Replies to Cepollaro and Torrengo, Táíwò, and Amoretti

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Abstract

In this short piece belonging to a book symposium on my book *How Propaganda Works* (Oxford University Press, 2015), I reply to the objections, comments and suggestions provided by the contributors: Bianca Cepollaro and Giuliano Torrengo, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, and Maria Cristina Amoretti. I show how some of the objections can be accommodated by the framework adopted in the book, but also how various comments and suggestions have contributed to the development, in future work, of several threads pertaining to the general view put forward in *How Propaganda Works*.

Keywords
Propaganda, ideology, slurs and code words, agenda setting, standpoint epistemology

Reply to Cepollaro and Torrengo

In their incisive and fascinating paper, "The Worst and the Best of Propaganda", Cepollaro and Torrengo develop two critiques of *How Propaganda Works* (henceforth HPW). Their first critique involves the discussion of slurs and code words in Chapter 4, where I argue that the focus on slur words in recent analytic philosophy is misplaced. Against my discussion in Chapter 4, they argue that slur words are in fact distinctive and should not be theorized together with code words (such as the American use of "inner city" as a code for raising negative stereotypes about black Americans). According to Cepollaro and Torrengo, slurs are distinctive in ways that are worthy of special philosophical discussion and debate. Their second critique involves the taxonomy of propaganda provided in HPW, which they argue

fails to be exhaustive. In what follows, I respond to their critiques. Cepollaro and Torrengo's paper raises many important issues that require extensive discussion. I am unable to resolve all of the issues that arise in this short reply; at points in what follows I end by indicating open avenues for future debate.

1 Are slurs special?

In Chapter 4 of HPW, I argue that the recent focus in analytic philosophy on slurs is problematic. My basic point is about the problematic consequences of only focusing on slurs, to the exclusion of subtle forms of linguistic manipulation, with code words as an example. I worried that by focusing just on the ways in which slurs are problematic, one thereby suggests that once one has eliminated slurs, the rest of language is non-problematic. My intention in the lengthy discussion of code words in Chapter 4 was to show that the problems raised by slurs are much more general.

Manipulative speech often does have the same effect as slurs. Philosophy of language should focus not just on explaining how slurs have problematic effects, but on the thornier issue of how the apparently "safe" parts of language can be used to similar effect. Furthermore, since code words have the effects of slurs but are "masked" as innocent words, giving so much theoretical attention to the former to the exclusion of the latter contributes to strengthening the masking effect of code words. It's not a problem to discuss only one of several problems. But it is a problem when the failure to discuss the other problems actually contributes to making them more of a problem. Only discussing slurs is problematic in this way; it has the effect, no doubt unintended, of suggesting that slurs are the "real" problem.

My central point survives Cepollaro and Torrengo's critique (I think). There are ways of speaking that have the effect of slurs, but do not contain slurs. Failure to think theoretically about such ways of thinking has problematic consequences. We should discuss both slurs and code words. However, in making the case for this point, I went too far. My discussion suggests that slurs are not "special" either linguistically or politically, and so are unworthy not just of being the sole focus of discussion in recent analytic philosophy of language of

problematic speech (which, with a few exceptions, seemed to be the case at the time), but are unworthy of being singled out as a distinctive topic. This was too strong a claim to make, and Cepollaro and Torrengo are right to critique it.

Cepollaro and Torrengo argue that slurs are linguistically distinctive from code words. They base this on the premise that slurs *always* carry their negative not-at-issue content, whereas code words, in contrast, do not. I do not agree in the end with Cepollaro and Torrengo's analysis of the situation. Nevertheless, I concede that they are correct that the framework of HPW fails to vindicate the claim that slurs and code-words belong in the same linguistic species. More generally, the account of code words in HPW is not sufficiently complete to vindicate its claims. In response, I sketch a novel account of code words, due to forthcoming work with David Beaver (Beaver and Stanley forthcoming b). This account preserves the similarity between code words and slurs that Cepollaro and Torrengo rightly point out fails to be vindicated by the framework of HPW. From the perspective of Beaver and my framework, the difference between code words and slurs is of degree and not kind.

Cepollaro and Torrengo also provide political reasons to think that slurs are special. In HPW, I argue that slurs are not politically important in liberal democracies, because they are rarely if ever used in contemporary public political discourse—they have, in essence, been replaced by code words. Cepollaro and Torrengo give two reasons to think that slurs are nevertheless politically important. The first, provided in passing, is that the use of explicit slurs in public political discourse is a marker of the decline of liberal democratic norms (in the book, which was published in 2015, I give the example of Hungary; now the more salient example would be the United States). Their second, and more central point is that even when there are norms in place that prevent politicians and the media from explicitly using slurs, the *private* use of slurs can still have politically problematic consequences.

Let's begin with the putative linguistic distinctiveness of slurs. Cepollaro and Torrengo argue that slurs are distinctive, because they are *always* associated with their problematic content. According to them, slurs always conveys problematic not-at-issue content. In contrast, code words can be used completely innocently in certain

linguistic contents; in "Denmark is a European social welfare state", the use of "welfare" does not carry racist not-at-issue content, or at least not obviously so.

It is far from clear that slurs are always associated with problematic content. When slurs are used in *appropriation*, they do not carry problematic not-at-issue content. Slurs differ from one another in the degree to which they allow appropriative uses, which can blur the fact that such uses do stand as a robust counter-example to Cepollaro and Torrengo's claim. A good example is the anti-gay slur "queer", whose appropriative use is enough in common currency as to be the name of an academic discipline ("Queer Studies"). Cepollaro and Torrengo themselves note in footnote 3 that appropriation could be seen as a counter-example to their premise, crediting the point to Dan Zeman. But they dismiss appropriative uses as a potential counterexample, endorsing the view that what we have, in the case of appropriation, are polysemy or non-literal uses of the term.

Cepollaro and Torrengo are right that HPW does not provide a framework to account for the fact that code words can be innocently used, i.e. used without conveying problematic not-at-issue content. But I do not accept their claim that slurs always carry problematic not-at-issue content. Both slurs and code words can be used innocently, and can be used to convey problematic content. But I fail to provide a satisfactory explanatory account in HPW that can explain these facts.

In "Calling, Addressing, and Appropriation", Luvell Anderson argues that something fundamentally different is going on in white and black uses of the N word (Anderson 2018). Moreover, on Anderson's account, the difference is not due to polysemy. When white Americans use the N word, they are, according to Anderson, they are using it to *call* people the N word. When black Americans use the N word, they are using it to *address* one another. When one uses the N word in a speech practice of *calling*, it carries problematic not-at-issue content. When one uses the N word in a speech practice of *addressing*, it does not. I regard this as a fundamental insight, one that is completely lacking from the framework of HPW. The not-at-issue content of expressions must be considered relative to *speech practices*. Relative to certain speech practices, code words convey problematic not-at-issue content; relative to other speech practices, they can be perfectly innocent; *mutatis mutandis* for slurs.

The difference between slurs and code words is one of degree, rather than kind (and, as the case of "queer" demonstrates, the degree may not even be particularly large). Of course, this is less of a reply than a promissory note. It rests on a semantics and pragmatics that incorporates speech practices in a systematic way into familiar mechanisms. The provision of such a theory is the goal of Beaver and Stanley forthcoming b. However, that there is no obstacle in principle to so doing is clear from the fact that one can simply *add* speech practices as a parameter to contexts of use. Relative to a context of use with a speech practice of calling, the N word has problematic not-at-issue content; relative to one with a speech practice of addressing, it does not; mutatis mutandis with "welfare" and "inner city".

Cepollaro and Torrengo proffer an account of slurs according to which slurs always convey problematic content; appropriative uses can be bracketed as non-literal. From this perspective, it does follow that slurs are linguistically distinctive, and should be treated as a separate phenomenon from code words. I have sketched an alternative framework, one that takes appropriative uses at face-value, and provides a general account both of slurs and code words. Whether it is ultimately a superior account, and hence more explanatory, depends on details that will be developed in forthcoming work (Beaver and Stanley forthcoming b).

Finally, what about the politically distinctive character of slurs? First, I concede Cepollaro and Torrengo's important point that private discussions have political import; insofar as slurs are common coin in private discussion, they are politically important. Moreover, the fact that explicit slurs are generally banned from public political discourse does suggest that they are politically important; as I note in HPW, their entrance into public political discourse is a sign of the demise of liberal democratic norms. However, here too I am skeptical that a sharp line can be drawn between explicit slurs and code words. After all, code words begin life as unnoticed, and then as liberal democratic norms strengthen, tend to disappear from public discourse in the same way that slurs do. Before US President Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the use of "inner city" to describe places where Black Americans live began to be called out by the media as racist, and was starting to disappear from public discourse.

2 Is the taxonomy of propaganda exhaustive?

Cepollaro and Torrengo's second critique is that the taxonomy of kinds of propaganda in HPW fails to be exhaustive. In particular, there are kinds of "supporting propaganda"—propaganda that addresses failures or gaps in liberal democratic norms—that do not attempt to heal such gaps via empathy. Their ingenious example, which deserves further discussion and study, involves the use of the pronoun "she" as the default personal pronoun in academic writing. This, they claim, is a kind of supporting propaganda. Yet, they argue, the use of "she" as the default personal pronoun in academic writing is not a method to create empathy—it is a method to restore equality, but not via stirring the emotion of empathy. It is therefore, according to the taxonomy of HPW, a kind of positive propaganda that is not "supporting propaganda."

I want to begin by correcting a misimpression about the taxonomy of HPW. In HPW, I define *undermining propaganda* as propaganda that uses an ideal against itself. Undermining propaganda takes a particular ideal and uses it in the service of undermining that very ideal. I define *supporting propaganda*, by contrast, as propaganda that uses emotion to strengthen the realization of an ideal. I define demagoguery as propaganda that is in service of anti-democratic goals. So, demagoguery can take the form either of undermining propaganda or supporting propaganda. Similarly, we may define a kind of propaganda—in HPW, I call it *civic rhetoric*—that is the opposite of demagoguery; civic rhetoric is in the service of democratic goals. In the taxonomy of HPW, civic rhetoric can take the form either of undermining propaganda or supporting propaganda.

Cepollaro and Torrengo write, "Stanley seems to suggest that 'positive' propaganda is always a form of supporting propaganda, rather than a form of undermining propaganda." But this is mistaken, and some of the main examples I give of civic rhetoric do in fact have the structure of undermining propaganda.

In W.E.B Du Bois's classic 1926 paper, "Criteria of Negro Art", he formulates a strategy for those without power to make their perspectives visible to a dominant majority. Du Bois argues that the only Black artists white Americans want to see are those who fit certain subordinating racial stereotypes; they "want Uncle Toms, Topsies,

good "darkies" and clowns" (Du Bois 1926: 295). His strategy is to employ art that uses the subordinating racial norms as a mask, ultimately to undermine them by revealing a Black humanity inconsistent with these subordinating and dehumanizing stereotypes. Alain Locke names this strategy, the use of "art as propaganda". Art is Du Bois's suggested tool for expanding empathy and realizing American democracy by making public spaces more reasonable, to make public discourse about policy inclusive of all perspectives.

Du Bois's paper was written during the flourishing of the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1920s, and a central member of the Harlem Renaissance movement, shared Du Bois's political vision of art as a vehicle for liberation. In turn, Du Bois regarded the NAACP as an ideal vehicle to plan such propaganda: "And it is right here that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People comes upon the field, comes with its great call to a new battle, a new fight and new things to fight before the old things are wholly won; and to say that the beauty of truth and freedom which shall someday be our heritage and the heritage of all civilized men is not in our hands yet and that we ourselves must not fail to realize." (Du Bois 1926: 294).

The popular 1921 Broadway play *Shuffle Along* is a classic example of the use of Du Bois's strategy. The writers met at an NAACP benefit, and the play was written by Black authors, produced by Black citizens, and starred Black performers. Marketed, as is evident from its title, to appeal to whites with a simplistic stereotyped vision of Black existence, it used novel forms of jazz to call attention to the vastly greater complexity and humanity of Black American life. It is civic rhetoric in the form of undermining propaganda.

Cepollaro and Torrengo have misdescribed the taxonomy of HPW. But we are still left with their thought-provoking example of the use of "she" as the gender-neutral pronoun, which they are right to classify as a kind of propaganda. Cepollaro and Torrengo argue that it is not supporting propaganda, and their argument is plausible. But I think it is can be seen as a species of undermining propaganda; it employs the norms of academic discourse, which use the male pronoun as the favored gender neutral pronoun, to subvert those very norms.

Reply to Táíwò

Eric Swanson, in a critical review of HPW, describes the strategy of the book, as least as far as the philosophy of language aspect of the book goes, as "extending well-established work in … methodologically conservative ways" (Swanson 2017: 937). What Swanson means here is that in the book, I attempt to use the standard apparatus of philosophy of language and semantics to capture the phenomena I discuss, namely how propaganda is used to create and reinforce ideologies. In "The Emperor has No Clothes: Ideology, Repression, and Agenda Setting", Olúfémi Táíwò draws attention to the limitations of this "methodologically conservative" strategy.

The standard apparatus of philosophy of language and semantics operates with individual mental states, such as belief, and seeks to explain how individual beliefs change in a conversation. In addressing the question of how propaganda creates or reinforces ideologies with this apparatus, it is necessary to model ideology as beliefs—or at least as belief-like states that can fit into standard models, which treat a conversation as involving adding new propositions to a common ground, either via assertion or presupposition. One of my goals in HPW was to argue that one could use "off the shelf resources" in philosophy of language and semantics in ways that would help in the understanding of propaganda and ideology.

Táíwò argues that "propaganda should be understood primarily through how it restructures practical deliberation, rather than moral deliberation or belief formation about the propositions at issue." Táíwò objects to modeling the common ground as a set of beliefs, on the grounds that it is at best an incomplete way of explaining how propaganda restructures practical deliberation, instead suggesting "we treat practice, rather than beliefs as the basic element of critique."

To make his point about the importance of practical deliberation, Táíwò focuses on the concept of *agenda setting*. He argues that although there are linguistic strategies for agenda setting, capable of being captured within the standard apparatus of philosophy of language and semantics, there are methods to set an agenda that are non-linguistic in character, including "murder, prison, and abduction". If we are interested in understanding agenda setting, we must think about how non-linguistic as well as linguistic acts constrain

and shape public practical deliberation. We only have a partial grasp on agenda setting if we focus on specifically linguistic methods to set the agenda.

There are several interrelated critiques that emerge from Táíwò's criticism of the methodological conservatism of the approach in HPW. First, it is an error to focus on *beliefs* as what is explanatorily central in ideology critique. To do so is to obscure the centrality of public practices to ideology. Secondly, to understand how ideology functions, for example in setting the agenda, it is excessively narrow to focus on linguistic means. Let's begin with the first of these points, that it is a mistake for ideology critique to focus on beliefs.

There are several different critiques of the focus on belief in an account of ideology. For example, there is one, due already to Robert Stalnaker, that critiques belief as the attitude most appropriate for the theory of presupposition, replacing it instead with a less committal notion, such as acceptance. This is not a very radical revision, already adopted by Stalnaker. Two other critiques involve a more radical revision. The first is that ideology is poorly captured by belief states, because ideology is a matter of practices, and practices are poorly captured by belief states. Another is that belief states are properties in the first instance of *individuals*, whereas ideologies are best captured by notions that are characterized in terms of groups.

Following Robert Brandom, let's call *regulism* the view that "properties of practice are always and everywhere to be conceived as expressions of the bindingness of underlying *principles*" (Brandom 1994: 20). If regulism is true, then we can think of adhering to a practice as believing a regulative principle. When I wrote HPW, I was persuaded of the plausibility of regulism—or at least that what it was for an individual to follow a practice supervenes on their belief state. The main objections to regulism—such as the Lewis Carroll regress—are ones I have addressed at length in previous work.[1] If regulism is correct—and I think there is a good case that it is, and at the very least that its shortcomings have been exaggerated—then it is possible to model participating in a practice as having a belief. If regulism is true, there is one less barrier to a methodologically conservative approach to ideology critique.

[1] See Chapter 2 of Stanley 2011.

Another objection to treating ideology in terms of belief is that belief states are properties in the first instance of *individuals*, whereas ideologies are best captured by notions that are characterized in terms of groups. As Brandom has noted, "talk about the community in which a performer belongs is not obviously translatable into talk about regularities of individual performance" (Brandom 1994, 40). A speech act occurs in a community governed by norms—its significance is determined in part by deference to relevant members in that community, the ones whose authority matters more. If we focus on individual mental states, we are obscuring the social dimension of norms. Norms in a community do not supervene on the individual mental states of its members; they are determined by authority and power.[2]

Táíwò argues that capturing propaganda and ideology requires us to be more methodologically radical. To account for these phenomena, we need a framework that allows us to update on "norms and incentives", to use his vocabulary. I was aware of this tension in HPW. There, following suggestions in Ishani Maitra's work (2012), I suggest adding *rankings* to the common ground (Stanley 2015a: 133). In the same chapter, I use this less methodologically conservative framework in the analysis of generic statements associated with code words. So, even in that work, I was aware of the possibility that the methodologically conservative nature of the standard framework was insufficient.

But the issue at the heart of Táíwò's piece cannot easily be addressed—indeed, in part thanks to Táíwò, I have been thinking about how to reevaluate the standard framework of semantics and pragmatics in a more thoroughgoing way in Beaver and Stanley forthcoming b[3]. In his piece, Táíwò sets up an agenda for the philosophy of language and semantics—how to adjust the framework to account for differences in power, to explain how power affects the setting of an agenda, and similar topics that cannot obviously or straightforwardly be captured within standard frameworks. This is the project that I sought to begin in Chapter 4 of HPW—but like Táíwò, I see it as a project that is at its initial phases, and not at its end.

[2] Of course, the content of beliefs is also determined in part by deference to experts, as Tyler Burge established in "Individualism and the Mental" (1979).

[3] For an entry into this project, see Beaver and Stanley forthcoming a.

Dominant ideology theory and epistemic privilege: reply to Amoretti

Teaching in the Wesleyan University Prison Program one day in 2016, I assigned a piece I had written, Stanley 2015b. In discussing its arguments, I spoke of everyone as having been tricked by vocabulary representing Black men as irredeemable predators and criminals by propaganda. The students in the class were shocked and disappointed. They pointed out to me that neither they nor anyone in their communities had been tricked by the vocabulary of the 1990s Clinton era "war on crime." They wondered how I, a university professor who had published a book and several articles on mass incarceration, could have been ignorant of that fact. My experience illustrates the reality of standpoint epistemology—that groups oppressed by an ideology have a better standpoint from which to see through the ways in which it misrepresents reality.

Dominant ideology theory is the view that those oppressed by an ideology can be led to accept the ideology that oppresses them. On this view, the oppressed often suffer from false consciousness. The rise of standpoint epistemology has led to skepticism about dominant ideology theory. And there are in any case grounds for independent skepticism about it. Karl Marx's most famous quote from *The German Ideology* is, "the ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas" (Marx 1998: 67). Remarking on this thought, Michael Rosen writes in his classic work on false consciousness:

> Marx now seems to have switched to a view of those who live under the domination of the ruling class as passive victims, taking their ideas from those who control the 'means of mental production' like obedient chicks, with no critical reflection on their part as to whether the ideas are either true or in their own rational interests. This, it seems, is an almost paranoid view. Why should one suppose that the ruling class is capable of promoting its interests effectively, forming its ideas in response to those interests, whereas the dominated classes simply accept whatever is served up to them? (Rosen 1996: 182–3).

My goal in Chapter 6 of HPW was to defend the coherence of dominant ideology theory against objections (and my goal in Chapter 7 was to defend Marx's view that the distinction between mental and

manual labor was a spurious ungrounded ideological invention used to undergird the spread of dominant ideology). But I wanted my defense to be sensitive to the charge of privileging the epistemology of dominant groups, a claim that is inconsistent with the facts of standpoint epistemology.[4]

Since dominant ideology theory is controversial, my arguments in Chapter 6 have also been proven to be controversial—they have been challenged by such formidable philosophers as Kristie Dotson (2018), Gaile Pohlhaus (2016), and Amia Srinivasan (2016). These philosophers have argued that my focus on the epistemic ills of oppressed groups is an error, and my arguments for them flawed. It is thus with some relief that I have the privilege of engaging Maria Christina Amoretti's more sympathetic approach in "Flawed Ideologies, Propaganda, and the Social Situatedness of Knowledge." I will focus, in this brief reply, on one point of disagreement. Amoretti argues that my reflections "cast doubt on the standpoint theorists' claim that negatively advantaged social positions come, at least in principle, with epistemic privilege."

I will argue that while my arguments do, in the ways Amoretti spells out, show that it is wrong to claim that negatively privileged positions are free from negative epistemic consequences, this is not in tension with the facts of standpoint epistemology. All things considered, negatively advantaged social positions do come with epistemic privilege.

In Chapter 6 of HPW, I use interest-relative invariantism, the thesis that knowledge depends upon interests, to argue that people with significant interests in an outcome face greater epistemic obstacles when reflecting about their situation, and hence higher barriers to knowledge. Applied to persons in negatively privileged situations, the result is that they face certain kinds of epistemic barriers due to those situations. If the outcome of some legislation affects whether I can stay in my home rather be evicted, then I face higher epistemic barriers in my reflections about the legislation. This fact is reflected in intuitive reactions to people in such situations, that they are engaged for example in "wishful thinking" in their judgments.

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[4] One of the most powerful cases against dominant ideology theory is made in Scott 1985. Obviously, I do not have the space here to take on his considerations with respect to the arguments of HPW.

I use this analysis, as well as the one in Chapter 7, to ground dominant ideology theory on a more secure epistemological basis. People in negatively privileged situations face particular kinds of epistemic injustice. On the one hand, they can be made to feel epistemologically inferior because their obviously negatively privileged situation results in higher epistemic standards. On the other (and this is the point of Chapter 7), the division between manual work and intellectual reflection is used to make those who are economically negatively privileged feel insecure about their cognitive capacities. Thus, we can make sense out of the tactics by which an economically privileged class can intellectually dominate those whose resources they control.

However, my analysis in HPW does not conflict, as Amoretti argues, with the facts of standpoint epistemology. In particular, it does not conflict with the claim that negatively privileged groups have a privileged epistemic position. The reason it is consistent with the facts of standpoint epistemology is that, as I argue (Stanley 2015a: 254–63), people in positively privileged positions generally face more powerful epistemic barriers than people in negatively privileged positions. As a result, the analysis in Chapter 6 is consistent with the facts of standpoint epistemology—indeed, it even vindicates those facts. Let me explain.

The claim that knowledge depends upon interests, the core thesis of Stanley 2005, includes all human interests in the practical domain, including *moral* interests.[5] And as I write in HPW, "[i]n societies with group hierarchies, members of positively privileged groups will have interests at stake in political deliberation: they will not want to perform unjust acts, for example" (Stanley 2015a: 262). Since positively privileged people have moral interests at stake in political decision making, they too face high epistemic standards for knowledge.

However, positively privileged people suffer from an ideology that is absent in the case of negatively privileged people, one that affects them in political deliberation. This is the ideology of *meritocracy*, which leads them to think that their positions of privilege have been earned. They will therefore not recognize that they have moral interests at stake in political decision making, and will be inappropriately

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[5] The thesis of moral encroachment—which I regard as a subspecies of pragmatic encroachment—is explored at length in Basu forthcoming and Moss 2018.

overconfident in their reasoning. In contrast, members of negatively privileged groups will be underconfident in their reasoning—but this very lack of confidence will lead them to take more care in their reasoning, to gather more evidence, etc. Thus, according to the analysis in Chapter 6, all things considered, negatively advantaged groups will have an epistemically privileged position.

There is one caveat to this argument. Persons in negatively privileged situations who accept the ideology of meritocracy may thus sacrifice their epistemic advantage. As I argue in the book, the ideology of meritocracy is for that reason among the most potent tools of dominant ideology theory—but for the reasons I have given, it is, epistemologically speaking, a two-edged sword.

My goal in Chapter 6 of HPW was to rehabilitate dominant ideology theory, but for the 21st century. At this point, the challenge posed for dominant ideology theory is to explain not is pervasiveness, but its possibility. So doing requires defending its consistency with the facts of standpoint epistemology, which I hope, in this reply, to have done.

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