

Traumatic Brain Injury as Phenomenological Death



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Abstract

The Heideggerian concept of phenomenological death is specifically relevant to a personal experience of traumatic brain injury and twenty-five-year survival. This paper argues that specific instances of traumatic brain injury (SITBI) provide insight to Heidegger's phenomenology of death in "Being and Time"¹. The discussion is based on pathology and from phenomena drawn from my first-hand experience of a SITBI. This paper highlights phenomena specific to this circumstance, however provides a basis for SITBI and wider applicability to traumatic brain injury. In addition to philosophical analysis, I insert sections of first-person experience, both in the text and as footnotes.

Introduction

This paper contains an explication of Martin Heidegger's Dasein Analytic, defined in his work, "Being and Time". Heidegger seeks to define that element of being fundamental to human existence; Dasein. Heidegger's Dasein Analytic provides examination of the concept of death, defining existential phenomenological death, and distinguishing it from mere demise.

Iain Thomson argues regarding Heidegger's "Being and Time", that "many readers seem to have trouble experiencing the phenomenon Heidegger describes as "death" for themselves. Without such a personal experience, however, readers can neither contest nor confirm Being and Time's phenomenology of death. This is a general problem for critical readers of phenomenological works. Absent our own experience of the phenomenon at issue, we can neither attest to (nor so confirm for ourselves) nor testify against (and so contest, refine, or seek to re describe) the phenomenon at issue." (Cambridge Companion to Being and Time) [1].

Heidegger refers to projects in terms of general and fundamental components of one's life [2]. For example, one's projects may include being a teacher; a husband; a dog owner; a father, etc. Heidegger refers not to specific projects, but rather that a being at its fundamental level, Dasein, has projects - is a projecting

This paper claims that personal experience-stemming from SITBI-yields the following phenomena:

- a. Complete collapse of life projects.

- b. Transformation to, in Thomson's terms, a projectless projecting.
- c. Cognitive and mental continuity-allowing the re-establishment of projects, and thus providing specific ability to witness and testify to the entire phenomenon.

These points support a claim that specific instantiations of traumatic brain injury (SITBI) provide particular insight to the mode of 'death' referred to by Heidegger in Being and Time, and provide a specific insight to the concept of authentic phenomenological death.

Personal Narrative-Two Phases

Phase one-radical disengagement

I am writing from personal experience, and thus first-hand testimony of a SITBI. This paper is based on the following general pathology-not focusing on it in detail, but rather focusing on the philosophical and phenomenological aspects of this case. The general pathology and historical background, however, provide illuminative background for this discussion.

My experience begins as a twenty-four-year-old healthy, athletic outdoorsman, recently married. I am a first-year law student at Pepperdine University. I live in Southern California, just having moved from my home state of Colorado. After experiencing a progression of strange neurological symptoms, and pursuing a series of simple and mildly successful medical treatment, new and more disruptive symptoms present. I undergo further, more serious diagnosis, yielding the discovery of a golf-ball-size benign tumor in the center of my brain. The

¹This provides an approach to a general problem for critical readers of phenomenological works, that absent one's own experience of the phenomenon at issue, one cannot testify regarding it. (Cambridge Companion to Being And Time (Hereafter CCBT) 261).

resulting treatment is immediate hospitalization, medication, and surgical removal. Perhaps consistent with “bedside manner,” I am assured of a surprisingly simple surgery, simple recovery, and quick resumption of my previous life. Important to the claims of this argument is that I fully believe this. I am then sedated and taken to surgery.

There are complications within the surgery, yielding a sudden and unexpected traumatic brain injury, marking a radical transformation in my life. It results in near death, a two-month coma, four-month hospitalization, extended rehabilitation, and permanent physical disability. This trauma is greatly exacerbated by its suddenness, abruptness, and my prior full belief regarding short recovery and resumption of previous life. Although suffering significant physical disability, I retain all cognitive and mental functionality, as well as psychological health. The cognitive ability of my law-school-self remains and has been present immediately following my regaining consciousness following surgery, and at all times since.^{2,3,4,5,6} Clearly, I am cognitively able to grasp my circumstances prior to surgery, and during recovery and rehabilitation.

Phase two-re-engagement

Upon physical survival, I resume life characterized by physical disability and retention of previous cognitive faculties. I enter a fifteen-year period of malaise (1992-2007), highlighted by my continued attempts and failures to reconnect with the world in which I live.⁷ I am cognitively, emotionally, and psychologically as I was prior to the traumatic brain injury, but am unable to connect to the world I live in.⁸

I suddenly become not the independent, autonomous, and intentional individual that I had been prior to my SITBI. Rather, I am functionally dependent, cared for, and substantially restrained by my situation. Life is transformed from that of an intentional basis to that of a reaction to every situation and a struggle for basic existence. It is from this basis that our only child is born. It is from this basis that I struggle to meaningfully re-connect with the world.

From this existentially reactive lifestyle, and after fifteen years, I attain a measure of stability that allows me to further

attempt meaningful re-connection with the world. Upon assessment of my desire, abilities, and interests, I determine that a career as an academic is adaptively possible and desirable. I earn an M.A. and begin a career in teaching. I become rather comfortable in the adaptive individualism that life as a disabled person has forced. Not only am I able to teach, but am also able to meaningfully research and write. It is this attempt at reconnection is one in which I find meaningful success.

Of particular interest here is the abrupt removal from all life projects (In the time it takes to experience surgical complications).⁹ I instantly became (in Thomson’s terms) a projectless projecting. I remember my wife, my father, and my law school colleagues wishing me well as I was taken to the operating room, all of us fully believing that life as it had been would quickly and easily resume. I endured surgical complications, and my being was radically transformed.

In order to properly analyze this situation, its meaning and effects, the work of Martin Heidegger is especially relevant. Heidegger, in “Being and Time”, provides a comprehensive treatment and examination of fundamental human being; Dasein. Heidegger provides an analytic of the concept of being which is particularly relevant to my personal experience of SITBI.

Heidegger-Dasein Analytic

Thrownness, Understanding

Heidegger defines a fundamental structure of Dasein in terms of care or worry (Sorge). (Some clarity may be found in the following reference from John Haugeland: We, as humans, give a shit - give a shit-ness is defined by Heidegger’s Dasein Analytic). This fundamental structure presents two moments: So-foundness (Befindlichkeit), and Understanding (Verstehen). Befindlichkeit and Verstehen are “running in the background’ of Dasein’s everyday activities and such [3]. Dasein is always already. For example, myself prior to SITBI (being) is determined by my so-foundedness- that is my roles, abilities, desires, and such-a facticity in which I find myself. Continuing this example, myself prior to SITBI (being) is also determined by my understanding- that is my roles, abilities, desires, and such as they relate directly to the possibilities that my life contains.

²Early in my recovery and immediately following a deep coma, my wife and father recognized me to have retained significant portions of the calculus and German language terms that I had learned in my previous education.

³Early in my recovery and immediately following a deep coma, my wife and an attendant were discussing an issue regarding history. Unable to speak but wanting to contribute to the matter, I spelled out “Conquistadors” on a rehabilitation spelling board. That was the proper answer to the issue, and a significant point in my recovery.

⁴In 1995, while undergoing rehabilitative treatment, my intelligence quotient was blindly measured, yielding a high measurement.

⁵I worked as an Internet web developer from 1998-2007, earning computer network certification and pursuing a career as a computer network specialist.

⁶I earned an M.A. in 2010, and am currently active in academics - particularly philosophy.

⁷Throughout my experience, I am unable to match my physical abilities to my cognitive status. This results in not being heard, and not being understood. This continues currently.

⁸1992-1998 resumption of adaptive physical functionality. In 1998, my only child is born. This is marked by continued failures at attempts to become a traditional parent and inability to relate to other parents in my world. It is important to realize the period of 1998-2006 in terms of continued failed attempts to develop a career involving computers/Internet. Of further significance is my adaptive development of a successful academic career.

⁹Unable to project myself into the projects that normally give my world meaning, I experience myself as a mere projecting” (CCBT 277).

In so-foundness (Befindlichkeit), Dasein finds itself always already in a factual situation - referring to the situation in which Dasein always finds itself. Understanding (Verstehen) refers to the fact that Dasein brings an understanding to its existence, expressing Dasein's comportment toward possibilities.¹⁰ Dasein has a past, which is relevant to its future possibilities. Heidegger's Dasein Analytic tells us that Befindlichkeit and Verstehen are acting in Dasein's everyday activities-unbeknownst to Dasein.

There is an important distinction to be mindful of throughout Heidegger's work. He refers to our tendency to view being in terms of specific objects rather than the more fundamental and general being of Dasein as the structural moment of fallenness (Verfallen)¹¹. Myself prior to SITBI is to be distinguished from my more general being - for example not in terms of specific skills, desires, proclivities, etc.¹² but rather in terms of generally and fundamentally having skills, desires, proclivities, etc. My being is not defined in terms of specific projects, but rather in terms of a projecting.

Befindlichkeit refers to the ground upon which Dasein always finds itself. Heidegger proposes a fundamental question regarding "How one finds oneself", arguing that "one always finds oneself". Within this existential moment of Befindlichkeit is the concept of Dasein's thrownness, of its facticity-"how it finds itself"^{13,14} Within Befindlichkeit, how Dasein finds itself, this argument focuses on this specific component of Befindlichkeit: Thrownness (Heidegger 173), arguing that SITBI lead to a 'Re-thrownness'. This analysis defines and provides some clarity regarding 're-thrownness that specifically occurs in SITBI'. After my being was established based on having been thrown into a certain world (pre-SITBI), I was forced to re-establish my being based on having been thrown into a world again in an abrupt and rather dramatic way (post SITBI). I was an individual whose Heideggarian thrownness led to an initial/ certain factual situation regarding my existence, but the abrupt and radical nature of my SITBI creates a 're-thrownness'. My always already-

ness changed significantly, in clear and definite response to my SITBI.¹⁵

Heidegger - Dasein Analytic

Mood-Anxiety

As a specific concept regarding how Dasein finds itself (Befindlichkeit), Heidegger points out the attunement of mood (Stimmung). A mood discloses "how we are" or "how we find ourselves", as it manifests a peculiar attunement to existence. Heidegger points to anxiety as a specific mood disclosed as the human being finds itself in a world that is meaningful and with which it is fascinated. The world is homely (Heimlich). In the Heideggarian mood of anxiety, all of this changes. The human being is thrust into a world to which it is unable to connect. There are many lives going on in the world which a human being is not a part of. In this unhomeliness (Unheimlichkeit), the human being is overtaken by the mood of anxiety that renders the world meaningless [3].

Redefinition of thrownness to re-thrownness' necessitates a transformation of the Heideggarian concept of anxiety to a 'radical anxiety'. It is clear that the abrupt change of my SITBI precipitated a "global collapse of my world's mattering". As a direct result of my SITBI and the way in which it happened, I suddenly and abruptly cannot connect with the world in the way I had grown accustomed to - a 'radical anxiety'. Key to understanding this 'radical anxiety' is the realization of the following: Although profoundly and clearly changed in physical status and ability to relate to the world, I maintain sufficient cognitive, mental, and psychological stability. This leads to a very poignant Heideggarian anxiety, as I faced the possibility of impossibility. (CCBT 269) According to Thomson, I faced a global collapse of my world's mattering. This is a 'radical anxiety', directly resulting from the 'rethrownness' caused by my SITBI.

In order to further support the argument of this paper (that a sufferer of a SITBI experiences authentic death, there must be

¹⁰This comportment of possibilities leads to a deeper structure of freedom in openness. (Critchley 2009).

¹¹Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being itself, and has fallen into the 'world'. Fallenness into the world means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, [seen in] is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. Through the interpretation of falling, what we have called the 'inauthenticity' of Dasein may now be defined more precisely. (Heidegger. Kindle. 6032).

¹²For example, I am a law-student, a husband, an outdoorsman, etc.

¹³Dasein finds itself already situated in a particular world that is arranged in a definite, concrete fashion and where particular things have already shown up as mattering. Heidegger refers to this as Dasein's "thrownness" (Geworfenheit): we are "thrown" into the world. We also find ourselves with characteristics that shape our engagement with the world. Unlike occurrent entities with their factual properties, our concrete characteristics are always encountered as bearing a meaning - I'm an embodied being, with a history, a family, and so on. These are fact-like constraints but still meaningfully taken up and constituted. To distinguish it from "brute facts," Heidegger calls human factuality our "facticity" (Faktizität) (135, 276). Our thrownness and facticity are disclosed to us through a particular way of being "attuned" to the world. Heidegger calls this our disposedness, and it involves the way we always find ourselves saddled with dispositions, aims, desires, skills, and particular ways of making sense of the world. Disposedness is to some extent always beyond our control, since it provides the background against which we exercise our abilities in order to shape our existence actively. (CCBT 14).

¹⁴The human being is not just a being defined by being thrown into the world. It is also one who can cast off that thrown condition in a movement where it takes hold of its possibilities. This movement is what Heidegger calls projection. (Critchley 2009).

¹⁵Note the clear distinction between my pre-SITBI-self and my post-SITBI self.

¹⁶"anxiety and death are in fact two facets of the same basic existential condition" (CCBT 324).

clear connection between anxiety and phenomenological death.^{16,17,18} This connection provides clear evidence that one is able to live through death if death is viewed phenomenologically, and not as mere demise. This becomes clear in Heidegger's Dasein Analytic, treatment of death, and characterization of anxiety as the possibility of no longer being able to "be-there" (Heidegger 250).

Heidegger - Death

Existential death defined

As this paper characterizes my narrative as an instance of phenomenological death, it is crucial to understand the concept of phenomenological existential death, and to distinguish it from mere demise. Iain Thomson characterizes demise in terms of "a global collapse of my world's mattering, in which, unable to project myself into the projects that normally give my world meaning, I experience myself as a mere projecting" (CCBT 277) However, Demise is a paradox-In that one cannot witness oneself as a projectless projecting if one does not live through it.¹⁹ Demise necessitates physical death, which precludes witness. To be distinguished from demise, Heidegger's phenomenological death is only possible if the subject lives through a cognitively/psychologically/mentally meaningful experience of becoming a projectless projecting. Heidegger requires the subject to live through death, bearing meaningful witness to the entire phenomenon^{4,20,21,28}.

My fifteen-year malaise of 1992-2007 provides a point from which I, the subject, experience being in terms of a projectless projecting - Then in my cognitive continuum am able to bear witness, in addition to re-establish life projects. Clearly, this provides a solid approach to Heidegger's phenomenological death. (CCBT 278) Sufferers/survivors of SITBI-of which I am one-die and live through it. My cognitive continuum is a means through which I am able to provide sufficient testimony in this regard.

Authenticity

As this argument claims that sufferers of SITBI die phenomenologically, this must be undergone in what Heidegger calls an authentic manner. According to Heidegger, phenomenological death is not a specific terminal event, but rather reveals the baseline within which we live our human lives. "Death in the authentic sense is a boundary. It is a limit that indicates the positive space in which to carry out authentic living." [5].²²

In further analysis of authenticity, Heidegger defines two specific components, anticipation and resoluteness.^{23,24} Recalling that Heidegger sees death as the horizon within which we live our human lives-anticipation is life within the within the horizon of death. One does not passively await death, but rather exercises mortality as the condition for free action in the world [6]. Heidegger characterizes this horizontal view as anticipatory running- forward (Vorlaufen), a life that clear-sightedly [and intentionally] carries out its projects, no matter what they may be (306) [7]. Heidegger defines the concept of resoluteness as the mode of disclosedness that attends authenticity. (CCBT 322)²⁵ At a fundamental ontological level, Dasein is in part defined by the norms under which it exists. This definition gives rise to the notion that Dasein is a responsible being, not in a specific sense, but rather exists within some framework of normativity.²⁶

The mode of resoluteness is seen in the expression that, for each of us, our being (what our lives will amount to overall) is always at issue.²⁷ This "being at issue" or "being in question for oneself" is made concrete in the specific stands we take-that is, in the roles we enact-over the course of our lives [7]. Death characterized in terms of "being at issue", or "being in question for oneself", is not a specific event, but rather is seen in terms of Critchley's "mortality as the condition for free action in the world." That our being is always at issue means that Death is always on the horizon of our being, not specifically immanent.

¹⁷ "In anxiety ... [t] he 'world' can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of others" (Heidegger 187).

¹⁸ To exist, according to Heidegger's formal conception of existence (53), is to understand oneself, but in anxiety, Dasein cannot understand itself, hence is unable to exist. And that is exactly how Heidegger characterizes death: "Its death is the possibility of no longer being able to be-there." (250) (CCBT 324).

¹⁹ Absent our own experience of the phenomenon at issue, we can neither attest to (and so confirm for ourselves) nor testify against (and so contest, refine, or seek to redescribe) the phenomenon at issue. (CCBT 261).

²⁰ Death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost, non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, and non-surpassable possibility". (Heidegger 258-9).

²¹ Death as the "possibility of the impossibility of existence in general" (Heidegger 262).

²² Death "limits and determines" (Heidegger 277).

²³ Running-forth is, Heidegger says, "the possibility of authentic existence." (263).

²⁴ "Thus only as running-forth does resoluteness become an originary being toward Dasein's ownmost ability-to-be". (Heidegger 306) Heidegger makes a distinction between anticipation (Vorlaufen) and expectation or awaiting (Erwarten). His claim is that the awaiting of death still contains too much of the actual, where death would be the actualisation of possibility. Such would be a gloomy philosophy of morbidity. (Critchley 2009).

²⁵ "Resoluteness" (Entschlossenheit) is Heidegger's name for such free decisions, by which we recognize that the self, as a (projectless) projecting, is more powerful than (that is, survives) death (the collapse of its projects), and so become capable of "choosing to choose," of making a lucid reconnection to the world of its existential projects. (CCBT 273).

My experiences prior to the onset of symptoms, in a conscious state of recovery from my SITBI, and currently as a member of society, have all been authentically lived (In a Heideggerian sense). Death has always been “the condition for [my] free action in the world.” I live a “life that clear-sightedly and [intentionally] carries out its projects, no matter what they may be.” This boundary is highlighted by a continuum of functional cognitive ability-in which I am able to meaningfully experience Thomson’s global collapse, become a projectless projecting, and then re-establish life projects. This is clearly seen in my pre-SITBI self, my fifteen-year malaise, and my post SITBI self. My recovery and rehabilitation reveal a set of boundaries within which I am to create a human existence. It is thus clear that my experience is not that of demise, but rather existential phenomenological death characterized by Heideggerian authenticity.

Conclusion

Recalling the argument of Thomson regarding Heidegger’s Being and Time; “many readers seem to have trouble experiencing the phenomenon Heidegger describes as “death” for themselves. Without such a personal experience, however, readers can neither contest nor confirm Being and Time’s phenomenology of death. This is a general problem for critical readers of phenomenological works. Absent our own experience of the phenomenon at issue, we can neither attest to (and so confirm for ourselves) nor testify against (and so contest, refine, or seek to re describe) the phenomenon at issue” (CCBT 261) [4].

This paper draws on my first-person testimony, leading to a conclusion that specific instantiation(s) of traumatic brain injury (SITBI) provide significant insight to the mode of ‘death’ referred to by Heidegger in Being and Time-specifically that SITBI provides particular insight to the concept of authentic phenomenological death. This conclusion is based on the Heideggerian analysis of Dasein, fundamental being. Heidegger’s Dasein Analytic analyzes the concept of phenomenological death, distinguishing it from demise. Demise is common to all-the “global collapse of my world’s mattering”, however is constrained by the paradox of not being able to fully approach this “global collapse” because this necessitates physical death. In phenomenological death it is necessary to fully witness this “global collapse”. One must bear witness to one’s existence as a “projectless projecting”. My experience in a SITBI provides this.

- a. Complete collapse of life projects.
- b. Transformation to, in Thomson’s terms, a projectless projecting.
- c. Cognitive and mental continuity allowing the re-establishment of one’s projects, thus providing specific ability to witness and testify to the phenomenon.

This argument focuses on Heidegger’s concept of “being-already-in-the-world (Befindlichkeit). Befindlichkeit is “running in the background’ of Dasein’s everyday activities and such. SITBI defines a concept of ‘re-thrownness’ within the existential moment of Befindlichkeit [8,9]. Heidegger also tells us that Dasein brings an understanding (Verstehen) to its existential situation. Dasein has a past, which is relevant to its future possibilities. This moment expresses Dasein’s comportment toward possibilities. In addition to Verstehen, Befindlichkeit refers to the concept there is a factual situation always surrounds that a human being. My experience clearly demonstrates two points:

- a. In life prior to my traumatic brain injury, I was thrown into a factual situation. This is my pre-SITBI-self.
- b. In life following my traumatic brain injury, I was re-thrown into an alternate way of physically being, but remained static cognitively, mentally, and psychologically. This is my post-SITBI-self.

Within Befindlichkeit, or how Dasein finds itself, is the concept that Dasein always brings an attunement, a “mood”, (Stimmung). In the Heideggerian mood of anxiety, the human being is thrust into a world to which it is unable to connect. Suddenly, the human being is overtaken by the mood of anxiety that renders the world meaningless. The world thus becomes unhomely (Unheimlich). The radical re-thrownness provided in my SITBI greatly magnifies the Heideggerian concept of anxiety to a ‘radical anxiety’. My sudden and dramatic ‘re-thrownness’ leads to a sudden catapult into a world in which I encounter extreme Heideggerian anxiety - inability to connect to my world. My cognitive continuum and fifteen-year period of malaise clearly show this inability to connect-a radical anxiety.

My SITBI clearly provides support for a conclusion of re-thrownness and a radical anxiety, but it supports a further conclusion that it provides an authentic phenomenological death-Death not as a specific event, but rather as a condition

²⁶Heidegger characterizes resoluteness as “wanting-to-have-a-conscience,” and conscience is a transcendental condition of the possibility of Dasein being responsible at all. It is Dasein’s responsiveness to norms in general. In resoluteness, then, Dasein clear-sightedly experiences that it is not subject to norms in the way that physical events are subject to scientific laws of nature. Rather, Dasein is a participant in a sphere of normativity. This insight frees Dasein from unquestioning subservience to anonymous, public rules and constraints, freeing it to take responsibility for who it is and how it lives. (CCBT 322).

²⁷Authenticity is a mode of existence, according to Heidegger, that is, a manner in which Dasein can lead its life. By this phrasing, I do not mean to suggest that self-ownership is a way of life or life-style as these phrases are commonly used. Ways of life (e.g., the modern American way of life or the traditional Crow way of life) and lifestyles (the Southern California lifestyle or the lifestyle of the suburban Bible Belt) are particular factual configurations of culture. They come and go through history, are culturally localized and limited, and serve therefore as concrete possibilities for Dasein. (CCBT 322).

under which we conduct our lives in the world. Heideggerian analysis provides a notion that in our human existence, what our lives will amount to overall is always at issue, thus providing illumination of authentic phenomenological death, highlighting the notion that one must live through the “global collapse of one’s mattering” to bear witness to the phenomenon.

The first component of Heideggerian authenticity, anticipatory running-forward (Vorlaufen), is the horizontal view of a life that clear-sightedly and intensely carries out its projects, no matter what they may be. (Heidegger 306) Resoluteness, the second component of Heideggerian authenticity, is seen in the expression that, for each of us, our being (what our lives will amount to overall) is always at issue.²⁸ This “being at issue” or “being in question for oneself” is made concrete in the specific stands we take—that is, in the roles we enact—over the course of our lives [7]. My personal narrative, both prior to and following SITBI, clearly demonstrates both of these components, and thus full Heideggerian authenticity.

Specific instantiations of traumatic brain injury (SITBI) provide particular insight to the mode of ‘death’ referred to by Heidegger in Being and Time, and provide a specific insight to the concept of authentic phenomenological death. My experiences in

SITBI provide particularly relevant testimony in this regard, thus providing a valuable means by which such phenomenon can be critically approached.

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²⁸Authenticity is a mode of existence, according to Heidegger, that is, a manner in which Dasein can lead its life. By this phrasing, I do not mean to suggest that self-ownership is a way of life or life-style as these phrases are commonly used. Ways of life (e.g., the modern American way of life or the traditional Crow way of life) and lifestyles (the Southern California lifestyle or the lifestyle of the suburban Bible Belt) are particular factual configurations of culture. They come and go through history, are culturally localized and limited, and serve therefore as concrete possibilities for Dasein. (CCBT 322).



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