

Article

Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics: Summary and Application

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Received: 21 August 2017; Accepted: 20 September 2017; Published: 25 September 2017

Abstract: This text represents a summary of the major points developed in the book, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, and a brief overview of how the author understands the relation between religion, ethics, and the building of a virtuous community. The main points of the book involve the anatomy of “the moral event” that includes a breakdown of all the elements necessary to consider before one arrives at ethical judgments and decision-making. Foundations are brought forth for these elements, each of which exhibits its own characteristics. The good and evil details of actions and circumstances that make up behavior are based upon an analysis of what is beneficial or harmful to human persons, integrally and adequately considered. Behaviors themselves are considered right or wrong in relation to whether they are appropriate ways of achieving one’s intended ends. Then, the distinction between good and bad is related to one’s virtuous or vicious dispositions, which necessitates a revised understanding of virtue. Based upon a view of religion that provides a formulation of principles that guide the life of the believing community, it is suggested that these principles encourage a commitment to ends or goals that serve the maintenance and advance of a community’s ethics.

Keywords: ethics; intention; virtue; principles; narrative

In March 2016, I published *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* (Selling 2016). A major premise of this study is that traditional Catholic moral theology was fashioned not to point the way toward responsible, ethical living and decision-making, but rather to train priests how to hear confessions. As a result, the emphasis of the discipline fell upon the actions and omissions that were reported by penitents and which the priest-confessor had to judge as sinful or not, as gravely sinful or less so.

The early (from the seventh century) penitential books listed sins by describing acts (or omissions) along with any circumstances that might have a bearing on their offensiveness. These behaviors were evaluated in themselves with little attention being given to the motive or intention of the person who performed them. The moral theological textbooks that developed as a result of the counter-reformation (in the sixteenth century) followed along these lines, although they attempted to incorporate some theoretical basis for the teaching presented. This included some account of conscience which was usually described as the capacity or mechanism for appropriating moral laws and applying them to concrete situations. In this tradition, the end or goal of the acting person was considered important, but only in the sense of establishing or mitigating the guilt of the penitent. It had no bearing on the evaluation of individual behaviors.

We have learned from modern psychology that healthy, adult, and attentive persons do not choose behaviors in a random manner (Maslow [1954] 1987). Although they may be attracted to certain behaviors emotionally, mature persons develop the capacity to weigh short-term satisfactions against long-term accomplishments and subsequent satisfaction. The ends or goals of ethical living are important with respect to making ethical decisions (Rokeach 1973). Further, in a very real way, they form the starting point of that decision-making. Aiming at more long-term goals helps to clarify how to arrange and prioritize short-term goals in order to facilitate making choices about what to do

(or omit). These short-term ends or goals are the object of the person's ethical intention. In schematic form (see Figure 1).

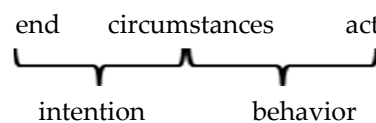


Figure 1. The sources of morality (expanded).

Neither ends nor actions on their own can determine an ethical evaluation outside of a context of circumstances. One could imagine several ends toward which a person might aim. But one could only ethically commit to the realization of a specific end or goal within circumstances that provide a minimum of opportunity for achieving that end. When this occurs, one may—or may not—formulate an intention to achieve that end.

By the same token, one could consider a range of options for achieving one's ends. But ethically choosing which of these options one might implement depends upon the presence of a given set of circumstances. Performing actions within those circumstances constitutes a behavior. Behaviors can be very different even when the action performed is exactly the same. Striking a person may represent camaraderie, insult, offense, or self-defense. Killing a person may represent punishment, personal hatred, defense of an innocent party, or simply an accident.

1. Expansion and Precision of Ethical Terminology

Traditionally, textbook moral theology presented “the moral act” as a phenomenon that could be assessed by considering the so-called “sources of morality”. These sources consisted in the act itself, the consequences surrounding that act, and the end or intention of the acting person. This classical paradigm suffered from a fundamental ambiguity because it was not always clear what one meant by the word “act”: was it referring to the entire event or simply to the performance of a material action (or omission)? When moral theologians refer to “acts” that are “evil in themselves” they beg more questions than they answer, none of which contribute to ethical insight.

By making distinctions between intentions and ends, and between acts and behaviors, we introduce both nuance and precision into our ethical vocabulary. Each of the elements presented here can be examined on their own. They are distinct. However, when they all work together, they form a unity, a single, complex phenomenon that I refer to as a “moral event”.

I will examine the meaning of these terms shortly (see Figure 2), but first I would like to point out that, when using the terms in an ethical context, each one of them is subject to (a somewhat different form of) evaluation. Fortunately, the English language provides us with different words to describe the kind of evaluation that is taking place.

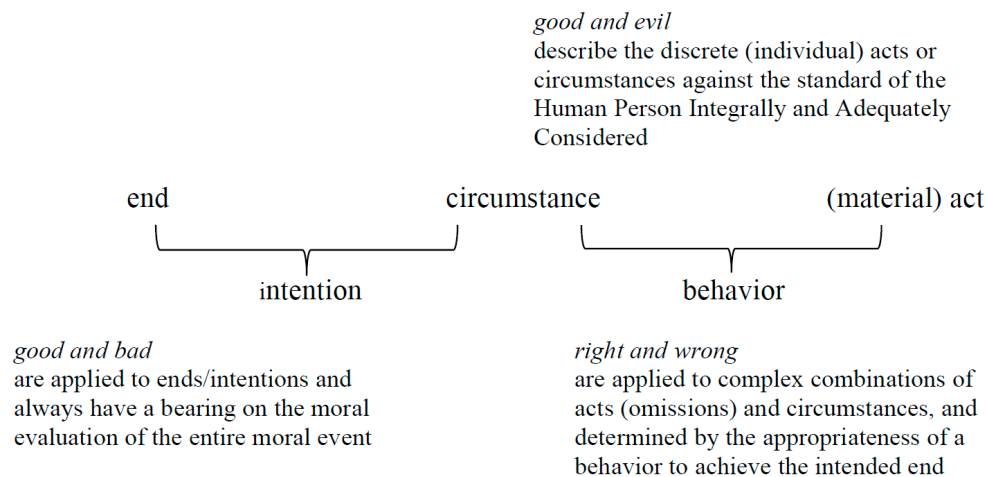


Figure 2. The moral event.

In English, the word “good” has two possible antonyms, evil and bad. This allows us to assign each word-pair to a different form of evaluation. One could be used in an expressly moral¹ context, while the other can be used as a descriptive term, indicating its morally relevant characteristics but stopping short of making a moral judgment.

Most of us would agree that if the intention of the acting person is not good, the entirety of the moral event will be corrupt and cannot be made good, no matter how much beneficence flows from it. The classic example here is giving to charity in order to gain the admiration of others. Therefore, I would assign the word-pair good and bad to label the ethical character of one’s intention-to-an-end.

On the other hand, the discrete elements of material actions and the circumstances that influence their morally relevant characteristics are descriptive and not (yet) morally qualified. Imprisoning a person, for instance, may be described as an evil—something disadvantageous for the person being imprisoned—and the circumstance that the duration of imprisonment is for the remainder of their life adds another dimension of disadvantage which is also negative in character. Nevertheless, there may be other circumstances, such as who this person is and what they may have done in the past, that make the evil(s) of the action (behavior) justifiable as punishment.

Behaviors represent the decided-upon combination of actions and circumstances that the person may ultimately choose in order to achieve their intended end. They are classified as “right or wrong” depending upon two factors: whether this choice of behavior has a reasonable chance to accomplish the intended end, and whether the evil(s) associated with this behavior neither contradict nor overshadow the good that is being achieved through the moral event. This, of course, is a matter of prudential judgment.

2. Acts and Circumstances: The Meaning of Good and Evil

When Thomas Aquinas described the circumstances surrounding human moral (voluntary) activity (S.T., I-II, q. 7, a. 3), following Cicero he lists them as who, what, where, by what aids, why, how, when, and, following Aristotle, about what. Note that the “what” (I take something belonging to another) and the “about what” (I take a little or a lot, from the poor or the rich, etc.) are listed as *circumstances*. They do not constitute a “human act” because an “activity” can only be considered human when it is voluntary, when it proceeds from the will that is first manifest in the activity called

¹ I use the word “moral” (antonym: immoral) here because this linguistic category is clearly judgmental in tone. The word “ethical” is primarily used to describe the type of discourse that is taking place. Its antithetical counterpart, unethical, can hardly be used to describe things like murder, rape, or torture.

intention (“the end is last in execution, but first in the intention of reason, according to which moral actions receive their species”, q. 18, a. 7, ad 2).

In the following article (q. 7, a. 4), Aquinas tells us that the two circumstances, why and what, are the most important. The reason that the circumstance “why” is important is because it describes “the motive and the object of the will which is the end”. A truly human act must be voluntary, and the will to the end (intention) is what motivates the moral event in the first place. That said, although a bad intention will corrupt a moral event “from the beginning”, on its own a good intention cannot guarantee that the moral event will be a good one.

What is done is also important because, without something “being done”, the end will never be achieved. Again, although the thing done along with all the relevant circumstances can be judged to be right or wrong, purely on its own, the behavior cannot determine the status of the moral event without taking into account the intention to the end of the acting person and the freedom present in the will when choosing. The choice of a wrong behavior could be the result of ignorance.

Responding to the question about how one assigns the labels “good and evil” to the *circumstances* of what is done, textbook moral theology would search for a “ruling” on that matter either from a stipulation found in the scriptures or from its own attempt to analyze a “natural law”. Neither of these, however, is adequate for the task. Even clear commandments, such as “thou shalt not kill” admit of exceptions that have been enshrined in church teaching for centuries. And what is considered to be “against nature” can turn out to be largely beneficial for human persons. (At the beginning of the nineteenth century, for instance, many looked upon the technique of vaccination as working against the natural law.) Therefore, the documents of the Second Vatican Council urged the adaptation of a different norm for making these evaluations, namely the Human Person Integrally and Adequately Considered.

Far from understanding, the human person as a mere individual, the anthropology worked out by many moral theologians stresses the interconnectedness of persons that flows from the many dimensions of being human that are weaved together to form a realistic and integral notion of what it means to be human persons. An example of the multidimensionality of the human person was developed by Louis Janssens on the basis of the text of *Gaudium et spes* (Janssens 1980; Selling 1998).

1. Human Persons stand in relation to everything, to the whole of reality
2. Human Persons stand in relation to the material world
3. Human Persons are cultural
4. Human Persons are historical
5. Human Persons stand in particular relationships with other persons
6. Human Persons become a conscious interiority, a subject
7. Human Persons are corporeal subjects
8. Every Human Person is unique, yet fundamentally equal in dignity

Whatever protects, promotes, or enhances human persons can be understood as good: it is “good for persons”. Whatever threatens, harms, or diminishes human persons can be understood as evil: it is “evil for persons”. These goods and evils are morally relevant and an important part of one’s ethical analysis of choosing a behavior. But they do not ipso facto determine the ethical evaluation of a complex moral event. For instance, the removal of an organ is an evil, but it can be justified when it protects the well-being of the whole body.

3. Ends and Intentions: The Meaning of Good and Bad

Attention to the circumstance “why” reveals the motivation of the acting person. Many people give insufficient consideration to this aspect of their ethical decision-making and end up pursuing short-term goals that distort their understanding of the challenge they may be facing. At least part of the reason why this happens is because traditional morality tended to focus on behaviors alone,

without focusing on the larger picture. Attempts to consider ends or goals as the starting point of ethical discourse were linked to “consequentialism”, a theory that suggests that it is *only* the outcome of our activity that matters in decision-making.

Fear of consequentialism led many moral theologians to disvalue or even ignore the outcome of ethical decision-making. They failed to see that consideration of the motive of the acting person, which can only be discerned through an examination of the end or goal that the person intends to accomplish, is an integral part of human voluntary activity. What motivates us reveals our ethical character and disposition. It is that disposition that helps us determine whether intention is good or bad. A good disposition is said to be virtuous, while a bad disposition is not virtuous and may even be vicious.

Most of us have accepted the idea that virtuous dispositions are learned. They are built up as habits of choosing a path that is virtuous². By the same token, making vicious decisions leads to being habitually vicious in our outlook and therefore prone to intending ends or goals that exhibit that viciousness. But what are the virtues, exactly? The Catholic tradition has recognized three “theological virtues” from St. Paul’s writings and four “cardinal virtues” inherited from ancient Greek philosophy. Some, like Aquinas, have attempted to break each of these down into more specific parts, but the framework of the seven categories remains limited. Perhaps this is the reason why virtue theory never became a significant part of the dynamics of doing theological ethics.

Another reason why virtue theory did not succeed in shedding light on the importance of one’s intention-to-an-end in ethical evaluation is because virtues were treated as singular and static ideas. The classic idea that virtue stands as the mean between two extremes was virtually beyond question until Peter Knauer made a provocative suggestion for an alternative perspective.³

Referring to Aristotle’s famous dictum about virtue standing between two extremes, as in bravery or courage being a “mean” between foolhardiness and cowardice, he observed that even “The Philosopher” noted that bravery is closer to the extreme of foolhardiness than it is to cowardice. Knauer then asked whether there was another virtue that was closer to the extreme of cowardice than it is to foolhardiness, and he suggested that there was indeed prudence, or as I would call it, caution. Giving five more examples of two virtues being relevant to a given challenge that could reciprocally moderate two extremes, Knauer referred to this as a square and claimed that it was a universal phenomenon. However, he then went on with his study without elaborating any further on how we could better understand the concept of virtue.

Because two virtues occupy the middle ground between two extremes of inappropriate attitudes, I prefer to use the schema of a trapezoid rather than a square (see Figure 3). I also refer to the two virtues as “complementary virtues” that describe a continuum within which the virtuous person would seek an appropriate solution to a given challenge by taking account of all the relevant details—circumstances—of a presenting issue. The issue calling forth the virtues of courage and caution can be described as facing up to a dangerous situation or perhaps even some form of opposition. The virtuous response that the person gives to the situation will depend upon several circumstances that could not be known before one actually confronts such a situation. What we do know is that one’s response should lie somewhere on the continuum (signified by the dotted line in the diagram) between the two, complementary virtues. Total courage without any hint of caution would be foolhardiness. Total caution without any hint of courage would be cowardice. The “mean” being suggested by Aristotle is thus not an absolute point.

² Some virtues are such that they cannot be arrived at on one’s own. The individual needs to be “given” reasons to have faith in the meaning of life, see hope that good will ultimately prevail, and receive compassion that demonstrates the meaning of love.

³ Peter Knauer, “La Détermination du bien et du mal moral par le principe du double effet” (Knauer 1965, pp. 356–76). This was later published in a reworked version in English as “The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect” (Knauer 1967, pp. 132–62) and was reprinted in Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (eds.), *Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition* (Knauer 1979, here, pp. 1–39).



Figure 3. The Virtuous Trapezoid.

The elaboration of complementary virtues is, in my opinion, an ongoing project. One can begin by identifying ethically challenging situations and then ask what the possible virtues and vices (extremes) might be; conversely, one could look at a list of virtues and then identify the type of challenge to which it responds so that one can set the stage for identifying the complementary virtue that, together with the first, holds the extremes in check. In the book, I identify 55 sets of complementary virtues that the reader can also find on my website.⁴

It also bears observing that virtues are not necessarily eternal or transcultural. Although some of the virtues such as kindness, hope, and patience occupy a hallowed place in most societies, others are more culturally connected in their expression, such as modesty, discretion, and industriousness. Some virtues mentioned by medieval thinkers like Aquinas, such as magnanimity and magnificence, are no longer helpful, while others have only been recognized in recent times, such as stewardship, self-care, and ecumenism. Then there are some virtues, such as truthfulness and responsibility that receive widespread approval but rather dubious observance in many social settings.

4. Religion's Role in Emphasizing Attitudes

Most religions impress upon their adherents some code of conduct that approves, demands, or condemns various forms of behavior. Torah, for instance, stipulates 365 negative and 248 positive laws that rule just about every facet of life. Catholic Christianity deeply respects the tradition of Judaism, but does not subscribe to the vast majority of their laws. It explicitly teaches the Decalogue, but then presumes to elaborate ancillary meanings of the commandments worked out through a system of "natural law" reasoning. This is founded upon the presupposition that, since God is the author of creation, its "natural" structure and laws must be of divine origin and are therefore inviolable.

What we have too often allowed to escape our attention is that there is another approach to ethical reflection present in our Judeo-Christian tradition that addresses something other than normative stipulations. At the end of the second chapter of the book, I draw attention to twenty "principles" which I consider to be part and parcel of the Catholic ethical tradition. Eleven of these, I believe, can find substantiation in the scriptures. In the following paragraph, they are named with the italicized words.

The People of God identify themselves as a *community*. Individuals may sometimes play a prominent role, but this is always understood to be in service to that community. Fleshing out the history, identity, and destiny of the community is achieved through *narrative*, the continuous story of the people and its individual members. Together, they seek *justice* by exercising *responsibility*. Thus, while affirming the fundamental *goodness* of persons and the community, as well as the whole creation, there remains a consciousness of the presence of *sin* that brings about disruption. This demands that they continuously seek *reconciliation* among all persons. Outside the community, this should even be extended to *enemies*. Included in this is the need to be sensitive to those who do not enjoy justice

⁴ The four pages on the topic can be found at: <https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0010542/theory/virtue.html>. In the book, my tentative list of virtues and vices can be found in Appendix 9.

and therefore deserve the benefit of an *option* to respond to and restore their justifiable claims. The deeds that are called for to achieve all these goals will only be pursued when the people embrace a proper *attitude*, one that seeks righteousness not only in the present but also in the future, the hoped-for *eschatological* ideals that motivate the people.

Through the course of history, which when narrated as the unfolding of the message contained in the scriptures is referred to as tradition, we witness the community of believers recognizing that they need to adapt their social, cultural, and political practices to remain true to that message. In doing so, they formulate principles that they consider to flow from or be compatible with the narrative they are attempting to live out. Some of these are temporary, but others exhibit a lasting character that becomes integrated into the ethic of the community of believers, even institutionalized in the medium that we refer to as church. In the following paragraph, I point to nine principles that I believe reflect the ethics of the post-Vatican II church, although most of them pre-date that event. Again, they are named with the italicized words.

The idea of formulating and being motivated by principles leads toward the adaptation of a philosophical insight referred to as *virtue*, or the acquisition of habits that influence the way in which we respond to life's challenges. Virtues lead to the construction of a particular kind of *ethics* that not only reflects our understanding of scripture but also is grounded in our social and cultural experience. Because of its sense of community, the Catholic view of the world values what is referred to as the *common good*, a concept that needs to be continually updated in light of what we learn through the human sciences. This entails the development of a functional *anthropology* that, in many places of the world, is understood to include the *equal dignity* of all human persons, regardless of gender, skin color, ethnic affiliation, and so forth. At the same time, we must admit that our Catholic Christian tradition has had difficulty coming to terms with human *corporeality*, especially sexuality, something that should be appreciated in a virtuous manner. Then, with regard to material things we are aware of a definite strain in our tradition that values *detachment*. While some will claim that a sense of *commitment* has always been part of the Christian tradition, this has usually been thought of in absolute terms, whereas there is a necessary place for short-term commitment as well, especially in terms of evolving life projects. Finally, it has only been in the last sixty or seventy years that we have developed a sense of responsibility in caring for the *environment*.

These twenty principles describe the contours of ethical living and decision-making. They lead us to articulating the meaning of virtue that in turn motivates us to identify goals to be accomplished in life, both as a community and as individuals. However, this is an on-going process that, for the individual, spans an entire lifetime.

In the table below (see Table 1), I list the principles in alphabetical order in order to dispel the impression of a hierarchy of importance. I believe that the character of Catholic Christian ethics demands attention to these principles, which in turn should inspire individuals to shape their attitudes and thus their habitual responses to their community and their environment. I do not consider this list to be either complete or fully accurate, but I offer it as a focal point of further discussion.

Table 1. General principles of Catholic Christian ethics.

Scripture	General Principles	Tradition
	the need for a working <i>anthropology</i>	
	an emphasis on <i>attitude</i> before behavior	
	a sense of <i>commitment</i> to life projects	
	protecting the <i>common good</i>	
	maintaining a sense of <i>community</i>	
attitude	validation of <i>corporeality</i>	anthropology
community	striving toward <i>detachment</i>	commitment
enemies	fostering love of <i>enemies</i>	common good
eschatological	protecting our <i>environment</i>	corporeality
goodness	promoting <i>equal human dignity</i>	detachment
justice	maintaining an <i>eschatological</i> sense	environment
narrative	construction of a shared <i>ethics</i>	equal dignity
option	belief in basic <i>goodness</i>	ethics/virtue
reconciliation	cultivating a sense of <i>justice</i>	virtue
responsibility	communicating through <i>narrative</i>	
sin	embracing an <i>option</i> for the disadvantaged	
	seeking <i>reconciliation</i> whenever possible	
	exercising <i>responsibility</i>	
	recognizing the reality of <i>sin</i>	
	developing a life of <i>virtue</i>	

By developing and promoting these principles, religion, or similar systems of belief, stimulates the motivational aspects of what it means to be a member of that describable community of persons. General motivations lead to the formation of attitudes that influence goal orientation and the intentions to achieve those goals or ends. Motivations simultaneously predispose individuals to give attention to the expectations of the community that are embodied in normative ethics. However, beginning from the perspective of personal responsibility and the formation of intentions, norms and laws will be understood in their supportive and educative function rather than as behavioral dictates.

5. The Challenge of Teaching

If we adapt an intentional, attitudinal approach to ethical living and decision-making, we will have to accept the fact that the way we teach this—both to children and to the community of adults who share our belief system—will have to be different from simply listing rules or laws to be followed. With young people, this clearly cannot begin until they reach a reasonable age for understanding the importance of building character. However, if the adults responsible for their education already understand and are practicing such an ethical approach, this will influence the ethical education of those in their charge. Knowing, and especially articulating, the underlying principles and motivations that inspire ethical behavior will help avoid the impression that rules should be followed simply because they are imposed by authority.

One of the general principles listed above points to the importance of *narrative* in the way that we communicate our beliefs. Considering that an ethical system is based upon what we believe about ourselves, our communities, and our world, we need to articulate and seek a consensus about that narrative. This would reflect the teaching of Jesus through his words and deeds. However, before we fall into the trap of reading our own meaning into the scriptures, we need to study them and to seek out competent persons to explain them and their context. Each community will have its particular perspective on what the stories relate.

For instance, those who live in a political dictatorship will likely emphasize certain parts of the scriptures while those living in a liberal democracy will emphasize other parts. This is a task that needs to be shared by all the members of a community, being attentive to the different aspects of how life is experienced and represented. Relevant social, economic, ethnic, and historical factors should all be considered. At the same time, this coming together needs to be guided not only by experts

(theologians) but also by those who provide spiritual advice (religious), and those who maintain a link to the world church (bishops).

Before we turn in on ourselves and mistake the source of ethical insight to lie exclusively within our own tradition, we should recognize that (ethical) narratives are all around us. Story-telling, literature, motion pictures, television programs, and even the way that news items are sometimes presented, offer a narrative that invites ethical analysis. The story does not have to be of our own making to be a worthy vehicle for learning or providing role models. Christianity has infiltrated just about every culture on the face of the earth, sometimes disrupting it but also learning from it and adapting ethically relevant principles. Think, for instance, about the human rights tradition that the European churches resisted for so long, before recognizing it as nearly perfectly compatible with the teaching of the New Testament.

Further, one of the sub-principles of the social teaching of the church is the principle of subsidiarity, whereby challenges need to be faced and resolved at the presenting level and not from the outside or “on high”. When this is followed, the global community of the church will see the emergence of different ways of dealing with similar ethical challenges. This is entirely appropriate. It resembles how, in the earlier life of the church, different groups and even religious orders developed their own, characteristic ethic—a way of living in community and participating in a shared set of goals. That experience needs to be expanded and applied to the entire church, so that what we are seeking is not uniformity but similarity.

Finally, in order to avoid being misunderstood, I believe that I must repeat my observation that the development of a meaningful, continuously scrutinized, and carefully elaborated, advisory form of normative ethics is essential for guiding persons who are attempting to navigate their way through making responsible behavioral choices for achieving the ends to which they want to commit their efforts. Norms do not have to be “absolute” to be important and have a bearing on how we make behavioral choices. When we realize their proper place, guiding us and not dictating to us, they become helpful and even friendly.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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