

80,000 Hours for the Common Good: A Thomistic Appraisal of Effective Altruism

Abstract

Effective Altruism is a rapidly growing and influential contemporary philosophical movement committed to updating utilitarianism in both theory and practice. The movement focuses on identifying urgent but neglected causes and inspiring supererogatory giving to meet the need. It also tries to build a broader coalition by adopting a more ecumenical approach to ethics which recognizes a wide range of values and moral constraints. These interesting developments distinguish Effective Altruism from the utilitarianism of the past in ways that invite cooperation and warrant a fresh look from Thomists. Nonetheless Effective Altruism’s fundamentally consequentialist and aggregative model for ethics precludes more foundational agreement with Thomistic ethics in ways that limit the extent of practical cooperation.

Contents

Abstract.....	0
Introduction to Effective Altruism.....	1
Axiological Criticisms and Responses.....	4
The Hedonic Criticism.....	4
The Institutions Criticism.....	7
Action-Theoretic Criticisms and Responses.....	10
The Rationality Criticisms.....	11
The Pauline Principle.....	14
Aggregation: An Unsolved Combined Problem.....	17
Conclusions.....	21
References.....	21

1. Introduction to Effective Altruism

The Effective Altruism movement is one of the most ambitious attempts by philosophers in recent years to use new developments in ethics to coordinate and integrate other disciplines. A roughly ten year old movement begun by a few Oxford philosophy graduate students now awards about 300 million dollars in grants annually¹ and has resulted in serious reflections by doctors² and technologists³ about how to be more ethical in their practice. The movement runs a website called *80,000 Hours* which encourages those discerning a career to focus on how they can use their roughly eighty thousand lifetime working hours “to help solve the world’s most pressing problems” which it lists as global health and development, animal welfare, the long-term future of humanity, and further philosophical research and communication in ethics.⁴ Their general advice to focus on both the direct ethical impact of a career and charitable giving has been heard by thousands, including some of the most talented people in the world.⁵

Effective Altruists’ encouragement to give 10-50% of income to charity⁶ should be appreciated by Thomists,⁷ since presently only 15% of U.S. Catholics donate at least ten percent

¹ William MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² John Launer, “Is It Worth Being a Doctor? Effective Altruism and Career Choice,” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 96, no. 1141 (November 1, 2020): 723–24, <https://doi.org/10.1136/postgradmedj-2020-138936>.

³ Alexander Herwix and Amir Haj-Bolouri, “Having a Positive Impact with Design Science Research – Learning from Effective Altruism,” in *Designing for Digital Transformation. Co-Creating Services with Citizens and Industry*, ed. Sara Hofmann, Oliver Müller, and Matti Rossi, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (International Conference on Design Science Research in Information Systems and Technology, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 235–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64823-7_22.

⁴ “What’s the Best Charity to Donate To?,” 80,000 Hours, December 2019, <https://80000hours.org/articles/best-charity/>.

⁵ “2019 Annual Review” (80,000 Hours, April 5, 2020), <https://80000hours.org/2020/04/annual-review-dec-2019/>.

⁶ Benjamin Todd, “Why and How to Earn to Give,” 80,000 Hours, April 2017, <https://80000hours.org/articles/earning-to-give/>.

⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, “Secunda Secundae,” in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso, 2016, <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part2-2.htm> Q. 87.

of their income.⁸ Further, any reader of recent papal encyclicals should welcome a commitment to global health and development,⁹ animal welfare,¹⁰ and the long-term future of humanity.¹¹

And what member of the American Catholic Philosophical Association could fail to be excited about money and talent for philosophical research and communications in the present era of academic budget cuts? Nonetheless while some Christians have appreciated the Effective Altruists' call for aid to be preferentially directed to the neediest, no matter where they may be in the world,¹² neither Thomists nor Catholics generally have written much about the movement.

One reason for this lack of reaction might be a deep ambivalence in Thomists' thoughts about Effective Altruism. On the one hand, the movement's central exhortation toward greater charitable giving is at best commendable and at worst innocuous. On the other hand, Effective Altruism is often presented as a gussied up version of Peter Singer's Utilitarianism.¹³ While

⁸ Brian Starks and Christian Smith, "Unleashing Catholic Generosity" (University of Notre Dame McGrath Institute for Church Life, Fall 2012), https://mcgrath.nd.edu/assets/96494/unleashing_catholic_generosity.pdf%22%3Eunleashing_catholic_generosity.pdf.

⁹ Francis, "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," Encyclical, October 3, 2020, para. 109, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

¹⁰ Francis, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," Encyclical, May 24, 2015, para. 92, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html; this also holds for Aquinas at least as a matter of preventing vice: "Book Three," in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), <https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles3b.htm> Chap. 112, n. 13.

¹¹ Francis, "Laudatio Si'," May 24, 2015, para. 109. Aquinas, like the Effective Altruists, considers preserving the future in as good a state as the present a legitimate constraint on almsgiving: "ST Ila-IIae" Q. 32, art. 6, co.

¹² Alida Liberman, "Effective Altruism and Christianity: Possibilities for Productive Collaboration," *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (January 2017): 6–29, <https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1576>.

¹³ See e.g. John Gray, "How & How Not to Be Good," *The New York Review of Books*, May 21, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/05/21/how-and-how-not-to-be-good/>; Catherine Tumber and Iason Gabriel, "The Logic of Effective Altruism," *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism>; Giles Fraser, "It's Called Effective Altruism – but Is It Really the Best Way to Do Good?," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2017, sec. Money, <http://www.theguardian.com/money/belief/2017/nov/23/its-called-effective-altruism-but-is-it-really-the-best-way-to-do-good>. Singer was indeed the motivation for Effective Altruism: "Foreword," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), v–vi.

Catholics can appreciate Singer's concern for the poor,¹⁴ the logical conclusion of his views in the infanticide of severely disabled infants is morally repugnant to anyone with even vaguely Thomist sensibilities.¹⁵ Moreover, utilitarianism was condemned as a moral philosophy detached from eternal law in the magisterium of both Pius XII¹⁶ and John Paul II.¹⁷ It is therefore understandable that Thomists may have decided to pass over such a morally ambiguous movement in silence.

I nonetheless suggest that the time for more sustained Thomist engagement with Effective Altruism has come. First, the movement's influence is spreading and deepening throughout all fields of applied ethics and even international relations, so ignoring it is counterproductive. Second, treating the movement as merely a rebranding of already-rebutted utilitarian views ignores the major work Effective Altruists have done, beginning with William MacAskill's doctoral dissertation,¹⁸ to respond to stock criticisms and expand their field of

¹⁴ E.g. Charles C. Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ E.g. Derek S. Jeffreys, "Euthanasia and John Paul II's Silent Language of Profound Sharing of Affection: Why Christians Should Care About Peter Singer," *Christian Bioethics: Non-Ecumenical Studies in Medical Morality* 7, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 359–78, <https://doi.org/10.1076/chbi.7.3.359.6881>; Peter J Colosi, "John Paul II and Christian Personalism vs. Peter Singer and Utilitarianism: Two Radically Opposed Conceptions of the Nature and Meaning of Suffering," *Ethics Education* 15, no. 1 (2009): 23; John Finnis, "Capacity, Harm and Experience in the Life of Persons as Equals," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 5 (2013): 281–83; Robert P George, "Infanticide and Madness," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 5 (2013): 299–301; Charles C. Camosy, "Concern for Our Vulnerable Prenatal and Neonatal Children: A Brief Reply to Giubilini and Minerva," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, no. 5 (2013): 296–98; John Paul II, "Evangelium Vitae, on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life," Encyclical, March 25, 1995, para. 14, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html; Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 64, art. 6, co.

¹⁶ "Summi Pontificatus, on the Union of Human Society," Encyclical, October 20, 1939, para. 55, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_20101939_summi-pontificatus.html.

¹⁷ "Veritatis Splendor," Encyclical, August 6, 1993, para. 74, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

¹⁸ "Normative Uncertainty" (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford, UK, University of Oxford, 2014).

ethical regard. Indeed, Effective Altruists have begun making arguments that are pro-natal,¹⁹ unabashedly pro-life,²⁰ and even ascetical.²¹ A more nuanced appraisal is worthwhile.

2. Axiological Criticisms and Responses

Every ethical theory must offer both an axiology (an account of the goods and evils which motivate action) and an action theory (an account of how particular actions relate to those goods and evils). This appraisal begins with axiology, since Thomists have sharply criticized utilitarians in this regard but Effective Altruism has made significant advances.

2.1 The Hedonic Criticism

One response to utilitarianism, exemplified by the old *Catholic Encyclopedia*, is to treat it as “a modern form of the Hedonistic ethical theory which teaches that the end of human conduct is happiness” such that “the arguments urged against Hedonism in general are effective against Utilitarianism.”²² Unaugmented, this is a strange line of criticism for Thomists, since Aquinas professes that happiness is the last end of man because it is “a perfect good that puts the appetite totally to rest.”²³ Perhaps the real objection is that utilitarians define happiness in a reductive way as net quantity of pleasure,²⁴ whereas Aquinas holds that true happiness is found in God alone rather than in pleasure, which he takes to be a mere bodily delight.²⁵ While this criticism finds its

¹⁹ Bernadette Young, “Parenthood and Effective Altruism,” *Effective Altruism Forum* (blog), April 14, 2014, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/bz2A2gRvtrpHAsToN/parenthood-and-effective-altruism>.

²⁰ Dale, “Blind Spots: Compartmentalizing,” *Effective Altruism Forum* (blog), December 31, 2014, <https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/ADuroAEX5mJMxY5sG/blind-spots-compartmentalizing>.

²¹ Kathryn Muyskens, “The Other Half of Effective Altruism: Selective Asceticism,” *Essays in Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (April 1, 2017): 91–106, <https://doi.org/10.7710/1526-0569.1575>.

²² James Fox, “Utilitarianism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15241c.htm>.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, “Prima Secundae,” in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso, 2016, <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part1-2.htm> Q. 2, art. 8, co.

²⁴ Jason Lloyd, “Let There Be Justice: A Thomistic Assessment of Utilitarianism and Libertarianism,” *Texas Review of Law and Policy* 229 (Fall 2003): 232.

²⁵ Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 2, art. 6, co.

mark for Bentham, however, it fails to hold for Mill and Singer.²⁶ Mill admits not only quantitative but also qualitative distinctions in happiness, and his “rule for measuring [quality] against quantity” is “the preference felt by those who, in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison.”²⁷ Singer, too, has defended this sort of preference-based utilitarianism.²⁸ Aquinas’s argument *against* happiness consisting in bodily pleasure is based on just this sort of preference-ordering argument: bodily pleasure is finite and thus incapable of satisfying infinite human desire, while the infinite goodness of God can completely satisfy human desire without bodily pleasure.²⁹

Jason Lloyd suggests that the relevant difference is utilitarians’ subjective conception of happiness grounded in the experiences of the majority versus Aquinas’s objective hierarchy of goods.³⁰ What makes Aquinas’s hierarchy of goods objective, however, is not that it commands universal assent but that such ordering belongs to the wise man who is actually acquainted with (*cognoscit*) the highest good.³¹ Only such a person, possessed of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit, would meet Mill’s criterion of being best furnished with the means of comparison. Indeed, more recent utilitarians like Allan Gibbard insist that the theory depends on some objective ordering of preferences.³² While Aquinas’s account of the qualitative hierarchy of human goods

²⁶ Emilie Dardenne, “From Jeremy Bentham to Peter Singer,” *Revue d’études Benthamiennes* 7 (September 13, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudes-benthamiennes.204>.

²⁷ John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 214.

²⁸ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25.

²⁹ Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 2, art. 6, co.

³⁰ “Let There Be Justice: A Thomistic Assessment of Utilitarianism and Libertarianism,” 235, 241.

³¹ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 45, art. 1, co.

³² Allan F. Gibbard, “Ordinal Utilitarianism,” in *Arrow and the Foundations of the Theory of Economic Policy*, ed. George R. Feiwel (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1987), 135–53, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-07357-3_3.

certainly exceeds the bounds of Mill's materialism and empiricism, these metaphysical and epistemic concerns are outside the scope of utilitarianism as an ethical theory.

Effective Altruism goes even further in partitioning the application of utilitarian reasoning from the metaphysical ground of utility. Far from a commitment to the deeply controverted claims associated with Bentham and Singer, MacAskill says that Effective Altruism does not essentially involve any first-order normative claims at all, and is even compatible with significant uncertainty about the correct axiology.³³ Instead, MacAskill thinks that Effective Altruism requires only the commitments to *effectiveness* (doing as much good as possible with the resources available) and *altruism* (everyone's good should count equally).³⁴

Thomists should respect both of these commitments. Aquinas argues that almsgiving is a matter of precept due to its relation with charity—we are to be the well-*doers* of others and not merely their well-*wishers*—and that the precept applies to resources surplus to maintaining one's own person and household.³⁵ The first claim on this surplus is had by those whose needs are extreme and otherwise unmet,³⁶ and Aquinas further specifies that it is not praiseworthy to give extravagantly to those whose needs are already met, because the same resources could be used to meet the basic needs of others.³⁷ Having thus established *effectiveness* as a requirement, Aquinas

³³ MacAskill, "Normative Uncertainty"; William MacAskill, "Normative Uncertainty as a Voting Problem," *Mind* 125, no. 500 (October 1, 2016): 967–1004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzv169>; William MacAskill and Toby Ord, "Why Maximize Expected Choice-Worthiness?," *Nous* 54, no. 2 (2020): 327–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12264>; William MacAskill, Krister Bykvist, and Toby Ord, *Moral Uncertainty* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁴ MacAskill, "The Definition of Effective Altruism," 14.

³⁵ Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 32, art. 5, co.

³⁶ *Ibid.*. Effective Altruists disagree among themselves about the "otherwise unmet" criterion, see Mark Budolfson and Dean Spears, "The Hidden Zero Problem: Effective Altruism and Barriers to Marginal Impact," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); versus Andreas Morgensen, "The Callousness Objection," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁷ Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 32, art. 10, co.

also insists on *altruism*. Where almsgiving is a matter of precept it is not a matter of liberality,³⁸ and thus the recipients must be selected according to their circumstances rather than personal preference.³⁹ While Aquinas grants that closeness to the giver of alms is a circumstance yielding a certain claim on care, he nonetheless insists that it be a lesser criterion than the extent of need.⁴⁰ This is quite compatible with current framings of Effective Altruism since resources given to those closely conjoined to us might either be considered as simply unavailable for *altruism*⁴¹ or as a duty of group membership which preempts individualized duties.⁴² Far from being precluded by Thomistic axiology, the minimal heuristic principles of Effective Altruism thus seem to follow from Thomist commitments.⁴³

2.2 The Institutions Criticism

Another common criticism of Effective Altruism is the institutional critique, which “targets effective altruists’ tendency to focus on single actions and their proximate consequences” to “the neglect of coordinated sets of actions directed at changing social structures that reliably cause suffering.”⁴⁴ The institutional critique arises directly from the commitment to *effectiveness*, which requires data—data that is much easier to obtain for projects of narrower scope and their proximate consequences than for broader and longer-term

³⁸ C.f. *ibid.* Q.63, art. 1, ad 3.

³⁹ This is the sin Aquinas calls “regard for persons”: *ibid.* Q. 63, art. 1, co.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Q. 32, art. 9, co.

⁴¹ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 15–16.

⁴² Stephanie Collins, “Beyond Individualism,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴³ As Mill himself supposed: “Utilitarianism,” 218.

⁴⁴ Alice Crary, “Letter to a Young Philosopher: Don’t Become an Effective Altruist” (Public Philosophy, Oxford University, June 11, 2020), <https://www.oxfordpublicphilosophy.com/blog/letter-to-a-young-philosopher-dont-become-an-effective-altruiststrong-strong>. This criticism has been advanced by Angus Deaton, “The Logic of Effective Altruism,” *Boston Review*, July 1, 2015, <https://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism>, Emily Clough, “Effective Altruism’s Political Blind Spot,” *Boston Review*, July 14, 2015, <https://bostonreview.net/world/emily-clough-effective-altruism-ngos>, and especially Timothy Syme, “Charity vs. Revolution: Effective Altruism and the Systemic Change Objection,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 22, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 93–120, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-09979-5>.

undertakings. This concern about malformed social structures should resonate with Catholics due to its similarity to Pope John Paul II's language of "structures of sin."⁴⁵ Such sinful institutions, moreover, are the macro-scale versions of an even more fundamental structure which reliably causes suffering, but can be improved by a coordinated set of actions—vicious character.⁴⁶

The institutional critique certainly lands on Bentham's purely act-based utilitarianism. In fact, Mill himself recognized the inadequacy of Bentham's theory in this respect, and insisted on the moral importance of habits:

When the moralist thus overlooks the relation of an act to a certain state of mind as its cause, and its connection through that common cause with large classes and groups of actions apparently very little resembling itself, his estimation even of the consequences of the very act itself, is rendered imperfect. For it may be affirmed with few exceptions, that any act whatever has a tendency to fix and perpetuate the state or character of mind in which itself has originated. And if that important element in the moral relations of the action be not taken into account by the moralist as a cause, neither probably will it be taken into account as a consequence.⁴⁷

Surely this is not a full-blown virtue ethics. Mill is a consequentialist, whose axiology reduces to the aggregate happiness present in a state of affairs, which character helps to cause and compose but does not constitute.⁴⁸ Aquinas is also not a strict virtue-ethicist in his axiology, however, taking *actions* rather than character the central bearers of moral good and evil,⁴⁹ and including all foreseen harms as aggravating factors in the evil ascribed to actions.⁵⁰ While these axiological

⁴⁵ John Paul II, "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis," Encyclical, December 30, 1987, paras. 36–40, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

⁴⁶ See Aquinas, "ST Ia-IIae" Q. 71, art. 3 for a discussion of the relation between vice and sets of actions. The analogy with character should be taken seriously, since in the social sciences "institutions" means any "well-established and structured pattern of behavior": "Economic Institutions," in *The Library of Economics and Liberty* (Liberty Fund, 2019), <https://www.econlib.org/library/Topics/College/economicinstitutions.html>.

⁴⁷ John Stuart Mill, "Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy," in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, ed. John M. Robson, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 8.

⁴⁸ Mill, "Utilitarianism," 213.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, "ST Ia-IIae" q. 71, arts. 3, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Q. 73, art. 8, co.

differences between Aquinas and Mill are subtle (because the terminology used and distinctions made differ so sharply), they are fundamental for any deep comparison of Thomistic and utilitarian ethics. For the purpose of shared public advocacy, however, these metaphysical differences need not take center stage—it's sufficient to note that utilitarians are not insensitive to the importance of character formation in moral decision-making.

Effective Altruists have also taken the institutional criticism seriously and worked to internalize it. Certainly they were right to care about data, as anyone committed to *effectiveness* (like Aquinas) should. Different programs for preventing the effects of contagious disease in poor countries sometimes have *thousand*-fold differences in their cost-effectiveness,⁵¹ which our sin-darkened intellects⁵² often fail to recognize in the absence of data. Even knowledge of earthly sciences proportioned to our minds requires great care and perseverance,⁵³ and God has directly revealed little about the relative effectiveness of various charitable endeavors. On the other hand, Effective Altruists have been committed from the start to some endeavors on which little data exists (like the preservation of the far future against hostile artificial intelligences) because of their large potential benefits.⁵⁴ Effective Altruism's attachment to empirical evidence is not due to misguided scientism but rather a concern that *effectiveness* will otherwise be dominated by

⁵¹ Toby Ord, "The Moral Imperative Toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 31.

⁵² See the contrast between Thomas Aquinas, "Prima Pars," in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso, 2016, <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part1.htm> Q. 94, art. 4, co., and "ST Ia-IIae" Q. 85, art. 3, co.

⁵³ Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 2, art. 4, co.

⁵⁴ Nick Beckstead, "A Brief Argument for the Overwhelming Importance of Shaping the Far Future," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

emotional appeals⁵⁵—a concern which Thomists should share since Aquinas identifies reason’s failure in the face of inordinate passion as the general internal cause of sin.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Effective Altruists have recently been more explicit about taking a broader view of scientific methodology “to include reliance on careful rigorous argument and theoretical models as well as data,”⁵⁷ and a broader view of data which includes “ways of gaining empirical evidence other than [Randomized Controlled Trials].”⁵⁸ Effective Altruists have even come to realize that promoting a given form of altruism is a good way to gain data and improve institutions in a virtuous cycle⁵⁹—an insight that should be familiar to an Aristotelian thinking about character development. These insights have spurred Effective Altruists to begin addressing both the improvement of individual character⁶⁰ and political institutions.⁶¹ The institutional critique has been fully internalized by Effective Altruists.

3. Action-Theoretic Criticisms and Responses

Thomists have historically criticized not only utilitarianism’s axiology but also its action theory. While Effective Altruists have tried to make their action theory open to more agent-centric and non-consequentialist perspectives, less has been gained in this area than in axiology.

⁵⁵ Iason Gabriel and Brian McElwee, “Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 101.

⁵⁶ See “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 75, arts. 1-2 and Q. 77, art. 1.

⁵⁷ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. This even includes awareness of the external validity concerns about Randomized Controlled Trials: Amanda Askill, “Evidence Neutrality and the Moral Value of Information,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 46n27.

⁵⁹ Askill, “Evidence Neutrality and the Moral Value of Information.”

⁶⁰ Richard Yetter Chappell, “Overriding Virtue,” in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶¹ Gabriel and McElwee, “Effective Altruism, Global Poverty, and Systemic Change.”

3.1 The Rationality Criticisms

Another venerable criticism of utilitarianism recorded by the *Catholic Encyclopedia* is that it would require moral agents to “calculate...all the results of every action” which would “require an intellect much more powerful than that with which man is endowed.”⁶² Here again, there are reasons to be doubtful. First, as Mill notes, one can rely on the world’s regularities (which are precisely what Effective Altruists use the scientific method to discern) to derive heuristic subordinate principles.⁶³ The production of these heuristic subordinate principles needed to compensate for each agent’s limited calculation ability is the basic justification for the practical side of the Effective Altruism program.⁶⁴ This procedure should be familiar to Thomists,⁶⁵ who take the natural law to include a multitude of secondary precepts derived from the first precept to do good and avoid evil,⁶⁶ even though fallen humans often fail to understand the derivation.⁶⁷ Second, *pace* Robert George,⁶⁸ Thomists also face the calculation problem, since as argued above they endorse *effectiveness* as a matter of precept in at least some cases.⁶⁹ Finally, Effective Altruists have taken on the calculation problem directly, calculating the likely cost-effectiveness of further research on cost-effectiveness.⁷⁰ As long as this series of estimates converges, the subordinate heuristic principles used by Effective Altruists will be maximally efficient.

⁶² Fox, “Utilitarianism.”

⁶³ Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 225.

⁶⁴ “Our Criteria for Top Charities,” GiveWell, January 2020, <https://www.givewell.org/how-we-work/criteria>.

⁶⁵ Mill himself argues for this parallel: “Utilitarianism,” 224.

⁶⁶ Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 94, art. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Q. 94, art. 6.

⁶⁸ Robert P. George, “Does the Incommensurability Thesis Imperil Common Sense Moral Judgements,” *Am. J. Juris.* 37 (1992): 185.

⁶⁹ In addition to the case of almsgiving discussed above, the proportionality condition on violence (Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 64, art. 7) also requires calculation. .

⁷⁰ E.g. Owen Cotton-Barratt, “Project Overview: Problems of Unknown Difficulty,” The Global Priorities Project, February 6, 2015, <http://globalprioritiesproject.org/2015/02/project-overview-problems-of-unknown-difficulty/>.

The calculation criticism can be understood as a special case of the more general demandingness objection, that utilitarianism simply asks too much of us, both intellectually and morally. The moral over-demandingness of utilitarianism is supposed to consist in its insistence that we “promote the happiness of others, even at the expense of our own projects.”⁷¹ This demandingness should not discomfit Thomists, however, since Aquinas also offers a demanding morality where every action is concretely good or evil (never indifferent),⁷² a good action must be good in all respects (species, circumstance, and intention),⁷³ intention is only good insofar as it is in complete conformity with the divine will,⁷⁴ even a disorder of the means implies venial sin,⁷⁵ and ignorance only completely excuses when it is completely involuntary.⁷⁶ In both moral systems the good is jealous and tends to preclude personal projects conceived without reference to it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Thomist and Effective Altruist responses to the demandingness objection look quite similar. The first move is to sharply distinguish precept from counsel, as when Aquinas insists that almsgiving is only a matter of precept for resources surplus to maintaining one’s state in life,⁷⁷ or as MacAskill puts it, Effective Altruism does not normatively imply sacrifice.⁷⁸ The second move is to nonetheless hold out giving even more as

⁷¹ Alison Hills, “Utilitarianism, Contractualism and Demandingness,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60, no. 239 (April 1, 2010): 225–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2009.609.x>. For a fuller explanation of the concern, see Brian McElwee, “What Is Demandingness?,” in *The Limits of Moral Obligation: Moral Demandingness and Ought Implies Can*, ed. Marcel van Ackeren and Michael Kühler, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 21–27. This objection is pressed against Effective Altruism by Crary, “Letter to a Young Philosopher.”

⁷² Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 18, art. 9, co.

⁷³ Ibid. Q. 18, art. 4, ad 3.

⁷⁴ Ibid. Q. 19, art. 10, co.

⁷⁵ Ibid. Q. 88, art. 1, co.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Q. 76, art. 3, co.

⁷⁷ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 32, art. 6, co.

⁷⁸ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 15–16.

an important exercise of virtue, as in Aquinas's discussion of liberality,⁷⁹ or as Richard Yetter Chappell puts it for Effective Altruists, "abstract benevolence."⁸⁰

Alice Crary claims that the form of the demandingness criticism with the most force against Effective Altruism is not that it ignores the finitude of our calculative abilities, or the finitude of our willpower, but rather that it ignores the finitude of our ability to recognize values.⁸¹ Recognizing values, she claims, is not merely a matter of abstract intellection, but of transformative engagement with the world: service-learning, as it were. In this view, commitment to a certain strategy is a transformative experience which may foreclose not only factual knowledge that would be gained from other strategies (as Effective Altruists admit),⁸² but even the values that would make such factual effectiveness worth pursuing. Effective Altruists admit the basic difficulty, since "devoting a certain proportion of one's resources to charity is a way of life,"⁸³ but contend that their combined commitments to *altruism* and *effectiveness* provide sufficient resources to craft an answer. Due to *altruism*, everyone's preferences should count equally (rather than preferring one's own current or future values), and the scientific methodology of *effectiveness* applies just as well to discovering preferences as to discovering facts, so there is no special problem.⁸⁴ Crary's rejoinder is that studying social phenomena presumes rather than elucidates values: "gender-based and racist abuses are not as such

⁷⁹ Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 117, art. 1.

⁸⁰ Chappell, "Overriding Virtue."

⁸¹ Crary, "Letter to a Young Philosopher."

⁸² Askill, "Evidence Neutrality and the Moral Value of Information."

⁸³ Ben Sachs, "Demanding the Demanding," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 145. Sachs is himself a strict act utilitarian who thinks that this sacrifice is a matter of precept, but his point for Effective Altruists in general is just that this insistence will lead to more actual altruism, not that they must accept it as a moral truth.

⁸⁴ I take this to be the upshot of Jeff Sebo and Laurie Paul, "Effective Altruism and Transformative Experience," in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues*, ed. Hilary Greaves and Theron Pummer (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–9.

indifferently open to view” but rather “only come into focus through the lens of a sense of the social suffering that systematic sexist and racist bias occasions,” so “distinctive methods” rather than generalized science are required for ethical engagement with social phenomena.⁸⁵ Thomists also face the transformative experience objection because the virtue of liberality achieves its height in giving away all of one’s possessions in order to enter religious life,⁸⁶ a sharply differing state which cannot be fully appreciated in advance.⁸⁷ The Thomist solution relies not on scientific methodology, however, but rather on the tradition which affirms entrance into the religious state as a perpetual divine counsel of perfection.⁸⁸ Avid readers of Catholic philosophy will recognize here Alasdair MacIntyre’s incommensurable dialectic of “Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition.”⁸⁹ The transformative experience criticism thus cannot be fully internalized by Effective Altruists, but nor should it give them pause since it comes from an incommensurable view of the world.⁹⁰ While Thomists may not grant the extreme generality Effective Altruists claim for the scientific method, however, they have their own philosophical and theological justifications for almsgiving and have no reason to doubt scientific evidence of *effectiveness* within that scope.

3.2 The Pauline Principle

None of the criticisms so far discussed, however, are the reason that utilitarianism suffered papal condemnation. John Paul II’s concern was rather that utilitarianism judged the

⁸⁵ Crary, “Letter to a Young Philosopher”; see also Alice Crary, “The Methodological Is Political,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (June 2018), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-methodological-is-political>.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 117, art. 1, ad 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Q. 189, art. 2, ad 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Q. 189, art. 10, ad 1.

⁸⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

⁹⁰ This is why the debate has had the unproductive character noted by Jeff McMahan, “Philosophical Critiques of Effective Altruism,” *The Philosophers’ Magazine*, no. 73 (August 2, 2016): 92–99, <https://doi.org/10.5840/tpm20167379>.

morality of acts purely based on their consequences⁹¹ (which for Thomists are merely part of the circumstances)⁹² rather than including their proper objects which sort actions into species.⁹³ For utilitarians it is thus “never possible to formulate an absolute prohibition of particular kinds of behavior,”⁹⁴ vitiating the Pauline Principle that evils may never be done for the sake of greater goods (see Rom 3:8) central to a Thomistic understanding of ethics.⁹⁵ Mill tries to brush the difficulty aside, arguing that supposed intrinsically evil acts always have evil consequences in a suitably general and long-term meta-analysis.⁹⁶ Nonetheless Mill recognizes that philosophers will be able to generate counter-examples to this thesis, so he parries by suggesting that alternative ethical theories *also* fail to uphold truly exception-less moral norms, for which he takes truth-telling as his example.⁹⁷ The problem with Mill’s argument is that it equivocates between lying and truth-telling. Aquinas genuinely upholds an exception-less negative moral precept against lying,⁹⁸ but denies that there is any exception-less positive precept to tell the truth,⁹⁹ or indeed that there could be any exception-less positive precepts at all.¹⁰⁰ Mill may thus be correct that utility (or at least *efficiency* more broadly) is useful in deciding among conflicting

⁹¹ “Rules of action...must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.” Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 206.

⁹² Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 7, art. 3, co.

⁹³ Ibid. Q. 18, arts. 2, 5.

⁹⁴ John Paul II, “Veritatis Splendor,” August 6, 1993, para. 75.

⁹⁵ Servais Pinckaers, “Historical Perspective on Intrinsically Evil Acts,” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman, trans. Mary Thomas Noble and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 185–235; Servais Pinckaers, “Revisionist Understandings of Actions in the Wake of Vatican II,” in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman, trans. Mary Thomas Noble and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 236–70.

⁹⁶ Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 223.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 110, art. 3, co. This position is today defended by Christopher O. Tollefsen, “Moral Absolutes,” in *Lying and Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 79–101.

⁹⁹ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 111, art. 1, co.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Q. 33, art. 2, co.

positive norms, but wrong that it can ground all of morality to include exception-less negative precepts.

As discussed in the axiology section above, however, Effective Altruism is not committed to utilitarianism, and in fact MacAskill defines it as compatible with exception-less negative precepts, which he calls “side constraints.”¹⁰¹ The problem is that unlike Thomistic ethics which derives both efficiency-maximizing considerations and exception-less negative precepts from an underlying virtue theory,¹⁰² Effective Altruism must model side constraints within its fundamental ethics of maximization.¹⁰³ Such maximization can either be of preferences or of expected value, and MacAskill has tried to fit exception-less moral norms into both systems. In preference-rankings MacAskill models actions which violate side-constraints as least-preferred,¹⁰⁴ but this suggests such actions have *some* relation to the end sought, which Aquinas denies.¹⁰⁵ Actions which violate negative precepts are not just dis-preferred for Aquinas—they constitute genuine practical irrationality since in contradicting charity they lead the agents further away from what they most truly desire,¹⁰⁶ and true moral dilemmas which force agents into such violations are impossible.¹⁰⁷ In expected-value maximization, by contrast, MacAskill and Ord model actions which violate side-constraints as yielding infinite disvalue.¹⁰⁸ The problem with this model is that it shifts from a (first-person) exception-lessly-prohibited

¹⁰¹ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 17.

¹⁰² Pinckaers, “Historical Perspective on Intrinsically Evil Acts,” 206.

¹⁰³ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 14.

¹⁰⁴ MacAskill, “Normative Uncertainty as a Voting Problem.”

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, ed. Brian Davies, trans. Richard Regan (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) Q. 7, art. 1, ad 8.

¹⁰⁶ Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 88, art. 2, co.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Q. 19, art. 6, ad 3.

¹⁰⁸ MacAskill and Ord, “Why Maximize Expected Choice-Worthiness?,” 349.

action to a (third-person) exceptionally disvalued world,¹⁰⁹ where all relevant worlds are likely to have histories involving the violation of putative side constraints. True moral dilemmas are thus assumed to exist¹¹⁰ unless the problem is reframed such that the *number* of norm-violations is what matters¹¹¹—but then of course the negative precepts in question aren't true “side constraints” at all. While MacAskill can gerrymander consequentialist axiology to extend an olive branch to non-consequentialists, in the end Effective Altruists can never losslessly model Thomistic action theory. For present practical collaborations this is a minor issue because current Effective Altruist priorities like assistance to the world's poorest, improved conditions for factory-farmed animals, and artificial intelligence research do not obviously involve the violation of any exception-less negative Thomistic moral precepts, which are few.

4. Aggregation: An Unsolved Combined Problem

While Thomists and Effective Altruists have deep yet subtle differences in their axiologies and action theories, these are often of minor practical importance. Another long-standing Thomistic criticism of utilitarianism portends greater practical difficulties for collaborating with Effective Altruists today, however—the problem of aggregating utilities. This practice of aggregation is driven by both axiological concerns of altruistic impartiality and by the need of consequentialist action theory to rank-order possible outcome states of affairs. Mill claims as a “proof” of utilitarian ethics “that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.”¹¹² While the old *Catholic Encyclopedia* was certainly correct to harshly criticize the

¹⁰⁹ Martin Rhonheimer also sees problematic axiological consequences in this shift: *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 208–9.

¹¹⁰ MacAskill and Ord, “Why Maximize Expected Choice-Worthiness?,” 348.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 349.

¹¹² Mill, “Utilitarianism,” 234.

logic of this “proof,”¹¹³ our present concern is not with the justification of the conclusion but rather its appropriateness as a guide to action. The problem from the Thomist perspective is that happiness is the achievement of an end rather than the possession of a quantity (of whatever kind), so human happiness cannot simply be aggregated like human mass. Rather, the general happiness must be a *common* good shared in by all without division¹¹⁴—the end of a society rather than a mere aggregate. Human society, in turn, is according to Aquinas an ordered multitude, with a single form inhering in each of its citizen-parts.¹¹⁵ The extrinsic common good of the community is God,¹¹⁶ while its intrinsic common good is the perfection of its form,¹¹⁷ namely the relation of the parts by power in a certain order of dependence,¹¹⁸ yielding a certain natural inequality.¹¹⁹ Thus the idea that the common good is a mere aggregate of individual happiness seems as absurd to Thomists as the idea that the good of an organism is a mere aggregate of the goods of its organs.¹²⁰ The achievement of individual goods is presupposed by the existence of a common good,¹²¹ but they cannot constitute its intensive perfection.¹²²

As discussed in the response to the hedonic criticism, Effective Altruism is not committed to a particular quantitative axiology like Mill’s utilitarianism. If the goal is only to help the neediest at current margins and within side constraints (as stressed by MacAskill), then Quality-Adjusted-Life-Years or some similar purely instrumental metric can be adopted to assess

¹¹³ Fox, “Utilitarianism.”

¹¹⁴ Aquinas, “ST IIa-IIae” Q. 58, art. 6, co.

¹¹⁵ Aquinas, “ST Ia” Q. 39, art. 3, co.

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, “ST Ia-IIae” Q. 111, art. 5, ad 1.

¹¹⁷ Aquinas, “ST Ia” Q. 5, art. 5, co.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, “Tertia Pars,” in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947), <http://isidore.co/thomas/summa/TP.html> Q. 90, art. 3, ad 3.

¹¹⁹ Aquinas, “ST Ia” Q. 47, art. 2, co.

¹²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, “Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics,” in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, trans. Ernest L. Fortin and Peter D. O’Neill (Toronto, ON: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), para. 39, <http://isidore.co/thomas/Politics.htm>.

¹²¹ Aquinas, “ST Ia” Q. 5, art. 5, co.

¹²² *Ibid.* Q. 18, art. 3, ad 1.

effectiveness with little objection from Thomists. If Effective Altruism deepens its political involvement in response to the institutions criticism, however, its *effectiveness* metrics must relate to justice in a correspondingly broad way that supports counterfactual comparisons to increasingly distant possibilities. MacAskill suggests that the method of comparison should be impartial welfarism, according to which “for any two worlds *A* and *B* with all and only the same individuals, of finite number, if there is a one-to-one mapping of individuals from *A* to *B* such that every individual in *A* has the same wellbeing as their counterpart in *B*, then *A* and *B* are equally good.”¹²³ This criterion ensures that *effectiveness* metrics respect *altruism*, but at the cost of demanding a quantitative axiology without which “the same wellbeing” is uninterpretable.

A forthcoming paper by Jacob Nebel seems to show Effective Altruists a way out.¹²⁴ Nebel defends Harsanyi’s Theorem, which *guarantees* an aggregative expression of the common good, so long as both individual and common goods rank possible states of affairs in a partial ordering and a possible state of affairs ranked more highly with respect to each individual’s good also ranks more highly for the common good—even if comparing individual goods is impossible. The trick is performed by treating each individual good’s contribution to the common good as weighted by a dimensional constant (in much the same way that a university’s endowment can be a function of its age and selectivity without implying that age and selectivity are directly comparable in any scale). These dimensional constants have to come from somewhere though, and in Nebel’s account they arise from quantitative ranking of possible states of affairs with respect to each individual’s good. If this were possible, however, Thomists would not have had such good reason to reject Mill’s original account. Effective Altruists must therefore settle for

¹²³ MacAskill, “The Definition of Effective Altruism,” 14.

¹²⁴ Jake Nebel, “Aggregation Without Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming.

Harsanyi's own version, in which the weights are selected by evaluative comparisons. If these evaluative comparisons are not to presume direct inter-personal comparisons, they must be made by weighting the importance of each individual's good by their contribution to the common good, as Aquinas does in his discussion of almsgiving.¹²⁵ This violates the impartiality of MacAskill's *altruism*, however, because it entails that exchanging two individuals' goods does not preserve the same level of common good.

Thomists can thus endorse *effectiveness* and *altruism* only in narrow contexts where the common good is not directly at stake rather than in their full generality. If Thomists are trying to decide among different charities focusing on health interventions among those in foreign countries experiencing extreme poverty, this is a plausible assumption and partnership with Effective Altruists is likely to be helpful: the order of society is unlikely to depend on whether a child in one country is treated for a disease or a child in another country is educated against contracting the disease in the first place. Thomists trying to decide which products to avoid in order to reduce animal cruelty in factory farms are likely in a similar situation. The space for collaboration between Thomists and Effective Altruists is thus quite broad, though rather less than the entire "domain of beneficence" hoped for by the latter¹²⁶ since there are cases of supererogatory liberality which *do* directly implicate the common good (like Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan's election administration grants,¹²⁷ or on a more mundane level the decision to check the Presidential Election Campaign Fund on one's U.S. tax return). Such cases directly concern the power relationships within the political unity of order.

¹²⁵ Aquinas, "ST IIa-IIae" Q. 32, art. 6, co.

¹²⁶ Chappell, "Overriding Virtue," 218.

¹²⁷ Kenneth P. Vogel, "Short of Money to Run Elections, Local Authorities Turn to Private Funds," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2020, sec. U.S.

5. Conclusions

Thomists should commend Effective Altruists for developing utilitarian consequentialism in a direction open to broader axiological and action-theoretic concerns without losing its zeal for the poor and suffering. The achievements of William MacAskill and others in formulating the strictures of *effectiveness* and *altruism* in a more neutral way allow collaboration on a broad range of humanitarian causes to a degree that would be impossible with pure act utilitarians like Peter Singer. Such collaboration not only enables greater economies of scale in relief work, but exposes Catholics to a transparent and demanding moral ethic likely to improve their institutions and moral character. Nonetheless, Effective Altruism's increasing political involvement (while an internally commendable and consistent response to criticism), should concern Thomists due to the increased likelihood of violating exception-less negative precepts and greater conflict between merely aggregative estimates of moral value and the true common goods of political communities. Thomists should be data-driven egalitarian consequentialists within a certain restricted scope, but that scope is itself defined by a more fundamental virtue ethics.

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