

*Impudence-Addresses*

# The Alcohol Question

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IN THE

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## Light of Social Ethics

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By DR. B. STEHLER



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THE ALCOHOL QUESTION  
IN THE LIGHT  
OF SOCIAL ETHICS

## The Alcohol Question in the Light of Social Ethics

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**N**O man lives for himself alone. If a person were the sole inhabitant of a little planet, he would never need to think of anything but his own woe or welfare. He would be isolated; his will and conduct would reach no further than his own little circle of one.

### Man As a Member of Society

Actually, however, mankind is an organic unit. We are right in comparing the human race to a tree of which nations form the branches, and individual men only the green and quickly fading leaves, though it is true that this comparison does not allow for the other side of man—his personality. Every one lives his own inner life and must himself bear the responsibility for his acts. Everything else is only a means to his mental and spiritual development, for improvement of his natural capacities, his development to a refined, noble, mature, moral personality, is the most important aim of every individual. But along with the perfection of one's individual endowments must go recognition of man as a member of the whole, of his close dependence upon the fate of the community with regard to what he gives and what he receives from society. Mankind has a solidarity of interests from which no individual dare hold aloof. As the individual receives from society his subsistence, his training, and his citizenship, as he is, therefore, in many respects a product of his social condition, so also is he responsible to society for his omissions and commissions; he can not and dare not withdraw himself. This is the standpoint of social ethics.

It is easy to understand why these social-ethical considerations have attained especial importance at the present time. In earlier times when population was sparse, economic life was very simple and intercourse very limited. But now, crowded living conditions, continued specialization of labor, an enormous increase of mental and material intercourse have made the relation of individuals to one another and to the community much closer, the possibility of influencing the fate and conduct of others and of being influenced by them much greater than formerly. For this reason we must exert every effort to increase the sense of responsibility toward the whole, and systematic, far-sighted care for the welfare of the whole.

### Social Ethics as a Standard

Ethics is a natural science. Its theme is the necessity of existence which is identical with what the orthodox regard as the "will of God." Its starting point is the conviction that human conduct is not an occurrence brought about simply by the working of natural laws, but that it can and should be a course of action guided by purpose, a procedure self-devised and self-determined under the direction of regulating principles.



Social ethics has to do with the ideal human community life, according to which it lays down the conditions for the formation of character and the elevation of conduct. Economic, social and political conditions are, as it were, raw material to be transformed by the influence of moral ideas and reshaped to a higher type of existence. Hence, the more highly developed the state of civilization, the more comprehensive and profound the changes occurring in it, the more difficult as a general thing, will be the task of ethics, and, the more necessary also, will it be for all-important questions to be tested by the light of social ethics.

The principal questions that will always arise will be: Are existing conditions actually necessary? How are they related causally to one another or to the general conception and conduct of life? How may they be improved? What effect does a given course of conduct have upon the welfare of the community?

It is evident that one can impute morality only to a personality, not to an institution or a society. No institution acts of itself but only by the decisions and conduct of the persons it represents. The real basis of customs is always personal will, which in itself is powerful.

Organizations, from that of marriage to that of the state, are means for making possible the employment and co-operation of individuals; at the same time, they are permanently organized and maintained by the orderly conduct of these individuals. To attribute to the institutions an independent existence and a kind of impersonal and gregarious morality is simply a fiction of the imagination.

Social ethics, according to our meaning is, therefore, a higher viewpoint, a higher standard by which the web of human action is inspected and measured in its thousand-fold complications.

To think along the lines of social ethics means increasingly quickened sensibility to the mutual and dependence of good and evil; it means seeing the consequences upon human solidarity of the prevailing needs, abuses and morality, and the recognition of collective responsibility for them; it means measuring one's own conduct by the effects it will have upon the morality of the community. It means a feeling of fellow responsibility for the mistakes and failures of one's brothers, and incites to active efforts to form a public opinion for the protection of the individual against evils.

An illustration may make the matter clearer: Individual ethics teaches us the duty of regarding personal health as a blessing and of caring for it in a rational way. It is to be deplored that many do not seem to want to know much about this duty. Very many persons look upon health as an accidental blessing granted to some and denied to others, while in fact, physical buoyancy and vigor are as a rule to a great extent the wages of a correct all-round conduct of life.

But it is by no means the individual alone who has an interest in his personal health. Every disturbance of it extends its consequences to his environment. The ill-humor or irritable behavior of one individual is an annoyance to all in the home. Serious illness of the father brings anxiety, care, perhaps actual want. If he is an official, his associates are inconvenienced. If he becomes prematurely unable to work, he increases the public budget which provides his pension.

In special circumstances, for example, during epidemics of infectious diseases, this regard for the public becomes a matter of much greater importance.

Then, the question is not simply, What must I do or cease doing to keep well, but how ought every individual so to conduct himself that the health, strength and vigor of the whole community will be preserved? Out of this grow new duties as to personal behavior, or at least, old duties appear in a new and clearer light. Care as to expectoration is a self-evident requirement of hygiene. The anti-spitting notices related to the spread of tuberculosis, posted in places of heavy traffic, serve as a kind of education of the social-hygienic conscience. Cleanliness in the matter of food is always proper and healthful; indifference here in times of cholera may create an infection area and endanger the lives of many. The herdsman who ranges the plain and meets no one all day long need not especially trouble himself about the care of excretions; but in the city, negligence in such matters may lead to a ravaging typhus epidemic, and from the standpoint of social ethics must be termed a gross lack of principle.

### Alcoholism a Social Question

With these considerations we are brought very close to the alcohol question. One more step and we meet it. Of course here, too, we can gain important knowledge by looking at the question from the individual standpoint and thereby arrive at a definite position. We are greatly indebted to scientists for their tireless investigations of the physical and mental effects of alcohol upon the individual body. These scientific results will open the eyes of all who will look. But the light shed upon the alcohol question by social statistics, social hygiene and social ethics makes the eyes overflow, for one can hardly mention a vital question of the day that is not interwoven with the alcohol question.

### How the Modern Alcohol Question Differs from That of Antiquity

Present day alcoholism which we so much lament, this wide network of technical regulations, legal enactments, opinions, customs and usages, which serve the production, sale and use of alcoholic drinks, did not always exist. Nor has it grown over night into such an immense poison tree. Since the time when intoxicating drinks were occasionally used, this dangerous life-destroying foe to civilization has been given a thousand years of development by utilizing economic, technical and social inventions and improvements until now it restrains humanity like a straight-jacket. Manufacturing and capitalistic art, railroad transportation, airtight bottling, enormous plants, financial corporations, woman's work and household needs all had to work together before alcoholism in its present dimensions could be produced.

To see clearly the great change that has taken place, compare the use of alcohol in Palestine in the time of Christ with our alcoholism of today. There, in the first place, was a single alcoholic drink, wine, of very limited strength; here, among us, besides wine, pure and impure, are beer produced in mammoth factories, and spirits manufactured in numberless distilleries. Then, not a single saloon in the present sense; now, innumerable retail places whose proprietors in sharp competition try in every conceivable way so to display their wares as to entice patrons. Then, in Judea, with allowance for exceptions, occasional moderate drinking, a relatively harmless luxury; now, popular moderation widely prevalent, an enormous outlay for alcoholic drinks, an almost inestimable economic devastation. Then, individual excess, and poverty of the individual toper; now, workhouses, poorhouses, hospitals full of the unhappy victims of alcohol.

Then, an occasional, inconspicuous use of a drink, the essential nature of which was practically unknown, the evil effect of which was explained only by



immoderation. Now, among all classes and conditions of life universally prevailing drinking customs which everyone observes, which condemn to scorn and ostracism those who refuse conformity, and which are constantly sucking innumerable fresh victims into the vortex.

### Alcoholism No Longer An Individual Problem

The differences are great and fundamental. New conditions place upon us new moral requirements. A greater sense of responsibility, more prudence and reliability are demanded of the engineer of a fast locomotive than of the camel driver of 2,000 years ago. Our attitude toward the present demand for alcohol must be quite different, and far more strict than that of former days.

As old as time is the fight of mankind against drunkenness. Even the modern anti-alcohol movement began with combating intoxication. It continued a long time until we learned to look upon and to treat cases of inebriety from the standpoint of social ethics. We used to think the drunkard was only a depraved man who in inexcusable weakness and evil-mindedness had brought this evil upon himself. Thirty years of earnest work have shown that cases of drunkenness are above all else symptoms of widespread custom in the use of alcohol; that they stand in the closest connection with the prevailing alcoholic delusion, with the alcohol customs and the alcohol arrangements of family and society, community and nation; that they are the boils and tumors on the sick body politic while the real sickness has its seat in the blood and brains and hearts of the people.

When cholera breaks out we are not satisfied with treating the individual patient. Orders are issued for maintaining healthy conditions; the drinking water, food, houses and manner of living are all inspected and improved. There may be individual cases where this causes trouble and is burdensome. But an enemy of the community must be fought by the combined efforts of all. Every individual must co-operate and if necessary, laws must be invoked to compel him to do so.

### Prevention the Essential

In the same way the fight against drunkenness must be traced back to its causes. It must be directed to the prevention of drunkenness.

Preventive efforts in similar matters have long led to good results. The practice of medicine is constantly tending away from mere treatment of individual cases and their symptoms to a search for causes and methods of prevention. Political economy is ever striving for a definite betterment of the fundamental social factors. The courts are making very promising experiments (for example, in the treatment of juvenile criminals) in the prevention of causes of crime and in so doing, tend toward the care of the morally endangered.

Now, is drunkenness an exceptional occurrence? or is it a kind of social disease which like a cancer gnaws at social vigor?

Conservative estimates founded upon the statistics of numerous city and country districts place the number of drunkards in Germany at about 400,000. To these belong fully 300,000 unhappy wives who are made daily martyrs by their husbands, and also, probably, a million pitiable weak, frail children, an immense army of wretched humanity.

In all Germany there are scarcely a dozen cases of hydrophobia a year, but how carefully we guard against it. Upon the barest suspicion of hydrophobia, the strictest measures are taken for preservation against it. Should we not then give a thousand times as much care and attention to the drink problem?

From the standpoint of social ethics, the chief propositions affecting the alcohol question are the following:

1. Through the habitual general use of alcohol there is brought about a congenital weakness in respect to this narcotic that is shown by a craving for alcoholic drinks, and at the same time a lowered resistance to its poisonous influence.

2. This widespread weakness is also a factor in the prevailing drinking customs, which, by confirming the alcohol bias, or affording numberless occasions for drinking, awaken and develop slumbering tendencies.

3. It follows that today the individual is much more in danger than formerly of overstepping the bounds of uninjurious use and of drifting imperceptibly into drunkenness. Further, in view of all this general danger—as contrasted with cholera or hydrophobia—much stricter measures of prevention should be taken than formerly seemed necessary, and it is the duty of the individual to bring his conduct in this matter into harmony with the needs of society.

From the standpoint of social ethics, therefore, everyone who is seriously concerned about this matter must ask himself, what can and ought I do in order that this state of things may be improved?

### Breaking the Hold of Custom

The question would receive varying answers from equally earnest persons interested in social welfare. To me it appears that the general requirement must be, first, a campaign against the use of intoxicating drink until this custom loses its commanding place, and until it is no longer beyond the strength of the individual to hold himself free from it, or at least to guard himself against injurious use.

The most certain measure—and I believe we must strive for it with all our might—is to break up further transmission of alcoholic weaknesses by means of a generation of abstainers and by gradually, but surely, changing the alcoholic customs.

Give us a generation of abstinent parents, and let the children and grandchildren be born into an alcohol-free society, and the question of a craving for drink would be solved. Prophylaxis is always better than a belated cure. The abolition of alcohol, at least under normal conditions, is one of the greatest tasks of civilization; it is the only certain means of drying up the swamp of drunkenness.

### Custom as a Menace to the Weaker Members of Society

Those who have as yet developed very little social spirit, and, have a correspondingly large amount of craving for personal pleasure, oppose this idea which, to them, seems very distasteful. "Let the drunkards drink themselves to death, the sooner the better; they care for nothing else and deserve nothing else," is the argument. "Drunkards are all a lot of thoroughly weak, diseased, worthless members of society. It would be foolish to let considerations for such inferior individuals deprive others of a source of enjoyment."

That sounds plausible, but it is a very selfish and short-sighted view, and it cannot stand in face of the inexorable seriousness of the situation. Were all these people actually inferior at birth, or did many of them become such through the temptations to drink which our alcoholized society put before them? Have we not all seen examples enough of highly endowed young people, poets and authors even, ending in the deepest alcohol misery? From whom



did they get their low resisting power? Were there not alcoholized individuals among their ancestors from whom the injurious influences were transmitted to this generation? Have not many delicately organized individuals been able to avoid breaking down in a non-alcoholic environment? Must it not be said, even from the selfish standpoint, that this great army of mentally and physically feeble individuals, of only half-responsible men, is a constant menace to society? Do we not see how, out of this morass of silly poison-talk, springs a rank growth of moral coarseness and crime?

It is cowardly to close one's eyes to these sorrowful facts. It is more than thoughtless not to work with all one's might to put an end to this state of things.

If it is true, as it is, that such great numbers of inexperienced weak-willed men are forced by our drinking customs, almost of necessity because of their tendencies and environment, to a craving for drink, and thereby, possibly into crime, social ethics then unquestionably demands that all intelligent persons possessed of normal sympathy, stand together and by every means, but especially by total abstinence from this dangerous substance, erect a firm dike against any further flood of this black stream of evil and misery.

I have gone into this point thus in detail in order to make clear the importance of total abstinence from the standpoint of social ethics. The work of rescuing drunkards is fruitless without complete abandonment for life, of all alcoholic drinks, even of the lightest, a fact on which there are no two opinions among those acquainted with the subject.

#### Moderation a Public Peril

But, of course, the matter of drunkenness, and the rescue of drunkards by no means comprise the whole of the alcohol question. Even if there were no drunkards, and if the brain poisoning called intoxication, were as infrequent among our people as hydrophobia, even then, in the name of social ethics, we should be obliged to fight against the regular general cult of alcohol consumption, which now passes for moderation among large classes of people. There are many who still hold the idea that a man may drink as much as he can carry, that is, until he is close to the line where the mind shows serious disturbances or ceases to work, just "one glass of beer short of intoxication." They still consider this moderation. They believe that such drinking is a personal matter and that no one else should concern himself about it.

In the meantime, it has been unmistakably demonstrated that the injury from the use of alcohol begins much earlier and far within the limits that are called normal by the representatives of the old moderation theory. So, a new and rigid moderation is next demanded, which allows the use of alcohol only occasionally, and with all caution. Representatives of such moderation are personally irreproachable; they hold to the happy conviction that they can exert sufficient resistance to excitation by alcohol. But they overestimate the assistance they give to the abolition of social alcohol misery. They are contributing, rather, to the increase of alcoholism, because, by their occasional drinking they strengthen and maintain the respectability of the use of alcohol by others. The conventional moderation which can not conceive of a meal time, a rest period, a meeting, a celebration, without something "bracing" to drink is, in fact, with most men, already associated with the beginning of imperceptible bodily impairment; but, above all, it is a serious public menace

hygienically, economically, and morally, and, therefore, in the name of social ethics is to be vigorously opposed.

#### Race Welfare to be Considered

That word "race hygiene," includes a whole parcel of dark problems. Nations appear, rise, fall and disappear. Must it be so? Or is this coming and going dependent upon the mode of life, the fitness and the morality of the members of the race? These are highly important questions, and tireless effort should be given to clearing them up.

How does the matter stand with our nation? In respect to numbers, we find ourselves on a marked ascent. Is this the case in quality, in moral fitness? Learned scholars believe that they are compelled to point out indications of a weakening of national vigor. The increase of nervous and mental disorders, the great number of feeble-minded, inferior children, the extensive prevalence of tuberculosis, the increasing number of mothers who are unable to nurse their children, effeminacy and weak will, aversion to the serious struggles of life, eagerness for pleasure, open immorality with all its deplorable consequences—all these are named as serious indications of a race deterioration taking place among our people.

Perhaps the evidence of a causal connection between these disturbing phenomena and the prevailing alcoholism is not entirely clear. But to those who are willing to listen, experience speaks a plain language, which is wholly in harmony with the findings of Bunge and Laitinen. Contributory, at least, to all these troubles is the regular moderate, and still more, the immoderate, consumption of alcohol. It is the procurer in immorality, it prepares a soil favorable to tuberculosis; with whole classes of people it is the cause of under-nourishment of the children, of weakening the nervous system, of a lowering of the total life energies.

It may be said: "The use of alcohol seldom kills." Unfortunately, that is true. For thereby it acquires the appearance of harmlessness. It contents itself with causing slight unnoticed disturbances and weakening, which gradually become cumulative and apparently in the next generation bring about an unfavorable tendency. Then alcohol can continue its quiet, energy-sapping work until the degeneracy becomes openly manifest.

For that reason, alcohol is an unsuitable agent for weeding out the unfit. Those weakened by alcohol do not, indeed, die at once, but before they do, they transmit their weakness to the next generation. How much of the nation's vigor is destroyed every day in the more than 400,000 tap-rooms in the German countries! True social ethics would take care to preserve the strength and vigor of the people, their capacity for resistance and defense, and to avoid everything that endangers these priceless possessions.

There is a responsibility toward unborn generations. "That which is bred in the bone will not die out in the flesh" may be taken as a law of generation. But where there is generation, there may also be degeneration. Weakened stock also can transmit itself. More sense of responsibility concerning the health of the next generation and of the whole people, and our position in regard to alcohol, would be much more decisive.

#### Social Usefulness the Test of Industry

The relations between the alcohol question and industrial life are extremely numerous and complicated. Only by fitness for work and pleasure in work



can a people preserve their health and efficiency. On the other hand, work, industry and commerce are not the highest aims. All work, manufacturing and the pursuit of business, must serve the welfare of the whole. Over every factory should be written in large letters: **The welfare of the people is the highest law.** All work should have an intrinsic value: as exercise for mental and bodily strength, pleasurable as far as possible, but, above all, as a useful contribution to the nation's work.

The farmer should be conscious that his plowing and sowing serve to nourish the people; the merchant that he negotiates an exchange of benefits; the factory hand that through his work objects of value are produced and that thereby the prosperity of the people is increased. That everyone shall obtain by his work his necessary livelihood is also a first principle. Whoever produces value should receive his wages. But personal interest in the profit must not take first place, still less be the only standard. The object must be a contribution of general advantage to society.

All work which promises no common usefulness in mental, artistic, scientific, or economic directions from the standpoint of social ethics must be repudiated. Purely pecuniary interest, money-making alone, tells nothing as to the moral worth of the work. Even gamblers, traffickers in women and usurpers "work" in their way, in the interest of money recompense. But their work is a curse to the public good, they suck their profits from the blood and life of the people. That stamps their work as immoral and dishonorable. That their own character must thereby become brittle and rotten is, of course, self-evident.

It is evident that economic life must follow its own economic laws in technical sense, but that in the long run, because it is a human affair, it cannot dispense with ethical considerations. Moral law is, indeed, the expression of the necessities of the inner life; failure to regard it must lead to serious impairment and disturbances in life development.

Brutal selfishness is the worst enemy of all true culture. Morality and religion are the strongest living forces with which to indefatigably oppose its power and thereby to elevate and purify civilized life. Inconsiderate selfishness has an isolating effect upon economic life; it looks upon man as the means for accomplishing its purpose, upon the community as material from which it may get the most possible for its private interests. Its highest principle is the profit to be obtained at any price, even by robbery of public life and welfare.

Both in private and community life, the distinct purpose of life gets easily displaced; advantage is not estimated at its true worth; that which has only a relative value as a means insists upon being regarded an independent end. Production is important, but the life which it serves is more important. Man must command production, not production the man. The machine should make the work of man easier, but the living man is almost in danger of becoming a slave to the lifeless machine. Capital and capitalism are important inventions as means of systematizing the exchange of the earth's products, but woe is man if he falls under the enchantment of gold, if he bows his knee to Mammon.

A glance at present-day economic life shows how far we are yet from the recognition of this principle, to say nothing of putting it into practice.

### Alcohol an Enemy to High Social Ideals

In the alcohol question, we find the representatives of personal interests in a sharp struggle with the promoters of ethical ideas. "No damage to our income, no diminution of our dividends," cries the alcohol industry. "No damage to public welfare, no diminution of public energy or public morality," is the cry from the ranks of the opponents of alcohol.

An important task of social ethics yet to be accomplished is to appeal to the chief forms of community life, the family, the church and the state, and to make clear to their respective members the duties involved. How these ideals of right living, in relation to family, church and state, are directly opposed to the prevailing use of alcohol, I can only briefly point out.

The husband should go through life in a spirit of love, fidelity and harmony; alcohol puts into him the demon of dissension and jealousy. He should provide the necessary support for the family by regular honest work; alcohol uses up a large part of his earnings, needed for supplying actual wants. It is a shame that hundreds of thousands of children lead a miserable existence, with weak bodies in unhealthy homes. Alcohol destroys in the hearts of many fathers, with other honorable feelings, love for their own children; it destroys in so many pitiable children honor and respect for their parents. Where loving care and deferential respect fail, no proper training is possible. There will necessarily be disorderly conduct and rudeness. All care of youth that does not strive to improve family training by the banishment of alcohol fails at the most important point.

It is the duty of the state to insure justice between its citizens and defense against attacks from without. Hence the demand upon the state for proper institutions and laws for accomplishing the tasks of civilization. But, in all these matters, it finds itself hampered by alcohol, which leads to innumerable offenses against the laws, weakens the defensive powers of the people, impairs intellectual and moral strength, and swallows up great sums of money that should be devoted to important tasks of civilization.

The churches' care of souls aims at meeting the highest needs of the mind and heart; at satisfying the inner desire for self-respect, for moral worth, for joy and beautiful surroundings and communion with God. What is good and honorable and just and holy it cherishes with love and wisdom, and with truth and mercy from above builds up the kingdom of God in the soul. Alcohol dulls susceptibility to religious influences; it causes a loss of desire for things mental and moral, an indifference which dully repulses all calls to a higher life. The man who puts to sleep in an alcoholic doze his conscience and his sin, who seeks exaltation in the illusion and excitement that proceeds from an alcoholized brain, shuts against himself the door to the powers of light and strength and to the higher life in religion. With such a one the work of the church will but seldom, and that incompletely, reach its high object.

### Conclusions

Whichever way we look from the standpoint of social ethics, we find everywhere the hindering, depressing, injurious influence of alcoholism, which lies like a thick mist over all situations. It is hard traveling through a cloud. It is very difficult for mankind to go forward through the alcohol cloud. When shall we be able to dry up the alcohol swamp, to rise above the cloud, or when, at least, will the sunbeams of a better understanding break through this foggy veil?



The most important question, therefore, is not, does the smallest consumption of alcohol injure me? But, what can I do, how shall I so order my life that our nation may free itself from the meshes of alcoholism?

Diffusion of knowledge and awakening of conscience are the directions in which we may all proceed immediately. Example, particularly on the part of those holding influential positions, will do much to promote progress. When anything is regarded by the leading circles of society as no longer good form, its dominion is already greatly endangered; when this view becomes general it has already essentially won. Let us place a high value upon the formation of better customs. Custom, the outcome of many persons acting together, is a prodigious educational power in the service of morality. Displacing present drinking customs by higher, finer forms of good fellowship and social intercourse would be an important social-ethical advance. The aristocracies of birth, brains and money, the physician, judge, clergyman, teacher, and officials of all ranks, should strike the key-note in this matter.

Let us combine with intelligent clemency toward the drinker based upon social-ethical considerations, a discriminating protest against fallacious principles in custom and against prevailing immorality, those indefensible circumstances which drive so many of our fellow-men directly into the arms of alcoholism. Improvement in these matters would soon put a short stop to this evil.

On the other hand, every curtailment of the use of alcohol would make easier the hygienic, economic and moral progress of the people. Let us improve what can be improved. Encumbering our position with unwisdom and injustice must bring with it internal and external evils. Let us form the habit of considering the question as a whole, of striving to get beyond the individual self into the broad field of common interest. All work devoted to the service of all returns to fertilize and enrich the soul of the giver. Power and corruption are at work. Let them be opposed by the forces of goodness, vitality, truth, love, courage and the spirit of sacrifice. These carry in themselves the guarantee of success.

# THE INTERNATIONAL SERIES

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