Metaphor: Imagery Devices Used by Morgan to Describe Organizations as Culture and Psychic Prisons

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This article demonstrates the practical applications of metaphors in diagnosing problems and developing new theories in organizational development. Metaphors are defined as imagery tools that provide insight to complex issues, thus advancing the study of organizational change. They are liberating in orientation and provide fresh perspectives to both new and existing phenomenon. Metaphors benefit organizations by describing shared reality in organizations. In his book, Images of Organizations, Morgan used metaphors to describe organizations as cultures and psychic prisons. His use of metaphor provides a perspective of the unconscious factors that affect organizations. This article compares Morgan’s use of metaphor to biblical principles, thus giving a biblical perspective.

Metaphor is a valuable imagery tool used by organizations to provide clarity to complex issues by offering non-literal meaning to describe real situations (Morgan, 2006). Morgan posited that metaphor provides one-sided insight describing organizations and, while their use is “incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading,” they create new ways of seeing things and provide opportunities for new theories (p. 5). This article examines Morgan’s use of metaphor to describe organizations as cultures and psychic prisons and identifies the biblical context of these metaphors. Metaphor is a literary tool that is liberating in orientation by supplying a new way to shape perception. It provides insight and can be used by organizations to diagnosis and treat problems within the organization (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Morgan said that metaphors are “a way of thinking and a way of seeing” (p. 4), as well as a cognitive process in which literal meaning to words is applied to give non-literal meaning. They influence our values and beliefs and therefore legitimize policies and authority (Charteris-Black, 2005).

This article also discusses the benefit of metaphors to organizations. Specifically, it addresses the benefits of understanding the metaphors organizations as culture and
organizations as psychic prisons to leaders and managers. Metaphors are instrumental at identifying and facilitating change within organizations (Marshak, 1996). Managers can use the meaning gained by metaphor to more effectively manage change and create shared reality within their organizations.

**Metaphor: As Persuasive Discourse**

Metaphors are used throughout society (Morgan, 2006). They facilitate communication and are influenced by a society’s culture. According to Morgan, their origin and the use of metaphor in communication can be found in early Egyptian hieroglyphics.

*Metaphor*

The process that metaphor shapes and, in turn is shaped by, society is evolving in nature. A society’s culture is shaped by the values, beliefs, ethos, traditions, and attitudes of the people within it. The people in a society communicate by assigning similar meaning to words or phrases—metaphors (Morgan, 2006). Metaphor in turn influences beliefs, values, and attitudes by communicating the meaning of a metaphor (Trim, 2007).

Metaphor is a characteristic of persuasive discourse (Charteris-Black, 2005). Morgan (1996) posited “metaphor as a primal, generative process that is fundamental to the creation of human understanding and meaning in all aspects of life” (p. 228). According to Charteris-Black, it mediates between conscious and unconscious means of persuasion and between cognition and emotion. Metaphor influences our beliefs, values, and attitudes by providing unconscious emotional associations to words or phrases that we equate to as being good or bad (Charteris-Black). Charteris-Black defined it as:

a linguistic representation that results from the shift in the use of a word or phrase from the context or domain in which it is expected to occur to another context or domain where it is not expected to occur, thereby causing semantic tension. (p. 14)

*History*

Metaphor creation happens suddenly; however, the time it takes for common use between societies varies (Trim, 2007). Morgan (2006) used the word *structure* throughout his book to describe organizations. Metaphor creation and evolution can be understood by examining the metaphor structure. The etymology of structure is *heap up, build*. Over time, society began to describe things that were heaped up or built as having structure. The structure metaphor was created to describe things that had order or a definite form. Thus, when Morgan used organizational structure, it is understood to describe a definite form of an organization.

Metaphor creation appears to be a timeless process that has been traced back to the time of Egyptian hieroglyphics (Trim, 2007). Cognitive linguists concluded that the same mechanisms used to create metaphors existed thousands of years ago. People have been creating relationships between a word or words and non-literal meaning to convey a culture’s conceptualized meaning.
For instance, a bull’s head was the symbol for “rage” in hieroglyphics. Today, bulls are still used to signify anger and rage. Many images have maintained the same interpretation that they had since antiquity. Images that do not possess strong conceptual links may cause problems for interpretation (Trim).

Metaphor: Liberating in Orientation

Metaphor is a process in which one aspect of an experience is crossed over to another (Morgan, 1996). As a process, it entails combining language and thought to develop new non-literal meaning that when applied shapes and enhances our reality (Grant & Oswick, 1996). It is a powerful educational tool because it advances our knowledge and understanding (Grant & Oswick). Metaphors provide meaning to everyday experiences and are epistemological since they provide a frame from which we can view the world (Morgan). They provide us with a way of understanding that offers an opportunity to be innovative and have the ability to clarify complex issues (Morgan). Metaphors help us see things in a new way and that is why they are liberating in orientation (Grant & Oswick).

Provide Meaning

Metaphors as imagery devices provide meaning to deepen understanding in all aspects of life (Morgan, 1996). As Morgan explained, meaning occurs when we overlap associations from one experience to another. Our human nature is to seek understanding and provide meaning to our experiences. Metaphor provides meaning by causing unconscious emotional associations that influence our values and beliefs (Charteris-Black, 2005).

Morgan (2006) used the metaphor organizations as culture to evoke a reaction from the reader so he or she may find symbols of culture in his or her organization. To recognize these symbols, leaders and managers can ask: What are our values? What are our beliefs? What symbols or slogans do we associate with it?

Metaphor provides a liberating orientation by giving individuals a way of associating and discussing what things are and what they mean. Management writers, Peter and Waterman “emphasize[d] that successful organizations build cohesive cultures around common sets of norms, values, and ideas that create an appropriate focus for doing business” (as cited in Morgan, 2006, p. 137). They illustrated this in their book, In Search of Excellence, by showing core values of three companies: “IBM means service,” “Never kill a new product idea” (3M), and “Sell it to the sales staff” (Hewlett Packard; Morgan, p. 137). These metaphors demonstrate the shared meaning in organizations through their slogans.

An Investigative Tool

Metaphors, when applied to new or existing phenomenon, have the ability to uncover complex organizational theory or behavior (Grant & Oswick, 1996). They can be used to diagnose and treat organizational problems (Grant & Oswick). Leaders frequently need to
evaluate phenomenon in their organization. Metaphor provides a way that they can look at existing or new problems and gain insight. The deductive and inductive approaches are two ways that leaders and theorists can use metaphor as an investigative tool.

**Deductive approach.** The deductive approach involves three phases: choosing a metaphor, imposing a particular organizational phenomenon, and determining if it offers something of value (Grant & Oswick, 1996). The deductive approach identifies metaphors and, if used correctly, can be a valuable tool for leaders to gain insight to phenomenon.

Morgan (2006) described an issue with integration that is caused by a division of labor as a problem of “cultural management” (p. 117). Cultural management is an example of a deductive metaphor. Here Morgan suggested the metaphor organization as culture. Early theorists developed theories regarding organizations in the two categories of metaphors: rare skills and organizations (Grant & Oswick, 1996). The study of rare skills is a metaphor regarding division of labor. The anthropological study of organizations focused on the development of organizations (Grant & Oswick). Morgan’s cultural management metaphor is assigning meaning to an organization phenomenon—integration—to describe the problem caused by division of labor.

**Inductive approach.** In contrast, the inductive approach involves a conscious attempt to find underlying metaphors that are in use and determine if they influence the “ways of thinking and seeing” (Grant & Oswick, 1996, p. 10). Morgan (2006) used metaphors such as public attitude, out to get us, and the enemy to describe anxiety experienced by groups (pp. 211-214). These metaphors can help leaders understand the mentality of employees in organizations.

Using the inductive approach to gain understanding of the loss of production or increased anxiety, leaders need to identify what is causing the problem (Morgan, 2006, p. 224). For instance, a leader may realize production is down and not understand why this is occurring. Upon further research, it appears that employees are concerned with “the enemy.” This term may be used so frequently in an organization that leaders miss opportunities that impact the organization. Morgan noted that “the enemy” was used by automobile manufactures to describe their reaction to Japanese and other Asian companies entering the market. As Morgan indicated, the relevance of this metaphor to leaders is they need to understand how its use points to issues within the organization. Leaders hearing “the enemy” used in their organization may need to identify what concerns employees really have. Is this affecting individuals or groups? Is this affecting productivity? Is this an opportunity for innovation? What role does the leader have in combating fears? The initial reaction to the enemy may have been negative, but a leader who understands its influence on the organization can use this as a positive.

Morgan (2006) discussed how culture shapes the character of organization. American corporations are known for their competitive nature from the standpoint of individuals and as an entire organization. American corporate cultures typically have systems for reward and punishment to recognize exceptional behavior in companies. In regard to management, Morgan explained the ethic of competitive individualism is shaped by culture (p. 122). Using the inductive approach, a leader could use the metaphor competitive individualism to discover or gain insight to phenomenon related to reward and punishment in an organization. A characteristic of transactional leadership is using reward and punishment to achieve goals (Yukl,
Leaders that understand competitive individualism can evaluate the effectiveness of their reward and punishment practices.

As Innovation

Morgan (2006) posited that metaphors provide one-sided insight describing organizations and, while their use is “incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading,” they create new ways of seeing things and provide opportunities for new theories (p. 5). Metaphors represent partial truth and are weak in literal meaning yet their strength is in their ability to explain complex organizational behavior (Morgan, 1996). The caution with metaphors is they cannot be taken too literally or their value will be lost (Trim, 2007). Also, metaphors are not objective because they rely on the interpretation of the individual. If used correctly, metaphors can provide insight to organizations (Morgan).

According to Morgan (2006), the power of metaphors is their ability to frame complex thinking and challenge innovative reasoning. For instance, if you consider organizations as cultures, you are focused on the concepts related to the values, beliefs, knowledge, and ethos that make up society. Similarly, if you consider organizations as psychic prisons you are focused on concepts related to unconscious influences. In this regard, metaphors help leaders expand their knowledge or identify issues by causing them to disregard other concepts of organization. Each chapter of Morgan’s book discusses complex organizational issues from different one-sided viewpoints. Thus, he creates a new way of seeing which provides the opportunity to gain insight. For leaders, metaphor provides opportunities for innovation.

The psychic prison metaphor illustrates how individuals and groups can become stifled in their way of thinking. Unconscious factors limit their ability to think outside the box (Morgan, 2006). Morgan discussed how “the last thing a fish is likely to discover is the water it is swimming in” (p. 209). For an organization to change, it needs to recognize the need for change and not be irrational toward the idea of change. Morgan posited that the strength of the psychic prison is it forces leaders to identify rational and irrational behavior toward change. Thus, metaphors create environments conducive to innovation.

Clarity to Complex Issues

Morgan (2006) noted that effective managers become skilled at understanding the situations in organizations that they manage. Metaphor helps managers by providing clarity to complex organizational issues (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Metaphor can also help leaders effectively communicate with subordinates regarding complex issues.

Morgan (2006) described how individuals or groups can be unconsciously influenced at work by concerns about immortality and death. These unconscious thoughts can be complicated for managers to understand and know how to manage. According to Morgan, people make decisions at work that are guided by their conscious and unconscious concerns about immortality. He pointed out that many organizations are designed to survive for generations. He explained that people set up systems in organizations as a way to have control. Thus,
bureaucracy provides defined functions within an organization. Bureaucracy, systems, and structures are some of the ways that people try to control their mortality.

Metaphor in this case helps managers understand how unconscious factors influence individual and group decisions. For instance, managers can gain insight regarding time management if they understand why people spend or do not spend time on certain activities (Morgan, 2006). Morgan noted that some activities at work may be highly valued because they are designed to leave a legacy. Individuals that believe in leaving a legacy may focus more effort on these activities.

**Legitimates Policies and Authority**

In organizations, metaphor legitimizes policies by providing meaning to “underlying social and cultural value systems” (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 14). Metaphors influence our unconscious emotional associations (Charteris-Black). Thus, metaphor helps define what we believe to be legitimate. In organizations, it is critical that policies and authority have legitimate power (Yukl, 2006).

Corporate culture provides legitimacy and authority in organizations (Charteris-Black, 2005). Morgan (2006) described an insurance company’s corporate culture after going through a traumatic period in which the president of the company was replaced. The new president tried to create a team atmosphere by encouraging an environment of harmony. The president created imagery of harmony and teamwork by using a wagon wheel to signify these concepts. Unfortunately, the corporate culture did not support his ideas. The president’s efforts resulted in creating a culture that was repressive. People felt the need to hide their feelings to be a team player. In the end, the repressive environment caused the company to fail because important issues were overlooked or ignored. The creation of subcultures also resulted. Thus, he was not able to gain legitimate power and was not able to turn the company around.

**Metaphor: Scriptural Context**

Metaphors influence our values, beliefs, and attitudes (Morgan, 2006). Metaphors transcend time and can be validated by scripture. Morgan used metaphors to describe phenomenon in organizations. This paper illustrates how metaphors can or cannot be supported scripturally.

**Scripturally Supported**

Morgan (2006) used the metaphor organizations as psychic prisons to discuss the effects of unconscious influences in organizations. The metaphor also serves to provide a new way of understanding an individual’s reactions in everyday life. The hidden dimensions of reality influence how individuals cope, understand, and gain insight (Morgan). The metaphor explains the underlying human behavior.

The Bible tells the story of a very rich man named Nabal (1 Samuel 25:1-42, NKJV). He
had 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats. Nabal was a rude and belligerent man whose shepherds worked in the Wilderness of Paran. David realized that the men were in the wilderness and protected them. In return, he asked one of the shepherds to ask Nabal if he could spare any food or drink in exchange for their protection. Nabal refused to do so. He did not share the same gratitude that his shepherds had for David.

Nabal’s wife, Abigail, recognized the mistake made by her husband. She went to David with food and drink, begging that he allow her to rectify the mistake made by her husband. David agreed and Abigail returned home. She realized her husband was drunk and did not share with him what had happened until he was sober. His reaction to the story made her realize that his heart had become like stone.

The metaphor psychic prison explains how leaders can become trapped in their own thoughts and how this influences their behavior. Nabal had become self-centered and could not see the opportunity before him. Abigail, on the other hand, realized the importance of giving provisions to David. In organizations, leaders and managers need to be able to recognize opportunities and not allow personal issues to influence their work.

Another example of metaphor supported by scripture is from organization, death, and immortality. Morgan (2006) explained that people’s actions in organizations demonstrate their awareness of mortality. People create systems and structures in organizations that are meant to last for many years. Often, people will focus their energy on completing activities that will leave a legacy. Ecclesiastes 9:7-18 instructs us to work joyfully, hard, and wisely even though the results are unknown.

Ascriptural

Morgan (2006) discussed competitive individualism and the influence of individuals and groups in organizations to strive to be number one (p. 122). The metaphor competitive individualism is influenced by our values and beliefs, but it is not supported by scripture.

Another example by Morgan (2006) discussed manipulation on organization and their negative effects on individuals. Morgan uses the metaphor corporate newspeak to describe how culture can control an organization and fail to reflect human character (p. 146). This form of manipulation results in resistance, resentment, and mistrust (Morgan).

Not Supported by Scripture

Morgan (2006) discussed how groupthink can cause individuals to become trapped in their way of thinking. The story of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3:1-30) addresses this issue. In this passage of scripture, Nebuchadnezzar erected a 90-foot high golden statue and ordered everyone to bow down before it whenever they heard the sound of horns. Anyone that did not bow down was sentenced to death. Three people disagreed with the law and encouraged the king, as well as the crowd, to reconsider it. Groupthink is a phenomenon of organizations, but the Bible does not support its use.

A second example of metaphor not supported by scripture involves the prevailing idea
regarding psychic prisons. Psychic prisons help leaders understand unconscious factors that prevent leaders and subordinates from being more creative or innovative. This metaphor helps leaders understand the need for insight and wisdom. This creates a paradox according to Proverbs. Proverbs 2:1-5 states that we should strive to gain wisdom and understanding. Proverbs 3:5 reminds us to “not lean on your own understanding.” According to scripture, we should seek wisdom, but lean on God for understanding.

**Metaphor: Benefits to Organizations**

This article has presented examples of metaphor as a valuable tool for increasing understanding and identifying problems. It is important to discuss prevailing schools of thought and how metaphors influence organizational theory and change. Morgan (2006) posited a strength of organizations as culture is it conceptualizes organizational change. It shows how changing organizational values and images is part of the process of change. Many examples of metaphors as an imagery device have been supported referencing Morgan’s book *Images of Organizations*. It is also important to discuss how organizations benefit from understanding organizations as culture and psychic prisons.

Cognitive, cultural, and unconscious or psychoanalytical schools of thought have been instrumental in providing understanding of how metaphors guide organizational theory and change (Marshak, 1996). These schools provide the foundation to understand how governing beliefs and schemata influence our thinking (Marshak).

**Organizational Change**

*The cognitive school.* The cognitive school advanced theories related to problem-solving and adaptive behavior in individuals and organizations as influenced by conscious schemata (Marshak, 1996). Schemata can influence creativity and innovation which is instrumental for organizational change (Marshak). According to Marshak, the common metaphor for this school is “organizations as learning systems” (p. 148). Problems related to organizational change are identified by evaluating “existing assumptions, beliefs, theories-in-use, and paradigms” (p. 148). Problem solving can also occur by identifying the problem, evaluating existing solutions, and then looking for innovative solutions (Marshak).

*The cultural school.* Organization theorists from the cultural school believe organizational behavior is influenced by collective beliefs or cultures (Marshak, 1996). Marshak posited that governing beliefs are assumed to be expressed symbolically through “myths, stories, rituals, and metaphors” (p. 149). Culture is believed to be a multi-layered system of beliefs that influences organizational behavior (Marshak).

Morgan’s metaphor organization as culture has concepts and theories that are from the study of organizational theory and change (Morgan, 2006). For instance, corporate culture and subculture occur because of a need for change within an organization’s culture (Morgan). This may occur from a significant event in the company such as the change in leadership or from an external event such as new entrant into a market. Other factors that may affect organizations are
new technologies, markets, and competitors (Marshak, 1996).

The unconscious or psychoanalytical school. The unconscious or psychoanalytical schools provide theories regarding the “unconscious influence [of] perception, meaning, and action in organizations” (Marshak, 1996, p. 149). Theorists from the psychoanalytical school posited individual or organizational change can occur if unconscious schemata are understood and addressed. Many of the theories were influenced by ideas from Freud and Jung (Marshak).

Morgan (2006) discussed many of the unconscious forces that guide individuals, groups, and organizational behavior in the chapter, “Organizations as Psychic Prisons.” Morgan discussed how organizations become trapped operating in terms such as “business as usual.” In these organizations, creativity and innovation are stifled or non-existent (Morgan). He referred to this as strong corporate cultures becoming pathological. Companies can fail or lose market share from being trapped in a particular way of thinking. Morgan identified that individual and organizational behaviors are influenced by unconscious schemata. He discussed influences such as childhood, gender, and anxiety in organizations as psychic prisons to illustrate how unconscious influences can affect organizations.

Morgan posited that “humans live their lives as prisoners or products of their individual and collective unconscious” (p. 212). Morgan told a story about Fredrick Taylor, the creator of “scientific management,” and his need to control everything around him (p. 212). According to Morgan, Freud would have described his personality as anal-compulsive which is formed by early childhood experiences. Taylor’s controlling nature was instrumental in understanding organizational structure and control and their limitations (Morgan).

According to Morgan (2006), gender also influences organization behavior. Male characteristics have dominated western businesses in regard to roles, traditions, philosophy, and authority. Morgan described mentors in business as “organizational members [who] cultivate fatherly roles . . . of help and protection” (p. 219).

Meta-Theory of Organizational Change

According to Marshak (1996), despite the differences in theories between the three schools, they all agree on a singular meta-theory of organizational change which incorporates the following:

1. Organizational behavior is influenced by out-of-awareness schemata. These schemata may be underlying theories-in-use, cultural assumptions and beliefs, and/or unconscious material or archetypes.

2. Organizational schemata may be accessed and modified. Different methods are suggested depending on whether or not the schemata are considered to be conscious, pre-conscious, or unconscious.

3. Second-order organizational change requires modification of controlling schemata in order to create innovative behavior that is different from “automatic” or “habitual” patterns. (p. 150)

Metaphors unify the three schools in two other ways (Marshak, 1996). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are schemata that structure or relate meaning. First in
regard to organizational change, it is important to understand metaphor and its influence on individuals and the organization as a whole.

Second, metaphors unify by providing a better understanding of literal and symbolic meaning and of conscious and unconscious influences (Marshak, 1996). Marshak posited that metaphors provide clarity to theories-in-use, cultural beliefs, and unconscious influences and their effects. Metaphors are valuable tools for understanding individual and organizational influences, paving the way for organizational change to occur.

**Organizations as Culture**

Culture in organizations is an ongoing process that requires conscious attempts to create meaning to better communicate and share vision (Morgan, 2006). It is a living phenomenon in which people share meaning and gain insight. Cultural metaphors shape reality (Morgan, 1996).

Technology is making the world smaller, thus it is becoming increasingly more important to share meaning in organizations (Morgan, 1996). People in organizations may communicate face-to-face or use forms of electronic communication. They may come from different cultures and backgrounds. Metaphor provides a way of communicating shared meaning within an organization.

Metaphors explain what is most important in an organization’s culture (Morgan, 2006). Is it the customers? Is it quality? Is it the employees? Metaphors convey this message through slogans, mission statements, and vision statements. As organizations evolve, establish new goals, or innovate, they can effectively communicate this throughout the organization using metaphors to share reality. Metaphors are important to organizations because of their nature of shaping reality (Morgan).

The enactment of shared reality establishes the foundation in which we gain an understanding of the “processes that produce systems of shared meaning” (Morgan, 2006, p. 137). Morgan posited that organizations have “structure, rules, policies, goals, missions, job descriptions, and standard operating procedures” (p. 139). They serve as a reference point for individuals thereby creating “cultural artifacts [that shape] the ongoing reality” (Morgan, pp. 139-140).

The metaphor organizations as culture therefore creates a vision that leaders can use to guide organizational objectives (Morgan, 2006). It also provides a perspective so followers can gauge the leader’s performance in achieving the vision.

**Organizations as Psychic Prisons**

Organizations as psychic prisons helps leaders and managers understand how unconscious factors influence individuals and groups and provides insight to deal with organizational challenges (Morgan, 2006). According to Morgan, organizational theorists try to provide insight to this phenomenon and rational solutions to control their effects.

Organizations benefit from this metaphor because it helps managers recognize and understand unconscious projections that occur when innovation or change is needed in an...
organization (Morgan, 2006). Managers need to understand and anticipate how traumatic events such as mergers, departmental changes, and new policies are likely to produce negative effects within the organization (Morgan).

Morgan (2006) posited that organizational theorists need to focus research on how managers and leaders can be effective working with the conscious and unconscious factors that affect employees. He believed rational theories do not consider the irrational side of employees and how to manage or guide their behavior.

This metaphor provides awareness to rational and irrational behavior of individuals, groups, and even leaders in organizations. When leaders and managers better understand how to manage the unconscious factors, they are more likely to be able to effectively make cultural changes within the organization.

**Conclusion**

The research indicates that metaphors are imagery devices that are liberating in orientation (Grant & Oswick, 1996). They provide meaning by creating unconscious emotional responses to experiences that influence our values and beliefs (Charteris-Black, 2005). They shape our reality and provide innovative ways of seeing things (Morgan, 2006). Metaphors help organizations by creating and describing shared reality. They also provide opportunities for organizational theorists to assist managers and agents of change by identifying and effectively managing unconscious factors that affect organizations (Morgan).

The caution with metaphors is they cannot be taken too literally or their value is lost (Trim, 2007). Metaphors shape and are shaped by individual reality. Due to this, they are not objective since they rely on the interpretation of the individual (Morgan, 1996). Morgan (2006) illustrated the power of metaphors is their ability to frame complex thinking and challenge innovative reasoning.

According to Morgan (2006), there has been extensive research regarding the metaphor organizations as culture from a cross-national perspective. Technology is bridging communication gaps between individuals in organizations. Future research should consider the relationship between organization and culture from a cross-cultural perspective. Future research could explore the effects of technology on the life and death of metaphors. Questions need to be asked about the effects of technology on the life and death of metaphors. Does technology create universal metaphors? Does technology accelerate the effects caused by the difference in culture and language regarding the life and death of metaphors? Will technology be able to create a shared reality in multinational organizations and companies with foreign business relationships?
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