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## Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires

### §1 Introduction

Why is it that some people's lives go well for them, and others' lives go badly for them? In other words: what makes the difference between higher and lower *well-being*? According to one popular line of thought, the difference is to be explained at least partly in terms of *desire satisfaction*. For example: suppose I planted some tulips, and I desire that they survived the winter. Plausibly, then, my life is going better for me if my tulips did indeed survive. My well-being is increased if they are still living. Plausibly, also, the *degree* to which my well-being is increased is proportional to the *strength* of my desire—the more I want my tulips to live, the better it is for me if this desire is satisfied. This is an instance of what I will call the *Satisfaction Thesis*.

The Satisfaction Thesis does *not* tell us what happens if my tulips did not survive the winter. But the most natural answer is that the death of my tulips would *decrease* my well-being. And, the stronger my desire, the *worse* it is for me if my desire is frustrated. This is an instance of what I will call the *Frustration Thesis*. Philosophers have given comparatively little attention to the subject of desire frustration, but insofar as they have done so, they have tended to endorse this Frustration Thesis (Kagan 2014; Heathwood 2016). Putting the Frustration Thesis together with the Satisfaction Thesis, we arrive at what I will call the *basic desire view*.

In this paper I have two aims. First, I will raise a problem for the basic desire view. The problem stems from the fact that some desires are *normatively asymmetrical*: they have greater positive than negative significance for well-being, or vice versa. *Having those desires and satisfying them* increases our

well-being more or less than *having those desires and frustrating them* decreases our well-being. We have such desires when we are strongly *attracted* to  $p$  without being strongly *averse* to  $\sim p$ , and when we are strongly *averse* to  $p$  without being strongly attracted to  $\sim p$ .<sup>1</sup> Asymmetrical desires make trouble for the basic desire view. Accordingly, my second aim is to revise the basic desire view to escape the trouble. I contend that there is no single attitude which is truly described by both the Satisfaction Thesis and the Frustration Thesis. Instead, we should say that each of those Theses describes a different psychological attitude: attraction and aversion, respectively. Attraction *satisfaction* is good, but attraction *frustration* is not good. Aversion *frustration*<sup>2</sup> is bad, but aversion *satisfaction* is not bad. Some desires—namely, asymmetrical desires—involve attractions and aversions of different strengths. That is why those

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<sup>1</sup> Although modern desire theorists have had relatively little to say about the distinction between attraction and aversion, the distinction arguably featured in the inception of the theory. Thomas Hobbes, often cited as an early proponent of a desire-based theory of well-being, writes:

...whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire that is it which he for his part calleth good; and the object of his hate and aversion, evil... (1651, ch.6)

Since Hobbes seems to deny that anything is good or evil “simply” or “absolutely”, he can plausibly be read as offering a theory of what is good *for subjects*—in other words, a theory of well-being. And the theory seems to suggest that *appetite/desire* and *hate/aversion* differ substantively in their significance for well-being, as opposed to merely being different ways of signifying the same underlying attitude.

<sup>2</sup> There is a strict sense of “satisfaction” and “frustration” on which one’s attitude is *satisfied* just in case its content obtains, and is *frustrated* otherwise. In this sense, a case of “aversion frustration” is a case in which one is *averse* to a state of affairs which does *not* obtain. But in the present context I think it is more natural to understand “satisfaction” and “frustration” in a more metaphorical sense: some of our attitudes (such as attraction and aversion) aim at making the world a certain way, and they are *satisfied* just in case the world is that way. Otherwise they are *frustrated*. I intend for “aversion frustration” to be understood in this more metaphorical sense. So a case of “aversion frustration”, as I use the phrase, is a case in which one is *averse* to a state of affairs which *does* obtain. In using “frustration” in this way, I follow Kagan (2014) and Sumner (2014).

desires have asymmetrical significance for well-being. Thus, asymmetrical desires reveal something about the internal structure of desire.

I will begin in §2 by describing the basic desire view in greater detail, and by introducing the distinction between attraction and aversion. Then in §3 I will use the distinction to argue for the existence of asymmetrical desires. Along the way I will argue that nothing more than the attraction/aversion distinction is needed to account for these desires. In §4 I consider a few challenges for the attraction/aversion strategy which have been raised in passing by Shelly Kagan and Wayne Sumner. I argue that these challenges can be met. I take stock of my conclusions in §5.

## **§2 Terms and Conditions**

The basic desire view—henceforth simply “the desire view”—is a view about which things are non-derivatively good and bad for us, where “good for us” and “bad for us” are understood in terms of *well-being*. On my usage, a state of affairs is *good for* a subject insofar as it increases their well-being, and *bad for* a subject insofar as it decreases their well-being. *Well-being*, in turn, is the kind of value at issue when we say that someone’s life is going well or badly for them. To get a fix on the concept, it is helpful to note that well-being seems to bear certain connections to our *attitudes*. It seems that, all else being equal, it is appropriate to feel sorry for those we regard as having lower well-being than us, and to feel glad for those we regard as having higher well-being than us. Furthermore, well-being seems to bear a connection to *desert*. Insofar as people deserve to be rewarded or punished, they can get what they deserve by having their well-being raised and lowered, respectively. One or both of these claims about well-being might turn out to be false, but they are claims which many of us are pre-theoretically inclined to accept, so they are useful for getting a fix on the concept of well-being.

The desire view, like most theories of well-being, is principally concerned with *non-derivative* goodness and badness. To get a grip on the distinction between derivative and non-derivative value, we can start with a familiar sort of example. Getting a massage is merely *derivatively* good for me—it improves my well-being, but only because it *causes* me to have a pleasant experience, and that experience is *itself* good for me. In contrast, the pleasant experience improves my well-being in a way that does not depend on its being related to the value of anything else. If this is right, then the pleasant experience is *non-derivatively* good for me. I will be exclusively concerned with non-derivative goodness and badness, as opposed to derivative goodness and badness. I will leave the “non-derivative” qualifier unstated, except as an occasional reminder.

Desire theorists accept the Satisfaction Thesis: they claim that there are desires whose satisfaction is (non-derivatively) good for us in proportion to their strengths. Much less attention has been paid to the topic of desire *frustration*, but philosophers have tended to suggest that it is (non-derivatively) bad for us in proportion to strength of desire. This is what I call the Frustration Thesis. Shelly Kagan tentatively endorses it in a rare discussion of desire frustration (2014, p.172). And Chris Heathwood suggests that he and many other philosophers of well-being also accept it. Here is the opening passage of his introduction to “the desire-fulfillment theory of well-being”:

The desire-fulfillment theory of well-being—also known as desire satisfactionism, preferentism, or simply the desire view—holds, in its simplest form, that what is good in itself for people and other subjects of welfare is their getting what they want, or the fulfillment of their desires, and what is bad in itself for them is their not getting what they want, or the frustration of their desires. Most or all desire theorists would agree

that the stronger the desire, the more beneficial is its satisfaction and the worse its frustration. (2016, p. 135)

If Heathwood's assessment is correct, most proponents of the desire-fulfillment theory accept the Frustration Thesis.

The desire-fulfillment theory is strictly stronger than the basic desire view. It takes the positive claims of the basic desire view—that is, the Satisfaction and Frustration Theses—and adds that *nothing else* is non-derivatively good or bad for us. As Chris Heathwood notes, the desire-fulfillment theory is often regarded as the leading theory of well-being in the philosophical literature.<sup>3</sup> The basic desire view is at least as popular. So I take it that the basic desire view articulates a widely-held view among philosophers of well-being.

With that said, there is much disagreement among those who accept the basic desire view. One prominent point of disagreement concerns the question of *which* desires are relevant to well-being. For example, some philosophers claim that only *informed* desires are relevant; others claim that our desires are relevant only insofar as they are *self-interested*.<sup>4</sup> One might also hold that our desires make a difference to our well-being only to the *extent* that they are informed, or to the *extent* that they are self-

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<sup>3</sup> Heathwood quotes Daniel Haybron as writing that it is “the theory to beat” and has been “[t]he dominant account among economists and philosophers over the last century or so” (2008, p. 34). In a similar vein, William Shaw writes: “[...] the desire-satisfaction theory is probably the dominant view of welfare among economists, social-scientists, and philosophers, both utilitarian and non-utilitarian” (Shaw 1999, p. 53).

<sup>4</sup> Purported examples of desires which do *not* have significance for well-being include *ill-informed desires*, *other-regarding* desires, *base* or *pointless* desires, and *remote* desires. For a discussion of ill-informed desires, see e.g. Sidgwick 1907, p. 109–111. For pointless desires, see e.g. Rawls 1971, p. 92–93. For other-regarding desires, see Robert Adams 1999, p. 87–88. For remote desires, see Parfit 1984, p. 494.

interested. (In that case, one would in effect deny that desires' impact on well-being is proportionate to their strengths; instead one would say that their impact is proportionate to the *products* of their strengths and their informedness, self-interestedness, etc.<sup>5</sup>) For present purposes, I do not want to tackle these issues head on. Instead I will avoid them. I will assume that all the desires I describe in this paper are such that they satisfy whatever criteria are said to be relevant: they are equally informed, self-interested, etc. So, if the basic desire view is true, then the positive and negative significance of those desires should be proportionate to their strengths. These assumptions do not affect the substance of my arguments, but they make the discussion go more smoothly.

While I take it that the basic desire view is motivated by some plausible ideas—namely, that desire satisfaction and frustration have significance for well-being, and that stronger desires have greater significance—I will not defend these general ideas here. Instead I will defend a conditional claim: *if* one accepts that desire satisfaction and frustration have significance for well-being, in roughly the way that I have specified, then one should *reject* the basic desire view as an inadequate articulation of this plausible idea. Instead, one should embrace the distinction between attraction and aversion: two different kinds of desire-like attitudes, with differing significance for well-being. So I have two goals: the first is to show that the basic desire view goes wrong; the second is to show that it goes wrong because it fails to recognize the attraction/aversion distinction.

In service of my first goal, I will argue that the basic desire view makes false predictions regarding *asymmetrical* desires: desires whose satisfaction has greater significance for well-being than their frustration, or vice versa. Given that there are asymmetrical desires—and, more specifically, given

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to [name removed for anonymity] for raising this point.

that our desires can be asymmetrical in *both directions*—it follows that the positive and negative significance of our desires is not always proportional to their strengths.

To see what this claim comes to, consider the following pair of desires:

Table 2.1

	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>Strong Desire</b>	+5	-5	○
<b>Weak Desire</b>	+1	-1	○

The exact numbers should not be taken too seriously here. What’s important is that Strong Desire has greater positive *and* negative significance for well-being than Weak Desire. Whether one satisfies or frustrates Strong Desire, the result (all else being equal) is that one’s well-being diverges *significantly* from the relevant *baseline state*: the state of lacking the Strong Desire altogether. In contrast, if one satisfies or frustrates Weak Desire, the result (all else being equal) is that one’s well-being diverges *less significantly* from the baseline state. Weak Desire has less significance for well-being than Strong Desire. The upshot, here, is that the chart is consistent with the basic desire view. It is consistent with the claim that the positive and negative significance of desire satisfaction and frustration are proportionate to strength of desire.

Table 2.1 suggests that desire satisfaction and frustration have *exactly opposite* significance for well-being, in the following sense: for any pair of desires of equal strength, satisfying the first will raise one’s well-being *exactly as much as* frustrating the second will lower one’s well-being. And vice versa. Call this the Equality Thesis. It is natural for proponents of the basic desire view to embrace the Equality Thesis. But it is not mandatory. Proponents of the basic desire view might accept an Optimistic Thesis:

for any pair of desires of equal strength, satisfying the first will raise one's well-being *more than* frustrating the second will lower one's well-being. They might illustrate their view as follows:

*Table 2.2*

	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>Strong Desire</b>	+25	-5	○
<b>Weak Desire</b>	+5	-1	○

The optimist can tell the following simple story. All else being equal, desire satisfaction is five times as significant as desire frustration. So, satisfying one's desire has five times as much of an impact on one's well-being (relative to baseline) as frustrating that same desire. At the same time, however, the positive and negative significance of a desire are proportionate to that desire's strength. So, given that Strong Desire is five times as strong as Weak Desire, satisfying Strong Desire is five times as good as satisfying Weak Desire, and frustrating Strong Desire is five times as bad as frustrating Weak Desire. Thus, the optimist is a proponent of the basic desire view in good standing.

For exactly parallel reasons, a pessimist could be a proponent of the basic desire view in good standing. They could claim that desire frustration is five times as significant as desire satisfaction, while also claiming desires' the positive and negative significance are proportionate to their strengths. The basic desire view is broad enough to accommodate these varieties of optimism and pessimism.

Crucially, however, a proponent of the basic desire view *cannot* accept the deliverances of the following chart:

*Table 2.3*

	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>Positive Desire</b>	+5	-1	○



<b>Negative Desire</b>	+1	-5	0
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No matter the relative strengths of these two desires, it cannot be that the positive and negative significance of *both* desires is directly proportional to their strengths. For if Positive Desire is stronger, then its frustration should be worse (relative to baseline) than the frustration of Negative Desire—but it isn't.<sup>6</sup> If, alternatively, Negative Desire is stronger, then its satisfaction should be better (relative to baseline) than the satisfaction of Positive Desire—but again, it isn't. There is no way that *both* desires' positive and negative values are proportional to their strengths. So the basic desire view cannot admit such pairs of desires. It cannot admit them because they are asymmetrical *in different ways*: Positive Desire is weighted towards the positive; Negative Desire is weighted towards the negative. I will argue that there are such pairs of desires.

These arguments are closely related to my second goal, which is to show that the asymmetrical desire cases can be neatly explained by distinguishing between attraction and aversion. I will appeal to the distinction in order to motivate the view that the relevant desires are indeed asymmetrical. This might sound circular, but it is not. My arguments would be circular if I were to *define* attraction and aversion in terms of their contributions to well-being. But that is not what I am doing. In motivating the claim that there are asymmetrical desires, I will only appeal to a *psychological* distinction between attraction and aversion. Then, having motivated the claim that there are asymmetrical desires, I will argue that nothing more than the distinction between attraction and aversion is needed to explain our normative judgments in these cases.

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<sup>6</sup> Technically, a basic desire theorist could hold that frustration disvalue is *inversely* proportional to desire strength: the stronger the desire, the less bad it is for one if that desire is frustrated. I take it that this is not a tenable position.

We have a pre-theoretic grip on the distinction between attraction and aversion, though we do not always describe it using those terms. As I understand the attitude of *attraction*, it is implicated in all of the following claims:

- I am looking forward to going to the movie.
- I would love to get a new computer for Christmas.
- I am pleased at the prospect of finishing my paper on time.

When we are attracted to something, we regard it in a positive way. All else being equal, we are motivated to bring it about or maintain it. We can distinguish between “dispositional” and “occurrent” attractions. Paradigmatic instances of the *occurrent* variety are happy daydreams: about being fabulously wealthy, getting a promotion, kissing one’s crush, etc.

The attitude of *aversion*, in contrast, is implicated in other claims:

- I am dreading going to the dump.
- I would hate to get a bucket of spiders for Christmas.
- I am displeased at the prospect of finishing my paper late.

When we are averse to something, we regard it in a negative way. All else being equal, we are motivated to prevent it or get rid of it. Again, we can distinguish between “dispositional” and “occurrent” instances. Paradigmatic instances of *occurrent* aversion are ruminations: about going bankrupt, being fired, being rejected by one’s crush, etc.

Insofar as philosophers have discussed a distinction between positive and negative desire-like attitudes, they have tended to use the term “desire” rather than “attraction” for the positive attitude

(Kagan 2014; Sumner 2020). I prefer not to use “desire” in this way, because it seems to me that desires are not purely positive attitudes. On the contrary, paradigmatic desires involve a mixture of positive and negative attitudes. To illustrate: suppose you strongly desire that there be clear skies today. Then, typically, you will not *merely* regard the prospect of clear skies in a positive way. You will *also* regard the prospect of cloudy skies in a negative way. And your negative attitude seems no less relevant to your desire than your positive attitude.<sup>7</sup> The strength of your desire for clear skies—the degree to which clear skies *matter* to you—seems to be something like the “sum” of your attraction and your aversion.<sup>8</sup> So it seems that aversion is, or can be, a component of desire, in which case it is at least misleading to *contrast* “aversion” with “desire”. It is better to contrast “aversion” with “attraction”, where *attraction* is explicitly understood to be a purely positive attitude, along the lines described above.

More could be said about the difference between attraction and aversion. But for present purposes, it is enough that we have an intuitive grip on the attitudes at issue, and on the difference

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<sup>7</sup> It is sometimes suggested that desire is a paradigmatic “pro-attitude,” where *pro-attitudes* are ways of “being for” or “being into” certain things. (See e.g. Heathwood 2007, p.25.) If this suggestion entails that desire is a purely *positive* attitude in the same way that I have described attraction as being a purely positive attitude, then I am inclined to reject the suggestion, and say that desires are not pro-attitudes in that sense. An alternative view is that “desire” is ambiguous, and on *one* of the meanings between which it is ambiguous, it refers to a purely-positive attitude (see Heathwood 2019). I cannot explore this alternative view here.

<sup>8</sup> Notice also that your negative and positive desire-like attitudes might both have the effect of motivating you to bring about the same outcome. If a wish-granting spirit offered to grant you clear skies in exchange for a fee, your delight at clear skies and your dread at clouds would both have the effect of making you more willing to pay a higher fee. Assuming that the amount of money you would be willing to pay is a rough proxy for the strength of your desire for clear skies, this is further evidence suggesting that both attraction and aversion are relevant to desire.

between them. That is all I need to motivate the view that there are asymmetrical desires: desires whose satisfaction affects our well-being more than does their frustration, or vice versa.

### **§3 Normatively Asymmetrical Desires**

I can say with great confidence that I desire to not be covered in ants. It matters to me quite a lot that I not be covered in ants. This desire, like other paradigmatic desires, involves a mixture of positive and negative attitudes. But the positive and negative are not balanced. On the one hand, I am *strongly averse* to being covered in ants. I loathe the idea of being covered in squirming insects. But on the other hand, I am *not strongly attracted* to being ant-free. I normally take it completely for granted that I am at no risk of being covered in ants, so I am not particularly excited or grateful for the fact that I am not covered in ants.

I claim that this desire is asymmetrical. On the one hand, *having this desire and frustrating it* makes me significantly worse off than I would be if I lacked the desire altogether. On the other hand, *having this desire and satisfying it* does not make me significantly better off than I would be if I lacked the desire altogether. To see what these claim comes to, consider the following three cases:

#### **Ants Desires:**

1. *Frustration*: I am strongly averse to the prospect of being covered in ants. But as I walk to work one day, a clumsy myrmecologist spills her bucket of ants on me.
2. *Satisfaction*: I am strongly averse to the prospect of being covered in ants. My walk to work proceeds as normal—I am never at risk of being covered in ants.
3. *Indifference*: I am not at all averse to being covered in ants. Neither am I attracted to *not* being covered in ants. I simply do not care one way or the other. The myrmecologist may or may not

spill her bucket of ants on me. Either way, I continue on my way to work without any fuss, brushing away ants if necessary.

The space of relevant states of affairs can be organized as follows:

*Table 3.1*

	<b>Covered in Ants</b>	<b>Not Covered in Ants</b>
<b>Desire Not to be Covered in Ants</b>	Frustration	Satisfaction
<b>No Desire Not to be Covered in Ants</b>	Indifference	

My contention is that although Frustration is *much* worse for me than Indifference, Satisfaction is at most only *slightly* better for me than Indifference. Having my desire satisfied is, at most, only slightly better than lacking the desire altogether. Thus, my desire has asymmetrically negative significance for my well-being: its satisfaction makes me only slightly better off, but its frustration makes me much worse off.

A few clarificatory points should be made here. First, we have to be careful in interpreting claims about what “makes us better off” and “makes us worse off”. “Better off” and “worse off” are comparatives; they can only be interpreted relative to some baseline state. In this case, crucially, the relevant baseline state is *Indifference*. I claim that I am much worse off in Frustration than I am in Indifference, and at most only slightly better off in Satisfaction than I am in Indifference. Relative to Indifference, then, my desire has asymmetrically negative significance for my well-being.

It might be natural to think that the relevant baseline state is Satisfaction. After all, this is the status quo for most of us: we are not covered in ants, and we desire to not be covered in ants. But if we take Satisfaction to be our baseline state, then this yields a trivial interpretation of the asymmetry claim. Of course Satisfaction has less significance for my well-being than Frustration, *relative to the baseline state*

of Satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Satisfaction has *no* significance for well-being relative to Satisfaction; it does not make me any better or worse off. So we have to be careful to keep in mind that the relevant baseline is not Satisfaction but Indifference. The resulting asymmetry claim can be expressed as follows:

Table 3.2

	Satisfaction	Frustration	Baseline (Indifference)
Ants Desire	+1	-5	0

The numbers should not be taken too seriously here; the important point is that whereas Frustration is much worse for me than Indifference, Satisfaction is not much better for me than Indifference.

A second clarificatory point: I am assuming that, apart from my desire not to be covered in ants, I do not have any further desires which make for a difference in my well-being across the three cases. And a third, final clarificatory point: I am ignoring the *derivative* goodness or badness of being covered in ants. Being covered in ants might cause some bad effects—I might not be allowed in my office, which would frustrate my desire to get to work. But I am ignoring these derivative, downstream effects, because I am concerned solely with the *non-derivative* value of desire satisfaction and frustration.

To get a grip on the comparison between the three cases of Satisfaction, Frustration, and Indifference, it can be helpful to imagine that they concern three different subjects: Anne F(rustration), Anne S(atisfaction) and Anne I(ndifference). My claim, then, is that whereas Anne F is *significantly* worse off than Anne I, Anne S is at most only *slightly* better off than Anne I. It would be appropriate for Anne I to feel *very* sorry for Anne F. But it would be quite strange for Anne I to feel *very* glad for Anne S. Although Anne S is perhaps a bit better off for having her desire satisfied, this does not amount to a very

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

significant difference in well-being between herself and Anne I. The upshot is that the desires in this case are asymmetrical: they have more negative than positive significance for well-being.

All the same considerations apply if we start at the other end of the spectrum, with a case of “positive” desire. Suppose, for example, that I desire to be on TV. When I see other people interviewed on talk shows, I often have pleasant daydreams about being interviewed myself. I am strongly attracted to the prospect of being on TV. On the other hand, I am not terribly averse to the prospect of *not* being on TV. I am not particularly frustrated or upset about the fact that, as things stand, I probably will never be featured on television.

I claim that this is another asymmetrical desire. Its satisfaction (being on TV) would raise my well-being more than its frustration (not being on TV) lowers my well-being, *relative* to the state of my not having this desire at all. We can once again appeal to a set of three cases:

**TV Desires:**

1. *Frustration:* I am strongly attracted to the prospect of being on television. I walk to work as normal—I am not stopped for a television interview.
2. *Satisfaction:* I am strongly attracted to the prospect of being on television. As I walk to work one day, I am stopped by a reporter who conducts an interview. Of course, I am excited and happy.
3. *Indifference:* I am not at all attracted to the prospect of being on TV. Neither am I averse to *not* being on TV. I simply do not care one way or the other. The reporter may or may not pull me aside for an interview. Either way, I continue on my way to work unfazed.

The space of relevant states of affairs can be organized as follows:

<i>Table 3.3</i>	<b>TV Appearance</b>	<b>No TV Appearance</b>
<b>Desire to be on TV</b>	Satisfaction	Frustration
<b>No Desire to be on TV</b>	Indifference	

And the asymmetry claim can be expressed as follows:

<i>Table 3.4</i>	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>TV Desire</b>	+5	-1	0

Again the numbers should not be taken too seriously. The point is that whereas Satisfaction is much better for me than Indifference, Frustration is not much worse for me than Indifference. Having my desire frustrated is at most only slightly worse than lacking the desire altogether.

Suppose that the three cases concern three different subjects: Trevor F(rustration), Trevor S(atisfaction), and Trevor I(ndifference). Then I claim that whereas Trevor S is *significantly* better off than Trevor I, Trevor F is at most only *slightly* worse off than Trevor I. The satisfaction of the relevant desire is more significant than the frustration of that desire. Thus, it would be appropriate for Trevor I to feel very glad for Trevor S. But it would be inappropriate for Trevor I to feel *very* sorry for Trevor F. Although Trevor F might be a bit worse off for having his desire frustrated, this does not amount to a very significant difference in well-being between himself and Trevor I. The upshot is that this case, like the case of Ants desire, shows that our desires can be asymmetrical. In this case, however, the desire is asymmetrically positive.

To account for the asymmetries, we need only leverage the distinction between attraction and aversion. We can divide up the work that desires are supposed to do in the basic desire view, so that attraction takes on desire's positive significance, and aversion takes on its negative significance. In place



of the original Satisfaction Thesis and Frustration Thesis, we can substitute straightforward alternatives:

**Attraction Satisfaction:** It is non-derivatively good for subjects to have their attractions satisfied. The stronger the attraction, the better its satisfaction.

**Aversion Frustration:** It is non-derivatively bad for subjects to have their aversions frustrated. The stronger the aversion, the worse its frustration.

Having taken on these claims, we can provide straightforward explanations of what is going on in Ants Desire and TV Desire. I am strongly averse to being covered in ants, but only weakly attracted to the prospect of *not* being covered in ants. That is why it would be very bad for me to be covered in ants, but it's only slightly good for me to not be covered in ants. Similarly, I am strongly attracted to being on TV, but only weakly averse to the prospect of *not* being on TV. That is why it would be very good for me to be on TV, but it's only slightly bad for me to not be on TV. (Recall that all these claims are to be understood relative to the baseline state of Indifference.) The attraction/aversion proposal is well-suited to explain what is going on in these cases.

The basic desire view, in contrast, provides no easy explanations. Putting together the asymmetry claims regarding Ants Desire and TV Desire (and assuming those desires are roughly equivalent in strength) we can express those claims roughly as follows:

*Table 3.5*

	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>Ants Desire</b>	+1	-5	○
<b>TV Desire</b>	+5	-1	○

At most one of TV Desire or Ants Desire is such that its positive and negative significance is proportional to its strength. Either way, the basic desire view turns out to be false. There is no set of desires such that all and only those desires have positive and negative significance, and in proportion to their strengths.

In contrast with my interpretations of the two cases, proponents of the basic desire view must claim that Ants Desire and TV Desire share the same or similar significance for well-being. Assume that the two desires are the same strength. Then the basic desire theorist must offer some version of the following schematic interpretation:

*Table 3.6*

	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Frustration</b>	<b>Baseline (Indifference)</b>
<b>Ants Desire</b>	+ $x$	- $y$	○
<b>TV Desire</b>	+ $x$	- $y$	○

Different values of  $x$  and  $y$  correspond to different versions of the basic desire view. If  $x$  is greater than  $y$ , then the version is “optimistic”. If  $y$  is greater than  $x$ , then the version is “pessimistic”. If  $x$  and  $y$  are equal, then the version is “natural”. But *however* we fill out this schema, we will arrive at an implausible result. I will consider each of the options in turn.

Suppose we say that  $x$  is relatively high. This claim yields the welcome result that TV-Satisfaction is much better for me than TV-Indifference. But it also yields the unwelcome result that Ants-Satisfaction is much better for me than Ants-Indifference. It is flatly implausible that I am significantly better off merely for dreading the possibility of being covered in ants. This implies that if I were to stop caring about being covered in ants—if I were to become Indifferent—then I would be significantly worse off. More generally, it implies that if I started to dread various possibilities to which I

am currently Indifferent, I would be much better off.<sup>10</sup> But these implications are absurd—aversion does not have that sort of positive significance. We cannot make ourselves better off by dreading various far-flung possibilities which never come to pass. So it is not plausible that the satisfaction of my Ants Desire is very good for me.

Similar issues arise if we say that  $y$  is relatively high. This claim yields the welcome result that Ants-Frustration is much worse for me than Ants-Indifference. But it also yields the unwelcome result that TV-Frustration is much worse for me than TV-Indifference. And it is implausible that I am significantly worse off merely for liking the idea of being interviewed on TV. If I were to rid myself of this desire, I would not be much better off. More generally, we are not much worse off for having happy daydreams about various far-flung possibilities which never come to pass. So it is not plausible that the frustration of my TV Desire is very bad for me.

Now suppose we say that  $x$  and  $y$  are relatively low. Then we will have to conclude that my TV Desire's satisfaction and my Ants Desire's frustration would be at most slightly good and bad for me, respectively. These results are again implausible. One of my greatest hopes is to be on TV, and one of my greatest fears is to be covered in ants. It would be quite good for me if one of my greatest hopes was realized, and quite bad for me if one of my greatest fears came to pass. At least, this is certainly what we

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<sup>10</sup> In response, the basic desire theorist might point out that we generally desire to rid ourselves of irrational phobias, and the frustration of *these* desires might make for a net decrease in well-being. This is fine as far as it goes, but it does not change the central point: my developing agoraphobia (for example) does not make it the case that my well-being is increased by staying home all day. Merely being agoraphobic would not increase my well-being in any way at all—unless, perhaps, it causes me to feel pleased or grateful for the fact that I remain indoors. In general, our dreads and fears do not have any positive implications for our well-being, unless we come to feel grateful for the fact that our fears have not come to pass.

should say if we are at all on board with the idea that desire satisfaction and frustration make a difference to well-being.

One who accepts the basic desire view might respond as follows. Both  $x$  and  $y$  are low because they concern possibilities which, *at present*, I regard as distant. It is hard to muster up strong desires regarding distant possibilities. But if the possibilities were no longer distant—as they would not be if I were in fact on TV, or in fact covered in ants—then my desires would be *vivid*. In those circumstances, the desires would increase significantly in both positive and negative significance. So it turns out that the satisfaction and frustration of those desires would have a significant impact on my well-being, even though they are not *presently* such that their satisfaction and frustration would have a significant impact on my well-being. Thus, one might argue, the desires might meet the proportionality constraint after all: they might both have significance proportional to their strengths.

In effect, the proponent of the basic desire view is offering a psychological hypothesis about how my desires can be expected to change over time. But even if this hypothesis is correct, it will not get us far. Even in cases in which my TV Desire is vivid, its frustration may be no worse for me than lacking the desire altogether. Similarly, even in cases in which my Ants Desire is vivid, its satisfaction may be no better for me than lacking the desire altogether.

The clearest illustrations of this point are cases in which I am mistaken about whether my desires are satisfied or frustrated. Suppose I am walking down the street, and I see that a television in a store window is playing a video of me. The television is simply playing a live feed of the street in front of the store. But for a few moments, I do not realize this. I briefly believe that I am being broadcast on television. So, for a moment, I *vividly* desire to appear on TV—and of course, this desire is frustrated.

But it is implausible that the frustration of this desire seriously lowers my well-being, below the baseline state of lacking the desire altogether. If, upon realizing my mistake, I began to feel crushing disappointment, then that would be a way in which the frustration of my desire is *derivatively* bad for me. But suppose that, once I realize that I am not really on television, I am not at all disappointed. I simply laugh at my silly mistake and continue my walk. In this case, it is not at all plausible that I am significantly worse off for having my desire frustrated, relative to the baseline of lacking that desire altogether.

The same kind of case can also be constructed around my aversion to ants. Suppose I am waking slowly from a dream in which my house has been infested with ants. Still half-dreaming, the tickle of the sheets on my skin feels like the movements of insects, and I briefly believe that I am indeed covered in ants. So I *vividly* desire that I not be covered in ants—and of course, this desire is satisfied. But it is implausible that the satisfaction of this desire provides a significant positive boost to my well-being, over and above the baseline state of *lacking* the desire altogether.

The attraction/aversion proposal can neatly explain the cases I have considered. In contrast, the basic desire view struggles to explain them. I provisionally conclude that we should reject the idea that there is a single attitude—desire—whose satisfaction is good for us in proportion to its strength, and whose frustration is bad for us in proportion to its strength. Instead, we should run with the idea that there are two attitudes—attraction and aversion—whose satisfaction and frustration are good for us and bad for us in proportion to their respective strengths. We should run with this idea at least until it runs into problems.

Accordingly, my next step will be to go looking for problems. In the next section I will consider some problems suggested by Shelly Kagan (2014) and Wayne Sumner (2020) for the distinction between positive and negative desire-like attitudes. I conclude that the problems they raise can be satisfactorily addressed, so desire theorists should adopt the attraction/aversion proposal as a working theory. We should reject the view that desires have fundamental normative significance for well-being; we should instead say that their normative significance is derived from the significance of attraction and aversion.

#### **§4 The Distinction Defended**

Shelly Kagan and Wayne Sumner consider cases of normatively asymmetrical desire (though not by that name) and they note that those cases make trouble for desire theorists. They both briefly consider solutions which appeal to a distinction between positive and negative desire-like attitudes. But, for different reasons, they both reject that solution. I will begin with Kagan's objection, before moving on to Sumner's objection.

##### **§4.1 Kagan's Objection**

Here is how Kagan describes the distinct-attitudes view:

Perhaps what the preference theory needs is to introduce a second psychological attitude, one that corresponds, in a negative way, to the positive attitude that preference theories normally describe. That is, just as there is a positive attitude—desire or preference—that we can have toward certain objects (or states of affairs), perhaps there is a quite distinct negative attitude—call it *aversion*—that we can also take toward various objects (or states of affairs). And just as preference theory holds that when I want X and X obtains (so my desire is satisfied) this *improves* my level of well-being, so

too it should hold that when I have an aversion to X, and yet X obtains nonetheless (so that my aversion is frustrated) this *lowers* my level of well-being. (2014, p.270; emphasis in the original)

For Kagan, “desire or preference” corresponds roughly to what I call “attraction”. And we share the same usage of “aversion”. So I think that Kagan’s general proposal is correct. Desire theorists ought to distinguish between positive and negative desire-like attitudes, with differing significance for well-being.

But Kagan himself rejects the proposal. He writes:

[...] if preference and aversion are indeed logically distinct psychological attitudes, then as far as I can see, nothing rules out the possibility that one might have both a preference for X and an *aversion* to X—indeed both a preference and an aversion to the very same *feature* of X—at one and the same time. (2014, p.270; emphasis in the original)

Kagan takes this to be a worrying result. He tells us:

To be sure, we are used to the idea that some generally described object or state of affairs might be good for you in one way and bad for you in another. But in such cases, I think, we normally point to different features of the object (different aspects of the state of affairs), precisely so as to be able to say that the one feature of the object is good for you, while another feature of the object is bad. What seems troubling is the idea that a *single* feature of a single object could be both intrinsically good and intrinsically bad for you simultaneously. (2014, pp. 270-271; emphasis in the original)

Speaking for myself, I do not find this to be a terribly troubling result. Suppose that I will soon be sharing a long car ride with Bill, a friend of mine from high school. On the one hand, he is an old friend who I have not seen in a long time. On the other hand, our interests and personalities drifted apart long ago, and we no longer have much to talk about. Thus, I have mixed feelings. And let us assume that these mixed feelings are to be cashed out in the way that Kagan describes: I bear both positive and negative attitudes towards the very same state of affairs. I am both *attracted* to the prospect of the long car ride, *and* averse to it. With the details of the case thus specified, it does seem plausible—to me, anyway—that the car ride is both good for me and bad for me.<sup>11</sup>

More generally, I do not share Kagan's thought that no state of affairs could be both non-derivatively good and non-derivatively bad for one simultaneously. The thought seems natural insofar as we conceive of goodness and badness in terms of positive and negative numbers which cancel each other out. But maybe that is not the right way to think about values. Maybe goodness and badness are more like black and white pigments: do not cancel each other out but instead mix together. If so, then the total value of a single state of affairs could be a mixture of good and bad.

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this would suggest that the goodness or badness of Bill's presence is irreducible to its being *better* for me or *worse* for me than other states of affairs. For suppose that I am having a party, and both Bill and Briti are attending. I am strongly attracted to the prospect of Bill attending, and only weakly averse to it. Suppose furthermore that I am weakly attracted to the prospect of Briti's attending, and not at all averse to her presence. Intuitively, then, Bill's presence might have the same *total* value for me as Briti's presence, owing to the balance of my attractions and aversions. In a ranking of states of affairs from best to worst, those two states of affairs would occupy the same spot. But they are *not* good for me to the same degree—Bill's presence is better for me than Briti's presence, because I am more strongly attracted to Bill's presence than to Briti's presence. They occupy the same spot in the ranking only because Bill's presence is *also* bad for me, owing to the fact that I am averse to his presence.



Let us grant, however, that Kagan is right about this: no single state of affairs can be both intrinsically good and intrinsically bad for a subject. Even granting this point, the proponent of the distinct-attitudes view has at least three possible responses to Kagan's objection. If any of the responses are successful, the objection poses no special problem for the distinct-attitudes view.

The first response is that we need not assume that attraction and aversion are "logically distinct psychological attitudes" (2014, p.270). We have said very little thus far regarding the psychological natures of these attitudes, but ultimately, they might be understood in such a way as to rule out the possibility of a subject being attracted and averse to the same state of affairs. For example, we might say that being attracted to X is a matter of being disposed to have overall pleasant experiences insofar as one contemplates X, and that being averse to X is a matter of being disposed to have overall unpleasant experiences insofar as one contemplates X. If, as seems plausible, one's overall experience cannot be both pleasant and unpleasant, then we could maintain that no one can be simultaneously attracted and averse to X. In the Bill case, we will end up concluding that due to the natures of the attitudes involved, my attitudes of attraction and aversion must target different fine-grained states of affairs. Perhaps I am attracted to the prospect of *having nostalgic conversations with Bill*, but averse to the prospect of *having awkward conversations with Bill*.

A second response is that, even if it is possible to be simultaneously attracted and averse to the very same state of affairs X, proponents of the distinct-attitudes view can still avoid the conclusion that X is both non-derivatively good for one and non-derivatively bad for one. To see this, notice that there is an important ambiguity in claims like "it is non-derivatively good for you to satisfy your desire for pizza." The claim could be that it's good for you to eat pizza, or it could be saying that it's good for you to

eat pizza while desiring to eat pizza. On the second interpretation, but not the first interpretation, your desire is *part* of the overall state of affairs which is good for you.<sup>12</sup> The second interpretation will be favored by those who side with Moore in thinking that nothing can have non-derivative value merely in virtue of its relations to other things, such as desires. If we embrace this Moorean interpretation, we have an easy response to Kagan's challenge. Strictly speaking, X is not non-derivatively good for you. Neither is it non-derivatively bad for you. Rather, X while you are attracted to X is good for you, and X while you are averse to X is bad for you. Or, in my case: sharing a car ride with Bill while being attracted to doing so is non-derivatively good for me; sharing a car ride with Bill while being averse to doing so is non-derivatively bad for me. These states of affairs are distinct, even if they occur simultaneously. So no single state of affairs is *both* non-derivatively good for me *and* non-derivatively bad for me.

The third response to Kagan's worry is that it has nothing in particular to do with the distinct-attitudes view. It arises for the basic desire view as well. As Kagan notes:

Admittedly, it isn't clear to me whether this problem arises only when we introduce the second attitude, aversion. After all, what should a fan of *traditional* preference theory say about the possibility of a case in which someone simultaneously wants both X and not X (by virtue of the very same feature)? Won't this also be a situation in which the obtaining of X is both intrinsically good and intrinsically bad for that person? (2014, p.271)

Kagan ultimately contends that the basic desire view is *not* equally vulnerable to the objection. But his reasons for thinking this are somewhat puzzling. Kagan suggests that it is *irrational* to desire X while

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<sup>12</sup> This ambiguity in desire-based approaches to well-being is explored by Jan Österberg and Wlodek Rabinowicz (1996), and by Joseph van Weelden (2019).

also desiring  $\sim X$ , but it is *not irrational* to be attracted to X while also being averse to X. So the basic desire view offers a kind of guarantee that X will never be both non-derivatively good and non-derivatively bad for a *fully rational* person. But the distinct-attitudes view offers no such guarantee. Thus, Kagan thinks, the basic desire view (or as he calls it, the “traditional preference theory”) is to be preferred over the distinct attitudes view.

Even granting Kagan’s claims about rationality, I don’t see how this is supposed to be an advantage of the basic desire view. Supposing that one has the intuition that nothing could be both non-derivatively good and non-derivatively bad for the same subject, why should one’s intuition discriminate between rational and irrational subjects? Why is it *more* intuitive that a single state of affairs may be both good and bad for an *irrational* subject, and *less* intuitive that a single state of affairs may be both good and bad for a *rational* subject? The intuition concerns which can be co-instantiated with which other properties. It is something like the intuition that nothing could be both uniformly hot and uniformly cold, or uniformly red and uniformly blue. The whole topic of *rationality* seems to be beside the point. So it seems that, with respect to the phenomenon Kagan finds troubling, the traditional desire theory is on a par with the distinct attitudes view. It is no less amenable to the possibility that a single state of affairs may be both non-derivatively good and non-derivatively bad for a subject.

It should be noted that Kagan does not claim to have given the final word on the distinct-attitudes view. He closes by reminding us “Obviously, more needs to be said about this issue, and others may not share my own judgments about these matters” (2014, p.272). I hope I have said enough to show that, ultimately, Kagan’s worries are not so worrying after all. At most, Kagan’s objection poses a problem for desire-based theories of well-being generally. It does not cast doubt on the distinct-

attitudes view in particular. So it does not cast doubt on the view that desire theorists should distinguish between positive and negative attitudes.

#### **§4.2 Sumner's Objection**

Sumner considers a kind of desire theory which:

...introduces a con-attitude – call it aversion – which involves disfavouring an object or shunning it or seeking to avoid it. A substantive bad would then be the frustration of an aversion: having the disfavoured object occur or obtain. (2020, p.427)

Sumner keeps the word “desire” to refer to the positive counterpart of aversion, whereas I prefer “attraction”. But the proposal he considers is substantively the same as my proposal: we introduce a distinction between positive and negative desire-like attitudes, then use the distinction to explain what is going on in cases like Ants Desire and TV Desire.

Sumner's objection to the proposal is as follows. Suppose you desire that it not rain this afternoon. In that case, Sumner says, your attitude can be represented in three different ways:

- R1. Desire (It does not rain this afternoon.)
- R2. Aversion (It rains this afternoon.)
- R3. Desire (The weather is dry this afternoon.)

But, Sumner claims, the different *representations* of your attitude cannot do any philosophical work. He says that:

All three of these alternatives come to the same thing: that is, your positive desire is satisfied, your negative desire is satisfied, and your aversion is frustrated by exactly the

same state of affairs (a rain-free afternoon)... Nothing seems to be gained by introducing the negative element. The problem for the desire view will still be to distinguish those desires whose frustration constitutes a substantive bad from those whose frustration is a mere privation... (2020, p.428-429)

Sumner's objection is that, by articulating three different ways in which a single desire can be represented—namely R1, R2, and R3—we have not made any progress towards explaining what sort of significance this desire has for well-being.

It seems clear how we should respond to Sumner's objection: we should reject his assumption that R1, R2, and R3 merely correspond to different ways of *representing* a single attitude. We should insist that there is a substantive difference between positive and negative desire-like attitudes.

We have different words for talking about these different attitudes. It might be that I *dread* the prospect of cloudy weather, whereas you are *delighted* at the prospect of clear skies. As Sumner says, our attitudes are satisfied by the same state of affairs: namely, clear skies. Nevertheless, our attitudes are different. Dread and delight are clearly different. And I claim that this difference in our attitudes makes for a difference in how our well-being would be affected by the weather. If it rains, my well-being is significantly *lower* than it would be if I lacked the desire. If there are clear skies, your well-being is significantly *higher* than it would be if you lacked the desire.

We should be careful here. I am not merely making a point about how the weather will affect our feelings and emotions in different ways. It is true that clouds would cause me displeasure, and clear skies would cause you pleasure, and that our pleasures and displeasures have direct impacts on well-

being.<sup>13</sup> But that is not the point I am making. I am claiming that *the weather* affects our levels of well-being differently in virtue of the difference in our attitudes towards the eather: I am averse to clouds; you are delighted by clear skies. In line with the spirit of the basic desire view, I am proposing that the weather impacts us differently in virtue of our differing attitudes. I am not wheeling in any further explanans.

I conclude that Sumner's worry is misguided. We have good reason to think that attraction and aversion are distinct phenomena, and not merely different ways of talking about desires. It's true that, if one appeals to the distinction between attraction and aversion, one should ultimately give an account of the psychological difference between them. I think it likely that difference is to be explained in terms of pleasure and displeasure: attraction involves a certain sort of directed anticipatory pleasure; aversion involves a certain sort of directed anticipatory displeasure. On the resulting view, clear skies leave you doubly well-off: both the clear skies *and* your anticipatory pleasure are good for you. And cloudy skies leave me doubly badly-off: both the clouds *and* my anticipatory displeasure are bad for me. This is not the place to develop a psychological account of the distinction in any detail. But there certainly is a difference between, for example, dreading clouds and loving clear skies, whether or not those attitudes are satisfied by the same state of affairs.

## **§6 Conclusion**

I have argued that there is no single subset of desires whose satisfaction is non-derivatively good for us in proportion to their strengths, and whose frustration is non-derivatively bad for us in

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<sup>13</sup> Sumner warns against this. He warns that desire theorists do not have recourse to "...invoking the experientialist's resource: the quality of the subject's subsequent affective experience" (2020, p.249).

proportion to their strengths. For there are pairs of desires which differ with respect to their positive-negative asymmetries. Ants Desire is asymmetrically negative, and TV desire is asymmetrically positive. At most one of these desires can be such that its positive and negative significance is proportional to its strength.

If we insist that the desires do not differ with respect to their positive-negative asymmetries, then we commit ourselves to strange claims. For example, we have to say that I am made significantly better off for dreading the possibility of being covered in ants, or that I am significantly worse off by daydreaming idly about being on TV. I have argued that there is no way to avoid making these strange claims, so long as we hold onto the basic desire view. So we should give it up in favor of the view that desires involve a mixture of two different attitudes: one of which has positive significance for well-being, and one of which has negative significance for well-being. By helping ourselves to the distinction between attraction and aversion, we can better explain the connection between desire and well-being

I will close by noting a particular way in which the distinction might help us understand the connection. According to an influential Buddhist idea, desire is a deeply bad thing, and we would be better off if we rid ourselves of desire. This idea sits uncomfortably with traditional desire-based theories of well-being, since such theories entail that having desires is a necessary condition for being benefitted by anything.<sup>14</sup> Proponents of such theories must roundly reject the Buddhist idea. But if we accept the distinct-attitudes view, we need not do this. We can say that, insofar as it is interpreted as a point about *aversion*, the Buddhist idea is correct. Aversion has no positive implications for well-being: its frustration makes us worse off, and its satisfaction does *not* make us better off. So it is plausible that,

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<sup>14</sup> Chris Heathwood briefly notes this point in a summary of lesser-known objections to desire satisfactionism (2015, p.145).

insofar as we rid ourselves of our *negative* attachments to things, this is good for us. And there is nothing *ad hoc* about interpreting the Buddhist claim as a claim about aversion. In the context of the claim that desire leads to suffering, Buddhist texts typically use the word “taṇhā,” which is better translated as “craving,” rather than “desire” (Williams, Tribe, and Wynne 2012, p.44). This at least suggests that “taṇhā” refers to a distinctly unpleasant *kind* of desire, rather than referring to desire in the most general sense. So, on the distinct-attitudes view, there is an available interpretation of the Buddhist idea which is plausible. The key is to notice that not all desires are created equal: some have greater positive significance for well-being; some have greater negative significance for well-being.

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