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The Good Place and Philosophy

WITH A FOREWORD BY

MICHAEL SCHUR

CREATOR OF *THE GOOD PLACE*

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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Edited by

Kimberly S. Engels

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David Baggett is Professor of Philosophy at Houston Baptist University and works in ethics, philosophy of religion, and natural theology. He's the executive editor of MoralApologetics.com, and his most recent book is *The Moral Argument: A History*, co-written with Jerry Walls. Unapologetic about drinking almond milk, he remains just 520,000,008 points shy of The Good Place.

Marybeth Baggett, an English Professor (not a philosopher) at Houston Baptist University, studies contemporary American literature, science fiction, and the life and work of groundbreaking artist and popular icon Kamilah. The Eleanor to David's Chidi, Marybeth has authored two books and has been working for 18 years on her magnum opus, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Mediocre People Who Lie about Their Identity?*

Steven A. Benko is a Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies at Meredith College. His research focuses on ethics, subjectivity, and culture. He is the co-editor of *The Good Place and Philosophy: Get an*

Afterlife, Ethics and Comedy (forthcoming) and has published articles on authenticity and *The Good Place*, religious humor in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, critical thinking pedagogy, and posthumanism. He once asked Chidi for help with an ethics syllabus, but Chidi said that it gave him a stomachache.

Kiki Berk is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Southern New Hampshire University and currently holds the Papoutsy Chair in Ethics and Social Responsibility. She received her PhD in Philosophy from the VU University Amsterdam in 2010. Her current research interests include value theory (especially happiness), analytic existentialism (especially the meaning of life), and the philosophy of death. If searching for meaning is philosophical suicide, then her days are numbered.

Andreas Bruns is a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds. His research focuses on deontological ethics and moral conflicts. He teaches moral and political philosophy, and medical ethics. The Accounting Department assigns a negative value of –143 points to doing a PhD in philosophy, and the job prospects are terrible. But, as his good friend Barack once told him during a skiing holiday with Michelle and the kids, "You are not here to fear the future. You're here to shape it. And where you are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell you that you can't, tell them: Yes, I can."

Andrew Davison is a student at the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science, so you may be surprised to see him listed as a contributor to a philosophy volume. He researches applications of the Fourier Transform and other mathy stuff. This is his first philosophy chapter and his second publication. Clearly, Andrew is conflicted about what exactly he wants to do when he "grows up," but hopefully he can be as cool as his dad (see: Scott Davison). As Jason Mendoza once said, "I'm just trying to figure out what the fork is happening."

Scott A. Davison is Professor of Philosophy at Morehead State University. He is the author of two books, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* (Continuum, 2012) and *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford, 2017), and a number of articles in the areas of metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and value theory. He serves as the book review editor for the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* and the associate editor of the journal *Faith and Philosophy*.

In his spare time, he likes to build things and hang out with his children and his rabbits. Other than that, as Eleanor has told him repeatedly, "Ya basic."

Kimberly S. Engels is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Molloy College. Her research focuses on existentialism as a contemporary living philosophy, applicable to all domains of modern life. She is co-editor of the book *Westworld and Philosophy: If You Go Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), and has published articles relating existentialism to issues in environmental ethics, medical ethics, and public policy. Jason Mendoza once told her, "You've got a dope soul and hella ethics."

T Storm Heter teaches Philosophy at East Stroudsburg University. He is author of *Sartre's Ethics of Engagement* (Continuum, 2006) and he writes about existentialism, music, and critical race theory.

Darren Hudson Hick is the author of *Introducing Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (2017) and *Artistic License: The Philosophical Problems of Copyright & Appropriation* (2017), and co-editor of *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Copying* (2016). Unbeknownst to Sarah Worth, his bud-hole is mostly filled with velvet Elvis paintings.

Pamela Hieronymi is a Professor of Philosophy at UCLA. She has published on moral responsibility and on our control over our own states of mind. She is currently bringing these two strands together into a book, *Minds That Matter*, in order to unwind the traditional problem of free will. She and Chidi are still trying to decide which quotation to use for this bio.

Jake Jackson is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy at Temple University writing on depression, anxiety, and moral responsibility. His published work examines how to navigate depression and anxiety within a stigmatizing world. He's been compared to Chidi a few too many times and tries his best to ignore his point totals, but fears the Time Knife.

David Kyle Johnson is a Professor of Philosophy at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, who also produces lecture series for The Teaching Company's *The Great Courses*. His specializations include metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of religion, and his "Great

Courses" include *Sci-Phi: Science Fiction as Philosophy*, *The Big Questions of Philosophy*, and *Exploring Metaphysics*. Kyle is the editor-in-chief of *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy* (forthcoming), and has also edited other volumes for Wiley-Blackwell, including *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* and *Inception and Philosophy*: *Because It's Never Just a Dream*. Thanks to Lisa Kudrow, his six-year-old son Johney won't stop calling him a think-read-book-man.

Dean A. Kowalski is a Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Arts & Humanities Department in the College of General Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He regularly teaches philosophy of religion, Asian philosophy, and ethics. He is the author of *Joss Whedon as Philosopher* (2017), *Classic Questions and Contemporary Film*, 2nd edition (2016), and *Moral Theory at the Movies* (2012). He is the editor of The Big Bang Theory *and Philosophy* (2012), *The Philosophy of* The X-Files, revised edition (2009), and *Steven Spielberg and Philosophy* (2008); he is the coeditor of *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon* (2011). Like Chidi, he is vexed by what you might call directional insanity. Vexed. Just ask his wife (or any of his friends, really).

Being a fairly young soul, this is only **James Lawler**'s 322nd time for participating in *The Good Place and Philosophy*. Previously, some may recall, during his 321st time round his classic book *The God Tube: Uncovering the Hidden Spiritual Message in Pop Culture* (Open Court, 2010) won the Noble [*sic*] Prize, beating out Bob Dillon [*sic*] that year. Dillon (this time around he spells it Dylan) failed then to convince the jury with his song "The Times Are They Are Unchangin'." After 702 repetitions, he finally got the message, showing that humanity is indeed making progress. James is still at the State University of New York at Buffalo, but this time, for those who remember, in the Philosophy Department, not Astrophysics.

If **Greg Littmann** goes to The Good Place, he'll still get to be an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. But the exams will all magically grade themselves. He'll still publish in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of logic, and the philosophy of professional philosophy. He'll still write chapters relating philosophy to popular culture, like the ones he's written for books devoted to *Big Bang Theory*, *Black Mirror*, *Doctor Who*, *Game*

of Thrones, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *The Walking Dead*, and others. But there'll be no word limits or due dates, and his word processor will automatically underline bad ideas in red. If Greg goes to The Bad Place, the students will ask, "Will this be on the exam?" anytime he says anything in class. He'll still be allowed to write, but Plato and Aristotle will stand over his shoulder, sniggering.

Laura Matthews is an Instructor in the Department of Philosophy at Auburn University. Her research focuses on integrating phenomenology with 4E (embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended) approaches to cognition. She is particularly interested in the application of these approaches to philosophical problems surrounding the classification and treatment of mental illness. She is currently finishing her thesis on an enactive approach to mental illness at the University of Georgia. Chidi once sat in on one of Laura's lectures and complimented her that it was "so bleak."

Todd May is Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of the Humanities at Clemson University. He is the author of sixteen books of philosophy, most recently *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* and *Kenneth Lonergan: Filmmaker and Philosopher*. When Jason tells Shawn, "You used to be cool. But you've changed, man," he was thinking of Todd. Except the cool part.

Michael McGowan is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Florida Southwestern State College. He is co-editor of *David Foster Wallace and Religion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2019) and author of *The Bridge: Revelation and Its Implications* (Pickwick, 2015). He is currently interested in meaning-of-life questions and nihilism, or maybe he isn't. Whatever.

Matthew P. Meyer is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. His main areas of study are existentialism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis. He has written a book entitled *Archery and the Human Condition in Lacan, the Greeks, and Nietzsche: The Bow with the Greatest Tension* (Lexington, 2019) and has published articles and chapters on Nietzsche and film, and in several Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series books, on Sartre (and *The Office*), Nietzsche (and *House of Cards*), and aesthetics (and *Westworld*). Chidi Anogonye once gave him the answer to life, but he is not willing to share it.

Traci Phillipson is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University. Her research focuses on Medieval Latin and Arabic philosophy and its Aristotelian roots. She works primarily on issues of will and intellect in Aquinas and Averroes. She, like Michael, thinks that human beings can be "g-g-good, sometimes."

Alison Reiheld is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University–Edwardsville. She is a regular contributor to the scholarly bioethics blog, IJFAB Blog, and hopes that her work there helps folks to think through tricky issues in medical ethics. In addition to her research on the ethics of memory, Dr. Reiheld deals with how power and social norms operate within social institutions to render some people and groups vulnerable in unethical ways. She tends to make folks question ethical conclusions that had at first seemed obvious. This is why everybody hates moral philosophers.

Catherine M. Robb is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. At the moment she is interested in questions about the ethics and politics of self-development, and also writes on the aesthetics of music. In her spare time she "takes it sleazy" just like Eleanor, although she prefers red wine to margaritas.

Dane Sawyer is Senior Adjunct Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of La Verne. His research focuses on the interconnections among existentialism, philosophy of mind, Buddhism, and meditation. Tahani often brags that Dane offered her "exquisite" and "unsurpassable" meditation advice and philosophical reflections on the nature of mind during her time as a Tibetan Buddhist monk.

Michael Schur is the creator of *The Good Place*. He also co-created *Brooklyn 99* and *Parks and Recreation*.

C. Scott Sevier is Professor of Philosophy at The College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas. His research focuses on medieval philosophy and aesthetics as well as the nature of beauty. He is interested in the history of ideas and in philosophy as a wisdom tradition. He contributed a chapter to *Psych and Philosophy: Some Dark Juju-Magumbo* (Open Court, 2013), and published articles relating to the aesthetics and morality of Aquinas, as well as the book *Aquinas on Beauty* (Lexington Press, 2015). If it seems like he talks too fast, it's because he still goes to Andy's Coffee, and he's got a full punch-card, Bro.

Eric J. Silverman is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Christopher Newport University, United States. He has twenty publications on topics in ethics, philosophy of religion, and medieval philosophy. His publications include two monographs, *The Prudence of Love: How Possessing the Virtue of Love Benefits the Lover* and *The Supremacy of Love: An Agape-Centered Vision of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics*, and a co-edited collection, *Paradise Understood: New Philosophical Essays about Heaven*. Although he shares much of Chidi's fashion sense, it has never taken him more than fifteen minutes to choose a fedora.

Zachary Swanson is in his final year as an undergraduate at Christopher Newport University. He is applying to graduate programs in psychology. He is still in the process of completing his 4000-page manuscript on the simple question: Why? Like Chidi, his brain makes noises as a fork in a garbage disposal.

Joshua Tepley is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Saint Anselm College. He received his BA in philosophy from Bucknell University and his PhD in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame. His research focuses on the intersection between twentieth-century continental philosophy and analytic metaphysics. The thing he looks forward to the most when he gets to The Good Place is hanging out with Judge Gen.

Sarah E. Worth is a professor at Furman University. She writes at the intersection of aesthetics and epistemology. She published *In Defense of Reading* in 2017 and is now working on a book called *The Pleasures of Eating: A Philosophy of Taste*. Sarah teaches classes about food and eating as often as she can, and believes, ironically, that although hell is other people's tastes, frozen yogurt is pure heaven. She shares an office with Darren Hudson Hick that is decorated only with clown paintings.

Robin L. Zebrowski is Associate Professor of Cognitive Science at Beloit College. Her research focuses on artificial intelligence and human/computer interfaces, with a focus on the relationship between embodiment and conceptualization. Jason Mendoza thinks she's the Pam Anderson boob motorcycle of people, but she also once got lost on an escalator.

Editor's Introduction and Acknowledgments

Kimberly S. Engels

"We Are Not in This Alone"

> So, why do it then? Why choose to be good, every day, if there is no guaranteed reward we can count on, now or in the afterlife? I argue that we choose to be good because of our bonds with other people and our innate desire to treat them with dignity. Simply put, we are not in this alone.

When Chidi Anagonye reads this aloud in "Somewhere Else," he expresses the heart and soul of a show that succeeded in making philosophy both funny and mainstream. More than any work of contemporary pop culture, *The Good Place* explicitly explores the work of a variety of famous philosophers, yet it is anchored in one theme. As the show's creator, Michael Schur, said in a 2018 plenary session of the annual meeting of the North American Sartre Society, "The goal is to try to ask the question what it means to be a good person. That was the one line source of the show."

Despite Chidi's desire for the first three and a half seasons, perhaps there is no single philosophical answer to that question. There is, though, a narrative answer. Through the story it tells, *The Good Place* shows us that being a good person is social. It involves becoming better together through our relationships and bonds with other people—through our shared experiences, sacrifices, triumphs, and failures. Simply put, we are not in this alone. This is true not just for Chidi but for all of us.

Indeed, I have not been alone at any stage with this book, which has its origins in a meeting of the North American Sartre Society (NASS) in November 2018 at the University of Mary Washington. The NASS includes many supportive, collaborative, and remarkable individuals who are even better when together. Each year's meeting is filled with

meaningful scholarship and companionship, but the 2018 gathering was extra special. The show's creator, Michael Schur, and one of the show's philosophical advisors, Todd May, joined us for a special plenary session about *The Good Place* and Sartre's work. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life.

My gratitude to all who organized and participated in the event—Michael Schur, Todd May, Jake Jackson, Kiki Berk, and Craig Vasey—cannot be overstated. NASS president T Storm Heter, conference organizer Craig Vasey, as well as other members of the NASS executive committee then entrusted me to carry this project to the next stages. Michael Schur graciously agreed to write the foreword for the book. He was kind, responsive, and generous with his time. Likewise, the philosophical advisors for *The Good Place*, Todd May and Pamela Hieronymi, graciously agreed to write an introduction for the volume.

William Irwin, the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series editor, helped turn the project into a reality. He offered invaluable assistance in every stage of the process. The contributing authors worked diligently, met important deadlines, and helped create something wonderful. Did I mention that I was not in this alone?

Last but not least, my daughter, Moriah A. Khan, binge-watched the show with me on repeat. At this point she is a mega-fan as well as a budding philosopher.

Foreword

In the summer of 2015, I found myself sitting in heavy traffic on a freeway in Los Angeles. Sitting in heavy traffic is one of our favorite pastimes out here, along with sitting in moderate traffic, inching along in light traffic, and canceling plans because there's too much traffic. On this particular day, a man in a white sports car decided the rules of society didn't apply to him—he is special! He has a white sports car!—and he pulled into the breakdown lane and sped by all of us poor suckers who were foolish enough to abide by a social contract.

"That guy," I thought to myself, "just lost twenty points."

It was a game I played sometimes—a little soul-soother: I imagined that someone (or -thing) is omnisciently tallying up our moral triumphs and failures, filing them away for review *in toto* when our threads finally get snipped. I'm hardly the first person to imagine such a system, but in my version it was a real numbers game—a cold, computational, *Moneyball*-style analysis of our every action. This time, when I played my little accounting game, something else occurred to me: if this were the actual grand, eternal system, whose computational rules would we be using? Would all moral philosophers even agree that white sports car man had lost a few points in that moment? Would there be a consensus as to how many points his act had cost him? Would their reasons for believing so be the same? And then I had one more (slightly less lofty) thought: is there any way this is a television show?

In the months that followed I conceived of and wrote the pilot for *The Good Place*, a comedy on NBC that I've now run for the last four years. The basic premise, if you haven't seen it—though, if you haven't, why the hell are you reading this book?—is this: Eleanor Shellstrop wakes up in the afterlife, and is told that she is in The Good Place. Though it's explicitly nondenominational, The Good Place is a version of the Christian "heaven," full of everything she'd ever want, and

reserved (she's told) for the very best people who ever lived. Humans' moral scores have been scrupulously kept, points added and subtracted for every action, great and small, and only the real cream of the moral crop get into this paradise. The problem is: she is decidedly *not* the cream of the crop. She is a very mediocre person, who certainly does not qualify for this VIP Club of ethical superstars. There's been a mistake.

Then a million other things happen, that would take too long to explain. Just watch the show, it'll be easier. (And also, again, if you don't know what happens in the show, why did you buy this book?)

In order to write the show the way it needed to be written—meaning, "not ignorantly"—I embarked on a self-designed course of study into moral philosophy, a subject about which I knew very little. From my few courses in college, I remembered that Kant was strict, Mill was results-oriented, and Socrates was forced to drink hemlock because he annoyed everyone in Athens until they couldn't take it anymore. That was about it.

I bought a few survey books covering the basics—virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontology—designed to lay down a primer coat of knowledge: Ethics for Dummies Who Write TV Shows. The problem was, every book and article pointed me to five others, which led me to twenty others after that. I bought more and more volumes, spent more and more time reading, got deeper and deeper into the philosophical weeds. My eyes were never unstrained. My Amazon cart was never empty.

It was exhausting—but it was fun. Oh man, was it fun. It didn't feel like work, really—it felt like listening to a *conversation*, a 2500-year-long conversation these men and (far too late in the game) women were having with each other. The debates, and refutations, and criticisms.… Scanlon was talking to Rawls, who'd been talking to Kant, who'd been sniffing at Aristotle. Philippa Foot was talking to Mill, and then John Taurek snapped at the people who'd talked to her. The ideas were fascinating, but the *conversation* was the fun part. And as long as humans walk the planet, it occurred to me, it would never end. As T.M. Scanlon wrote, when concluding his magnum opus: working out the terms of moral justification is an unending task.

Which is why this volume delights me so much. When you start a TV show, you have very pedestrian goals: make something good, that entertains people. If you're lucky, you make something audiences care about, and invest in, emotionally and intellectually. But this show had another, clandestine goal: to add to the conversation. I hoped the

show could toss out a few ideas, ask a couple questions, raise a hand from the back of the class. An entire book full of ideas based on its contents was something I never dreamed of.

I'm very grateful to the academics who contributed to the pages within—and to the writers, actors, editors, and crew members who made the show sturdy enough in its scholarship to warrant those pages. I'm doubly grateful for everyone who watched the show and felt it contributed, in some small way, to the conversation of philosophy.

Michael Schur
Creator of *The Good Place*
October 2019

Introduction

Pamela Hieronymi and Todd May, philosophical advisors to The Good Place

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that "A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes."[1] But who, really, has tried this? Who would have the chutzpah, not to mention the fortitude, to write such a book? And if such a task were beyond most philosophers, what about this: a television show of philosophy composed largely of jokes?

If you're reading these pages you already know that it's been done. Tacking between the Scylla of cheapening philosophy and the Charybdis of unfunny humor (the dreaded philosophy jokes), *The Good Place* has sought to engage philosophy seriously while at the same time remaining an entertaining sitcom broadcast on network television. In particular, it has focused on the questions of how to be good and how to learn to be good in a world fraught with ethical complexities. Although the show engages in any number of philosophical arenas, for instance existentialism and the problem of personal identity, it always returns to the core issue of living an ethically decent life in a world that has the unfortunate tendency to push back.

In doing so, the show does not cleave to one or another of the ethical theories current in philosophical discussion. It presents Kant's view, through the behavior of the academic philosopher Chidi, as a blind set of imperatives whose key is hard to discover and even harder to act upon. Consequentialism, on the other hand, comes in for critique in the form of the point system for getting into The Good Place. Consequences are impossible to calculate in a world where good and bad are so deeply entwined that even the most diligent of consequentialists—and who is more diligent than Doug Forcett?—cannot pull off the trick of earning enough points to achieve proper Good Place standing. As Judge Gen discovers when she takes her short foray to the land of the living, acting rightly, if we base it on consequences, is far too complicated to master.

In the first and second season, T.M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* looms large. Contractualism offers a contrast to both points and imperatives, with its update of the Golden Rule and its focus on respect and concern for other people. It is not so much the particularities of Scanlon's theory that inform the show in its early episodes—although Chidi does present Scanlon's idea that we should act on principles that others could not reasonably refuse—but rather the primary role that the theory gives to interpersonal relationships. In the first season, it is revealed that, in life, Eleanor never felt comfortable being part of any group; she was a distrustful loner ("Someone Like Me as a Member"). She turns a corner, though, when she convinces Jason and Janet that they all must return to The Good Place and sacrifice themselves, so that Chidi and Tahani are not sent to The Bad Place ("Mindy St. Claire"). Eleanor's first motive is friendship, but its connection to justice comes through.

If there is a philosophical view that comes closest to what *The Good Place* puts before us, it would be Aristotle's virtue ethics. And yet there is no wise person, no sage that stands as a model for those seekers of ethical living. Instead, all Eleanor, Chidi, Jason, Tahani, and Michael have are one another—flawed human beings (and a flawed immortal). What allows them to improve? What keeps them on the path even as, in the third season, they are convinced it will be impossible for any of them to enter The Good Place? In interview after interview about the show, Mike Schur returns to a single word: trying. Through their relationships with one another, they come to desire and then to try their hardest to become better people.

Trying, though, has its own hazards. Eleanor needs to try because she lacks the motivations of a good person. Aristotle would recommend that she do what the good person does, as a way to become a good person: in contemporary terms, "Fake it 'til you make it." But sheer effort alone will not transform poor motives—motives are not like muscles; mere repetition will not effect change. To become a better person, your motives must be transformed, and effort alone does not guarantee transformation. In the pilot, Eleanor volunteered to pick up trash as a way of becoming better. She tried, but she couldn't stick to it. Later, though, when she realized Chidi's disappointment in missing his real soul mate, she was moved to kindness, without effort (and the sinkhole closed). Eleanor's resolve again flags when she is back on earth, attempting to improve herself, but it revives when she hears Chidi's lecture on contractualism, with its emphasis on interpersonal relations. As the humans (re)unite on earth and form friendships, their transformations begin.

Aristotle's ethics is not, in the end, in tension with Scanlon's contractualism. Aristotle recognized that becoming good is not something that one does on one's own. Ethics, for him, is a part of politics: becoming good requires other people. *The Good Place* turns the Sartrean dictum that hell is other people on its head. Michael tries to create an interpersonal hell for Eleanor and the others, but it backfires. The four humans bond in bringing themselves to be better than they were. They recognize one another as people who are also seeking to live their lives as best they can, and they realize that they might do much worse than to try to help one another out.

As *The Good Place*'s characters learn this, we learn something important about them. It is a lesson that we would do well to heed in this period of profound polarization and mistrust. There is often more to people than our quick summary judgment of them leads us to believe. Eleanor, the "dirt bag from Arizona," becomes, through her moral education alongside others, the most morally courageous of the group. There is nothing in the early episodes of the series that would make us predict this. Yet her evolution that stems from her relationships with others, especially but not exclusively Chidi, is entirely believable. There is more to her, and more to most people, than our snap judgments would tempt us to think. We can each be better—or at least try to be better—than we currently are; and, relatedly, we should realize that others are often better—or at least might well be better—than we think they are.

The essays in this volume approach *The Good Place* from a variety of philosophical angles, although ethics is never far from the text. The contributing authors engage in conversation with the thinkers one might expect—Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, Aristotle, and Scanlon among them—developing their ideas in order to bring forward aspects or implications of the show that are either implicit or cannot be treated at length philosophically in the episodes themselves. (Let's not forget that *The Good Place* is a sitcom, complete with fart jokes.) Although we cannot canvass those aspects and implications here—after all, that is the job of the essays themselves—perhaps a few quick gestures can indicate the rich resources of the show itself for philosophical reflection.

The final episode of the first season, "Michael's Gambit," calls to mind the quote from Sartre's *No Exit* that "Hell is other people." As several essays argue, and as is evident from the show itself, things are more complicated than those four words might, on their own, lead one to believe. To be sure, Michael designed The Good Place

neighborhood with that very idea in mind. The frustration Chidi experiences in trying to teach Eleanor to be good (and the conflict he experiences, in keeping her secret), the exasperation Tahani feels in being unable to engage Jason in conversation, and so on lead to feelings of helplessness and self-torture among the four characters. Nevertheless, as the show develops we become witness to an alternative: just as they can make one another miserable, so they can encourage one another to be better. If hell is other people, might it not be that heaven is as well?

This theme leads to another one: that of moral development. Several of the essays note the journey of moral development and self-understanding that takes place. Eleanor, especially, comes to listen to the little voice in her head that warned her when she was about to do something wrong, a voice that she admits to Michael has always been there but that she had not been willing to pay attention to before. Likewise, Tahani comes to recognize that her feelings toward her sister have been one-sided, and that her sister has had struggles with her parents' expectations complementary to Tahani's own. Being with one another over the course of *The Good Place*'s episodes has fostered these recognitions, and so the characters provide one another opportunities to become better persons, instead of just torturing one another.

Another theme that appears in the essays, and looms large in the show itself, is that of reward and punishment. In the third season we learn that nobody has gotten into the real Good Place in 521 years. This is because, as Judge Gen discovers, there are so many unforeseeable consequences of our behavior; it seems impossible to try to be good without thereby causing bad. This raises a question—and it is a question not only for moral reflection, but also for such social institutions as the contemporary prison: how should we think about the ways in which we judge one another? Challenging a simple calculus of good and bad consequences, the show asks us to consider the complexity of our fellow human beings. In a period in which polarization has lent itself to the formation of simple binaries in our assessments of others, the sitcom asks for nuance and grace.

Finally, a fourth theme, one that plays an important but sometimes implicit role in the show, is that of our freedom of action, particularly in the contemporary world. If the characters of the show are to be capable of moral development, then they must have the freedom to be able to engage in that development. However, their freedom of action is hedged by the complexity of our world, one in which to buy a rose for a loved one might contribute to exploitation (of the workers who

picked the rose), climate change (through the transportation of the rose), and deforestation (if the rose was an element of a farm that cleared forest land in order to create a rose farm that will itself be laid waste). Although the general theme of free will and determinism only appears once in the show during a conversation between Michael and Eleanor ("The Worst Possible Use of Free Will"), the pressing question of our freedom to be good in a world fraught with unforeseen consequences is an abiding concern throughout.

In all, *The Good Place* offers much food for thought without either spoon-feeding us or, as Wittgenstein worried about, unduly restricting our diet. By raising issues but refusing simple answers, by illustrating theories and dilemmas in ways that are at once provocative and entertaining, by allowing us to follow the moral development of four flawed individuals (and one flawed demon) through four seasons, the show displays how the reflective work of philosophy can be deep, engaging, and humorous all at once. And it has accomplished the trick that has eluded many of us in the field over these past several thousand years: it makes philosophy cool.

Note

1 Quoted in "A View from the Asylum" in Henry Dribble, *Philosophical Investigations from the Sanctity of the Press* (New York: iUniverse, 2004), 87.