



The Problem of Administrative Evil in a Culture of Technical Rationality

GUY B. ADAMS

Abstract

The prevailing cultural context in the modern age, with its emphasis on technical rationality, has enabled a new and dangerous form of evil. The Holocaust was the signal event marking the emergence of administrative evil, but the tendency toward administrative evil, as manifested in acts of dehumanization and genocide, is deeply woven into the identity of professions in public life. The common characteristic of administrative evil is that ordinary people, within their normal professional and administrative roles, can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are doing anything wrong. Under conditions of moral inversion, people may even view their evil activity as good.

Keywords: administrative evil, moral inversion, public service ethics, technical rationality

Administrative evil is not a common topic of discussion in the context of ethics in government. Most of the literature focuses on positive actions that might be undertaken—for example, making systems more transparent. While there is considerable value in the various constructive activities proposed for government ethics, the starting point here, borrowing from the Hippocratic oath, is the principle: First, do no harm. Going further: Be very, very sure to do no great, catastrophic harm. From this point of departure, what then is the problem of administrative evil?

The problem of administrative evil is that the theory and practice of professional ethics, including public service or governmental ethics, does not necessarily keep people from engaging in actions that reasonable persons would agree—usually

well after the fact—warrant the rubric of evil. As paradoxical as it may sound, one can be a “good” and “responsible” professional and at the same time commit or contribute to evil acts. Before discussing how this can happen, the term “evil” needs some discussion.

The word “evil” may strike many as strong language, perhaps too strong. Indeed, evil is still not a widely used term in social science. Social scientists have long preferred to *describe* behavior, avoiding ethically loaded or judgmental rubrics—to say nothing of a word with a long tradition as a religious term. As Claudia Card notes:

The denial of evil has become an important strand of twentieth century secular Western culture. Some critics find evil a chimera, like Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, but a dangerous one that calls forth disturbing emotions, such as hatred, and leads to such disturbing projects as revenge. . . . Many reject the idea of evil because, like Nietzsche, they find it a *bad* idea. . . . Nietzsche’s critique has helped engineer a shift from questions of what to do to prevent, reduce or redress evils to skeptical psychological questions about what inclines people to make judgments of evil in the first place, what functions such judgments have served. (2002, 28)

In *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (2009), Adams and Balfour argued that evil is an essential concept for understanding the human condition, and therefore essential as well for understanding human action in organizational settings. Evil was characterized as the actions of human beings that unjustly or needlessly inflict pain and suffering and even death on other human beings (Adams and Balfour 2009, 3).

There are many other useful definitions and characterizations of evil. Claudia Card (2002, 3) defines evil as “foreseeable intolerable harm produced by culpable wrongdoing.” Ervin Staub (1992, 25) offers another: “Evil is not a scientific concept with an agreed meaning, but the idea of evil is part of a broadly shared human cultural heritage. The essence of evil is the destruction of human beings . . . By evil I mean *actions* that have such consequences.” Philip Zimbardo suggests this definition (2007, 5): “Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize or destroy innocent others—or using one’s authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf.” Finally, Jennifer Geddes (2003, 105) emphasizes that

evil is relational . . . For evil occurs between people: one or more persons do evil (and are thereby understood to be evil or connected to evil) and someone else, or some other group, suffers evil. As Paul Ricoeur (1995, 250) notes, “To do evil is always, either directly or indirectly, to make someone else suffer. In its dialogic structure evil committed by someone finds its other half in the evil suffered by someone else.”

These definitions, while helpful, can be further refined. Adams and Balfour (2009, 11) proposed that there is a continuum of evil and wrongdoing, with horrible, mass eruptions of evil, such as the Holocaust and other, lesser instances of mass murder,

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at one extreme, and the “small” white lie, which is somewhat hurtful, at the other. Somewhere along this continuum, wrongdoing turns into evil. Staub (1992, xi) notes, “Extreme destructiveness . . . is usually the last of many steps along a continuum of destruction.” What then constitutes administrative evil?

Administrative Evil

The common characteristic of administrative evil is that people can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are doing anything at all wrong. The basic difference between evil as it has appeared throughout human history, and administrative evil (which is a fundamentally modern phenomenon) is that the latter is less easily recognized as evil. Human beings have always been able to delude themselves into considering their evil acts as really not so bad. But there are three major differences in administrative evil. One is the modern inclination to *un-name* evil, an ancient concept that does not fit well in the scientific age (Bernstein 2002; Neiman 2002). The second difference is found in the structure of the modern, complex organization, which diffuses individual responsibility and requires the compartmentalized accomplishment of role expectations in order to perform work on a daily basis (Staub 1992, 84). The third difference is the way in which the culture of technical rationality (more on this below) has analytically narrowed the processes by which public policy is formulated and implemented, so that “moral inversions” are now more likely. A moral inversion (Adams and Balfour 2009, 4, 9) occurs when something evil or destructive has been successfully presented (repackaged) as something positive and worthwhile. Under the conditions of moral inversion, one can engage in evil acts while thinking that one is engaged in something constructive or positive.

Because administrative evil is typically “masked,” no one has to accept an overt invitation to commit an evil act, because such invitations are almost never made. Rather, it may come in the form of an expert or technical role, couched in appropriate language, or it may even come packaged as a good and worthy project (moral inversion). Evil then occurs along another continuum: from acts that are committed in relative ignorance to those that are knowing and deliberate acts of evil (masked and unmasked). Individuals and groups can engage in evil acts without recognizing the consequences of their behavior, or when convinced their actions are justified or serve the greater good. Administrative evil falls within this range of the continuum, where people engage in or contribute to acts of evil without recognizing that they are doing anything wrong. Typically, ordinary individuals are simply acting appropriately in their organizational roles—in essence, just doing what those around them would agree they should be doing—and at the same time, participating in what a critical and reasonable observer, usually well after the fact, would call evil.

The modern age, especially in the last century and a half, has had as its hallmark what is called *technical rationality* (Adams and Balfour 2009, 27–30). Technical rationality is a way of thinking and living (that is, a culture) that emphasizes the scientific-analytic mindset and the belief in technological progress. A combination of social, economic, and political dynamics, the culture of technical rationality is

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constituted by the interaction of two powerful streams. The first—the scientific-analytic mindset—is the dominant epistemology; it is “how we know what we know.” The second element—the belief in technological progress—represents a large part of how we think of the “good life.” The culture of technical rationality is not the cause of administrative evil, but it has served as a powerful enabler of administrative evil. William Vanderburg (2005) refers to technical rationality as the first universal culture of humankind. Indeed, globalization has resulted in technical rationality becoming ubiquitous everywhere on the planet in varying degrees. This culture is not a monolith, however, and is in different stages of development in various countries and regions.

The Holocaust and Administrative Evil

Adams and Balfour’s understanding of administrative evil has its roots in the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany during World War II (2009, chapter 3). In 1939, there were 16 million Jews in the world, with 9 million living in Europe. In 1945, there were 10 million Jews in the world, with only 3 million

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left in Europe. In areas of Eastern Europe, notably Poland, over 90 percent of the Jewish population was killed. Whole towns and villages simply ceased to exist. The Holocaust occurred in modern times in a culture suffused with technical rationality, and most of its activity was accomplished within accepted organizational roles and within legitimated public policy. While the results of the Holocaust were horrific and arguably without precedent, ordinary

Germans fulfilling everyday roles carried out extraordinary destruction in ways that had been successfully packaged as socially normal and appropriate—a classic moral inversion (Arendt 1963).

Many of the administrators directly responsible for the Holocaust were, from the technical-rational perspective, effective and responsible administrators who used discretion to both influence and carry out the will of their superiors. Professionals such as Adolf Eichmann and Albert Speer obeyed orders, followed proper protocol and procedures, and were often innovative and creative while carrying out their assigned tasks in an efficient and effective manner (Hilberg 2003; Lozowick 2002). Ironically, the SS was very concerned about corruption in its ranks, and mandated conformance to the professional norms of its order (Sofsky 1997).

As Rubenstein (1983) points out, no laws against genocide or dehumanization were broken by those who perpetrated the Holocaust. Everything was legally sanctioned and administratively approved by a legitimated authority, while a number of key programs and innovations were initiated from within the bureaucracy (Browning 1992; Sofsky 1997). Even within the morally inverted universe created by the Nazis, professionals and administrators carried out their duties within a framework of ethics and responsibility that was consistent with the norms of professionalism and technical rationality (Lifton 1986). The professions were “everywhere” in the Holocaust (Hilberg 2003). Lawyers, physicians, engineers, planners, military pro-

professionals, and accountants all contributed to the destruction of the Jews and other “undesirables.” Scientific methods were employed in ways that dehumanized and murdered innocent human beings. Still, the Holocaust occurred over a half century ago, and in another culture. Is it an event unique to a particular time and place, or is it a horror that could be repeated today in the United States? Studies of compliance behavior suggest that the latter possibility should be taken quite seriously.

The Stanford Prison and Milgram Experiments

Many university psychology departments conducted a range of experiments on human behavior during the 1960s and 1970s that would not be permitted with the human subjects review processes prevalent today. One such experiment, conducted in the basement of the psychology department at Stanford University, showed how people can easily adopt behaviors that are destructive to others (Zimbardo 2007). Zimbardo and his colleagues selected twenty-two “normal” male undergraduates; individual “dispositional characteristics” that might have inclined subjects toward higher degrees of either passive or aggressive behavior were screened. The plan was to create a simulated prison in which eleven subjects were randomly assigned to be prisoners, and eleven others to be guards (with two in each group to be back-ups in case of illness). Nine prisoners occupied three cells in groups of three, and the nine guards were divided equally into three shifts of eight hours each. Zimbardo (2007, 31–32) was “interested in discovering what it means psychologically to be a prisoner or a prison guard. What changes does a person undergo in the process of adapting to that new role? Is it possible in the short time of only a few weeks to take on a new identity that is different from one’s usual self?”

The “contract” offered to the subjects at the beginning of the experiment gave assurances of adequate diet, clothing, housing, and medical care—and, more generally, “humane conditions.” Prisoners were told they could expect to be under surveillance and have some basic civil rights suspended, but that there would be no physical abuse. Directions for the guards were simple: “maintain the reasonable degree of order within the prison necessary for its effective functioning.” Prisoners were provided a loose, muslin smock with a number on the front and back, no underclothes, a light chain and lock around one ankle, rubber sandals, and a nylon stocking skullcap. Guards were given a uniform of plain khaki shirts and pants, a whistle, a police nightstick, and reflecting sunglasses (making eye contact impossible). The Palo Alto police department helped out by “arresting” each prisoner and running them through standard booking procedures. The situation was loaded with social cues to mimic the experience of prison.

Prisoners followed rules that were developed by the guards: three supervised toilet visits; two hours for reading or letter-writing, work assignments (to “earn” the \$15 per day that all participants were paid), two visiting periods per week, movie rights, and exercise periods. Three times a day, at the beginning of each shift, there was a line-up for a “count” (with nine prisoners, this was hardly difficult). The first of these lasted ten minutes, but they were spontaneously increased in length by the guards until some lasted several hours. Interactions between guards and prisoners quickly assumed a negative tone, with prisoners assuming a passive, sullen role of “learned helplessness” (Zimbardo 2007, 196), and guards an aggressive, initiating role, characterized by verbal affronts.

Without orders or prompting, the guards became increasingly aggressive and abusive, even after the prisoners had ceased any resistance and were visibly deteriorating. Prisoner rights were redefined as privileges, to be earned by obedient behavior. The experiment was planned for two weeks, but was terminated after six days. Five prisoners were released early because of extreme emotional depression, crying, rage, or acute anxiety. Guards forced the prisoners to chant filthy songs, to defecate in buckets that were not emptied, and to clean toilets with their bare hands. They acted as if the prisoners were less than human, and so did the prisoners.

The subjects of the experiment adapted to and developed their new roles more rapidly and fervently than was anticipated, thus demonstrating how social roles and structures play a far more powerful part in everyday human behavior than our culture of individualism would predict. And it can be seen clearly how the dynamics of social situations are far more powerful in shaping our behavior than most would imagine:

At the start of the experiment, there were no differences between the two groups; less than a week later, there were no similarities between them. It is reasonable . . . to conclude that the pathologies were elicited by the set of situational forces . . . in this prisonlike setting. . . . Neither the guards nor the prisoners could be considered “bad apples” prior to the time when they were so powerfully impacted by being embedded in a “bad barrel.” (Zimbardo 2007, 197)

In the second compliance experiment, Stanley Milgram of Yale University anticipated that the study he was planning would show that Americans were less prone to obey the direction of authority than their German counterparts who had given themselves over to a totalitarian regime and obeyed it to the extremes of mass murder and genocide. His initial intention was to conduct the experiment with psychology students in both the United States and Germany as subjects, but he abandoned the comparison after finding that American students were remarkably willing to obey legitimate authority, even when the consequences entailed harming other human beings.

Milgram then set out to test a wider population of Americans and placed an advertisement in the New Haven, Connecticut, newspaper seeking volunteers for a “study of memory” (Milgram 1974). Volunteers were promised payment of \$4.50 for their time and trouble. As the experiment began in the psychology department, the participant found himself (in the initial experiments the participants were all males) in a room with a “scientist in a white coat,” who ran the experiment, and another subject, who was actually an actor. The “scientist” explained that the experiment was a study of memory in which there would be a “teacher” and a “learner.” The other subject, the actor, was chosen through a rigged lottery to be the learner, always leaving the only real subject in the role of teacher.

The role of the teacher was to read a series of word pairs to the learner, who then attempted to recite them from memory. A correct answer was simply acknowledged, but upon hearing an incorrect answer, the teacher’s task was to flip the switch on the rather elaborate console in front of him, which delivered an electric shock to the learner. The teacher was given a 45-volt shock before beginning the questions, in order to have some direct sense of the learner’s experience. A 45-volt shock is quite sufficient to get one’s attention. That, of course, was the only real electric shock anyone actually received in the experiment, but the teacher did not know this, and

acted under the assumption that he was actually administering a series of shocks to the learner. The learner was literally strapped into a chair, with electrodes attached to one bare arm.

The console of the shock generator had thirty ascending levels of shocks, starting at 15 volts and continuing in 15-volt increments all the way to 450 volts. It was further labeled by groups of four, with the first group called “slight shock,” the next “moderate shock,” then “strong shock,” which ended at 180 volts. The scale continued with “very strong shock, intense shock, extreme intensity shock, danger: severe shock,” and finally, a simple “XXX.” It was anticipated that many subjects would express hesitations or objections as the experiment progressed and they were called upon to deliver ever-increasing shocks. A series of “prods” was established, such that the first time the teacher expressed hesitation, the scientist in the white coat said, “Please continue.” After the next three such expressions by the teacher, the remaining three prods in order were: “The experiment requires that you continue”; “It is absolutely essential that you continue”; and “You have no other choice, you must go on.” A fifth balk by the teacher terminated the experiment.

Milgram asked several different samples of people what they thought the subjects’ responses in this experimental situation would be. He asked psychiatrists, graduate students, sophomores, and a middle-class group from New Haven what their estimates would be. To a person, they indicated that they personally would break off at some point early in the experiment, and they predicted that only a pathological few subjects (less than 1 percent) would deliver shocks all the way to 450 volts.

While the experiment came to have many variants, the initial one was the so-called voice-proximity version. In this version, the learner was positioned in a room adjacent to the teacher, but with the door open, so that his voice could be heard. The learner, of course, rapidly began giving far more incorrect responses on the word-pair questions, and at the fifth level—75 volts—he grunted audibly. At 120 volts, the learner complained verbally that the shocks were painful. Two levels later, at 150 volts, the learner demanded release. At 270 volts, the learner began delivering an agonized scream after each shock, and from 300 to 330 volts, no answer was offered, only the scream. The scientist in the white coat explained that no answer was to be considered an incorrect answer. After 330 volts, there was no further response from the learner.

In the voice-proximity version, fully 62.5 percent of the subjects went through all thirty levels on the console, delivering the final two shocks of 435 and 450 volts in the XXX category. If the willingness to deliver a “strong shock” of 135 volts is used as the measure of compliance, then fully 99 percent of the subjects complied. And remember, at 120 volts the learner complained about the pain of the shocks. In other versions of the experiment in which the learner was moved into the same room as the teacher, the percentage of fully obedient subjects was reduced, but was still at 40 percent. Yet, when placed in a group setting, subjects were almost 100 percent compliant and willing to cause harm to the learner, especially when another teacher administered the shocks. No version of this experiment of which we are aware—Milgram’s or others—has produced what one would call comforting results.

This kind of experiment would never pass muster before a human subjects review panel today. The scientist and the learner misrepresented what was going on. They lied to the subjects, many of whom experienced considerable stress and discomfort until finally informed that the learner was unharmed. Still, the teacher was placed

in a rather typical social situation. A legitimate authority figure, a scientist, backed by the status of a major university, presents an experiment that ostensibly will help to discover more about learning. The learner is a volunteer, just like the teacher. When the situation induces discomfort, which it did for large numbers of participants, the scientist authoritatively took full responsibility for the experiment and its consequences. Once the procedure began—15 volts seems insignificant—role acceptance was in place, and the situation was loaded so that a clear and strong individual response was needed to break free of the setting.

In this culture, which so highly values individualism, the expectation is that the individual response will trump the social situation and nearly everyone will break off, and most assuredly not fully comply. However, these Americans, much like the guards in the Stanford prison experiments, found it acceptable to harm others, and to play the role of shock technician or perhaps even executioner, as long as the role was euphemistically called “teacher” and a professional in a technical-rational mantle of authority took full responsibility. In at least this context, and perhaps in others, American culture seems well adapted for administrative evil, and indeed, demonstrated this capacity at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (see Adams and Balfour 2009, chap. 7).

Organizational Dynamics of Administrative Evil

Individualism, one of the core values of U.S. culture, acts as an obstacle to perceiving and understanding the group and organizational dynamics that underlie administrative evil (Zimbardo 2007, 212). Americans are inclined to assume that each individual’s actions are freely and independently chosen. When we examine an individual’s behavior in isolation or even in aggregate, this assumption can be reinforced. However, our culture’s emphasis on individualism blinds us to group and organizational dynamics that typically play a much more powerful role in shaping human behavior than might be assumed. It is a frequent error to personalize evil in the form of the exceptional psychopath, such as a Charles Manson or a Jeffrey Dahmer (often without considering how they might be products of our culture). We also tend to focus on particularly bad actors in organizations, such as Enron’s Jeffrey Skilling or Charles Graner in the Abu Ghraib prison. Understanding evil as arising from an individual’s disposition—the default option in a society that so highly values individualism—draws a cloak over social and organizational evil, rendering it unseen, as it were. As Zimbardo underscores (2007), situational and systemic factors are far more significant than we typically imagine. What then are the group and organizational dynamics crucial to understanding how evil and administrative evil occur in organizations?

Organizations, of course, are often the locus of both wrongdoing and evil (Darley 1992, 1995, 1996). Indeed, they are the home base of administrative evil. Organizations can facilitate such activities both internally and externally. Internally, these acts would be inflicted on members of the organization, while externally, customers, clients, or citizens in various combinations would be the victims. And, of course, organizational evil may have an impact on both those outside the organization and those inside it.

Modern organizations, as noted, are characterized by the diffusion of information and the fragmentation of responsibility. With diffuse and scattered informa-

tion, literally no one in the organization may have a complete enough picture to adequately comprehend the destructive activity to try to reverse course. Those who might have enough of a picture to perceive that something is wrong may well assume that higher management is aware of the problem and has chosen to do nothing about it. With regard to responsibility, those in operational units may note a problem, or a part of a problem, but are likely inclined to understate it so as not to bring negative news to superiors. Not knowing may be replaced by “strategic ignorance,” in which organizational actors may decide that pretending not to know is the safer approach.

The longer wrongdoing or evil activity persists, the more difficult it becomes to acknowledge it. The notion of sunk costs, borrowed from economics, is descriptively helpful here. Each step along the way in which such activity is not halted becomes an additional commitment to that trajectory. This dynamic can be described as “successive ratification” (Darley 1996). As a consequence, bringing such activity to a halt (e.g., recalling a product, grounding a fleet of aircraft, firing a contractor) requires a really quite decisive action. One needs clear and overwhelming evidence to do so, for one can be certain that no thanks will be forthcoming. Allowing normal processes (the status quo) to continue requires no action at all—momentum alone becomes a very powerful social force.

In some cases, a turning point is reached, when administrative evil turns into evil, and those actively participating in it also become evildoers (Darley 1992). The mask is removed from administrative evil at this point. This is when people in the organization realize or discover that the organization has been engaged in actions destructive of human beings—in the more egregious cases causing the death of innocent others. Occasionally one can find cases of organizations in which people have knowingly engaged in harmful, destructive acts—that is, evil plain and simple—the unmasked version. More often, the activities that constitute the wrongdoing are thought by at least some of the participants to be benign or even beneficial. But, at the turning point, the painful truth is seen.

At this juncture, personal guilt and shame—and organizational liability—are immediately present, because in hindsight, most reasonable observers would say that someone should have known or done something about what was occurring. Since it is readily apparent that others are likely to react as though those involved should have known, relevant actors are likely to feel a level of guilt and shame commensurate with “knowingly” doing harm or evil. This in turn becomes a powerful psychological incentive to deny the harm or evil. If the wrongdoing or evil stems from management, such denial is likely to be read by those lower in the organization as sufficient direction to collude in a cover-up or lie. Apprehension over the possible loss of one’s job is often sufficient incentive for collusion.

The psychological incentives to do so are socially powerful, if not, indeed, overwhelming, because it is widely known that a cover-up is highly unlikely to succeed, and often results in the complete disclosure of the harmful or evil activities. Denial and cover-up are chosen in the face of knowing they are unlikely to work. This progression of dynamics can be seen in numerous organizational case examples, including the Dalkon Shield (Mintz 1985), the American tobacco industry (Hurt and Robertson 1998), the Goodrich Corporation (Darley 1996), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Adams and Balfour 2009), Enron, Worldcom, and Blackwater (Adams and Balfour 2010), among others.

Overcoming the Dynamics

Finding a way out of the social and structural dynamics that foster administrative evil is difficult. We are very rarely confronted with clear “black and white” decisions on ethically loaded issues. Most often, a series of small, usually ambiguous choices are made, and the weight of serial commitments and of habit drives out ethical considerations over time. Certainly, all of the positive actions recommended in the government ethics literature are steps in the right direction. However, these alone do not offer adequate protection against slipping into administrative evil and moral inversion. Critical reflexivity, the somewhat awkward mental exercise of reflecting on a situation as if one is seeing it from a distance, can help. Thinking systemically (as distinct from individually) is also helpful. Active questioning and the assistance of colleagues who may be adept at critical reflexivity are useful. None is foolproof.

Imagining a model public service professional who might be less receptive to administrative evil is instructive. Such a person should be expert, knowledgeable, competent, effective—all these attributes almost go without saying. The public service professional also needs to be an educator who can help foster learning organizations and learning communities—in effect, schools where citizens learn, deepen, and eventually habituate the practices of democratic citizenship. This professional also needs to become adept at systems thinking, and to learn the public value of courage. Courage in the face of fear is a crucially important virtue that should not be underestimated. Franklin Roosevelt, in the midst of the Great Depression, wisely said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Fear is almost always involved when we go really wrong; it plays well to our worst instincts. So the professional who can foster public courage is to be prized. Public courage can be contagious when seen by others. Building a “good barrel” in this way can, over time, make public courage systemic in public life, ameliorating the problem of administrative evil in a culture of technical rationality.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy B. Adams is a professor of public affairs in the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. He is co-editor-in-chief of the *American Review of Public Administration*. His research interests are in the areas of public administration history and theory, public service ethics, and organization studies. He is co-author (with Danny L. Balfour) of *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (3d ed., 2009) and has more than seventy-five scholarly publications, including books, book chapters, and articles in the top national and international public administration journals. He earned his doctorate in public administration in 1977 from the George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

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