INTEGRITAS
Wyoming Catholic College
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# GLOBALISM, TECHNOLOGY, AND ...POETRY?

## WHETHER THE HUMANITIES CAN CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING TO THE MODERN WORLD

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I would like you to imagine the following situation: sometime after graduation you are given an extraordinary grant to found a Center for Leadership Studies. You are hired as an intern, and to your delight, within your first year of working, the CLS wins another grant to host a major international leadership event. To help prepare for this week-long international symposium, your boss asks you to do the research necessary to create the invitation list. The goal of the week-long event is to identify the world's most important problems, and invite men and women from all over the world, from both developing and developed countries, to discuss these problems and formulate solutions. When you are sitting down at the first planning meeting, what kinds of questions do you think will be brought up, as particularly in need of solving: poverty, hunger, questions about infrastructure, women's rights, disease, elementary education, and perhaps questions about technology, environmental issues, and extending the Internet to the whole world, right? And what about the guest list? What kinds of people will you suggest should attend your Global Leadership Conference: influential politicians from the developing world, biologists, doctors experienced in working in the field, medical researchers, experts on technology, computer scientists who deal with big data, engineers, and some creative business leaders, right? Who else might you invite?

My point in all this is to suggest that you probably did not think about inviting a poet, a musician, an art historian, a philosopher, or a professor of literature. But the point is: the way we formulate to ourselves what kinds of questions are worth asking, what kinds of answers we should be pursuing, and what kinds of people might be able to develop solutions to those problems is for the most part confined within the fields of global business, politics, applied science, mathematics, engineering, and technology.

This is not a new view of the world. Indeed, as Pierre Hadot has shown in *The Veil of Isis,* this approach toward seeing the world as a series of technical problems and man's responsibility to uncover the secrets of nature in order to answer them dates back to antiquity. In fact, Hadot calls it the "Promethean Attitude," based on the mythological tale of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and snuck it down to earth to give it to men. Here's how Hadot puts it: "If

man feels nature to be an enemy, hostile and jealous, which resists him by hiding its secrets, there will then be opposition between nature and human art, based on human reason and will. Man will seek, through technology, to affirm his power, domination, and rights over nature" (92). Commenting on the ancient practice of the Promethean Attitude, Hadot continues: "Technology allows us to regain the upper hand over nature... [Its goal] is to serve mankind's practical interests, and therefore to relieve human sufferings, but also, it must be admitted, to satisfy the passions, particularly those of kings and the wealthy..." (102). As Hadot mentions, Nature is viewed as holding back the secrets which, if we knew them, we could exploit and use to improve our condition, but we have to get them out of her: "If one situates oneself in a relation of hostile opposition, the model of unveiling will be, one might say, judicial. When a judge is in the presence of a defendant who is hiding a secret, he must try to make him confess it."

Now, this way of thinking about Nature and technology existed in antiquity, but it was this approach to nature which has taken hold within the modern world, so much so that we don't realize there are alternatives. For this reason, then, the "Promethean Attitude" seems obvious, and it is repeated in almost every facet of modern American culture, although without reference to the historical roots.

This Promethean Attitude rules contemporary American culture, even if we are not fully aware of it. In almost every facet of society, there seems to be little cultural space for humanistic studies. It is difficult to perceive how literature, philosophy, or theology could contribute to technological capitalism. At first, then, we might answer our question—can the humanities possibly contribute to our modern culture?—in the negative.

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At this point, though, I would like to shift my attention from the contemporary scene to the humanities themselves. And I would like to suggest that humanistic studies can do at least four things that the economic, scientific, technological, Promethean paradigm cannot. You could say there are four questions or issues which the humanities can address which the STEM paradigm cannot even conceive of. But moreover, I will argue that even for technological capitalism to be successful, it needs to be supported by the fruits of humanistic study.

I will state the four things first, and then I will come back to each one to explain what I mean and then illustrate it with some concrete example. The humanities can make a special contribution because they promote:

1) the mental creativity to develop tools and processes which promote real human flourishing;
2) the strength to stand tall when your long-term plans run against the current of short-term gains;

3) the ability to let things be, with a regard to their beauty and goodness, quite apart from any profitability or utility which they may be subjected to;
4) the breadth of mind to push back the horizons within which we ordinarily contemplate what human life is and should be.

Let's start with my first point: the mental creativity to develop tools and processes which take into account real human flourishing. If you think about it, this is not as obvious as it might seem. On the surface, it would seem that the computer scientist or the engineer is exclusively devoted to doing precisely this: developing new tools and more efficient processes for institutions of manufacturing. But my contention is that these efforts take place within a paradigm which is already established: that is, your creativity is invited and needed, but the questions to which you are paid to find the answers is not up for negotiation. Technology might provide the clearest example. Right now, if you are skillful in computer science, then you are in demand, whether it is with Google or Apple or some other company which makes our electronic interactions more efficient. That Apple will come out, sometime in the future, with an iPhone 7 is not only assumed but also considered, indubitably, a good thing. The assumption is not only that technology will continue to develop, but that it should. Big Data will continue to be gathered by Facebook, and this is a good thing. We will continue to make progress toward AI, and that is a good thing (despite all the symptoms of anxiety about AI which manifest themselves in our movies and television shows). Technology will solve whatever problems confront us right now, provided that we keep working at it.

One of the problems with this assumption is that technology will create many new problems in its efforts to solve the ones it has already brought about. A controversial example is, perhaps, our attempt to solve problems of world hunger through the use of technologically engineered foods. Is it possible that we could be introducing some serious future technological problem—to emerge clearly only twenty years from now—in our very effort to move forward? Is it possible that by disrupting the natural structure of certain foods we will actually be introducing sickness or malnutrition in some unforeseen way?

Let us step back for a moment, then, to consider this issue from a vantage. What I am trying to say is this: there is a much needed ability—let us call it the ability to ask what kinds of problems we should pose to ourselves—which cannot be cultivated within the Promethean framework of technological capitalism. Each field of engineering is already locked within certain trends, developing certain products, and realizing certain ends. But it does not belong to that individual field to ask whether or not its products, when released, will promote real human flourishing. This ability, to step creatively out of the streams of development and ask not just how do I solve this problem, but what kind of problems should I be thinking about in the first place—must come from somewhere else. And, as you will guess, I believe that the humanities is the appropriate place for posing this question of what kinds of tools and processes lead to real human flourishing, as opposed to short-term gains in questions which have already been posed.

And how can the humanities do this? I think humanistic studies can promote this in at least two ways: 1) by cultivating the sense of memory and 2) by developing a due sense of caution with respect to our use of power. In fact, these are just modern restatements of something a medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, suggested. He said that for a man to make *prudent* decisions, that is, to creatively realize the good in real ways which lead to human flourishing, he must be guided by "memory" and what he calls "hesitant openness," *docilitas.* Aquinas's stress on memory makes sense. Given that the whole point of prudence is to come up with fresh ideas for particular situations, it cannot be some attempt merely to copy out the solutions from some rule book. No, for Thomas Aquinas, the prudent man is more like an artist, applying to his particular situation the fundamental shapes and colors of the moral world. And yet to do so, it helps to have the mind well-stocked with many historical and literary examples of individuals who either abused their opportunities to do real good or heroically and creatively did so. Clearly, the humanities are particularly valuable in this regard, providing thousands of examples of human flourishing or human failure in concrete situations. You could say that the humanities provide case-studies, not just for what will gain some part of an existing market, but what kinds of markets should exist in the first place.

Secondly, I have said that the humanities can help provide what Aquinas calls *docilitas,* and what I have called, "hesitant openness" to a variety of courses of action, as well as a due caution about any particular path which has seemed successful hitherto. If you listen to contemporary discussions on social ills (poverty, disease, racism, education, etc.) then you are often disconcerted, because those who identify the problems and then attempt to identify the deep roots of the problem often speak as if they are unaware of any other way of viewing the subject. It is so easy to condemn, from a safe distance, the idiocies of the past: Gulags, Jewish ghettoes, genocides, or even repressed Victorian sexual mores. The problem is that while we propose our answers to our own social ills we do not often hesitate enough to think around the question. We have to ask if we are presently perpetrating evils which will be rightly ridiculed by a later generation. A farmer/poet from Kentucky, whom many of you will know, Wendell Berry, says that art—we could say the humanities in general—can help with this natural proclivity to moral myopia. In a beautiful and short little essay called, "Damage," Berry writes about a mistake he made in trying to reshape the landscape of his farm. He writes:

> I have a steep wooded hillside that I wanted to be able to pasture occasionally, but it had no permanent water supply. About halfway to the top of the slope there is a narrow bench, on which I thought I could make a small pond. I hired a man with a bulldozer to dig one.
>
> He cleared away the trees and then formed the pond, cutting into the hill on the upper side, piling the loosened dirt in a curving earthwork on the lower.

> The pond appeared to be a success. Before the bulldozer quit work, water had already begun to seep in. Soon there was enough to support a few head of stock. To heal the exposed ground, I fertilized it and sowed it with grass and clover.
>
> We had an extremely wet fall and winter, with the usual freezing and thawing. The ground grew heavy with water, and soft. The earthwork slumped; a large slice of the woods floor on the upper side slipped down into the pond.
>
> The trouble was the familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge. The fault was mine. I was careful to get expert advice. But this only exemplifies what I already knew. No expert knows everything about every place, not even anything about any place. If one's knowledge of one's whereabouts is insufficient, if one's judgment is unsound, then expert advice is of little use.

Berry feels a sadness about the failure of his project, in part because of his philosophy of farming. As he says,

> In general, I have used my farm carefully. It could be said, I think, that I have improved it more than I have damaged it. My aim has been to go against its history and to repair the damage of other people. But now a part of its damage is my own.
>
> The pond was a modest piece of work, and so the damage is not extensive. In the course of time and nature it will heal. And yet there is damage—to my place, and to me. I have carried out, before my own eyes and against my intention, a part of the modern tragedy: I have made a lasting flaw in the face of the earth, for no lasting good.
>
> Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it.

To our surprise, Berry says he will not try to cover up the mistake, and in fact his choice to write about it is part of his decision to bare the wound, to make everyone see the scar he inflicted on his own land he loves so much. Berry, then, points out that art serves memory, and it serves it by preserving the freshness of the presence of the wound. Berry says that it would be irresponsible to try to escape from the damage he has done: "To lose the scar of knowledge is to renew the wound," he says. In fact, the good artist keeps a record of such scars. He stores them up in his memory. Or, as Berry puts it, "An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars." Briefly imagine, then, that at your leadership symposium all of the guests had cultural memories, well-informed with both

positive and negative exempla. And then they set about to find creative solutions to our ills, but cautiously, with a keen attentiveness to the "geography of scars" of human history.

So much then for how the humanites can help promote this cautious and creative habit of thinking outside of the immanent stream of development. But what if it happened that you came to the conclusion that a new technology would not lead to human flourishing, that an investment should not be made, or that a tool or process, though perhaps profitable within the short-term, would not lead to long-term flourishing? Well, then you would be in a very difficult position, and thus you would need a kind of strength to stand tall and insist, at the very least, that the conversation take place. But all the pressure would be against you, pushing you back into the stream, whose currents and trends would exert pressure against you and cause you to have anxiety about your own personal success. Clearly, the Promethean Paradigm will not be able to provide you with this precious ability—this strength to stand tall.

But the humanities potentially could. A recent study in neuroscience compared the experience of students reading philosophy or non-fiction with those reading about the same subject but through literature. And it found, perhaps not surprisingly, that completely different patterns of the brain were involved. Indeed, in the reading of literature, the areas of activity were scattered throughout multiple regions of the brain. The modern study pairs nicely to what ancient and medieval readers used to say about imaginative reading: that in addition to asking a question of truth it also touches the will. In the medieval poem the *Comedy,* Beatrice says to Dante, that the heart has not understood until the foot has moved. The point is, I believe, that there is a kind of reading, a kind of study, which is more like coaching the heart than it is memorizing the facts of a textbook.

You'll have to forgive me for doing this, but I want to read to you a passage from an exceptionally grumpy professor from the University of Chicago—now dead—who raised concerns in the 1980's that this mode of heart-reading was beginning to disappear: "[O]ur students have lost the practice of and the taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading… When I first noticed the decline in reading during the late sixties, I began asking my large introductory classes, and any other group of younger students to which I spoke, what books really count for them. Most are silent, puzzled by the question. The notion of books as companions is foreign to them. Justice Black with his tattered copy of the Constitution in his pocket at all times is not an example of what would mean much to them. There is no printed word to which they look for counsel, inspiration of joy." Bloom, then, continues, suggesting that these reading habits have left our imaginations unfurnished with examples of heroism, or even with a real concrete sense for evil. Bloom says: "Having heard over a period of years the same kind of responses to my question about favorite books, I began to ask students who their heroes are. Again, there is usually silence, and most frequently nothing follows." And finally, Bloom adds: "Following on what I learned from this second question, I

began asking a third: Who do you think is evil? To this one there is an immediate response: Hitler. (Stalin is hardly mentioned.) After him, who else?... And there it stops. They have no idea of evil; they doubt its existence. Hitler is just another abstraction, an item to fill up an empty category… Thus, the most common student view lacks an awareness of the depths as well as the heights, and hence lacks gravity."

If Bloom is right, then we are in a situation in which it will be difficult for most of us to find that strength to stand tall, to stand against the currents of the Promethean paradigm, because we lack exempla—literary and historical—of people who did; or, even if we know vaguely about Rosa Parks, Martin Luthers, Thomas Mores, or Boethiuses, we don't know enough about them so that their situations, their difficulties, their flaws, their failures, will actually help us respond well in moments of challenge. Thus, we haven't read affectively yet; that is, reading to the point of desiring to imitate their courage or feeling the texture of their situation. But the humanities, of course, aim to do this very thing: to understand these actions well and thoroughly, in all the nuance and complication which we can bring to these questions.

My third point about the humanities is that it can potentially cultivate the ability to let things stand as beautiful even apart from their profitability. This is a rather abstract way of putting it. Let me try to explain. Within the Promethean paradigm, there is a constant interest, of course, in trends of consumption: how many people purchased an iPhone this quarter? Are younger people more likely to vote for Bernie Sanders? Is the organic food industry trending up? Perhaps these kinds of questions are appropriate in some situations. But what if these kinds of questions began to dominate? What if it became difficult for me not to think of other human beings as anything but consumers—that is, what if I got in the habit of mentally limiting them to potential markets? Understanding human beings in terms of their consumption habits? In this instance, if I am a leader—in business, industry, or politics—I will begin to instrumentalize human beings: knowing how they tend to behave, I can capitalize on that behavior for my personal interests.

Literature and poetry in particular, I believe, have a particular power to shatter the enchantment of instrumentalization. By allowing human beings and cultures and even places to emerge for me in my consciousness as concrete

## WCC FAQ

**How should a high school student prepare for the academic rigors of WCC?**
Generally, WCC expects an incoming freshman to have had a standard curriculum of college preparatory studies, including literature, grammar, American and European history, natural sciences (introductory biology and chemistry), catechesis in faith and morals, two years of a foreign language, and mathematics up to algebra 2/trigonometry. Calculus and physics are also very helpful. Students should know how to write well, as excellent writing is of inestimable value a liberally-educated man or woman, and seems often neglected in high school curricula. Finally, time management skills are critical, since the (often new-found) freedom of college life can be deleterious to a rigorous and demanding curriculum that is designed to stretch every part of the human person. Again, the Admissions Committee looks carefully at each applicant's background to gain reasonable assurance of their potential for success at WCC.

places, I begin to admire them, to be glad that they exist as they exist, and, in fact, to desire less that they conform themselves to my will. In short, I begin to take delight in their beauty apart from any profit or utility they may bring me. One of my favorite examples of how humanities can do this comes from a relatively recent book, *The Solace of Open Spaces,* by Gretel Ehrlich. In a time of personal crisis and confusion, Ehrlich left her urban life and moved to Wyoming in the late 70's, living as a ranchhand in what are still fabulously remote and silent spaces.

She writes about how she "lost (at least for a while) my appetite for the life I had left: city surroundings, old friends, familiar comforts. It had occurred to me that comfort was only a disguise for discomfort; reference points, a disguise for what will always change" (ix). She continues: "Friends asked when I was going to stop 'hiding out' in Wyoming. What appeared to them as a landscape of lunar desolation and intellectual backwardness was luxurious to me. For the first time I was able to take up residence on earth with no alibis, no self-promoting schemes" (ix). Wyoming, then, was a place of healing for her, despite its desolation. In the midst of its forbidding climate, Ehrlich began to love something which was free. Here, for example, is how she describes the brutal climate: "Winter lasts six months here. Prevailing winds spill snowdrifts to the east, and new storms from the northwest replenish them. This white bulk is sometimes dizzying, even nauseating to look at. At twenty, thirty, and forty degrees below zero, not only does your car not work, but neither do your mind and body.... During the winter, while I was riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle, and in the silence that such cold creates I felt like the first person on earth, or the last" (1–2). And this severely beautiful and open landscape gives birth to people who can match it: "People here still feel pride because they live in such a harsh place, part of the glamorous cowboy past, and they are determined not to be the victims of a mining-dominated future" (3).

Ehrlich goes on to describe the marriage of people and place: "Things happen suddenly in Wyoming, the change of seasons and weather; for people, the violent swings in and out of isolation. But good-naturedness is concomitant with severity. Friendliness is a tradition. Strangers passing on the road wave hello. A common sight is two pickups stopped side by side far out on a range, on a dirt track winding through the sage. The drivers will share a cigarette, uncap their thermos bottles, and pass a battered cup, steaming with coffee, between windows" (5). Ehrlich is particularly fascinated by the granite silence of the people: "The solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet. They telegraph thoughts and feelings by the way they tilt their heads and listen; pulling their Stetsons into a steep dive over their eyes...Sentence structure is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought. Descriptive words are dropped, even verbs; a cowboy looking over a corral full of horses will say to a wrangler, "Which one needs rode?"... What's behind his laconic style is shyness. There is no vocabulary for the subject of feelings... I've spent hours riding to sheep camp at dawn in a pickup when nothing was said; eaten meals in the cookhouse when the only words spoken were a mumbled, 'thank you, ma'am" at the end of dinner. The silence is profound" (7).

I would love to quote the whole book to you, but I hope my selections have at least conveyed what the humanist can do: she can fill us with a kind of reverent admiration for a place in its particularity, and fill us with a delight that such a thing exists, untouched, unowned by us. It can help us open our grasping hands and let beauty be, whether or not it is possessed by me. In fact, every now and then, the reader can feel that he is possessed by it: that is, my belongings or my surroundings have a kind of claim on me, even if I have claim on them by legal ownership. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the great 19th century, Jesuit poet, who in an age of Victorian primness somehow wrote experimental verse, wrote a dazzling poem about a string of trees which lined a walk to a small village outside of Oxford. The poem is entitled, "Binsey Poplars," *felled 1879*:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandalled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank.
O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew —
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselve
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene.

One of the reasons I love this poem by Hopkins is that he seems sensitive to the fact that we perhaps misunderstand our relationship to things if we think only in terms of possessing them. What is mine can be undone by me, because I own it. Hopkins rather suggests that we need to imagine what kind of obligation the landscape, the people, the thing exerts on us.

One of the delightful surprises for me which came in writing this talk was that my speech fell into a pattern which I had not intended to use. That is, when I sat down, over the course of several months, to think about what I would say,

what arguments I would use to think about the value of the liberal arts within a technological age, I developed each of the pieces mentioned above in piecemeal fashion: that is, around my bedside table, on the dresser, and especially on and under my messy academic desk you would find dozens of sticky notes and legal pad pages in which I tried to develop any one of these arguments.

But what is interesting, is that, though I have tried to use updated language the four powers I have mentioned—the ability to develop new tools and ways to promote human flourishing; the ability to stand tall and against the current; the power to let things stand as beautiful apart from what profit they may bring me—are ways of restating the cardinal virtues of antiquity and the middle ages: prudence, the ability to make the good incarnate in this particular way and in this particular time; courage, the ability to remain committed to the good despite personal harm; justice, giving to each person (and perhaps place) what it is owed; and temperance, the restraint of my own actions if I suspect that they might cause more harm than help. Thus, I found it appropriate that even as I was endeavoring to come up with fresh and exciting ideas to suggest why the humanities might possibly have something worth communicating to our culture, I inadvertently slipped into old patterns. And this actually might be the most powerful argument of all.

The final element, though, pushing back the horizons of how we imagine human life is simply what the ancients, such as Plato, would have called *philosophy*: the ability to take into account the complexity of my experience and the earnest attempt to discover if there is any meaningful pattern which can explain all of those experiences, and tell me how I should live, even if others tell me to ignore part of what I know. Thus, philosophy, as the ancients understood it, involved all four of the other cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, courage, and justice.

I will conclude by saying two things: ultimately, even the success of the Promethean paradigm is dependent on bold, honest, thoughtful, well-meaning, creative people who direct the trends, order teams to look at developing new tools, and think critically about existing processes. And so, even as we continue to call for education in STEM and business, we should also be very cautious about thinking the humanities are irrelevant. If we are not careful, then we might end up creating a world in which we become the tools of our tools, creating a world which does not promote human flourishing.

My second concluding point is that we should be careful to keep the humanities around because they might just ask questions which are still important, but are impossible to be asked within the Promethean paradigm. T.S. Eliot, I think, has put this very beautifully in the opening movement of his "Dry Salvages," which is the third of his *Four Quartets*:

> I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
> Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,
> Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
> Useful, trustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;
> Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.

The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting (191).

Note that Eliot's point is that a mysterious power, a river, once worshipped and propitiated by ancient civilizations later becomes only the engineering problem for the STEM field. How do I cross it? How do I manipulate it? How do I own it? How do I silence it? For Eliot, of course, the river stands for something deeper than just the flowing body of water. Rather, it includes the conditions of life in which we find ourselves. We are made of water; water surrounds us by the oceans. For Eliot, then, the river and water represent our creaturehood, by which I mean the fact that we are made and belong to an order which in an interesting way comes before man and into which man is invited to find his place. Eliot, then, neatly sums up what I think is the foundational point of all five major world religions. For Jews and Muslims and Christians, law is very important. There are behaviors prescribed to him, and his opinion about these things is not requested, because he is a creature made for an order. In Hinduism and Buddhism there is a different emphasis, on awakening to the nature of illusion. That is, beneath the ordinary thoughts and desires of your life lies a truer and deeper reality to which you must ultimately conform. But in both Eastern and Western religions, whether the emphasis is on law or awakening from illusion, there is a recognition that there is a world and an order to which you, as a creature, must correspond.

Now, we can pretend that there is no such order, but according to Eliot and the major religions you can't just make up your own life, and you can't just do what it is you want to do. I think the humanities, like some old prophet from the desert, remind us of our creaturehood. The Promethean Paradigm, though, only tells us about our creative powers, and thus, at the very least, we should keep the humanities around as a kind of canary in the mineshaft, so that we don't forget what we have chosen to ignore.

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