Monism of Śańkara and Spinoza – a Comparative Study

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Abstract: This paper tries to study philosophical standpoints of Śańkara and Spinoza in comparative manner. Though these two philosophers are from totally different cultures, their philosophical method has certain similarities.

Keywords: Spinoza, Śaṅkara, Monism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Śańkara's (788-820 CE) philosophy is known as *Kevalādvaita* system of philosophy. Baruch Spinoza (1632 –1677 CE) was Jewish-Dutch philosopher who propounded Absolute Monism. Eastern and Western civilizations are different but they have tackled the same philosophical problems and in solving them, their method and assumptions were strikingly similar. Same is the case with Śańkara and Spinoza as they come under one roof of Absolute Monism. Though there are some differences peculiar to their philosophies, some similarities should be noticed when we think about universal spirituality and global harmony.

2. ABSOLUTE MONISM

2.1 Kevalādvaita of Śaṅkara:

Śańkara's philosophy can be given in nutshell as – 'Brahma satyam jagat mithyā'. Brahman is the sole reality for him. Diverse things exist on $vy\bar{a}vah\bar{a}rika$ level but their validity is negated on $p\bar{a}ram\bar{a}rthika$ level. Diversity is regarded as the creation of $m\bar{a}y\bar{a}$ or ignorance. Reality of many things is overruled on the basis of $vivartav\bar{a}da^1$ and only one thing is accepted to be real i.e. *Brahman*. Therefore, his philosophy is known as Kevalādvaita.

2.2. Spinoza's Substance Monism:

Spinoza has clearly defined Substance as -'that which is in itself and conceived through itself; in other words, that, the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed.'¹

Therefore, substance can be only one.² If there were two substances, they would limit each other and cease to be independent, i.e. they would cease to be substances. Hence there can be only one substance, which depends on nothing, and on which everything depends. He clearly says that –except God, no substance can be conceived.³ If there were any substance except God, it would have to be explained through some attribute of God, and so two substances of the same attribute would exist, which is absurd. According to Spinoza, God only correctly fits into the definition of substance.

¹ Vivartavāda is to consider cause doesn't undergo any changes even after effect is produced. Atattvatah anyathābhāva is vivarta as explained in Vedāntasāra. Experiencing snake in the place of rope is not real transformation (Pariņāma) but Vivarta.

3. ULTIMATE REALITY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ŚANKARA AND SPINOZA

Brahman is the ultimate reality in Śańkara's system of philosophy. Nature of *Brahman* is explained by Śańkara in *Brahmasūtraśańkarabhāşya* (*B.S.S.*) as *athāto brahmajijñāsā*.⁴ *Brahman* by nature is eternal, pure, intelligent, omniscient and omnipotent. The word *Brahman* is derived from the root *Brimh* which denotes all these meanings.⁵ Spinoza's Substance i.e. God coincides with Śańkara's Absolute *Brahman*. Some common threads can be discussed as below:

3.1. Indeterminate Reality:

Highest reality for Śańkara is indeterminate i.e. *nirguņa. Brahman* is beyond the qualities, words and form. It is described as neither subtle nor gross, neither short nor long, without birth or change, without form, attributes, colour and name.⁶ *Śruti* statements like *'Satyam jñānam anantam Brahma'* are accepted to denote the *svarupa lakṣaṇa* (the very nature) of *Brahman*. Śańkara's viewpoint is explained by Rāmānuja in *mahāpūrvapakṣa* of *Śrībhāṣya* I.i.1. The word *satya* means *satyetaravyāvṛti* i.e. non-existent things are excluded from the definition of *Brahman* due to the use of the word *satya*. The word *jñāna* excludes things which are dependent on others for the illumination. The word *'ananta'* excludes those things which are limited by space, time and material.⁷ Śańkara while commenting upon *Taitirīya Upaniṣad* II.1.i states that words used to define *Brahman* actually function to differentiate *Brahman* from other entities that posses opposite qualities.⁸ *Brahman* is also defined as *saccidānandam*.⁹ Here also existence, consciousness and bliss are not the qualities of *Brahman* but essence of the same.

God is having infinite attributes according to Spinoza but these attributes are equal to the essence of God^{10} which is exactly similar to that of Śańkara's conception of Indeterminate *Brahman*.

3.2. Non-interference:

Interference of God in the fate of people is not admitted by Śańkara. He has proved this in the commentary over the aphorism- 'vaiṣamyanairghṛṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathāhi darśayati' (B.S.S. II.i.34). Everybody is influenced by his own desires, passions and previous karmans. Spinoza has also stated the same thing –'God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one.'¹¹ It means- there is no cause either extrinsic or intrinsic, which prompts God to action, except the perfection of his nature.

3.3. Omnipotence:

God's omnipotence has been 'actual' from eternity and will remain in the same actuality and eternity¹² this is the proposition of Spinoza. In the aphorism, *lokavattu līlā kaivalyam* | (*B.S.S.* II.i.33) Śańkara comments that though creation of the universe looks like a gigantic task, it is like a sport for God because God is possessed with unlimited power.¹³ Thus, Śańkara has proved the omnipotence of *Brahman*.

3.4. Indivisibility:

Ultimate reality is indivisible. It means- it is without parts or without limbs. Partlessness of *Brahman* is proved in the aphorism-*krtsnaprasaktirniravayatvaśabdakopo vā* | (*B.S.S.* II.i.26) on the basis of scriptural authority.¹⁴ If *Brahman* is considered as having parts then it will be non-eternal.¹⁵ All the differences which are seen in the *Brahman* are imagined by ignorance¹⁶ and are not real. Moon though perceived as many by a man having blurred vision doesn't become really so, similarly *Brahman* becomes subject to all kinds of transformations on account of ignorance. Since the differences like name and form originate from speech and thus partlessness of *Brahman* is not violated.¹⁷ *Brahman* is beyond all kinds of transformations. It is clearly stated by Śańkara that scriptural statements are not talking about real transformation. They establish that all this is in essence one with *Brahman* that is beyond all phenomenal process.¹⁸ Here the pantheistic outlook of Śańkara is seen as he has clearly propounded the unity between *Brahman* and the world having many differences.

3.5. Eternality and infinity:

Spinoza's God is eternal; all God's attributes are eternal.¹⁹ Substance is infinite.²⁰ If it were finite, it would be limited by other substances, and consequently depend on them. Spinoza defines God as -'Being absolutely and substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.'²¹ *Brahman* is also called as *nitya* (eternal) and *ananta* (infinite) because It's partelessness automatically gets concluded in its infinity.

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3.6. Immutability:

God's immutability is proved in the proposition by Spinoza as 'God's existence and his essence are one and the same.'²² God or all God's attributes are immutable. If they changed as to their existence, they would also change to their essence, which is absurd. Immutability of the *Brahman* is stated by saying that *Brahman* is described as $k\bar{u}tastha nitya$.

3.7. Perfection:

Spinoza's God is without passions and is not affected with any affect of joy or sadness.²³ God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love i.e. the nature of God enjoys infinite perfection.²⁴ This concept coincides with $\bar{a}ptakamatva$ and *nisprhatva* of *Brahman*.

3.8. Self-caused Reality:

In the *sūtra*, *janmādyasya yata* $h \mid (B.S.S. I.i.2)$ Śańkara has proved that *Brahman* is the cause of the diverse universe. Again in *Śāstrayonitvāt* | (B.S.S. I.i.3), it is pointed out that even the scriptures have originated from *Brahman*.²⁵

In *Upasamhāradarśanānneti cenna ksīravaddhi* | (*B.S.S.* II.i.24), Śańkara has cited illustrations of milk and water. Just as milk or water gets transformed into curd or ice without any external cause similarly *Brahman* without any external cause creates the world.²⁶ *Brahman* is not the *parīņāmī upādāna* but *vivarta upādāna* of the world which gets proved in the aphorism - *ātmani caiva vicitrāśca hi* (B.S.S. II.i.28). Just as magician creates the elephant, horse etc similarly *Brahman* creates diverse world which is illusory. Here he has resorted to *vivartavāda*. Creation is the same thing like a magic shown by magician.²⁷ Creation is mere illusion, it doesn't exist in reality. It is the *Ajātivāda* propounded by Gaudapāda wherein it is stated that nothing is born in reality.²⁸

From the Spinoza's definition of Substance, it is followed that Substance is its own cause; it pertains to the nature of substance to exist.²⁹ It doesn't depend on any other thing. This definition is clear enough to prove that Substance exists without any cause and is without beginning. This is nothing but the acceptance of the theory of non-origination i.e. *ajātivāada* propounded by Gaudapada and accepted by Śańkara. Śańkara says in the introduction of the commentary over *Taitirīya Upanişad* - 'What is eternal cannot have a beginning, and whatever has beginning is not eternal.'³⁰

Spinoza proves that God is the efficient cause of all things by the proposition-'from the necessity of divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes.³¹ Spinoza's God is the immanent cause and not the transitive cause of all things.³² This matches with the illustration of spider and cob web cited by Śańkara in the *sūtra devādivadapi loke (B.S.S.* II.i.25) to prove that *Brahman* is the efficient as well as the material cause of the universe. Spider oozes the cob web from own body, louts creeper goes to different lake without any external vehicle similarly *Brahman* creates the world.³³ Just as the water is the material cause of the universe.³⁴ Though not clearly stated, Spinoza's view about the theory of causation is quite similar to that of *Vivartavāda*.

4. VISION OF UNITY

Unity is established by Śańkara on the basis of Monism. He established the unity of $J\bar{v}a$ and *Brahman*. *Jagat* is just the appearance of *Brahman*. Therefore, various things are nothing but the manifestations of *Brahman* due to ignorance. Ignorance is the root cause of the diversity seen in the universe. The whole world is filled with $\bar{A}tman$ inside and out. It means all the contents of the universe are spiritual in their character.³⁵

Spinoza has established the Unity of God and universe by saying that whatever is in God, and nothing can be conceived without God.³⁶ Except God, there is nothing which is conceived through itself. But modes cannot be conceived without substance. So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone. Therefore, everything is in God and nothing can be conceived without God.

Unity is also established by the proposition –'Each idea of each body, or of each singular thing which actually exists, necessarily involves an eternal and infinite essence of God.'³⁷ Singular things cannot be conceived without God. This standpoint of unity also enters into Pantheistic monism.

Pantheism is the belief that everything composes an all-encompassing, immanent God³⁸, or that the universe (or nature) is identical with divinity.³⁹ Pantheists do not believe in a personal or anthropomorphic god. Pantheistic monism identifies God with the universe and all that is in it i.e. all is one, one is all, all is God. Spinoza is described as a 'God-intoxicated man,' and used the word God to describe the unity of all substance.⁴⁰ Spinoza has accepted the reality of one Substance.

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He specifies that Substance only can be real and it is only one i.e. God. God includes everything and therefore nothing exists without God. Difference existing in this world is admitted in the sphere of mode. Śańkara has given clear indications of the unity of *Brahman* and the world.⁴¹

Both the philosophers had the vision of unity. Neither Śańkara's *Brahman* nor Spinoza's God is exclusive of everything but it is inclusive of everything.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

Spinoza has used geometrical method to reach towards the substance and ultimately to prove Absolute Monism. Spinoza assumes whole world as the geometrical theorem. He has given certain set of definitions, axioms, propositions which automatically takes us to the definite conclusions. E. M. Curley has pointed out that – 'No philosopher should be easier to understand than Spinoza, for none has taken so much trouble to explain himself, defining his key terms, listing his basic assumptions, and arguing carefully for each conclusion her draws for these assumptions.'⁴²

Famous illustration used in *Kevalādvaita Vedānta* is that of *ghatākāśa* (space in the pot) and *mahadākāśa* (space which is not limited by any shackles). This illustration is cited by Gaudapāda⁴³ and adopted by Śaṅkara many times in his commentary over *Brahmasūtras*. There is no soul under bondage which is different from God. Still just like the association with such conditioning factors as pots, jars, caves of the mountains etc. it is assumed that God has association with such limiting adjuncts as body etc. Ignorance is the root cause of all such discriminations.⁴⁴

This illustration is purely geometrical in nature because geometry is the science of space. Triangle, circle etc shapes are formed with the division of space but ultimately space is one. Just as space is the sole reality in geometry though there are seen square, circle etc modifications of it. Infinite space can be reached by removing all the figures, lines and planes. This standpoint of Spinoza comes very closer to the *vivartavāda* of Śańkara.

6. APPEARANCE OR ILLUSION

Śańkara has used the concept of $m\bar{a}ya$ to attain the coherence between unchanging *Brahman* and ever changing dynamic world. All changes seen in the world are justified on the basis of $m\bar{a}ya$. $\bar{A}varana$ (concealing) and *viksepa* (projecting) are two powers of $m\bar{a}ya$ by which truth is covered and different objects are seen instead of real thing. According to Śańkara, when this ignorance vanishes, knowledge of a sole reality dawns immediately.

Spinoza has explained the concept of appearance on the basis of attributes and modes. Particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God, that is, modes wherein the attributes of God find expression in a definite and determinate way.⁴⁵ A. Wolf opines while dealing with the relation of substance with the attributes- 'attributes are not regarded as the real, objective characters of Substance, but only as our subjective ways of conceiving it'.⁴⁶

7. PHILOSOPHICAL GOAL

Śańkara's philosophy is experiential and spiritual rather than mere theoretical discussion. As it is said by Eliot D. – 'Advaita Vedānta is a religion as much as it is a technical philosophy; it is a way of spiritual realization as well as a system of thought.'⁴⁷ Aim of Śańkara's philosophy is *mokşa* i.e. liberation which comes out of knowledge. Brahman cannot be known by any other pramāṇa.⁴⁸ Brahmasakṣātkāra (realization of Ultimate Reality Brahman) or mokṣa is the real goal which is obtained when ignorance which is the root cause of saṁsāra is eradicated.⁴⁹ In Ātmabodha, it is said that knowledge is the direct means of Liberation just as the fire is the direct cause of cooking.⁵⁰

Spinoza's philosophy also has the concept of human bondage and freedom. His philosophy is the practical and spiritual in the sense that it has some practical and definite goal. Knowledge of God is the mind's greatest good; its greatest virtue is to know God.⁵¹ By this proposition, Spinoza has given an ample scope for the knowledge of the Highest and it is regarded as the greatest virtue.

The greatest striving of the mind and its greatest virtue is understanding things by the third kind of knowledge.⁵² The third kind of knowledge i.e. knowing the essence of a thing proceeds from an adequate idea of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge. If the essence of things and the more we understand things in this way, more we understand God. He who knows things by this kind of knowledge passes to the greatest human perfection, and consequently is affected with the greatest joy, accompanied by the idea of himself and his virtue. Therefore, greatest satisfaction which there can be

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arises from this kind of knowledge.⁵³ This third kind of knowledge depends on mind as the mind is eternal.⁵⁴ Mind is eternal and capable of knowing all those things which can follow from the third kind of knowledge. It proves that Spinoza is opposed to the agnosticism like Śańkara.

The more each of us is able to achieve this kind of knowledge, the more he is conscious of himself and of God, that is, more the perfect and blessed he is.⁵⁵ Concept of salvation is also stated by Spinoza and given the concept of ultimate bliss which should be the goal of human being. He clearly states - 'Whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge we take pleasure in, and our pleasure is accompanied by the idea of God as a cause.' From this third kind of knowledge arises the greatest satisfaction of mind, this joy is accompanied by the idea of oneself and consequently it is also accompanied by the idea of God, as its cause.⁵⁶ This is similar with the realization of self i.e. *ātmānubhūti* and God realization which is equivalent to *mokşa*. For Śańkara, *mokşa* is not something to be obtained, but it is to be realized.⁵⁷

Observations:

- 1. Śańkara and Spinoza both maintain 'Absolute monism' in their philosophical standpoints. Both lean towards pantheistic attitude as they have identified everything with ultimate reality. This outlook of unity is favourable for attaining unity.
- 2. Spinoza's substance is similar to Śańkara's Indeterminate *Brahman*. All the attributes belonging to this ultimate reality are regarded as the essence of the same. Śańkara has assumed indeterminate *Brahman* as the Highest Reality. Differences in the corporeal forms of God can be the reason of discord in spirituality. Idea of indeterminate reality has given a clear cut way to reconcile and subsume corporeal forms of Gods assumed by all the religions and philosophies.
- 3. Śańkara has used the device of *māya* to prove the multiplicity of world. Spinoza has used the device of 'modes' to solve the problem of one and many. Differences existing in various religions can be dissolved on the basis of this concept i.e. they are the manifestations of the same reality.
- 4. Both have adopted the logical method to prove their standpoints. For Śańkara, scriptural authority is of prime importance but he has given importance to *tarka* as well. Spinoza has proved everything on the basis of geometrical method. It means Universality is not just the matter of faith but can be proved on the basis of reason too.
- 5. Both the philosophers have given importance to knowledge as the means of ultimate goal which is pure bliss. Proper knowledge of Self and its unity with the ultimate reality and understanding that all are one with Ultimately real principle is the goal of philosophy.

To Sum up:

Though both these philosophers are of different temperament and from different geographical areas, they meet at on one point of 'Absolute Monism' and their method in reaching this is strikingly similar. Absolute Monism of Śańkara and Spinoza rule out the appearing differences and by saying that ultimate reality is the essence of everything propound equality as well as Universal Spirituality. Comparative study of religion and philosophy should be the part of education in order to create all inclusive universal spirituality. It not only gives us an idea about the existing similarities but also a new outlook that all religions and philosophies ponder upon the same ultimate reality only their languages, methods and standpoints different.

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¹ *Ethics* I. Def.3

² *Ibid* I, prop.11f

³ *Ethics* I. prop. 14

⁴ B.S.S. I.i.1

⁵ B.S.S. I.i.1

बृहतेर्धातोरर्थानुगमात् ।

⁶ Ātmabodha 60

अनण्वस्थूलमह्रस्वमदीर्घमजमव्ययम् । अरूपगूणवर्णाख्यं तद्ब्रह्मेत्यवधारयेत् ।

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⁷ Śrībhāsya I.i.1 तत्र 'सत्य'पदं विकारास्पदत्वेनासत्याद्वस्तनो व्यावत्तपरम । 'ज्ञान'पदं चान्यधीनप्रकाशाज्जडरूपाद्वस्तनो व्यावत्तपरम। 'अनन्त'पदं च देशत: कालतो वस्ततश्च परिच्छिन्नाद्व्यावत्तपरम । ⁸ TaiUp II.i.1 समानजातीयेभ्य एव निवर्तकानि विशेषणानि विशेष्यस्य । 9 Ibid 24 स्वभावः सच्चिदानन्दनित्यनिर्मलतामात्मनः । ¹⁰ *Ethics*, I., Def. 6. ¹¹ Ethics I. prop. 17 ¹² Ibid I. Prop 17, school 1 ¹³ B.S.S. II.i.33 यद्यप्यस्माकमियं जगद्विम्बरचना गरूतरसंरम्भेव भाति तथापि परमेश्वरस्य लीलैव केवलेयं. अपरिमितशक्तित्वात । ¹⁴ ŚveUp 6.19 निरवयवं त निष्क्रियं शान्तं निरवद्यं निरञ्जनम । ¹⁵ B.S.S. II.i.26 सावयवत्वे चानित्यप्रसङग: । ¹⁶ Ibid II.i.27 अविद्याकल्पितरूपभेदाभ्यपगमात । ¹⁷ Ibid II.i.27 वाचारम्भणमात्रत्वाच्चाविद्याकल्पितस्य नामरूपभेदस्येति न निरवयवत्वं ब्रह्मणः कृप्यति । ¹⁸ B. S. S. II.i.27 नचेयं परिणामश्रतिः परिणामप्रतिपादनार्था. तत्प्रतिपत्तौ फलानवगमात । सर्वव्यवहारहीनब्रह्यात्मभावप्रतिपादनार्था त्वेषा. तत्प्रतिफलावगमात । ¹⁹ Ethics I. prop. 19 ²⁰ *Ibid* I. prop.8 ²¹ *Ibid* I. def. 6 ²² *Ibid* I. prop. 20 ²³ Ibid V. prop. 17 ²⁴ *Ibid* V. prop. 35 ²⁵ B.S.S Li.3 महत ऋग्वेदादेः शास्त्रस्यानेकविद्यास्थानोपबंहितस्य प्रदीपवत्सर्वार्थावद्योतिनः सर्वज्ञकल्पस्य योनिः कारणं ब्रह्म। ²⁶ Ibid II.i.24 ²⁷*Ibid* II.1.28 आत्मनि चैवं विचित्राश्च हि । ²⁸ Gaudapādakārikā III.48 न कश्चिज्जायते जीव: संभवोऽस्य न विद्यते । ²⁹ Ethics I. prop.7 ³⁰ Ś on TaiUp न हि नित्यं केनचिद आरभ्यते. लोके यद आरब्धं तदनित्यम । ³¹ *Ibid* I. prop.16 ³² Ibid I. prop 18 ³³ B.S.S. II.i.25 तन्तनाभश्च स्वतः एव तन्तन्सुजति । पद्मिनी चानपेक्ष्य किंचित्प्रस्थानसाधनं सरोन्तरात्सरोन्तरं प्रतिष्ठते । एवं चेतनमपि ब्रह्मानपेक्ष्य बाह्यं साधनं स्वत एव जगत्स्रक्ष्यति । ³⁴ Ātmabodha 8 उपादानेऽखिलाधारे जगन्ति परमेश्वरे । सर्गस्थितिलयान्यान्ति बृदब्बुदानि वारिणि ॥ ³⁵ आत्मन: एव धर्मा:। Ś on *TaiUp* II.1 ³⁶ Ethics, I.prop. 15 ³⁷ *Ibid* II. Prop.45 ³⁸ Paul Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy ed*, Macmillan and Free Press, New York, 1967. p. 34 ³⁹ The New Oxford Dictionary Of English. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 1341 ⁴⁰ Plumptre, Constance, 3–5, 8, 29 ⁴¹ B. S. S. II.i.20

⁴² S. P. Kasyap, xiii ⁴³ Gaudapādakārikā II.4 घटादिष प्रलीनेषु घटाकाशादयो यथा । आकाशे संप्रलीयन्ते तद्वज्जीवेहात्मनि ॥ 44 B.S.S. I.i.5 नेश्वरादन्यः संसारी । तथापि देहादिसंघातोपाधिसंबन्ध इष्यत एव. घटकरकगिरिगहाद्यपाधिसंबन्ध इव व्योम्रः । ⁴⁵ Ethics I, Prop. 25, Corollary 46 A. Wolf, 17 ⁴⁷ E. Deutsch, 4 48 B.S.S. I.i.1 ज्ञानेन हि प्रमाणेनवगन्तुमिष्टं ब्रह्म। 49 B.S.S. I.i.2 ब्रह्मावगतिर्हि परुषार्थ: निःशेषसंसारबीजाविद्यानर्थनिबर्हणात । तस्मादब्रह्म जिज्ञासितव्यम । $50 \bar{A}$ tmabodha 2 बोधोऽन्यसाधनेभ्यो हि साक्षान्मोक्षैकसाधनम् । पाकस्य वह्निवत् ज्ञानं विना मोक्षो हि सिध्यति । 51 Ethics IV. Prop. 28 ⁵² Ethics IV. Prop. 25 ⁵³ Ibid IV. Prop. 27 54 Ibid IV. Prop. 31 ⁵⁵ Ibid IV. Prop. 31. Schol. ⁵⁶ Ibid IV. Prop.32, dem. ⁵⁷ B.S.S. I.i.4 न हि दध्यादि विकार्यं, उत्पाद्यं वा घटादि, नित्यं दृष्टं लोके, नापि संस्कार्यो मोक्ष: ।

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