

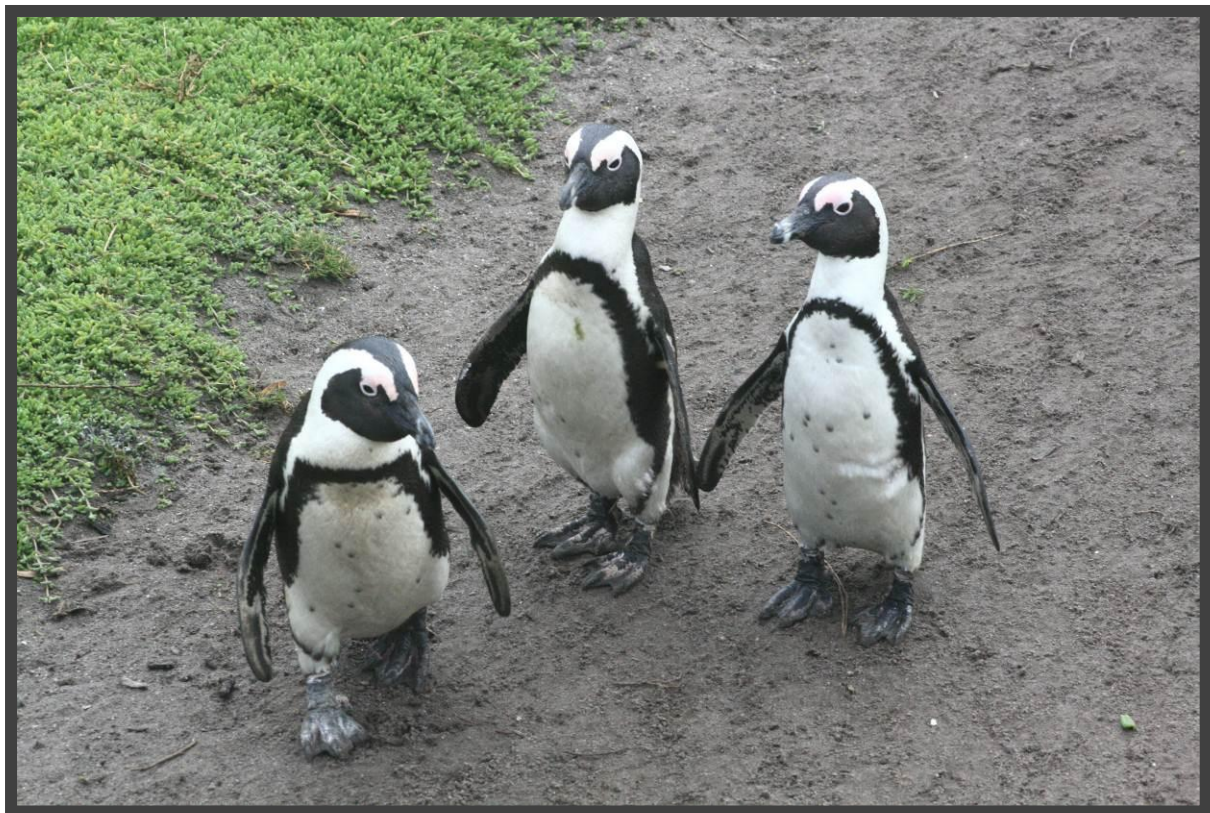
# **A CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENTAL WORLD VIEW**

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## 1. INSUFFICIENT ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

*Christians, along with the rest of society, have come to believe the unspoken maxim: A certain amount of damage to the earth is the cost of the lifestyle we require; we dare not sacrifice this lifestyle, because there is nothing else to give life meaning.<sup>1</sup>*

One does not have to look very far to find sufficient evidence of man's destructive impact on his environment – polluted air and streams, the poaching of rhino and the large amount of plastics being washed up on beaches. Through the misuse, disregard and destruction of the environment, contemporary society is making a clear statement that everything in life is about consumerism and economic growth, and that one has to be prepared to pay an environmental price to achieve these goals.

It is often argued that the essence of contemporary society's problem of disregarding and misusing the environment can, to a large extent, be traced back to the Western World and to Christian society's lack of proper environmental ethics throughout history. This argument is based on the major influence of Christian society on the rest of the world and its current influence on the process of globalisation. This influence is based on the following facts: The Western World and Christian society provided the basic values for



the contemporary economic system, with the United States of America, with its profound influence in the establishment of a global economy and culture, as the most important role-player. Furthermore, according to White<sup>2</sup>, all successful technology is Western in origin, while all significant science is Western in style and method. Although the Western World can no longer be seen as a Christian civilisation in the true sense of the word, and although nowadays many *Christians* are not committed to Christianity, environmental ethics or the lack of environmental ethics in the West is still being based

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<sup>1</sup> Badke, 1991, p. 130

<sup>2</sup> White 1966, p. 74



on axioms and traditions derived from Christianity. According to White<sup>3</sup>, *We continue today to live, as we have lived for about 1 700 years, very largely in a context of Christian axioms.* Furthermore, Christians of today are being treated as contemporary symbols of established environmental ethics. A poor environmental performance by the contemporary professing Christian will therefore enhance a poor environmental reputation based on established Christian axioms.

Christianity and Christian tradition have often been accused of pragmatism and the exploitation of the environment for the sole benefit of man.<sup>4</sup> The Calvinistic work ethic is frequently referred to in this regard. The irony is that concern for the environment is often lost between Christians focusing on two extremes: a spiritual mindset and a materialistic mindset. According to the spiritual mindset, eternity is all that counts – the earth does not. It will, after all, be destroyed and replaced by a New Earth:<sup>5</sup>

*We have convinced ourselves that people issues are the only important concerns for the Christian. To defend the earth from destruction would be to divert our time and energy away from our God-given mandate to drag human beings out of the jaws of eternal destruction.*<sup>6</sup>

According to the materialistic mindset, the Calvinistic work ethic and the Christian's relationship with the rest of creation have been deliberately misinterpreted to focus on economic growth at all costs, the accumulation of possessions and the enjoyment of life.

Since the current insufficient principal environmental world view is based on improper Christian axioms, or the improper interpretation of such axioms, it is the responsibility of Christian society to provide a proper world view based on relevant Christian axioms and principles in order to solve this problem. Although Christianity does provide values for a non-pragmatic and deeper approach



<sup>3</sup> White 1966, p. 78

<sup>4</sup> cf. White, 1966; Ice, 1975

<sup>5</sup> cf. Freudenberg, 1990, p. 16

<sup>6</sup> Badke, 1991, p. 12

to environmental management, these values have often been deliberately and conveniently overlooked in order to justify a consumerist and materialistic lifestyle.

In developing a proper Christian world view and environmental ethics, the emphasis should be on the professing Christian, who by the everyday life he or she is living is clearly indicating to be a true, committed follower of Jesus Christ. Such environmental ethics should be able to contribute to the true identity of the professing Christian in a practical manner.

## 2. A NON-PRAGMATIC CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW ON ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

### 2.1 Background

Miller<sup>7</sup> differentiates between two main types of environmental world views: those that put humans at the centre of things and those that do not. According to this approach, the essence of the **human-centred world view** can be seen as managing the earth's life-supporting systems for the sole benefit of man, together with the pursuit of unlimited economic growth. In contrast to this world view, the **biocentric and ecocentric environmental world views** focus on the inherent or intrinsic value of all forms of life (the value that exists regardless of these life forms' potential or actual use to man) and on the value of the earth's life-support systems. The biocentric and ecocentric world views are seen as a more responsible and sustainable approach. Most of the proponents of these more sustainable and responsible environmental world views share the opinion that human-centredness or anthropocentrism should be seen as the main cause of environmental ills.

In order to be viable, any environmental world view should have a deeper or religious base. There should be a deeper motive for striving for a more sustainable and responsible approach to environmental management. Unless man's ethical responsibility for sustainable environmental management is anchored to deeper values, there will always be a tendency to fall back to pragmatism, where everything is done for the sole benefit of man. White<sup>8</sup> makes the following statement in this regard: *Since the roots of our (environmental) trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.*

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<sup>7</sup> Miller 1996, p. 711

<sup>8</sup> White 1966, p. 85

Seen simplistically from a Christian perspective, there are basically three possible foundations for an environmental world view:

- ❑ A **theistic** approach, which holds that everything was created by and lives for the glory of God.
- ❑ A **pantheistic** approach, which sees God as the sum of all that exists in the universe and believes that all things in the universe are made up of the same substance and therefore have the same value. Panentheism differs slightly from pantheism since it sees God *in* everything, rather than seeing God as everything.
- ❑ A **pragmatic** and **egocentric** approach, according to which man is his own god and everything is done for personal gain or solely for the benefit of man. For the purpose of this study an egocentric approach must be distinguished from an anthropocentric approach, which is interpreted as man performing a leading role regarding the environment.



The problem with the current Christian world view is that it seems to be primarily inclined to the last approach while ignoring the first approach.

There may be various approaches to or interpretations of a non-pragmatic and theistic Christian world view on environmental management. The Christian world view presented here is based mainly on Schaeffer's<sup>9</sup> approach to environmental management, which will be discussed under the following headings.

- ❑ Anthropocentrism
- ❑ Human dignity and limitation
- ❑ Practical application – a lonely path

## 2.2 Anthropocentrism

Since a world view indicates a particular view or philosophy of life and the world held by *man*, it is anthropocentric in essence as it revolves solely around the thoughts and beliefs of man. All environmental world views therefore have an anthropocentric point of departure. The fact cannot be denied that man is the most powerful and dominant species on earth. We therefore we have no choice but to manage the influence of our own actions on the environment. As an act executed by man, environmental management is anthropocentric in nature. Even a pantheistic world view, which sees God as the sum of all that exists in the universe and therefore believes that man should not dominate nature, but should care for the environment in a sustainable manner since each thing in the universe is of the same substance and thus of the same value, is still anthropocentric. If man is to be truly of the same essence as the animals or the trees, so that he should reject all desires to dominate nature, then he should logically also reject any attempt to care for and manage creation. He should also not strive towards achieving his full potential lest he should become the dominant species. It is therefore only the interpretation of and approach to the term anthropocentrism by the various world views and the motive for placing man in a central position that differ; it is the motive for managing the environment that differs. Thus it is not anthropocentrism *per se* that is negative, but the interpretation and application of anthropocentrism. Most environmentalists tend to confuse and equate anthropocentrism with pragmatism and egocentrism, since anthropocentrism has a natural tendency to divert to pragmatism and even egocentrism if not anchored to deeper values. The argument that crops up again and again in discussions about sustainable development is that sustainable development is necessary since it will ultimately be man who will benefit from such an approach, and that man's survival depends on a more sustainable and responsible approach to environmental management. Ironically enough, even the most advanced level of environmental awareness, as proposed by Miller<sup>10</sup>, according to which the value of all forms of life exists regardless of their potential or actual use to man, can be interpreted as having an anthropocentric dimension on the grounds of the following statement made by Miller:

*At this level, **our survival and economies** are viewed as being totally dependent on Earth's natural processes...* (Emphasis added.)

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<sup>9</sup> Schaeffer, 1972

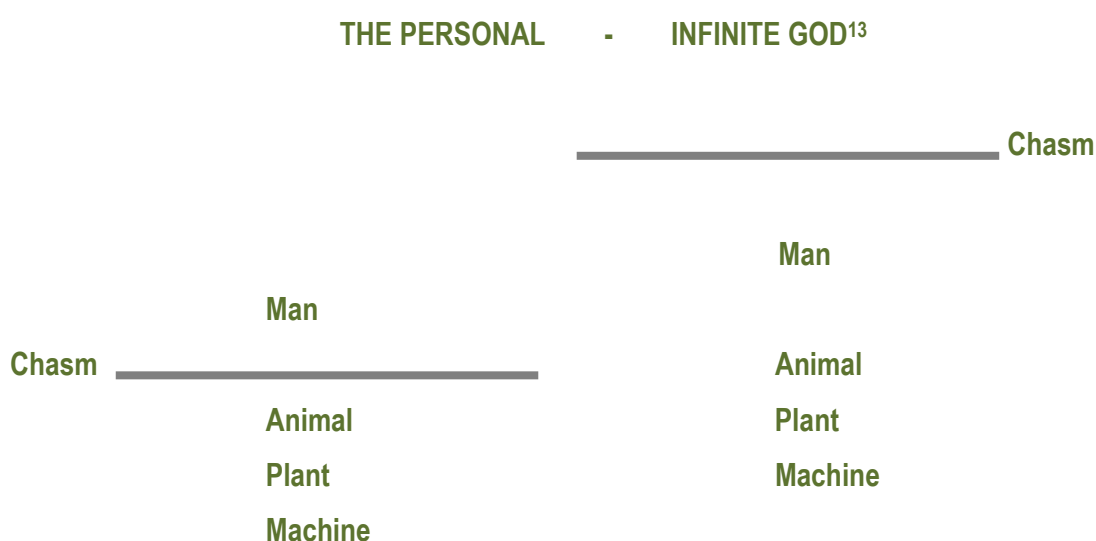
<sup>10</sup> Miller, 1996, p. 714

An anthropocentric motive can very easily become purely egocentric and exploitive to the detriment of the environment if not adequately managed. Motloch<sup>11</sup> gives the following description of such an exploitive anthropocentric approach:

*The anthropocentric view, ... has humans as the center of the universe, dominant over nature; and nature exists to serve human needs. The environment has value only in its ability to serve; it exists to be exploited for people's use and benefit.*

In such a case environmental management is substituted for environmental manipulation and exploitation.

The Christian environmental world view presented here contains a higher motive where anthropocentrism involves much more than mere pragmatism. It puts God at the centre and as a result it also places emphasis on both man *and* the environment. Schaeffer<sup>12</sup> considers the unique nature of the Judaistic-Christian God, who is at the same time both Personal and Infinite, as point of departure of the Christian's view of the environment. According to this view, man is both separated from and united with nature. Since only God is Infinite and only He is Creator, everything else is the creature and is finite. On the side of God's infinity there is therefore a great chasm between God and everything else. In the biblical viewpoint man, animal, plant and machine are equally separated from God, which points at a unity between all created things.



<sup>11</sup> Motloch, 1991, p. 23

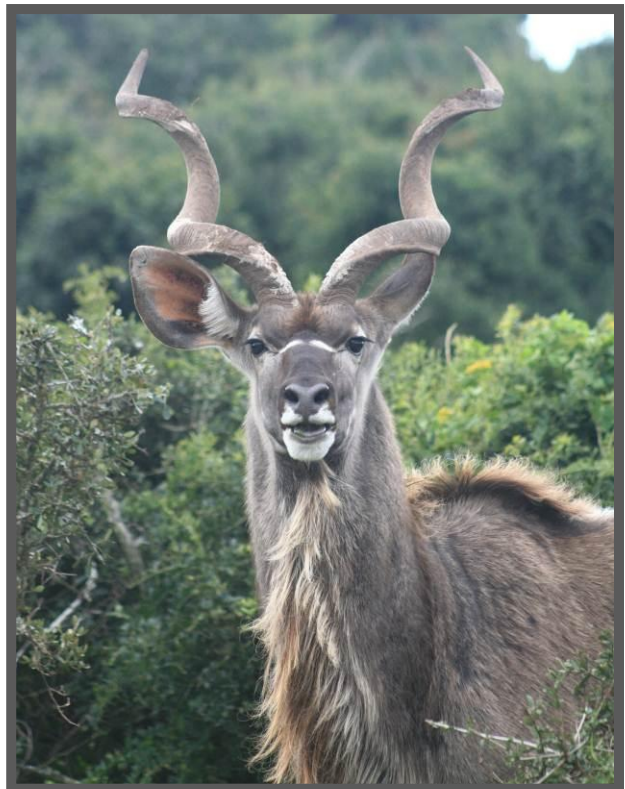
<sup>12</sup> Schaeffer, 1972

<sup>13</sup> Schaeffer, 1972, p. 36



On the side of the Personal there is a chasm between man and the rest of created things. God has created man in His own image and therefore man's relationship is upward rather than downward. Man has a personality and as such has a unique position among the rest of creation. He also has the opportunity of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Although man's relationship is basically upwards, and although he is separated from the rest of nature on the side of the Personal, he also has a downward relationship and is united with all other things as being finite and created on the side of God's infinity.

On the side of the Personal the Christian perspective of the environment is anthropocentric, to a certain extent, in the sense that man has dominion over the lower orders of Creation. Nevertheless, it involves much more than mere pragmatism and exploitation of nature for the good of man, since on the side of the Infinite man should treat creation with respect. ... *for the Christian the value of a thing is not in itself autonomously, but because God made it. It deserves this respect as something which was created by God, as man himself has been created by God.*<sup>14</sup> Mankind's mandate for responsible environmental management is found in the commission to work the Garden as God's envoys on earth, by *imaging* God and by dealing with the environment as if God Himself were at work<sup>15</sup> – a mandate still valid after the Fall, with many indications in Scriptures that this is the case.<sup>16</sup> A disregard for the environment means an *egocentric denial of God ... The ruin of nature and the denial of God go hand in hand, because both overexalt human beings.*<sup>17</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> Schaeffer, 1972, p. 44

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 2:15

<sup>16</sup> Badke, 1991, p. 149

<sup>17</sup> Carmody, 1983, p. 79

To respect Creation also implies that, arising from the truth of Redemption in Christ, man has a responsibility to heal in nature some of the results of the Fall:

*In each of the alienations arising from the Fall the Christians, individually and corporately, should consciously in practice be a redemptive factor. By God's Grace they should consciously in practice be a healing, redemptive factor in this life in the separation of man from God, man from himself, man from man, man from nature and nature from nature. And certainly this is true in regard to nature. A Christian-based science and technology should consciously try to see nature substantially healed, while waiting for the coming complete healing at Christ's return.*<sup>18</sup>

The concept of substantial healing is also reflected by Badke's *Fifth Witness*, which involves the responsibility of man to enhance creation's bright witnesses and to limit its dark witnesses<sup>19</sup> by actively repudiating environmental exploitation. *As the Maker has taken hold of the lives of those committed to Christ, giving them new life, so too we can demonstrate, through environmental action, that God is laying claim as well to the world he made.*<sup>20</sup>

From a Christian perspective, anthropocentrism and the importance of man should always be seen within the context of theocentrism and the sovereignty of God. For the purpose of this paper, anthropocentrism should therefore be defined as follows:

*To regard the human race as God's envoys on earth and therefore central to the universe created, upheld and maintained by God.*

The Christian view of environmental management finds its ultimate motive in the glory of God and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Schaeffer, 1972, p. 58; cf. Badke, 1991, p. 126

<sup>19</sup> Creation's original and natural witnesses, glory and nurture, called the **bright witnesses** by Badke, both *testify to and honor the Creator God, the first by showing his majesty through the complexity and beauty he has made, and the second by demonstrating that God intends to support abundantly the ongoing life he has created* (Badke, 1991, p. 146-7). Man's rebellion against God in the spiritual realm brought a corresponding harshness to the environment. After the Fall two additional witnesses have been added to nature's proclamation, penalty and precariousness, called the **dark witnesses** by Badke, and which serve as opposite to the bright witnesses. *Instead of glory, we find condemnation in the mortality of all things, the horrors of natural disasters, and the growing crises of ecological pollution. This is the witness of penalty. Instead of nurture, we discover that the earth no longer supports life without extreme effort, and that death can snuff out in an instant all that we have worked for. This is precariousness* (Badke, 1991, p. 148). In his sinfulness man now has a selfish tendency to exploit nature for his own benefit. Man's sinful nature enhances the dark witnesses by degrading the environment.

<sup>20</sup> Badke, 1991, p. 151

## 2.3 Human dignity and limitation

All created things (humans, animals, plants and machines) should be treated with integrity in the way and order in which God made them.<sup>21</sup> A non-pragmatic approach to anthropocentrism does therefore not mean that human life, human dignity and human needs should be overlooked or trivialised by romanticising nature and domestic animals. More compassion is often shown for stray cats and dogs than for hungry street children. However, the Christian principle of simplicity should be considered seriously in considering and fulfilling human needs. This includes a serious look at modern society's consumerism mentality and the *necessity* of consumer items.<sup>22</sup> Christian simplicity is a topic that has received much attention in recent times and, if applied correctly, may be of much relevance to the environmental crisis.<sup>23</sup> Simplicity also relates to the important principle of conscious and voluntary human limitation, which is an important ingredient for order and responsible environmental management. First of all, this means that limits to economic growth and consumption have to be recognised by man. In the words of Schaeffer:

*In the making of profit in industry and business, ... man must put a "self" limitation on himself. He must not be driven either for greed, or haste, to remove all the self limitations. Or we can put it in another way: that we must not allow ourselves, individually, nor our technology, to do everything we or it can do.*<sup>24</sup>

## 2.4 Practical application – a lonely path

Apart from having a negative impact on the environment, current environmental ethics based on Christian axioms also portrays a very negative image of Christianity. It has become time for professing Christians to establish and actively promote non-pragmatic environmental ethics and a Christian world view by making use of various Christian media such as the radio, websites and printed media. However, a level-headed approach is needed in this regard. Professing Christians should be extremely careful not to become involved in interfaith environmental campaigns and dialogue.

*Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers [do not make mismatched alliances with them or come under a different yoke with them, inconsistent with your faith]. For what partnership have right living and right standing with God with iniquity and lawlessness? Or how can light have*

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<sup>21</sup> cf. Schaeffer, 1972, pp. 42-43

<sup>22</sup> cf. Badke, 1991, pp. 108; 137

<sup>23</sup> cf. Cloninger, 1993

<sup>24</sup> Schaeffer 1972, p. 66

fellowship with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and Belial [*the devil*]? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement [*can there be between*] a temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in and with and among them and will walk in and with and among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. So, come out from among [*unbelievers*], and separate (sever) yourselves from them, says the Lord, and touch not [*any*] unclean thing; then I will receive you kindly and treat you with favour ... (2 Corinthians 6:14-17 AMP)<sup>25</sup>

In recent times, environmental issues have become a minefield of political and religious intrigues. It seems as if environmental crises, such as global warming, are being deliberately created in order to facilitate global economic and religious integration. Any interfaith cooperation by professing Christians will be a denial of Jesus Christ as the only Way of salvation<sup>26</sup> through acknowledging the validity of other faiths as alternative truths. By taking part in interfaith campaigns and dialogue professing Christians will also become guilty of contributing to the establishment of a single world religion. The

environmental road to be travelled by the professing Christian will therefore be a lonely one. Apart from making use of Christian media, setting a practical example should form the main thrust of promoting non-pragmatic environmental ethics. This may consist of practical matters such as



recycling of household waste, not littering or not using harmful pesticides in gardens. Congregations may also contribute to caring for the environment through organised actions such as collecting litter on beaches or the eradication of alien plant species. Concern for God's creation during everyday life should become an integral part of the professing Christian's true identity. Caring for the environment

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<sup>25</sup> Seen in the wider context of 2 Corinthians, where Paul is defending himself against false teachers who have infiltrated the Corinthian church, "unbelievers" should in the first instance be seen as those within the Corinthian church who adhere to false teachings. 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 is also about demonstrating a true Christian identity, which should be clearly distinguished from a worldly identity. However, the application of the word "unbelievers" may also be extended to unbelievers and those of other faiths in general.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus said to him, *I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by (through) Me.* (John 14:6 AMP)

may also be an important instrument for witnessing to a lost world about salvation through Jesus Christ.

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