

# ISSA Proceedings 2014 - On What Matters For Virtue Argumentation Theory

*Abstract:* Virtue argumentation theory (VAT) has been charged of being incomplete, given its alleged inability to account for argument validity in virtue-theoretical terms. Instead of defending VAT against that challenge, I suggest it is misplaced, since it is based on a premise VAT does not endorse, and raises an issue that most versions of VAT need not consider problematic. This in turn allows distinguishing several varieties of VAT, and clarifying what really matters for them.

*Keywords:* virtue argumentation theory, argument quality, validity, conflicting virtues.

## 1. Introduction

Virtue argumentation theory (henceforth, VAT) is a relatively new contender in the arena of argumentation theories – a martial metaphor that some virtue theorists may not be ready to endorse without reservation, by the way (see, e.g., Cohen, 1995). To the best of my knowledge, the name was coined by Andrew Aberdein as late as in 2007, in a paper where he outed Daniel Cohen as a sort of closeted virtue argumentation theorist, quoting persuasive textual evidence from Cohen’s previous work (2004, 2005). However, Aberdein (2007, 2010a) has made also abundantly clear that VAT is but the latest offspring of an illustrious scholarly tradition, to wit, virtue theory in general, dating back to ancient philosophy, and most notably to Aristotle’s ethical writings. As it is well known, that particular approach has been gaining a lot of momentum in recent years, in the context of virtue ethics (Foot, 1978; MacIntyre, 1981; Hursthouse, 1999) and positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), as well as in the area of virtue epistemology (Sosa, 1991; Zagzebski, 1996), which share many topics of concern with argumentation theories. So it should not come as a surprise to see that VAT is currently prospering: for instance, “Virtues of Argumentation” was the topic of the latest international conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argument (Windsor, 22-25 May 2013), with Daniel Cohen featuring as one of the keynote speakers; nor is the relevance of VAT confined to argumentation theories,

given that a non-specialistic high-profile philosophy journal such as *Topoi* is currently preparing a special issue on “Virtues and Arguments”, guest edited by Andrew Aberdein and Daniel Cohen.

In spite of all these indications of success, the surest sign of the growing importance of VAT is the fact that it also attracted a fair share of criticism and doubt. Some of these were relatively mild, and would be better understood as constructive efforts to improve on this recent approach: so, for instance, Heather Battaly (2010) has argued that the frequent efforts at distinguishing fallacious and non-fallacious *ad hominem* arguments (e.g., Walton, 1998; Tindale, 2007; Woods, 2007) should be framed in the context of virtue epistemology. If Battaly is right, then also several scholars who do not currently regard themselves as virtue theorists ought to take argumentative virtues into greater consideration. Other critical commentaries, however, have been less kindly disposed towards VAT: this is the case with a recent article by Tracy Bowell and Justine Kingsbury (2013), in which VAT was charged with an inability to offer an alternative account of what a good argument is, and in particular of validity. That challenge was later answered by Aberdein (2014), and the present paper also intends to address the same problem, although from a very different angle. In fact, in what follows I will engage in a modest effort at meta-argumentative reconstruction (in the sense of meta-argumentation detailed in Finocchiaro, 2013), to make the following points:

- \* the key problem with Bowell and Kingsbury’ criticism is that it aims at the wrong polemical target;
- \* in contrast, taking that criticism as central and thus responding to it in details, as Aberdein did, has the undesirable consequence of further derailing the discussion on VAT towards issues that are tangential to its aims and unlikely to be productive;
- \* since there are more pressing theoretical concerns with VAT, priority should be given to those matters, by both proponents and critics of VAT;
- \* ironically, the whole debate analysed here exemplifies one of those key concerns, to wit, how to establish the virtuous path when multiple argumentative virtues conflict with each other.

While my analysis is intended to defuse Bowell and Kingsbury’ attack against VAT, it does not end up making their criticism useless. On the contrary, along the way I will show that it works well as a litmus test: how one reacts to their argument reveals the kind of virtue theorist that person is prepared to be.

## 2. *A case against VAT - and why it doesn't matter*

Bowell and Kingsbury set out to prove that “virtue argumentation theory does not offer a plausible alternative to a more standard agent-neutral account of good argument” (2013, p. 23). In order to make that point, they employ an argument (denoted as BK from now on) that can be reconstructed as follows:

1. They *define a good argument in terms of validity*, as “an argument that provides, via its premises, sufficient justification for believing its conclusion to be true or highly probable, or for accepting that the course of action it advises is one that certainly or highly probably should be taken” (p. 23).
2. They argue that considerations on the arguer’s character can be pertinent to establish the *truth* of her claims, including the premises of her arguments (e.g. in legitimate *ad hominem*), but are never relevant to evaluate the *structure* of the argument - which is what matters for validity.
3. They consider and reject *two apparent counterexamples* to 2: inductive arguments whose validity may be affected by unstated facts, and arguments based on reasoning too complicated for the untrained to follow (such as the Monty Hall puzzle).
4. They conclude that argument assessment cannot be reduced to considerations on the arguer’s character: “*virtue argumentation theory cannot be the whole story* when it comes to argument evaluation” (p. 31, my emphasis).

In his response to BK, Aberdein (2014) mostly focused on points 2 and 3 above: that is, he tried to show how the arguer’s character can provide insight on the structure of the argument and its validity (contra 2), and how this happens also in those counterexamples that Bowell and Kingsbury thought to have rejected (contra 3). I will not discuss here whether Aberdein is successful in his efforts, because I want instead to put pressure on step 1 of BK, as well as inviting further reflection on 4.

The starting point of BK is in how argument quality is defined: this is a truly pivotal move, because the attack is aimed at *argument evaluation*, but it hinges on alleged limits of VAT in dealing with *validity*. So, unless validity plays a key role in argument assessment, the whole criticism falls apart. Bowell and Kingsbury are of course aware that VAT is unlikely to endorse a definition of argument quality that reduces it to validity, and this is how they frame the issue: “This [i.e., their own definition of argument quality] is not an account of good argument that a virtue argumentation theorist would accept. The virtue theorist

thinks that what makes an argument good is that the person presenting it has argued well, whereas we think that what makes it the case that an arguer has argued well is that they have presented an argument that is good in the sense described in the previous paragraph” (2013, p. 23). Unfortunately, this strikes me as a particularly unhelpful way of describing the situation, akin to the proverbial dilemma “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” – we all know how that sort of discussion leads nowhere. In particular, here *Bowell and Kingsbury* overlooks the substantive reasons that prompted *VAT* to focus on the arguer’s character in the first place.

Looking at the literature, it is absolutely clear that *VAT* was borne out of a deep-seated suspicion towards a definition of good argument limited to validity, given the latter inability to justify people’s intuitions on argument quality. Consider for instance the following (real) textbook example of an allegedly good argument: “Both Pierre and Marie Curie were physicists. Therefore, Marie Curie was a physicist” (quoted in *Cohen*, 2013, p. 479). If we look at this piece of text with a rich notion of “quality” in mind, we find it hard to hold it in high esteem, since it does not seem very “good” in any meaningful sense. On the contrary, it is manifestly *bad* in a variety of respects: uninformative, trivial, pedantic – you name it. That is why some people may even have what I like to call “a *Cohen’s* reaction” to it – something like “*Really? That’s your example of a good argument?!*” (again, *Cohen*, 2013, p. 479, emphasis in the original).

Let us name this the *problem of balidity*: it hinges on the fact that some inferential structures, in spite of their unquestioned validity, are still terminally bad *qua* arguments. Nor is balidity a rare affection: as a case in point, consider the-mother-of-all-enthymemes (assuming enthymeme to be a female gendered noun, which is something I was unable to establish): “Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal”. If reconstructed as a truncated syllogism with the implicit premise “All men are mortal”, it is perfectly valid – yet it is still not a good argument, other than for the purpose of illustration (which is, not surprisingly, the only use it ever had). Could anyone seriously picture Aristotle, or anyone else, using this line as a piece of real-life arguing, e.g. to persuade an interlocutor of the mortality of Socrates? Certainly not: it is only meant, and always was, as an example, not an argument.

Someone might object to the whole idea of balidity, on the ground that instances like those mentioned above are best understood as *non-argumentative at all*.

Simply put, the idea would be to claim that a certain linguistic expression, even though it conveys a clear (and, in this case, valid) inference pattern, may serve a function that has nothing to do with arguing - e.g., exemplifying what an argument is. However, this view has two main flaws: first, it is inconsistent with presenting similar sentences as tokens of the type "argument", and it fails to explain how they could exemplify what is supposed to be "good" in an argument (by comparison, consider an example of a delicious apple, which is typically an apple with the appropriate qualities, not something else entirely); second, scholars have been treating similar cases as arguments (in fact, prototypical ones) for several centuries, so a very convincing error theory would be required to explain how we were all so deeply mistaken. Absent such a theory, it is much more parsimonious to treat these cases as arguments that are valid and yet bad (*balid*, for short), and therefore try to provide an account of argument quality that does not reduce it to mere validity.

In this perspective, which is the one endorsed by VAT, *balid* arguments are instances in which validity does not rescue the argument from its badness. As Cohen quipped, only someone with logical blinders on (2013, p. 479) could fail to see their spectacular lack of value, in spite of their validity. What *Bowell and Kingsbury* omit to notice is that *balid* arguments are also the main motivation for VAT. So, a better reconstruction of the VAT standpoint on argument quality would be the following: the virtue theorist thinks that what makes an argument good *cannot just be validity* (given the existence of *balid* arguments), and thus conceives argument quality as depending on the act of arguing well. This is not just a matter of perspective, but rather a substantial disagreement on what counts as good argument, based on a verifiable appeal to people's intuitions.

The upshot is that *Bowell and Kingsbury* give us a definition in which validity is necessary and sufficient for quality, whereas virtue theorists reject sufficiency, and may also reject necessity, depending on how radical they are (more on this later on). So *BK* argues against VAT from a premise that VAT explicitly rejects: it is not hard to see that this is unlikely to produce much progress.

### 3. *Varieties of VAT*

Turning to step 4 of *BK*, one notes that *Bowell and Kingsbury* (2013) tend to shift aim across their paper, or at least leave open multiple interpretations of it. Sometimes their critique of VAT is framed in terms of failure (e.g., "VAT does not offer a plausible alternative to a more standard agent-neutral account of good

argument", p. 23), but more often it is presented as a *charge of incompleteness*: e.g., "any agent-centered account that cannot accommodate [a validity-based characterization of argument quality] will be unable to offer a complete account of good argument" (p. 24). Howell and Kingsbury may not consider these two positions as truly distinct, since in their view validity is the crux of argument quality, therefore if VAT cannot give us validity, then it is a failure at evaluating arguments, period. However, for virtue theorists, who do not consider validity as the crux of argument quality, the two charges are clearly different. In what follows I will stick to the more modest reading of Howell and Kingsbury's accusation, as it is spelled out in point 4 of BK (taken from their own conclusions): "virtue argumentation theory cannot be the whole story when it comes to argument evaluation" (p. 31).

The question I want to pose is the following: *Should virtue theorists be worried by this charge of incompleteness?* The answer depends on what kind of virtue theorist one is prepared to be. To simplify, let us distinguish between:

\* *Moderate VAT*: validity is *necessary* but insufficient for argument quality; hence it is perfectly possible for an argument to be valid, whereas all good arguments are also valid.

\* *Radical VAT*: validity is *neither sufficient nor necessary* for argument quality – hence looking at validity is a non-starter to assess argument quality.

In a moment I will turn to the empirical question of what kind of virtue theorists are to be found "in the wild", taking as prime examples the leading proponents of VAT, Daniel Cohen and Andrew Aberdein. But first let us note that radical virtue theorists are by definition immunized against BK: if validity is neither sufficient nor necessary for argument quality, who cares whether or not it depends from the arguer's character?

Looking at textual evidence, it would seem that Daniel Cohen takes precisely that stance: "Valid reasoning is apparently neither necessary nor sufficient for an acceptable argument" (2013, p. 479). Although Cohen is quick to add that "acceptable" is not synonymous of "fully satisfying", this certainly sounds as an endorsement of radical VAT. Now, denying the sufficiency of validity for argument quality is not especially hard, since valid arguments make a pretty strong case in that direction, as discussed. But to reject necessity too, one must produce at least one instance (and possibly several) of an argument which is indisputably good,

and yet invalid – what I suggest we call a *goodacy*, i.e. a good fallacy. This strikes me as something much harder to do. Yet Cohen thinks he can deliver on this, so let us turn again to his work for elucidation.

Unfortunately, I do not think his treatment of this particular point can really win the day for radical VAT. This is how Cohen argues against the necessity of validity for argument quality: “Under certain circumstances, it is not necessarily unreasonable to overlook an argument’s flaws. One might, for example, resort to a meta-argument like this: ‘I can see that the argument doesn’t work as it stands, but the conclusion is so attractive that I’m sure someone will be able to fix it. I’ll accept this flawed one for now.’ The French mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré suggested that he sometimes operated this way: accepting a formula as a provisional lemma in proving theorems before he had any proof for that lemma” (2013, p. 479).

If we look at this as an example of a goodacy, I believe we are bound to be disappointed. After all, what is being accepted as good here is the *conclusion*, not the argument for it: while this is indeed a fairly common instance (we often have clear intuitions on certain matters, even when we lack the means to prove them to our satisfaction), this has little to do with the quality of the argument. In fact, by *provisionally* accepting something as a lemma, Poincaré was certainly not suggesting that he had a good proof for it – and indeed, the whole point of provisionality is because you can get away with it for the time being in light of practical considerations, but sooner or later you will have to deliver “the whole thing”. So I do not see meta-arguments of the kind suggested by Cohen as convincing cases of goodacies.

In my view, if one really wants to be radical on VAT, then the most promising direction to take is looking at cases where *validity does not matter* for the interested parties, rather than being objectively absent. Goodacies may or may not be the unicorns of argumentation, but there is no lack of instances in which people (i) experience an argumentative exchange as being fully satisfying, while (ii) bypassing entirely any consideration of validity, or even (iii) regarding such considerations as a threat to the optimal flow of arguing they are currently experiencing. When you are having the time of your life animatedly discussing with your friends, scrutinizing the validity of each other arguments may very well be considered a fatal *faux pas*. Granted, presenting similar instances as evidence against the idea that validity is necessary for argument quality is not without

problem: a predictable, but far from trivial objection would be to note that, as long as mutual rational questioning of each other arguments is out, then it is hard to see why we should insist in calling that particular activity “argumentation” at all. Still, it seems to me that similar cases are more promising for radical VAT than instances where lack of validity is fully acknowledged, like the one discussed by Cohen, because in the latter situation the notion of “quality” does not truly apply to the argument, but rather to its conclusion.

However, my purpose here is not to defend a radical version of VAT, but rather to note that (i) it is not easy to be a radical virtue theorist, yet (ii) if you manage to hold to that particular position, then you do not need to worry at all about BK. This, in turn, provides us with the intellectual resources to offer a streamlined, and possibly more informative reconstruction of BK. As far as I can see, Bowell and Kingsbury line of argument can be summarized as follows:

*BK, compact version:* Unless radical VAT can be defended, either it can be explained how validity is determined by the arguer’s character, or it must be conceded that VAT does not provide a complete theory of argument evaluation.

Radical virtue theorists deny the premise (they are ready to defend radical VAT), so they can ignore the disjunctive conclusion. Moderate virtue theorists, in contrast, have to decide whether they want to take the first or the second horn of it. Again, their choice in that respect will tell us something on the kind of virtue theorist they intend to be, differentiating two sub-types of moderate VAT:

\* *Modest moderate VAT:* validity is necessary, albeit not sufficient, for argument quality, and moreover it is an aspect of quality that does not require considerations of character to be established.

\* *Ambitious moderate VAT:* validity is also considered necessary and non-sufficient for argument quality, but it is conceived as determined by virtue theoretical considerations, like any other facet of quality.

Aberdein, in his reply to BK (2014), clearly endorses the latter position: so here I am taking the liberty of outing him as an ambitious virtue theorist, in spite of his moderation. It is also worth noting that virtue theorists of Aberdein’s persuasion, i.e. ambitious moderates, are the only ones that need take issue with BK. For the radicals, the challenge it poses is non-existent; for the modest moderates, accepting the charge of incompleteness is not a problem to start with, since they

agree that argument evaluation, while requiring an appeal to the arguers' virtues to establish quality in general, does not need to make use of similar means in dealing with the specific problem of validity. But, to paraphrase *Bowell and Kingsbury*, since validity cannot be the whole story when it comes to argument evaluation, then leaving validity outside of the scope of virtues does not make VAT any less necessary to understand argument quality. That is what makes *modest moderates* immune to BK.

But is *modest moderate VAT* a genuinely interesting theoretical option? I believe it is - or, at least, I want to argue that, *prima facie*, there is *nothing wrong in being modestly moderate*, when it comes to VAT. Two main reasons stand out for that claim: first, *modest moderation* is a very natural theoretical stance to have, with respect to VAT; second, one can be moderate in a very ambitious sense, that is, without making virtues any less crucial to argument evaluation. The first point I take to be rather self-evident. As discussed, from day one VAT presented itself as an attempt to move *beyond* validity in assessing argument quality: as such, it was never necessarily committed to providing a complete theory of argument evaluation, especially for what it pertains validity, because that is precisely what VAT is not interested in - at least not primarily. This brings us to the second point: VAT may be "modest" in that it leaves validity to non-virtue-based considerations, but it also denies any special role to validity in determining argument quality, to get a fresh look at *everything else that matters* - open-mindedness, fairness, sense of proportion, contextual appropriateness, mutual respect, etc. So *modest moderate VAT* may not give us the whole story of argument evaluation, but it certainly provides the bulk of it, relegating validity to little more than a footnote, albeit a necessary one.

#### 4. *Conclusions: do not feed the validity buffs!*

If my reconstruction is correct, BK does not fare particularly well as an attack against VAT: it is based on a definition of argument quality that virtue theorists universally reject, and its conclusion needs to worry only one version of VAT, i.e. *ambitious moderation*, out of three - too bad for *Aberdein*, but good for the rest of us! On the plus side, diagnosing BK helped us uncovering different varieties of VAT, which hopefully may prove useful to foster the debate.

However, I think BK and *Aberdein's* reaction to it (2014) epitomize a potential stand-off in the dialogue between proponents and critics of VAT, so I would like to try and intervene as an interested third party in the debate. At risk of caricaturing

a serious dispute, the whole affair reminds me of the following hypothetical dialogue between Dan, a virtue theorist, and Bo, a “validity buff”, that is, a stalwart defender of validity as the key to argument quality:

Dan: *Look, there are plenty of valid arguments that are not good in any reasonable sense. That's fascinating! It means we need more than validity to capture argument quality.*

Bo: *Well, maybe so, but what about validity?*

Dan: *Are you not listening? I have no beef with validity - keep it, for all I care! I want to talk about everything else that matters for argument quality, and yet has nothing to do with validity.*

Bo: *AHA - then you cannot account for validity!*

Dan: *Jeez, some key argumentative virtue is missing here...*

This is just a cartoon, of course, but it emphasizes a real problem: by insisting on validity as key in argument evaluation, *Bowell and Kingsbury (2013)* focused attention on something which is, explicitly, of very little interest for the general rationale and purposes of VAT; in turn, by taking up their challenge and dealing with it, it could be said that *Aberdein (2014)* allowed the debate on VAT to be momentarily derailed towards matters that are, at best, tangential to it. Nor my present efforts should be regarded as being beyond reproach, since what I am doing is to argue that we should not care much whether validity is analysable in terms of virtues, and this is tantamount to deny that we have to address the worries raised by *Bowell and Kingsbury* - an attitude that many argumentation theories would not find especially commendable.

It seems that what we have here is a *conflict of argumentative virtues*, in which nobody can honestly claim to have upheld all relevant virtues at once: no matter what the actors of this minor academic drama do, they will violate at least some argumentative virtue. To put it simply, *Bowell and Kingsbury*, by exerting the virtue of careful critical scrutiny (focus on any unclear or defective details in a target argument), violated the virtue of relevant engagement (i.e., avoid focusing on what is manifestly of minor importance in your target argument): this, in turn, risked side-tracking the discussion on VAT. *Aberdein*, by closely addressing their line of attack, exerted the virtue of dialectical responsiveness (address all potentially sound criticism), but failed to apply the virtue of maximal relevance in theory construction (focus primarily on what is most significant), and thus allowed the discussion to be side-tracked. Finally, my own approach tried exerting

maximal relevance, but thereby failed to demonstrate dialectical responsiveness: in fact, readers will notice that whether or not VAT can account for validity is not discussed anywhere in this paper, so Bowell and Kingsbury' arguments to that effect are simply not answered.

Whether or not my reconstruction of this minor scholarly debate is correct, a general point should be apparent by now: there is no guarantee that, by exerting an argumentative virtue, the arguer will not also violate another virtue. This raises an obvious and yet crucial question for VAT: in similar conflicts of argumentative virtues, what is the virtuous option? On what grounds?

Now, *that* is a good challenge for VAT, not quibbling on something that VAT was never inclined to consider central, i.e. validity. If VAT cannot deliver a solution to the frequent conflicts of argumentative virtues we encounter in everyday life, then it has a serious problem, one that applies to all varieties of VAT. Besides, the theoretical means to engage with that particular problem are within the province of VAT, and two possibilities immediately come to mind: either assuming some *ordering of virtues*, so that certain virtues should have precedence over others, whenever a conflict arises, or adopting some *doctrine of the mean*, following in Aristotle's footsteps. The former solution lends itself nicely to neat formalisms, but it raises the thorny issue of establishing criteria to generate (and possibly change over time and/or across contexts/cultures) the relevant ordering. As for the doctrine of the mean, it certainly fits nicely in any virtue-theoretical framework, but it is not easy to spell out in sufficient detail to handle real-life conflicts of argumentative virtues, which in turn may severely limit the scope of application of VAT.

Not surprisingly, Cohen listed conflicts of argumentative virtues in his to-do-list, at the end of his keynote address on VAT at OSSA 2013: "Questions such as just which virtues are needed for the different roles in arguments, how they might relate to one another, *how conflicts among them might be resolved*, and how they differ from skills" (p. 484, my emphasis). To explain why none of these problems were taken up in that particular paper, Cohen noted that "all of them have been addressed at length by others elsewhere" (p. 484). Unfortunately, he did not provide any exact reference for that claim, and I was unable to locate a satisfactory treatment of conflicts of argumentative virtues in the relatively small literature on VAT. Thus I suspect that Cohen here was slightly exaggerating: while some of the problems he mention (e.g., distinguishing between virtues and

skills) have been addressed at length by other scholars (e.g., Aberdeen, 2007), some others have not, and I think conflicts of argumentative virtues belong to the latter group.

In fact, it is only in Cohen's own work that I could find a brief discussion of conflicting virtues in argument, both before (2005) and after (2009) that Aberdeen "invented" VAT in 2007. In a nutshell, Cohen tends to think of conflicting argumentative virtues as *counterbalances*: for instance, he sees an interlocutor that concedes too much and too readily to the counterpart (the "Concessionaire") as the opposite in a spectrum that starts with the "Deaf Dogmatist", that is, someone who never concedes the opponent's point, no matter what. This leads him to explicitly invoke Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, albeit only in passing: "If Aristotle is right and the golden mean is found by aiming for the opposite extreme from our natural inclinations, then we could do worse than trying to emulate the Concessionaire. The Concessionaire does, after all, listen well and has the honesty and self-confidence to acknowledge good points. If we hope for as much in our fellow interlocutors, we should cultivate it in ourselves" (2005, p. 62). In a similar vein, Cohen discusses open-mindedness and sense of proportion as two key virtues of argumentation, regulated by the same sort of balancing act; in his own words, "although it is a necessary precondition for getting the most out of our arguments, open-mindedness can also be a counterproductive trait of mind in argumentation. The problem is that arguments are open-ended in a number of different ways with the potential to be extended *ad infinitum*. Open-mindedness exacerbates matters. It needs the counterbalance provided by a sense of proportion" (2009, pp. 59-60).

While I have much sympathy for this counterbalancing view of conflicting virtues, Cohen's remarks are still far from providing us with a general, detailed theory of what the relevant counterbalances are, and how they are supposed to work: as far as I can see, a well-structured map of argumentative virtues is still missing. Until that map is sketched out in greater detail, the jury is still out on whether or not VAT can deliver a satisfactory understanding of conflicts of argumentative virtues. Still, the point remains: this is a worthy quest for virtue theorists, as well as a suitable target for their critics. With so much yet to be done, no energy should be wasted on less essential matters, and virtue theorists should stop feeding the validity buffs.

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