critique. As Leon Wieseltier observed, "nothing rots the life of the mind more than the immunity to experience" (2011, October 20, 40). In contrast, systems based in public reason, such as those energized by Enlightenment values, are epistemically and politically self-correcting.

Those who critique social practices for ignoring the voices of women and other groups point to a shameful history and ongoing denial of rights. The underlying cause of that denial of rights is not public reason, but a commitment to ideology or culture resulting in discrimination. Scholars who claim that standards of public reason deny the voice of those who experience discrimination are simply wrong. It is important to consider the tests that the three pragmatic theories would apply to claims based in individual experience. Personal testimony could be considered either as a form of expertise based on experience, such as an eyewitness to an important event, or as an example supporting a claim. In both cases, standards for assessing evidence do not rule out the voices of women, people or color, or any other group. The voices of women, gay people, people of color, and other groups often have been discounted, but that has occurred based on cultural values, ideology, religion or other factors, not standards of public reason.

In actuality, public testimony (and other forms of public reason, including qualitative and quantitative social science) have played a key role supporting the great empowerment movements fighting for equal treatment for people of color, women, non- heterosexual people, and other groups. The most famous and influential twentieth century study of race in the United States, Gunnar Myrdal's groundbreaking research, *An American Dilemma* (1944), is a strong illustration of this point. Myrdal's sociological study, which was conducted based on the principles of "reason-based social science" (Lyman, 1998, 328), uncovered the horrors of segregation and other forms of racism, giving voice to those who suffered under those social structures. It combined quantitative social science with sociological research presenting the voices of the oppressed. There is no question about the influence of the research on the struggle for equal rights. It was, for example, cited in the Brown v. Board (1954, 483), probably the most important Supreme Court case of the 20th Century. As the case of *An American Dilemma* illustrates, standards of public reason do not devalue the voice of the oppressed. Ideology, culture, and tradition may lead scholars and others to devalue those voices, but standards of public reason validate those voices, thereby exposing the terrible arguments made against the claims they support.

It is also important to recognize that standards for evidence evaluation and other principles for evaluating the pragmatic utility of any argument, are useful for protecting society from dangerous falsehoods and bigotry. Consider the case of American election deniers who argue that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. There is an avalanche of strong evidence showing that Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump to win the presidency and no strong evidence that there was any significant voter fraud (Eggers, Garro & Grimmer, 2021). However, far-right Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene and others cite election deniers to argue that the election was stolen (Roche, 2023, January 21). The weakness in the claims of Greene and others should be obvious. Those claiming fraud were not in a position to actually observe the claimed fraud. They also could not be considered unbiased sources given their loyalty to former President Trump. Moreover, they lacked the expertise to comment about election procedures. Thus, standards of pragmatic reason provide clear reasons for rejecting the views election deniers and embracing the views of all the real experts who had found no evidence of significant fraud. Without those pragmatic standards,

however, there would be no principled rationale for endorsing the fact-based claims of the experts, against the paranoid worldview of Greene and others. In a world without standards for assessing evidence and argument, the very idea of the truth would be "up for debate" (Draper, 2022, June 18,A12).

Additionally, the generalization that white masculinity is associated with objectivity and rationality is obviously incorrect. No one would associate the nationalist populist leaders of Europe and the United States, including people like Viktor Orban and Donald Trump, with reason and objectivity. Standards of public reason expose the terrible and evil arguments made for white supremacy or any other ideology that denies the humanity of all people.

Finally, some critics argued that the "problem with reason . . . [is that it] claimed to settle matters once and for all, and that this was arrogant" and exclusionary (Wieseltier, 2011, July 14, 36). The view that reason is exclusionary is misguided. Reliance on argument does not shut down debate; it opens up the space for give and take about evidence, counter-evidence, counterarguments and so forth. The proper response to someone who makes a claim based on evidence and reasoning is to either accept the claim and move forward or dispute it, citing better evidence and stronger reasoning. Leon Wieseltier eloquently expressed the value of argument as an inclusive method of decision making, when he observed, "It is not reason, but unreason, that shuts things down. You cannot argue against an emotion, but you can argue against an argument" (2011, July 14, 2011, 36).

Moreover, in cases where the evidence overwhelmingly supports one position over another (evolution, global warming, vaccine efficacy, and so forth), failing to give primacy to the argument supported by the stronger data often leads to a crisis of unreason. Anti- mask and then anti-vaccination attitudes in the United States led to more than one million deaths from Covid-19, vastly more per 100,000 than in Canada, where anti-science attitudes were much less influential (Debusmann, 2022, February 15). Making a strong argument does not close off debate. What it can do in some circumstances is reveal that there is strong evidence and reasoning for one approach to a given problem, but little evidence or reasoning for competing views. Discovering that a given position is strongly supported does not force one to endorse that view. What it does is give people good reasons for supporting that view. The discovery that a particular view is strongly supported, while alternative views are not, should be understood as epistemically and morally freeing. Surely, no one would claim that it is wise to make decisions based on weak or non-existent evidence. To take only one example, there are magicians and others who have claimed that they possess the power of levitation. Application of principles of pragmatic reason to such a case would reveal that there are no strong arguments suggesting that one could levitate one's way to the ground from the observation deck of a tall building. Such a realization does not constrain human action. One can still choose to jump. What it does is provide useful information that it would be wiser to use the elevator.

Basing decisions in pragmatic reason frees one from oppressive rules of societies governed by religious or ideological doctrine. Dennis Overbye noted the difference between decision-making based in pragmatic reason and decision-making based in ideology or religion, when he observed that "nobody was ever sent to prison for espousing the wrong value for the Hubble constant" (2009, January 27, D4). It is important to recognize that in societies such as Stalin's Soviet Union, Hitler's Germany, or the Ayatollah's Iran, people do go to prison for statements about the world inconsistent with

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religious or ideological doctrine. A world governed by principles of pragmatic reason is not only a world where effective policies are more likely to be chosen, but a world where free expression is protected.

As should be obvious, decision-making based in pragmatic reason is entirely consistent with democracy. In contrast, decision-making based in ideology, religion, or self-interest is never free and often quite dangerous. Overbye's conclusion, "Science and democracy have always been twins" (2009, January 27, D4) is not quite right. Science often has been coerced by state or religious power into serving an oppressive function. That coercion depends upon the suppression or repression of principles of pragmatic reason, in favor of ideological or religious doctrine. Overbye would have been more accurate if he had said pragmatic reason and democracy always have been twins.

5. CONCLUSION

Given the enormous benefits flowing from the application of public reason to problems facing human society and the fact that principles of public reason are inherently person-respecting, self-correcting, and consistent with democracy, it is important to consider why there is so much irrationality, bigotry, and hatred in the world. The answer is that the old enemies of public reason—religion, ideology, self-interest and traditional cultural values—remain powerful, and very dangerous. We live in a world where for much of society "reason" has "ceased to matter" (Brooks, 2018, March 9, A23). Consequently, there is enormous need to teach students the principles of public reason and to create decision- making structures that privilege reasoned debate.

Training in basic principles of public reason needs to be incorporated at every level of education, from elementary school to college instruction. In the United State, there have been recent efforts to promote media literacy (Ali, 2022, March 18). While these efforts are important, training in public reason would provide basic principles for identifying and testing claims that would help students assess claims in the media and any other context. Timothy Egan got it exactly right when he observed of the United States that "too many Americans are ill equipped to perform the basic functions of citizenship," in part because they have been told "there is no such thing as knowable truth" (2017, November 18, A18). A curriculum should be developed for incorporating argumentation training at all educational levels. This curriculum should especially emphasize training in the importance of rigorously considering arguments for and against a given position. The finding "that people who engaged in more reflective reasoning were better at telling true from false, regardless of whether the headlines aligned with their political views" is strong indication that with proper training people can put aside their biases and consider the balance of evidence and argument in making decisions (Pennycoock and Rand, 2019, January 20, SR 12).

One promising approach would link instruction in basic principles of pragmatic argument with a practicum in public debate. Dr. Jeff Jarman of Wichita State University has conducted promising research that when a debate practicum is combined with fact- checking materials such an effort can be successful in leading students to internalize principles of public reason (2015, 2018). The combination of debate training with argumentation training and fact checking essentially moved participants from what

Kahneman (2011) labeled "system one" or a "method of jumping to conclusions" to "system two," which "impose[s] logical analysis" and [s]elf-criticism" (2011, 85, 103). While Jarman's study must be considered exploratory, it suggests the vast potential of linking a debate practicum with training in public reason. If his results are confirmed with larger studies, the research should sound a call for incorporating training in academic debate and public reason across the curriculum.

Pragmatic reason has been the strongest force in human history supporting efforts to create a humane and inclusive society capable of solving social problems. It is for this reason that Michael P. Lynch, citing the views of John Rawls and Jűrgen Habermas, argues that "Democracies are, or should be, spaces of reason" (2011, October 2). Rational argument is best viewed as the strongest force behind the ongoing battle to finally realize a society enacting the values of the Enlightenment, a society focused on progress, inclusion, and democracy.

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