

How Do You Like Them Ethics?

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As NBC's breakout sitcom opens, Eleanor Shellstrop finds herself in a dilemma. She has died, and a cosmic mismanagement lands her in The Good Place, a secular version of heaven, completely by mistake. Confessing the error will almost certainly mean her removal to The Bad Place and eternal torture. So what should she do? It is out of this predicament that all the series' hijinks ensue. In considering this tension, we find that two organically connected questions lie behind this delightful show: (1) whether morality requires that we do good for goodness' sake and (2) whether reality itself is committed to morality.

Starring Ted Danson as the demon Michael and Kristen Bell as Eleanor—sweet, teentsy, and no freakin' Gandhi—the show blazes a trail of brilliant fun from Nature's Lasik to “Ya Basic!” As proof that moral philosophy professors aren't as bad as the show's running gag suggests, consider ethicist Chidi Anagonye's *Hamilton*-style rap musical: “My name is Kierkegaard and my writing is impeccable! / Check out my teleological suspension of the ethical!” Or how one day in class Eleanor dismissively asks, “Who died and left Aristotle in charge of ethics?” to which an exasperated Chidi replies, “Plato!”

Although the show is a comedy, the picture that emerges is one of tragedy, tragicomedy at best. Nobody, it turns out at the close of Season 3, has made it into The Good Place for centuries. Not even Doug Forcett is likely to make the cut, even though he's the show's quasi-prophet who accidentally stumbled on the secret of the afterlife and has arguably led a faultless life ever since. The reason for this regrettable situation is life's complexity. Even good-intentioned behavior

often results in a number of unintended bad consequences, yielding a net *loss* of “points” rather than a *gain*. The relative importance of intentions versus consequences is one of the vital philosophical questions the show raises. After discussing what the show has to say on the matter, we will offer our own view and why, if we’re right, the context of *The Good Place*, it turns out, is much more tragic than comic. Then we will consider the evidence of morality itself to see if it might suggest a different outcome. But enough of this bullshit. It’s high time to take a swig from a putrid, disgusting bowl of ethical soup.

What Makes an Action Right?

Before reviewing how philosophers have answered the intentions/consequences question, let’s first consider the question itself. Some might say that actions are neither right nor wrong. The whole enterprise of morality, they suggest, is misguided. Perhaps life is meaningless or the category of morality is confused. A committed nihilist might insist there’s good reason to think there’s ultimately nothing to this morality business at all. There are simply no moral truths to be found.

This isn’t quite the position of Mindy St. Claire when she counsels Eleanor and company not to mess with ethics (“Mindy St. Claire”). Instead, she advises them to look out for number one. In principle that leaves open the possibility that she believes in objective morality and that we can know what such morality tells us to do, but that she is simply indifferent to it. Perhaps she sees morality and self-interest as so much at odds that she simply gave up on what morality had to say. As she sees it, the more reliable path to happiness concerns promoting what’s best for oneself. Interestingly, the moral theory of ethical egoism says that doing what’s in one’s own ultimate best interest *is* our moral obligation. This is one way of maintaining a vital connection between what morality says and what’s best for us. There’s no particular evidence to suggest that Mindy held such an ethical account. What we know is simply that her life was about “making money and doing cocaine”—finding what happiness and fulfillment she could in her circumstances.

The better representation of a nihilistic approach is what Chidi flirted with after becoming aware of his impending eternal doom in the episode “Jeremy Bearimy.” Making his vile Peep-M&M-chili concoction in the middle of class, quoting Nietzsche’s immortal lines about the

death of God, losing heart about morality and meaning—this is the stuff of nihilism commonly understood. Of course, defenders of Nietzsche would quickly suggest it's a bit of a caricature, and they have a point. But we'll leave that interesting discussion to the side for now.

Most people still think it's important to consider what makes actions right or wrong. This is the arena of "normative ethics," which has two main strains in the history of philosophy. Chidi discusses both of them in his lectures. One is the Kantian idea that what makes an action right is that it comes from the right motive. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the first philosopher mentioned in the show, serves as both ethical touchstone and punchline, a "lonely, obsessive hermit with zero friends" whose ideas nevertheless challenge the characters to wrestle with fundamental questions of right and wrong. The only truly good thing, he thought, is the "good will," which requires that our moral actions be motivated by respect for the moral law. Consequences, on Kant's understanding, don't capture the heart of an action. It's the motive that counts. We should do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not for any other reason, at least if our action is to retain its moral worth.¹

One reason Kant found the emphasis on consequences to be dubious is that we're notoriously bad at predicting them. We might try to do something that will result in a good outcome, but the effort can backfire and we end up doing far more bad than good. So it's not the consequences that matter morally.

Obviously ethical egoists would disagree. But a narrow focus on self-interest alone strikes many as myopic. A broader "consequentialism" called utilitarianism says an action is right if it produces the best overall consequences for *all* who are affected by an action. The philosophical nerd best known for being horny for utilitarianism is John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). Whereas Kant put the moral focus on intention, Mill generally put it squarely on *consequences*. Chidi's lecture on Mill has Eleanor initially enamored of utilitarianism's simplicity, Jason's convoluted but surprisingly apropos example of framing "one innocent gator dealer to save a 60-person dance crew" notwithstanding.

Mill did see the possibility that a good-intentioned action might end up doing more harm than good. He handled that sort of possibility by distinguishing between the worth of the moral action and the intention of the moral agent. A well-intentioned action that surprisingly backfires is, in retrospect, a wrong action, but the doer of the action is not necessarily culpable for it. So in this way Mill carved out some space for intention too.²

We might side with Kant, or with Mill, or argue for some sort of combination of the two views. As *The Good Place* goes on, it becomes clear that the world it depicts represents a sort of synthesis of Kant's and Mill's ideas. There's a strong emphasis on doing the right thing for its own sake—which sounds like Kant. There's also an important consideration of consequences, but without Mill's distinction between the status of an action and the quality of the agent who performs it. Unintended consequences, even those that can't be reasonably foreseen, can function over time—and almost inevitably will in this increasingly complicated world—to doom one to The Bad Place. For this reason, Doug buying his grandmother flowers actually costs him points, given that his purchase inadvertently supported labor malpractice, environmental abuse, and sexual harassment. This is why nobody has made it to The Good Place for centuries, leaving Chidi and the gang to work out a better system come the final season.

Should It Bother Us?

Should this seemingly unfair feature of the universe of *The Good Place* bother us—chap our nips, tug our nuggets, zip our tip? It would seem patently unjust to be held eternally responsible for the unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of our best-intentioned actions. The surface problem is the complexity that renders moral decision making so complicated and uncertain. But the deeper problem is that the world of *The Good Place* is apparently governed by incompetent administration and a bad moral theory.

Some commentators have noted how secular *The Good Place* is. There is no positive mention of God, for example. There's the Judge, but she's enthralled by *NCIS* and blindsided by the world's complexity, so she doesn't qualify as God in any traditional sense. She's as much at the mercy of the system as anyone. There are also layers of various bureaucracies, like the superficially benign but actually feckless, benighted, and ineffectual "committee," which is more ready to create subcommittees than to correct injustices in the point system. Though they're impeccable rule-followers, questions of actual justice, fairness, and suffering don't drive them.

It's all portrayed hilariously, of course, but viewers find themselves rooting for Eleanor and Chidi, Jason and Tahani—and even Michael! It does *and should* bother us that the system is flawed, the presiding administration unjust, the reigning hierarchies uncaring.

It also understandably bothers the characters themselves, because they continue to make their case, expose the unfairness, and appeal to some standard of goodness and decency that could give humankind hope for a better fate.

But should the callous administration and flawed system of such a world detract from the characters' commitment to do the right thing, to grow morally, to become better people, to discharge their duties? The show suggests that it shouldn't. Its message is that, even if doing the right thing is inconsistent with happiness, it's still worth doing. Eleanor's an exemplar of this approach, especially in her public confession in Season 1 that she does not belong in The Good Place. She has all the reason to suspect this confession will land her in The Bad Place, but she comes clean nonetheless. Morality is worth doing for its own sake. Once the characters' eternal fate in The Bad Place seemed sealed, any effort on their part to do good—by helping those they love escape a similar destiny—must be coming from a pure motive since it would help only others, not themselves. In this seemingly Kantian spirit, the show implicitly extols the heroic virtues of commitment to the moral life irrespective of consequences for oneself.

This approach, though, doesn't really resonate with Kant. Although he downplayed the importance of consequences and counseled commitment to duty for duty's sake, Kant wasn't indifferent to the moral agent's well-being. He thought human beings reside in both the noumenal and phenomenal realms—the world as it is and the world of appearances, respectively. If we were purely noumenal creatures, he argued, then commitment to virtue for its own sake and nothing else would be enough, but because we're also phenomenal creatures, we're hardwired to care about issues like our own happiness. So, it's true that Kant thought that our moral motivations shouldn't include our desire to be happy. But it's also true that Kant thought our desire to be happy is morally legitimate.

The show gestures toward this with Eleanor's conclusions in "Pandemonium," the final episode of Season 3. Even though she thinks reality is basically meaningless, she finds she can't let go of the desire to find happiness. "I guess all I can do is embrace the pandemonium, find happiness in the unique insanity of being here, now." Kant might suggest that the heroic depiction of being moral for its own sake irrespective of consequences is both correct and incorrect. It's true that we should be motivated by morality alone, but it's false to think that we can set aside questions of ultimate happiness as if they're unimportant. They remain important—and even more, they remain

important *to morality*. The very institution or enterprise of morality itself, to make full rational sense, to remain rationally stable, requires a greater correspondence between virtue and happiness than *The Good Place* seems to allow.

The Coincidence Thesis

Although Kant is the philosopher best known for talking about the need for such correspondence between virtue and happiness, several thinkers before him recognized the connection. Questions about morality and the afterlife have a long history in philosophy. In his *Pensées*, French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) asserted that the immortality of the soul is so important that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter.³

Continuing on the same general theme, the great English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) is well known for emphasizing the importance of rewards and punishments in moral motivation. The forthrightness with which he occasionally emphasized their centrality, in fact, has elicited from some quarters accusations that he fell prey to the misguided notion that the matter of moral motivation can be reduced to aiming for a beneficial outcome—something more practical or prudential than intrinsically moral.⁴

However bluntly or crassly drawn some of these connections may be, Locke was right to insist on an ultimate reckoning and balancing of the scales—something emphasized both by the Hellenistic Socrates in the *Apology* and by the Hebraic St. Paul in Acts 17. *The Good Place*, in its own way, underscores this insistence on justice. Although the characters find themselves in a skewed system, they cannot let go of the conviction that there's a standard above the broken system that ought to hold sway. Unless ultimate reality is itself committed to justice, many of our most cherished hopes for the rectification of wrongs and redemption of sufferings are in vain.

Locke thought that humans can appreciate the intrinsic goodness of virtue, and even its appeal, but this is not nearly enough to motivate virtuous behavior, especially when doing so is costly. To remedy this problem, on Locke's view, clear and explicit sanctions are needed to ensure that the virtuous course of action will always be the more attractive option.

What if being or doing good were to produce, rather than *good* consequences, *horrible* ones? What Locke seemed to recognize—as

did many other major philosophers, from Augustine to Anselm, from Bishop Butler to George Berkeley (and that's just the A's and B's)—is that morality and ultimate happiness need to go hand in hand if morality is to be a fully rational enterprise. To retain its authority in our lives, morality requires the stability of cohering with ultimate happiness.

Some philosophers have called this the “Coincidence Thesis,” which says that the moral life is, or is at least likely to be, good on the whole for the virtuous agent. The rationality of morality requires it, but certain experiences of evil can shake this conviction. How can we believe in such a thesis? How can Chidi and Eleanor, especially after they find out that nobody's made it to *The Good Place* for centuries? Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796), for one, saw no way to defend the coincidence of virtue and well-being apart from supposing that the world is under benevolent administration. Entering the final season, we had yet to see evidence that the world of *The Good Place* is.

Reid offered a few arguments in support of the Coincidence Thesis, according to which well-being and virtue go together. He made it clear that virtue and well-being are distinct, but a benevolent deity secures their coincidence. As Reid put it,

While the world is under a wise and benevolent administration, it is impossible, that any man should, in the issue, be a loser by doing his duty. Every man, therefore, who believes in God, while he is careful to do his duty, may safely leave the care of his happiness to Him who made him.⁵

As it happens, Reid would agree with the writers of *The Good Place*, convinced that genuine virtue requires being committed to the moral life for its own sake, not for some reward. Importantly, though, he saw no way to make sense of that commitment apart from holding that there is just and benevolent administration of the world, ensuring that an agent's virtue and well-being coincide, if not in this life, then in the next. As Reid put it, “Virtue is his [i.e., God's] care. Its votaries are under his protection & guardianship.”⁶ Reid thought a commitment to the Coincidence Thesis, though virtuous, natural, and intuitive, goes beyond the evidence in some sense. Another step is needed. For Kant, these considerations provided the material for an argument for God's existence.

Kant held that a rational moral being must necessarily will “the highest good,” which consists of a world in which people are both morally good and happy, and in which moral virtue is the condition

for happiness. Kant was less concerned with questions of happiness per se than with questions of what makes us worthy of happiness. He held that a person can't rationally will a virtuous life without believing that moral actions can successfully achieve such an end, which requires that the world be ordered in a certain way. This conviction is equivalent to belief in God, a moral being who is ultimately responsible for the character of the natural world.

So Kant would reject both the suggestion that happiness is irrelevant to the moral life and the suggestion that the world features a huge disconnect between virtue and happiness. *The Good Place*, potentially anyway, seems to represent a thought experiment in which the Coincidence Thesis is simply false. But Kant would say that rather than such a scenario enabling the purest morality of all, it would render the moral enterprise less than rationally stable. What morality and what rationality would dictate us to do would be at odds. Morality wouldn't really make full rational sense. Thus the tragedy.

Incidentally, Kant was known for a second moral argument for God's existence (or rational belief in God), which we can call his "argument from grace."⁷ In light of our corrupt motivations and inward bents, Kant thought we must believe in God to give us the needed resources to be virtuous—to cure us from privileging our desires and inclinations over our moral duties. More could be said about this, but it's only mentioned here to identify another critique he'd offer of *The Good Place* universe. It had become a world in which the moral life was irremediably impossible to achieve with no divine resource to rectify it. Rational commitment to the moral life requires believing it's possible. If it isn't possible, the moral enterprise, once more, is compromised.

Benevolent Administration

Many of us have a nagging conviction that the moral life is worth doing for its own sake. Morality has autonomy or independence; morality is its own thing and reward. If this is correct, what does it reveal about reality?

Earlier we mentioned Reid, who held that the Coincidence Thesis lies deep in the moral life. Reid thought it a virtuous coincidence that the moral life is, or is at least likely to be, good on the whole for the virtuous agent. At the same time, Reid recognized that certain experiences of evil can shake this conviction. Terence Cuneo explains that

“Reid sees no way to defend the coincidence of virtue and well-being apart from supposing that the world is under benevolent administration. There is an important sense, then, in which Reid’s ethical views are ineliminably theistic.”⁸

It might be thought that insisting that virtue and happiness ultimately coincide is self-centered. How is this different from Mindy St. Claire’s me-first attitude? But if Kant was right, we as human beings can’t help but to care about our eternal destinies and to desire enduring joy. It’s not irrational to be concerned with such things, but rather quite natural and altogether human. The idea that happiness and virtue ultimately coincide is not, on this score, myopically selfish. Rather, morality, to be the fully rational thing we suppose it to be, must feature such resonance with happiness. Not all self-interest is selfish. So-called eudaimonists are so convinced of the inherent connection between virtue and happiness that they tread the verge of equating them. Kant was not inclined to conflate them, but still he saw them as connected. This is why moral action should be done for its own sake, and this is why the stability of morality requires benevolent administration. Kant happened to think that a personal and loving God not only could but absolutely would ensure the airtight correspondence between virtue and happiness.

Some might suggest that there is a good nontheistic way to ensure such ultimate correspondence. Consider the possibility of karma instead of a theistic universe. In “You’ve Changed, Man,” something like reincarnation or transmigration of souls is hinted at as a potential solution to the broken system. Couldn’t an atheist opt for something like that to make everything bonzer? Yes, but in light of the incalculable complexity of a system of karma featuring its plethora of precise calibrations, such a moral order postulated by nontheistic reincarnation paradoxically provides evidence for the existence of a personal God after all. Who else is crunching the numbers and directing the whole show? So Kant at least would be inclined to think theism—not a mechanistic universe, a rule-obsessed committee, or a free-for-all pandemonium—is the more plausible explanation of the benevolent administration that morality and rationality would be at odds without.

Tragedy, Comedy, or Cincinnati?

Until the final season, the question loomed whether the show’s depiction of the afterlife constituted a comedy or a tragedy. Simon Critchley has written that the world is

a tragicomedy defined by war, corruption, vanity, and greed, and entirely without the capacity for redemption. Perhaps this is why it is so hard for us to parse the difference between tragedy and comedy. Who knows, perhaps Socrates was right in the *Symposium* after all: the tragedian should be a comedian and vice versa.⁹

With the finale now in the books, *The Good Place*, in its own way, seems to contain elements of both tragedy and comedy.

The show's aforementioned steadfast adherence to secularity makes it stand in contrast to the robustly religious conception of the afterlife held by those earlier thinkers like Pascal or Locke, St. Paul or Kant. And the show's tragic elements are thrown in relief by these points of departure. At the beginning of this chapter, recall that two central questions reside at the heart of the show: (1) whether morality requires that we do good for goodness' sake and (2) whether reality itself is committed to morality.

Now we can qualify and clarify that claim. Doing morality for morality's sake echoes a recurring and resounding note in the show. But if benevolent administration is needed to make morality and rationality cohere, the universe of *The Good Place* is not really as committed to morality as it might first appear. The highest authorities are often benighted, callous, ineffectual, and little concerned with justice. In fact, absurdly, voices of good and evil are accorded the same weight in final determinations—as if fairness requires treating them equally and impartially. That Shawn might still mount a coup and set up a whole new and deeply unjust system remains a possibility. Whether the reformed system stays in place is a wholly contingent matter. But as we saw earlier, a world ungoverned by a just authority undermines the Kantian notion of the rationality of doing right for the sake of rightness alone.

The final season enables us to extend this analysis. A feature of secularism is what Charles Taylor calls its "immanent frame," which inclines the modern mind to find fulfillment without recourse to any transcendent source. Rather than the beatific vision as humanity's ultimate end and best destiny, the highest good becomes, at worst, garden-variety amoral trivial pursuits like the perfect video game performance or jamming with a Magic Guitar. But at least at moments the show seems to recognize an even deeper value: that bonding with other people may be a more satisfying endeavor. In this way, the show affirms Ernest Becker's conclusion that the modern relationship is all that many of us have left after the "death of God." We see this in Chidi

and Eleanor's relationship. By the final episode, however, we also come to see that even this love ultimately falters.

Perhaps this is because even human loves fall short. They admit of boredom and fail to satisfy. Understandably so since, as Becker puts it, "No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood."¹⁰ But what if that's all there is, as *The Good Place* intimates? What if all we have to look forward to is monotony-induced enervating ennui, relieved only by the dissolution of the self? What else is to be said but that this would be a tragic state of affairs? Such a picture is one in which the highest possible good isn't large or transcendent enough to satisfy forever. It would be profoundly sad if eternal joy were an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Only an infinite good could liberate us from such a fate. Who knows what joys of life redeemed may bring, when fecund light and love unending sing?

The Good Place, despite its recognition of the flaws in a broken system, either can't or won't imagine for its characters a source of unending bliss and eternal satisfaction. If the show is right, however much we might wish to follow Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) in crediting morality as the source of meaning, life for Chidi and company is tragic indeed. Although *The Good Place* may be second to none as a brilliant sitcom, we have principled reason to hope for an even more divine comedy.

And that, in the words of our paragon of moral wisdom Eleanor Shellstrop (1982–2016), is how you get ethics'd in the face.

Notes

- 1 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, translated and edited with an introduction by Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 258.
- 2 See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002).
- 3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 143.
- 4 John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. I.T. Ramsey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 70.
- 5 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, intro. B. Brody (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 256.
- 6 Thomas Reid, *Practical Ethics, Being Lectures and Papers on Natural Religion, Self-Government, Natural Jurisprudence, and the Law of Nations*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 120.

- 7 Kant gave this argument in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*; at the beginning of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and at the end of the first and third *Critiques*.
- 8 Terence Cuneo, “Duty, Goodness, and God in Reid’s Moral Philosophy,” in *Reid on Ethics*, ed. Sabine Roeser (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 256.
- 9 Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon, 2019), 267.
- 10 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 166. For further discussion on this, see Alan Noble’s *Disruptive Witness* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVPBooks, 2018), chap. 3.