

## Consequentialism, Effective Altruism, and God's Glory

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### **Introduction**

The intent of this essay is to introduce a new normative ethical theory, divine glory consequentialism (DGC), argue from DGC to a radical, normative form of effective altruism, and propose a taxonomy of material possessions (needs, tools for good, and luxuries) for moral evaluation of monetary resource usage. The basic idea of DGC is that divine glory is the value that should be maximized in consequentialism. As the Westminster Confession says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever." A more typical utilitarian may emphasize the second part about enjoyment. A "Christian hedonist" like John Piper would change it to say, "Man's chief end is to glorify God *by* enjoying Him forever." Divine glory consequentialism says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God. By doing so, you will enjoy Him forever." Divine glory consequentialism emphasizes glorifying God such that our pleasure does not factor directly into our ethical decisions. If it is true that man's chief end is to glorify God, then our ethical theory should reflect that reality. No extant normative ethical theory, to my knowledge, incorporates the glory of God as directly morally significant. DGC mitigates this problem.

Divine glory consequentialism is intended to be an ethical framework available to any theist, but I would particularly contend is the most suitable ethical theory for the Christian theist. DGC resolves issues that plague classical utilitarianism, such as the paradox of hedonism, utility monster, special obligations to close relationships, and the moral importance of motivations. Additionally, DGC can incorporate divine commands in such a way to limit epistemic worries.

### **Christian Consequentialism**

The relationship between Christian thought and utilitarianism has been a rocky one, but it did not start out that way. As John Perry observes, "Utilitarianism was originally a Christian endeavor, and its earliest systematic defenses were works of moral theology,"<sup>1</sup> and William Paley set the Christian utilitarian stage in the universities for decades before John Stuart Mill's resurrection of Bentham overshadowed Paley (and Francis Hutcheson before him). John Hare notes that it was Paley's work that prompted Bentham to write his own version of utilitarianism in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate end of creation, God's actions and desires, and our actions, if such an ultimate end exists, is a great candidate for the foundation of an ethical theory. Such an end would be so important and valuable that it would be our duty to maximize such an ultimate end. Upon examination, it appears that God's glory is exactly the type of ultimate end mentioned here, and thus an ethical theory of maximizing God's glory easily unfolds. God's glory is "arguably the foundational theme of New Testament theology, biblical theology in general, and the very purpose of all creation and history,"<sup>3</sup> as well as "the ultimate goal of the display of God's attributes,

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<sup>1</sup> Perry, John. "Where did utilitarianism come from?" in Perry, John, ed. *God, the Good and Utilitarianism: Perspectives on Peter Singer*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Hare, John E. *God's Command*. Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 288-289

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, Christopher W. "Toward a Theology of the Glory of God." in Morgan, Christopher W. and Peterson, Robert A., eds. *The Glory of God*. Crossway, 2010, p. 154.

perfections, or person.”<sup>4</sup> Christopher Morgan also points out that “God’s ultimate purpose is his glory is clear enough” and “God’s glory is his ultimate end,” though he also “acts with multiple ends in mind.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, it is the “goal of creation; the exodus; Israel; Jesus’ ministry, life, death, resurrection, and reign; our salvation; the church; the consummation; and all of salvation history.”<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Edwards dedicates an entire work, *The End for Which God Created the World*, to this idea of God’s glory being “the supreme and ultimate end of all God’s works.”<sup>7</sup>

All I have said so far is compatible with there being many things that are finally valuable, or valuable for their own sake, and therefore should be treated as ends rather than means, but that only one thing is an ultimate end. This type of reasoning is reflected in Christopher Morgan, Jonathan Edwards, and Joseph Fletcher. Joseph Fletcher says that “*ends*, like means, are relative, that all ends and means are related to each other in a contributory hierarchy, and that *in their turn* all ends become means to some end higher than themselves. There is only one end, one goal, one purpose which is not relative and contingent, always an end in itself. Love.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, I would replace love with God’s glory, but the same reasoning applies.

I suggest, with support from Mill, that God’s greatest desire, and the purpose of his creatures, makes a good candidate for the “utility” in utilitarianism. God’s greatest desire, and the purpose of creation as a whole, is His own glory. Therefore, the “utility” in a utilitarian theory should be divine glory; however, since divine glory is not a form of well-being, and utilitarianism is normally seen as committed to maximizing well-being (welfarism),<sup>9</sup> then this theory is consequentialist rather than utilitarian. Mill, in seeking utilitarianism to be compatible with his many theistic contemporaries, says, “If it be a true belief that God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures, and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other.” Since God desires his own glory above all things, not our happiness (which is not to say that they are in conflict),<sup>10</sup> then divine glory consequentialism represents a viable ethical theory, preferable to other forms of consequentialism. If God values and cares about His glory above everything else, then we should value and care about His glory above everything else, and we should want the most of His glory to result from our actions.

In summary, the above reasoning towards DGC may be formalized as follows:

1. If there is an ultimate end of creation, God’s actions and desires, and our actions, then it should be maximized (i.e., is a good candidate for the foundation of a consequentialist theory)
2. Divine glory is the ultimate end of creation, God’s actions and desires, and our actions

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Piper, John. *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World)*. Crossway, 2006, p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> Fletcher, Joseph F. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 129. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Mulgan, Tim. *Utilitarianism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Ezekiel 36:22 gives an example where God says, “It is not for your sake, house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name” (NASB).

3. Therefore, divine glory is a good candidate for the foundation of a consequentialist theory

### **Ethics of Glory**

Understanding God's glory is ethically significant for any Christian, as we are commanded to do everything for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). Therefore, if we are to be obedient to this command, then we must understand what it means to do things for the glory of God. The ethical significance of glorifying God is unsurprising to the Christian. It has been said that the overall goal of ethics "should be to fulfill our ultimate purpose, which is to glorify God" and that "God created us to glorify him."<sup>11</sup> It is natural, then, to take the glory of God to be the supreme ethical principle. Wayne Grudem alleges that a Christian ethical system needs to incorporate deontological (Scriptural commands), teleological (resulting in God's glory), and virtue ethical (developing Christlike character) components,<sup>12</sup> and I will contend that DGC allows for adequate consideration of deontological restrictions, consequences, and motivations.

Speaking more generally though, we will explore the ethical significance of glory, and I adapt Paul Silva Jr.'s conceptual analysis of glory.<sup>13</sup> Silva's simplest definition of *being glorified* is, "Something is glorified by some person at a time if and only if at that time they praise, respect, and admire it."<sup>14</sup> Silva suggests that this is a strong claim that being glorified includes all three components of glory: praise, respect, and admiration. Specifically, he says that this definition implies "one's praise must result from *both* respect and admiration" because he identifies praise as an activity and respect and admiration are dispositional states. I pivot here slightly to a weaker conception, namely, that of *ethical glory*, the type of glory that is morally significant. This ethical glory changes being glorified from a conjunctive form to a disjunctive form, where something is glorified by some person if they praise, respect, *or* admire it. One motivation for this comes from how obedience to divine commands is a form of respect which, especially for nontheists, will not always include praise or admiration, but should be considered an ethically significant form of glory.

For a more thorough discussion on what I mean by praise, respect, and admiration, I defer to Silva and Szerlip.<sup>15</sup> To summarize some important features, praise is an action of "commending something for its perceived characteristics," with an evaluative component, that one believes those characteristics are good. Importantly, praise is not degreed, but it does have a duration. Admiration is an attitude, and it also includes an evaluative component that you believe that thing is good. Respect can be understood as having a "behavioral disposition" that is fitting, and then an evaluative aspect where you have the behavioral disposition because of one's belief that the object deserves the respect you are giving. I am considering respect to be synonymous with or to subsume honor.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between the evaluative and behavioral aspects of respect will be key for

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<sup>11</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*. Crossway, 2018, Ch. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, Ch. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Silva, Paul. "A Conceptual Analysis of Glory." *Res Philosophica* 95.3 (2018): 561-582.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 569.

<sup>15</sup> Silva, Paul, and Brandon Szerlip. "A Unified Account of Glory Concepts: Glory, Glorious, Glorified, Glorifying-in, and Derivative Concepts." *Journal of Analytic Theology* 8.1 (2020): 300-320.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 304. Silva and Szerlip seem to take them to be synonymous, saying "respect (honor) that is most relevant in thinking about glory is..."

incorporating motivations into DGC, as well as how nontheists can perform moral actions, and I will come back to this later.

As Silva points out, praise does not have to be sincere, so this definition of glory must be fixed.<sup>17</sup> One can praise without respect or praise without admiration, but without both, it can hardly be said to be glorifying. The working definition of being glorified I propose is:

- (1) Something is *glorified* by some person at a time if and only if at that time they praise, respect, or admire it.

We can also introduce what it is to *properly* glorify something, which allows us to include several morally significant features of glory. The first of these is *sincerity*. The next feature of ethical glory that “properly” allows us to add is that the glory is *correctly referenced* to the object of glory. We can consider cases where glory is given accidentally, or to the wrong person. In a case of plagiarism, an author claimed something that was not their own. As a result, this may have resulted in sincere praise and thus glory. However, since the work was not their own, the glory was given to an incorrect referent. The praise should have been directed to the original creator of the work. Thus, *proper* glorification helps restrict glory to be directed toward the correct referent.

Being *properly* glorified now understood includes both sincerity and correct reference. *Proper* glorification is sincere glorification towards the correct object of glory, giving us (2).

- (2) Something is *properly* glorified if and only if the glorification is sincere and refers to the correct object of glory.

There is another consideration for glorification to be proper. Namely, it must be worthy of that level of glory. In other words, its being glorified should match its being glorious, not to exceed its gloriousness, and not to be beneath its gloriousness. Something is not properly glorified if it receives much more praise than it deserves, nor if it is worthy of more praise than it actually receives. Thus, we have 3’.

- (2) ’ Something is *properly* glorified if and only if the glorification is sincere, refers to the correct object of glory, and matches the object’s gloriousness.

One may think that the notion of correctly referencing can easily be collapsed as a case of matching the object’s gloriousness, but this is not the case.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The way Silva fixes this is to say, “Something is glorified by some person at a time if and only if at that time they praise it as a result of their high degree of respect or their high degree of admiration for it (or as a result of both).” Since I want to have a disjunction between praise, respect, and admiration, I prefer an alternative notion.

<sup>18</sup> Unlike the case of plagiarism mentioned earlier, there may be cases where glory is sincere, fitting, and yet still referring to the wrong object, such as when there are multiple objects which are equally glorious. Consider that you are standing in a field facing an archery target. An arrow hits the bullseye. You look back and praise Archer 1 for such a great shot, but it was actually Archer 2 who completed the shot. The two archers are equally skilled, and unbeknownst to you, Archer 1 had just completed an equally skilled (or “glorious”) shot worthy of praise. Archer 1 receiving fitting, sincere glory, but it was incorrectly referenced. Thus, you did not properly glorify Archer 1 because you had an incorrect basis and referent for your sincere, fitting glory.

## **Considering Consequences**

The Bible seems to affirm the importance of considering the impact of our actions and, thus, its implications for the rightness or wrongness of actions. In particular, there is an emphasis on how our actions lead to others' response to God.<sup>19</sup> Here, I discuss the consequential aspects already inherent in glory, which show that if glory is morally significant, then consequences are directly morally significant.

Perhaps the first place to start with the consequences of actions in a divine glory theory is the secondary and tertiary senses of glorification that are elaborated in Silva and Szerlip (2020).<sup>20</sup> I will refer to these as glorify<sub>2</sub> and glorify<sub>3</sub>, respectively, and I will refer to the primary sense of glorify given in (1) as glorify<sub>1</sub>. First, to glorify<sub>2</sub> God is to incite others to glorify<sub>1</sub> God. Second, to glorify<sub>3</sub> God is to put others in a position to recognize God's attributes that make God glorious, i.e., worthy of being glorified (for example, the heavens are said to glorify God in this tertiary sense in Psalm 19:1). If I use "glorify" without a subscript, then I mean the conjunction of "glorify<sub>1</sub> and glorify<sub>2</sub> and glorify<sub>3</sub>."

To combine the primary, secondary, and tertiary aspects of glorification together in one sentence, we get (3).

- (3) To glorify God is to properly praise, respect, or admire God, incite others to do the same, or put others in a position to recognize God's attributes that make God worthy of being glorified.

It is now that divine glory consequentialism begins to take shape, since we need to include consequence-focused aspects of glory, especially in glorify<sub>2</sub> and glorify<sub>3</sub>. Therefore, we get a picture of evaluating rightness and wrongness based on (4).

- (4) An action is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory.

To emphasize, "results in" is intended to include all the consequences of an action through its causal chain, rather than just considering the action itself. One entailment of this formulation is that it eliminates the supererogatory. I consider this a virtue of the theory, as I see little room for the supererogatory in Christian ethics (a defense of this and how that is compatible with Christian liberty, I leave for elsewhere).

## **Two Quick Theological Arguments for DGC**

We can give some considerations in favor of DGC from the two starting points in theology discussed by Jonathan Kvanvig,<sup>21</sup> which are perfect being theology (PBT), and worship worthiness theology (WWT). There is a natural progression from PBT and WWT to DGC.

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<sup>19</sup> For example, discussions of stumbling blocks by both Paul in Romans 14 and Jesus in e.g., Matthew 18:6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 310-312.

<sup>21</sup> Kvanvig, Jonathan L. *Depicting Deity: A Metatheological Approach*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

Perfect being theology says that God, fundamentally, is the greatest conceivable being (or greatest possible or actual being, depending on its characterization). PBT then derives further characteristics of God, such as aseity, which is that God is self-existent and does not rely on any others for his existence. Aseity can be derived from PBT because a God on whom all else depends for its existence is greater than a God on which things exist independently. Similarly, a God who is the ultimate end of all creatures, such that all morally right actions are properly ordered and directed toward God, is greater than a God who is not. Dan Kemp reasons, “A being who cannot fail to be the end of all creatures and creaturely states, and therefore all valuable ones, is greater than a being who can. Thus, God cannot fail to be the end of all creatures and creaturely states.”<sup>22</sup> If that is correct, then moral evaluation requires actions as being properly directed toward God, and glorifying God encompasses these actions directed toward God.

God’s maximal greatness entails God’s maximal gloriousness (worthiness of being glorified), since being glorious is a great-making property. If an agent is maximally worthy of being glorified, then it follows that it ought to be the case that the agent is maximally glorified by all at all times, as this is the fitting response. This principle entails divine glory consequentialism, as an action would then only be right if it results in maximal divine glory.

Perfect being theology presents a picture of a theocentric (God-centered) universe. All things are directed toward God. A being who all things, not just creatures, have as their end is greater than one who does not. Dan Kemp treats traditional theism (commonly understood as a form of PBT) as including the Principle of Theistic Explanation, “Everything that can be explained must ultimately be explained by God or be God.”<sup>23</sup> Divine glory consequentialism enables the Principle of Theistic explanation to be true in the context of ultimate moral explanation of the evaluation of actions. If the universe is theocentric, then our ethics should be theocentric. DGC is an example of theocentric ethics which focuses entirely on God’s greatness and magnifying His greatness to ourselves and others. As such, DGC is the best approach and explanation of theocentric ethics and aligns well with PBT.

James M. Gustafson has developed a theocentric ethics, which he summarized with the following moral imperative: “we are to conduct life so as to relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God.”<sup>24</sup> In theocentric ethics, it may be the case that morally right action “does not guarantee benefits to man as we traditionally perceive benefits...The chief end of man may not be salvation in a traditional Christian sense; it may be to honor, to serve, and to glorify (celebrate) God.”<sup>25</sup> On all of these points, DGC is in full agreement with Gustafson.<sup>26</sup> We indeed need to “turn from anthropocentrism to a more theocentric focus of attention,”<sup>27</sup> as “the proper orientation is not primarily toward self but toward God – to the honoring of God, and to the

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<sup>22</sup> Kemp, Dan. "Created goodness and the goodness of God: divine ideas and the possibility of creaturely value." *Religious Studies* 58.3 (2022): 534-546, p. 538.

<sup>23</sup> Kemp, p. 535.

<sup>24</sup> Gustafson, James M. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Theology and Ethics*. Vol. 1. University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> But I will note that one’s salvation will inevitably lead to an increase in the glorification of God, by an infinite amount, and thus it will likely be instrumentally the most important end, but this needs to be explored further.

<sup>27</sup> Gustafson, p. 112.

ordering of life in relation to what can be discerned of the divine ordering.”<sup>28</sup> As in Jonathan Edwards view, “God’s own end, his glory, becomes the supreme, governing, and ultimate end of man and human activity.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, divine glory consequentialism offers a corrective towards theocentric ethics by putting God back in His proper place in the cosmos at the center of everything, including our ethical framework. Ethics is about God first and humanity second.

Now let us consider an alternative theological starting point, worship worthiness theology, which states that God, fundamentally, “is maximally worthy of the most supreme worship, in a way that makes such worship mandatory.”<sup>30</sup> On this view, what makes God, God, is that He is maximally glorious. As Kvanvig points out, though, worship worthiness is grounded in other features, and it is deriving these features that makes WWT powerful as a metatheology. However, it remains the case that what is fundamental to the nature of God is his maximal gloriousness to the point of providing a moral obligation for all moral agents. From this perspective, our most fundamental moral obligation is worshipping God. The central attribute of God is something that obligates glorifying Him. Since God serves as the foundation of all reality, and God fundamentally requires glorifying Him, we have reason to think this obligation to worshipping God is fundamental to our ethical theory, and our ethics should center around this moral obligation. Divine glory consequentialism offers a unified explanation of how our fundamental moral obligation, worshipping God, relates to and derives all our other moral obligations, which seems to align well with the framework of WWT on how the worship of God can derive God’s other attributes.

In summary, we have offered two arguments from two distinct metatheologies, perfect being theology and worship worthiness theology, which naturally precipitate divine glory consequentialism. Both of these frameworks provide reasons to think that our fundamental and pervasive moral obligation involves glorifying God as the greatest being who is maximally worthy of supreme worship.

### **Considering Divine Commands**

Divine command theory (DCT) has a long and substantial history in Christian thought, so it would be important to address what place divine commands have in DGC. Obeying divine commands, glorifies God because obedience is a form of respect. The first example Silva and Szerlip give of a behavioral disposition of respect is that “we respect laws by obeying them.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one way we respect God is by obeying Him, similar to how obeying our parents is a form of respect. Disobeying divine commands is deglorifying God because disobedience is a form of disrespect. Therefore, obeying divine commands are a subset of actions that glorify God.

### **Considering Motivations**

There are two ways in which divine glory consequentialism can consider the motivations as of a person as morally significant, which is typically not accounted for in consequentialist theories.

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<sup>28</sup> Gustafson, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Gustafson, p. 176.

<sup>30</sup> Kvanvig, Jonathan L. *Depicting Deity: A Metatheological Approach*. Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Silva and Szerlip. "A Unified Account of Glory Concepts: Glory, Glorious, Glorified, Glorifying-in, and Derivative Concepts," p. 304.

The first is based on the idea of respecting God, which has both behavioral and evaluative components. The very idea of respecting something includes having a certain evaluative attitude towards the object. The way Silva and Szerlip put it, respect requires having a respectful behavior “because of one’s belief that the object in question is deserving of respectful interaction”<sup>32</sup> or that such behavior is fitting towards the object. For example, it is not enough for respect for a child to behaviorally follow his parents’ instructions out of spite, but the child must also have a certain positive evaluative attitude and motivation simultaneously. Similarly, our respecting God and, by implication, His creation, requires that we have a correct motivation that includes respectful action as fitting toward these objects.

The second way DGC can incorporate the moral significance of motivations is by divine commands specific to motivation. For example, it is plausible to understand 1 Corinthians 10:31, doing everything for the glory of God, as including a command to be motivated by God being glorified. Additionally, Colossians 3:23 speaks to having a motivation directed towards God with our vocation. Finally, Philippians 1:15-18 shows that even though motivations are morally significant, they can be outweighed by a good result, in agreement with the consequentialist mindset.

### **Diffusing Standard Objections**

So far, we have seen that DGC offers the ability to combine important aspects of all three branches of normative ethics: consequential aspects of glory, deontic restrictions from divine commands, and the motivation and evaluative dispositions from virtue ethics. Furthermore, DGC resolves several of the standard objections to standard pictures of consequentialism, including the paradox of hedonism, utility monster, and special obligations to close relationships.

The paradox of hedonism, which can be applied to “direct”<sup>33</sup> forms of both hedonism (including Piper’s Christian hedonism) and desire-satisfactionism,<sup>34</sup> says that a rational agent’s pursuit of pleasure restricts the ability to obtain pleasure. Chasing pleasure limits pleasure. Divine glory consequentialism implies the pursuit of God’s glory, not pleasure, so there is no paradox at play here.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, since God commands us to glorify him, and obeying commands is a form of glorification, then glorifying Him in this way further glorifies Him, as opposed to restricting glory as would happen in the case of the paradox. This difference in what is valuable also makes DGC immune to the philosophy of swine objection, since as we have seen, divine glory is the greatest good and ultimate end of all creation.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Direct forms of consequentialism make maximizing value both the criterion of rightness and the decision-making tool of its adherents, whereas indirect consequentialism entails that maximizing value is the criterion of rightness, but its adherents need not be motivated by consequentialist thinking. Since Christian hedonism includes explicit claims about our motivations, it would be subject to the paradox of hedonism.

<sup>34</sup> Dietz, Alexander. "How to Use the Paradox of Hedonism." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1.aop (2021): 1-25.

<sup>35</sup> One can make a further claim, that glorifying God will result in our pleasure. This is not *always* the case before death, but when combined with a certain theory of ultimate justice in an afterlife, a claim that maximally glorifying God will always be net pleasurable (or infinitely pleasurable) becomes plausible.



Utility monsters would be less problematic, as people who generate much more divine glory would not require any more resources than those who do not, and thus no substantial sacrifice or mistreatment of others for the sake of someone who glorifies God substantially would be required.

Special obligations to close relationships can be accounted for in DGC with the inclusion of divine commands regarding those close to us, such as 1 Timothy 5:8 that commands people to “provide for their relatives, especially for their own household” (NIV). Without divine commands, special obligations would only be indirect, since consequences of actions more substantially, both in frequency and magnitude, influence close relationships.

### **An Epistemological Objection**

One significant aspect of DGC is how it deals with the epistemological objection to divine command theory.<sup>36</sup> DGC is intended as a normative ethical theory, but it is worth pointing out how it simplifies an epistemic problem for a rival theistic normative ethical framework, DCT. The solution is that DGC can be true even if God did not issue any commands. DGC is applicable to any theism, including a generic theism or Abrahamic theism.<sup>37</sup> Thus, any lack of epistemic access to God’s commands is not (immediately) a problem for DGC. Additionally, the resulting epistemic issue appears to be more straightforward: do things that result in the most praise, respect, and admiration for God. With limited assumptions, we can conclude that we can respect God by respecting and loving His creation. By analogy, if I invite a friend to my house, then if he is respect me, then he will respect my paintings. Similarly, we must respect other humans, created by God, if we are to respect God. We can continue this endeavor to derive many standard obligations to fellow humans, animals, and all of creation.

### **From Consequentialism to Normative Effective Altruism**

Stage two of this project is arguing from divine glory consequentialism to effective altruism. If one is a divine glory consequentialist, one should be an effective altruist as well. However, they should not be solely a *minimal* effective altruist, but a *radical, normative effective altruist*. I will start by characterizing the radical and normative versions of effective altruism, building on MacAskill’s non-normative definition of effective altruism.

#### **Characterizing Effective Altruism**

MacAskill characterizes effective altruism (EA) with two parts, an intellectual project (or research field) and a practical project (or social movement). Effective altruism is:

- (i) the use of evidence and careful reasoning to work out how to maximize the good with a given unit of resources...
- (ii) the use of the findings from (i) to try to improve the world.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Danaher, John. "In Defence of the Epistemological Objection to Divine Command Theory." *Sophia* 58.3 (2019): 381-400.

<sup>37</sup> I will leave Jewish and Islamic support for DGC for elsewhere.

<sup>38</sup> MacAskill, William. "The Definition of Effective Altruism." in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* (2019), p. 14.

MacAskill characterizes EA in a such a (non-normative, non-radical) way because of ecumenical concerns, as well as the degree of support (or lack thereof) from EA leaders and community members. Some people want to be effective altruists because it is what they want to do, not because they think they are obligated to. Furthermore, MacAskill specifies that the maximization of good is about increasing the effectiveness of a given unit of resources, not about increasing the amount of resources. This focus on the conditional “if one donates” is more in line with Theron Pummer’s treatment of effective altruism as a conditional obligation to maximize good with a given unit of resources rather than a general obligation to donate.<sup>39</sup> Brian Berkey challenges this view, arguing that the only conditional view misses an essential part of EA, and effective altruists are committed to there being some unconditional obligations of beneficence.<sup>40</sup>

I will not make a claim or argument about which of these views may correctly characterize the core of effective altruism, but I will only be arguing that divine glory consequentialism entails the strongest version of effective altruism here. This version includes obligations (normative EA) and, specifically, strong and unconditional obligations of beneficence (radical, normative EA).

I will now give more specific account of what I mean by normative and radical effective altruism, beginning with a simplification of MacAskill’s non-normative definition to

Effective Altruism: A person P is an effective altruist if and only if P tries to maximize the good with P’s resources.

Thus, to *try to maximize* includes using evidence and careful reason to figure out *how* to maximize, and then acting on that. I would also assume (though it appears ambiguous in (MacAskill 2019)) that using the findings from (i) to try to improve the world includes trying to maximize the use of one’s resources and that there is no gap between what one ascertains would be best and what one attempts to do.

*Resources* should be restricted to the two emphases of effective altruism, which are money and time, or, more specifically, charitable donations and career choice. My focus here is on material possessions, so I will characterize radical and normative EA in terms of charitable donations.

Normative effective altruism introduces obligations, namely, the obligation to be an effective altruist. Thus, I characterize normative effective altruism (NEA) as

NEA: A charitable donation is morally right if and only if it results in maximal good.

The morally right and morally obligatory are necessarily coextensive, and all actions (and thus donations) that are not obligatory are impermissible. I will note that *results* should be understood as *foreseeable* consequences to 1) align with what can be ascertained from intellectual project of EA in MacAskill’s definition, and 2) protect the characterization as problematically treating epistemic failures as moral failures, which is the same reason why foreseeable consequences

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<sup>39</sup> Pummer, Theron. "Whether and Where to Give." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44.1 (2016): 77-95.

<sup>40</sup> Berkey, Brian. "The Philosophical Core of Effective Altruism." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 52.1 (2021): 93-115.

should be in the criterion of rightness rather than actual consequences. This foreseeable constraint should be assumed for the remainder of the paper when talking about the results from actions.

A *charitable donation* I will understand as an action of an agent where a monetary gift is given to a charity. From there, it is easy to see why NEA follows from any consequentialist framework by instantiating a subset of actions as in (4) from the section “Considering Consequences” above. This move will be made explicit in the next section, “Characterizing Consequentialism.”

We can now consider a stronger version of effective altruism which includes unconditional obligations of beneficence. We will call this radical effective altruism (REA).

REA: A person is morally obligated to donate a substantial portion of one’s surplus income to charity

This will be argued for by establishing a framework of material possessions in the next section. The normative and radical versions of effective altruism can be combined into radical normative effective altruism (RNEA)

RNEA: A person is morally obligated to donate a substantial portion of one’s surplus income to effective charities

RNEA can be defended once we introduce a taxonomy of material possessions and argue for the elimination of luxury and the optimization of tools for good and needs. Exactly how much *substantial* will refer to will depend on one’s usage of tools for good. I will now show how DGC entails NEA.

### Characterizing Consequentialism

Consequentialism, as a generalization of (4), is:

Consequentialism: An action is right if and only if it results in maximal good.

Divine glory consequentialism specifies *good* to be *divine glory*, as in (4).

DGC: An action is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory.

Thus, substituting charitable donation for action, we get divine glory consequentialism for donations (DGCD)

DGCD: A charitable donation is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory.

If divine glory is the correct analysis of good, as DGC implies, then DGCD implies NEA. Therefore, we can easily see that divine glory consequentialism entails normative effective altruism. The argument can be expressed as

1. An action is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory. (DGC)

2. If (1), then a charitable donation is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory. (instantiation)
3. If an action results in maximal divine glory, then it results in maximal good. (from DGC)
4. A charitable donation is right if and only if it results in maximal good. (NEA)

It is perhaps even easier to see that any form of consequentialism entails NEA. The argument can be expressed as

1. An action is right if and only if it results in maximal good. (consequentialism)
2. If (1), then a charitable donation is right if and only if it results in maximal good. (instantiation)
3. A charitable donation is right if and only if it results in maximal good. (NEA)

However, we cannot just stop at normative effective altruism. Similar to Pummer's analysis, this claim does not tell us *how much* to donate to charities, even though it does say that *if* we do give to charities, we should give to the most effective ones. This claim, that there are only conditional and no unconditional obligations, is a bit bizarre. The reason is obvious when we can look at the tradeoffs. Charities can differ in their effectiveness by a factor of 2 or 3, or even one or two orders of magnitude. There remains something highly unintuitive about the following scenario. Person A gives \$1 to the most effective charity, while Person B gives \$100,000 to the second most effective charity, and the second most effective charity is 90% as effective as the first one. If the conditional obligation view is correct, then person A has done the morally right thing, and person B has done the morally wrong thing (assuming the need for funding is comparable and other candidate differences are held constant). Surely this is incorrect.

When we assess the total amount of good in the world accomplished via charitable donation, we assess the multiplication of the amount donated and the effectiveness of the donation. If I donate 100x to a charity that is 1/100x as effective, I have done the same amount of good as someone who donates 1/100x to a charity that is 100x as effective. The conclusion to draw is that the absolute amount of donation matters as well, not just the effectiveness. Moreover, for an organization that claims to aim at doing the most good and doing it better, both of these factors should be considerations. Someone can "make up" for their ineffective donation by giving much more. However, they could have done even more good if they gave everything to the most effective charities. Assuming people would not consider giving more to compensate for the lack of effectiveness in giving, then conditional obligations are sufficient; however, we should question that assumption. Conditional obligations cannot tell the whole story.

So, since we do have unconditional obligations of beneficence, how much are we required to donate? Are we required to donate to the point of marginal utility? If any form of consequentialism is correct, then it trivially follows that we are morally obligated to donate to the point at which it does less moral good (globally speaking) to donate any more. We must give sufficiently to where the moral costs begin to outweigh the moral benefits. However, this point of donation is not merely at meeting basic needs, as I explore in the next major section. Immediately next, I will explore a possible tension between what a divine glory consequentialist identifies as the moral good and what an effective altruist identifies as the moral good that needs to be maximized.

### A Conflict of Axiology?

As MacAskill characterizes effective altruism, the moral good to be maximized is “tentatively impartial and welfarist,” so everyone’s well-being counts equally. He labels this as a “tentative hypothesis or a first approximation.”<sup>41</sup> This axiology *prima facie* conflicts with the divine glory consequentialist axiology, which appears to only maximize the single moral good of divine glory. Divine glory is not identical to, reducible to, or supervenient on well-being. We will explore various ways that the divine glory consequentialist can respond such that DGC and EA do not turn out to be in conflict after all. We will examine what I will call the foot-stamping, indirect, and equivalence responses, respectfully.

The first approach, foot-stamping, is to say that, while well-being is an acceptable first approximation, it is ultimately incorrect and that effective altruists essentially must all maximize God’s glory, since God’s glory is the only intrinsic moral good that exists. This approach is probably least attractive, not least for ecumenical reasons, as the majority of EAs are atheists and would have no interest in such a goal. There are two much more plausible approaches I will examine more fully.

Typically, consequentialism requires a value theory where all and only things that are maximized are morally good. Other things may only be instrumentally morally good insofar as they contribute to the intrinsically valuable item(s) of value. For example, utilitarianism maximizes utility, or well-being, and only well-being is good. There are two ways in which this can be modified, one is the well-established indirect approach, and the other is the equivalence approach.

The indirect approach employs the distinction between direct and indirect consequentialism. *Direct* consequentialism says that the criterion of rightness and the decision-making procedure are the same, while *indirect* consequentialism allows for a decision-making procedure that differs from the criterion of rightness.<sup>42</sup> This way, indirect consequentialism is a way to overcome objections against consequentialism that have to do with morally problematic motivations. For example, some object that consequentialism is incompatible with friendship because a consequentialist considers their friends as means to an end (maximizing welfare, for example). However, if treating individuals as ends in themselves can be the decision-making procedure, then consequentialism can retain proper motivations while still getting the same outcome.

In the case of DGC and EA, we can say something similar. The decision-making procedure can be to maximize impartial welfare, though the true criterion of rightness is still maximizing divine glory. It is true that maximizing well-being marks a good heuristic maximizing divine glory, as it glorifies God to obey divine commands about loving everyone equally, which includes seeking their well-being. This reasoning is a strong motivation for being a Christian consequentialist in the first place. Additionally, respecting humans and animals, which includes wanting and acting for their best with respect to their well-being, is a form of respecting God, since humans and animals are God’s creation that we are to steward and care for. Furthermore, in the area that we might

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<sup>41</sup> MacAskill, William. "The Definition of Effective Altruism." in *Effective Altruism: Philosophical Issues* (2019), p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Mukerji, Nikil. *The Case Against Consequentialism Reconsidered*. Springer, 2016, p. 119.

initially most expect the axiologies of DGC and (secular) EA to differ, evangelism and missions with concern for the afterlife (since evangelism is central to increasing glorification of God, but is not essential on a secular worldview), there is substantial agreement in the outcomes of maximizing. The reason is because there is a perfect match between the infinite well-being and glorification of God in the afterlife in heaven. The well-being and glory contributed from each person is positively infinite for someone in heaven, and either 0 or negatively infinite for someone not in heaven (depending on the view), so there is no difference in the summation of well-being or divine glory on these considerations.<sup>43</sup> There remains the theological disagreement, but there is not an axiological disagreement. In this way, a divine glory consequentialist can easily be an effective altruist and support DGC by following the decision-making procedure of EA in the case of charitable donations, though the criterion of rightness remains set by the DGC axiology.

The final approach, equivalence, is a way that we can make an even stronger claim, namely, that divine glory consequentialism (in a restricted domain of charitable donation) is deontically equivalent to normative effective altruism. Consequently, objects besides divine glory have intrinsic moral value, though what is maximized is divine glory (in the criterion of rightness). This claim can be defended by first analyzing the structure of normative ethical theories and how they relate to one another and can be artificially constructed to relate to other types of theories in particular ways. Normative theories have two components: a theory of moral value (axiology) and a theory of moral obligation. There are three candidate claims of equivalence that can be made between two normative ethical theories: axiological equivalence, deontic equivalence, and total equivalence, which is the combination of both axiological and deontic equivalence. Axiological equivalence between two theories implies that both theories say the same objects have the same amount of final value, or value as ends in themselves. Deontic equivalence implies that both theories will say that the same actions have identical deontic predicates (i.e., right, wrong, supererogatory, obligatory, impermissible, etc.). In other words, the theories are extensionally equivalent with respect to deontic status.

The exact significance of deontic equivalence is debated, particularly on the topic of *consequentializing* moral theories, which is a procedure for turning a non-consequentialist theory into a deontically equivalent consequentialist theory. For example, some challenge the idea that all theories can be consequentialized,<sup>44</sup> some allege that the ability to consequentialize any ethical theory makes consequentialism vacuous,<sup>45</sup> or some claim it implies that everyone is a consequentialist.<sup>46</sup> While I think it is possible to consequentialize any non-consequentialist theory,<sup>47</sup> since it is also possible to deontologize any consequentialist theory,<sup>48</sup> there is likely an

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<sup>43</sup> There are additional concerns here about how to include the afterlife and its infinite value into moral considerations, but I will not pursue those here.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Brown, Campbell. "Consequentialize This." *Ethics* 121.4 (2011): 749-771. Typically, moral dilemmas and supererogation are the two key challenges to consequentializing. See, for example, Peterson, Martin. "A royal road to consequentialism?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13.2 (2010): 153-169 for two proposed solutions to these challenges.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell Brown appears to endorse this in "Consequentialize This." *Ethics* 121.4 (2011): 749-771.

<sup>46</sup> Lousie, Jennie. "Relativity of value and the consequentialist umbrella." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 54.217 (2004): 518-536, p. 536.

<sup>47</sup> See Portmore, Douglas W. "Consequentializing." *Philosophy Compass* 4.2 (2009): 329-347 for a consequentializing procedure.

<sup>48</sup> Hurley, Paul. "Consequentializing and deontologizing: Clogging the consequentialist vacuum." *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, 3 (2013): 123-153.

inference that “if we are all consequentialists, we’re also all Kantians, all contractualists, and all virtue theorists, and all at the same time.”<sup>49</sup> This inference clearly is incorrect, as ethical theories are not reducible to merely their deontic predicates, so we are not all consequentialists after all, even if any theory can be consequentialized. S. Andrew Schroeder agrees that more than deontic predicates matter because “ethical theories that declare the same actions right may nevertheless differ in their explanations of *why* those actions are right.”<sup>50</sup> The entire structure of moral reasons differs between moral theories, so different families of theories cannot merely be “notational variants on the same view.”<sup>51</sup>

The deontic equivalence approach, then, claims that divine glory consequentialism and normative effective altruism are deontically equivalent, so for every action that DGC says is morally right, normative effective altruism will also say is morally right, and same for all other deontic predicates. For the same reasons defended previously for the indirect approach, the deontic equivalence thesis appears to be quite plausible. The interesting question that remains is what follows from this. It seems the best way to understand this deontic equivalence is that it enables the divine glory consequentialist to accurately ascribe intrinsic moral value to humans and animals and their well-being due to the close connection between these and God’s glory. In standard DGC, this can be understood instrumentally. However, given deontic equivalence, when combined with the intuitive starting point that humans are not merely instrumentally value,<sup>52</sup> preference is given to a view that makes humans finally valuable. Some may say, on the other hand, why would you not just maximize divine glory *and* human and animal well-being if you think both divine glory and well-being are finally valuable and even maximizing both is deontically equivalent to maximizing divine glory? One reason is because of theoretical and practical simplicity. If there is one theory that maximizes x and y, and another theory that maximizes x, and the two theories are deontically equivalent, then we should prefer the theory that seeks to maximize only x on grounds of theoretical simplicity. Practically, it is easier to only consider one item to maximize than to try to maximize over multiple dimensions, as these dimensions are possibly competing or at least difficult to combine. Thus, the DGC theory of moral obligation remains unchanged, but the axiology expands to include well-being as a form of final value, on grounds of intuition, deontic equivalence, and simplicity. If such a defense is plausible, which may similarly apply to other views like hedonistic utilitarianism’s inclusion of knowledge and friendship, then the deontic equivalence approach to the axiological conflict between DGC and EA is resolved, and DGC expands its axiology to be even more intuitive.

Another equivalence approach is closer to total equivalence rather than merely deontic equivalence. There is a long and venerable tradition in the history of Christian thought that connects God’s will, desires, and ultimate ends to human well-being, in some sense. The exact nature of that connection is heavily debated. One strong version of this resembles a type of total equivalence approach by Walter Rauschenbusch when he says that “the will of God is identical

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<sup>49</sup> Portmore, “Consequentializing,” p. 345 n. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Schroeder, S. Andrew. “Consequentializing and its consequences.” *Philosophical Studies* 174.6 (2017): 1475-1497, p. 1481 (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> Portmore, “Consequentializing,” p. 345 n. 46. Portmore apparently has changed his mind such that he no longer thinks it is absurd to say different ethical theories are notational variants of each other.

<sup>52</sup> For example, by doing intuitive tests like the isolation test or the annihilation test, it appears that humans and animals have value on their own.

with the good of mankind.”<sup>53</sup> If this is right, then (along with the reasoning from the first section of the paper), then utilitarianism would be the correct view, and God’s glory would have to be identical to, or reducible to, human well-being. Based on our analysis of divine glory, though, this identification is implausible. Furthermore, it misses one motivation for DGC in the first place; there appears to be times when God’s ends of human well-being and his glory appear to be competing either in outcome or intention, and God’s glory is chosen over human well-being.<sup>54</sup> In any case, this total equivalence between divine glory consequentialism and normative effective altruism is implausible.

As we have surveyed, we have uncovered two serious solutions to the conflict of axiology, the indirect and deontic equivalence approaches, both deserving consideration. The indirect approach is easier to defend and well-accepted in other cases, as well as being sufficient to placate concerns about conflict, so the stronger, deontic equivalence approach is not necessary to defend further. Next, I will introduce my tripartite taxonomy of material possessions.

### **Taxonomy of Material Possessions**

There is great need to invert the so-called “American dream” and revive the ancient critique of luxury. The early Church Fathers were strongly opposed to luxury. As David Cloutier observes, “The early Church Fathers took luxury to be a sign of idolatry and of neglect of the poor.”<sup>55</sup> A few examples will suffice. Basil of Caesarea demands, “What will you tell the judge, you who dress up your walls and leave humans naked? You who groom and adorn your horses and will not look at your naked brother? You whose wheat rots, and yet do not feed the hungry?”<sup>56</sup> Ambrose states, “You give coverings to walls and bring men to nakedness. The naked cries out before your house unheeded; your fellow-man is there, naked and crying, while you are perplexed by the choice of marble to clothe your floor.”<sup>57</sup> St. John Chrysostom laments how “luxury consumption not only harms the poor but is a counter-witness to the truth of Christianity”<sup>58</sup> when he says, “For this cause the very heathens disbelieve the things that we say...when they see us building ourselves fine houses, and laying out gardens and baths, and buying fields, they are not willing to believe that we are preparing for another sort of residence away from our city.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rauschenbusch, Walter. *The Social Principles of Jesus*. Association Press, 1916, p. 128. Cited in Gustafson, James M. *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Theology and Ethics*. Vol. 1. University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> I would consider Ezekiel 36:22 and Isaiah 48:9-11 as paradigm cases.

<sup>55</sup> Cloutier, David. *The Vice of Luxury (TVOL): Economic Excess in a Consumer Age*. Georgetown University Press, 2015, p. 137.

<sup>56</sup> Basil, *Homily in Divites*, cited in González, Justo L. *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002, p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> Ambrose, “On Naboth”, cited in Phan, Peter C. *Social Thought*. Message of the Fathers of the Church series, Vol. 20, 1984, p. 175.

<sup>58</sup> Cloutier, David. *The Vice of Luxury (TVOL): Economic Excess in a Consumer Age*. Georgetown University Press, 2015, p. 115.

<sup>59</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Homily XII, 5. Translated by George Prevost and revised by M.B. Riddle. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 10. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200112.htm>. Accessed August 14, 2022.



The Church Fathers recognized that luxury is a detriment to the worst off in society, a hindrance to the proclamation of the name of Christ, and also that there is a need to identify “some reasonable basic standard of necessities...a standard the Church Fathers applied when they shamed the rich for their fine clothing while others lacked any clothing.”<sup>60</sup> They differentiated luxuries from necessities when they criticized decorating walls and floors while some had no clothes. In this section, we will explore that distinction further with a taxonomy of goods.

I will introduce a tripartite taxonomy of all material possessions: 1) needs, 2) tools for good, and 3) luxuries. The normative conclusions are that we should minimize luxuries and optimize needs and tools for good. Furthermore, we should not spend any money on luxuries when there are others that do not have their needs met.

When categorizing material possessions, it is commonplace to distinguish needs and luxuries, or needs, luxuries, and something that is not quite a need but not quite a luxury either. Generally, we have needs, and then we have surplus goods (or excess). However, we do not need to give up everything but our basic needs and donate it to charity. I will provide a new framework for assessing material possessions.

When thinking about luxuries, it is not enough to critique “the one percent” in America or other wealthy nations. We must move well beyond that. It is not merely those making over \$340,000 per year that engage regularly in luxury. As William MacAskill reminds us, “You are the one percent”<sup>61</sup> when we consider the global income distribution and not just the income distribution of wealthy nations (more precisely, the 1 percent starts at \$52,000 per year). Indeed, someone “below the US poverty line, earning just \$11,000 per year, is still richer than 85 percent of people in the world,”<sup>62</sup> and this figure includes purchasing power (which differs based on cost of living, among other things). Even the full-time minimum wage worker, at \$7.25 per hour, will be in the top 14 percent of global income.<sup>63</sup>

Joanne Roberts asks this very important question, “Is contemporary luxury morally acceptable?”<sup>64</sup>, but unlike what her subtitle suggests, it is not merely “A Question for the Super-Rich” (which she identifies as the top 0.22 percent of the global population, or ‘high net worth individuals’ with investible wealth of \$1 million or more). Roberts does, however, mention in her conclusion that “luxury consumption continues to expand as it extends from exclusive items for the super-rich to mass luxury for the aspiring middle classes,” and how the rich, “together with the middle classes, continue to indulge in their own guilty pleasures.”<sup>65</sup> The progression of luxury spending to middle class is a long time coming. Cloutier traces the social stratification of wealth over time since

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<sup>60</sup> Cloutier, TVOL p. 155.

<sup>61</sup> This is the title of chapter 1 of William MacAskill’s *Doing Good Better*.

<sup>62</sup> MacAskill, William. *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Help Others, Do Work that Matters, and Make Smarter Choices About Giving Back*. Penguin, 2016, p. 18. This is on slightly older data. The latest is based on 2019 data, which says that \$11,000 is richer than 81 percent of the people in the world.

<sup>63</sup> <https://howrichami.givingwhatwecan.org/how-rich-am-i?income=15000&countryCode=USA&household%5Badults%5D=1&household%5Bchildren%5D=0>. Accessed August 15, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Roberts, Joanne. “Is contemporary luxury morally acceptable? A question for the super-rich.” *Cultural Politics* 15.1 (2019): 48-63.

<sup>65</sup> Roberts, p. 61.

Ancient Rome, concluding that “the top class contains far more members than it did in earlier societies.”<sup>66</sup> While ancient Rome only 3% of the population had significant surplus resources, the U.S. has 20-40% with significant surplus resources. Ancient Rome had less than 20% with any surplus whatsoever, while 60% of the U.S. has surplus resources (assuming surplus begins around \$40,000-50,000, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics claims).<sup>67</sup> Thus, the majority of people in the US are candidates for the critique of luxury based on how they use surplus resources (and, since it is well-known that poor people purchase luxury goods, perhaps even more).

Cloutier uses this information to expand his critique of luxury from the one percent to the middle class, especially ‘the 39 percent’ that have significant surplus but are not the super-rich. His reasoning is that “while it is easy to maintain the luxury critique for today’s 1 percent, it is considerably more important to understand its relevance for ‘the 39 percent.’”<sup>68</sup> Because middle class households try to simulate luxury, and luxury brands and goods are expanding their reach into middle classes to appease this desire, there is substantial economic impact. The 39 percent have far more economic impact, in fact. “The \$34 million yacht is a drop in the bucket compared to the aggregate surpluses of the many. The social impact of the consumption choices of those in [the 39 percent] is much larger than that of the 1 percent – more than three times greater.”<sup>69</sup> This group also has 39 times as many votes to influence public policy.

The most extensive treatment of this type of categorization in recent times is by David Cloutier in *The Vice of Luxury* (TVOL), so Cloutier will be my primary conversation partner. Cloutier accepts a threefold categorization of possessions. The first step is distinguishing necessities and surplus (or, synonymously, excess). The next step is distinguishing the good type of surplus from the bad type of surplus, where, in my analysis, tools for good is good surplus and luxury is bad surplus. I will follow this general progression.

### Needs

There is great difficulty in demarcating exactly where the line between meeting the necessities of life ends and surplus resources begins. Consider the claim is that a need is what is necessary for survival. Well, survival for how long? You do not die instantaneously upon not having a supply of food or water. Without water, you may live for days. Without food, you might live for weeks. Consider someone who has a regular, consistent food supply, but it is deficient in some category that removes ten years off of one’s life expectancy. In this case, they had enough to survive for, let’s say, a decade, but not the 20 years they would have lived had they not had that deficiency. Inherently, these types of health issues will be probabilistic in nature, so there is a certain disposition that increases or decreases probabilistically.

There is a further problem if we take something like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs seriously, which includes 5 levels of needs: physiology, safety, belonging and love, self-esteem, and self-actualization (see Figure 1). Are all of these *necessities* as we typically understand them? While I

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<sup>66</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 196.

<sup>67</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, pp. 194-196. I suspect this is an overestimate of when surplus begins if needs were optimized, but I will not test or press this hypothesis.

<sup>68</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 198

<sup>69</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 198

do not aim to settle this question, I also do not need to, as I will explain. For now, I will give a first pass characterization of a need as *an item which results in a sudden and significant decrease in life expectancy if lacked consistently*. As far as I can tell, this aligns with the *basic needs* subset of the hierarchy, which agrees with a commonsense assessment of a necessity.<sup>70</sup> One quickly dies of physiological reasons without meeting physiological needs, and one will inevitably die if one is constantly faced with threats to one's life without meeting safety needs. So, everything above that, such as seeking friendships, accomplishments, and creativity, is not a *need* but may be a tool for good (see next section).

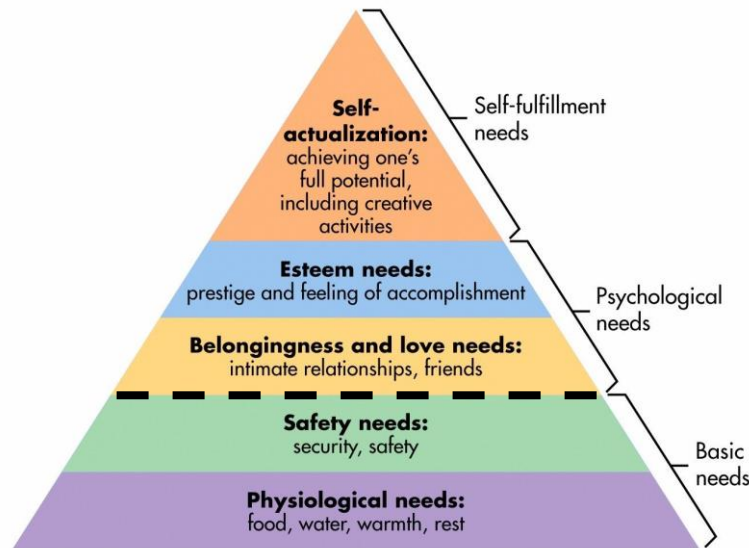


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, with the dotted align approximating necessities

There is biblical reason to not desire or be dependent on much more than basic needs. “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”<sup>71</sup> From this, we can conclude that contentment is attainable and an ideal for all with basic needs met, and we must be extremely diligent in testing our desires which go beyond our needs.

While I gave a first-pass characterization, defending a strict demarcation between needs and tools for good is not essential to my project. It may very well be that there is ontic vagueness on the dividing line between the two due to the inherently chancy biological mechanisms connected to significant increases or decreases in life expectancy. The advantage of my approach is that I do not need to worry about solving the never-ending problem of identifying necessities or even basic needs. Solution to this demarcation problem is not required because the normative conclusion within both categories is the same: Both needs and tools for good should be optimized to do the

<sup>70</sup> It may be that belongingness and love or even above that can non-negligibly affect life expectancy, but 1) it is not a sudden and significant drop in life expectancy without them, and 2) categories above basic needs seem to move beyond the ordinary language usage of the term *necessity*. Capping necessities to basic needs is useful for thinking through the optimization process. Quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) are a useful metric for quantifying these things that affect the quality of life over long periods of time or that non-negligibly affect life expectancy.

<sup>71</sup> 1 Tim. 6:8-10 (ESV).

most good. Given that you can (foreseeably) do more good when you are alive than when you are dead, things that extend your life expectancy are, *ceteris paribus*, tools for good.

I will use food as a case study for how needs can be optimized. Food is required for survival. However, filet mignon from the local steakhouse every day is not required for survival. The monetary differential between eating out and cooking at home is extremely high, and this differential can often pay for many meals in the life of the global poor. For example, we can estimate \$10 for an average restaurant meal (adjust as needed for restaurant type or additional purchases, such as alcohol or dessert), or \$3 for a meal cooked at home (though this could be less than \$1 depending on the meal). This differential of \$7 can supply food for an entire week in the life of someone in extreme poverty. If one goes out to eat once per week, this can amount to \$364 of savings per year. So, eating at home instead of a restaurant once a week for a year enables someone else to be fed for that entire year (assuming you actually donate the differential).

Furthermore, optimization can occur even for cooked meals. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has four different recommended meal plans to cook (targeting a family of four) that each meet the vast majority of dietary recommendations.<sup>72</sup> They are the Thrifty, Low-Cost, Moderate-Cost, and Liberal Food Plans. In 2021, the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) has a cost for the reference family of four of \$192.84 per week,<sup>73</sup> which may represent something like a minimum budget for a healthy diet in America. An average American household spent 59% more than the Thrifty Food Plan.<sup>74</sup> To the extent there is a gap between the TFP and actual spending, there remains room for optimization of one's needs.<sup>75</sup>

In summary, necessities are things which result in a sudden, significant drop in life expectancy when lacked consistently. Also, necessities should be optimized to do the most good with minimum cost, so that one can donate the monetary differential to effective charities.

### Tools for Good

It is commonplace to attempt to identify some middle ground between necessities and luxuries, and I attempt to provide a robust challenge to common thought. This framework presents a simple and unified approach to analyzing material possessions in a way that is theoretically illuminating as well as action-guiding.

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<sup>72</sup> The only category that was not met (in the concerning direction) was sodium, and the report stated that “It was thus practically impossible to develop market baskets that met the sodium recommendation. To do so would require substantial changes in food-manufacturing practices or require many foods, including bread and pasta, to be made from scratch without added salt.” In Carlson, Andrea, Mark Lino, and Thomas V. Fungwe. *The Low-Cost, Moderate-Cost, and Liberal Food Plans, 2007*. (CNPP-20). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2007), p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. “Thrifty Food Plan – 2021.” <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/thrifty-food-plan-2021>. Accessed August 14, 2022. P. 47.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. This percent overage is with reference to the 2006 plan, though.

<sup>75</sup> There remains an additional difficulty of the time dimension, as the TFP includes additional preparation time. This has been subject of some criticism, as poor people are less likely to have leisure time. For our purposes, this represents a difficulty of translating between time and monetary costs, which I do not explore here but has been the subject of much discussion in the EA movement, particularly with 80,000 Hours.

Broadly, there are necessities and then there are surplus goods. Within surplus goods, we have luxuries, and then something intermediate between necessities and luxuries. David Cloutier notes that we need “the distinction between ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ pursuits as a way of distinguishing among different possibilities for using surplus wealth.”<sup>76</sup> Historically, “the word *comfort* began to figure as the happy mean between biting necessity and indulgent luxury.”<sup>77</sup> Christians, considering the importance of dying to self, mortification of the flesh, and carrying one’s cross, should have little concern for their own comfort as an intrinsic goal. The Christian should want to transform “from a luxury-liner approach that seeks more comforts in the world to a troop-carrier approach that forsakes comforts in the world to accomplish an eternally significant task and achieve an eternally satisfying reward.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, what are commonly considered comforts will be split between tools for good and luxuries depending on their moral “bang for their buck” and their intention of use, following the analysis in the rest of this section.

A tool for good is something that is not a necessity, but it is being used for good. That is, the intention of the user is directed as a moral good. A tool for good is *optimized* if the monetary resources devoted to the tool do at least as much moral good as could be done with those monetary resources given in a donation to an effective charity. That there is a moral obligation to optimize tools for good is easily derived from any form of consequentialism. An action (involving monetary resources) must do the most good, and it only does the most good if it does at least as good as every alternative action. The set of alternative actions includes donation to effective charity, which is probably one of the most good things someone can do, as we commonly praise someone for selling all they have and giving to charities, thinking that it is more morally good than keeping it for one’s self. Therefore, there is an obligation to ensure tools for good do at least as much good as an equivalent donation to effective charity.

Tools for good can be modeled as technical artifacts (i.e., human-designed pieces of technology), particularly with respect to the intention of the user, such that something is a tool for good only if the user’s intentions are for using that tool to accomplish some moral good. Technical artifacts have material properties as well as a function (aka purpose), and the function is not itself a material property. Thus, technical artifacts have a dual nature of both material and immaterial properties, and this dual nature appears subject to a hard problem of how to relate the two together (analogous to the hard problem of consciousness).<sup>79</sup> Recently, Martin Peterson has developed and defended a dual supervenience thesis, where the function of a technical artifact supervenes on the material properties as well as the intentional history (including the designer’s and user’s intentions) of the artifact.<sup>80</sup>

In the same way, a tool for good should be understood as an object with a function of accomplishing some moral good, and this function supervenes on the user’s intentions such that

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<sup>76</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 214.

<sup>77</sup> Appleby, Joyce. "Moderation in the First Era of Popular Consumption." In Yates, Joshua, and James Davison Hunter, eds. *Thrift and Thriving in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present*. OUP USA, 2011, p. 150. Cited in Cloutier, TVOL, p. 215. (Emphasis added).

<sup>78</sup> Platt, David. *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. Multnomah, 2010, p. 171.

<sup>79</sup> Houkes, Wybo, and Anthonie Meijers. "The ontology of artefacts: the hard problem." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 37.1 (2006): 118-131.

<sup>80</sup> Peterson, Martin. "What do technical functions supervene on?" *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*. (In Press).

the user must be using that tool intentionally for obtaining that moral good. If the user is not intending the moral good to come from using the tool, then it is not a tool for good in the morally significant sense. This requirement is especially relevant for the Christian, as we have already been directed explicitly to have an overarching intention in all of our actions to glorify God. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”<sup>81</sup> In fact, divine glory consequentialism marries 1 Cor. 10:31 with tools for good such that all tools should be directly specifically at the glory of God, as DGC implies that God’s glory is the moral good in question (though see “A Conflict of Axiology?” section for more).

For example, consider a laptop. A laptop is not needed for basic survival. However, my current vocation of engineering student requires the use of a laptop, as one of only a few options (all \$1,000 or more) was required for entry into the program, and a fairly robust one was required to be able to run engineering software. Without it, I will be greatly hindered in my ability to get a job and, among other things, donate significantly more money to effective charities than I could have with only a high school education. This ~\$1,000 purchase goes a long way in enabling my long-term giving increases. It is my intention to accomplish these and other moral goods, which significantly outweigh \$1,000 in donations, with this laptop. Ideally, one would get the cheapest laptop that has the necessary specs for one’s required work functionalities (whether engineering software, video editing, etc.) with sufficient longevity. One must also consider the possibility of doing all work on a school computer, but the productivity cost on the order of multiple hours per day, assuming I am using that time for noticeable moral good, is too high for the school computer to be the morally favorable option. Thus, purchasing a laptop is a paradigm tool for good in many circumstances.<sup>82</sup>

Henry Sidgwick identifies two middle ground items between necessities and luxuries. The first is *comforts*, which are “means of protection against slight pains and annoyances [that] do not materially injure health or interfere with efficiency – such annoyances as we call ‘discomforts’.”<sup>83</sup> Comforts end up being things we use with regularity to the point of dependency such that if we lack them, we can be quite uncomfortable and less efficient. Sidgwick lists several examples, including tea, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco. He notes that “largely what we call comforts are – apart from habit – luxuries.”<sup>84</sup> If there is a certain level of physical dependence on these substances that without them would substantially subtract from doing good in other ways, then comforts may be, at least temporarily, classified as tools for good. However, since tools for good need to be optimized to do more moral good than a donation to effective charity, the long-term moral requirement would seem to be to free one’s dependence on said substances,<sup>85</sup> which would retain comparable moral good attainability without them and donate the monetary differential to charity.

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<sup>81</sup> 1 Cor. 10:31 (NIV).

<sup>82</sup> My laptop was not a fully optimized purchase, as I could have gotten with a cheaper model and gotten the same productivity. I chose a touchscreen laptop that could rotate in hopes of taking class notes as well as doing and grading homeworks with a stylus, a hope which turned out to be less productive than anticipated due to stylus difficulties. So, I should have gone with the slightly cheaper model I was considering and donated the differential.

<sup>83</sup> Sidgwick, Henry. "Luxury." *The International Journal of Ethics* 5.1 (1894): 1-16, p. 4.

<sup>84</sup> Sidgwick, p. 4.

<sup>85</sup> As Sidgwick notes, there may be times when breaking free of this habit is imprudent, and it should not necessarily be externally mandated by law, but it would be a good (and likely best) thing if they did break free of this habit.

The second intermediate Sidgwick discusses is *decencies*, which are “all commodities beyond necessities which we consume to avoid not physical discomfort, but social disrepute.”<sup>86</sup> A decency is an item “that increases a man’s efficiency in the performance of his industrial or social function.”<sup>87</sup> But Sidgwick includes an important caveat here, which is a proportionality constraint. Decencies are not luxuries if they increase someone’s efficiency, “so long as the increase of efficiency is not obtained at disproportionate cost... because in all kinds of work it is possible to increase efficiency really but wastefully by adding instruments which are of some use, but are not worth their cost.”<sup>88</sup> From a consequentialist perspective, we must require that this cost constraint is the moral cost of the decency, and the EA requirement is that it does at least as good as the equivalent donation to effective charity. Thus, Sidgwick’s proposals for intermediates between necessities and luxuries can be nicely assimilated into and illuminated by my taxonomy of material possessions as tools for good (given the constraints are met).

David Cloutier discusses four types of goods that are proper uses of surplus items ordered to higher ends and conducive to human flourishing: shared goods, vocational goods, festival goods, and enrichment goods. These are examples of tools for good in my framework. They are instruments to accomplishing a moral good that could not be accomplished only using one’s bare necessities.

Shared goods are those that may or may not have individual ownership but are used by multiple people or even an entire community, such as a public library, communal toolshed, or a home that is used to host guests. Festival goods refer to “the occasion of special expenditures and excess in service of communal celebration.”<sup>89</sup> These goods should be “occasional,” meaning both infrequent and marking a significant occasion. Furthermore, the consuming and the enjoyment thereof is not an end in itself. Vocational goods are personal (not *private*) development tools that are in view of one’s long-term work and will require noteworthy material expenditure, but they develop your material and spiritual nourishment to enable you to do much more good than you typically would do without a strong vocation. Finally, enrichment goods are personal enhancements or self-actualization tools that contribute to skill development, authentic self-expression, or communion with others who share a similar passion, and these will likely be of the sort “not typically exercised in one’s vocation.”<sup>90</sup>

Now, we need to be careful in evaluating our tools for good and if we are making the best use of resources. As Cloutier notes, there is “ample opportunity for both snobbery and self-deception”<sup>91</sup> here, particularly with respect to enrichment goods. Cloutier emphasizes, “Any devotion to enrichment goods must be less central than others more urgently and obviously recommended in the scriptural literature, especially care for the poor.”<sup>92</sup> My claim, as derived from DGC, will be stronger, which is that enrichment goods should be nonexistent except in the case that it will enable meeting more basic needs of those dying of starvation and preventable disease than you otherwise would have. How can we possibly justifying “enriching” our own lives while others are starving

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<sup>86</sup> Sidgwick, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Sidgwick, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Sidgwick, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Cloutier, David. *The Vice of Luxury (TVOL): Economic Excess in a Consumer Age*. Georgetown University Press, 2015, p. 257.

<sup>90</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 267

<sup>91</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 267.

<sup>92</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 268.



and will soon not have any life remaining to enrich because of us? It is likely the case that cheap (or, even better and more likely, free) hobbies that enable friendships, spiritual conversations, and rest and recovery enable us to help meet more needs in the long run than without them. It is also likely that only a small, regular amount of monetary expenditure on said hobby will be enough to make the hobby too morally costly given the 100x multiplier when giving to those in extreme poverty. We must take a good, long, hard look at our expense-accruing hobbies and ask just how many starving children it is worth sacrificing for us to continue in this hobby.

What Cloutier misses is an emphasis on the counterfactual reasoning of how much moral good the same amount of money can do in alternative circumstances, particularly when given to an effective charity. \$5 can buy a malaria net to protect a child from malaria, and the cumulative effective of which can save a life for around \$4,500 (because of the probabilities of getting and dying from malaria).<sup>93</sup> \$3,400 can deworm 7,000 children or double the income of fifteen people per year<sup>94</sup> (which has the same effect on subjective well-being as giving 15 typical U.S. people \$28,000 each<sup>95</sup>). Alternatively, it costs around \$1 to feed a person for a day, and one can give money directly to individuals in extreme poverty via GiveDirectly. This money automatically has a multiplicative factor because of it going overseas where the purchasing power is much greater. William MacAskill calls this the 100x Multiplier because “[f]or those of us living in rich countries, you should expect to be able to do *at least* one hundred times as much to benefit other people as you can to benefit yourself.”<sup>96</sup> Finally, it costs around \$10 or less for someone to convert to Christianity via an evangelistic organization.<sup>97</sup> Given the centrality of sharing the Gospel to the Christian life, taking seriously the Great Commission, and the impact of salvation on the glorification of God, the cause area of global missions should have a prominent place in Christian effective altruism.

It is these counterfactuals that we have to contend with. If I did not spend \$20 per month on Netflix, I could give the gift of sight to someone every month. In another example, the question is not, “Do I value product X at \$30?” or “Do I think this is worth \$30?”, but rather, “Is this worth more and doing more good than providing a month of a starving person’s food?”

Take an example of going out to eat with four other friends with some regular frequency, assuming the bill is \$10 each, for a total of \$50. A reasonable question to ask is, “Is this the best use of resources?” One may say that it is not, as clearly going out to eat is a luxury, since there is a much cheaper way to get the same food by cooking it yourself. On the other hand, there is a communal aspect to this event, as going out to eat together facilitates friendships, bonding, and making memories. While the money may be donated to charity, there are goods that would be missed as a result. Perhaps, even, these goods are incommensurable.

However, the goods to be compared are not supplying basic needs to the global poor versus the communal goods of friendship. The reason is because the communal goods of friendship do not need to be obtained via going out to eat. They can be obtained with other means, such as having

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<sup>93</sup> <https://www.givewell.org/charities/amf> and <https://www.givewell.org/cost-to-save-a-life>

<sup>94</sup> MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, p. 196

<sup>95</sup> MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, p. 22.

<sup>96</sup> MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*, p. 23

<sup>97</sup> <https://doulospartners.org/our-impact/>. Accessed August 15, 2022. Needless to say, this is a complicated metric that I will not go into the difficulties of assessing.



friends over with cooking, going to a cheaper fast-food place, or simply hanging out for free. So, the relevant compared goods are the communal goods that can be obtained via eating at one's house (for example) versus eating out to eat, and the relative good that can be done with the cost of cooking and donating the cost differential versus the cost of eating at a restaurant and its contribution to society (and the tip's contribution to the waiter or waitresses' life). It would be very difficult to say that the communal goods of eating out are noticeably higher than those of eating together in a house, while it is fairly easy to say that the good done from giving money to the extreme poor is more than giving the same amount of money to those in an affluent society, due to the multiplier of giving money overseas.

The question we should always ask is, "Can we do more (or the same) with less?" We should do more with less and donate the rest. Another example is with the vocational good of a car. Many places, especially in the US, require a car to get around due to lack of public transportation. A car is a tool for good because it enables a vocation that would otherwise be impossible. It also enables various communal goods with getting together with friends and family, etc. However, one does not need a Lexus to do that. One needs a reliable form of transportation and nothing more. Sometimes, work may require a more substantial car that can tow certain loads. Two things seem obvious, though. One is that a new car is not optimal, as there is instant depreciation that is wasted money. Another is that there are certain frills that just are not necessary. It is a negligible moral good to get a better sound system, entertainment system, heated seats, or more horsepower or larger engine for typical uses, and thus more expensive, enhanced packages would likely be morally unjustified. Similarly, some car brands are more expensive for the same technical specifications, such as Lexus as the luxury offshoot of Toyota. For example, the 2014 Toyota Highlander and 2014 Lexus RX are nearly identical with their specs, but the Lexus was more expensive by \$10,000.<sup>98</sup> The point of luxury brands is to give the appearance of wealth while delivering little to nothing on functionality.<sup>99</sup> Expenditure on such luxury brands can hardly be morally justified when considering the counterfactual case.

To recap, an optimized tool for good is something that is not a necessity but is being used intentionally to obtain a moral good that is at least as much good as could be done with the tool's value in a donation to an effective charity.

### Luxury

Luxury is anything that is not a need or a tool for good. In other words, it is a surplus good that either 1) the user's intention is not to maximize good and/or 2) does less good than could be done with its value in a donation to an effective charity. Luxuries should be eliminated entirely. This can be done by converting them into a tool for good or removing them completely.

The reason they should be eliminated completely is because we should not accept the satisfaction of luxurious desires before we accept the satisfaction of necessary desires (desires for basic needs). There is a lexical priority of necessary desires to luxurious desires. Pope Paul VI said it very well, "No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare

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<sup>98</sup> Okulicz-Kozaryn, Adam, Tim Nash, and Natasha O. Tursi. "Luxury car owners are not happier than frugal car owners." *International Review of Economics* 62.2 (2015): 121-141, p. 137 n. 27.

<sup>99</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, pp. 109-111.

necessities of life.”<sup>100</sup> The proposed trichotomy (needs, tools for good, and luxuries) helps us see through the problem of interpersonal comparison because not all desires are created equal. We need to not only look at the magnitude of the desire, but the content of the desire, to ascertain its moral significance. Much of economics does not evaluate these specifics, leaving interpersonal comparisons opaque,<sup>101</sup> but this is important for moral evaluation.

Luxury, as defined by Cloutier, is “the disposition of using surplus resources for inordinate consumption of private goods and services in search of ease, pleasure, novelty, convenience, or status.”<sup>102</sup> Since I am attempting to demarcate a taxonomy of material goods, including wealth, income, and material possessions, I will focus on luxury as a subset of the surplus resources. Furthermore, since the material goods discussed herein are individual and public goods that do not require any expenditures, the *resources* I am analyzing are already private. Therefore, luxury goods, as I adapt from Cloutier, are “surplus resources inordinately consumed in search of ease, pleasure, novelty, convenience, or status.” Alternatively, luxury goods are “surplus resources used in search of ease, pleasure, novelty, convenience, or status.” Furthermore, an agent A is *luxurious* if and only if A has a disposition to consume luxury goods. This characterization of luxury good and luxuriousness allows us to retain the notion of a disposition while clarifying the type of goods in question.

Americans love their luxuries, and they love the American dream. Get a job, get a family, buy a nice house, nice cars, get rich, retire. It is nearly certain that God’s picture of the good life looks very different. David Platt suggests God’s perspective is more like this: “I have blessed you for my glory. Not so you will have a comfortable life with a big house and a nice car. Not so you can spend lots of money on vacations, education, or clothing. Those aren’t bad things, but I’ve blessed you so that the nations will know me and see my glory.”<sup>103</sup> Americans spent a total of \$736 billion per year (averaged over the years 2000-2005) on a subset of nine categories of surplus goods, most or all of which are luxuries (at least the majority of the time). Spending in each category was \$15 billion on boating, \$28 billion on candy, \$30 billion on sporting goods, \$30 billion on alcohol, \$37 billion on pets and toys: \$45 billion on lotteries: \$59 billion on jewelry and watches, \$204 billion on entertainment, \$289 billion on domestic travel and tourism.<sup>104</sup>

At the same time, 736 million people still live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 per day.<sup>105</sup> The amount of spending in the previous categories per year from 2000-2005 is nearly 67 times the amount needed annually to end world hunger (which is needed for only 15 years).<sup>106</sup> It is an

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<sup>100</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* [On the Development of Peoples], 23. [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html). Accessed August 14, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury*, p. 154.

<sup>102</sup> Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury*, p. 180.

<sup>103</sup> Platt, *Radical*, p. 84.

<sup>104</sup> Blomberg, Craig L. *Christians in an Age of Wealth: A Biblical Theology of Stewardship*. Zondervan Academic, 2013, p. 25.

<sup>105</sup> Singer, Peter. *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty*. The Life You Can Save, 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Laborde, David, et al. *Ending Hunger: What Would It Cost?* International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2016. Estimates vary and are decreasing in required costs over time as progress is made, but this study estimated 11

unfortunate reality that many of our pets in the U.S. live much better lives than such a significant portion of mankind. While animals are of course valuable without even considering how they benefit humanity, it is morally absurd to give more money towards a pet animal than what 700 million people have to live on, especially when several million of those people in extreme poverty will die within a year from starvation and preventable disease. David Platt decries this, “For over a billion people what it costs you or I to buy French fries, over a billion people do not have for food, water, shelter, clothing, and medical care today. The reality is most of our dogs and cats are living on more than \$2.00 a day.”<sup>107</sup> There clearly needs to be a shift in American spending habits toward charitable giving, including in the church.<sup>108</sup>

One way of framing the problem is that the affluent West has “expensive tastes,” and we need to educate ourselves to have less expensive tastes. We require more resources to get the same well-being output than the global poor. This transformation is a function of our habits that require time to change. The problem of expensive tastes is a standard objection to egalitarianism and is a form of the problem of defective desires against desire satisfactionism. Expensive tastes also come up in the context of debate over utilitarianism, where it is said that our expensive tastes can be trained to avoid the problem of utility monsters, as it would make the utility-to-resource output comparable (or at least more comparable). Sidgwick has been said to have anticipated the problem of expensive desires, as he discusses how “through habitual use individuals can become dependent on goods such that their loss entails a significant decrease in welfare.”<sup>109</sup> This appears to be the case for the entire society of the U.S. on a very large scale, as many paradigm luxuries are commonplace in a significant majority of households. America is a strong candidate example of how “as Socrates argued, a society as a whole can be said to be infected by luxury.”<sup>110</sup>

While it is non-consequentialist to claim that any subset of actions is always wrong (except those that do not maximize good, of course), we can at least claim that something is generally wrong barring unusual circumstances. In this context, we can lay out paradigm cases of luxury that can be accurately called luxury in all but the unusual circumstances (some more unusual than others). Examples of paradigm luxuries include luxury brands, luxury goods, secondary automobiles, cosmetic surgery, pet ownership, and “coffee concoctions.” Luxury brands and luxury goods are well-discussed concepts explored elsewhere, so I will focus on other cases here.

When it comes to personal transportation, we can distinguish between primary automobiles, which are those used as a primary form of transportation that is generally required for travel to and from work, grocery store, etc., and secondary automobiles, which are those automobiles beyond 1 car per person.<sup>111</sup> Secondary automobiles, in some cases, might be vocational automobiles in the sense that they are required for work whether or not they are used for transport to work. For example, a

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billion dollars annually from the U.S. from 2015-2030 would result in decreasing the hunger rate in each country to less than 5% (which is the rate for what is considered “ending world hunger”).

<sup>107</sup> Platt, David. “Radical: What the Gospel Demands.” The Church at Brook Hills. Birmingham, Alabama. 7 Sept. 2008. <https://radical.net/message/what-the-gospel-demands/>.

<sup>108</sup> Average annual charitable giving from 2000-2005 totaled \$188 billion, from Blomberg, p. 25. In 2009, Christian giving was around 2% of one’s income, from Blomberg, p. 24.

<sup>109</sup> Fischbeck, Ryan Thurber. “On Henry Sidgwick’s ‘Luxury’.” *Ethics* 125.1 (2014): 226-228, p. 227.

<sup>110</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 191.

<sup>111</sup> Possibly, this should be 1 car per (externally) *working* person, but I will not discuss that possibility here.

professional motocross rider, boat racer, or cargo hauler will have secondary vocational automobiles. Hence, I propose that secondary non-vocational automobiles are paradigm cases of luxuries. These would include recreational motorboats, dirt bikes, ATVs, private jets, yachts, etc. They require substantial initial and continuous investment that are almost certainly not worth their cost in equivalent donations to effective charities.

Cloutier introduces “hairstyling or plastic surgery” as “particularly blatant examples of luxury,”<sup>112</sup> but he does not analyze them in any depth. Presumably, by plastic surgery, he is referring to cosmetic surgery, not reconstructive surgery due to birth defects, trauma, burns, and disease.<sup>113</sup> Cosmetic surgery is focused solely on enhancing one’s appearance with respect to size, shape, symmetry, and reducing the appearance of aging. Americans spent over \$16 billion on cosmetic surgery in 2018.<sup>114</sup> Since cosmetic surgery is likely to have marginal, if any, professional or personal enhancement of any moral significance, and is expensive for any given surgery, cosmetic surgery is a luxury. By “hairstyling,” perhaps Cloutier means something more significant than a basic haircut, as some semblance of professionalism is a useful instrumental tool for good to avoid *de facto* negative judgments on appearance that can limit one’s ability to have moral impact from promotion. However, there is likely no moral justification for going beyond the most basic haircutting place, as the marginal improvement in “professional” appearance from a nice hair salon is most likely not going to do moral good than what could be done with the differential value donated to effective charities.

Pets, or companion animals, are a large American expenditure with \$124 billion being spent on pets in 2021, with 70% of U.S. households owning a pet.<sup>115</sup> Annual spending estimations were well over what it would cost to support multiple people living in extreme poverty. Does having a pet do more moral good than an equivalent donation to effective charities? One must consider the life of the pet, of course. Now, there are larger issues at play here with the existence of puppy mills and breeding specifically for pets, which feeds the abundance of pet availability. If there was not such a high demand for pets, many of these animals would not exist in the first place. Consequently, long-term decreased demand for pets would lead to many fewer animals that are in need of care at all. While conditions at a pound or animal shelter are less than ideal, to say the least, the moral disvalue of the experience of a human in extreme poverty is much worse. The moral value of doubling the income of several individuals in extreme poverty is significantly more (probably by orders of magnitude) than the well-being loss of a pet going to the pound.

What about one’s personal well-being benefit from having a pet, both in companionship and also health benefits like a decrease in obesity or cardiovascular risk? Both of these can be obtained without a pet in ways that do not require the same monetary expenditures. For example, consider

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<sup>112</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 134.

<sup>113</sup> “Cosmetic Surgery vs Plastic Surgery: Cosmetic vs Plastic Surgeons.” *ABCS*, American Board of Cosmetic Surgery, 1 Feb. 2022, <https://www.americanboardcosmeticsurgery.org/patient-resources/cosmetic-surgery-vs-plastic-surgery/>.

<sup>114</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons. “Americans Spent More than \$16.5 Billion on Cosmetic Plastic Surgery in 2018.” American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 10 Apr. 2019, <https://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/press-releases/americans-spent-more-than-16-billion-on-cosmetic-plastic-surgery-in-2018>.

<sup>115</sup> “Pet Industry Market Size, Trends & Ownership Statistics.” *American Pet Products Association*, [https://www.americanpetproducts.org/press\\_industrytrends.asp](https://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp). This is based on 2021-2022 APPA National Pet Owners Survey Statistics.

human companionship. Regarding a decrease in obesity (associated with walking a dog several times a week), consider taking walks alone or with a person. Thus, it seems that the moral cost is substantially greater than the moral benefit of having a companion animal for the typical household. As such, companion animals represent a paradigm case of luxury.

Cloutier also presents the \$5 “coffee concoction” that is a “nearly everyday purchase for many Americans”<sup>116</sup> as a paradigm case of luxury, on which I am in total agreement. The cost is largely profit, not nutritious, as coffee can be made much more cheaply at home. Also, as discussed above, it is morally ideal to remove a dependence on those substances completely (which would also save initial and ongoing expenditures on the equipment to make coffee at home). Any drink expenditure at a restaurant could also be grouped in here. They are disproportionately more expensive than one can get at home and offer negligible moral benefit, and the cost differential, especially when summed over time, can be a substantial moral investment into effective charities.

After assessment and identification of luxuries, the proper response is to either 1) eliminate by selling or giving away the possessions identified as luxuries (and refraining from purchasing them in the future), or 2) transform the luxury into a tool for good. The first thing to do to transform a luxury into a tool for good is to ensure that the intention in keeping and using the tool is to do the most moral good (or in our case, maximally glorify God). Secondly, one must try to optimize the tool for good. If one cannot optimize it to the point of tradeoff to the point of the counterfactual good of charitable donation, one should get rid of it.

### **Assessment**

First, here is a summary of my key claims. DGC: An action is right if and only if it results in maximal divine glory. NEA: A charitable donation is morally right if and only if it results in maximal good. REA: A person is morally obligated to donate a substantial portion of one’s surplus income to charity. RNEA: A person is morally obligated to donate a substantial portion of one’s surplus income to effective charities. DGC entails RNEA. A necessity is an item which results in a sudden and significant decrease in life expectancy if lacked consistently. A tool is an item that is not a necessity but is being used with an intention for good, and this tool is optimized if does more moral good than its equivalent value in effective charitable donations. A luxury is a surplus good that either 1) the user’s intention is not to maximize good and/or 2) does less good than could be done with its value in a donation to an effective charity. Finally, we should eliminate all luxuries and not purchase them in the future, and we should optimize necessities and tools for good.

After this assessment, it looks as though much of the expenditures of people in the West involve luxuries and unoptimized tools for good. Once these tools are optimized, the remaining income leftover, based on high amount of luxury spending, would likely be free to give to effective charities. To the extent that we do not have optimized tools for good, we are counterfactually responsible for the death of those individuals that we could have saved. While there are some (external) differences in killing and allowing to die, “not aiding the poor is not to be condemned as murdering them; it could, however, be on a par with killing someone as a result of reckless driving, which is serious enough.”<sup>117</sup> Given this moral assessment, along with the large

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<sup>116</sup> Cloutier, TVOL, p. 235.

<sup>117</sup> Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. Third Edition. Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 199.

expenditures on luxuries and non-optimized tools for good, there is a moral obligation to donate a significant proportion of one's income to effective charities. In other words, our analysis shows that radical, normative effective altruism is correct.

If divine glory consequentialism is true, we should be radical, normative effective altruists. As such, we should eliminate all luxuries and optimize our needs and tools for good, and we should donate all remaining money to effective charities. From the divine glory consequentialist perspective, we should do with our possessions what results in maximal divine glory. As Gregory Baumer and John Cortines put it, "we must ask ourselves which course of action will most glorify God and most benefit His Kingdom on Earth."<sup>118</sup> St. Ignatius, in his rules for the distribution of alms, has a similar rule that one should be "distributing alms for the greater glory of God and the perfection of his soul."<sup>119</sup> We should all make an assessment of all of our possessions, categorize them, and then begin optimizing tools for good and removing luxuries (or transforming them into tools for good, i.e., tools for God's glory).

We offer one final note on practicality: One need not worry as much about nickel and diming small purchases if one has secondary non-vocational automobiles, etc. (unless the small purchases are in such high frequency that they sum to the monetary equivalent). Further, if the time, monetary, and instrumental mental health concerns over moral calculations involving small sums of money would restrict your ability to do more good in the long run, then it is best to focus on the more substantial untapped good.

## **Conclusion**

The criterion of rightness of DGC is to maximize the glory of God, which is to maximize the admiration, praise, and honor of God by one's actions and their consequences. This form of consequentialism solves conventional problems with consequentialism, while retaining attractive features of traditional theistic ethics.

When applied to the question of altruism, DGC implies that one should be a radical, normative effective altruist, so one has a moral obligation to give a substantial portion of one's income to effective charities. I introduced a taxonomy of material possessions, differentiating between necessities, tools for good (tools for God's glory), and luxuries, arguing that we should eliminate luxuries and optimize both necessities and tools for good.

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<sup>118</sup> Baumer, Gregory, and Cortines, John. *God and Money: How We Discovered True Riches at Harvard Business School*. Rose Publishing Inc, 2016, p. 52.

<sup>119</sup> St. Ignatius. *Spiritual Exercises*. <https://spex.ignatianspirituality.com/PuhlTranslation.html#c29-1234>. Accessed August 11, 2022.