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COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

# Ecosocial Autonomy as an Educational Ideal

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## Abstract

*Autonomy – or rational self-control – is not only fashionable as an educational ideal, but also in present-day economics, ethics, and society in general. However, the concept of traditional autonomy is problematic because it privileges humans and treats the rest of nature primarily as resources fit only for human exploitation. This anthropocentrism has led human beings to see themselves as superior to nature and separate. Ecosocial autonomy is an attempt to redress the balance, by contextualising autonomy so it incorporates the idea of self-control, while taking into account the impact of humankind on our surrounding ecosystems. Our formulation of ecosocial autonomy is an extension of relational autonomy – based mainly on ecological, ecosocial, and ecofeminist ideas. Ecosocial autonomy is thus contextualized within a multispecies society which includes our interdependencies with other living creatures. Whereas the individualist idea of autonomy suggests a human being owes nothing to society, ecosocial autonomy acknowledges the need to cultivate aspects of self-sufficiency that combine reason, emotional maturity, and will. A competitive society presupposes individual autonomy and the need to defend oneself. Ecosocial autonomy advocates a form of social interaction that diverts the human energy misspent on individual competition to mutually beneficial collaboration.*

*Keywords*: autonomy; ecofeminism; ecosocial education; education; environmental education; holobiont; individualism; multispecies society; philosophy of education; relational autonomy.

## 1. Introduction

Autonomy has become a key prerequisite for living in modern Western society. Education is successful when a pupil becomes a self-sufficient and responsible member of human society. Many fashionable educational

concepts such as "self-direction" are based on autonomy (Hand 2006), and the idea of moral independence via rationality gives further impetus to them. Autonomy also has an essential role in moral philosophy, economics, political philosophy, and rational choice theory (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 4-5); ideas of freedom, dignity, individuality, responsibility, critical thinking, privacy, volition, self-regulation, and free choice are some examples (O'Neill 2003, 2; Rosich 2019).

According to Rosich (2019, 6), the history of modernity unfolded with the threat of becoming an imperial or colonial subject – creating the need for aspiring autonomy. In other words, autonomy is related to avoiding domination and violence (Rosich 2019), which is mirrored in our relation to nature also (Bai 1998). Autonomy, based on reason alone, has also drawn a lot of criticism. Feminists argue it lacks sensuous or affective dimensions and so advocate a relational form of autonomy instead (Bai 1998; Friedman 2000b). "Autonomy can be understood as the fact of being absolutely independent" (Rosich 2019, 23).

Our central thesis is that an ecosocial understanding of autonomy is needed to steer education in an ecologically viable direction. *Ecosocial autonomy* extends the relational understanding of autonomy to accommodate the more-than-human world (Abram 1997), i.e., humankind's relationship to other species. We examine the largely unrealistic *cultural ideals* of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and independence rather than engage in a highly detailed discussion in academic philosophy (such as Kant and others) (Friedman 2000a, 218).

We begin with examining how autonomy as a concept can be opened up to less aggressive and more inclusive ways of thought. We then review feminist portrayals of relational autonomy, followed by our own interpretation of ecosocial thinking, and specifically how it has progressed in Finnish education. The result is our formulation of an ecosocial idea of autonomy. We then show that this formulation is an important way to reassess the relationship between humans and other species in the educational context. Finally, we briefly discuss the potential of ecosocial autonomy to steer education in a more sustainable direction.

## 2. Autonomy as an educational ideal and its flaws

The word autonomy comes from the Greek word *auto* that means self, and *nomos* meaning law. Greek city-states (*polis*) in Antiquity were autonomous when they enacted their own rules. Smaller villages were heteronomous, which means they obeyed the laws of another legal entity.

An autonomous person is thus someone who adheres to their own laws. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is famous for formulating the modern idea of autonomy in his publication from 1784 entitled *What Is Enlightenment*:

> Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude*! "Have courage to use your own reason!" – that is the motto of enlightenment. (Kant 1963, 3)

This quote describes both the individual development from animality to enlightened form of humanity as well as more general aspirations for social progress and emancipation from different forms of oppression. In the 1800s, emphasizing self-government was a revolutionary prospect in an era when the prevailing ethos was still one of obedience. The shift from obedience to self-enforced moral laws is an essential aspect of social and moral development (Friedman 2000b, 214). Freedom is another crucial concept Kant (and others) made central to modern education. Freedom was made important as the key element distinguishing autonomy from heteronomy – the previously mentioned state or condition of being ruled or governed by another entity. To access this freedom and release themselves from tutelage, a self-governing autonomous people would need to use their rational understanding (Kivelä 2002; Biesta 2009, 356-357).

In Kantian thinking, the human being is (1) a natural entity – their body (especially) is part of the natural world; and in (2) a realm of the spirit, the soul, and volition – free from the restrictions of the physical body through the use of reason (Berlin 1971). Referring to autonomy in the educational context therefore refers to people who use reason to overcome physical restrictions (Huhtala 2018, 67).

Human beings are seen as having an inherent value because of this rational ability. Other animals are seen as incapable of reason and thus they have only instrumental value. As a consequence, human beings are seen as autonomous, as entitled to use other living beings to satisfy their needs, and as the highest form of life on Earth (Huhtala 2018, 67).

So it is that from Kant one might easily adopt a *biophobic* attitude towards the harsh causal and deterministic laws of nature – seeing them not only as a threat to our freedom of will and spirit, but in many cases as something dangerous or even deadly and fit for human reason to overcome (Berlin 1971; Achterhuis 1993). Our digestion and blood circulation represent nature within us, for example, something which is not under our wilful control (Berlin 1971). In this respect, human nature has heteronomous and non-autonomous elements that affect us from the

inside. In Kantian thought, the realm of the spirit or soul is thus struggling against the human body as a natural entity governed by deterministic natural laws (Berlin 1971; Pulkkinen 2000, 12).

The history of autonomy did not start with Kant. In Ancient Greece, for instance, one meaning of the word autonomy (αὐτονομία) was "freedom" (Rosich 2019, 23), nonetheless, the Kantian definition of autonomy and moral education has remained popular. Kohlberg and Piaget, for example, see moral maturation as a gradual shift from heteronomy to autonomy (Bai 1998, 95), while critical pedagogy considers aspiring towards independent and autonomous reasoning to be a central educational goal. Autonomy in this educational context means (among other things) freeing oneself from depending on others, their moral precepts, and their opinions (Masschelein 2004). Social norms, general opinion, and uses of power are seen as obstacles to autonomy (Masschelein 2004; Biesta 2009, 356-357).

Supporters and critics alike of mainstream educational science (following Kohlberg and Piaget) usually agree that education should lead to autonomy. The result is that the aggressive power sometimes used to govern ourselves is left unexplored – with the rare exception by Bai (1998), Hand (2006), and a handful of others (e.g., Rosich 2019). Autonomy as a concept now has a life of its own, regardless of academic philosophy.

## 3. Individualism: freedom from (inter)dependence

One of the major problems of autonomy, according to feminist criticism, is excessive individualism (e.g., Friedman 2000a, 217; Friedman 2000b). Individualism can be defined as the belief that humans are independent, autonomous units, that pursuit of self-interest leads to the greatest good, and that competition is natural (this is different from individuality, which recognizes each person's unique attributes and contributions) (Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci 2015, 38, 52, 78). Individualism is also a mindset according to which many aspects of the natural world are not defined as an interdependent set of relationships among earthlings but rather as commodities to be harvested and used in pursuit of profit (Merchant 1990; Cronon 2003; Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci 2015, 40).

Individualist thinking that privileges the individual over society emerged from the seventeenth-century social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes (1985) among others (Locke 1995). Individualism is also related

to seventeenth-century atomistic thinking, where individual rights and the procurement of property rights became central in building the modern nation-state (Macpherson 1962; Taylor 1985; Locke 1995). Atomism refers to separate and independent subjects and places individual rights above all others. These individual atoms have been seen as the core ingredients upon which modern society was built (Taylor 1985).

We should not confuse moral autonomy and liberal individualism, however. In Kantian thought a person is only really free when they are *not* acting on the basis of their inclinations, desires, and hopes. Freedom lies rather in going through a critical reflection of those hopes and desires. A person is not free if it is their body, culture, or other people which are commanding them to act. Moral free will must be the result of rational critical reflection, not arbitrary desires, whims, or the wish to please (Pulkkinen 2000, 12). Even though Kant's thinking about freedom might not be liberal in a secular twenty-first-century sense, his views on autonomy might be considered individualist in the sense that they prioritize the perspective of the individual.

This epitome of the dry scientific thinker, Immanuel Kant took his ideas and assumption about the individual from his upbringing as a Christian pietist. In pietism, the individual chooses freely between right and wrong. Escaping perdition required that a person is constantly alert and using one's conscience to reflect with a sufficient degree of self-doubt to avoid sin. A knowledge of right and wrong is thus found in the conscience and learning to listen to it enables one to escape eternal damnation (Berlin 1971; Taylor 1989). Indeed, the Christian belief system of heaven and hell emphasizes the individual perspective of autonomy, which in turn relegates the importance of other social, cultural, linguistic, and historical ideas.

In contrast to this atomistic thinking, many indigenous cultures and societies see people as being more closely entangled within a multispecies society and circles of life and death (Abram 1997). However, western individualism is more concerned with possession; according to Macpherson's (1962) idea of possessive individualism, individuals are the sole owner of themselves. Freedom consists in being independent of the wills of other people, and relations of dependence are only "free" when a person voluntarily enters them with a view to their own interest. Other forms of dependence are seen as an unpleasantness to be avoided. The possessive individual is thus the proprietor of their own person and capacities, for which they owe nothing to society (Macpherson 1962, 263-264).

This form of self-interested ownership fails to see the individual as always interconnected with other people and nature. Another problem with possessive individualism is it fails to realize the *cultural* character

of the autonomous individual (Masschelein 2004). We can become free and autonomous moral actors only in relation to a culture that recognizes the value of independence and educates people to become autonomous (Anderson and Honneth 2005). Learning to value autonomy requires a certain kind of socialization and education that also fosters that autonomy (Taylor 1985; Anderson and Honneth 2005), besides the fact that human beings clearly owe many things to both the human and multispecies society they live in. Not only are we related to other living beings, but these relations also constitute who we are as individuals.

## 4. Relational autonomy

The idea of relational autonomy emerged as a countermove against an individualism where individuals owe nothing to society. Relational autonomy has gained popularity in feminism and other branches of thought, and it emphasizes relations: human beings become the individuals they turn out to be by virtue of being fundamentally interrelated rather than atomistic and separate. Relational theorists of autonomy also criticize Kant for too unilateral an emphasis on reason. According to Friedman, Kantian autonomy ignores the fundamental issues of care and our emotions (2000a, 212). Governing oneself through reason alone lacks emotional sensitivity and intelligence, making it difficult or impossible to develop genuine care for other people (Friedman 2000a, 213); and having a lack of consideration for others' wellbeing has led to many a historical (eco)disasters.

The ecofeminist concept of relational autonomy sees human creatures as creative, embodied, and social beings in constant relationships with other human beings (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 21). Relationality refers to being in various states of relationship and having a communal social life instead of constantly managing on our own, because human beings are above all social animals. Even the most self-sufficient people come into this world because of other people, and they live and study in buildings built by others and eat food grown by other human beings. Our bodies are constructed from water that is only briefly taking time out from the Earth's hydrological cycle, and we breathe the oxygen recycled by trees and plants. Human skin is not the absolute border we might like to think it is between ourselves and the environment, but skin cells constantly interact with their surroundings (Järvilehto 1994, 23-33; Pulkki 2021b). The mammal immune system works in symbiosis with numerous microbial organisms, and the list of human interdependence with other organisms is long and complex (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012). Thinking of humans

as autonomous and independent individuals (Rosich 2019, 23) who owe nothing to society, ignores the fact that there is already a complex "society" of micro-organisms interacting in a carefully calibrated way within us to create that "individual" (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012).

The central ecofeminist idea is that women and nature are both oppressed by the same dualistic logic of domination (Warren 1990). Both are cast in a simplistic negative light by using a series of dualisms to compare them unfavourably with *man*kind: reason-emotion, strong-weak, mind-body, active-passive, master-slave, civilized-uncivilized, and culture-nature. The first one in each pair is considered better and the latter inferior. Nature and women are seen as more emotional, weak, passive, and body-oriented; these prejudices have been further reinforced by building social structures based on them. Gaining equality in both the human and more-than-human worlds faces similar societal and political challenges. Many kinds of oppressive power relations such as racism and sexism are intertwined with other ways of mistreating living creatures. More importantly though, it could also apply in reverse: by learning to treat other people with more kindness and respect we might, according to Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci (2015), deconstruct the unnecessary dualisms which encourage toxic power relations to build instead a society that is less ecologically destructive.

One crucial starting point for the feminist criticism of traditional thinking about autonomy is its implicit masculinity. Gomes and Kanner (1995) consider the masculine ideal of autonomy as a kind of "radical autonomy", seen as heroic from the conventionally narrow perspective of a white Christian man with liberty, privileges, education, and a livelihood. The image of these kinds of autonomous individuals is that of the defiant warrior who would rather battle on alone without the help of others. When it comes to relational autonomy, feminist critics point to the failure of its proponents to properly acknowledge interconnectedness, insofar as it leads to a kind of parasitic behaviour where one individual benefits from another without considering the other's well-being (Gomes and Kanner 1995, 115).

The liberal individualistic concept of autonomy concentrates too much on self-regulation and not enough on how this may also affect others, whereas the relational version acknowledges we can only achieve real autonomy via relationships (Clement 1996, 24). While this is an important addition to the traditional version, relational autonomy nevertheless remains rather anthropocentric. In the next section, having glimpsed some of the possibilities in ecofeminism, we want to extend this further to the more-than-human world by looking first at ecosocial thinking.

## 5. Ecosocial thinking

Ecosocial thinking is an important addition to the idea of autonomy, and we use it to adjust the context of autonomy to include all of Earth's ecosystems and forms of life. Our take on ecosocial thought stems from Finland, where ecosocial *Bildung* became an established part of the comprehensive school curriculum in 2014 (OPS 2014). Ecosocial *Bildung* in Finland, according to Salonen and Bardy (2015; Åhlberg *et al.* 2015), requires that we do *not* start from a human-centred worldview where human beings are seen as separate from nature. Instead, we start from the ecological understanding that nature and humankind are intimately entwined (Salonen and Bardy 2015). Ecosocial *Bildung* is primarily concerned with cultivating a culture and lifestyle which cherishes, on the one hand, the inviolability of human dignity and diversity and on the other, regenerative ecosystems and sustainable resource know-how (OPS 2014, 16).

The hierarchy between ecological, social, and economic aspects of life is emphasized in ecosocial *Bildung* – in contrast to sustainable development, where the three aspects are considered equal. The most crucial of these is to provide functioning ecosystems that will also allow life to flourish in the future. The second most important thing is to support life while cherishing human rights, and the third is to maintain a steady economy which shares resources efficiently between different groups according to their needs (Åhlberg *et al.* 2015, 49). Salonen seems to use the idea of *Bildung* in a broad sense to signify the generally sociable behaviour of human beings, which includes taking care of those who are less well off than us. He uses a multidisciplinary approach and systems theory to understand how humans and ecosystems co-exist. Ecosocial *Bildung* is thus a process of harmonizing human selfhood and identity with human culture, economy, and the ecosystems we depend upon (Pulkki, Varpanen, and Mullen 2020).

Our examination of ecosocial thinking starts from the same point as ecofeminism and ecojustice education – extending social courtesy and care from human communities to the more-than-human communities (Pulkki 2021a). According to ecofeminism, the domination of people (especially women) and nature go hand in hand (Warren 1990). Social injustice and ecological injustice are intimately entwined (Harvester and Blenkinsop 2010; Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci 2015). The core of our ecofeminist take on ecosocial thinking is that solving ecological crises becomes possible only if we solve our social crises too.

The words "ecology" and "social" are combined in ecosocial thought precisely to emphasize an entwined multispecies sociality that includes

both the human and more-than-human world. Ecological understanding has two dimensions (Smith 2013): (1) any living entity should be viewed in terms of its numerous interrelations to other entities; and (2) some of these interrelations will always be between species. Part of ecological understanding is also acknowledging that everything connected with human sociality must be understood in this multispecies manner. As we become members of human society by socialization in human communities, we also become members of multispecies communities by interacting with many other kinds of organisms. Human socialization is therefore always, in part, ecosocialization (Keto and Foster 2021).

The term "ecosocial" is an umbrella term for many schools of thought in which interrelated social and ecological problems are being solved simultaneously (Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001, 30). Social work (Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001), social ecology, biosocial theory, ecojustice education, ecosocial epidemiology (Krieger 2001), and ecofeminism (Harvester and Blenkinsop 2010) are just a few examples that can fit under the general umbrella of ecosocial studies. The interrelations between humans and the more-than-human worlds are so complex, it is unlikely that any comprehensive ecosocial theory will emerge any time soon (Haila 2009). Even so, the general idea of combining ecological and social matters as a theoretical approach in education is clearly a fruitful and pertinent one in an age of ecocrisis (e.g., Pulkki 2021a). By education we mean everything we learn that changes the way we are and how we behave in formal and nonformal settings, regardless of it being intentional or unintentional education.

## 6. The autonomy of the human holobiont?

One way of questioning the all too anthropocentric idea of human autonomy is the holobiont theory, which is based on looking at the human organism itself in ecological terms (see Margulis 1998). According to the holobiont theory of human beings, we are not individuals in the traditional sense. We humans are not even one single species, but multispecies communities of many living beings (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012).

The word "holobiont" derives from the words *holos* and *biont*, meaning whole and unit of life. Therefore, a holobiont is an assemblage of both the host and other species living around it that together form an ecological unit. The human body contains more cells from other organisms than there are human cells in it (Savage 1977; Sender *et al.* 2016), and yet we are accustomed to thinking of other organisms in human

beings as disruptions and alien intruders to get rid of. There are different pathogens indeed, but mostly this microbiome is vital for the development and well-being of the whole (human) holobiont.

The holobiont known as human already gets its first microbes while it is forming in the womb (Aagaard *et al.* 2014). The birth is a vital time as we receive microbes from the mother's birth canal and guts (Funkhouser and Bordenstein 2013), as is the period right after birth when our microbiome grows through contact with the parents and drinking the mother's milk. Indeed, the formation of the microbiome continues throughout our lifetime and can show, for example, how much time we have spent in various environments (Hanski 1999).

The interrelatedness of human beings with the more-than-human world is therefore not just an ecological slogan. The holobiont theory shows that we are embedded in ecosocial communities from before birth in a very concrete way. Interaction with microbes plays a key role in our development and throughout life (Smith 2015), contributing to our psychological processes (Allen *et al.* 2017; Sarkar *et al.* 2018), physiological processes (Jones 2016), and our behaviour (Hsiao *et al.* 2013). In anatomical, genetic, and immunological terms, we are thus far from being autonomous, self-governing individuals in the traditional sense of the concept (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012). Ecosocial autonomy is an attempt to be more realistic about the extent of our dependence on other organisms both within and between ourselves and the multispecies community we live in.

## 7. Ecosocial autonomy

Ecosocial autonomy provides the grounds to expand upon the old autonomy-heteronomy dualism. Many Foucauldian studies have shown how power is much more complicated than a king coercing his subjects into obedience against their own will. Even human will is influenced by the social realities, cultures, and power relations of a particular place and time. We internalize different kinds of power with "technologies of the self", which shape our psychological makeup (Foucault 1988). Foucault does not speak of autonomy directly, but a significant line of his work aims to show the modern subject's particular historical qualities (Athanassiadis 2021). Power in Foucauldian terms is not only obstructive but constructive for our psyche. We internalize power-related ways of thinking, wanting, and feeling, and apply these in our own lives. Being an autonomous individual who uses their rational self-control is also learned.

The enormity of the issues enables only a generic and tentative definition of what ecosocial autonomy is or might be. Human interaction and power are complex, and including multispecies communities makes matters even more complex. We wish to remind the reader that ecosocial autonomy is about the possibility of learning a less individualistic, atomistic, and harsh kind of autonomy. It should convey a mode of thinking that problematizes the nature and scope of human control over the rest of nature. Ecosocial autonomy is, in this way, a form of self-control with awareness of one's impact on the surrounding environment and ecosystem. Ecosocial autonomy is contextualized within in a multispecies society which includes interdependencies with other living creatures.

Ecosocial autonomy is a form of relational autonomy, where the relations concern all living beings and their interactions within different ecosystems. A human being is thus relational in terms of both the living beings within their body (microbes) and those outside it. Ecosocial autonomy also stresses humility in thinking about what we can and should control and caution in exercising our power (Pulkki *et al.* 2020). As the holobiont theory proposes, the human psyche – including our will – is affected by our microbiome (Allen *et al.* 2017; Sarkar *et al.* 2018).

Thinking about rational self-control without taking into consideration other living beings is both obsolete and destructive. A very individualistic (and possessive) take on autonomy – where the individual owes nothing to society or the ecosystems we depend upon – will only perpetuate ecological problems (Pulkki 2021b). Ecosocial autonomy appreciates individuality and diversity – vital parts of any flourishing ecosystem. Instead of a self-serving individual form of autonomy, we need the educational ideal of autonomy within a multispecies society accompanied by an all-round aspiration to foster life. This does not necessarily mean sacrificing people's welfare but accommodating the welfare of other living creatures as well, which may in turn also improve our lives. Bai's (1998) description of autonomy as being in tune with one's surroundings is pertinent for ecosocial autonomy too.

## 8. End remarks

The climate crisis is an example that shows how difficult it is for us to control ourselves and our surroundings with reason alone. Nevertheless, the illusion of control persists and allows us to think there is little need to worry about the ecocrisis. Ecosocial autonomy suggests we relinquish the existing attitude we have towards nature both within and outside

ourselves – feeling an excessive need to control and manipulate it at every turn – and instead balance this with being more attuned (Bai 1998) to the multispecies society we are part of. Ecosocial autonomy is *not* saying that rational self-control should be discarded – it is rather expanding the concept of autonomy to include multispecies ecosocial communities so that we can take responsibility for our action in these surroundings as well. In short, we need broader self-understanding and self-awareness that include the multispecies society and our impact on that (Pulkki 2020; 2021b).

Being out of control and causing ecosocial havoc stems partly from our narrow self-awareness and the accompanied inability to control our emotions and will. An individual can fight the consumerist urges that we are subjected to within a capitalist system. We could also channel the human energy we presently use to fight commercial manipulation by changing the social-economic structures and assumptions about human autonomy. We need ecosocial autonomy as a means of self-control for making shared grassroots decisions about common matters that concern our multispecies communities.

An ecosocial approach insists on educating people so that they form holistically responsible relationships with others – both humans and other species (see Åhlberg *et al.* 2015). This requires a transition from having an extractive, instrumental, and insensitive relationship with the rest of nature towards an empathic and engaged one. In this transition, we argue that ecosocial autonomy has an important role to play – as a more realistic formulation and understanding of autonomy in education.

Ecosocial education is a new and emerging pedagogical orientation (Keto *et al.* 2022), and novel concepts such as ecosocial autonomy are needed for thinking about what this could mean for teaching practice. Even though more practical teaching guidelines must wait, two ways in which education for ecosocial autonomy might be implemented are via art education (in particular) and greater interaction with the multispecies world (in general). Ecosocial autonomy is just one ingredient in a pool of ideas that include also educating for ecosocial virtues (Pulkki 2021a), humility (Pulkki *et al.* 2020), ecosocialization (Keto and Foster 2021), and eco-individuation (Pulkki 2021b). Eco-individuation can also be extended to include the deep psychological and spiritual issues accompanied by ecosocial thinking (Pulkki 2020). We welcome other scholars to join our efforts to create a pedagogy for ecosocial education.

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