

Educational Adequacy, Educational Equality, and Ideal Theory

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The current philosophical and political debate in the US and UK between proponents of adequacy and proponents of equality in educational opportunity involves a heated disagreement about the purpose of education reform. On both sides of the debate, philosophers are trying to develop principles that can be used in creating effective policies for improving current educational systems with respect to justice. Proponents of an adequacy standard argue that justice requires that a minimum level of opportunity be available to all, and that inequalities above this level are not unjust. Elizabeth Anderson (2007) and Debra Satz (2007, 2008) have recently pursued demanding adequacy standards, arguing that justice calls for each person to be educated to a level adequate for the opportunity to function in the public sphere as an equal citizen. Proponents of what can be called ‘meritocratic’ educational equality of opportunity like Harry Brighouse (2000) and Adam Swift (2003) have instead argued that justice requires prospects for educational achievement to be dependent upon a child’s ability and willingness to learn, and not on factors outside of her control.

Adequacy and equality views have widely been considered distinct approaches to educational distribution. The shift in educational law and policy reform from emphasizing equity to adequacy is probably partly causally responsible for this belief (see Koski and Reich 2006 for a description of the rhetorical shift). Recently, however, some philosophers have been hesitant to draw a bright line between adequacy and equality. Debra Satz (2008) has argued that her conception of adequacy is deeply rooted in a concern for equality and that the distinction between the two is ‘overdrawn’, and Kenneth Strike (2008) has argued for a view that involves an adequacy threshold as well as equality considerations. To what extent, then, are adequacy and equality views distinct? While I believe there are several ways one might go about drawing a meaningful distinction between adequacy and equality, I appeal to the so-called ‘ideal theory’ that underlies the approaches of Anderson, Satz, Brighouse, and Swift in order to illuminate a fundamental conceptual distinction between the two approaches. I hope to show that, while not mutually exclusive approaches, adequacy and equality are supported by distinct normative arguments.

Adequacy and Equality

Proponents of an adequacy standard argue that justice requires a minimum level of opportunity to be available to all, and that inequalities above this level are not unjust. Elizabeth Anderson and Debra Satz have proposed that justice calls for each person to be educated to a level adequate for the opportunity to function in the public sphere as an equal citizen, but they take different perspectives on what must be achieved in order to establish that minimum. Anderson focuses on those who make policy decisions, identified as ‘elites’, and the role that they play in structuring social opportunity:

In a democratic society, elites must be so constituted that they will effectively serve all sectors of society, not just themselves. They must perform in their offices so that the inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility, and reward they enjoy in virtue of their position redound to the benefit of all, including the least advantaged (2007, 596).

In order to create conditions under which elites will reliably and appropriately act in ways that benefit the disadvantaged, Anderson argues, the elites as a group must be partly constituted by the disadvantaged.

In light of the social goal Anderson sets out to achieve and the observation that it can only be achieved with integration, she argues that the education system ought to cultivate those qualifications that will enable elites, as a group, to be properly sensitive and attentive to the plight of the least advantaged. In practice, several standards within the education system must be established in support of this broader social goal, beginning with the standard that children across all social groups “have effective access to a primary and secondary education sufficient to qualify them for success at a four-year residential college” with a curriculum “demanding enough to prepare students for post-graduate (professional) education” (2007, 614). This standard, in turn, requires every child with the potential to join the elite to have effective access to college-preparatory material in high school, and that elite educational institutions revise their entrance policies so as to give qualified members of the disadvantaged effective opportunities to join the ranks of the elite.

Debra Satz, in contrast, offers an argument for adequacy in educational opportunity that focuses on those who are likely to be disadvantaged, and thus unlikely to be elites. She argues that schooling is properly constrained by the purpose of fostering democratic citizenship, whereby children can come to see everyone as social equals as well as develop the skills necessary to fully participate as citizens. Satz lists five criteria by which primary and secondary education ought to be distributed in order to realize adequacy. First, schooling must provide individuals with the skills necessary for acting politically (voting, sitting on a jury, etc.), as well as for maintaining employment and “solid prospects of living a decent life.” Second, any inequality of opportunity for securing ‘elite’ positions is itself bounded by the adequacy criterion, based on the observation that inequalities amongst the upper-echelons of society can affect the minimum requirements for equal citizenship. Third, and with a nod to Anderson, Satz says leadership positions ought to be distributed across various social groups. Fourth, the capabilities for cooperation with others in a diverse society need to be secured, which in practice demands reform outside the education sector (including the desegregation of race and class across neighborhoods, as well as schools). Lastly, ‘leveling down’ the educational prospects of the advantaged is permissible only if doing so is the only way to achieve the adequacy threshold.¹ Leveling down must be avoided in all other circumstances because, she argues, education is an intrinsic good to those who receive it.

What is the conception of justice that inspires the adequacy standards advanced by Anderson and Satz? I suggest we look to Anderson’s 1999 article, “What Is the Point of Equality?”, in which Anderson defends what she calls ‘democratic equality’. Democratic equality requires the universal moral equality of all people to be represented in the space of political capabilities, such that everyone is entitled to those capabilities that are necessary for functioning as equals in a democratic state. This aim is met by the establishment of a threshold: once people are able to function as equal citizens, the demands of justice have been fulfilled. As Anderson says, democratic equality

¹ Notice that this usage of the concept “leveling down” does not follow the typical usage in the egalitarian literature. In Satz’s sense, to level down is to decrease the educational prospects of the advantaged, which is consistent with the prospects of the disadvantaged being improved as a result, or not. The charge that (at least some) egalitarians are committed to leveling down in the egalitarian literature, however, amounts to the charge that egalitarians could in principle be forced to favor policies that worsen the better off while bettering no one, just for the sake of achieving equality. See, for example, Derek Parfit, 2002. In what follows, I will use “leveling down” in Satz’s sense.

“guarantees not effective access to equal levels of functioning but effective access to levels of functioning *sufficient* to stand as an equal in society” (1999, 318 my emphasis), and “requires that everyone have effective access to *enough* resources to avoid being oppressed by others and to function as an equal in civil society” (1999, 320 my emphasis).

Debra Satz’s claim that her own adequacy standard undermines the distinction between equality and adequacy suggests that something very like democratic equality grounds her adequacy criterion as well (2007, 625 and 638). As she says: “On my view, a certain type of equality—civic equality—is actually internal to the idea of educational adequacy for a democratic society” (2008, 425). What constitutes educational adequacy is determined by the requirements of equal citizenship, and thus includes “comparative, egalitarian, and relational elements” because what it takes to be a successful citizen depends on the knowledge, skills and successes of one’s fellow citizens (2008, 425). For the purposes of this paper, I will use democratic equality and civic equality interchangeably.

The demands of equality expressed by democratic equality are supported by a sufficientarian conception of justice. According to sufficientarian views, justice demands only that some minimal level of opportunity (or goods, or capabilities, or whatever the currency of justice is) is met for all. I believe democratic equality offers the most comprehensive theoretical, moral basis for the adequacy standard in the education sector. The reason that elites be qualified in such a way that “the inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility, and reward [elites] enjoy in virtue of their position redound to the benefit of all” is that when they are so qualified the positive aim of democratic equality can be met: that we realize a social order in which people have the opportunity to interact with each other as democratic equals. Similarly, the reason why Satz proposes each of the above specific five criteria for the distribution of education is that each one is integral to establishing the conditions for people to interact as democratic equals. Democratic equality, then, functions as a kind of moral standard against which the condition of the disadvantaged can be measured, and specific proposals for remedy can be offered. Since the education system offers a prime mechanism for manifesting some of the changes that are necessary to achieving the desired social arrangement, democratic equality has particularly salient implications for reform in the education sector.

It is worth noting that democratic equality does not imply that segregation of the disadvantaged is, in itself, unjust. As long as the social segregation of the disadvantaged does not prevent the disadvantaged from acting as full equals in the public sphere, it is consistent with justice that such social division exists. No failure of compliance with justice is *necessarily* involved in such social division (likely as it may be that non-compliance is involved). Further, just as democratic equality is meant to encompass all of society’s justice concerns, educational adequacy is presented as an all-inclusive sectoral principle. Consider the following, from Anderson:

I have argued that if we practice integration in our educational institutions to the extent required to produce a qualified elite, the resulting distribution of educational opportunity will redound to the benefit of all *and provide no grounds for complaint on the part of the disadvantaged*, even if some receive more investments in their education than others (2007, 622 emphasis added).

The defined minimum requires only the development of a qualified elite, and so long as that minimum is met, the disadvantaged have no justice-based cause for complaint. When we examine Satz's five criteria, we can see the same applies to her view; education must be distributed so as to achieve effective opportunity for civic equality for all, and once that goal is achieved there is nothing more justice requires.

Proponents of what can be called 'meritocratic' educational equality of opportunity have instead argued that justice requires prospects for educational achievement to be dependent upon a child's ability and willingness to learn, and not on factors outside of her control. In his book *School Choice and Social Justice*, Harry Brighouse offers a detailed account of the value of equal educational opportunity, providing two arguments in favor of its being a value. The first argument he offers in favor of equality, what he calls the 'basic' argument, highlights the instrumental value of education in equalizing competitive economic advantage (2000, 117-118). The argument takes as a background assumption a labor market structure that results in an unequal distribution of rewards. Brighouse claims the competition for reward ought to be designed so that the achievement of it hinges as much as possible on factors for which individual agents are rightfully held responsible. To the degree that market outcomes depend upon factors outside of agents' control, such as the socioeconomic background and decision-making capabilities of their parents, inequalities in outcomes are not properly reflective of how much agents deserve the rewards they receive. Insofar as educational achievement is a precondition of enjoying opportunities in the labor market, opportunities for educational achievement, similarly, ought not be due to factors outside of agents' control. It follows that inequalities in education that are due to such factors are objectionable.

Brighouse's 'secondary argument' for educational equality focuses on the intrinsic benefits of education. Receiving education confers an opportunity to possess an intrinsic good—a good that adds value to one's life whether or not it is instrumental in improving one's economic opportunities. Intrinsic goods, insofar as they are subject to distribution by the state, ought to be distributed equally in order to express the state's equal concern and respect for its citizens. Unequal state distribution of goods that are intrinsically valuable risks the perception that the state values the lives of some of its citizens more than others. Of course, equal respect and concern for citizens may itself underlie the rationale for an unequal distribution of intrinsically valuable goods, and insofar as it does the perception that the state unevenly values its citizens can be mitigated. But importantly, the obligation on the part of the state to recognize the fundamental moral equality of its citizens serves as an appropriate standard against which to evaluate the distribution of goods of intrinsic worth, like education.

In his *How Not to Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent*, Adam Swift likewise recognizes both the instrumental and non-instrumental aspects of the good of education. In negotiating the complicated moral terrain that middle-class parents face in deciding whether to send their children to high-quality schools, the instrumentality of education takes center stage. Because having access to education can translate into advantages in the labor market, sending one's child to high-quality schools can appear to come at a cost of sacrificing equality of opportunity as a social ideal. So in deciding whether to send one's child to private school, or whether to move to a different neighborhood in order to send one's child to a better quality public

school, parents must take under consideration both the instrumental and intrinsic benefits that are likely to accrue to their own children, as well as the fact that the benefits their children accrue are likely to be implicated in disadvantaging other, less well-off children. Parents must take into account the positional quality of the good of education, as it were, in addition to its inherent benefits. At the level of individual decision-making in nonideal circumstances, Swift argues that the fine-grained details of each parent and child's particular circumstances will make all the difference as to what the right course of action will be. If sending one's child to a poor-quality school is likely to improve conditions with respect to justice even a little bit, that counts as a reason in favor of doing so. In many cases, he argues, this outcome will be unlikely, and it may be outweighed if the costs that one's child will bear by going to a poor-quality school are beyond what it is fair to ask her to bear. Swift also points out, however, that the more usual case will be one in which people underestimate the demands that justice makes on them.

Both Brighthouse and Swift are concerned to argue that, even though equality is an important ideal in their discussions, it is not the only one at stake:

We see the principle [of educational equality of opportunity] as nested in a larger theory of justice that gives due weight to other values, such as the family and priority to the prospects for flourishing of those who have less. In that context the principle demands that equality be pursued only to the extent that, and in ways that are consistent with, realizing these other values (2008, 463 and Brighthouse 2000, 117).

According to the first of the competing values listed, parents have a right to a certain kind of familial, loving relationship with their children. This right will inevitably protect some activities that, for some children, will confer on them advantages in the educational sphere (and beyond). But insofar as parents have that right, the demands of equality cannot outweigh it (Brighthouse and Swift 2006b). According to the second value, priority should be given to improving the possibilities to lead flourishing lives for those with the worst prospects. These two values act as limits on what can be done to realize equality, even though when equality is outweighed it never ceases to be a relevant value. As Brighthouse and Swift (2008) argue, egalitarians do not limit their scope of concern to equality; they can be pluralists about value (also see Koski and Reich's arguments for value pluralism 2006, 613).

Just as I investigated the theoretical underpinnings of Anderson and Satz's commitment to adequacy, I will consider the ways in which Brighthouse and Swift's principles for educational distribution are supported by more fundamental views about the nature of justice. For the purposes of this paper, I'd just like to focus on their belief that full justice requires (among other things) that citizens' prospects are determined by those actions and decisions for which they are held rightly responsible. That view mirrors the central claims of luck egalitarian theories of justice, which focus on neutralizing the effects of misfortune on people's lives. Richard Arneson, who articulates one of the most well known versions of luck egalitarianism, claims that the very nature of justice is to counterbalance morally arbitrary inequalities:

The concern for distributive justice is to compensate individuals for misfortune. Some people are blessed with good luck, some are cursed with bad luck, and it is the responsibility of society—all of us regarded collectively—to alter the distribution of good and evils that arises from the jumble of lotteries that

constitutes human life as we know it... (Arneson 1999, also quoted in Anderson 1999, 289-90).

Ronald Dworkin shares Arneson's assessment of justice, and gives a detailed account of it according to which resources are justice's proper currency. He argues that claims to equal resources are constrained by the responsibility that must be born for life choices, determined by the extent to which one's voluntary decisions impact one's life circumstances. Unequal outcomes that result from bad "option luck," or are the result of considered decision-making, cannot be the basis for redistribution because agents are properly held responsible for them. However, unequal outcomes resulting from bad "brute luck," or those events or circumstances not under an agent's control, can ground claims for resource redistribution because they are pure misfortunes.

With respect to the education sector, Brighthouse and Swift's focus on talent and willingness to learn as the proper determinants of educational opportunity can be judged as an attempt to isolate features that are properly relevant to educational opportunity, and that people can reasonably bear some responsibility for exercising or failing to exercise. Further, the socioeconomic status and decision-making capabilities of one's parents amount to precisely the kind of "brute luck" that ought not determine the quality of one's educational prospects, positively or negatively.

Of course, all things considered the picture looks a bit more complex for Brighthouse and Swift. The commitment to meritocratic equality of opportunity is coupled with Brighthouse's secondary argument for equal distribution, and both are bounded by the value of legitimate parental partiality and prioritarian concerns.

Evaluating the Debate

Adequacy and equality have often been assumed to be conceptually distinct on the grounds that equality standards are relational, whereas adequacy standards are not (for example, see Koski and Reich 2006, 589). Whether good *g* has been distributed equally between *X* and *Y* depends on whether the amount of *g* possessed by *X* is equal to that possessed by *Y*. However, whether good *g* has been distributed to *X* and *Y* adequately has nothing to do with how much of *g* *X* and *Y* have with respect to each other, but rather whether the amounts of *g* *X* and *Y* possess are sufficient, relative to some standard. As Satz points out (2008), this simple way of drawing the distinction ignores ways in which an adequacy standard can embody relational components. Whether education is distributed adequately to the least advantaged, according to Anderson and Satz, will in part depend on the educational opportunities exploited by society's most advantaged; securing equal standing as a democratic citizen for all inevitably involves considering the relational components of citizenship.

But does it follow that there is no way to draw a distinction between the adequacy and equality views of Anderson and Satz, and Brighthouse and Swift? I believe my above analysis of the moral underpinnings of adequacy and equality suggests there is a way. Concern for equality provides *a* reason to care about inequality above the threshold of adequacy. Brighthouse's basic and secondary arguments for equality articulate his (and Swift's) reasons why. The basic argument tells us that merit ought to dictate access to educational opportunity, and not factors exogenous to merit; even if the threshold of adequacy has been met, we are constrained by that principle to distribute opportunity equally (i.e. according to merit). Brighthouse's secondary argument, whereby there is a

presumption in favor of making the intrinsic benefits of education equally available to all, provides a further reason to care about inequalities in distribution of educational opportunity even once the threshold of adequacy has been met. This is an important normative implication of equality views that does not exist for adequacy views. As long as the case for adequacy is grounded in a sufficientarian conception of justice, no theoretical tools exist for identifying inequalities unconnected with the adequacy threshold as cause for concern. Of course, this is intentional; commitment to democratic equality in the case of Anderson and Satz does not identify inequalities outside the realm of equal citizenship as problematic according to justice.

At this point, one might object that I have not provided a rigorous conceptual distinction between adequacy and equity. Consider what Kenneth Strike says:

One reason why adequacy and equity are seen as competitors is because it is assumed that once we have identified what constitutes an adequate education and provided it, then we have no further obligation to provide for equity with respect to amounts of education that exceed adequacy. [...] This way of putting the matters reflects many policy and legal discussions, but conceptually it is mistaken. That is, if we discover that a certain amount of education is the minimum required in order to provide those educational goods that justice and the common good require us to provide, it does not follow that if some people are able to secure a more than adequate education for their children, there is no moral obligation to provide the same education for all (2008, 471-472).

Strike is right that a commitment to adequacy does not preclude a concern regarding inequalities beyond adequacy; as concepts adequacy and equality are not mutually exclusive. But to say that adequacy and equality are not mutually exclusive is not to say that they are not normatively distinct. Each standard requires its own moral argument, and an argument from a sufficientarian view like democratic equality cannot support a concern for inequalities unrelated to the adequacy threshold. This becomes salient when comparing Anderson and Satz's adequacy principle with Brighthouse and Swift's equality principle, perhaps because Anderson and Satz have a monistic attachment to adequacy; they appear to believe that justice requires nothing more. Again, in Anderson's words the least advantaged have "no grounds for complaint" so long as the demands of sufficiency are met (2007, 622). If *that* is what one's view is, then one simply cannot provide the case for equity above the threshold.

Secondly, one might also object that I have mischaracterized at least Satz's view. Consider again her fifth criterion for educational distribution: that leveling down be avoided except as is necessary for achieving adequacy. With this admission Satz looks to be conceding that there is another value relevant to education policy (namely, the value associated with the intrinsic benefits of receiving an education), though one that it is always subordinated to the value of achieving adequacy. Anderson, on the other hand, explicitly argues that an adequacy standard rejects leveling down because the standard permits inequalities above the threshold. This point, at most, shows that sufficientarianism is consistent with no leveling down. The fundamental moral justification of the adequacy standard allows no room for a principled argument against leveling down the prospects of the advantaged. In fact, to the extent that leveling down would be necessary to achieve the aims of democratic equality, whether at the societal or sectoral level, there would be at minimum a strong presumption in favor of it. It is

unclear upon what principled basis either Anderson or Satz can argue that leveling down ought to be rejected, since whether it ought to be rejected hinges on whether it is necessary for achieving the threshold under consideration. A revision at the level of ideal theory could ground an argument against leveling down above the threshold set by democratic equality, but Anderson and Satz would have to endorse value pluralism, and provide an understanding of how the values that prohibit leveling down are situated with respect to the value of achieving adequacy. So, it is possible that Satz has a pluralistic conception of value that would permit such a move, but she has not hinted at what it might be. Alternatively, Satz might believe that leveling down threatens the adequacy threshold *because* of the intrinsic value of education. In that case, however, I have not mischaracterized her view along the objected lines.

Lastly, one might worry that I have omitted an important difference between adequacy and equality that is apparent at the level of ideal theory: whether or not education's positional aspects are relevant to the goals of education reform. The relevance of education's positional aspects has sometimes been used as a means by which to distinguish equality from adequacy views. I suspect this is because of positionality's relational nature, but also because equality theorists like Brighouse and Swift have given education's positionality significantly more attention than adequacy theorists. What's more, one of the main objections Anderson levels against equality theorists generally is that they treat the positional value of education as a fixed feature of society:

[The positionality] model treats one person's cognitive development as an injury to others, because it puts others in an inferior position to compete for higher education and the further private goods it helps people secure. I have argued elsewhere that such a conception of the value of cognitive development reflects a political economy of envy, with its accompanying destructive and wasteful implications (2007, 621).

Implicit in the decision not to hold the fact of the positionality of education fixed is a more fundamental judgment that is connected with the ideal theory Anderson has assumed in the background. One might disagree with Anderson's claims either that a political economy of envy is necessarily undesirable, or that the acknowledgment of positionality actually fosters it. The first is a value consideration, the second an empirical consideration. At the level of value lies ideal theory. What the proper constitution of a just society is will bear on whether a political economy of envy is consistent with it. Democratic equality rejects the permissibility of a culture of envy, because pervasive envy subverts the aim of fostering equal social relationships. But it is not obvious that if one adopts a different ideal theory, such as luck egalitarianism, a culture of envy will subvert the aims of justice. That Anderson is motivated to achieve democratic equality gives her a reason not to include positionality as a fact in the development of her adequacy standard—she understands the aims of education as they ought to exist under full justice.

Brighouse and Swift disagree with the decision to ignore education's positional aspects while developing the goals of education reform, but not on grounds of equality. Brighouse says:

When we are considering how to design educational institutions in the world that we actually live in, one in which the most important goods distributed by social institutions are distributed very unequally, we have a duty to children to prepare

them for that world, the one that they will actually inhabit, rather than for some other world which they will not inhabit (2000, 125). Importantly, this judgment is independent of Brighthouse and Swift's equality concerns; it involves something like a rule of engagement regarding how to implement policy reform in the education sector (which probably extends to other sectors as well). There is reason, according to them, to consider as a purpose of education the preparation of children for the conditions they face, even if educational reform is also to be used to precipitate broader social change. In designing adequacy schemes which either do not hold the current socioeconomic conditions as fixed, or do not acknowledge them in their design, there is a real danger that the children who are educated under them will bear the cost of transition to adequacy, without receiving the rewards an adequacy standard is motivated to secure. But as Brighthouse notes, "if in pursuing justice our educational practices have failed to prepare some children for the economic order, then those children have, it would seem, a complaint of injustice against us" (2000, 125).

There is no principled reason for Anderson's adequacy standard to differentiate between the children who will be educated under the reforms, as society is transitioning into realizing democratic equality, and children who will have the full benefits under democratic equality. Indeed, Satz, unlike Anderson, is willing to incorporate facts about positionality into her adequacy criterion:

If the inequalities that adequacy permits fail to integrate such privileged positions in universities and employment across class and racial lines, then adequacy is not adequate to its purpose. This is why adequacy views must look not only to the bottom of the distribution but also to the top of the distribution (2008, 238).

Of course, the facts of education's positional value will not *necessarily* matter to adequacy theorists. My only point is that they might matter, and that whether a theory lends significance to the positional value of education is not a good marker of that theory being tied to equality, versus adequacy.

Conclusion

Clarifying the positions of Anderson and Satz, and Brighthouse and Swift at the level of their most basic theoretical commitments has helped to illuminate an essential difference in their proposals: as equality theorists Brighthouse and Swift always have a (defeasible) reason to support equal distribution, and as adequacy theorists Anderson and Satz do not. While my investigation of the ideal theory that underpins the two positions illustrates that the distinction between adequacy and equality has been oversimplified, there is a fundamental difference that we ought not lose sight of.

The fact that equality theorists will always have a (defeasible) reason to care about equality and adequacy theorists do not, matters even for the sake of policy reform. Ultimately, one must be clear about the goals of education policy in order to get legislative decisions right. For example, it might be true that the current adequacy movement involves more effective rhetoric; perhaps policies that demand 'enough for all' are more politically viable than those that demand 'equal for all', even if in reality what constitutes 'enough' is very demanding indeed (Koski and Reich 2006, 561). But viability is only one concern policymakers should have. They must also want to institute policies that, to the greatest extent possible, move society in the direction of justice. One can imagine a case in which, even if an immediate move in the direction of equality is

unfeasible, it is possible to immediately shape conditions to be friendlier to equality concerns in the next go-around. Whether one wants to do so depends on whether equality is an important policy goal, and rhetoric cannot help to determine whether it is; only thinking about policy with respect to what justice demands can do that. Being clear about the moral foundations of the principles guiding reforms is thus of utmost importance.

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