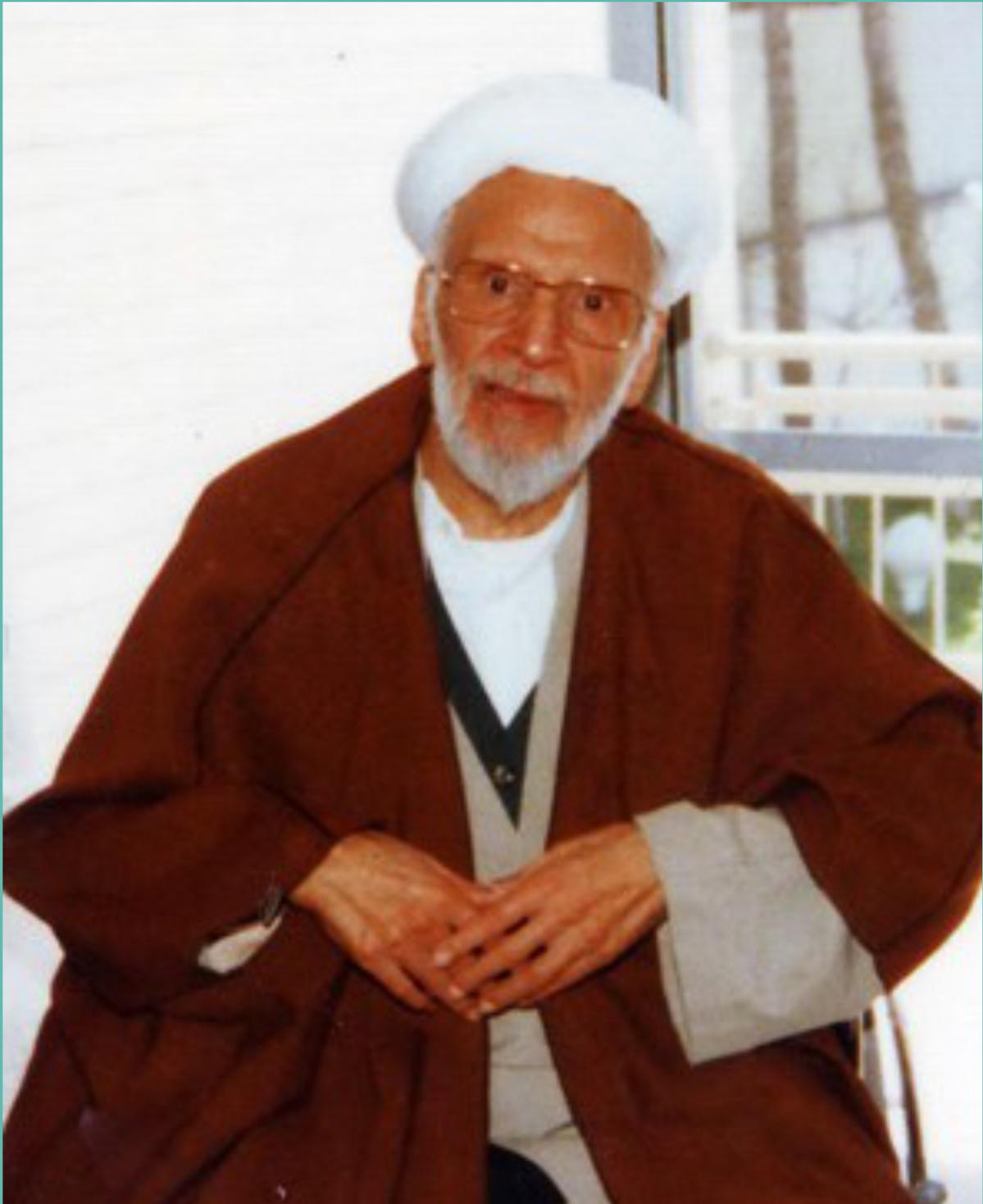


Mehdi Haeri Yazdi

An Insight Into His Intellectual and Political Philosophy

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Abstract

Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi occupies a significant place not only within Islamic circles but also philosophical ones. Having written nearly ten books on Islamic philosophy, he is considered a key figure within traditional Islamic philosophers in contemporary Iran. His expertise in Islamic studies alongside Islamic philosophy, coupled with his formal studies in Western philosophy enabled him to engage with the paradoxical relationship between modernity and Islam. Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi formulated a unique model of a state whereby individual autonomy is emphasised whilst the weakening of it in the name of collective interest is cautioned against. Thus, this paper will seek to provide a brief biography and an insight into the contentious thoughts of Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi.

Introduction

Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi was a prominent Shi'i cleric in Iran and the son of Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi, the esteemed founder of the Qom Seminary and teacher of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian Revolution. As the eldest son of Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi, he curated a somewhat interesting path for himself. Both sons of Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi, Mehdi and Murteza, followed their father's footsteps in becoming distinguished religious scholars in their own right. Murteza remained in Qom and taught in the seminaries. One of his most distinguished students is the current president of Iran, President Hassan Rouhani. Murteza's daughter was married to Ayatollah Khomeini's oldest son Mustafa, who passed away before he revolution. Unlike his older brother, Murteza went on to become a close associate and supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini during the revolution. Nevertheless, this paper will attempt to provide a brief insight into the life of Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi. It will do so by providing an illustration of his early life and education, his move to the West, his engagement with philosophy, his objection to *vilāyat-i faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist) and finally his own thesis of government prescribed in his book *Hekmat va Hokumat* (Philosophy and Government).

Early Life & Education

Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi was born in the holy city of Qom in 1923/1341 AH into the deeply religious family of Haeri Yazdi. He studied Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic philosophy under his father, Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi, who played a pivotal role in the renaissance of the *Hawza 'Ilmiyya* (Islamic seminary) in Qom. The *Hawza* in Qom is considered as the largest theological epicentres of Shi'i Islamic knowledge alongside the *Hawza* in Najaf.

Aside from his father, Mehdi was taught by other prominent scholars such as Ayatollah Ahmad Khunsari, Ayatollah Mirza Mehdi Ashtiyani and, Ayatollah Borujerdi¹. Mehdi considered jurisprudence to be mandatory, however, once commencing his studies in theology, he found it to be more rhetorical and argumentative rather than demonstrative². Thus, he was drawn to philosophy and studied works such as the mystical texts of Mulla Sadra and Ibn Sina. After fifteen years at the *Hawza*, at the age of twenty-eight he received his ordination as an Ayatollah from Ayatollah Borujerdi, who by then had become the main Shi'a authority after the death of Ayatollah Abd al-Karim Haeri Yazdi³. When one is granted the prerogative to engage in *ijtihad* (juristic reasoning), it indicates that the student has reached the level of expertise and competence required in determining the legal religious edicts for themselves through their own reasoning. After this period, instead of choosing the traditional route of remaining in Qom, Mehdi chose to move to Tehran in 1951⁴.

¹ Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013)

² Ibid.

³ Meysam Badamchi, 'Reasonableness, Rationality and Government: The Liberal Political Thought of Mehdi Ha'eri Yazdi' in *Iranian Studies*, 47,5, 2014.

⁴ Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, (London: Anthem Press, 2015), p.142.

Upon his arrival in Tehran, Mehdi first taught at what is now known as Shahid Mutahari School (formerly Madrasah-yi Sipahsalar), which was built during the period of the Qajar dynasty⁵. Mehdi initially taught the rational and transmitted Islamic sciences but following the death of the school's principal, Ayatollah Mirza Mehdi Ashtiyani, whom he had previously studied *Kitab al-Shifa* of Ibn Sina under, Mehdi assumed custodianship of the school in 1953⁶. Later he earned his doctorate from the University of Tehran in the field of theology and became a member of the faculty at Tehran University's theology department⁷. During this period, Mehdi experienced the tense political atmosphere in Iran which was plagued by the infamous coup d'état, which saw the overthrow of the popular Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in favour of the monarchical rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi; orchestrated by the United Kingdom and the United States following Mossadegh's nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company⁸. It was during this period he wrote his famous book, *Ilm-i Kuli*.

Soon after, Mehdi entered a new phase of his life by leaving Iran and migrating to the United States, thus beginning his long engagement with Western philosophy. Mehdi was reportedly first sent to Washington by Ayatollah Borujerdi to provide for the religious needs of Persian students in the West. He played a pivotal role in establishing the Islamic Education Center (IEC) in an effort to spread Islam in North America⁹. Mehdi also worked as a visiting professor at Georgetown University where he taught Eastern Existentialist Philosophy, a topic only a few were familiar with. Mehdi was just one of three individuals in the world at the time who had specialised in this field and had written books on it¹⁰. During his time in the Western hemisphere, Mehdi increasingly developed a strong interest in Western philosophy, particularly the works of Immanuel Kant and David Hume. After spending time in the United States, Mehdi moved to Canada where he earned a doctorate in analytical philosophy from the University of Toronto in 1979¹¹. His doctoral thesis was later published in 1992 with a foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and under his editorship by the State University of New York Press titled, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*. Prior to the completion of his doctorate, Mehdi had authored work on the theoretical rationality and Islamic metaphysics titled, *Kavushha-yi 'aql-i Nazari* in 1968¹². After graduating with his PhD in 1979, Mehdi returned to Georgetown and took up a position as a Senior Fellow at the Kennedy Institute of Ethics where he remained until 1980 when he was invited to become a Visiting Professor at Yale University.

Thus, Mehdi occupies an unrivalled position amongst debates on modernity and Islam, particularly in Iran. A combination of his knowledge and expertise on Islamic philosophy and theology together with his secular education in modern Western philosophy enabled Mehdi to explore the fundamental issues of modernity and Islam through a unique lens. Whilst the majority of Islamic scholars who delve into governance take a jurisprudential approach, he is one of the exceptionally rare jurists to

⁵ Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad, Editor's Introduction. In M. H. Yazdī, & S. N. Ahmad (Ed.), *Universal Science: An Introduction to Islamic Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) p.5.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Yasin Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, (Indiana: Author House, 2011), p.19. Meysam Badamchi, 2014.

⁸ Hossein Bashiriyeh, *The State and Revolution in Iran, 1962-1982*, (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p.17.

⁹ Yasin Al-Jibouri.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, (Maryland: Lexington Books., 2004), p.52.

¹² Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad

approach governance from a philosophical perspective, as he believed politics belongs to a branch of practical ethics¹³. However, as some scholars note, Mehdi's personal sensibility seemed to have disposed him towards an esoteric and elitist attitude in his writing that made him deliberately shun writing for the larger public unlike the other contemporary Islamic thinkers in Iran¹⁴. Consequently, much of his thoughts that spanned three decades may seem inaccessible even to experts and thus has not received the attention it deserves.

Relationship with Ayatollah Khomeini

Aside from his philosophical endeavours, Mehdi is perhaps most known for his proclaimed opposition to Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *vilāyat-i faqīh*. Despite Mehdi having once studied mystical philosophy under Ayatollah Khomeini, including the famous book *al-Asfar as-Arba'a* (The Four Journeys), a mystical text written by Mulla Sadra during the Safavid era, the two men later shared a somewhat complicated relationship¹⁵. Mehdi objected a number of policies implemented by Ayatollah Khomeini. For instance, he was incensed by Ayatollah Khomeini's uncompromised position to end the Iran–Iraq War during the 1980s when he personally went to visit him at his house and asked him to bring an end to the blood shed between Muslims¹⁶. Mehdi also argued that Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie was inconsistent with the principles of Islamic law, or Shari'a and against the interests of Muslim society.

Mehdi's opposition to Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *vilāyat-i faqīh* as justification for the rule of the Islamic state by Islamic jurists was no secret and he later went on to publish his objection in his book *Hekmat va Hokumat*. Thus, whilst visiting Iran to see his wife and children in the summer of 1980, he was barred from leaving the country and was placed under house arrest in Tehran¹⁷. Nevertheless, during this period Mehdi published several of his most important works which often originated from lectures he delivered at various research institutes such as in Anjuman-i hikmat wa falsafeh in Tehran. During this period, some of his most famous works were conceived including, *Haram-I hasti: tahlili az mabadi-yi hasti shinasi-yi tatbiqi*, in which he attempted to elaborate upon the basis of comparative ontology in the Western and Islamic traditions and a work on meta and applied ethics titled, *Kavushha-yi 'aql-I 'amali: falsafah-yi akhlaq*¹⁸.

Hekmat va Hokumat

Mehdi was seemingly free to travel by 1983 and so left Iran for the United Kingdom, first to Oxford and then to London. Whilst in London in 1995, Mehdi published his work on political theory, *Hekmat va Hokumat*. The book was published in London but and was

¹³ Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴ Farzin Vahdat, p.141.

¹⁵ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007), p.119

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad, p.9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

denied permission to be published in Iran. Nonetheless, the book has since been widely distributed in Iran¹⁹. The book is mainly concerned with ‘the logical relationship between government and Islam’, and the relationship between ‘democratic states’ and, Islam in particular²⁰. In the book, Mehdi not only drew from traditions in Islamic metaphysics, jurisprudence, mysticism, and political thought, but also on social contract theory upon which much of his work centred on the defence of the inalienability of humankind’s natural rights. Mehdi is considered by some scholars as a liberal political theorist as he endorsed liberal conceptions of the reasonable and the rational based on the Rawlsian thought. The key elements of Mehdi’s liberalism are that philosophy has priority over jurisprudence, his doctrine of contract based upon concepts of agency contract (*‘aqd-e vekalat*) and joint private ownership (*malekiyat-e shakhsi-ye musha*), and his defence of individualism against the alleged collectivism of Rousseau²¹.

In *Hekmat va Hokumat*, Mehdi contends that state-society relations belonged exclusively to *‘aql ‘amali* (practical reason) and were therefore completely out of the realm of metaphysics²². Religious matters such as knowledge of God and His attributes fall within the realm of theoretical reason while managing the affairs of a city falls within the realm of practical reason. In Mehdi’s view, the conduct of a government was simply meant to deal with nothing more than the management of domestic relations and international relations²³. Therefore, these practical functions of a government did not belong to the metaphysical domain and hence did not require the expertise of religious scholars. Furthermore, Mehdi argued that Islamic political theory cannot be developed simply on a reliance on jurisprudence. Rather a robust political thought must be strongly rooted on philosophy²⁴. Despite being an Islamic jurist, himself, Mehdi argued that when conflict arises in political affairs between Islamic practical philosophy on the one hand, and Shi’i jurisprudence on the other, one should side with practical philosophy. He believed that Islamic philosophy should be given greater consideration than the science of jurisprudence in solving both theoretical and practical issues concerning state affairs and politics²⁵. Consequently, he rejected the concept of the guardianship of the jurist, arguing that the government is not a superior divine metaphysical reality in the way the theory of *vilāyat-i faqīh* insinuates.

The book further delves into a detailed objection to the political doctrine of *vilāyat-i faqīh*. In contemporary Shi’i thought, *vilāyat-i faqīh* was expressed first in 1970 by Ayatollah Khomeini whilst residing in Najaf. Ayatollah Khomeini delivered a series of lectures on the theory of governance and leadership. This was later published as a book titled *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Hokumat-e Islami: vilāyat-i faqīh)* and was smuggled back to Iran by visitors who came to visit Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf²⁶. This was his most famous and influential work and laid out his ideas on governance. Four essential themes emerged from this book. Firstly, it comprised of a

¹⁹ Hamid Mavani.

²⁰ Meysam Badamchi, *Post-Islamist Political Theory: Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue*, (New York City: Springer, 2017), p.127.

²¹ ²¹ Meysam Badamchi, 2014.

²² Sussan Siavoshi, *Montazeri: The Life and Thought of Iran's Revolutionary Ayatollah*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.208.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Meysam Badamchi, 2014.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1985), p.38.

condemnation of the institution of monarchy as illegitimate and alien to Islam. Secondly, it presented an Islamic state based on the Quran and modelled after the Islamic community governed by the Prophet Mohammed. Thirdly, it claimed an assertion of the clerical class as heirs to the mantle of the Prophet. According to *vilāyat-i faqīh*, the two qualities essential to the ruler are justice and expertise in Islamic law, thus he writes 'the real governors are the Islamic jurists themselves'.²⁷ He goes on to claim that while the other '*ulama*' (religious scholars) may exercise their leadership over the community collectively, leadership may be vested in a single exceptional religious figure. Finally, the fourth key tenet out of *vilāyat-i faqīh* argued that it was incumbent upon all believers to work actively for the overthrow of the non-Islamic state. The book also laid down the essential steps by which the Pahlavis were to be overthrown, thus acting as a manual for a non-violent revolution.²⁸

According to Mehdi, the doctrine of *vilāyat-i faqīh*, which regards Muslims as invalids or minors, in need of the care of a guardian (*vali*), is unreasonable and irrational and therefore should be rejected. Viewing individuals that way is incompatible with the reasonable consideration of them as citizens that are free, equal and cooperating members of society, and also disregards the fact that they should be able to correct their conception of the good during the lifetime²⁹. Mehdi further argues that in traditional Shi'a jurisprudence, guardianship is only applicable in the cases of minors (*saghīr*) and people with an incompetent mind (*majnūn*), not for autonomous individuals who can claim the right of property and citizenship³⁰. Thus, he argues that the concept of *vilāyat-i faqīh* is misleading both philosophically and theologically. Philosophically, it deprives individuals of their rights and denies their human autonomy. Consequently, this can lead to despotism. Theologically, Mehdi questions the validity of the guardianship of the jurist theory within Islam. According to Shi'i Islamic teaching, the divine right to rule is bounded solely to the infallibles and they are the only ones who have access to a mystically illuminated knowledge about reality and existence³¹. Therefore, he argues, no fallible person, including a Muslim jurist, can claim a right to political leadership and divine *vilāyat*. Thus, since the guardianship of the jurist attributes the divine right of ruling to fallible people, from an Islamic theological perspective, the theory of *vilāyat-i faqīh* is deeply flawed in his opinion.

Aside from a critique of *vilāyat-i faqīh*, in *Hekmat va Hokumat*, Mehdi sought to provide a detailed explanation of his philosophical approach to governance that provides a definitive basis for a secular government and the separation of religion and state. Given Mehdi's training and expertise in Islamic and Western philosophy as well as Islamic theology and jurisprudence, he devised a unique model of a state whereby individual autonomy is stressed upon. Thus he sought to promote the notion of freedom of religion and believed an ideal state could accommodate a diversity of views regardless of one's religious affiliation or rather lack-of³². However, he cautioned against extremes and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Meysam Badamchi, 2014.

³⁰ Ibid; Ramin Jahanbegloo, p.65.

³¹ Meysam Badamchi, 2014.

³² Hamid Mavani.

seeking absolute freedom. He believed a balance was achievable as long as the peoples' actions were supervised by practical reason³³.

By introducing the notion of "joint private ownership" in his book, a concept derived from traditional Islamic jurisprudence, Mehdi developed a reasonable contract theory. Human ownership of one's body and one's capability is the basis of private and exclusive ownership of things, including the land upon which one lives on³⁴. Mehdi viewed the territory of a nation-state as common private property whose owners constitute its citizens. Thus, similar to the view held by the founding father of the 'liberal state', John Locke, Mehdi believed the primary reason for establishing a government is to provide for public welfare by protecting citizens' joint private property³⁵. In doing so he maintained that true political sovereignty of the country lays with the people and not the clerics and therefore the people have the inherent right to choose or dismiss whomsoever they wish as their agents. He proposed a 'principle of representation' (*vikālat*) as the principle of organisation in a democratic society that should replace the institution of the *vilāyat-i faqīh*. According to Mehdi, the people's right to delegate to whomsoever they wish to conduct the state affairs should not be contested because, in principle, each human being has this right even though they may opt to give up some of his/her freedom on the basis of practical intellect and in order to live as a social unit with peace and safety³⁶. His proposal incorporated a full parliamentary system and the election of public officials who are unconditionally accountable³⁷.

Conclusion

Mehdi later continued to travel back and forth between the United States, Europe and Iran. Unlike his brother Morteza, who was an advocate of *vilāyat-i faqīh*, Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri was influenced greatly by his father's apolitical nature and the separation of religion and state. Furthermore, he inherited much of his father's highly intellectual and simple aesthetic nature. He outlived his brother Morteza, who passed away in 1986. In his final years, Mehdi was afflicted with Parkinson's disease and eventually passed away in the summer of 1999/1420 AH. Similar to his father and brother, Mehdi was buried in the shrine of lady Fatemeh Massoumeh, in the holy city of Qom, Iran.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sussan Siavoshi, p.208.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hamid Mavani.

³⁷ Farzin Vahdat, p.159.

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